

MINUTES

BUDDIES GENERAL MEETING (FACE TO FACE) – 30th MAY 2021 – 11 am

UNITING CHURCH HALL, GLOUCESTER ST, BUDERIM

Commenced: 11.05 am

(Our meeting was booked at 'Connections On King', however a double booking saw us, in a last minute scramble, transferring to the other Uniting Church Hall. However, all went well.)

Chairperson: Paul McKinlay

Apologies: Ilona Peet

Minutes: Gaynore Stoessel

Pages 1-4: Overview of guest speaker Narelle Matheson's talk and Q & A

Pages 4-5: General Business

Page 6: Financial Report - Buddies Summary of Accounts, May 2021

Main Event: Guest Speaker – Narelle Matheson

We were very pleased to welcome Narelle, a retired Social Worker with 40 years' experience, who from 2014 – 2018, provided Case Management support to Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the offshore detention centres at Manus Island, Port Moresby and Nauru. In Port Moresby, Narelle provided case management and health liaison support for people from Manus and Nauru awaiting medical advice/treatment.

- Accompanied by a PowerPoint, Narelle provided an overview of her work in the offshore detention centres, before opening the meeting up to a 'Question and Answer' time.
- Narelle will provide her PowerPoint to us.
- All photos are those sourced from the internet. (It is against Social Work Professional and Ethical Standards and privacy protocols to take and show photos of refugees and asylum seekers without their permission.)
- Narelle noted that she can only talk about her experiences and her position as a social worker. For example, she was not a security guard, so she cannot, with authority, talk about aspects of their work.
- There was no multi-discipline mixing between the teams at the detention centres (instant dismissal), therefore no exchange of information. (Which could have been helpful in the care of these people seeking asylum.)
- On Manus, the detention centre was set in the Naval Base. Billions was spent upgrading the facility. Narelle said less could have been spent on someone staying in a 5 star hotel with a private butler. (Analogy to highlight the continual waste of money on offshore detention by the Aust Gov.)

- Refugee Status Guidelines 1951 – core principle is non-refoulement. (Continually disrespected by Aust Gov)
- Interesting to note the difference in treatment to asylum seekers arriving by air and those arriving by boat. Arriving by boat – most put in offshore detention, but some on the same boat sent to Australia and put in community detention. Arriving by air – allowed to live in community anywhere in Australia while their application for asylum is processed. Arriving by boat – 94% accessed as genuine refugees. Arriving by air – 20% accessed as genuine refugees. Note – Aust Gov system is very arbitrary.
- Narelle also asked us to note that photos shown in the media of asylum seeker living quarters were actually that of the staff living accommodation: including interpreters, medical staff, maintenance workers and Border Force personnel. No wonder it all looked very tolerable. However, pictures of actual asylum seeker living quarters showed just how ‘intolerable’ their conditions were/are there.
- RPC = Regional Processing Centre. Four compounds. (Narelle could only work in one compound.) Staff and detainees were not allowed to mix.
- In 2016 the Port Moresby Supreme Court judged that detention of the asylum seekers in Papua New Guinea was unlawful and the gates of the Manus RPC had to be opened to allow the men access to the general community on Manus. Important to note that it wasn’t just a short stroll into ‘town’ for the asylum seekers. The nearest village was 45 minutes by bus (Lorengau).
- More information that is not made clear by the Aust Gov or by what we see in the media – both Manus and Nauru are very hot places. Nauru is right on the equator. The whole country has been mined (phosphate) and is covered in rocks. The country went bankrupt and was only too happy to be paid millions by the Aust Gov to detain asylum seekers. Nauru is actually smaller than Bribie Is, being only 20 km in circumference.
- Narelle only worked with men (on Manus). Men were stacked 50 to a tent in bunk beds with no air con. (Later, they were given fans, the only difference - the unbearable hot air was then circulated.) No private space for men at all. Serious medical conditions were treated with Panadol and water. There were very long queues at all times including meal times, access to bathroom blocks, and to obtain items from the canteen and access to phones calls– those at the back received very poor food or nothing.
- Men have been 8 years in detention waiting for assessment. Given no end date to look forward to – that is mental torture. System of 50 points a fortnight for each man, gained by participating in various ‘classes’ (ie. English). With the points they ‘bought’ toiletries, cigarettes, phone cards. Guards always present – at showers, phone calls – no privacy.
- Many of the men, locked up and not able to work, also had to cope with the fact they owed money to money lenders (only way to facilitate their escape) and now their families were at mercy of these people. Being locked up for so long, they felt useless and couldn’t help or provide for their families.
- All security was provided by people from a military, policing or prison background.

- Men had to be addressed by a number (their boat ID allocated at Christmas Island or Darwin), not their name. Narelle refused to do this. She reported the men wrote signs around their accommodation saying “We are not criminals.” “We are not animals.”
- Narelle visited a local Papuan New Guinea woman at Lorengau, the only hospital on Manus Island. She reported it was totally unfit for patients (especially by Australian standards) – dogs wandered in and out, families of patients had to bring in food, old rusted oxygen tanks sat around.
- The Aust Gov paid \$1million to upgrade the hospital at Nauru.
- Narelle’s working conditions: At first two weeks on and two off 12 hr shifts, then worked system of 3 wks on, 3 wks off. (22 days working were spent at each stint, with just 1 day off.) At the risk of losing her job, Narelle often worked outside the scope of her role, ie counselling and group work and writing comprehensive reports to try to get urgent medical treatment for desperately sick, injured tortured and traumatised people
- Staff (including doctors) consisted of people not only from Australia, but from Papua New Guinea and all over the world.
- Staff, including Narelle, had to sign non-disclosure agreements, and were threatened with jail if they spoke to their family or the media about their job and what they saw.
- Narelle said she loathed the detention system and the total lack of compassion within it. “Why did she stay so long?” (Narelle was one of those who stayed the longest working in these detention centres.) Her answer was, “If not me, then who?”
- “What about her self-care during this time?” She said she did yoga, and went for walks.
- Narelle said that she did suffer PTSD - a lot from the way fellow staff at Nauru treated her. Also, she said she could tell us horrific stories that happened while up there, but wouldn’t want to expose us to the trauma.
- In Port Moresby, staff were accompanied by guards to and from work, and even going to the supermarket. This was to protect them from the Papua New Guinean populace. Narelle said that on Manus, people broke into the detention centre and attacked the asylum seekers. Narelle witnessed injuries sustained by the asylum seekers when they travelled into Lorengau after the Supreme Court handed down its decision. Some had been attacked with machetes, resulting in horrific injuries, for their cigarettes or mobile phone.
- All water on Manus and Nauru was provided by a de-salination plant. If that went down – no water. Sometimes staff were restricted to 1 min showers. Drinking water for the asylum seekers and staff came in plastic bottles that were left in the sun.
- Increasingly, Papua New Guineans without training, were employed to provide services to the asylum seekers.
- “Why was such a cruel system put in place by the Aust Gov?” Narelle’s opinion – it was all political. These men were political pawns. During this time, some 3,000 people seeking asylum arrived by boat, while some 60,000 seeking asylum arrived by plane. Only those arriving by boat were vilified and put in offshore detention.

- “What were some good stories to share?” (Not many, but some.) There was Behrouz Boochani who was able to settle permanently in New Zealand, and Abdul Aziz Muhamat who was able to settle permanently in Switzerland. (These were very unusual, almost miraculous happenings, totally out of the hands of the Aust Gov). Many have been settled in the USA. (They take what jobs they can, for instance, those with Masters degrees are driving trucks.)
- There are still asylum seekers/refugees on Manus and in Port Moresby.

Thanked Narelle for her most informative session. We could have talked with her for much longer, but time was running out.

LEH overview: Given by Lesley Wilcoxson. Held 11-16 April at Immanuel Lutheran College, Buderim. This year, participants were refugees on temporary visas from the Romero Centre. (Previously, participants were refugees/migrants with permanent visas from Multicultural Australia.)

Sunshine Coast Refugee Update: Buddies is assisting three people at the moment. One has no visa, one is on a student visa, one has a permanent visa. Friendship and food parcels are being provided, as well as trying to source job opportunities.

Volunteer Opportunities with Buddies: Opportunities are growing for us to expand the work we do both with refugees themselves and asylum seeker/refugee advocacy (ie. organising information meetings, movie screenings, Q&A sessions, attending local market stalls).

At the moment, so that workload can be shared, and important jobs can be done properly, we are looking for at least 2 roles to be filled. One for a Refugee Coordinator and one for someone to organise/fix our Facebook Page.

Other Volunteer Opportunities: Robyn Jones pointed out that going to the RCA (Refugee Council of Australia) website will give lots of information about how to help refugees. She spoke of David Manne, a Human Rights Lawyer who has been giving free legal services to refugees. Robyn said that he has taken 6 cases to the High Court and won 6.

Refugee Week: Paul gave an update on our Refugee Week event which will take place Sunday afternoon, 20th June, 3pm at St Marks Anglican Church. The film ‘Molly and Mobarak’ will screen. Posters advertising this have been made ready for distribution.

Welcome to new Treasurer: We were very pleased to welcome our new treasurer, Clare Arico. (The financial update is listed on page 6.)

Parcels to Biloela Family on Christmas Is: Dianne Woolley advised that it is quite simple (and a great morale boost) to send parcels to Nades & Priya and their 2 little girls, still in detention on Christmas Is, far from their Biloela home. Dianne said she would put a piece in the Buddies Bulletin about how to send a parcel.

Minutes Extra

Meeting finished abruptly at 12.30 pm as another group needed the hall we were in. Several members adjourned to Coffee Club Buderim to continue. Following are the important points from that meeting:

1. Reminder to start each group meeting with Acknowledgement of Country
2. Record that Buddies has at least one member who has experience in grant writing. (This lady could be Lisa Edward – need to check)
3. Suggestion to provide list in Bulletin (or Bulletin Extra, or separate newsletter/email) that describes specific volunteer needs at the time, for example:
 - Refugee Liaison Co-ordinator - person to act as contact between identified refugees/seekers of asylum in need, and known services required/available to them - community support, Food Bank, financial training, English classes, etc. (*Lynda has done a draft job description for this, will update it and send through to Narelle for her input.*)
 - Friendship - two people required to socialise on weekly basis with local SC refugees who need friendship and practice in English
 - Librarian - person required to manage Buddies small collection of DVDs and books for loans to interested persons (maintaining record of assets, record of loanees' details, promoting, suggesting additions to library, etc))
 - Speaker co-ordinator - two people (one plus backup) to co-ordinate speakers for each meeting (5 per year). Names and contact details provided. Role requires contact with potential speakers, confirmation, supplying meeting details, co-ordinating speaker requirements (transport, speaker details brief, presentation style, etc
 - Other projects we have in the pipeline – School Talks (someone to coordinate this with Leslie and the schools). Grant writing – need someone who has experience in this field, also the Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (from the Fed. Govt - need to investigate)
4. Notice that next members meeting will be the AGM, scheduled for Sunday 29th August as per Directors Meeting 21st May.
5. Contact Narelle Matheson (May meeting speaker) for more information on training modules (ROP?) (*Lynda is following this up*)
6. Suggestion to include QR code for 'Cash for Cans' in the Bulletin so people can print and use when taking recycling to centres
7. Organise and present a small thank you gift for guest speaker

Buddies Refugee Support Group Ltd.

Summary of Accounts - May 2021

Opening Balance At Bank as at 1 May 2021	2,647.76	
Income		
Membership Fees	320.00	9%
Donations and other receipts	905.56	26%
Fund Raising	2,200.80	64%
Other	-	0%
Total Income	3,426.36	100%
Expenditure		
Operating costs	-	0%
Community Awareness	-	0%
Fundraising Costs	-	0%
Direct Support for Asylum Seekers & Refugees	-	0%
Donations to Refugee Support & Advocacy Groups	1,000.00	100%
Total Expenditure	1,000.00	100%
Cash at Bank c.o.b. 31 May 2021	5,074.12	
Less Accruals	1,840.00	
Nett disposable funds	3,234.12	

