



ROMERO NEWS

Romero Centre Newsletter June 2008

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**Mitra Khakbaz & Solihah Abdullah, a volunteer
at the opening of the new premises.**

Opening of new premises

Sixty people gathered on February 29th at the Romero Centre to celebrate the official opening of its new (and hopefully permanent!) premises.

Located at 20 Dutton St, Dutton Park, the new Romero Centre is only about a kilometre, as the crow flies, from the centre's first premises in Faversham St, Woolloongabba.

That first home of the centre was owned by the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy, and made available as part of their commitment to supporting refugees. The present location is also owned by the sisters of Mercy. Declaring the new premises officially open, the Congregational Leader of the Sisters, Sr Sandra Lupi, expressed the intention of the Sisters to make this the permanent home of the Romero Centre.

In between the first and the present

location, there were no fewer than five moves. All locations have been within a radius of a kilometre in Woolloongabba, Buranda and Dutton Park. The new premises at Dutton Park are easily accessible by bus and train.

The new home of the Romero Centre is a beautiful old Queenslander owned by the Sisters of Mercy, who have kindly made it available to the Romero Centre after extensively refurbishing it. Then finishing touches are being made to the exterior as we complete this newsletter.

The move itself went smoothly, thanks to the hard work of many of the Centre's volunteers, staff and clients. We are well and truly settled in and welcoming new and existing clients through our door.

New start in Refugee Policy?

Following the ALP victory in the November 2007 Federal Election, refugee advocates are looking to the new government to make major changes in refugee and asylum policy.

After a visit to the Romero Centre last year, Tony Burke, then Shadow minister for Immigration, wrote explaining some aspects of the ALP policy. Here are the main points:

- No indefinite detention of asylum seekers. Detention will be used for health, security and background checks. All claims for asylum to be processed within 90 days.
- Support for the continued use of the immigration processing facility on Christmas Island, but closure of detention facilities on Nauru and Manus Island. An end to the so-called "Pacific Solution".
- Abolition of the system of temporary protection visas.
- Recognition that the "45 day rule" results in many legitimate asylum seekers being denied Medicare, Centrelink and the right to work while their claims are being assessed. Labour is committed to removing this injustice, and

ensuring that only frivolous or vexatious claimants are denied these rights.

After more than 6 months in office, the new government has implemented the first three of the above Platform promises. The 45 day rule remains in place and prohibits skilled and unskilled asylum seekers who are prepared to do almost any job from working. They continue to be unnecessarily humiliated and impoverished through their dependency on charity, often for years.

The Romero Centre continues to make representations to the Minister, Senator Chris Evans, on these and other issues.



Hassan Ghulam and Jan

Success for Dr Fatima!



The number 13 proved to be lucky for Fatima Stanakzai. It was that day in November that she was told that the Queensland Medical Board had agreed to register her as a medical practitioner.

It was the end of a long battle by Fatima. She arrived in Queensland as a refugee in 2004 after fleeing from Afghanistan to escape the Taliban. In that year, she started the process of seeking to have her qualifications

recognised. She passed all the exams required of overseas-trained doctors - getting 12th place out of more than 400 candidates in one of the exams.

However, the Medical Board of Queensland refused to register her as a doctor, insisting that she provide the original copy of her degree. The Afghan department of Public Education and the Department of Health both attested to her medical qualifications, but the Board would not accept this. With the support of the Romero Centre and pro bono lawyers from CORRS, Fatima took them to court. An initial hearing of the appeal was inconclusive, and before the second hearing, Fatima went to Afghanistan and got the required certificate. The Medical Board reconsidered its decision and granted the registration.

Fatima now works at Redlands Hospital.

*Thank you Senator Bartlett,
You made a positive difference!*

The thank you luncheon for Andrew Bartlett on Saturday 24 May was an emotional occasion for his staff and friends from those who came as refugees and the advocates who have walked with them since 2000.

Ali Karimi, who now calls himself an Afghan Australian, not a refugee, expressed his elegant and heartfelt thanks for the support he and his community has received from Andrew from the time he came to Brisbane from Curtin Detention Centre in 2000. Chaman Shah Naseri, still a refugee on a Temporary Protection visa (until that is converted to permanency by October this year), spoke for the 1500 asylum seekers held on detention on Nauru for years. With superb oratory, he told the good Senator how he on his four visits to Nauru had given hope to those who were hope-less and that "you are the Prime Minister of our hearts and always will be."

Freddie Steen and Hassan Ghulam reminded the almost one hundred friends gathered in the back garden of the Romero Centre of the difficult times during which Andrew provided leadership on human rights and matters of justice and decency. Bobby Whitfield from the African community and Kerrin Benson from the Multicultural Development Association paid tribute to his support for refugee settlement and multiculturalism. The Parliamentary record shows for all time, the Democrats sustained and principled challenges to the Coalitions' inhumane policies and their calls for an end to the unnecessary suffering of those who had suffered too much already.

Andrew was visibly moved by the tributes to him, his party

Apology

In July 2006 the Romero Centre was the recipient of our wonderful sewing machines and a grant of \$1000 from the Zonta Club of Brisbane.

It has been very unfortunate that the last 2 newsletters have omitted to acknowledge those gifts. We would like now to take the belated opportunity to warmly thank the Zonta club of Brisbane for their very generous donation. Without the generous and ongoing support of organisations such as Zonta the Romero Centre would not be able to function. The sewing machines are put to good use every Tuesday for our women's sewing group. Many women have been able to sew their families' clothes and learn new skills as a result.

THANK YOU ZONTA!

Thank you also to the Quakers for their generous donation which enables us reimburse our community worker Hassan Ghulam for some of the expenses he incurs as a hardworking and generous volunteer.

Issuing certificates to Senator Bartlett and staff.



and his hard working staff. The Refugee Action Collective's Nicole Randall presented certificates of appreciation to all staff and a purple certificate to the Senator, and thanked the friends both local and from the Sunshine and Gold Coasts for being present.

The luncheon was organised by RAC, and the Romero Centre was pleased to co host it and have its centre and backyard alive with people, donated food and good feeling. The consensus was that Australia owes Andrew (and the Democrats) enormously and that voters were mistaken in not voting to return a Queensland Democrat to the Senate.



Senator Andrew Bartlett.

World Refugee Week



Freddie Steen & Ali Karami at Senator.

As part of the celebration of World Refugee Week, The Romero Centre hosted a preview of the documentary *Hope* and held a multicultural lunch for neighbours.

Over 100 people attended the film preview held at the Dendy, George St on Sunday 15th June. *Hope* tells the story of Amal Basry's journey to refuge in Australia.

In 2001, Four hundred asylum seekers were pitched into the sea when their people-smuggling boat from Indonesia sank on its way to Australia. Three hundred and fifty three people drowned. Only seven survivors made it to Australia.

Amal Basry, who had fled Iraq, was one of those survivors. She spent 22 hours in the ocean hanging on to a floating corpse, convinced that her son was dead and she was the only person left alive.

Controversy surrounded the sinking of the boat, which became known as the SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel Unknown). In public, Amal became an advocate for the survivors. In private, she fought to reunite her fragmented family, cope with the personal consequences of the disaster and return to Indonesia to 'find what I lost in the ocean'.



Amal Basry.

Amal loved movies and had always dreamed of being in a film of her own. Documentary maker Steve Thomas wanted to record her life story. So they made a deal. And having embarked on this journey, they were determined to see it through to the end.

Hope is an inspiring story. A film that works on many levels, it is a universal tale of family, migration and the search for 'a better life'. A "must see" for Australians particularly.

On Friday 20th, World Refugee Day, we hosted our multicultural lunch. The Romero Centre wanted to provide an opportunity to the local community to learn about refugee issues, acknowledge the contribution refugees make to our communities and celebrate the successes the refugees have achieved on arrival to Australia. As well as make a connection to our centre and find out what we do.

The theme this year for World Refugee Week, was "A Place to call home". The theme encouraged people to think about the global themes of protection and human rights by focusing on the fundamental right to a secure place to call home.

It was an opportunity for Australians to think about our common obligations to people who have no secure home, as well as to acknowledge the 700,000 refugees and humanitarian migrants over the past 60 years who have made Australia their home. It is also a time think about the nearly 9million refugees currently around the globe who have no safe "place to call home".

It also provided an opportunity for all Australians to think about how they contribute towards others making Australia home. As Julian Burnside so aptly wrote in his memoirs *Watching Brief*, "in our treatment of them - desperate, defenceless, and traumatized - we identify something of our character...".

And of course, we highlighted how the Romero Centre has been a home to many refugees holding Temporary Protections Visas over the last eight years.



Romero Centre: Where to now?



Our volunteer coordinator, Emma Davey and Lisa, a regular volunteer

Over the last few months the Romero Centre staff assisted by Mark Creyton from Volunteering Queensland and Red Cross have reviewed its mission and vision.

Mission statement:

The purpose of the Romero Centre is to be a place of welcome to refugees, primarily those from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, and to assist them to successfully settle in Australia.

The Centre has a special focus on refugees whose protection visas were temporary and on their reunited families.

The Romero Centre aims:

- to provide a place of respect and acceptance, hospitality and friendship to all;
- to redress the injustice done to refugees who were on temporary protection visas and to support their recovery;
- to offer practical and immediate assistance and to be available and accessible to refugees who need help;

- to be a base for human rights advocacy and community education;
- to support the community identity and life of people who came as refugees.

As part of the process, four major outcomes were identified:

1. Community and personal support
2. Advocacy
3. Community development
4. Sustainability

These outcomes ensure that we will continue to provide the services we have done for the last eight years. What these outcomes allow is a greater focus on community development.

With this in mind, we have begun community consultations and these will be ongoing over the next few months. We have tertiary student, Claire Kuyper, who is undertaking needs analysis with the communities with which we work. The needs analysis will then direct our community development work.



Kathi McCulloch

New Coordinator

We welcome to the Romero Centre Kathi McCulloch, our new coordinator.

Kathi comes to us from New Zealand where she was working with RMS Refugee Resettlement services as the Volunteer Team Leader for the Northern Region. She brings to the Romero Centre experience working with volunteers and refugees, both as a paid employee and as a volunteer.

While studying her Masters of Development Studies she volunteered with ESOL Home Tutors where her

passion for working in the refugee sector grew.

On completing her degrees she worked as a paid employee for ESOL Home Tutors as well as a Women Centre Community Support Worker.

Kathi has been warmly welcomed by the staff of the Romero Centre and those working in the sector and looks forward to meeting others.

Fundraising:

Besides the specific projects such as the one mentioned above, the Romero Centre also needs donations for more general refugee relief. This is used for a wide variety of needs – families whose limited budgets leave no room for extra health costs, unexpected school expenses, fees for an employment-related training course, driving lessons. When a member of the family is working, these things are usually not a problem. But for families or individuals on minimal government benefits, they can be insurmountable. We also need to raise funds for the day-to-day expenses of running the Centre –rent, upkeep, provide hospitality to visitors.

Any donation you can make will make a difference. Donations over \$2.00 are tax deductible. Cheques should be made payable to the Romero Centre.

The Romero Centre acknowledges the generous ongoing support of the Sisters of Mercy, Quakers as well as various individuals who have generously donated to the centre.

Wish List!

The Romero Centre is always looking for 'Wish List' items to assist in improving client services and facilities. If you are able to assist in any way, please contact the Centre.

Client Needs

Warm blankets
Computers/printers (only in working order)
Refugee relief (loans and payments)

Electronic donations

We are now able to provide, on a trial basis, donations by electronic transfer. If you would prefer to donate in this way, please follow the steps below.

1. In the lodgement reference please include your initial, surname and 'Romero'.
2. Complete the send in the name and address slip below.

On receipt of this information will be able to ensure that your donation is correctly identified and issue a receipt to you.

Our bank details are:

Sisters of Mercy, Mercy Family Services

ANZ, Virginia

014 275 775237628

Cut and send this slip in with your donation or to advise of a deposit into our account to:

Romero Centre
P O Box 6115
Buranda
QLD 4102

Name _____

Address _____

Post Code _____ Amount \$ _____