

Our History

In October 1999, the Government introduced a punitive and restrictive policy of Temporary Protection Visas granted to unauthorised arrivals that were recognised as refugees. Initially a TPV was for three years. It denied access to many of the services available to people with Permanent Protection Visas, including assistance with settlement into the community, family reunion and travel.

Judy Berlak, a former Coordinator of Volunteers, offered the following historical and ethical reflections in her farewell address historical and

The origins of The House of Welcome for refugees and asylum seekers in Carramar, Sydney seem shrouded in mystery and legend. Each time we reprint our brochure we change the date when it all began! I think this is significant because it was not handed down from on high in a neat blue-print on one day. It grew haltingly, probably over two years, from the shared ideas of a few concerned people living around Villawood or visiting the Detention Centre there in 1999/2000. This was very early in this round of refugee advocacy in NSW. Mary Hanoun-Khilla, Patricia Dunn, Rod Oldfield, Helen Barnes were a few at the centre of that little group. I have listened to Mary, fascinated at her graphic stories of what impelled them with a growing sense of urgency when detainees were being released and pointed in the direction of Leightonfield station nearest to Villawood. From here these people were left on their own to find their way in the Australian community without language or any means of accessing support.

In many ways it could be expected that The House of Welcome would begin life like this. It is the same way that I and each of our volunteers have been drawn to this work: having an ear already attuned to what is just, seeing something that offends that sense and deciding what I can do about it now - not what others can do. I like the definition of 'justice' as 'right relationships'. If we hold this simple description then it is no wonder that this very natural process has been repeated in the minds of close to 200 volunteers over the last five years. 'Volunteers are at the heart of our project' we say in our recruitment brochure. More than that, they are the only way that this seed of the 'welcome project', as it was called in the early stages, broadcast in those initial meetings, could have come to fulfilment.

In her letter in November 2001 inviting volunteers for that December day, Sue Phillips, the funding Co-ordinator, encouraged people to volunteer to help refugees in order 'to let them know that there are Australians who do care about them, even, despite all the negative publicity'. This was a prophetic comment and it is a pretty good summary of what we have been doing at The House of Welcome over the last five years: we do care: 'Welcome!' 'Ahlan wa sahan!' to the many who speak Arabic. How can we help you? Tea or coffee first? As one young man commented to me once, 'This is not like DIMIA!'

'Caring' as opposed to 'negative publicity' is a description of more than The House of Welcome. Sue could not have known how accurately those two phrases would describe the polarisation of the Australian people in the years following her letter. On one hand there was the happy multiplication of 'those who care' in so many groups and individuals. On the other, who could have foreseen the extent to which the 'negative publicity' would grow, be politicised, enshrined in wicked legislation and sully the soul of Australia so that detention razor wire as well as the sails of the Opera House came to symbolise our country?

How do you fight institutionalised injustice? I read somewhere that an Irish theologian Anne Thurston says:

“... If you persist in your efforts to influence a large institution, (for her the official Church) to become part of its decision-making, you will only break your heart and lose hope. What you must do is go around to the back and create a garden. Some day they will look out and see its beauty and marvel at its life...”

the In quietly measured activity close to the heart of this history making, we have all been gardening at House of Welcome, slowly making something of beauty to marvel at for half a decade now. It has become ‘place of respite and help’ where the stranger is welcome.

Others have been doing this too - out the back first and then around the front when the time was right: ChilOut (and we marvel ironically now at the beauty of detention centres without children), Rural Australians for Refugees, A Just Australia, The Romero Centre, the Hotham Project and a myriad of other political, humanitarian and church groups opposed to the refugee and asylum seeker policy and motivated to do what each could best do (to continue the metaphor) ‘in their own back yard’. To do otherwise would make us complicit.

This ‘subversive’ gardening is what I would like to celebrate in early 2006 as I leave my role as Volunteer Co-ordinator. (I read Paolo Freire avidly in the sixties!) I have been fortunate to be part of this chaotic and messy sometimes, but also professional and effective, welcoming of quite a large proportion of refugees on Temporary Protection Visas to Western Sydney since near its small beginnings - without much time until now for the luxury of reflection or research about origins.

The first Volunteer Preparation Day was on 8th February 2001. I joined the second such day on Saturday 1st December of that same year. By the beginning of 2002 there were 20 House of Welcome ESOL - trained volunteer English teachers with classes organised by legendary volunteer, Miggs Brodie, for about 100 students released on Temporary Protection Visas but with no access to the 510 hours of English lessons given to off-shore arrivals. Valuable training in the awareness of refugee situations for these teachers, as for all subsequent volunteers, has been provided for us with the help of STARTTS (Service for the Treatment of Torture and Trauma Survivors).

That I have stayed around for so long is not significant for me: that part was easy. I had that time to spare anyway waiting for my husband to catch up to me ‘in retirement’! Nor is what we do what I will remember, although the variety of kinds of assistance would take pages to enumerate and be at times humorous, if we got into detail, and at times tragic. This simply because of the dearth of services available and our very open initial question: ‘How can we help you?’ For we really meant we will do what we can within our very limited means, dependent as we are for our existence on donations, to ameliorate the trauma you are suffering because of our pernicious on-shore refugee policy.

Following English classes our programs centred around core needs: emergency accommodation upon release, help to access other services in the community, referrals for counselling, health, legal needs, a volunteer to visit and befriend the family, a safe place to be for a morning at the Drop-in centre with friends, someone to read documents and translate for us into Arabic or Dari, résumé and job search, a day outing, a respite holiday

outside Sydney, computer classes, accompaniment to interviews. The list could on, but the framework of justice, which was the genesis of the work, has continued: a group of willing volunteers knowing that 'right relationships' between people have been offended, asking earnestly each day how, in a relationship of trust and confidentiality, we can better heal the wrong that is being done, the pain that we can read in anxious, puzzled faces or the hopeless slump of a shoulder. The answers are still the stuff of each day.

*However, what I would like to reflect on, a little more, is not what we do, but the **how**, the 'feel', the emotional shape of these turbulent five years of refugee history in Australia as it played out in one small helping agency.*

What crystallises the essence of this time is best expressed for me in the halting English phrases of our refugee friends whom we have walked beside over that time - their exclamations, desperate unanswerable questions, unfinished sentences trailing off, that most often left me without words of reply. There was silence between us... Invariably the topic was time - how long?... and we had no answer to that, as three-year Temporary Protection Visas became four-year... five-year... These moments of helplessness were more important than the visible busyness of four years of doing. These phrases etched into my memory have allowed me to see another way in which time can be forced to be measured, rather than the neat chromatic way my life has advanced - from Christmas to Christmas, from birthday to birthday.

Just two such moments I will have time to share with you....

*Imad * (not his real name) was in his early 20s past the time when he would have been deciding on career or direction in life. He spent a number of years in Indonesia with a few false starts across the sea. When his large family arrived we helped them with English for Mum, health needs for Dad, schooling for younger members of the family. Imad found it hard to find a job and was getting depressed. The family went on a holiday in the country one long weekend to Orange. I attended the community BBQ on the Sunday with them when someone asked him, what he would like to do in Australia. Perhaps misunderstanding slightly he said: 'I would do everything for my country. I just want to know if this is my country or not.'*

This is the question we could not answer for so many of our friends over the years. Our task was to help already traumatised people live with more and more uncertainty. English classes, holidays in the country, social visits, help with a visa query, information through newsletters could only slightly deaden the pain and, we hoped, keep hope alive. Underneath all this activity, for me, was the dread that one day I might have to go to the airport with Imad or Noor or Salma or Karim. As a teacher I was used to knowing all the answers - or pretending to - but Imad's was a question where ignorance of the answer bound us together: was it their country or not? The echo within me was always: Was this my country or not - doing this?

This was the most insidious punishment, more so than detention or limited assistance: the psychological game played with vulnerable people's lives in the interests of politics. Because the work of our little group at the House of Welcome was multiplied a hundred fold in other kinds of advocate and action groups many of the Imads have found an answer to that question. A garden begins to bloom for them. But for a desperate few, the answer is no closer. The need for accompaniment by the House of Welcome goes on.

The second time phrase, which will remain with me forever, is one of the few English phrases that my friend Rihana (not her real name) now knows, after 8 years in Australia. Traumatized by solitary confinement in Port Headland and years of fear, she found herself alone with a baby in Australia, a husband and 7 other children still in Jordan.*

Nearly a year ago she and I stood in her little kitchen hearing over the phone a volunteer from the Refugee Advice and Casework Service that she and Fadel (her son) had a Permanent Visa. When she finally understood it was true, we cried, we laughed we cried again and then we danced and then we cried. There was only one accompaniment to all these emotions: the mantra she kept repeating, 'Seven years, Judi, seven years!'

How long is seven years when it is the time that you have not seen your next youngest child who was three when you left? How long is seven years of separation from your husband? Mary Hanoun-Khilla knew and held Fadel in Villawood Detention Centre when he was seven months old. He is now nearly nine years old and still has not seen his father. Rihana for me is a model of resilience I could never emulate. I have a photo of the two of us. In it she seems to lean on me. It is an illusion. It has been the other way round.

A few weeks ago Rihana gave me some little gold studs to say thank you for our friendship when she knew I was leaving the House of Welcome. She need not have bothered: she has given me much more. The anger and sense of injustice I continue to feel at the ruination of lives in this divided family has given me the gift of a renewed passion for justice, not new in my life, but honed again. There are others. Each one of you has your own stories and phrases that echo in your head. These phrases have shaped and coloured my four years at the House of Welcome. The friends who shared them have enriched my life..

After such experiences I find in myself a reluctance to use generic words like 'refugees or asylum seekers' that pepper press reports. I will not remember the four year of my life involved with 'refugees and asylum seekers' at Carramar. I will professionally and emotionally remember Abbas, Fouad, Latif, Rafiq, Samar, Salma, Ayah, Hanan, Kamilah and others alike. I will also remember that their phrases over the last year have become more positive thanks to yourselves and the people power of Australia

The Australian poet Gwen Harper has a line in a poem 'Early Morning Work' which I will more vehemently say/pray because of The House of Welcome, Imad and Rihana. I am not sure if the first word is an expletive or a prayer, but either way it works for me:

'Christ! Keep my anger sharp in me!'

There are some people whose presence looms large at the House of Welcome: Jim Carty, the present Co-ordinator of the Project, who also sometimes uses expletives (and prayer too I am sure!) to keep us all and himself fired up. And you do not have to be too close to his door to hear them! As the only one there five days a week, communication has always been a challenge for us, but not so for Jim. He keeps the volunteers on each of the five days up to date, not with emails and bulletins, but with recounting; news, stories and events personally to each of us with passion. You feel you are the only person who is working with him.

I am sure we know the tip of the iceberg of his compassion and generosity and can only surmise from fragments what support he gives to those he sits with in his office until they can

come out and walk a few more steps because of a phone call to a case manager, some practical help or words of encouragement.

There are others who have been models of passionate action for me. Sue Phillips, Colleen Foley and Lorraine Phelan with whom I shared those early years and Joanne Karcz and Grace Ellus more recently. The New South Wales Ecumenical Country through Ray Williamson and others for keeping an ear to the ground (a good humble attitude for all such lofty organizations!), very early responding to a little group meeting in Guneroo St Villawood and staying with the Project.

Finally, in early January, my husband, my sister and I took a long walk 14 km up Mt Kosciuszko. I could not help noticing a man with a small son about 4 years old. He was urging him to walk all the way up. I thought a short piggy-back would be in order from time to time. After all I was thinking of asking my husband to carry me at stages! On the way down I overheard this man's conversation with another young fellow. They discovered they were both in the army. The father of the boy was an Army Officer. He had been stationed on the HMAS Manoora (which you will recall took refugees from the Tampa to Nauru in prison-like conditions). Some refugees refused to disembark. He said proudly and loudly that he had spent some time '...pushing refugees off the Manoora...'

This was how one Australian talked about what he was doing in the early years of this century. Together we, too, have won some victories - without being in uniform. Nevertheless, I do not think there is much we can salvage and celebrate from our cheerless refugee saga over these five years. Just one thing we can: that so many ordinary Australians felt it was their personal duty to seek out The House of Welcome and other forums for dissent and offer the hand of common friendship to those fleeing persecution and harm. I am grateful for the creation and realisation of positive stories and personal friendships, which have kept hope alive for so many. Finally, the best tribute we can pay to our friends is to continue to tell of our experiences with them. We are the ones who carry their halting utterances deep in our hearts, so I know for sure what others along the way will overhear us say we were doing during these shameful years of refugee history as we continue to climb mountains?