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PRESS RELEASE

AUSTRALIA'S UNTOLD STORY RELEASED AT THE UNITED NATIONS

A report highlighting the extensive work of Australians supporting refugees has been released at the United Nations in Geneva. The "Untold Story" contains personal testimonies of many Australians who have rejected official detention policy to offer friendship and practical support to people in detention.

The "Untold Story" shows that harsh detention policy has galvanised thousands of Australians into action, which is quite unprecedented. There are now fifty-six national and state based organisations and Rural Australians for Refugees has seventy-one groups in regional areas throughout the country. In addition informal groups like Kids who Care and Baxter Mums are emerging in schools and the community.

The report compiled on the basis of a United Nations Association questionnaire reveals that significant personal relationships have developed between so many Australians and asylum seekers and those released on temporary protection visas. People from all age groups and backgrounds are involved and the overwhelming majority reveal a deep sense of shame about the way the Australian Government has punished vulnerable people.

As one elderly lady wrote

"I am 80 years old and a refugee from Hitler's Germany and I escaped in 1939 so I felt that I have to try and help others as I was helped."

National President of UNAA Margaret Reynolds said: "releasing this report at the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva is intended to send a clear message that many Australians DO welcome refugees and are actively involved in trying to compensate for oppressive government policy."

"Furthermore we hope it shows that wherever there is injustice ordinary people will mobilise to protect the human rights of others."

The report will be fully discussed at a public forum of human rights defenders on Tuesday 30th April at the United Nations.

A copy of the report follows

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Australians Welcome Refugees

The Untold Story: A report to the 60th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights - April 2004.

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Introduction

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”
- Martin Luther King Jr

This report aims to give just a snapshot of the efforts many Australians are making to help asylum seekers confined within prison like detention centres in isolated areas of Australia or in the Pacific.

Australia continues to attract widespread criticism for its punitive policies towards asylum seekers. The legacy of Tampa, SIEV X, the Pacific Solution and the arbitrary detention of families behind razor wire has seriously damaged our reputation as a tolerant nation.

These events and policies have galvanised thousands of Australians into action to personally support individuals and to lobby for reform. It is almost impossible to precisely detail the range of formal and informal organisations that have been established throughout Australia in the last three years. The National Directory of Refugees Australia lists fifty-six national and state based organisations. Rural Australians for Refugees details seventy-one websites of groups in regional areas.

There are other groups large and small – Kids Who Care, Armidale Sanctuary, Baxter Mums – which have emerged from schools, workplaces and community organisations. They meet in halls, lecture theatres and around each others kitchen tables. Actors, filmmakers, poets, writers, artists and crafts people have donated their time and talents to portray the plight of asylum seekers. School children have been involved in letter writing and a national essay competition organised by Australians Against Racism. Retirees and fruit growers have become politicised to organise protest rallies and delegations to Parliament. Grandparents have coordinated fundraising visits and legal appeals, while young people have collected toys for children in detention.

Sporting heroes have spoken out publicly. The first Muslim soccer team the Tiger II has attracted enormous support nationally when Hazara boys on Temporary Protection Visas were encouraged to form their own team. Professional groups representing – lawyers, doctors, teachers and nurses – have each publicly stated their concern for the health and well being of asylum seekers.

Hundreds of appeals are in the courts and the media constantly reports on new evidence against the punitive policy.

The range and level of activity is unprecedented in Australian history. So many Australians have rejected this official policy and rallied to provide friendship and practical support to asylum seekers. Hundreds of visits have been made and thousands of gifts, letters, photos, emails and phone calls exchanged which has made life in isolation a little more bearable. Significant relationships have developed between asylum seekers and their Australian friends.

This is the untold story of what can be achieved by determined citizens who have found ways to counter the oppressive policies of government. In February 2004, the United Nations Association of Australia circulated a questionnaire to help document “The Untold

Story” about Australians who welcome refugees. We have been overwhelmed with responses that are both personal and deeply moving accounts of how many Australians have been affected by a policy they believe shames all Australians.

It is impossible to include in this report all the detail of efforts individuals are making to compensate for government policy. However, in selecting material for this report, we hope that the personal dedication of so many people shows that when governments deny the humanity of others, many citizens will respond with generosity and compassion.

We hope this report highlights the depth of concern large numbers of Australians have about the arbitrary detention of asylum seekers. In detailing these personal experiences we want to show that punitive policies are extremely damaging and will be strongly resisted by those who value universal human rights.

Who Supports Asylum Seekers?

What are the backgrounds of people who commit themselves and their families to adopting strangers from around the world. How do they manage to adapt to different languages and cultures? Why do some people decide to reject official government policy to offer friendship and support?

There is no single identikit for the type of individual who has become an advocate for the well being of asylum seekers in Australia. They are young and old, rich and poor, professional and unskilled, retired and unemployed. Some are still at school while others are focusing on university studies in human rights and international law. A wide diversity of occupations is reflected in their backgrounds – scientists, nurses, psychologists, farmers, fruit growers, teachers, public servants, lawyers and doctors have all indicated their commitment to the basic principles of United Nations human rights standards in the treatment of asylum seekers arriving in Australia.

A number of individuals work in the public sector in areas like immigration, welfare, foreign policy, defense, customs and policing. Several have expressed concern about the way their professionalism has been compromised by government policy.

A navy officer wrote

- “The “Children Overboard” debacle was perpetrated by the government with the prime minister knowing it did not happen. It was a disgrace when a professional soldier had to take the fall for the incident”

The youngest respondent wrote

- “Hallo I am 11 and have been sending letters to refugees for two years and I would like to be part of your project”

Several elderly people identified their age and experience to emphasise the imperative they felt to “just do something”.

One wrote: "I am 80 years old and a refugee from Hitler's Germany and I escaped in 1939, so I felt that I have to try and help others as I was helped".

Some were very aware of their own heritage as coming from immigrant families.

- My grandmother was German Jewish and having researched her history and experiences in Australia before and during the Second World War, I was already well aware of the difficulties refugees face on entering a new country. I would not be here today if the Australian government of the time had a less lenient policy on accepting Jewish refugees. I feel it is the very least I can do, considering my personal history and as a compassionate citizen of a country in which I am fast losing my faith!"
- As an immigrant and Australian citizen, I felt that our treatment of these people was inhumane and that something should be done!!!... When I thought about it more, I realized that the best place to start was with myself!!"

A large number of respondents simply identified themselves as mums, dads or grandparents. A group of women from a Victorian country town formed a group called "Baxter Mums" to demonstrate their role in supporting young men in the South Australian Baxter Detention Centre hundreds of kilometers west of their homes.

Several individuals identified their own personal family tragedy of ill health, yet found it essential to try to alleviate the suffering of others.

- "I lost my older daughter to cancer in 1998. I still grieve for her, but I am distressed by the unnecessary hurt and harm and grief caused to other mothers when they lose their children to drowning or to mental disturbance in the concentration camps. It is intolerable."
- "I have Crohn's disease and was so furious I forced myself into remission, I don't sleep anymore, I weep every day when each new atrocity is revealed, I rejoice when we have a win – the day the kids were released I came home from the court and wept with relief and joy for them, but god it was hard work."
- "I suffer depression from a lifetime of other people making decisions that affected my life and future. I have waited for years to have decisions made by bureaucrats that basically put my life and future on hold, I feel I know a little of what these people are suffering and the despair of having unthinking, uncaring officials who crave power controlling the lives of the most powerless and defenseless people imaginable. Those in power either have no idea what they are doing or they are enjoying destroying these people."

Awareness of Australian's Arbitrary Detention Policy

A majority of people was alerted to the harsh reality of Australian's arbitrary detention policies when the Norwegian ship "Tampa" was refused permission to land asylum seekers rescued off the northwestern coast of Australia in 2001.

The overall climate of insecurity generated by terrorist attacks in America was manipulated during the Federal Election Campaign when politicians used misleading language to portray asylum seekers as “illegal arrivals” “queue jumpers” and even on occasions possibly “terrorists”.

The campaign sloganeering “we must protect our borders” further entrenched the view that these outsiders were a threat and because they were locked in prison like detention camps, many Australians were convinced asylum seekers must be criminals.

Yet many Australians are deeply troubled by the direction of this official policy.

- “I didn’t ‘decide’ to get involved in helping people in detention – I simply had no choice! For the love of my country, my 2 sons, myself – I HAD to get involved. A Labor Party supporter all my life, I watched in horror as the Tampa sailed onto my TV screen, and my country and my party contrived to use desperate people as pawns in our federal election. For me, there was no turning back.”
- “When the legislation for mandatory detention was passed through the parliament I was aware what was going on. I was so ashamed; it was the most un-Australian thing I had ever seen happen. Australians are renowned for sticking up for the under-dog, we have always been the champions of the oppressed and now we were gathering an international reputation as “Fortress Australia”. The Howard Government undertook a campaign of misinformation and playing on the paranoia of the uneducated and apathy of the general Australian public.
- “After the TAMPA I was outraged that a nation like ours would throw the refugees convention and all other human rights standards in the garbage bin, but listened and watched helplessly as they did so. My grand-daughters were then 10 and pleaded with me to tell Howard to send them a plane before the children died.”
- “My awareness certainly grew as more boats arrived then with the Tampa. I watched and listened to the news and read the papers in disbelief that our government could take such actions. The various ministers seemed to be totally lacking in knowledge, understanding, compassion, empathy and honesty. And the opposition accepted, even supported these tactics. Worst of all, it seemed that a majority of my fellow Australians did too.”
- “When “the Tampa” story broke into my living room, I became very concerned and horrified about what I was seeing and hearing. At the time, I thought I should do something. Being an Australian by choice and not birth (and having 2 passports) I thought about returning my Australian passport, then I thought they probably would deport me, so the gesture was empty as it would serve no purpose.”
- “I remember being overcome with shock and even disbelief.... I remember thinking, no this is not going to happen – the Australian people will not allow it how wrong was !!!

Several people reported as Australians living overseas at the time.

- "I was in Beijing for 3 weeks staying with friends when the Tampa incident occurred and the 7yr old came home from her international school and said "Australia isn't being very nice to people on that boat". Following the story on CNN and BBC World TV news and in English language newspapers there and on the flight home, I was horrified and heartened at how universal the media condemnation seemed to be from outside the country of the government's behaviour.

I had a friend who lived on Christmas Island who had been involved in refugee support in Darwin. She could see the Tampa from her verandah and the garden was full of photographers."

- "I first became aware of Australian's Detention policy whilst living overseas in Borneo (Sabah, Malaysia). This was the time of the Tampa Crisis. Our reputation as a fair and good nation lost much credibility during that time. (I have to say I was a little ashamed of being an Australian as a result of the way we were treating these unfortunate people. In fact I was appalled."

Several respondents had knowledge and experience of detention policy before the Tampa Controversy.

- "I had a friend, a Japanese student here, who was caught in a visa mix-up just before the 2000 Olympics. He called us from Villa wood, and during the three weeks before he was deported I learnt a lot about the confusion, inconsistencies, staff shortages, stubbornness and punitive controls of both the Department of Immigration and Australasian Correctional Management."
- "Strangely enough, I become aware of this government policy, after I befriended a homeless student some time ago! He became a good friend but unfortunately, he neglected to get his medical examination completed in time to renew his visa application, and two weeks later was picked up by police officers in a 'squat raid' (around the time of the Sydney Olympics) and sent to Villawood Detention Centre. That was my first encounter with the detention system, and I found it fairly disconcerting."

Many Australians became aware of arbitrary detention through extensive media coverage.

- "I first became aware of Australian's detention policy when I saw a report in 2001 on the ABC Four Corners Program where a little boy named Shayan's story was aired. I vividly remember the images shown of this little boy who would no longer speak and of his distressed parents. I remember Jackie Everitt the family's lawyer being asked by the Journalist "How could something like this be happening in Australia" Jackie's response was "Well bad things happen when good people do nothing." I couldn't sleep that night and felt very angry to learnt that Australia was locking up children for years on end. How come I didn't know about this? What could I do about it?
- "I first became actively aware of Australia's detention policy in early 2001, when I saw the Four Corners Report about the little boy who had been traumatized by his life behind the wire. As a middleclass, forty something, ordinary, average, Aussie

mum, I simply could not believe that the country I loved so much, could allow something like this to happen. How naïve I was. As soon as the program finished, I got onto the web and found websites dedicated to helping those people our country has almost demonized – that began my belated education.”

- “I was vaguely aware of the detention policy prior to the “Tampa” episode, and agreed with it. I can remember pictures of Chinese refugees on the roof of the Port Hedland Detention Centre and pictures of leaky boats. But when I saw the picture of the hundreds of refugees sitting in rows on “Tampa”, I began to change my view. I listened and read the news with a different mind-set, and took an interest in all the aspects of the issue. I was horrified that the Australian government decided on a “Pacific Solution.”

Why are people so involved?

Most respondents felt personally motivated to both show support for people incarcerated in detention centers and to change a policy they found totally unjust and un-Australian.

- “I found it unbearable that politicians who are supposed to be representing me could maintain such a harsh policy against innocent people. I needed to have some way of expressing my support for asylum seekers, and my disgust with our Government’s policy. I wanted to let them know that not all Australians agreed with their detention.”
- “I do not agree with our government policy of mandatory detention and I feel it is not the best way to deal with asylum seekers. It shames me that the country in which I enjoy immense freedoms should also be known for its poor treatment of those seeking asylum and refuge.”
- “To paraphrase Rural Australians for Refugees,” once you know the truth, you will open up your heart.”
- “It is impossible to ignore the issue once one becomes friends with people who have been through this appalling regime – all of them following horrors perpetrated in their places of origin. The blatant and ceaseless lies of the government, whilst sometimes draining one’s energy, more often serve as impetus to continue – the truth MUST come out one day.”
- “I got involved because I started to understand the kind of lives these people have to go through and I wanted to help in some way.”
- “I really wanted to do something to change the policy or make it a bit more bearable for these poor imprisoned people somehow, but I am just one person.”
- “I couldn’t complain and do nothing or I’d be guilty of complicity.”

People who have visited detention centres or met those released on temporary protection visas report a range of emotions.

- “I was angered, ashamed, determined to act, overwhelmed by the courage, sadness, generosity, appreciation of the little we offered and the humour displayed by the asylum seekers.”
- “I guess I felt a mixture of sadness at his situation as well as what I saw as a shortsighted and compassionless policy shown by successive governments. It seemed to me such a lost opportunity.”
- “I remember trying to put on a brave face and be cheerful after coming through the long, frightening process of getting into Villawood. I had not understood that it was really like a prison. The first day when I met many asylum seekers is honestly a bit of a blur. I heard so many heart-breaking stories and was amazed that people were so open about what had happened to them. I left a mixture of emotions. On one hand I felt utterly useless as I have no legal or counseling expertise or ability to help them get out. On the other hand I was so glad I had gone as at least they knew that some Australians care about them and wanted to welcome them!”
- “Extremely sorry for how my country has treated them. Angry at those politicians responsible. They are real human beings with needs common to all of us, not the demons they are made out to be by politicians.”
- “We felt a heart connection with the family straight away. We felt sad that they had been through so much suffering. We wanted to maintain a long term friendship with them.”
- “It was wonderful to make contact with these people. They have enriched my life and although I cannot do what they want most – to be able to let them stay, which I would love to do, I can support them in other ways. When I first visited my friend in Baxter, I felt anguish, disgust and shame at their circumstances.”
- “I felt deep sympathy but more than that – great admiration for their strength.”
- “I felt angry and ashamed. I have since felt frustrated and distressed by the stupidity and the cruelty of the situation. The secrecy and the deceit experienced OUTSIDE the detention centres is humiliating, and to know that it must be indescribable and painful INSIDE is unbearable sometimes. It’s just that I know that what I’m experiencing is nothing compared with what is being inflicted on helpless people.”
- “Developing friendships with detainees has changed my life. I am continually humbled by their strength of character and amazing generosity of spirit. They have experienced terrible traumas, which are so far beyond the bad things I’ve suffered that I almost can’t comprehend them; yet they retain the ability to care about me, and to welcome friendship.”

How Are Asylum Seekers Supported?

The determined energy and commitment of so many Australian refugee advocates can only be glimpsed through just a few examples.

- “I campaign to change policy. I collect and present petitions to members of parliament. I write to newspapers. On invitation I have spoken to three school groups and two church groups about refugees.

I work about eight hours a day most days from home helping organize information stalls, send out newsletters, campaign to change government policy, contact people in detention, try to find lawyers for those who need this, liaise between lawyers and detainees, research country information, help with Appeals to the Minister for Immigration, visas, maintain a data base to monitor needs of persons in Baxter detention centre, organise for letters and parcels to be sent to those in detention, write to politicians, work with a refuge activist committee. I work on the NO Deportations campaign.”

- “I work to organise legal help. I put people in touch with people who can help them. I have sent phone cards and parcels. I have paid to get relatives out of gaol in Iraq for one person and to get documents from Iraq from another. I have contacted Department of Immigration and Australasian Correctional Management to change specific unjust practice on two occasions. I have organized for affidavits that might be helpful for appeals. I phone one person every second night for eighteen months now and give counseling and relaxation sessions on the phone when he is suicidal. I have traveled to Port Augusta four times and stayed to make a total of seventy visits to people in the centre by now. I have had some people on Temporary Protection Visas stay with me – one for ten months and others for just a few days.”
- “In a personal sense, I write to detainees in Baxter Detention Centre, and occasionally send them small gifts. It’s worth mentioning that I don’t attempt to ring up any more, as I have never been able to get through. I also visit detainees in the Perth Detention Centre (I live in Perth). I work with a small informal group (the Fremantle Support Project) who try to help asylum-seekers; especially habeus corpus cases who aren’t allowed to work, but also aren’t entitled for the day-to-day living for one habeus corpus person (X). Here, I set up an email-based group of people who wanted help (a request for help was sent round informally through a number of email lists). Generally, people transfer \$2.50 a week or \$5.00 a week directly into X’s account. Others give a lump sum every now and then, others who are not in a position to help financially simply give their emotional support. The list has grown to around 70 people.”
- “I have sent the occasional food parcel, language tapes, got his spectacle renewed, sent a couple of things that he requested for his mother. He has been there for over 3 years. The other male has converted to Christianity. He won’t let me send him anything. I did send for his birthday one year but this made him angry more than anything. I have managed to speak to them both on the phone when they were in Curtin. The single male has now been in detention for over 4 years. I have also worked as a volunteer at a refugee claimant support centre and financially contribute a sum each month to help a person living in the community.”
- “I send gifts when I can, recently my brother in law gave me a personal cd player and cd’s to send, the postage to Nauru is outrageous even prisoners of war got Red Cross parcels. It concerns me that the mothers do not have enough clothes and

shoes for their children, and I bet toiletries are in short supply. I send newspaper cuttings that show support for asylum seekers.”

- “I’ve been in personal contact with Asylum seekers since 2001 and have maintained contact throughout this period with so many people I couldn’t count but I’d say around 100, young men, young women, children, fathers, mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers detained in centres around Australia as well as people in Nauru.”
- “I drove the first Freedom Bus around Australia, gathered “numbers” thrown to us over fences and painstakingly tried to write down foreign names to line up with the numbers – the people didn’t give their names first up they just told us their numbers – the memory still makes me cry it was truly shocking.

Little kids yelling out *“I am YAK 124 can you ring my father he is in Perth”, “We want a visa”, “Why are we in here we are not animals”, “I need to contact my family please help me.”*

I’ve organised fundraises to provide basic things like phone cards, underwear (the women in Curtin were making underwear out of bed sheets), warm clothing, shoes, books, etc. I’ve read stories to children over the phone (just finished Lord of the Rings), made lots of phone calls to lawyers, migration agents, ombudsman, politicians and anyone that would listen on behalf on numerous advocates and arranged for a brail machine for a blind man.

Arranged public meetings around Australia to form refugee advocacy groups and networked with these groups in the hope of working together and forcing change in the government policy. Spoken at schools and various community organisations to educate people about refugee issues – not just in Australia but globally. Arranged for numerous experts to come to our area to discuss the issue and had art displays, actions protests etc.”

- “I have supported asylum seekers in general by writing letter of politicians, newspapers, etc; making phone contact with people in Port Hedland and Baxter; visiting Port Hedland and Baxter in 2003; sending greetings cards on special occasions like birthdays, Eid, etc., phone cards, money, clothes, books, music tapes and musical instruments. When my husband and I drove from northern NSW to Baxter and Port Hedland we took with us boxes of books, art materials and much else sent by local Rural Australians for Refugee groups. In WA we delivered a table tennis table into the centre. As part of the group, I have worked to raise awareness of what is really happening through regular meetings, forums, demonstrations, market stalls, concerts and other fund-raisers.”
- “I have done all the normal things, lobbied Federal Government Members personally, written letters to the Prime Minister and The Minister for Immigration, attended rallies, joined and help set up action groups. I have spent a lot of time educating myself and then evangelizing for the cause, I speak to people every day and make them aware of the facts on the matter. I have accommodated a person on a Temporary Protection Visa in my home for the past 18 months at no expense to him at all. I have organized his medical and psychiatric care and his visa

applications. I have attended meetings in the Department with him and argued with the government officials about the accuracy of the information they were trying to put across as to the security of sending my friend back to where he came from. I have found him work and I have tried to be a good friend to him. Just today I have spent the day traveling to a regional city some 100 kms away, I took him for x-rays, passport photos, medical examination and blood tests so that he will be granted a Protection Visa. I have taken him to our state capital several times for psychiatrist's appointments and last week for an appointment with the red cross in an attempt to trace his family."

Thousands of letters and gifts have been sent to asylum seekers in detention in Australia and off shore islands. Phone calls can keep people in touch, but many Australians have never met their new friends yet feel extremely close to them.

- "I worried about what I should say. I didn't want to give false hope. I didn't feel comfortable about including much about my own life as it seemed so privileged. On the other hand I felt glad to have this contact. When I first received a reply I was filled with emotion. The two men wrote such beautiful letters, full of courage and good wishes for myself and the man I was soon to marry.
- "I cried when I received my first letters, I had gotten a list of people to write to from Julian Burnside. Three of my friends returned to Afghanistan pretty quickly they couldn't stand the conditions on Nauru. One young man returned before Christmas 2003 and it broke my heart at the desperation he was feeling. He said he would email me, I am worried about him. Another has become part of my life and no matter what happens I will never forget him. His photo was on front of the Weekend Australian when the detainees were sewing up their lips. He's letters always move me tears he is always concerned about me. I would love to meet him."
- "Making personal contact was difficult I felt unsure and clumsy, helpless yet elated. When I was able to visit and meet them face-to-face I felt a bond with them that was hard to explain.
- "I was very nervous! It took me a long time to get around it.. I think on some way I had assumed that the person who I was contacting was in some way either super-human, super-needy or super-persecuted...I found out that (surprise, surprise) the people I were taking to were just normal folks. I was made so aware through basic contact, that we live in a country that is rich in opportunities and resources. I felt kind of guilty because I have so much, and either do not share it or do not know the best way to steward my resources for others. After some writing, things became more relaxed and I suppose that I started to find I had a friend. I gained a lot through the letter we exchanged – people's first-hand stories and accounts are far more powerful and humanizing than reams of diatribe. I think I've learned to listen a little better."
- "I had a deep fear that I was entering a relationship with a possibly very needy person, which might become very time-consuming and drawn out, and could involve nasty courts. I knew that even if this fear was realized, it would be a rewarding and heart-warming relationship, but I expected a significant commitment."

- “I knew when I was writing to the first asylum seeker that I wrote to (aged 9) that he must have had a terrible past. When I received my first letter I realized the despair that this poor boy felt when he asked me to tell John Howard to free him. When I first heard his little voice on the telephone I felt his despair as he told me about his father in the Nauru hunger strike, and he asked me ‘when will I be free’. I felt helpless.”
- “I started visiting M at Maribyrrnong about a year ago. He was a quiet boy, around 23 years old and had come because of threats to his life. He was in detention for a period of 14 months until myself and a couple of friends managed to get him out on a bridging visa. We all mucked in together and put up the \$10,000 bond required. He is now living in my home with my family. His long incarceration has left him institutionalised and we are working hard to get him motivated about life again. He is fitting in well with family life, but his court hearing is in April and he is not expected to win.... he will be deported soon thereafter. The personal investment in all this is very high. On the one hand, you receive such joy at being able to help.... Even in small ways, and on the other hand, the relationship can end at any moment and you have to be aware that you and your friend will be facing great pain.”
- “I went with people who had been to Villawood before and I took my daughter with me. She took games with her and after the initial shyness of people who don’t know each other, we spent a great Sunday around a table full of people playing games and having a great time. My daughter made it easier for all concerned. They loved her and she allowed me to relax and be happy with my new friends. We got to know each other much quicker because of her.”
- “I felt like a “do gooder” who wasn’t achieving much. One young woman I visited was pregnant. She was here with her husband and is now out. She had the baby whilst in VW and I visited her in the hospital. I was surprised by the two armed guards outside her room and the one guard who stopped me taking a photo of the baby. When I said “*Oh well, I tried*”, she answered, “*Yes, I would have too.*”
- “When I first made direct contact with my first two friends two years ago I felt very tentative, not really knowing what to write; how much to tell them about my life and how much to ask them about themselves. I did not know whether they would understand English or whether it would be too upsetting for them to tell me what had happened to them. I was very happy when I received replies, even though their stories and thoughts were distressing. I am still in contact with those two men, plus a great many others. So many poets.”

The Future?

Because our every action has a universal dimension, a potential impact on others’ happiness, ethics are necessary, as a means to ensure that we do not harm others.

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama

This report has attempted to detail just a glimpse of the human interaction that has occurred between Australians and detained asylum seekers. My special thanks to everyone who has contributed, your words and actions are inspirational. To all those people in detention or on temporary protection visas thank you for your tolerance and friendship.

We cannot know if documenting these experiences will lead to policy reform. Is it possible that political decision makers are prepared to be guided by citizens who have put humanity and principle ahead of opportunism and xenophobia?

However we do know that as long as arbitrary detention remains in Australia there will be determined human rights advocates working in countless ways “just to make a difference”.

As one young woman wrote:

- “The support that I give to my friend in detention is very basic. I simply visit whenever possible to sit and have a chat. This may not sound like much but it can make a world of difference. I am sure even if I went and sat in silence with him for two hours it would not matter. It is the value of the knowledge that there are Australians who care, and that Australia as a whole is not trying to reject him that is important.”

As this report shows many Australians do welcome refugees and we have aimed to document some personal experiences in this continuing untold story.

Margaret Reynolds, National President
United Nations Association of Australia

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