

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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*I was a stranger and you made
me welcome ...*

Newsletter 86 November 2017

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for people seeking asylum
- * actively network with like-minded individuals and groups who are working for justice for asylum seekers
- * promote advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers
- * raise awareness of asylum seeker issues and concerns through a range of activities

Pope Francis said to an audience last month: "The future of humankind isn't exclusively in the hands of politicians, of great leaders, of big companies. Yes, they do hold an enormous responsibility. But the future is, most of all, in the hands of those people who recognize the other as a 'you,' and themselves as part of an 'us'."

There is a classic 'you' and 'us' on Manus Island at present. As we write there is an impasse occurring there—one that could become a terrible disaster. The 'you' are men who have suffered immeasurably, separated from family and friends, with no prospect of freedom and the 'us' are those who seem to have learned to live with what is being done in our name or are in favour of deterring some people from coming to Australia by punishing ones already here.

In an article on 26 February 2015 in The Guardian, Richard Flanagan wrote:

One day, many years from now, another prime minister will stand up and to a teary gallery apologise for the damage done to refugees in detention. We will be told that we didn't know then what we know now. We will hear testimony of destroyed lives. But we did know. We always knew. We just chose not to hear and to silence those who tried to remind us of the truth.

Over and over again, the United Nations has savaged Australia's policies on asylum seekers and refugees, saying the government is breaching "common decency", and Australian federal governments have ignored the outcry and concerns of the international body.

How will history judge us and what will our grandchildren ask?

* *How did you let Manus Island and Nauru be worse than the camps in Indonesia to make sure no one else tried to seek protection by coming to Australia by boat?*



* *Is it true that Australia locked up 600 men who arrived by boat on Australia's doorstep, having fled famine, war and persecution, on Manus Island for more than four years of their lives?*

* *How could you have been so selective that you voted for equality on the same sex marriage issue and did not give any equality to the hundreds of people you locked up in Nauru and on Manus Island?*

Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

What is the real situation on Manus Island?

What is the current situation for the men who are still trying to survive in the former Manus detention centre? Who are they? How did it come to this?

Officials from Australia and Papua New Guinea closed the Manus Island camp on Oct. 31 this year, after Papua New Guinea's High Court ruled last year that mandatory detention violated their country's constitution. The camp property is now technically in the hands of Papua New Guinea, but there's no one in it except the four hundred or so men who refuse to leave. The men have barricaded themselves in and say that it's too dangerous for them to move closer to the locals on Manus Island without protection. UN representatives and others say the new centre is not ready for occupancy. The most important reason for the men not wanting to move is because they have been for four and a half years locked in detention with no indication of where or when they would be given any security about their future. They do not want to go to another place for another four and a half years. Australia has tried to get the remaining refugees to go back to their home countries or accept resettlement in Papua New Guinea. The detainees have refused both options. Most of them are from countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka or Syria and returning is not an option.

Whose responsibility is it to resolve their distress, to find a safe and healthy place for them? What alternatives are being offered and by whom? How satisfactory are they? What role is the Australian government playing?

Australia cannot avoid the ultimate responsibility for the men because it was Australia that sent them to this off-shore place. New Zealand says it will accept up to one hundred and fifty refugees from the offshore detention centres and would do this each year, but Australia has repeatedly refused the offer. Now Minister Dutton is saying of course sovereign countries (New Zealand and New Guinea) can make their own decisions but they should be aware that this will not be viewed positively by Australia. (We can read into this a threat of financial retribution).

What will happen if the men refuse unacceptable options?

Possibly no-one knows! The 400 men that are held in the centre are still threatened with being forcibly moved to new facilities in Lorengau, a city about five kilometres from the detention centre. Food, water and power have been cut from the centre. Apart from the lack of food and drinking water the conditions are unhygienic and unsanitary. The group Doctors for Refugees said there was little hope for any refugee who becomes seriously unwell on Manus Island. They said if the situation deteriorates further and the PNG Defence Force decides to clear the centre then there is a risk of many deaths. Already several men are in a serious health condition because of the lack of medical facilities at the Centre.

Are there other possibilities, humane ones, that could be pursued? If so, what are they? Who could make this happen? Why are they not being considered/enacted?

The most obvious solution is to bring the men from Manus to Australia for processing their claims. Repatriation to a suitable third country is another option. New Zealand has already offered to take 150 asylum seekers but this offer has been refused by Australia. Only twenty two have been taken by US and there is no news of any more. One man was miraculously sponsored by a family in Canada. These options are not being considered because ostensibly the Government states that any humane treatment of these asylum seekers will give the wrong message to people smugglers and the influx of boat people will re-commence. The extraordinary logic they promulgate is as follows: allowing 150 asylum seekers to go to New Zealand gives the wrong message to people smugglers; allowing the possible, 1250 asylum seekers to go to the U.S. is O.K!

How can we, in Australia, best support the men?

Australians of good will are urged to write to and e-mail their local Federal MPs and their State's Senators; and to visit and or phone them about this crisis. Please urge them to support the immediate evacuation of the men on Manus Island to Australia. We ask that these approaches to MPs and Senators be made with great vigour and with respect. We reject the use of physical violence or verbal abuse in any approaches to politicians and public demonstrations.

**You are all invited to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project
Christmas party on Sunday 17th December.**

Venue: 54 Beaconsfield Pde, Albert Park

Time: 5pm onwards



We would love to see anyone who has helped BASP over the past year. It is a chance to meet other people who share a commitment to justice in this area as well as meet some of those who have been helped by the Project. It is also an opportunity for us to say thank-you.

You are all important to us as we try together to build a safer and more just situation for asylum seekers.

RSPV: barthur@basp.org.au

**We are doing well with ticket sales but hope to sell more! \$40/\$35;
groups of 6+ \$35. Or get a ticket at the door.**

**ASYLUM SEEKERS
COMEDY BENEFIT**

A CRACKER NIGHT FOR A WORTHY CAUSE!

Denise Scott, Dave O'Neil, Fiona O'Loughlin, Denise McGuinness, Geraldine Hickey,
Dilruk Jayasinha and Monica Dullard as MC

**Friday 1st December 2017
St Kilda Town Hall
Doors open at 6pm, show starts at 7pm**

Fabulous HOT FOOD and DRINKS from the bar

**Don't miss out! Book ASAP:
www.trybooking.com/321026**



Rita Hayes SGS responds to Rita Panahi
In response to an article in The Sun Herald x/x/2017

Manus debate needs facts, not hysteria – Rita Panahi
Manus debate needs facts, not biased assertions – Rita Hayes

For the record, Rita Hayes, Good Samaritan Sister, works with BASP, and Rita Panahi is a journalist with the Sun Herald newspaper.

Rita Panahi: The Greens and *a small but loud minority of agitators shamelessly engage in untruths and hyperbole* to push their open borders agenda.

Refugee advocates and their media mouthpieces *are adept at disseminating half-truths, fabrications and lies* to smear their political opponents in a futile attempt to change public opinion.

Response: Does Ms Panahi include in the above description the following outspoken critics: Bishop Vincent Long, Bishops' Delegate for Migrants and Refugees; World Council of Churches Australia; Fr Frank Brennan SJ AO, Rev. Tim Costello AO, Amnesty International Australia, Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, Human Rights Law Centre?

Rita Panahi: *...Australia is tarnished by fools with short memories who claim we are running Nazi-style "concentration camps" and "torturing asylum seekers"*.

Response: It would seem that the "fools with short memories" have considerable support from the highest reputable sources for their accusations as evidenced in the following:

The 2017 Human Rights Watch Report describes Australia's treatment of people seeking asylum as "draconian" and "abusive" and addresses instances of denied or delayed urgent medical care, very low resettlement rates in mainland PNG, Manus or Cambodia, and the abuse of those perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI).

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, Francis Crépeau, is quoted as saying that Australia's migration policies are in "contravention of its international human rights and humanitarian obligations".

Rita Panahi: *"Australia's humanitarian intake benefits those in the greatest need, not economic migrants who can afford to pay thousands of dollars to people smugglers"*.

Response: Malcolm Turnbull has confirmed that the majority of people on Manus and Nauru are genuine refugees. (Refer his phone conversation to President Trump). What Ms Panahi fails to understand, or doesn't wish to disclose, is that a refugee is someone escaping persecution and/or death. Their monetary status is irrelevant. To use one's money to risk life on a leaky boat indicates their level of desperation and some degree of courage and initiative. Are the people who pay their way to come by plane better citizens for our country?

Rita Panahi: *"It was Julia Gillard who reopened Manus Island in 2012, not Tony Abbott."*

Response: The ALP has a lot to answer for too and it could well begin by admitting to its 1992 mistake of introducing mandatory indefinite detention. What is deplorable now is that people are currently being kept in indefinite detention.

Rita Panahi: *"There is nothing compassionate about dangerous policies that lead to hundreds of deaths."*

Response: This spurious argument, that promotes indefinite detention that is deleterious to the physical, mental and social well-being of innocent people as necessary in order to save people from drowning, is as

ridiculous as it is false.

Rita Panahi: *“Far Left activists Get Up! released a video showing deplorable conditions in the Centre but Dutton claims the footage only shows that the men had deliberately “trashed” it.*

Response: This Minister does not have a good track record for communicating the truth about detention centres. He and his department are highly secretive about what happens in these centres. It is extraordinarily difficult to visit them. The government was prepared to pay \$70,000,000 to settle a class action brought by asylum seekers detained on Manus Island. Neither the Minister nor the Department have contradicted the generally held opinion that they did not want the evidence and stories of official abuse that would have emerged to become public should the case have come to court!

Rita Panahi: *“To paint this compassionate country as a callous human rights abuser is yet another outrageous lie propagated by activists.”*

Response: It is the differential treatment of asylum seekers who arrive here by boat that is abhorrent and a marked contrast to how we Australians see ourselves as treating needy people. We abhor behavior that, for seemingly personal power-hungry ministerial ambitions, inflicts cruelty on vulnerable human beings. One can only hope that the Australian public is not misled, as is Ms Panahi, into approving behavior that is totally contrary to important human values to which we adhere.

How will Manus be judged in history?

The enduring impact of this eviction of the asylum seekers on Manus from the former detention centre is of the dignity and courage of the men who peacefully resisted the cruelty they were subjected to. They exhibited leadership and solidarity that is sadly missing in the Australian government that is persecuting them.

This situation and the events of the past weeks and years are reminiscent of the history of the indigenous people who walked off Cummeragunja in 1939. Cummeragunja mission was an Aboriginal reserve situated in Yorta Yorta country, near the Victorian town of Barmah. It was founded in 1888 by the New South Wales Government, with the intention of producing a farm on 1,800 acres, providing a means for the local Koori community to live self sustainably. Successive managers who were appointed by the colonial powers made such a dream impossible.

Cummeragunja was not only a lot of hard work for the indigenous people but it was not the secure home that other people might enjoy. The families who moved there worked hard for twelve years without pay on rations of flour, sugar tea and some meat, clearing the land and building the township. However, instead of gaining freehold title to their own blocks of land, as was customary for settlers at the time, they received what only amounted to ‘permissive occupancy of Crown lands.’ The people were never free—in their own country, if they came to visit their parents, they had to go and sign a book at the manager’s office and say how long they were going to stay. Their houses were destroyed if they went away from the station.

Eventually they had a ‘walk off’ over the river into Victoria (which was forbidden). Many of the descendants of these people still live in Echuca, Barmah and Shepparton.

Elements of the two histories that resonate are:

- The authority being exercised is illegitimate
- The treatment of one group of people by another is cruel and harsh.
- There is peaceful and dignified resistance by those oppressed.

And above all, the right of all human beings to freedom is being denied.



BASP Housing

Earlier in BASP's history, we considered providing housing as a small part of our outreach, it has grown to be a major component of what we do due to need. BASP continues to be contacted almost daily with requests for housing for people facing homelessness. We are unable to help them all.

We assist around 120 people at any one time, in 35 houses- some rented by BASP, some made available to BASP for use by asylum seekers and some in community members' own homes.

We take in many people who have no income and are waiting for Centrelink to be approved or to have their work rights approved and then finding a job.

Once they have income, the plan is to find private rental so that more people with no income can use the BASP housing. Finding affordable private housing is becoming increasingly challenging, especially for single men and women and for women with 1-2 children. The Centrelink payment does not cover the rent of \$250-300 pw plus utilities and basic living costs. Karin Butterfield, our real estate guru volunteer and Sue Goonan who works in the office 2 days a week, have persevered and done wonders in finding scarce accommodation. However, they would welcome any contacts with low cost housing opportunities.

Housing support is such an essential component to one's welfare. BASP received the following email from a counsellor of one of those we have been able to assist: "I wanted to say thank you so much for all the work you are doing to support people seeking asylum, especially the work you have done in the past few weeks to support people here from Nauru and Manus Island. I really wanted to share my absolute gratitude, especially as I have just spoken to a client who was going to be homeless on Monday and I understand you have somewhere for him to live. He is so very thankful, as am I."

A man came to us for help recently having come from Ethiopia for a conference and then being warned not to return to Ethiopia following political reprisals. He was greatly distressed at being unexpectedly separated from his wife and children, his business and his community. His assets had been frozen and he had no money. BASP has paid for a boarding house room for 2 weeks pending a room becoming available in a BASP house. John, a BASP volunteer was asked to make contact and befriend him. This has been so helpful for the man, helping him navigate Melbourne, getting to appointments and not sitting alone in a room. Marian, a volunteer who assists with resumes and employment opportunities, is working with him to find work.

A particular group we have been able to help are men from Manus Island and Nauru, who are in Australia for medical reasons. About three months ago they were suddenly told that they would be removed from community detention, where housing and a small weekly income had been provided. They would have to find accommodation elsewhere and they would receive no income. The fortitude of these men is remarkable. Many are keen to work, but they are often unable to work full time, due to medical appointments as well. For some, this is too much too quickly after years of inactivity and poor treatment. They are, however, keen to take on part time or casual opportunities and if this is not available, they are looking for voluntary work to provide structure to their weeks and to make a contribution to their new community. **If anyone has any job or suggestions for voluntary work, we'd be pleased to hear from you.**



Celebrating success



Two young women who live in two different BASP houses have completed their first year in tertiary education with top distinctions. These women arrived by boat with their families prior to July 2013 and have shown determination and ability to secure a scholarship for higher education and then excelling. They required housing to be close to the relevant university. We congratulate their efforts and will watch their progress with interest..

And anticipating success ...

We also have two other young people who have just completed their VCE. Both have worked extraordinarily hard and they are eagerly waiting to see if they are successful in getting a score that enables them to get into University in the course they have dreamed of—one wants to do medicine and the other, some aspect of theoretical physics! They can only do this with a scholarship—otherwise, because they are not yet permanent residents, overseas student fees would of course be an impossible hurdle.

Friendship and the difference it makes

A couple volunteered to befriend asylum seekers and have been connected with 3 men who are living in private rental - the first time they have been truly independent in their lives. They are still learning how to do this and the friendship of their volunteers is adding considerably to their positive adjustment. Not only with their visits, food and advice, but also taking them to the Melbourne Victory v Melbourne City soccer match and more recently, assisting one with employment. What a difference this has made to these men!

Getting a helping hand

SHEV visas are a form of temporary visa which people who have come to Australia over the past five years. Many of those people who have been waiting to have their claims processed over this time are now getting a SHEV. Any potential benefits from a five year SHEV is that a person has to live in certain postcode areas—all away from major cities. This means they have to consider moving to a regional/country area to work or study.

Karim and Khadijeh Afoozi, a couple who have two children and were recently given a SHEV, relocated to Ballarat in the hope of being able to satisfy the requirements of the SHEV. They couldn't find any employment.

BASP contacted John Crowley, the Principal of St Patricks in Ballarat. John is a long-time supporter of ours. The result has been a job for Karim at St Patricks and a very happy and relieved family.

A High Tea

A high tea, organised by Dana and Jan with the assistance of Leonie, was a great success. The food was amazing and the company excellent! Thanks to those who came and those who managed the event.





Kilbreda laptops

Some of the senior girls at Kilbreda have been amazing in helping BASP. They managed to get nearly 30 laptops that had been used in the school to be 'fixed up' and available for some of our asylum seeker friends. The laptops were x and loaded with Microsoft works. We have given most of them out.

A concert at St Georges Church in Malvern.

We had a most beautiful concert at St Georges on Saturday, 18th November.



The artists were Cath Connelly—celtic harp, Greg Hunt – violin, mandolin and Jules Vines—keyboard and vocal.

The experience was actually theatre at its best because the music inside the church was accompanied by a very loud storm outside with thunder and lightning and rain.

We are very grateful to all at St Georges for their ongoing support. Charles Tegner is our main contact with the community there but many others, including Reverend Canon Dr Colleen O'Reilly, who helped arrange the concert.

A significant birthday party

It was wonderful recently to be able to share a birthday celebration with Mortezar. The piece de resistance was a 'hamburger' cake. A Persian knife dance (traditional before the cutting of the cake), was performed by Mohamad Didashi.



For those who know these men, Mortezar is working in a factory making kitchen cupboards and Mohamad is learning the art of laying carpets.

Generosity and how much it helps.



Mark Northeast made a car available to an asylum seeker family a year or so ago, when he bought a new car. This clearly impressed his sister-in-law Amanda who has recently made her former car available too. This was given to a single mother from Iran, still waiting for her visa interview and decision and managing two small children. The car has made an enormous difference to her, especially in getting her younger child to the special school he needs, located a fair way from her home.

We have had another second hand car donated to us. This one went to a man not long out of detention who was actually getting married on the day we were negotiating the transfer! Brigid was trying to give him instructions about the transfer of registration and not listening to the poor man saying he was busy with getting ready to be married. It did get sorted out !!

Pat, John, Tom and Jeremy continue with the weekly food run to people without income. They deliver groceries from the donations received at BASP as well as fruit and vegetables provided by Second Bite. It is a wonderful service made possible by the donors of food and these volunteers so generous with their time delivering. Other asylum seekers come to the centre for assistance and take groceries home.



The Parish of St Brigid’s Mordialloc and St Louis de Montfort’s Aspendale again held a wonderful picnic day for individuals and families seeking asylum. This was held on October 29 at St Louis de Montfort's primary school, a perfect location with much to do for children and parents alike. The parish community which planned and provided the delicious, plentiful and varied spread for lunch must have worked for days in preparation and then doubly so on the day. John Meyer, in the donated bus from Simond’s Catholic College, collected 24 people from the west and northern suburbs. Others came by car or bus. It was a wonderful day for all, and one father, whose second child born on Nauru has a disability, said “we only ever go out when you invite us to such days.” Another mother, with twins, had never been confident to attend such an event. After 30 minutes of clinging to mum, the twins were off and playing on the playing area with the other kids. A joy to behold!



BASP thanks all in the parish for its generosity and for giving all those who came such a memorable day. We make special mention of John, who headed off at 8.30 to collect his passengers and arrived home at 6 after returning them home, to then start his own birthday celebrations.



John is one of our heroes! Each week John assists in collecting donated furniture and taking it to homes in need of it or storing it until we receive a request. Over the years John has asylum seekers help him with this and this has been a confidence builder and launching pad for some into paid work. He has recently had a young man assisting, who has been tentative and withdrawn in new situations. John has observed how he has come out of his shell considerably since doing these collections and seemed to revel in the conversation and attention he received recently when they were provided lunch by some of the Cluny sisters.

Hamid and family

Hamid is one of the men we have known for a long time. He used to live in Ardeer and since then he has been in Dandenong and eventually he was successful in getting his family from Afghanistan. He is pictured here coming from the airport!



The children are in school and Hamid says they are ‘more happy than you can imagine’.

Hamid has a tiling business and he is having a hard time—it is easy enough to get jobs—even big jobs but the story we hear over and over again is that subcontractors don't get paid. At least not on time and often enough they only get a small proportion of what they are owed. Since staff have to be paid this is a terrible burden on people employing others.

News that heartens us

Hi Sister Brigid,

I just want to let you know that i have found a job now and i am working as a welder.

Regards Ebiakata, Etchoko



We still need to keep the pantry stocked so the following are very much appreciated

Sugar , flour , tinned tomatoes, tins of fruit, Tuna (plain), Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, biscuits, honey, noodles, Toilet paper, Gladwrap, tinfoil, Tuna – large and small cans, Cans of tomatoes, Cans - Corn kernels, peas, Cans – Red kidney beans, Cans – fruit, cooking oil Long life milk, Tea and Coffee, Sugar, Cooking oil, Dates, Noodles and spaghetti, Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches, Lollies, Salt and pepper, Pegs for hanging out washing, Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger, Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste.

We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products. A very generous person is keeping us supplied with toilet paper.

Quite a number of families have small children, so disposable nappies and wipes are an ongoing need.

Vouchers are really appreciated eg. for Coles, Big W, Kmart or similar stores; this allows individuals and families the independence to buy something they really want and need.

As well as maintaining the pantry, Noelle, our amazing volunteer who organises all this assistance, will be making up hampers and delivering them for Christmas. To make this possible, **we ask that all items for these hampers be delivered by Friday, 8th December.**

For anyone wishing to make a donation, the Project Bank details are: Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603; NAB.

Please put your name on the entry and if possible send us a message so that we can send you a receipt. This could be a text message on 0438 001 515 or an email to jcaldwell@basp.org.au.

We thank all of you for the support and encouragement you give us. We hope that you are blessed with love and good family and community times over this Christmas time.



Financially we could not continue to give help without you. The words don't quite convey what we want to say to those of you who have given us so much and so regularly. We often say there are flip sides of our BASP life— a lot of sadness for what happens to asylum seekers in this country—and a lot of joy and amazement in the generosity of so many in our community. In the end that generosity must win as we seek a changed culture in political arenas.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)