

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 109 February 2023

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

At last some good news for people on TPVs and SHEVs. We helped many of these in the past so we rejoice that they now have some certainty about their future. However the asylum seekers we now help are still living in uncertainty and fear about their future.

Sivanthan (not her real name) lives in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. She has three small children and a mother who is dying in the local hospital. Her husband left some months ago to return to their original country and she has not heard of him since.

Sivanthan was working in aged care, living very frugally, and was managing to pay her rent and bills. However since her mother became ill a few months ago and had to be cared for, eventually becoming hospitalized, Sivanthan's world has become a whole lot worse. She goes to the hospital to sit with her mother every day, she is destitute and feeling totally hopeless.

Unfortunately this is the story of many asylum seekers in Australia at present. And this will continue to be true in spite of the welcome news for those on a TPV or SHEV holders.

We have no good news for those who arrived by boat after 2013.

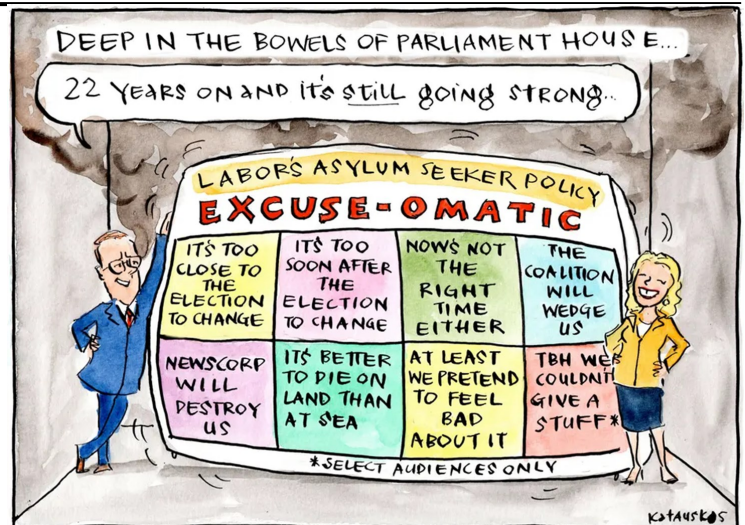
These include around 12000 who either failed under the now discredited and disbanded IAA and AAT process,

1000s still waiting to have their claims examined after a decade

and about 1100 Transitory Persons who have only six monthly Bridging Visas (those who came from PNG and Nauru for medical treatment)

As well, there are those who have exhausted the whole process and have no visa at all.

The government's position remains that all these people will never be allowed to settle in Australia, and should pursue resettlement options abroad. The sad reality about this is that USA are not taking even the people who have indicated a willingness to move there and very few have gone to Canada or New Zealand.



Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

Palm Sunday Walk

Justice for Refugees



**Permanent Visas for all.
Fair processes and income support
for people seeking asylum.**

**Sunday, 2 April 2023, 2pm
State Library**

cnr Swanston and La Trobe Streets, Melbourne

We will have as many brochures and posters as we can distribute. If any of our BASP people could deliver these anywhere—shopping places, community groups, churches and so on we would be delighted. It is so important that we get a good number to gather on 2nd April.

We are a little concerned that the government will bask in the sunshine of having given a RoS visa (Permanent Visa) to 19000 people and convince the Australian public that all is OK now.

More than ever we need to remind the current Federal Government that they have a large job to do if they are truly to be a compassionate and caring government and not primarily focused on being politically careful.

Forward Notice:

BASP Online Trivia Night

St Mary's Hampton online trivia event in support of the **Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project** is back on Friday 5 May.



We aim to provide a fun night for you and your friends and raise money for a good cause, and we'd love your support. To take part, sign up as a team host, and get your team together for a light-hearted night of trivia and conviviality. Suggested minimum donation of \$30 per team member.

When

Friday 5 May 7.30pm to 9.40pm

Where

Your place! Invite a group of friends to your home, up to 10 people - small groups are welcome. If you prefer you can form a distributed team in several locations and use our online breakout rooms to talk over your answers.

How

You don't need to be a tech wizard and we will have a practice run the night before. You need a smartphone, tablet (iPad, Android) or a computer with sound (a webcam would be nice but not essential). You'll get a link for the Zoom online chat service and use your web browser to answer the trivia questions. Check the website for more details.

Many of our BASP people will have met or heard of Nasser Moradi . Nasser was released from MITA three months ago on a SHEV. We found this painting that Nasser did quite touching and ironic in the light of his being given some freedom—after many years.

Of course he now has to begin carving out a life for himself. We tend to underestimate the uphill work it is for all those released from immigration detention to move from a situation where for years you are virtually not able to make any independent decisions, where all basic things are provided, where ordinary relationships with family and friends have not been possible and life in a place governed by rules, restrictions and punitive measures.

People like Nasser have endured years in limbo under a policy that research has shown to be unfair, expensive, impractical and inconsistent with our international obligations. We need many more changes—not least of which



The continuing sad history of Nauru and PNG

As at 31/1/23 there are still 66 people on Nauru who sought protection in Australia 40 of these have been found to be refugees, 11 are still in the process and 15 have been rejected. There are 105 people in PNG—most living in very dire circumstances.

Since the shutting down of the Manus Island detention centre after the PNG Supreme Court ruled it unlawful, Nauru has remained Australia's only offshore processing centre. While refugees are allowed to live in community housing, they are nonetheless stuck on the island indefinitely in inhumane conditions, with services set to become even more inadequate.

Last year the US prison company Management and Training corporation (MTC) signed a deal with the federal government to take over the management of Australia's off-shore processing on Nauru. This company has a history of human rights violations within its facilities in the US. The conditions faced by refugees have repeatedly become public in the leaked 'Nauru files' reporting 2,000 incidents of harm or threatened harm to asylum seekers over a three year period—frequent self-harm and suicide attempts, humiliation and assault by guards and the denial of proper medical treatment.

We need to remember that it was entirely arbitrary in terms of more than 4000 individuals who ended up on Nauru and Manus Island. When offshore processing resumed in 2012 some were sent to these off-shore processing places but there seemed there was no rationale about who was sent or who wasn't. This changed on 19 July 2013, when Kevin Rudd came back as Australia's Prime Minister. Under his policy, everyone arriving by boat was sent to either Nauru or Manus Island and they were told they can never resettle in Australia.



Courtesy Australian Human Rights Commission website

We have heard stories of individual and families being kept in navy ships at sea until the afternoon of 19th July when their last chance of coming to Australia was past. Now they are all being punished again being told that they have to find another country to accept them.

Visa Cancellation

Part of Australia's 'mandatory detention regime' is in the area of visa cancellation. The Minister for Immigration and Citizenship has the power (under section 501 of the Migration Act 1958) to refuse a person's application for a visa, or cancel a person's visa, if that person fails to satisfy the Minister that he or she passes the 'character test'. This includes having a substantial criminal record - defined as having 'been sentenced to a term of imprisonment of 12 months or more'.

In May 2021 an amendment to the Migration Act was rushed through Parliament that cemented the legal basis for the indefinite arbitrary detention of refugees whose visas have been cancelled on character grounds. Where refugees have their visas cancelled on character grounds, they go through the justice system like anyone else, however, unlike others who are released back into the community, these refugees were now subject to indefinite detention.

In December of last year the Federal court determined that a history of imprisonment should not be cumulative. Until then, all sentences handed down had been grouped together, resulting in Visa Holders easily triggering the 12-month aggregate threshold for an automatic cancellation of their visa with a mixture of shorter sentences. Following this decision, about 100 detainees were released from detention centres around Australia who were then able to resume their daily lives and reunite with their families.

In February of this year the Albanese Government introduced legislation to overturn the judgment and effectively force many of those people recently released from immigration detention back into detention. This bill would allow people to be deported who have committed low-level offences that do not pose a risk to the community, such as obscene language, graffiti and drunk and disorderly offences. This bill was passed in the senate and is now before the House.

We believe this is more of the punitive, harsh treatment of asylum seekers and refugees and it would be very sad if this legislation is passed. We had hoped for better from the Labor Government.

Another Bill before Parliament is the Migration Amendment (Evacuation to Safety) Bill 2023. This has been introduced by Nick McKim from the Greens. It calls for the immediate evacuation of refugees and asylum seekers currently held offshore, giving people the right to come to Australia while they pursue resettlement options. This legislation will not allow people to be transferred into held detention on arrival, requiring them instead to be placed in the community. There are currently around 60 refugees held in Nauru and 90 in PNG who after a decade of being subjected to traumatic and harmful conditions in offshore detention need urgent evacuation to Australia. Australia is contravening all human rights obligations while these people remain in Nauru and PNG. The success of this Bill rests largely on Labor supporting it. **We urge as many people as possible to approach their local MP to argue support for this legislation.**

We are also disappointed by the statement from the Minister for Foreign affairs (Claire O'Neill) reiterating the Labor government's continuation of Operation Sovereign Borders, the militarised policy introduced by Australia's previous Liberal-National Coalition government of forcibly turning back refugee boats or immediately deporting their passengers to face persecution or impoverishment in the countries they fled.

OPCAT is a human rights treaty that aims to implement and build on the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Practices. The object of this protocol is to have a system of regular visits undertaken by independent international and national bodies to 'places of closed environment' such as prisons and detention centres. Over the past year or so some places in Australia did not facilitate such visits and the subcommittee suspended its visit. The only other place this has happened is Rwanda!

Housing is still a pressing issue

Housing needs continue with no change in sight for the people we help with accommodation. **These are the people not included in the recent changes announced by the government.**

Numbers in BASP's 64 houses remain around 160 with changes in actual people. One family of 6 moved out after a fixed 12 month lease. 3 men from the first group released from hotel detention moved into their own private rental which enabled BASP to house 7 men in December when they were released from MITA – the Melbourne Immigration Detention Centre- after years.

The requests for help with rent from people in their own rental properties in the community increased over December and January - a significant number from the Sri Lankan community in the southeastern suburbs. Some rents were paid on a once off basis, with encouragement to people to seek work where possible. There was an increase of \$30k in both December and January for these rents.

A longtime supporter has purchased a one bedroom unit in Brunswick West for BASP's use, rent free, which will be of great benefit. This will commence later in February. This offer came at a welcome time as the housing crisis worsened and BASP has been unsuccessful in multiple applications. A big vote of thanks to Karin Butterfield, our 'housing volunteer' who has gone to many open for inspections in our search for specific units. She knows the system well but acknowledges these times are tough. One agent reported he had 94 vacancies a year ago and today has 6. Fierce competition indeed.

In the houses we call "BASP houses", because we lease or manage them, is a cottage for single men owned by the Columban community on their Essendon property. Father Peter O'Neill tallied up the numbers who have found shelter there since they offered it to BASP for accommodation for 2015. There have been 61. The longest stay was 4.8 years (an exception) and the shortest was 1 day (also an exception). Most have stayed there while they have sought work or work rights, established themselves and then moved into their own housing. It is not glamorous but it is a safe haven, in a beautiful garden and appreciated by so many men in these last 7 years. The latest resident is a man who worked for the UN for 14 years, was being threatened in his homeland and fled to Australia. His application has been rejected and had his work rights withdrawn while he appeals to the court. What a waste we aren't utilizing his skills.

BASP recommended an asylum seeker to a supporter who was looking for a casual worker to help in her garden. She was so pleased with him that she asked him to maintain her garden while she was overseas for five months. "It was excellent having someone reliable to make sure it all stayed alive, and he continues to do the same work now" she reports.



In December, the Welcome Centre run by the Uniting Church and based in Brunswick, held a twenty year celebration, having started only a year or two after BASP.

Libby attended for BASP and it was such a happy occasion seeing so many asylum seekers BASP has also assisted over the years. It was a rare opportunity for staff from different organisations to meet outside a work/meeting format and join in the fun of the afternoon.



One of the ongoing issues is getting suitable employment for people who are able to work.

For those who have work rights, it can still be a challenge to get work which matches their abilities- and barriers. This can range from a man with limited literacy and basic English but keen to work. He needs something repetitive and simple such as dishwashing, basic cleaning, stacking shelves.

We then have a recently arrived man from Ukraine who has a PhD in medical immunology and allergy and years of experience in research and teaching in this area.

We can help the preparatory training for some roles eg white card for construction or forklift certificate.

Many of the people we see also have past injuries which can be a hindrance to getting work. Some also need time off for medical appointments.

For those without work rights, many seek cash-in-hand work wherever they can get it - sometimes at markets, or gardening and cleaning.

We'd welcome any ideas or contact you may have in assisting these folk with work

Saltbush Balnarring Beach provides holiday experiences for families known to BASP. They offer places when they can, providing a self-contained house to each group, a wonderful environment and activities in school holidays. Those fortunate to attend always love it. The last family who went have had a few tough years with the husband/ father experiencing crippling mental health issues. His wife reported that their stay at Saltbush saw a great change in him and that the family had the best time they had ever had in Australia in 10 years.

Donations and Christmas Hampers

December is a busy time for food, gifts and hamper donations, making hampers suitable for each recipient and coordinating the volunteers to deliver these across Melbourne. St Finbar's parish in East Brighton again delivered over 60 hampers to us. We also had donations from other parishes, Clonard, Killester, Bowen Street Centre and other smaller groups. These bring such joy to those who receive them. Many thanks to all who contributed to make this



happen.

Prior to Christmas, a supporter sought the names of 10 needy households and she arranged for \$50 fresh food boxes to be delivered to them in late November. These too were greatly appreciated.

Lucky Canada

A family we have come to know well recently left Australia for Canada. They were given no hope of being allowed to settle in Australia. A farewell party was held in January for the family who fled persecution in Iran the only way they could and came by boat. Their boat arrived after the arbitrary cut-off date in 2013 so they were sent to Nauru for 2 years before coming to Australia for the birth of their 3rd child. They have been in Community Detention ever since- meaning the husband was not allowed to work, using his engineering skills or doing anything to retain his dignity and desire to be a breadwinner for himself and his family. His wife undertook several courses successfully but was unable to get a certificate to acknowledge this because they weren't allowed to study.

With the support of an amazing community group in the Macedon Ranges working with a Canadian sponsor program, the family has embarked on another move, this time where they will have full citizen rights and be great contributors to their adopted country.



Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

ZARA — NEEDED FRIENDSHIP. I have ^{be attending} no one near me — Spoke to many other mother. My children felt safe, I couldn't leave them going around the camp because there was always Mario (volunteer) walking around — Children had so many activities they could do together with other children —

Children I loved the giant Swing x 10

- the climbing wall.
- the trampoline
- the walks in the forest.

— the people running the camp

— "they welcome us all the time"

— "getting together for afternoon tea with all the ladies and ~~one~~ talking." talking and laughing.



Marisa Cerritelli continues to organize weekends away for our families. She organised 2 weekend camps—one in December and one for March for about 55 people each time. They go to the DOXA camp in Malmsbury on Friday afternoon and head home after lunch on the Sunday. For many this is their only 'holiday' in the year.

At the December camp, some of the Iranian women worked with the kitchen staff to create some wonderful meals and shared recipes.

Many thanks to Marisa for providing such a wonderful experience for families.





Just before Christmas the ASRC referred a 58 year old woman to us for immediate housing. She had been caring for a child in a Sydney family for 6 years. They brought her to Melbourne and left her, not returning as promised in 3 days but returning to Sydney. She had no money, no bank account and no knowledge of Melbourne.

BASP arranged motel accommodation for a few days while sorting out something else. 2 volunteers helped her with shopping and food while she was there. She then moved into one of our share houses and another volunteer began visiting and supporting her over this distressing period. Another couple helped her set up a bank account. Fortunately, someone from her community in Sydney offered her a room at her home and BASP paid for her to return, with the assistance of another BASP supporter willing to accompany her while visiting her daughter in Sydney at the same time.



A stalwart group of women organized an art auction On 12th November—the proceeds of which were given to BASP and RAC (Refugee Action Collective). More than 20 leading artists donated works for the auction to highlight the need to treat refugees and asylum seekers with dignity and compassion.

Works by sculptor and potter Deborah Halpern (OAM), Angus McDonald, Hoda Afshar, Maree Clarke and three artists with refugee experience were included in the auction.

Thanks to all involved.

Each year, the sisters of the Little Company of Mary provide an Endowment Fund for a refugee or asylum seeker, undertaking tertiary studies and needing help to do so.

This year a young man who is doing a Certificate in Community Services, with the hope of transferring to a Diploma has been the recipient. The Endowment Fund covers his fees, a laptop, travel and day to day expenses for getting to his college. When we notified him we had transferred the money, we received the following email—clearly a delighted recipient of this generous opportunity.

Hi Libby I was just going to call you to let you know we've received it, thank you so much as this has made my day and my whole family day as they now know I can study this year and hopefully finish everything. I'll let you know how I'm going next semester as for now I am doing great. Got couple presentations coming up and assessments but thank you so much for your help. Yourself and your teams has done something that no one was able to help us with and I want to say thank you very very much for this wonderful gesture and I'll do my very best to pass this year unit. I want to also thank the sisters that paid for my Uni fees. We will pray for you guys everyday."

Two volunteers, Tony and Karen, have committed one day a week to taking the van to collect or deliver lighter weight items and have helped with preparing houses for new tenants.

Noelle Mawdsley retired as “pantry manager” on January 25, handing over to Colleen and Barb. We had a morning tea on the 6th February to farewell and thank her for her many years of service.

Marian Steele, who has helped with CV's and employment for several years, had a serious health scare over Christmas and is now at home taking it quietly. Marg Fyfe also had a health scare and was off-duty at BASP for a while.





For many years now a group of Irish 'die-hards' organize a luncheon close to the feast day of St Brigid.

They always have a speaker who reflects on some aspect of

our society. As well as this they have a raffle, the proceeds of which go to BASP.

Equinox talks:

Speaker: Amanda Lohrey - Pathways to compassion in a post-secular age

Saturday March 25, 4-6pm

This is a free event, but we will be accepting donations for the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project

Here is a link to the details: <https://centreforacompassionatesociety.net/equinox-talks/>

This will be a hybrid event: you can register to join via Zoom here, or if you will be in Melbourne on March 25, you may like to register here to join our face-to-face gathering in Clifton Hill.

A few volunteers have advocated for individuals. One was relentless in fighting for SRSS (Status Resolution Support Services) payments for a woman and her adult daughter. After amassing documents and sending numerous emails to MPs, service providers and lawyers, the women were granted SRSS.

Another former lawyer helped secure a positive outcome at appeal by getting additional documents which the designated lawyer had not been able to do.

He is now seeking to have the Minister lift the bar for a man who has been here for years and has no visa. He has found witnesses in Saudi Arabia and Europe who can verify this man's identity.

Another is chasing up a housing scam for one of the asylum seekers caught paying for accommodation that never eventuated.

How fortunate we are to have such varied, skilled and committed people as volunteers.

Another car was offered to BASP for a family in need. It went to a family with 4 children where the parents are seeking work. This will enhance their ability to get and retain work. A wonderfully generous donation.

Marie, who donated this car, not only gave the car but contributed towards insurance and registration. The mother in the family who are now proud owners of the car has a job she is able to go to.

Thanks to Peter and Rachel who did all of the leg work to make this happen. Pictured here is the handover at Vic Roads. Rachel assured us "Peter and I were so glad we could help Marie with the hand over to such a beautiful family."

It is this sort of generosity and working together that gives hope to many asylum seekers.



Lauren, a teacher at Our Lady of Mercy College in Heidelberg wrote to us:

I am teaching Yoga to Staff before school once per fortnight and I have asked staff that attend to make a \$10 donation to Brigidine every time they attend yoga. The staff are very excited to contribute in this way.

We are grateful for any of the following food (or vouchers to buy food and household necessities).



We currently have enough tinned food except for cans of fruit and tomatoes. Tinned soup does not seem to be taken.

The following are still very much appreciated:

1 kg Sugar, oil (olive and vegetable) , salt, pepper, tea, coffee

Herbs and spices

Blocks or individual wrapped cheese. Eggs.

1 litre Long life milk, **honey is a most appreciated food**, noodles, tuna, 1 kg basmati rice, dates, jam (especially any red jam)



Gladwrap, tinfoil, pegs for hanging out washing,

Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches (even when home!),

Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger, Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers,

Toothpaste and toothbrushes. Soap, deodorants

Garbage bags and bin liners (small and large)

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

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 please email us at contact@basp.org.au after making a donation so we can send you a tax deductible receipt. We will send a newsletter but feel free to tell us that you don't want one.



Another year has come around. Again we have many new people needing help. Luckily to keep some balance we have many volunteers doing amazing work and many donors who are keeping us afloat!



We would like to see you all in person but of course that is impossible. We trust you all know your assistance is so valued by us at BASP.

Can we suggest that as many people as possible visit your local federal MP and ask for regular income for those on Bridging visas who cannot work and have no means of support. Most of these people are destitute and are suffering on all fronts—no income, no certainty about the future, very often physically and mentally ill. We should keep reminding the current government that they promised no-one would be left behind.

We hope that 2023 is a good year for all of you. Life is quite a struggle for many with the cost of living going up and the complexities of life in our contemporary world. This is especially true for those seeking protection from persecution in their own country.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)