

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2017

This last year has been a period of remarkable activity for the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group. Throughout the year we continued with the core of our work, which is the support of refugees and asylum seekers awaiting assessment in Villawood Detention Centre and others released into the community, living in uncertain conditions in the western parts of Sydney. Our visitors bring comfort, friendship and practical help to families and individuals and provide, I believe, a remarkable demonstration of what we used to think of as the essence of the Australian character - mateship. It is a tragedy of our times that the kind of help our Group offers to those in need has become the exception rather than the rule. It is against a background of State-orchestrated callousness and cruelty towards asylum seekers languishing on Nauru and Manus Island that we can hold up our heads proudly as we declare that all human beings - indeed, all living things - are deserving of dignity and respect.

We began our year last November with the most acclaimed of our outreach activities ever, which was the sell-out presentations by Professor Gillian Triggs and others at The Hub in Springwood. Professor Triggs and Madeline Gleeson inspired us by their courageous stands in speaking out against our nation's plunge into inhumane treatment of refugees. They gave us confidence to believe that what we are doing is right and necessary. The night was also a resounding fund-raising success. The funds we raise are ploughed back into the programs we run and support.

I should like to outline for you the range and breadth of those programs. I've mentioned the visits to Villawood and homes in Western Sydney as the core of our work. Our Villawood visitors visit every week, take in what little they are allowed to take in, in the way of food and other small comforts and remind the detainees that they have not been forgotten. Our community visitors identify what is needed by individual families and single men in group accommodation to keep them going. A lot depends on the kinds of visas they have. Some are entitled to work, and we might subsidise them to learn trades, take courses, sit exams or find jobs for them. Many are not entitled to work, and are expected to live on allowances well below the poverty line. We have garages in the Mountains where we store beds and other furniture, linen and white goods, and we will set up whole houses for these people. Our visitors take them the necessities of life - rice, oil and other staples - and ensure

their children have what they need for school. We provide an allowance for every child at the start of each year to make sure they have shoes and uniforms and can afford their books.

Many of the young men are unemployed, bored and have nothing to do. Four years ago in response to this our remarkable Noelene and Anne-Marie put together a cricket team of Tamil asylum seekers called the Ocean 12. The team found favour with the Wenty Leagues Club, which invited it to join a competition and provided some funding for outfits and equipment. The team's enthusiasm could know no bounds. It won the local competition, the state-wide competition several times and is set to compete in the national competition later this year. More recently Noelene, a former PE teacher, has identified another need, which is that many of the children cannot swim. She has arranged classes for them at Blacktown pool, and our Group provides the funding for the lessons.

In addition to these practical activities we also advocate for refugees. Our Group attends marches and protests under our banner, and, along with Amnesty and other like-minded groups, we have organised vigils in the Uniting Church in Leura when asylum seekers have died on Manus or Nauru. We have raised community awareness by funding educational programs for children to attend plays and other performances about homelessness at The Joan and in schools in and around Penrith. We have provided scholarships to senior students at Holroyd and Fairfield High School to continue with their studies to the end of Year 12 and at university. We have also combined advocacy with fund raising, with three very successful concerts, two in the Mountains and one in Sydney. Local musicians and choirs gave their time and talents, played to near-full houses on each occasion, and helped us raise thousands of dollars.

We respond to punitive measures, such as the proposed amendments to the Migration Act and the Citizenship Act by writing to politicians of all stripes, telling them that we speak for a large proportion of the Mountains community and demanding that they act. Occasionally they do. We initiated a successful move against the banning of mobile phones in detention centres. A few months ago our local member, Susan Templeman, arranged an audience for us with Shane Neumann, the shadow immigration minister. We impressed upon him the need for Labor to stand against the government's vicious policies. Labor has since joined with the Greens in opposing the citizenship amendments, and they will not go through. We have been on the point of taking up what one of our previous guest speakers, Stuart Hill, recommended - to adopt a pollie. There are several, who appear to have missed out on some of the benefits of good parenting, such as the capacity to recognise the good in others and to act in accordance with the universal golden rule. The problem is that there are so many of them on one side of politics we should have to open up a whole orphanage - or a detention centre - for them.

As you will learn from our treasurer's report, we have given out about \$160,000.00 over the last year. In addition to the activities I have already described, the money

has gone to other like-minded groups supporting refugees, for the legal costs of visa applications by those facing immediate deportation and, on occasion, to assist particular individuals in times of crisis. One of those was an asylum seeker who had contracted an illness, which led to the amputation of all his limbs. Another was a woman living in a car; there have been families who have needed bond money when they have faced eviction.

This year you will have been given reports prepared by some of our teams. I urge you to read those reports and to consider joining a team. If you do so, you will find yourself amongst other good people, with inspired ideas about raising money or running community activities, passionate about helping fellow human beings who, like the ancestors of almost all of us, have simply made their way to Australia hoping for a better life for themselves and their families.

The final achievement I should like to mention is that we have become adult, become independent, over this last year. Until now we have been a big kid - we were taken in by Blue Mountains Family Support, now known as Thrive!, which nurtured us and made an activity of that very worthwhile organisation. We have outgrown that dependency. We mentioned last year we were looking at becoming an incorporated association, at being a legal entity in our own right. Over the last six months we have worked on that process and consulted with our broader membership. I am happy to announce that, as of a few weeks ago, we are now the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group Incorporated. We have our own constitution, our own aims and structure. We have some motions to put to the meeting today, which will complete that process by transferring all of you, our members, and our assets over to our incorporated association. I must express a special "thank you" to Julie Martin for guiding us through the process.

Acknowledgements

Our work would not be possible without the continuing support of organisations and individuals within our local community. From the beginning we were auspiced by Thrive!, which for many years assisted us with our insurance, accounting, auditing and other legal requirements. We were also 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 the many who have made our work possible.

I should like to conclude by acknowledging the essential contributions of two of our long-standing committee members, our founder Marie Standen and our secretary and jack-of-all-trades, George Winston. Marie was our chairperson for many years, and then our deputy chair. Marie has chosen not to seek re-election to our committee. We would not be here now, and would not have achieved all that has been done, had it not been for Marie. I ask you join with me in applauding our inspiring founder.

George Winston has also given an enormous amount to our Group. He has been a driving force in it from the outset, acted as our secretary, and in that role has brought together many of the leading players in our activities. George has the gift of networking, and for raising money through book sales, raffles and direct approaches to benefactors who know that whatever George is involved in will be a worthwhile cause. George is standing down after many years as secretary, but will, we hope, remain on the committee as an events and fundraising co-ordinator. Please, also, put your hands together for George.

Dr Hal Ginges
Chairman
Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group
10th November 2017