

Sunshine Coast Buddies Meeting (Face to Face) – Sunday 21st Feb 2021

At 'Connections on King', Buderim

Minutes

Commenced: 11.10 am

Chairperson: Paul McKinlay

Apologies: Lesley Wilcoxson, Alison Lee, Jamie Seymour

New Secretary: Gaynore Stoessel endorsed as secretary and taking minutes

Main event: **GUEST SPEAKER**

Rebecca Lim, from the Refugee Hub, Indooroopilly Uniting Church (IUC), Brisbane. (Two other people from the Hub accompanied her, Freddie Steen and Annette Hogan with Freddie speaking on a couple occasions to back up Rebecca's points.)

Rebecca, describing herself as a Community Development Worker, began with an overview of her work with people seeking asylum and refugees. (Started when Frazer was Australia's PM and Vietnamese refugees were brought to Australia.) She has worked in detention centres in Australian and PNG. (She worked on Manus Island.)

Quick overview of detention centres, visas, and policy changes.

Since 13 August, 2012, the 'fast track' policy – very punitive, no stability. Government policies are unclear, changeable.

Offshore – Nauru mainly families, Manus Island for men

Visas do not allow refugees to sponsor any members of their families. "Safe Haven" - told living in a regional area for a number of years will gain permanent visa – but not necessarily.

Bottom line – for people seeking asylum and refugees to be properly helped there needs to be a Federal Government policy change. Temporary visas need to be repealed and people given permanent visas. (Administration Tribunal System).

Most pressing need today – all those in BITA need to be released (10 – 20 refugees/asylum seekers there who need to be released – men in BITA are very sick), as well as all those in the Kangaroo Point Hotel (about 100), and those from Melbourne Mantra.

Multiple factors as to why people have recently been released from hotels and community detention – basically the federal government is stringing out the releases, starving people, hoping they will go home. It is now up to charities and the community to support these people, amongst whom are young children. People have been locked up for up to 8 years so it is difficult to find work, accommodation, fit into the Australian community, and for some to speak English.

Federal Government is basically saying – you want them released, you look after them.

Some figures –

\$350,000/year/person - offshore detention

\$150,000/year/person – community detention

\$10,000/year/person – bridging visa

(Not everyone can meet the medical requirements to live on a bridging visa, some so damaged they need to remain in community detention.)

Qld Government – now has a Human Rights Act (passed 2019, began in entirety 1 Jan 2020) and has come up with some relief funding, \$200 -\$300 a month, provides emergency relief through the Red Cross.

11.25 pm. Rebecca finished her talk and opened up question time.

Manus and Nauru: Asylum Seekers there are accessed under those country's laws, not the UNHCR. Aust Gov offered men on Manus \$25,000 to go home. Some took offer – haven't heard how they fared.

Bomana jail, Port Moresby: All those not receiving refugee status (except Behrouz Boochani) were detained there. The UNHCR reassessed the men and most/all (?) received refugee status.

Refugees still detained: (Once someone has refugee status they should not continue to be detained – inhuman.) In Australia we have people with refugee status locked up! Australia is the only country to do this. (And there is no sense/logic as to who is released and who isn't.)

Habeas Corpus/hotel detention: This law, apparently, has recently been used to get some men free who have been in hotel detention. Not clear that this avenue will keep getting the result of freeing people. The men have been detained in various places for up to 8 years. They are confused, suffering, desperate and so some have signed up to this HC path in the courts. (Nauru is closing, so nobody will be sent there, even if they say they want to be – using this HC path, which says you cannot lock people up unless there is a plan for where they will ultimately go.)

Visiting detainees: Lots of disincentives to visit these men. Perspex screen up (no touching). Serco guards all around (can't talk freely). Can't bring food. No children allowed to visit (so those with a child in community cannot see them). Men actually say it is better not to visit – better to talk via zoom.

Advocacy is important: Speak to Federal MP, State MP, and local government reps. Need to push the economic side of things.

No more nice talk. Need to make them feel uncomfortable. Know your facts. What is happening is human rights abuse, delayed justice.

Know background of the gov rep you are going to see. For instance, someone like Amanda Stoker, a Qld Senator, is a conservative Christian.

Email Rebecca and she will provide dot points for us to go by when advocating to gov reps.

Community detention: housed in the community. Receive \$500/fortnight. Have to sleep at their address each night, and no overnight visitors.

Kangaroo Point and what happens if/when released: 20% of men would have a home to go to if released.

If/when released, they face many barriers to getting work. They are not well – have been locked up for 8 years. Some have started a job and been put off because they are “too slow on the line”. Many have physical injuries.

Refugee Hub, Indooroopilly Uniting Church – those released are provided with \$4,000 for 3 months for house and settling in. (They have had no settlement support)

(Qld Premier has raised this situation with the Australian PM)

Refugee Hub IUC also supports international students who have lost their jobs and have no means of support.

What keeps the detained refugees going? Some retain the hope that they will have a family reunion. But this has been 8 years of being locked up – longest ever. But many still have hope.

Bits and pieces of recent happenings, insights, information: Gov Dept very punitive – ie with the Merits review, new evidence cannot be provided.

Recently, 5 Hazaras were let in. Given a visa, but had to tell all their harrowing story again.

Rebecca set up the ‘Brisbane on Arrival’ support group – to support those transferred from offshore detention – medivac.

Rebecca is not in favour of naming and photographing refugees for fund raising.

The need now for refugees is housing.

Many people in Community detention have a case worker.

IUC – provided for 910 people last year

Asylum seekers & Refugees live in fear of what Minister (Peter Dutton) will do. MPs are the law makers/ have the power. These cruel laws have to be undone.

Remember – YOU CAN’T DO EVERYTHING, BUT YOU CAN DO SOMETHING!

Time with Rebecca Lim, guest speaker, finished. (Rebecca said for us to note – if there are refugees in the audience, she will ‘tone down’ her speech. Vinouth, a Tamil refugee, was in the meeting today. After finishing her guest speaker and Q&A duties, Rebecca went out to counsel Vinouth privately.)

GENERAL BUSINESS

Thanked Penny and her car parking team for all their fundraising efforts. \$990 raised in January.

Students at Matthew Flinders College raised \$1800 for LEH.

Thanked Andrea Douglas and James Fowler for all their hard work as Secretary and Bookkeeper respectively. Presented with card and gifts.

Finance update: Buddies has \$5 - \$6,000 to spend.

Len updated Harmony Day activities (Buddies Q&A at Connections on King, on Monday evening March 15).

Andrea has created posters advertising the event – to be taken and put up.

Ana Perez and Margaret Norris gave update on LEH. To be held this year April 11-16. (Hopefully at Matthew Flinders College – to be confirmed)

Because of COVID and gov policies there are not many migrants now. Usually migrants who have been in Australia less than a year come to LEH. This year people from the Romero Centre, in Australia 4-6 years, and still needing support, will attend LEH. Curriculum will be changed accordingly. More emphasis on gaining employment and technology.

If you want to be a host contact Kayla at kaylaszumer@gmail.com

The mid-week dinner is always a highlight. COVID restrictions may change the format. Perhaps Siva Kumar, the refugee who has restaurant at Noosa, will cater.

Food for Romero – Large pile of donated groceries brought by those attending the meeting.

Good news – Glimmer of hope with Biloela Family ruled they are to stay in Australia. (However they are still locked up on Christmas Is.)

Beerwah Markets (sharing stall with SCMN Sunshine Coast Multicultural Network) – once a month, productive place for informing public to the true plight of asylum seekers and refugees. Also have met at least one refugee - who wants to tell his story/be on Harmony Day Q&A panel.

Len hopes to have a Buddies/ SCMN stall at markets all over the Sunshine Coast.

Buddies Meetings: Confirmed that Buddies meeting place will be 'Connections on King' for the foreseeable future.

Face to face meetings every 3 months. (Third Sunday of the month.)

Zoom meeting in between. Zoom preferably to be on a weekday evening.

Survey Report: Andrea reported there were lots of interesting comments, but disappointed at the response – only 52 people out of 1100 filled in the survey. Findings to be put in Buddies Bulletin. Directors to look at findings.

Year of Education: to be discussed at next meeting.

Meeting closed at 12.37 pm.