

BLUE MOUNTAINS REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2015

Over the last year we have seen a continuation of the Federal Government's stringent attitude and tough policies towards refugees and asylum seekers. Those who are unfortunate enough to have been placed offshore on Nauru or Manus Island continue to be told they will never be allowed into Australia. Despite its declarations to the contrary the Federal Government has not released all the children in detention. There are continuing reports of physical and sexual abuse, deprivation of basic health needs and of detainees suffering from the mental illness born of hopelessness and desperation. The Government's recent announcement that it will resettle 12,000 Syrian refugees in Australia is welcome, but it highlights the cynicism and hypocrisy that allow for the same government to deny sanctuary to the 4,000 or so poor souls languishing in our shameful detention centres.

The year since our last AGM began with a telling example of what the Government is doing to asylum seekers and how we have responded to it. In September 2014 we learnt that work rights had unaccountably been withdrawn from some of the asylum seekers on bridging visas who had been able to find work in the community. At the same time the Red Cross had suffered funding cuts and was unable to continue with some of the utility payments it had been subsidising. The result was that many people in the community suddenly found themselves facing destitution and homelessness. Our response was to provide emergency funding for requests to pay a water bill, to pay rent arrears, for carpet cleaning where a toddler was in danger of suffering severe asthma, to recruit additional voluntary case workers to provide practical and emotional support, and to deal with particular requests as they arose on a case-by-case basis. We considered whether we should fund appeals against deportation orders. There are a few lawyers willing to assist with representation before the Refugee Review Tribunal and the Federal Court, but each application costs \$2,200 and there are still about 30,000 people living in Australia whose asylum applications have not been processed so we have not gone down that path.

It is against this background that our local refugee support group has continued to do what it can for those who have made it to our shores and are living in the western part of Sydney. We believe a considerable amount has been achieved through our efforts, and are pleased to provide our wider membership with the following reports about the activities of our various active members.

Community visiting

Members of our Group continue to spend many hours a week, every week, making life easier for those who have come to Australia as refugees and asylum seekers. They visit detainees in Villawood Detention Centre weekly, and when some of them are removed to centres as far away as Perth or northern Western Australia members, at their own expense, have travelled to visit them and reassure them that they have not been forgotten. Other members take on responsibility for supporting families and single men living in the community on temporary protection visas, many without work rights, limited access to medical services and on allowances which could never cover the cost of food, rent and other basic living expenses. We assist in finding accommodation, provide rice, flour, oil and other staple food items, and help with arranging access to medical, dental and other essential services.

Education and training

Asylum seekers may be released into the community on work visas, but they cannot always find work. Grant Medaris has built up connections with business willing to offer employment to those with the appropriate skills. He has identified the skills needed, such as warehousing and forklift driving and found where courses are available. Over the last year we have continued to provide interest-free "NILS" (no interest) loans to some with work visas to meet the costs of training and obtaining certificates for employment. We have also been able to assist some professional asylum seekers hoping to re-establish themselves in Australia. We assisted an accountant and lent \$3,000.00 to a doctor to sit exams to be admitted to practice medicine.

Collection and distribution of goods

Our collection and distribution team stores and organises goods and provides beds and bedding, furniture and white goods, shoes and clothing to those who have little or nothing. Over the first 6 months of this year we have made about 30 collections of large furniture items, beds and white goods and have also made 30 substantial deliveries to refugee families as well as numerous deliveries of smaller items. Through the dedicated work of our team of Adelaide, Julie and Shirley, our collection and distribution has become very much more streamlined. Our stores are much better organised, our electrical items are tagged, we know what goods we need and what we do not, and we have an expanded team of transport volunteers, who use their own utes, trailers or trucks to deliver goods to homes in western Sydney.

Transport in getting to shops and to appointments is a particular need we have identified. Private vehicles are out of the question and public transport is often expensive and unaffordable for many of the people we are helping. Our

response has been to collect and arrange for the repair of bicycles for those who could benefit from them. We have recently been able to deliver 15 of them in good condition to adults needing a means of transport and to some very happy school children, who now have the pleasure of owning and riding a bike.

Scholarships

In 2013 we were the beneficiaries of a generous bequest of \$80,000.00 from the estate of a dedicated member, Judy Gaskin. Judy had been a teacher and was committed to education. We decided to allocate the funds to providing scholarships and supporting schools with a large population of children of refugees and asylum seekers. We made an initial donation of \$10,000.00 to the Friends of Zainab Foundation, which supports students undertaking Years 11 and 12 and the first year of tertiary studies, and a further \$10,000.00 to Dorothy Hoddinott, the principal of Holroyd High School, which provides necessities such as uniforms and laptops to needy students. Dorothy gave a powerful address about her work at our public forum in Wentworth Falls in May this year. We have recently given a further \$10,000.00 from the Judy Gaskin bequest to each of the Foundation and Holroyd High School.

This year we have attracted the support of Judith Neilson of the White Rabbit Gallery in Chippendale. Judith provided us with initial donations of \$5,000.00 and \$10,000.00. We decided to use the funds to extend our educational support and have funded small group music therapy – drumming workshops run by a Syrian musician - and job skills training programs for traumatised children at Fairfield High School. Judith has recently given us a further \$15,000.00 to continue with this work.

Ocean 12 Cricket Team

In 2013 community visitors recognised that a particular problem is the boredom and isolation of those young men, who do not have work rights and have little to do other than wait in hope for a determination of their visa applications. In response Noeline and Anne-Marie put together a cricket team of Tamil men, which became known as the Ocean 12. The team was entered in a local competition run by Last Man Stands Sydney Sports League and obtained a grant of nearly \$10,000 to be fitted out with clothing and equipment. The team won the competition, and went on to win the state-wide competition. It has recently received a further grant of \$10,000 and is practising for the national competition to be held on the Gold Coast later this year. The Wentworth Leagues Club has provided valuable support.

Raising funds and raising awareness

Throughout the year our work has been supported by many generous donors to our website's Everyday Hero portal and our recently set up Givematcher

program, as well as other donations made direct to the Group. Our master chef, Tony Sharpe, has raised funds for us through applying his cooking and organisational skills to food from gourmet dinners to sausage sizzles. Our public forums in March at Glenbrook and in May at Wentworth Falls raised money as well as awareness of our work and the needs we are seeking to meet. Local musicians played at a Beatlefest at the Family Hotel in June and donated the proceeds of their raffle. We shared a stall with Amnesty International at Winter Magic and raised funds by painting faces and selling raffle tickets. After a long search we now have a fund-raiser in Maureen Williams, who has organised our coming coach tour to Mayfield Gardens and our Christmas stalls. We also now have a media group consisting of several journalists, who have helped us in getting letters published in the Sydney Morning Herald and the Gazette and will generate media releases. We have members committed to bringing the plight of refugees and asylum seekers to the attention of our local politicians.

Acknowledgements

Our work would not be possible without the continuing support of organisations and individuals within our local community. From the beginning we have been auspiced by the Blue Mountains Family Support Service (now Mountains Support), which has covered our insurance, accounting, auditing and other legal requirements. We have been provided with subsidised storage facilities and the use of trucks by Self Storage Plus at Blaxland and Springwood. The Elizabeth Evatt Community Legal Centre has allowed us to use its advanced office equipment. Many local heavy vehicle owners, tradespeople and business proprietors have given us their help and support when we have requested it. We wish to express our gratitude to all of those who have contributed to our work.

I should like to conclude with a personal note of appreciation to three of our most dedicated members. The first is to Tony Sharpe, who has given so much of his time and his skills to helping refugees and asylum seekers for many years. Tony is now very ill, and our thoughts and prayers are with him. The second is to George Winston, our apparently tireless secretary, who puts so much energy into keeping everyone engaged and informed. George is now, at last, to have the benefit of an assistant secretary. Finally I should like to express enduring thanks on behalf of all of us to our founder and deputy chair, Marie Standen. Marie is a truly remarkable person, who will not let age or ill-health or any other impediment get in the way of her continuing to fight for what she knows to be the right and good thing to do. Marie remains the inspiration of our Group.

Dr Hal Ginges
Chairman
Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group
19th September 2015