

Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group Newsletter February 2016

A Project of Mountains Support Inc.
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February 2016

**Education • Direct Help • Direct Action • Fundraising • Vale
Tony Sharpe**



A large number of Tony's loving family and friends assembled in the Leura Memorial Gardens to farewell Tony on Tuesday, 23 February 2016. Sadly Tony died on 16th after a long illness. Our sympathies are with his wife Judy, his children and his grandchildren. As a BMRSG member he will be sorely missed. The detainees at Villawood Detention Centre and refugees within the community always welcomed Tony. Many of these came to regard him as 'family'. Who can forget the wonderful dinners he catered for, and the sausage sizzles outside Bunnings? So many will miss you Tony – Bon voyage.

2015 Report of the Sydney Immigration Residential Housing

Visiting Group

The 5-person Housing Visiting group continued to visit the Villawood Detention Centre fortnightly throughout 2015.

Our two main concerns were to support detained families and people who were indefinitely detained. We met mainly with people from Sri Lanka, Iraq and Iran. At times Housing was at capacity with over 40 people in the 8 units. On occasion the number of detained children exceeded the number of adults.

Issues which came up during the year included access to adequate medical care, depression and loss of hope, provision of meaningful activities - particularly for long-term detainees, access to schooling for children, access to computers, lack of privacy in the unit accommodation and the constancy of "welfare checks" throughout the day.

The best news of the year was the gradual release of indefinitely detained men, women and their children who had previously received adverse security assessments and had been held for an average of about 5 years or more. Currently only 3 men in this category remain in Housing awaiting release.

Recently, several families and individuals previously held on Nauru, some for months, others for up to 2 years, have arrived in Housing for medical attention, which cannot be provided on the island. A few of these people have been subsequently moved out of Villawood into Community Detention. Although their long-term prospects for settlement in Australia remain uncertain (they may be returned to Nauru), their chance to live in a more normal, less-confined context is welcome.

Mention should be made that SERCO staff have, in the main, been co-operative and friendly in their dealings with us.

Because families continue to arrive at Housing from Nauru the visitor group will keep visiting, but the group is also in the process of expanding its role to supporting those people who have been released and who now need assistance with issues such as accommodation, training, and finding work.

Robyne Reichel

Employment

Grant Medaris continues to meet refugee men and women to help with resume preparation, accommodation, preparation for job interviews, finding jobs and training. Several women have been referred to Fitted For Work at Parramatta.

Skills are the secret to employment so the Group has helped a number of refugees to attend courses to prepare themselves for work. However, those with overseas qualifications find it very difficult to have their qualifications recognized. Grant assists these people to improve their English skills and has helped raise funds for recognition of overseas qualifications.

On advice from Grant the Group has provided several refugees with no interest loans to complete training courses and attend TAFE.

Our web page "Employ a Refugee" has attracted a fencing contractor from Roma, Queensland, looking for a refugee prepared to relocate and Air Brake Systems at Hornsby replied wanting employees.

A link has been established with Sydney Refugee Team (a Christian organisation doing similar work to BMRSG) regarding ways to help. Grant is to be commended for all this wonderful work.

Grant has developed an ongoing relationship with **Fairfield High School**. Again on his advice the BMRSG funded two courses for students in the Intensive English Centre – "Healing Through Evan Yako's Drumming" and "Preparation for Work Skills". Both of these proved successful. Grant attended the Graduation.

At the moment Grant has taken a break from the Management Committee.

Community Visitors' Review of 2015

The Community Visiting team mushroomed in 2015. We now have a dedicated team of 21 visitors drawn from all walks of life and with a huge range of expertise. The picture changes all the time, but the end of 2015 saw us supporting 38 families and households on an ongoing basis. We provide a variety of practical, material and moral support, but most of all a welcoming and friendly face. It is a joy to stay in touch with many others as their situation improves and they become more established.

Our Christmas Welcome Shoebox Project proved an outstanding success. Working together with the Mountains Youth Service (MYST) in an innovative partnership which we hope will continue, we were able to realise an idea developed by two gifted young women Annabelle and Alana, from Winmalee High School. Over 200 shoeboxes and gift bags were collated, collected and distributed to children of many nationalities. For some children, sadly, it was the only Christmas present they would receive.

The overwhelming generosity, empathy and thoughtfulness of young people and their families here in the mountains was very moving. This was a great testament to the power of young people and an important antidote to current harsh policies. For more on this story see the full article on our website.

Jackie Mayers





Alana and Annabelle

The Victorious Cricketers

Ocean 12 cricketers have continued their winning ways on and off the pitch. Frequently winning games is one thing but gaining respect and heightened self worth has been the huge winner. This week alone Julia Finn, MP for Granville, honoured them in State Parliament. Proudly supported by Dr Hugh McDermott, MP for Prospect. Julia gave her member's speech on Ocean 12 and BMRS. Ocean 12 was in the gallery along with many members of our group. We were then invited for drinks and snacks courtesy of Julia.

Sunday, another success. Ocean 12 once again won the Parramatta summer competition.

As this newsletter goes to press we enter the Sydney finals. Whichever way it goes Ocean 12 will always be winners in our eyes.

No matter how many accolades it's the growth in self worth that's the winner.

Most of the men now have work rights. Many now have employment and actually delight in the fact they have tax file numbers and pay tax!

Anne-Marie and I are extremely proud of Ocean 12 but it's time to break the umbilical cord. After the summer season they are on their own. They have proved they are capable of running the team and their manager Siva is relishing his role.

They will always be "our men" and have a special part in our life. It's all been the most wonderful journey. A journey made possible with the support of BMRS, Wenty Leagues Club and many wonderful individuals who like us believed that it could happen.

Our next project is on the drawing board.....watch this space.

Noeline

Apology

My apologies to the contributors for the delay in publishing.

At first it was Telstra and then my health.

Both fixed now I hope.

Happy Easter

Marie Standen, Editor