

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2016

As I came to prepare my annual report for this year I was struck by how depressingly apt the first paragraph of last year's annual report still continued to be. I shall, therefore, begin by reciting what I said then as a reminder to us all that our work is very far from being done. What I said then was this: "Over the last year we have seen a continuation of the Federal Government's stringent attitude and tough policies towards refugees and asylum seekers. Those who are unfortunate enough to have been placed offshore on Nauru or Manus Island continue to be told they will never be allowed into Australia. Despite its declarations to the contrary the Federal Government has not released all the children in detention. There are continuing reports of physical and sexual abuse, deprivation of basic health needs and of detainees suffering from mental illness born of hopelessness and desperation. The Government's recent announcement that it will resettle 12,000 Syrian refugees in Australia is welcome, but it highlights the cynicism and hypocrisy that allow for the same government to deny sanctuary to the 4,000 or so poor souls languishing in our shameful detention centres."

I can say again, as well, that it is against this background that our local refugee support group has continued to do what it can for those who have made it to our shores and are living in the western part of Sydney. We can, I believe, again take heart that we have achieved a considerable amount and I am privileged to be called upon to provide you with this report on the activities of our various subgroups over the last year.

Community visiting

Our community visitors, coordinated by Jackie Mayers, continue to visit detainees at Villawood Detention Centre and to provide whatever assistance they are allowed to provide. Some of these people will be returned to the home countries from which they have fled. Others are released on temporary protection visas and our visitors support them, mainly families and single men, who are managing as best they can in western Sydney. Most have no work rights, have limited access to medical services and survive on allowances which could never cover the cost of food, rent and other basic living expenses. The community visitors assist them in finding accommodation, provide rice, flour, oil and other staple food items, and help with arranging access to medical, dental and other essential

services. We are supporting about 45 families and groups and are, at times, in need of additional visitors. I wish to express the committee's very great appreciation to Jackie and her team for the invaluable work they do.

Education and training

Some asylum seekers are released into the community on work visas, and we continue to try to find work for them and to fund training so that employment may be more readily obtained. In the past Grant Medaris had built up connections with businesses willing to offer employment to those with the appropriate skills. Over the last year Grant has been unwell, and we have not been able to expand on what he has done. We have nevertheless continued to provide interest-free NILS loans in appropriate cases to help with meeting the costs of training and obtaining work-related certificates.

Collection and distribution of goods

Our collection and distribution team, under the guidance of Adelaide, Julie and now Denise, has made over 50 deliveries of large white goods and furniture items this year to families and shared households in western Sydney. Bed ensembles and mattresses were the most frequent deliveries, followed by chests of drawers, tables and chairs, fridges, washing machines and sofas. There have also been numerous deliveries of smaller items. We still receive more offers of donations than we can accept, and 17 separate collections were made over the past year. Most of the goods we deliver come from these donations, which are stored at the commercial facility at Springwood and at private garage spaces in Wentworth Falls,. At times we have not had what is required and have adopted a policy of making direct purchases to meet pressing needs.

Last year we identified the great benefit in providing bicycles both to adults and to children. We have continued to collect and arrange for the repair of bikes when they become available. We can always use more of them. Over the year we have delivered a further 12 bikes in good condition to adults needing a means of transport and to some very happy school children.

We are very grateful for all the volunteer hours that go into making this part of our work possible. We are always in need of more help, especially for the heavy lifting and for transporting to our storage facilities and to our points of delivery. I should like to take the opportunity at this point to express a special vote of thanks to Adelaide for her enormous efforts in gathering, storing and distributing goods. Adelaide, for a long time, was the backbone of this vital part of our work. Sadly, over the last year Adelaide and her partner, Beverley, have suffered very considerable personal distress and Adelaide has had to withdraw from the committee and reduce her participation. We wish Adelaide and Beverley a much better year ahead.

Scholarships

I mentioned last year that in 2013 we were the beneficiaries of a generous bequest of \$80,000.00 from the estate of Judy Gaskin, one of our members. Judy had been a teacher and was committed to education, so we allocated the funds for scholarships and the support of schools with a large population of children of refugees and asylum seekers. This year we made a further donation of \$10,000.00 to the Friends of Zainab Foundation for university scholarships, and have made substantial gifts again to Dorothy Hoddinott, the principal of Holroyd High School, to help her in providing practical support for her students, and to Fairfield High School for its programs in music therapy and preparation for employment. We also provide subsidies to high school and primary children at the start of each year to assist with the cost of buying books, shoes and uniforms.

Ocean 12 Cricket Team and Swimming for Kids

I am very pleased to be able to report that the Ocean 12 cricket team managed by Noeline and Anne-Marie has continued to be very successful in its competitions. It received a further grant of \$9,800.00 was able to participate in the national competition on the Gold Coast. Most recently Noeline has recognised the need for asylum seeker children to learn to swim. We have funded a proposal she put forward to pay for swimming classes for about a dozen young children. Noeline has reported that the first lesson was a tremendous success.

Fund raising and event management

Fund raising and event management took a great leap forward this year thanks to the efforts of our events manager, Maureen Williams. Maureen organised a highly successful coach tour to Mayfield Gardens, an art exhibition at Everglades and a Christmas stall and raffle late last year, and co-ordinated a trivia night at Warrimoo and film screenings at Katoomba and Mount Vic Flicks. She has spearheaded our most ambitious public awareness and fund raising event yet, which is the coming visit to the Mountains of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Professor Gillian Triggs. Maureen and her helpers have been able to arrange the hire of The Hub at Springwood from the Council for free. Professor Triggs and refugee advocate, Madeline Gleeson, will be speaking there on 30th November from 7pm. Tickets are selling fast, and we urge all of you to attend. Maureen also arranged a couple of very enjoyable social gatherings to ensure that our community visitors and committee members know each other and support each other's work.

We have continued to receive generous donations through the website Everyday Hero portal set up for us by Craig Beifus, as well as other donations from individuals and from bequests. Marcela Hart organised a Zumbathon for us at Warrimoo and raised \$1,500.00. Ramona Kennedy donated the proceeds of her e-novel to our group. Peter Long, a local musician, again arranged for his group

to perform a Beatlefest at the Family Hotel in Katoomba over Winter Magic and raised funds for us through a raffle. Most recently we had a booth at the Leura Fair, where we raised awareness and raised funds with face painting and selling tickets for our current raffle.

Education and advocacy

A significant development over the last year has been the increased activity of our education and advocacy group under the leadership of Joy Connor and Cathy Herbert. The group has drafted letters to politicians which have been sent out on our behalf, arranged for ChilOut speakers to speak at high schools to thousand of students in western Sydney, and for students from deprived schools to attend Suitcase Stories, a stage show about the journeys of refugees and asylum seekers. The group coordinated with Amnesty International, and organised the filming of *The Good Lie* at Katoomba in October and *Chasing Asylum* and the launch of *One Thousand Hills* at Mount Vic Flicks earlier this year to a full house. It has also organised our participation in public campaigns such as the *Let them Stay* protests and vigils, the Palm Sunday rallies in Sydney and Springwood, the Katoomba Winter Magic festival and *Don't let Hate have the Internet*.

Community outreach

Over the last year we have continued to do what we can to get the message out to the wider community that refugees and asylum seekers are people like us – people who are seeking to make a home where they can live in harmony with their neighbours and contribute to the wellbeing of others. Last September we hosted a visit by a group of 129 Tamils in conjunction with the Tamil Women's Development Group. At Christmas we and Mountains Youth Services engaged local high school students in a very successful Shoe Box project – putting together boxes of Christmas gifts. Jackie, Sue and Noeline are in the process of organising the shoe boxes again this year. Korowal School asked for our help in providing refugees' stories for *Belonging*, a play by Year 11 students, which was well attended.

Thanks to Pat Rayner we have a user-friendly and informative website, a Facebook page and a Twitter feed. The website presents what we are doing and can be used for disseminating research. We have about 2000 followers on Facebook and about 200 Twitter followers.

Mo Sabapathy suggested we have monthly social gatherings in cafes up and down the Mountains. A group which meets in Wentworth Falls has become particularly active, and we invite all of you to take part in one of these groups.

Proposed incorporation

Our group began as the brainchild of our deputy chair, Marie Standen. Marie placed a small ad in the Gazette after the boat people scares 15 years ago to see if anyone would like to work with her in offering support to asylum seekers. From that point onwards she, our secretary George Winston and other pioneers formed the Group from nothing. The Group needed legal protection, and that was provided generously by the Blue Mountains Family Support Service, now known as Mountains Support. Marie imagined then that the Group's work would be done in a year or so. Unfortunately refugees and asylum seekers have continued to be vilified and marginalised by some politicians and some sections of the community, and our work remains far from done. The need has continued to grow, but fortunately so has our capacity to meet it. We now have about 700 members and a healthy operating budget. We are paying our own legal, accounting and insurance expenses. We believe the time has come for us to consider stepping out from under the umbrella of Mountains Support and to stand alone as a community organisation. We are considering becoming a separate legal entity as an incorporated association. We have a small subcommittee working on the implications for our Group, and we welcome input from our members. If you would like to contribute to the process or give us your thoughts please email us.

Acknowledgements

Our work would not be possible without the continuing support of organisations and individuals within our local community. From the beginning we have been auspiced by Mountains Support, which for many years assisted us with our insurance, accounting, auditing and other legal requirements. We have continued to be provided with subsidised storage facilities and the use of trucks by Self Storage Plus at its depot at Springwood. We have also been assisted by local individuals and business proprietors, who have given us their help when we have requested it. We wish to express our gratitude to all of those who have contributed to our work.

I should like to conclude by acknowledging, in particular, the contributions of three of our former committee members. I have already mentioned Adelaide, who literally and metaphorically carried our goods distribution activities until Julie, and now Denise, were able to join her. Another of our dedicated volunteers who has faced personal struggles this year is Grant Medaris, who is recovering well from a serious illness. Grant and his wife, Jan, have devoted a great deal of time and energy to the welfare of asylum seekers, whom they have visited in Villawood and the community. Grant has also applied his talents to finding educational and employment opportunities for very many of them. We hope this year will bring Grant renewed health and strength. Finally, on behalf of all of us and the many people he helped and befriended, I should like to pay our respects to Tony Sharpe, who died earlier this year. Tony was a renowned chef and a

person of great warmth and good humour. He gave all he could to the welfare of others.

Dr Hal Ginges
Chairman
Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group
15th October 2016