

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 94 February 2020

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

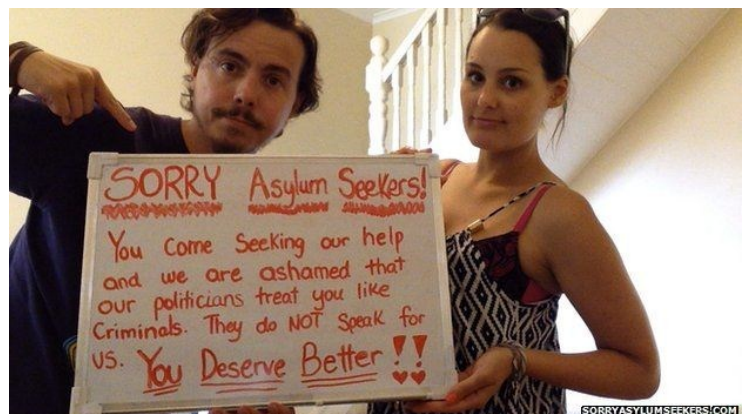
A sentiment many of us share—and captured here by Colleen Keating. Published in Eureka Street

we are sorry

there will come a time
when we bring these young ones
home from oblivion
name them
declare their age and their home of birth
admire and respect them
for their courage in their plight
if only we had the national imagination
and the heart
to do it now
for it will come to pass
a leader stands and exclaims
we are sorry for those who suffered
from our pacific solution
from their forced stay on Manus
for the damage done on Nauru
we are sorry about the temporary protection visa
for the policy of no visa
for the tough and mean treatment at our hands
in your moment of most desperate plight.
and the people now scarred
by loss of homelands
and the dash of hope they held
will look up
listen
and struggle on
— Colleen Keating

We are sorry, not just for the off-shore regime of Manus Island and Nauru— but for the ongoing outrageous set of policies that mean people seeking protection and many of those who have refugee status in Australia are treated abominably.

Now is surely the time to strongly advocate for legislation and new directions in Australia's immigration culture and practices.



Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

More than ever we need change: an opportunity as UN groups visit Australia in the next month

We have lived with the immigration regime we have for twenty years and there is a danger it is now the norm. In particular, we need changes to the immigration detention system that is incredibly cruel and capricious.

In March United Nations Inspectors are visiting Australia to look at the use of detention in Australia. *The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture will be examining the Australian immigration detention system for the first time as a result of Australia agreeing in 2017 to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT).*

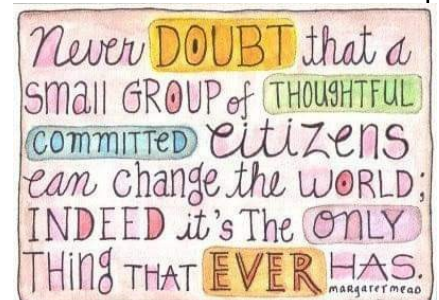
This requires that each Australian state and territory, and the Commonwealth – is required to set up a National Preventive Mechanism (NPM), a monitoring body to visit and report on places of detention, including youth detention, aged care, disability and prisons as well as immigration detention centres. The UN Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture (SPT) is visiting to review progress on the establishment of monitoring processes (including the involvement of civil society) *and some places of detention will also be inspected.* It is understood that the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention will also visit immigration detention centres.

The situation of refugees and people seeking asylum in closed detention has seen an increasing level of control exercised over detainees and those who seek to visit and support them. Detention has become more punitive and there are major concerns that people are too easily detained, that they do not have recourse to appeal, and are essentially held indefinitely.

With two international human right bodies visiting to look at issues of detention, we see this time as a unique opportunity to push for much needed policy changes.

We need changes that address:

- Impacts of arbitrary and indefinite detention
- Unjust and cruel processes including detention for spurious reasons, inadequate review processes and deliberate separations from families.
- Health and mental health impacts
- Unnecessarily restrictive conditions and practices
- Secrecy, lack of accountability, and lack of public scrutiny



Australians generously respond to the bush fire crisis. (Letter sent to The Age in January by Rita Hayes who works with BASP)

The hearts of Australians have gone out to the numerous families and individuals suffering from the devastation brought about by these seemingly never-ending bushfires. The resilience of those affected, and the heroic response of firefighters and numerous volunteers, have been almost unbelievable. A man was heard to say, as he and his family looked at their burnt out home: "I feel like a refugee in my own country". As we look at these heartbreaking scenes perhaps we can spare a thought also for the many refugees fleeing for their lives, trying to find any means of escape from danger. Perhaps, also, we can realise how impossible it is for war refugees and those escaping people who want to harm them, to try to get visas, to reach a safe means of transport, to extract their official documents from a bombed out home. We trust our generosity to all affected by the fires is not just because we are helping Australians. In Martin Luther King's words: "An individual has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow horizons of his particular individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

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

BASP Discussion Session 1 – 2020

Thursday 5th March , 7.30 – 9.30 pm

Venue:

St Joseph's Hall

(beside the bluestone church)

274 Rouse St , Port Melbourne

The complexity of the visa system that determines the fate of those seeking protection in Australia

A panel of asylum seekers and a migration agent

We will hear of the challenges facing individuals and the lack of consistency and justice in the processing of applications for protection.

There will be an update from BASP. We will share good news and challenges.

Save the date

**Walk for Justice
Palm Sunday April 5th**

2pm State Library, Swanston Street

Please start planning to come with family and friends.

**We need to give a significant message to the
Government**

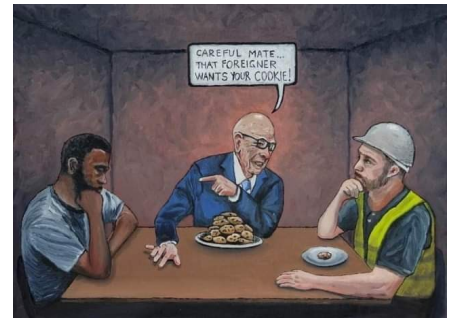
Cost of Australia's punitive refugee policies

According to figures compiled by the Refugee Council of Australia and published in March 2019, in the previous financial year the annual cost of detention per person was as follows:

- more than \$573,000 a year to hold an asylum seeker in offshore detention;
- more than \$346,000 to hold them in detention in Australia;
- \$103,343 for an asylum seeker to live in community detention in Australia; and
- \$10,221 for an asylum seeker to live in the community on a bridging visa while their claim is processed.

The Department spent \$111 million on legal costs to challenge positive decisions for asylum seekers in 2018-19.

The report built on a 2016 publication by UNICEF Australia and Save the Children stated that Australia's policies of onshore and offshore detention, and of turning back boats, had cost \$9.6 billion between 2013 and 2016.



How is Australia viewed overseas?

A small piece from an article "How Australia's love affair with coal looks from afar, and why it matters" by Klaus Neumann 4th February 2010: [Inside Story](#)

[This is in the context of reflecting on how Australia is seen in the EU, particularly Germany]. "Australia's Indigenous policies — particularly the Howard government's refusal to issue an apology and successive governments' refusal to enter negotiations about a treaty — and its asylum seeker policies have scandalised many people outside Australia. Then, too, the main response was one of bewilderment. Why is a country as affluent as Australia behaving in such a mean-spirited manner? "

All major faith traditions teach the imperative to reach out in friendship and care to those in need

In December last year an unusual crucifix greeted visitors to the Vatican.

The figure of Jesus is draped in a life jacket, found adrift off the coast of Libya and presented to Pope Francis by the rescuers.



"A new death caused by injustice," the Pope denounced, installing the crucifix in the presence of about 30 refugees from the Greek island of Lesbos. "For it is injustice that forces many migrants to leave their land. It is injustice that forces them to cross deserts and suffer abuse and torture in detention camps. It is injustice to reject them and make them die at sea. "

With clear and chosen words, he once again denounced the indifference towards refugees. "How can we not listen to the desperate cry of so many brothers and sisters who would rather face a stormy sea than die slowly in Libyan detention camps, places of torture and despicable slavery? How can we remain indifferent to the abuse and violence of which they are innocent victims, leaving them at the mercy of unscrupulous traffickers?"

"Our inaction is a sin," he said, thanking "all those who decided not to remain indifferent and to do everything possible to help the unfortunate, without asking too much about how or why the poor ended up on their path."

"We must help and save, because we are all responsible for the lives of our neighbours," the Pope said.

An update on some aspects of Australia's refugee situation

- As the large group of people seeking asylum move through the application stages, all who are rejected at the first two 'hoops' have only the option of appealing to the Court for a further attempt to prove that they are genuine refugees. The first two stages are dependent on a lot of factors that in many cases could really be described as luck! The time taken for a Court date is now usually more than two years. During this time they often have no income, no work rights and may be ineligible for Medicare. We believe there are more than six thousand people in this cohort. Many of those who come to BASP for assistance are among them.
- The number of people in community detention has decreased but currently there seems little movement for this group. There are still about 800 in Australia and of these about 270 in Victoria. These people have no Bridging Visa, they have no work or study rights and live always with uncertainty. They get 89% of Newstart so are very poor. They have constraints about where they can go and have to constantly report to Immigration authorities.
- We understand that the Federal Government money given to the agencies providing income support which included money for books and uniforms for school aged children, has been cut. BASP has received many requests for assistance for these school requisites. Luckily we have been able to help because of a Brigidine Education Fund that is supported by some very generous donors.
- 663 people have been resettled in the US and another 250 have been accepted but are still waiting. There are about 400 people still just waiting—194 in PNG—(those who were in Manus Island are now in Port Moresby) and 251 on Nauru. These sick distressed refugees in Moresby and Nauru are getting sicker and more hopeless. The Minister Peter Dutton said in answer to a question from a reporter that he wanted everyone off both islands. "Tomorrow. I don't want anyone in these places". We suggest he ring Jacinda Ardern !
- Nearly 600 people are held in detention centres across the country after their visa was cancelled on character grounds. Often the problems arise from mental health issues e.g. threatening to blow up the immigration department building. Or for lack of understanding of Australian law e.g. driving an unregistered car or for criminal action that does not normally mean jail e.g. shoplifting. It is worrying that the mandatory nature of cancellations means that people are detained without consideration of the context, and are forced to wait on a review of the cancellation decision only once they are detained, and often after months or years in detention.
- So many people both in detention and in the community are waiting for the Minister to make a decision. The extraordinary level of Ministerial discretion and intervention, with the Minister being able to overturn the decisions of an independent tribunal or to avoid the Tribunal's review by personally making decisions, is a big problem.
- In August 2019 the PNG government arbitrarily detained about fifty rejected asylum seekers in the Australian-funded Bomana Immigration Centre on the outskirts of Port Moresby. They were virtually incommunicado in raising serious concerns about their health and safety. These detainees had no access to phones or the internet, unless they have agreed to assisted voluntary return to their own homeland. Needless to say their agreement could scarcely be said to be voluntary. Bomana has now been closed—some returned to their own country and most are still in PNG. It must be noted that while it is claimed they were all rejected in their claim for protection many did not apply and the others were refused in what was a less than fair process.
- For a long time Canada has had a very generous Sponsorship scheme to help refugees resettle in their country. It has both Government and private support. Currently there are two groups who are offering help to resettle people from PNG, and Nauru and those who came to Australia through Medevac. Only those who have not been offered settlement in another country are eligible. A group in Australia aims to raise \$4 million for specific costs for this re-settlement that covers housing, employment, budget and support structures. The amount of \$18,400 will be placed in a dedicated account for the applicant to use for living costs for the first year.. The Canadian Government has to grant a visa to each person and this will take time—maybe a year to eighteen months.

Accommodation

BASP continues to assist a number of vulnerable people facing homelessness. In December an agency referred two family groups for urgent housing. They were eligible for some funding for rent but without a house they could not access this assistance. People without a job or any rental history have no



chance of getting a house. One couple had arrived from DR Congo, the husband with a little English, the wife then 38 weeks pregnant and no money. The other family, mother, baby, grandmother had no money, no chance to get a lease. BASP agreed to rent 2 properties and this enabled the couples to get a place to live.

In January, a Somali mother of 3, including a 3 week premature baby was about to be discharged with no place to go. Fortunately a woman had made her late mother's home in Caulfield available at low rent (\$200 pw) so we were able to house her.



Overall BASP is currently supporting 163 people with housing.

Adopting a house

Several volunteers have begun 'adopting' one of our houses, to not only support those and befriend those who live there but also to keep alert to the needs and maintenance of the house. This has been a great benefit to the residents of the houses and to the BASP co-ordinators.



Alanna has also taken residents on outings

St Cecilia's parish in Glen Iris has 'adopted' the Glen Iris house, with Trudy and David being the go-betweens. This has provided friendship and support to the 3 women living there as well as very practical assistance in getting to appointments, home and garden improvements, advice and even making contact with a doctor. This has made a world of difference to the women in becoming familiar with the area and feeling included and welcome.

Chris, another volunteer, had taken on a house in Dandenong, engaging well with the men who live there, being able to facilitate a smooth transition with a new house mat, and chasing Libby to get a lawn mower and TV there. These volunteers become the eyes and ears of BASP which enhances the experience of the people in the houses.

Surely an anomaly—another one!

Recently two incidents that put side by side make one wonder. Brigid visited MITA lately and was told she could not visit because she was wearing sandals (she did know this rule but had forgotten). It was explained by the Serco officer that this was an Occupational Health and Safety issue. A few days later a young man who had been re-detained in Immigration detention for an 'offence' that was clearly a mental health issue and who had been in detention for about two years, was released without warning. He was not given any money and apart from saying he had friends in Dandenong there was no assurance that he had anywhere to live. He got a taxi which cost \$100 to go to Dandenong. Luckily he met someone there who paid for the fare.

Was releasing a young man who has had serious mental health challenges a bigger Occupational Health and Safety issue than Brigid's lack of shoes?

A touch of compassion would help

A quiet, gentle man, a national of Chad, arrived in Australia in July 2012. He was detained at the airport, detained for a year or so and released on a Bridging Visa. He has spent a lot of the time since then without a Visa. He spent a lot of time in BASP provided accommodation and we have a lot of regard for him. We have found him a decent man in all respects. Whenever he could, he has always worked—often in dirty and hard jobs.

In Mohsen's (a pseudonym) words:

I was born in North Chad, in Moso Kori and grew up there. My father is deceased. I have a mother and two unmarried sisters aged 29 and 25 years who live in Chad. I have no formal education and have no education apart from Koran studies between the ages of 6-11. As a child, I worked selling water to help support my family. I then worked as a mechanic assistant and then a personal assistant/driver. I am married with 3 daughters aged 12, 10 and 8 years. My wife and children are in Saudi Arabia, which is where I lived before coming to Australia. I moved to Saudi Arabia from Chad in September 2004. I married in Saudi Arabia and my daughters were born there. I have no legal rights to reside in Saudi Arabia. I cannot return to Chad because I fear I will be killed or seriously harmed if I do so.

Mohsen still has a bullet in his leg and indications of a broken leg. These injuries happened in Chad when as a teenager he was captured by the Chadian army and shot. No-one denies this and there is medical evidence of the incident.

Mohsen has been rejected at every point of the process and the main reason given has been that the member or judge did not believe him. After his last rejection he is so sad and dejected.

As a country Chad is still quite lawless and dangerous for many people. It is unstable internally and its borders with Sudan and Libya mean there is a lot of threats from neighbours.

Refugees are being locked in hotels in both Melbourne and Brisbane after being brought to Australia under the repealed 'medivac' law.



Men at the windows of the Mantra when nearly 200 people gathered outside to sing Christmas carols.

Sick refugees who were brought to Australia for medical help have instead been detained in two inner-city hotels for months on end, in some cases not getting the treatment they need. There are about eighty men in Brisbane (Kangaroo Point Central Hotel & Apartments) and fifty in Melbourne (Preston Mantra Bell City Hotel).

Having spent over half a decade in offshore detention after seeking asylum in Australia by boat, they were disqualified from settling in Australia. The men in the hotel were brought to Australia after developing health conditions that could not be treated in detention on Nauru or in Papua New Guinea.

We have visited some of the men in the Mantra. They are dispirited and bored, spending all day in a very confined space. There is limited opportunity for exercise and the same long term lack of any certainty about their future.

At Christmas time the Grandmothers for Refugees organised singing of carols below in the courtyard of the hotel and the men said they felt very happy to see the support from the community.



The community of Kildare Ministries

The schools and community works of Kildare Ministries support BASP in a variety of ways, enhancing the benefits to people seeking asylum and in the



The delivery

process getting a better understanding of the needs and issues involved.

The VCAL students from St Joseph's, Echuca arrived early one morning in term 4 to hear about BASP's work. After this they returned to school and planned a Snack Attack fund

raiser. They collected a car load of snacks for children in asylum seeker families to take to school. A wonderful effort.

BASP was also delighted to receive a huge load of goods from the girls from Clonard in October. We enjoyed having them bring the goods in in person.

Clonard staff also rolled up their sleeves to help the BASP Christmas party cater for over 80 people at the end of the year. The staff gave their time at the weekend to prepare all the salads for the day.

Killester brought their usual multiple baskets of food and practical gifts. Marian West Sunshine also contributed to the hampers. And St Josephs contributed vouchers for Christmas gifts. .

Snack Attack
 Help the Brigidine Sisters make little kids happy.
 From Friday 1st - Thursday 15th November
 Please place donated snack food in the box provided in LMG.
*Children of Asylum Seekers are going hungry at school and VCAL students want this to change!
 Your donations will help children to eat what the other kids eat at school.*
The Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project works with thousands of individuals and families to provide housing, emergency food, household goods and moral support.
DONATE NOW



A "thank you" from one of the volunteers reminds us of **the two way nature of the volunteering activities**. "Thank you all for the beautiful Christmas celebration. ..this thank you .. is full of love and gratitude for all you do and for the privilege of working with you in supporting our friends who are seeking safety and freedom in our land."

Another volunteer sent a similar message after starting her visits to a mother and daughter who are greatly stressed due to health issues and the uncertainty of their future. "For me it is a privilege to meet with them and do anything I can to assist. I feel blessed that you gave me the assignment"

Catholic Church Insurances (CCI) called offering a days volunteering work by 2 of their staff. The day they chose was very hot but they persevered helping with 2 very overgrown gardens in 2 houses. Many thanks Paul and Summit.

BASP was assisted over January by Huy, a young Redemptorist who was available each day. He was willing to tackle any task and helped greatly in driving asylum seekers to services, assisting John with furniture deliveries and house set-ups, befriending isolated men, having a coffee and running errands. He enjoyed the experience and considered it had enhanced his understanding of issues facing asylum seekers.



Aspendale Picnic.

The parish of St Brigid's and St Louis de Montfort held its annual picnic for asylum seekers and refugees and it was another great success. The parishioners provided a feast for all and the school provides an ideal location for loads of activities and fun.



John is always there to help.



A success story...with many helpers

YarZar desperately needed a job - but it was two weeks before Christmas.

What about fruit picking? According to the media, growers are crying out for labour.

That might well be the case ,,, but mostly you need to find accommodation and have transport to the farm. Not something that most asylum seekers can organise.

But after many phone calls we found a Backpackers hostel near Mildura that organises jobs and drives workers to the farm!

So after an 8 hour trip with two trains and two buses... Yar Zar arrived.

After 2 weeks, local farmers have now heard about what a great worker he is..."They are competing to get him to work on their farm"

In October and November, about 45 families enjoyed a weekend at the Doxa camp in Malmsbury. This was arranged by Marisa Cerettelli, a BASP volunteer – a huge logistical exercise to get everyone at the meeting point and planning the weekend activities. However all that hard work was rewarded by the delight of all those who attended.

As Marisa said:

I can assuredly say the camp was a great success in giving the participants a weekend of serenity joy and camaraderie, for adults as well as the children.



The camp facilities were well used. We did archery, bush walks, played in the gym. In the games room the men congregated playing many games billiard and table tennis.

Others played uno (with lots of cheating), puzzles, crafts,

hairdressing and beauty sessions.

The ladies went home with additional pieces of clothing that we provided.

Recipes and advice was sought from the chef.

An error in the booking of the bus pick up time allowed us more time and an additional afternoon snack of cheese, dips crackers and fruit. The departure's hugs kisses and thank you were sealed with



their traditional yodelling that we had practised the night before while sitting around the fire singing and roasting marshmallows.



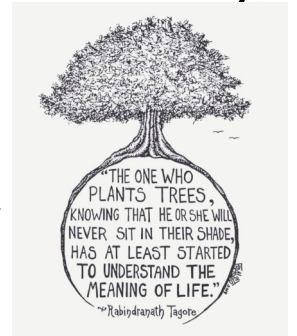
Good News Stories



Ruby is 7 and is learning to play the cello. She did some busking prior to Christmas and donated \$100 that she collected to BASP.

She sent this lovely card too!

It is wonderful to see such empathy from children.



School Holiday activities

Community members provided funds, ideas and opportunities for school holiday activities for children of people seeking asylum. The beneficiaries were all delighted with the opportunity to provide a day of activity and entertainment to their child/children. While most families just manage on their low income with support from organisations like ours, it is rare to have treats such as those donated.

The Bayside group (BRASA) and the Uniting Church, Ormond enabled many to have a day out.

The zoo was a great favourite, enabling 8 families to attend for a day. While the children are free in the holidays, fees still apply to the adults. Bounce trampoline was also popular with 3 different families taking up this option and another 3 visiting the Collingwood Children's Farm. Another family loved the fees to let them go to the local aquatic centre.

Having a non-specified donation also gave us the flexibility to fund swimming lessons for 2 youngsters who had never been swimming.

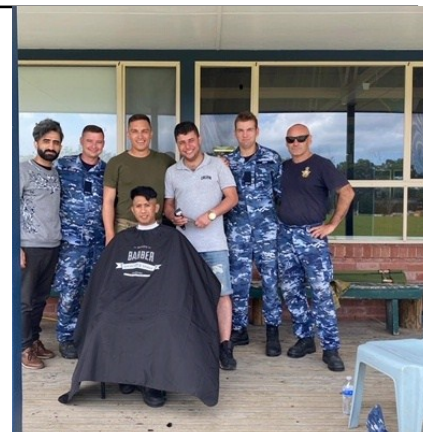
The group 'Befriend a Child' also compiled information about free activities available over the school holidays as well as some which incurred a fee. This was circulated widely and we understand a number took up the free options. The group offered to pay for anyone wanting the fee charging activities. This was taken up by one single mother and her 6 year old.

A couple who live in Dromana offered a day trip to their house for lunch and a day at the beach. A family of 5 took up this opportunity and greatly enjoyed the experience.

Barber stories.

Ashraf is part owner of the Perfect Barbershop in Johnston street Collingwood. He was a finalist in a Victorian Most Promising Business Award for new enterprises. A wonderful achievement for anyone, let alone someone who came here from offshore detention and lives from one 6 month visa to the next.

The other is Esmael who has a barber shop in Avondale Heights. When the fires were on, he contacted Red Cross and asked if he could help. He went to Orbost and cut the hair of the soldiers helping from Australia and Fiji.





The St Finbar's parishioners again provided many wonderful hampers at Christmas as did several others. These were then delivered to over 90 households by volunteer drivers in the couple of weeks before Christmas.



It gave such joy to so many individuals and families who received them.

We had many texts and emails thanking us in words and emojis.

These few reflect many.

From one of the men in a share house: "I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU MADE ME WELCOME Motto of the Century..."

We've received the Christmas gift and shared among ourselves and thank you so much for your unprecedented kindness!!!I'll always thank you all for making me felt welcome!!!Happy Christmas to you all!!!!"

From a mother and her 2 daughters: "Thank you very much for the Xmas hamper... It's not only a hamper with gifts inside it, it's also a hamper in which we found lots of love and endless happiness for me and my kids."

From a single man " Thank us so much u get me surprise. I don't know how to thank u. thanks for everything"

A heartfelt thanks to all involved.



The Christmas party is always good fun. It is a chance for some of our amazing supporters to meet each other and those BASP is able to support.

One day we will have a big party because our country's treatment of the whole refugee population is humane and decent. What a Christmas that would be!

The joy of learning English

Gail who is one of the BASP volunteers has been teaching Anna English and other social and practical skills like writing her own name. Sometimes they go to a cafe for a coffee and Anna asks for the coffee. Recently they had a meal where Anna learned to order from the menu. This is a source of great delight for Anna.



Jurina and her two daughters are living in a house made available through Star of the Sea College and the girls have started school at Star of the Sea and St James Primary school. Jurina wrote: *From today, girls have started going to new schools. I wanted to share this happy moment with you all so I sent you a picture.*

We are really short of food in the pantry at present. We would appreciate some help in re-stocking.



Sugar , flour , cooking oil, Cans of fruit and tomatoes.

Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, honey, noodles, tuna, basmati rice, dates, jam

Gladwrap, tinfoil, pegs for hanging out washing,

Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches, Salt and pepper, Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger,

Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste and toothbrushes. Soap, deodorants

Toilet paper

We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products.



We have enough cans of beans, tinned soup, beetroot and corn.

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.

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 are very grateful for all the help we get from our supporters. You are amazing.



Over the Christmas time this was particularly true. Amid all the commercialisation of this period, the reaching out to people who are suffering a level of destitution and poverty combined with their loneliness and isolation, is a wonderful reminder of what the time is actually about.

Some groups have made an ongoing commitment to bring food and household goods on a regular basis and some have made an agreement to bring particular items that we have most need of. One generous person sends us a big box of toilet paper every month.

May 2020 be a wonderful year for you all and may it bring relief in the form of new legislation and a changed culture for our friends who are seeking safety and a reasonable life.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)