

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 90 November 2018

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

There is a great temptation in our society to divide people on 'goodie/baddie' and 'nice/not so nice' lines. This tends to blur the truth that most of us are usually good but not always, usually nice but not on every occasion. Those seeking asylum are a cross section of humanity and they also mirror this reality.

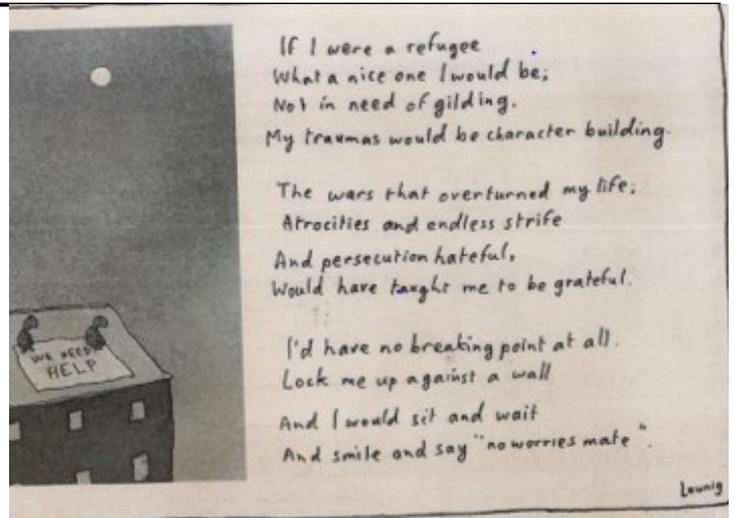
Exercising justice is often uncomfortable because it cuts across so many of our pre-judgments about what is good and what is bad.

Trying to reconcile the civil law with a belief that there are more 'greys' in life than 'black and whites' is not always easy. We have a section of our Migration Act (501) which provides for refusal to grant a visa, if the visa applicant does not satisfy the Minister, or their delegate, in satisfying the character test.

The character test refers to a range of character matters that the Minister or their delegate may have regard for in deciding whether to refuse or cancel a visa. These matters include having a criminal record. So, how much room is there for forgiveness in this? The Lord's Prayer is still said in Parliament – 'forgive us as we forgive others'. Perhaps this should be a lot scarier than it is!

Some of the things that are part of the whole 'system' of dealing with both the individual people seeking protection from persecution and groups of people seeking safety, challenge our understanding and application of norms of morality and justice. How much do we take into account the history of colonisation, war, poverty, lack of education, mental illness and such determinants of people's behaviour? Around Australia people are held behind closed doors with next to no rights and with no public awareness.

Our first response both personally and as a nation may well be precautionary, avoiding taking any risks in the face of the uncertainties of the future. It is tempting to sweep under the carpet the reality that, on a global level, the mass movement of people is about a division that separates the poorest and most vulnerable from the most privileged. It is tempting to accept policies that benefit us to the detriment of others. We need a system where paradox is honoured, vulnerability is protected, questions are respected and dogmatism gives way to trust and dialogue. We must never give up trying to achieve this.



Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible



Money matters

BASP has never directly asked for money before. We have been fortunate to enjoy your support and that of others in the community for many years. Up until recently, the donations we have received have covered the needs of those seeking our help.

For the first time in our history, we are looking for additional funds because our expenses are higher and our donations are lower than in previous years. We need this in order to continue the support we are currently giving to those seeking asylum, and if possible to assist the growing number facing destitution in coming months.

The sector, including BASP, is facing unprecedented demands due to changes in government policies. Some people who were previously able to get SRSS i.e. 89% Newstart, are systematically having these benefits stopped, whether the family or individual is capable of work or able to secure a job. People are having work rights stopped or not granted, with no consistency in how this is applied. No assistance is given until the initial substantive visa expires- affecting many, especially women on spouse visas needing to remove themselves and their children from family violence. With the safety net provided by SRSS removed many face destitution and homelessness. BASP is working with the other agencies to best utilise our resources but all are at capacity and are aware an increased demand of significant proportions is looming.

BASP's current monthly outgoings are:

\$20,000 per month for emergency relief- this is \$100 per person per week for food, travel, phone

\$20, 000 per month for housing

\$10,000 per month for legal costs, education and training, interpreting and other assistance

Currently, we house around 110 people at any one time. This is through a variety of arrangements.

36 people are in 8 houses gifted for our use and no rent is required. BASP covers the utilities and the basic expenses of the residents

29 people are in 9 houses rented by BASP which pays the rent and other costs.

15 are in 6 parish/religious houses where BASP may provide support to the residents but has no expenses associated with the housing

15 are in 4 houses leased by BASP but where the rent and other costs are paid by the residents or other sources.

13 people are living in 11 homes with community hosts.

BASP's involvement varies from minimal to significant.

In the past, people in BASP housing have moved into private rental when benefits or work has enabled them to do so. The current changes mean many in the houses now are unable to move on.

We are aware the sector as a whole is lobbying governments to help address these issues but from experience we know this will not happen quickly- if at all. We are most appreciative of the many generous donations we continue to receive.

The new BASP Board will be considering new ways to increase our income and we would welcome any creative ideas from our existing supporters.

We look forward to continuing to meet the needs of individuals and families who, without your help, would be homeless and hungry.

Children off Nauru? An end to cruelty?

Early in November the Federal Government announced that it would remove children and some family members from Nauru and bring them to Australia. This reflects a shift in public sentiment brought about as a result of years of campaigning by community groups, large charities, lawyers representing refugees and more recently, health professionals and sympathetic individual politicians. Currently there are fewer than twenty five children still on Nauru.

There is no indication that the Government has made this decision because they want to. Just a couple of weeks ago (at the same time they were saying they would bring children to Australia) the Government fought a case in the Federal Court to try and block the court's authority to order people to be removed from Nauru. The Government lost. 135 people, including 47 children have reportedly been brought to Australia since 15th October of this year. Of these, only 49 were removed by the Government without legal intervention by asylum seekers advocates. The Australian Department of Home Affairs has spent at least \$780,000 since July last year seeking to block court applications for urgent medical transfers.



The decision is of course very welcome but it is happening with a degree of callous disregard for the welfare of the families. Some children are being hospitalised on arrival for psychiatric and related health issues. They stay there for a few weeks until they are physically stabilised. Usually one parent stays with them or is taken daily by guards to the hospital from the detention centre.

Others, including family members are being put into detention in mainland detention centres or in motels where they are locked into a room and closely guarded for twenty four hours a day. Very few have been released into the community. Children have not been enrolled in school. Our fear is that the deleterious effects of long term and arbitrary detention is being repeated on the mainland. There is absolutely no reason why these families are not being housed in the community with a chance to establish some form of normal life.

There are still families where adult members are separated even after the whole family is in Australia.

Don't think people are safe because 'we have stopped the boats'!

Helen Davidson, writing in the Guardian says that about 13,800 refugees from 49 countries in Indonesia have no basic rights and are living in indefinite limbo and uncertainty. Instead of interceptions and disruptions of potential boat journeys, the Australian government should work with the Indonesian government to ensure refugees have the right to work, education and healthcare, and can remain in Indonesia safely until they find another solution.

Indonesia and Australian authorities have stopped at least 2,525 people from getting boats to come to Australia. Meanwhile Australia is cutting funding to IOM, a body responsible for giving basic necessities to those stranded in Indonesia. The Australian government announced it was cutting funding to the IOM, saying it did not want Indonesia to be a "pull factor" for asylum seekers.

This is not counting those in the boats that have been turned back while attempting the crossing. As at May of this year, 32 boats with 800 people have been turned back.

You are all invited to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project Christmas party on Sunday 16th 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: queries@basp.org.au

Cabrini Outreach has provided a house in Richmond for BASP's use for 4 months. This has been wonderful for a newly arrived young man who has been able to secure a job..

A mum and her toddler are in a self contained unit at the rear.

2 other men have moved in to be close to their work places where work starts early before public transport can get one of them to the factory, if he lived too far away.

All the men have the opportunity to save during this time so they will have the bond and first month's rent to move into affordable private rental in the new year.

This was also the plan for the mum. However, her work rights have been cut following a rejection at the tribunal. Her appeal in the Federal Circuit Court is likely to be in 2020 or 2021. How short-sighted - or mean?- to cut her off from working and also from benefits. BASP will seek alternative supported housing for her and her son.

Abere- one of the men in this house - works in a factory in Richmond. He has a BASP volunteer who visits each week to help his English improve and to provide friendship. Both were delighted recently when Abere won the Employee of the month. Well done Abere!



A visit to a detention centre

The place is the Melbourne Immigration Transit centre (MITA). It is 6pm on a Friday evening. I note with a wry sense of the absurd that there are guards around the perimeter of the fence and they are positioned about 10 metres apart. There are many of these guards because the fence is long. And as well, the fence is at least 5 metres high! And it is the outside fence with several other fences inside it. To say the least, the security measures seem like overkill.

I make my way to the button to press to say who I am and to ask to come in. After determining that my name is on the list of those allowed to visit tonight I am able to enter and proceed to reception. I leave my things in a locker, provide the 100 point documentation to assure my identity is still the same (I have been visiting detention centres for 18 years). I go through the drug testing machine.

Inside the visiting area I am welcomed shyly by a man I have requested to see. I get to talk to the others in the space – although this is strictly not permitted. A more than usually kind officer allows such interaction although he feels obliged on a number of occasions during the 2 hours I am able to visit to tell people to go back to their own tables.

I see men from Bangladesh who have been in detention for nearly 6 years. I talk to a woman with a baby being visited by the father of the child - he is in the community. I see a woman who came to Australia with her brother and he has just been released and she is still waiting hoping to get out soon because she is older than her brother and has much better English. I meet a woman who just won a case at the Federal Court a few weeks ago and does not know when or if this means she will be allowed to leave detention. An old man who comes from Afghanistan comes and sits at the table. He has very little English and I have seen him many times over a couple of years. We cannot converse much but he obviously just likes the company. Several men who have been in MITA for years say Hi and one tells me he wants to see me by myself. I pull my chair a few feet away and he tells me that he has new health issues but he wont go to an outside doctor because he has to go in handcuffs. He is a totally passive man usually and this is an unusual defiance which I marvel at.

I feel a sense of guilt and shame. Why can't I do something more for these people? Why can't we challenge the legality of the detention of these people in the Australian courts?

My friend tells me 'I can't sleep and I am depressed but I am not going to take sleeping pills or anti-depressants. They will drive me mad.' He tells me that he wants to get out of detention and prove to Australia that he is a good person and will contribute to the Australian community. I think 'How dare we as a country make people have to beg for acceptance?' A deep sense of resentment wells up inside me.

I look around the room and know that all of these people have been called illegal by Ministers of Immigration. How dare they characterise people as illegal, when they have not committed a crime. How dare they use the word to justify indefinite detention?

The whole process seems to me steely and unforgiving, destined to rob people of hope and, in the end, of any belief in their own ability to help themselves or anyone else. We need a complete overhaul of the mandatory detention of asylum seekers who have arrived without proper documentation. The truth is there are people who cannot get such documentation.

- Brigid Arthur

Changing governance for BASP

BASP has been incorporated as Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project Inc. Prior to this, the Project acted under the auspices of the Brigidine Association.

BASP is now part of Kildare Ministries which comprises the educational and community works formerly governed by the Brigidine and the Presentation Sisters. Kildare Ministries offers secondary school education in ten schools across Victoria, NSW, Queensland and South Australia, and three community services (BASP, Wellsprings and Presentation Family Centre, Balnarring).

The Brigidine Sisters will continue to support BASP in the same ways they have for the past 18 years. We will continue to work in the same way as we have in the past. The new legal entity gives us a solid framework for the future.

The members of the new Board are:
Julie Francis (Chair)
Norman Katende (Deputy Chair)
Mark Northeast (Treasurer)
Joshua Lourensz
Margaret Hill
Cecilia Merrigan
Julie Catalano is the Board Secretary
Libby Saunders and Brigid Arthur are the Coordinators



Our first Board meeting (missing Cecilia Merrigan, Mark Northeast and Julie Catalano)

BASP has had a loyal Council over the past years and we thank them.
Brigid Arthur, Bill Armstrong, Anne Boyd, Catherine Kelly, Delia Bradshaw, Jude Caldwell, Margaret Cassidy, Louise Cleary, Margaret Fyfe, Lorna Hannan, Maureen Minahan, Kevin Peoples, Libby Saunders, Helen Toohey



BASP Council members from 2004. Original members, Catherine Kelly and Maureen Minahan have died. (Missing: Lorna Hannan and Louise Cleary)

This is from a U3A writing group member and sent to BASP.

Memorandum to an alien anthropologist: to explain the concepts of hope and love. Thanks for the inspiration.

'Look for the poorest, the dispossessed, the disempowered and the disregarded. You will find them walking with babies in their arms; staggering with old people on their backs. They are climbing over hills; struggling through mountain ranges; wading through rivers. They are crammed onto leaky boats devoid of fresh water and fresh food; devoid of sanitary arrangements; devoid of safety. They are beset by pirates; they are beset by armed men in uniforms.

Without love, without hope, how would they endure?

Where the last cup of drinking water is apportioned, the last cup of rice is shared; where the last scrap of spare cloth is given to the mother of a newborn; where someone cradles the head of a dying man when no other help is forthcoming: surely, this is where you will find love and hope.'

Bitter sweet

Recently we caught up with Wilfred and Ebiakata from South Cameroon. They are two quite wonderful young men. It was a beautiful day and as we sat in the sunshine we talked about how they were getting on and also how their country was being ravaged by internal warfare. Roughly 20% of the Cameroon's population of 24.6 million people are Anglophone. The majority are Francophone. The unfair domination of French-speaking politicians in government has long been the source of conflict.

The crisis came to a head in late 2016 when lawyers, joined by teachers and others with similar grievances, led protests in major western cities demanding that the integrity of their professional institutions be protected and their minority rights respected.

President Paul Biya responded by deploying troops to the region and blocking internet access. When peaceful demonstrations were met with violent repression it exacerbated tensions and escalated the conflict to a national political crisis. Currently the situation is dire. My friends describe what is happening as genocide. It definitely seems that widespread brutality is occurring. More than 20,000 people have fled to neighbouring Nigeria, and an estimated 160,000 are displaced within Cameroon.



Currently fifteen African countries are involved in war, or are experiencing post-war conflict and tension. In West Africa, the countries include Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo. In East Africa, the countries include Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda.

It is easy to forget that the people here from these countries have been victims of long internal wars and long conflicts and that they have families still trapped in the same circumstances they left. Wilfred and Ebiakata were so keen to show me maps and to talk about their own families back home. At the same time they are both working so hard, trying to get qualifications that will give them some security in Australia.

Do the countries that colonised these areas and determined the future of them take any responsibility for the present state of affairs?

Housing Need.

BASP has received a request from a Sri Lankan man needing to change accommodation by the end of the year. He has been sharing with others but they are dispersing at the end of their lease. This man is a gentle man who has excellent English and is blind. Ideally he needs to be near a train station to be able to get to appointments easily. He has an IT background but as yet has not been able to find work. He is able to pay for a room or bungalow. The arrangement needs to be for at least a year so he can orient himself to the new area and not have to change again too soon. If you know anyone who might have a suitable option for him, please contact Libby on 0418526036.



We gathered in the Brigidine Ministry Centre for our own Blue for Nauru statement!



Norman Katende
Norman Katende is a well known journalist and photographer from Uganda. He was the Director of Communications for the World Cross Country Championships in Kampala 2017. He is also a Media and Public Relations Consultant, Trainer of Trainers and Counsellor. Norman and his wife came to Australia seeking asylum from Uganda last year. He is now working as a Communications Officer for the West Gate Tunnel Project. Norman is an initial member of the new BASP Board.

Employment assistance

BASP is thrilled to announce that we have been named as one of the 200 Westpac Foundation Community Grant recipients for 2018.

This grant will help us to provide more asylum seekers with job training.... and get work.

Perseverance paid off

When Michael finished his aged care certificate he thought .. 'that was the hard part and getting a job will be easy'.

Well it wasn't!

Even though there were jobs, often potential employers wanted experience, drivers licence and car - all the things he didn't have.

So with a bit of help from various people at BASP, Michael applied for 29 jobs and finally got the phone call with those wonderful words. "We would like to interview you"

Michael has now completed two months as an aged care worker.

John (one of our volunteers referred through the Xavier Social Justice network), reports on his contact.

"I am coaching a 12 year old Iranian boy in Maths and English. He is in Grade 6. His family arrived as refugee boat people four years ago. Fortunately, the family was not sent off-shore but, naturally the boy has much traumatic history hidden away and struggles to keep up with his Australian-born classmates. His mother worries that he is ill-prepared for his impending first year of secondary school.

And she is right. He is coming from a long way behind and for my first six lessons ..I wondered whether I was any help at all. The boy was serious and polite but appeared unenthusiastic and unmotivated.

Then, in my seventh lesson, came two ever-so-brief "highlights". He was fascinated that the word "ewe" was pronounced the same as "you". He immediately called his mother to bamboozle her with this absurd pronunciation. I was delighted at the resulting smiles all round. Later, we did prime numbers. I explained and demonstrated, using the prime numbers between 1 and 10. I then tested him on the prime numbers between 10 and 20. To my pleasant surprise, he correctly answered 11, 13, 17 and 19 but, unfortunately, included 16 as well. However, soon after and entirely of his own accord, he said, "Seeing that even numbers can always be divided by 2, prime numbers must always be odd."

These two little moments were music to my ears. For the first time, I am now looking forward to lesson number eight"



A weekend at Doxa Camp

On Friday, the 8th November, a group of about fifty asylum seekers went to Doxa Camp at Malmsbury for a weekend. Marisa Ceritelli, one of our volunteers with a close connection with the Doxa Camp in Malmsbury organised a weekend away for a number of families.

Most were collected in a bus, arriving Friday night to Sunday afternoon. Brigid Libby and Julie joined them for Saturday lunch, arriving while the archery activity was underway.

One father said they had been in Australia for 2 years and this was the first holiday their children had had. One small child said it was the best camp she had ever been on. Her father said in an aside—it is the only camp she has been on!

We watched with joy as a teenage boy from one family cradled a newborn baby of another with such gentleness and care. He has been having some issues at school so it was especially heart-warming to see the enjoyment he was getting from this interaction.

After lunch there was a bush walk, then craft and a sing along was planned for after dinner.

Thanks to Marisa Ceritelli and some helpers, especially Pam and Nellie, who organised the camp. Twelve families including twenty seven children had a great time together. The area is bush and beautiful. Activities included archery (seen opposite), walking in the bush, making pasta bracelets and such fun things, playing in the gym and on the trampoline.

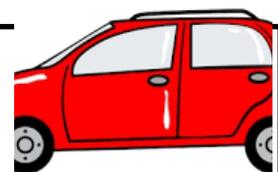


In case you have a spare car!

Over the years we have had a few donations of cars which have made a world of difference to those who have been the beneficiaries.

We have again come across a family in need of a car. They have spent 4 and a half years in Nauru and have been in community detention for 7 months. The daughter has many medical appointments and her anxiety prevents her from using public transport. The parents are not allowed to work, even though they have excellent English and are employable and keen to do so.

BASP has been able to assist with volunteer drivers on a few occasions and for this we are most appreciative. However, a car would be wonderful for this family, enabling them to move beyond their immediate neighbourhood and reliance on others for lifts.



Asylum Seekers - getting on.



Attention - anyone needing a haircut near Collingwood!
Ashraf and a female hairdresser have set up a new salon-
The Perfect Barbershop and Cafe

-
at 207-209 Johnston Street Collingwood, 2 shops north of the Hoddle Street corner.

Customers we have spoken to have been very pleased with the cut and the price - so give it a go if you can.
Phone 70157097.



Mulu and Tamrat, in traditional Ethiopian costumes are musicians. Mulu is a singer, Tamrat a songwriter and on keyboard and they performed, with others, at the Melbourne Festival in October. They

are receiving some requests for performing and would welcome more. They are fun, energetic and it's hard to stand still when they get going!

Enquiries to BASP.



BASP had a request from a family for someone to help their 8 year old daughter with music. The daughter has had health issues and is struggling in school. Our volunteer found a keyboard, visits weekly, engaging not only the daughter but the lessons now include the mother too.

Marian Steele, a volunteer who assists with employment has been working closely with Jesuit Social Services and getting some good results. One young woman has a job 4 days a week in housekeeping at the Windsor. She came to tell us about it, squealing with delight that she had been given a \$70 tip!

A man came to BASP asking if he could talk about employment possibilities. He has since offered a job to a young man who is into his third week of learning how to work with timber.

Marian has also assisted a couple of men getting into construction jobs.

Anyone who has job opportunities please remember asylum seekers.

Recently we caught up with a young woman who was referred to BASP about 5 years ago. The young mother of a 3 and 5 year old had fled an abusive situation, was desperate and facing homelessness.

BASP was able to assist with housing, introducing her to a couple who wanted someone to clean their home and linking her to other services. She now has a rental house, full time job, the kids are doing well at school and she is studying for her citizenship exam.

Each Saturday, she still cleans for 'Mrs Sue' and 'Mr Frank' who have become friends and mentors. It is heart-warming to see her settled, happy and successful and to recognise the significant impact of that first break with a job"



Each year for the past few years, the parishes of St Brigid's of Mordialloc and St Louis de Montfort Aspendale have hosted a picnic in their primary school in Aspendale. As in previous years, this year's was a great success. Those who came loved it and appreciated the amazing meal prepared by the parish community. The school grounds are safe and full of adventure for the kids, leaving the parents an opportunity to relax and chat.

What a difference some kindness makes



Despite the draconian practices of the government, we are continually heartened by the enormous amount of **goodwill and hospitality** shown by groups and individuals in the community.

So many of the people we see are focused on meeting the basics of life - a roof over their heads and food for themselves and their families.

Very few have the ability for treats or holidays. so when individuals and groups make these available, it is a wonderful boost for those who attend.

Since the last newsletter, there have been quite a number.

The **Mariana Community** again hosted 2 families to their retreat house in Millgrove, located in beautiful surroundings and supported by 2 or 3 of the community joining the families for the weekend and making them so welcome. Two Afghani families, who knew each other, had a wonderful weekend in September where the children could run and explore, **with** their parents getting pleasure for the break and seeing the children so free and happy.

The **Pallotti College**, just up the road, had a similar impact on 2 families who spent a relaxing long weekend in their family house.

A family in Korumburra has been offering a self contained studio to any family interested in a break. A mother with 3 sons took up this opportunity in the last school holidays and both families enjoyed the experience greatly.

The host's report afterwards " It was a delight to share time with Kathy and her family. It worked out well, and I think Kathy got a little much-deserved rest while the boys relished the chance to jump endlessly on the trampoline. We hope to stay in touch, and they would be welcome here for a break whenever they need it. We didn't delve into any stories, ... it felt like a good balance and a gorgeous encounter."

The mother wrote:

We would like to thank you for the wonderful time we had out of our little unit. Thank you BASP and especially Libby for thinking about us always and this arrangement.

Thank you so much Sarah and your wonderful family for welcoming us, taking care of us and making us feel so loved. It was a good environment for adventure, play and new friendships.

Food is being distributed very quickly at present. We have a lot of calls.



Sugar , flour , cooking oil, Cans of fruit

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

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.

Toilet paper

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

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



The only canned food we need at present is canned fruit.

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.



Again thank you for your support, in whatever way you have been giving it to us.

We have a whole variety of people who visit families, transport furniture and other necessities to a new destination, take people to appointments, deliver food to people in need, manage the pantry and food to be delivered, help people with forms, write advocacy letters, do research to inform our requests to Government and others who do CV's for people and get employment for many, befriend people and teach English, and give legal assistance. A big and sincere thank you to you all. We could never achieve the level of help for people without you.



May you have a very happy Christmas with your families and friends.

May 2019 see changes that make Australia a much kinder and more humane place for all those seeking refuge and protection.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)