



ROMERO NEWS

Iraqi Festival Day

Romero
Centre
Newsletter
Autumn 2009

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Festival Fun...
musicians entertained the crowd at the inaugural Iraqi Festival Day on April 4

Delicious food, energetic dancing, poetry, fashion, artwork and traditional music were in abundance at Brisbane's inaugural Iraqi Festival Day, held by the Romero Centre and members of the Iraqi community earlier this month. About 700 people from across Brisbane gathered at Marymac Hall in Annerley for the event, which was supported by the Queensland and Australian governments.

Kurdish, Arabic, Sunni, Shiite, Christian and Turkeman Iraqis made up the majority of the guests but members of the broader Australian community, including Syrians, Afghans and Africans, were also among the crowd.

Following a Koran reading in the morning, the festival was officially opened and the celebrations began. Festival goers were treated to traditional Iraqi snacks, displays of

artwork, books and fashion throughout the day, while Kurdish dancers, Turkeman musicians, poets and Australian band Waziz kept the audience entertained. Among the speakers were Iraqi community members Dr Wael Ghafor, Fazil Rostam, Sara Aziz and Dr Salma Al Khudairi, who presented a talk on Iraqi women.

At lunch time, Brisbane's Lady Mayoress Lisa Newman made a speech, followed by the presentation of certificates and prizes for the children's artwork competition. Romero Centre staff and volunteers were kept busy, serving food and drinks and manning the various stalls. The day was a great success and we would like to thank all who were involved in making it happen.



Left: Brisbane Lady Mayoress Lisa Newman with Romero Centre coordinator Kathi McCulloch

Right: Traditional Iraqi room on display at the festival



The idea to hold the Iraqi Festival Day came from a former Iraqi client of the Romero Centre's. His vision was to use the festival to combat isolation and fragmentation in the Iraqi community in Brisbane, encourage a robust and positive community identity and to foster strong networks. An annual festival has great potential to add richness and texture to Brisbane's cultural festival calendar, and highlight the wonderful diversity of the character of the Brisbane Iraqi community. Given circumstances in Iraq and divided public opinion on related issues, it is particularly important to provide a forum in Brisbane wherein Iraqis and non-Iraqis can publicly celebrate common values as well as cultural diversity.



Right and below: Festival-goers enjoying the fun and Kurdish dancers entertaining the crowds



Above: Musicians used Middle Eastern instruments at the festival



Right: Example of Iraqi children's artwork



Romero Centre Upcoming Events

June	14-21	Refugee week
	18	Refugee Film event
	20	World Refugee Day

"The foreigner, isolated from his fellow countryman, should be the subject of greater love on the part of men" - Plato



Romero Centre Volunteers

Comings and goings

A few 'Thankyous and Farewells' since our last newsletter:

- To Sr Thuy Nguyen, our volunteer caseworker, who accepted a position in PNG
- To Julie Stark, our wonderful project worker from Melbourne who so capably initiated and coordinated the women's activity group
- Derek Lundie, social support volunteer, who is off to pursue his social worker career
- Margaret Hounslow, teacher, who is off to teach in Nepal
- To Val Mowat, Patrick Nolan, and Mary Cameron, very special long-term volunteers at the centre

We also welcome several new additions to the volunteer team:

- Karyn Suhaimi (Iraqi Festival planning group)
- Madeline Sangster (tutor and childminding)
- Greg Manning (tutor)
- The Film Festival team - Bronwen, Jacque and Cat
- Andrea Lunt who is working on the newsletter
- ...and those of you who I am about to place, welcome!

And of course, appreciation is deserved by our centre's ongoing volunteers, the people who anchor our service with their dedication to their work. Some of you help us to staff the centre throughout the week, some of you have anchored the Saturday morning group for more than a year, some of you help us to help people outside of hours. You know who you are - and wonderfully, there are too many of you to name! You are the individuals who make the centre feel like a

family.

Special farewell to Mary Cameron

Mary Cameron is another one of the centre's longest serving volunteers, who started with Romero Centre during a critical time of crisis response. Her sense of 'can-do', intelligence, humour, and concern for social justice, was a snug fit with the centre's culture and ethos. She was a strong presence in amongst the core community of helpers that retained the Romero 'spirit' over the years.

Her final gift to the centre was to assist to create the centre's Volunteer Handbook. She retired at the end of 2008 to take care of her health and spend more time with family. Mary, we still miss your warm and positive presence, and hearing your incredible diving stories from around the globe. Take good care of yourself and please be sure to visit to catch up once in a while! We wish you all the best!

Iraqi Driver Literacy Group

January 2009 was a defining month for the rest of the year! Barely two weeks into the New Year, and the centre was already busy with people and activity. What made this particularly special was that this was a new group of people - women from Iraq - and an exciting new activity, driver literacy training.

The four-week intensive driver literacy group (two classes per week) was made possible by our volunteer Margaret Hounslow. Margaret is a highly experienced ESL professional, who has worked with many refugee and migrant communities in TAFE, schools, and community organisations. Margaret very kindly gave her time and knowledge to the centre, engaging with the group of women, and training them on the road rules in preparation for their Learner Driver test. She also provided workshops for a small number of tutors in strategies for ESL tutoring. We thank Margaret for her work, and wish her the best for her journey to Nepal.

Right: The Romero Centre has been abuzz with people and activity





WHAT IS 'FAMILY'?

Major issues remain after the very welcome abolition of Temporary Protection Visas, include the debilitating continued separation from loved ones, most of whom are outside their country, reside there illegally and are totally dependant on their Australian relatives. The financial burden is one aspect. One young man, a father working six days a week to support his growing family here, described the remittances he sends to his mother and younger sister as "like a second mortgage". Another sends \$500 a month to his little sister who has been refused twice, and is now in Pakistan alone, without protection of family.

The emotional effect of such yearning for family reunion is known to be negative. Regular expensive overseas phone calls are often filled with weeping and tales of constant fear, death on the streets and kidnappings. The settlement process of sponsors is seriously undermined. Mental health issues grow in the sister who feels guilt about failing to successfully sponsor her widowed sister and her children. How can I be happy, says a mother of five young Australians, when we had to abandon my widowed mother who has always been part of our family? Obligation weighs heavily with the eldest surviving sons and they will be sending vast amounts of Australian dollars off shore for decades to come.

The 80+% refusal rate for such sponsorships happen because of how we define "dependant family". The "Australian template" of father, mother and their biological children is imposed on refugees from cultures in which three generations live in the same household, where a dead brother's widow and children are automatically integrated into the surviving brother's family, where orphaned children are automatically taken in and cared for as family. War and persecution have interfered in the lives

of these families and our Migration Act and Regulations continue the destruction of what many refugees understand is family. During the year we have written to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship about the grief of separation and the increasingly dangerous situation for the relatives of Australian residents and citizens who are illegally in Pakistan awaiting the processing of applications for their resettlement. They include the wives of men who were denied travel rights and family reunion during their long years on TPVs. We said that the dependant relatives of former TPV holders should have priority in the humanitarian program and that processing should be fast tracked.

On 24 October the Department of Immigration and Citizenship announced that all new sponsorship applications for people living in Afghanistan and Pakistan under the Special Humanitarian Program will now be initially processed in Melbourne and not in Islamabad. Old applications - those lodged before October 27 2008 and processed in Islamabad - will be transferred to the Australian Consulate-General in Dubai for finalisation. Applications lodged in the special Offshore Humanitarian Processing Centre in Melbourne and which require further processing will also be decided in the Dubai office. We understand that this new arrangement will remove Australian-based immigration staff from an extremely dangerous situation in Islamabad and only hope that equal concern for safety will be extended to those relatives being sponsored by Australian citizens and residents and compassionate decision making accelerated.

Protection of children

Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of character of future society which is largely shaped by what the adults, constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children. They are a trust no community can neglect with impunity. An all-embracing love of children, The manner of treating them, The quality of the attention shown them, The spirit of adult behaviour towards them; These are all among the vital aspects of the requisite attitude.

-The Baha'i World Centre




In Other News...

The Hazara Community has established the Hazara Cultural Centre of Queensland Inc. The new centre aims to educate members of its rights and responsibilities and fulfil their social, economical, cultural, religious, health and educational needs. The centre has been created to provide a platform to bring members as well as the wider community together to express, share and practise their cultural and religious values. It aims to actively participate in promoting tolerance, multiculturalism, peace and harmony within Australian society and establish communication channels with the wider community to uphold these values. Other goals include raising awareness about moderate Islam among members and the wider community in order to promote mutual understanding that supports a cohesive and cooperative Australian community and prevents growth of extremism and fundamentalism and a culture of hatred and divisive.

Australia's Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, has introduced a Bill into the Senate to abolish detention debts imposed on people who have been locked up in immigration detention. This has been a long-standing goal of many people campaigning for reform in the immigration policy area. *The Migration Amendment (Abolishing Detention Debt) Bill 2009* will waive all existing debts for current and former detainees, however it will not refund any debt payments already made. The legislation also continues to apply the detention debt regime to convicted illegal foreign fishers and those convicted of people smuggling. The liability for costs associated with removing or deporting unlawful non-citizens will also remain unchanged. It is possible the legislation will be sent to a Senate Committee for examination. The Bill will most likely be brought on for debate and a vote in either May or June.

The Minister's announcement of the changes is here: <http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/media-releases/2009/ce09031.htm>

The Romero Centre



The Romero Centre
(For former TPV holders and their families)

We are open every day from Monday to Friday.

We offer:

- Commissioner of Declarations (ask for Kathi)
- Justice of the Peace services (Don on Mondays)
- Arabic speaking community worker – Sabah Al Ansari
- Dari/Farsi speaking community worker – Hassan Ghulam
- Help with forms
- People to talk to
- A place to meet
- Prayer room
- Childminding
- 2009 Activity groups (see below):

Tuesdays: From 9.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - English Class (TAFE homework help, Citizenship English, General English) - Women's Sewing Group - Hassan Ghulam available
Wednesdays: From 9.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - English Class (TAFE homework help, Citizenship English, General English) - Sabah Al Ansari available
Thursdays: 10am – 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Computer Class - General English - Women's group

If you are interested in any of these activities, please call us or come to the Centre.

The Romero Centre
 20 Dutton St, Dutton Park
 We are 5 minutes walk from Dutton Park Train Station

Call: (07) 3846 3250

ROMERO RESOURCE LIBRARY Community Education

Over our eight years' existence, books about asylum seekers and refugees have been donated to the Romero Centre. Some are well worn and many have not been returned. Please, if you are one of the borrowers, come visit us and return the books so others can read them. Donations of relevant books are always welcome. We still have students and new volunteers who appreciate use of our collection.



Thank you, thank you, thank you!

WE WOULD like to thank the Presentation Sisters for their ongoing generous support of our work and those individuals who regularly donate to the centre. Your support is greatly appreciated and really sustains the work we do. We would also like to acknowledge the ongoing and unwavering support of our work by the Sisters of Mercy.

Fundraising

Besides specific projects, 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 and 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 – upkeep, wages and provide hospitality to visitors. Any donation you can make will make a difference and you may wish to nominate the purpose of the donation you are making. Donations over \$2.00 are tax deductible. Cheques should be made payable to the Romero Centre.

The Romero Centre is a programme of Mercy Family Services. We are grateful for their support and the support of the 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

Sewing machines
Computers/printers (only in working order)
Exceptional circumstances fund (loans and payments)
Craft material for our women's group eg: scrap booking items, needles, threads, cottons for crochet, ribbon, beads, knitting needles, crochet hooks, beading tools, cuttings boards, Stanley knife, craft glue...

Electronic donations

We are now able to provide donations by electronic transfer. If you 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 and 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

Book Sales

Remember that we have a number of books for sale. Call the office or come and visit.

<i>Freeing Ali: The Human Face of the Pacific Solution</i> by Michael Gordon	\$15
<i>Rescuing Afghanistan</i> by William Maley	\$20
<i>Acting from the Heart: Australian advocates for Asylum Seekers tell their stories</i>	\$22
<i>The Rugmaker of Mazar-E-Sharif</i> by Najaf Mazari and Robert Hillman	\$25
<i>Human Rights Overboard</i> by Linda Briskman, Susie Latham, Chris Goddard	\$35
<i>Blind Conscience</i> by Margot O'Neill	\$33

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

Romero Centre
P O Box 6115
Buranda
QLD 4102



Name _____

Address _____

Post Code _____ Amount \$ _____

Electronic transfer?

Many thanks for your continuing support of our work.