



Asylum Seekers Centre

38 Nobbs Street
Surry Hills 2010

Ph: 02 9361 5606
Fax: 02 9331 6670

Email:
admin@asylumseekerscentre.org.au

Website:
www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au

Staff

Coordinator
Tamara Domicelj

Assistant coordinator
Fiona Keast

Caseworker
Ali Collier

Health care coordinator
Sally Harrold

Administration assistant
Jenny Cornish

Project/caseworker
(temporary)
Giann Hughes

Casework supervisor
(temporary)
Maree Delaney

Board members

Chairperson
Garry Rothwell

Treasurer
Geraldine Read

Secretary
Jenny Marsh (resigned
February 2005)

Noelene White
Margaret Piper
Lachlan Murdoch
Maya Cranitch

Please send newsletter
submissions to the editor,
Jessica Perini
perinij@ozemail.com.au

Asylum Seekers Centre

Newsletter

Hello, goodbye, hello again

Since our last edition the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) has undergone significant personnel changes. People who have been an integral part of the centre have moved on, new people have joined us and others have changed roles. Among those we've farewelled are Sylvia Winton as coordinator, Noelene White as chairperson (although she remains active on the board), Maree Delaney as assistant coordinator and Alison High as family support worker. Fiona Keast has become our assistant coordinator and Ali Collier has joined us as caseworker. In this edition we pay tribute to just some of these people and their legacy. We will also introduce you to our new coordinator, Tamara Domicelj and Garry Rothwell, the incoming chairperson of the board.

Welcome Tamara

I am delighted to be joining the ASC's dedicated team of staff, volunteers and board members, working to provide support and pursue social justice outcomes for asylum seekers within our community.

I extend heartfelt thanks to all who have given me such a warm welcome during my first few weeks as coordinator, and look forward to meeting and exchanging ideas with the ASC's extended network of supporters and allied agencies over the coming months.

I come to the position from the Service for the Treatment and

Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STAR TTS), where I coordinated a psycho-social settlement programme called Families in Cultural Transition. Prior to this I managed the Mexico City office of the US-based human rights agency Global Exchange. My earlier roles include trainer and complaints handler at the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW and community development worker at the Immigrant Women's Speakout Association of NSW.

While the challenges faced by asylum seekers are many, varied and complex, much can be achieved when like-minded individuals pool their ideas, skills and energies towards common ends. I look forward to reporting on Centre initiatives in future editions. And I join others in thanking Sylvia and wishing her all the very best in her exciting new role. — Tamara Domicelj

Beautiful world

How beautiful is the world that God has given us all. The men with their hate are destroying it all. Let us finish with this and put a full stop. Let's live happily with peace and love.

— Mercedes

From *In the darkest night, stars shine brightly*, a collection of writing and artwork by asylum seekers at the ASC. On sale for \$5.

ASC events

Sunday 20 March Sacred Easter Music

2:30–4:30pm

Mary Mackillop Church
Mount Street North Sydney

Please join us for a performance of Easter sacred music by Maree Delaney, Alison Hosking and Maryleigh Hand, with poetry readings by Ian Keast.

Tickets \$15 (concessions available) available through the ASC or on the day.

Friday 20 May Quiz Night 2005

7:30pm North Sydney
Leagues Club

Last year we enjoyed lots of laughs and raised much-needed funds for the ASC. You are welcome to join us again this year! Invite your friends! Get a table together! Registration opens in April. More details to follow.

Practical ways to help

Purchase:

1. Phone cards
2. Travel pass
3. Basic toiletries — shaving equipment, soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, washing detergent
4. Food vouchers

Remember, many asylum seekers we meet have to survive on little or no income. Send your purchases to the centre and they will be given directly to those who are in need.

Visions for the future

Interview with Garry Rothwell, new board chairperson.

Q: How did you come to be involved in the centre?

A: I was approached by Sylvia Winton and Noelene White early in 2004. I had a commercial background, something they thought would benefit the ASC.

Q. What is your vision as the new chairperson? **A:** Having lost a few key staff last year, it is important that I come in and help provide stability for the new group. We need to make sure that the place continues to be viable, and that growth continues.

Q: How do you attain the background knowledge required for this position? **A:** Issues surrounding asylum seekers and refugees are particularly interesting, involving a myriad of government, inter-government and support agencies. I'll be relying on other board members and staff who are already engaged in this field to guide me as I grow in my understanding.

Q: Have you had any experience working with charity organisations? **A:** Yes, I am a member of the board of directors at the Property Industry Foundation Charity, which was set up to be the charity of choice for the property industry. We are particularly concerned for the lives of 'children at risk' so we donate funds to organisations like Father Riley's Youth off the Streets, Doonside and the Boys' and Girls' Brigade. *cont page 4*

Sylvia in Africa

Sylvia Winton has been a vital part of the life of the ASC for many years. During her years with the centre Sylvia, first as a volunteer, assistant coordinator then coordinator, walked with, and advocated for, many asylum seekers in the protection process. Under her leadership and vision the centre saw an increase in the funding base, improved services, including the health care programme and family support programme, and the expansion of the volunteer programme. The ASC was also incorporated during these years.

When we asked for comments about Sylvia we were flooded with messages of high regard from professionals, peers and asylum seekers alike. The consensus was that Sylvia combined excellent organisational and communication skills with personal qualities of compassion, integrity and commitment.

In December of last year we said goodbye to Sylvia, as she left for the far shores of Guinea-Conakry in West Africa. She leads a team that provides training and pre-embarkation information for Liberian refugees re-settling in Australia. The following is a snapshot of Sylvia's experiences. She writes from near the refugee camps of Guinea, a place where hundreds of thousands of people from neighbouring countries have fled to escape one of West-Africa's longest and most brutal conflicts.

Notes from Africa

It is 8.45 am Sunday morning, the generator is still going, so we have power.

Soon it will stop and with the loss of power comes a most amazing silence till 6.30 pm. All works well, and whatever shortfalls there might be with a lack of power, I know I am so much better off than the locals or those in camps. They do not even have a house, and all its trimmings.

I do not think I have ever been in such a poor country.

While my work is helping the Liberian refugees, and those we work with are located in camps, the life for the people of Guinea is incredibly hard.

No electricity means no street lights.

Here if you drive at night, there might be candles in houses on the roadside or the thatch stores; people have no paths to walk on and the roads are not wide enough for two cars and pedestrians. It is so dark and dangerous driving or walking!

Everyday something new strikes me. Everything is carried on the head small and large — usually by the women with a baby tied to their back, while the husband or male walks alongside carrying the 'cutlass', a large knife that might chop greens or trees or anything that she might add to her load and carry home, while he again carries the knife! Saw a guy with a sack of rice this week, loads of wood, furniture, plastic lunch box absolutely everything!

Tiny children carry loads that are as tall as their arms are long. The children often support the load with their hands while the adults have developed a balanced stance.

We have given information to a huge number of folk who will come to different parts of Australia on refugee visas — 355 in total in February and more to come.

This is a wonderful experience and going so quickly. The management of the refugee population is difficult, only here there is no ASC to advocate and walk with people. There are so many things I shall miss: amazing shining teeth from beaming black faces, always a woman with a baby on her back and load on her head. They have so little yet are so welcoming.
— Sylvia Winton, Guinea



Palm beach trip

Every 6-8 weeks, the ASC runs a bus trip to give people who attend the centre an opportunity to relax and spend a day out of the city.

On 8 February we went to Palm Beach — Charles* from Sudan writes of his experience... *As my first time to go to the beach, I was excited with variable expectations... the whole idea was like a dream. On that happy day we had been traveling by bus from Surry Hills, we arrived and Ali announced we could swim. I was very interested in the idea as I had been used to swim in the river in my country. I expected the sea to be easier but when I found that the power of the sea wave stronger than the river current! To me the journey was historical. I learned a new lesson — how the sea is great!*

*name changed

Casework

@ ASC — by Ali Collier

Casework at the ASC is both challenging and rewarding. I work five days a week and my training is as a social worker. When asylum seekers first come in I conduct the majority of initial interviews and I do ongoing work with people when required.

I try, where possible, to make appointments to see people, however life is not always that orderly. I often see many more people than are written in my diary.

The ASC is first and foremost a place of hospitality and welcome. My role includes welcoming people, talking to them about what the centre does and advocating on their behalf, to open up opportunities that may otherwise be difficult to obtain.

The main areas in which I assist people include linking people with English classes either at the centre or outside, providing information about legal and medical assistance, supporting families in obtaining education for their children and providing general support for people who are often living in very uncertain and difficult circumstances.



History of the ASC (1993–2004)

— by Sister Noelene White

In 1992/3 a member of the Jesuit Refugee Service approached me with the question “Would the Good Shepherd Sisters be interested in helping asylum seekers?” I asked what was needed and was told, “We need a house and a wage”. And so began the Good Shepherd Sisters and my own involvement with the ASC.

The Good Shepherd Sisters provided a house in Nobbs Street Surry Hills to be used as a centre. When funding applications were unsuccessful, the Sisters also provided funding for the set up of the centre and employment of a part-time coordinator. Uniya, Jesuit Social Justice Centre agreed to be the auspice body for the organisation.

About two or three years into the life of the centre the Mercy Foundation came on board as an equal major funding body with the Good Shepherd Sisters. Sister Lorraine Phelan RSM was a great advocate for the centre and was responsible for helping to develop this partnership in funding. Other religious orders also contributed very generously and enabled the centre to gain some stability. Religious orders have been major supporters in sustaining funding throughout the years when there were no other avenues for funding.

And so the first centre in Australia for asylum seekers, officially opened on 6 September 1993 with one part-time staff member and one volunteer. It opened as a ‘house of hospitality’ and referral base for asylum seekers. We hoped to provide a place where people felt welcome, accepted and safe.

The initial plan was to develop a health care service, with one

medical practitioner and one registered nurse volunteering services. English classes were another priority and the search for ESL teachers began. The Australian Catholic University provided great assistance and advice in this area. Monthly bus trips and a job skills programme were adopted. Later, legal information gatherings were held to inform people about changes in immigration policy. Central to the operation of the ASC was the philosophy of care we adopted. We endeavoured to include participants in the decision-making processes and development of programmes.

From the very beginning we knew the centre would rely heavily on volunteers. Without them the centre could not exist. Long before the Sydney Olympics, the ASC was experiencing the value and great gift of volunteers — caring, generous women and men, sharing their many skills with asylum seekers.

Prior to the opening of the centre, a steering committee was established to oversee management and development and to provide support for the coordinator. I became a member of this committee and later I became the chairperson. The steering committee became a management committee and finally a board of management. I have been involved at the ‘management’ level since the centre began — most of that time in the chairperson’s role. It has always been a great management team to work with — a group with excellent knowledge of asylum seeker issues, committed to the centre and no dominating egos. We have always respected each other’s contribution.

The centre has become a very professional organisation,

delivering services while providing deep compassion and care for each person who walks through the door. The approach has been another expression of the Good Shepherd spirit and philosophy of “one person is of as much value as the world”.

This essence of valuing each person as if they were the only one, upholding the dignity of the person is what my life is built on. I am deeply touched to see these values lived out so strongly by staff and volunteers at the centre. I admire the enormous courage and care staff and volunteers bring to their work and I know some days are very hard and challenging. I run deeper as a person for the experience of being a small part of the life of the ASC.

I am humbled by the asylum seekers themselves — their spirit and desire for life, their courage in the face of so much rejection and fear for the future, their ability to laugh and sing at all — is confronting.

My heavy commitment and workload have left me feeling unable to be as available as a chairperson needs to be. While I have resigned as chairperson my commitment to the centre remains strong; I am remaining a member of the board. I am delighted Gary has accepted the role of chairperson — he will bring all the experience of his professional life and contribute to a new vision for the board and the centre. It can only be a positive transition.

I look on my association with the ASC as a very blessed part of my life journey. I am sad that such a place was ever necessary in this country, but in that terrible reality we have created a little oasis of care and support.

Visions for the future *cont from page 2* **Q: What is your background?**

A: I started off as a professionally-trained property valuer then moved on to the banking industry as a valuer working for major financial organisations. At the time of the property bust in the early

1990s I became the national president of the Australian Property Institute. That was a difficult but critical time to be in the property business. As general manager of Westpac's diversified property finance and advisory business I worked to get Westpac out of its difficulties.

I am currently a director of James Fielding Capital (a subsidiary of the Mirvac Group). **Q: Anything else you'd like to add?** A: It has been a real honour to become chairperson of the ASC board and a daunting prospect to step into Noelene's shoes.

I hope to bring to the experienced board what skills I can. I will be relying heavily on the assistance and insight of the other board members and staff to lead the organisation into the future.

Asylum Seekers Centre Philosophy Statement

The Asylum Seekers Centre aims to assist asylum seekers regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and religion. The Centre is committed to human rights, believing that all people have the same human, social and legal rights.

The Asylum Seekers Centre is first and foremost a referral base and hospitality centre for asylum seekers. It aims to raise awareness of the needs of asylum seekers within the community and offers a variety of services including English classes, health care assistance, a job skills programme and other recreational activities that asylum seekers are not able to access in the mainstream social system. The centre provides access to services and information without prejudice and aims to avoid duplication of any other services.

All services are free and confidential.

ASYLUM SEEKERS CENTRE (INC)

38 Nobbs Street Surry Hills NSW 2010 Tel: (02) 9361 5606 Fax: (02) 9331 6670
Email: admin@asylumseekerscentre.org.au Website: www.asylumseekerscentre.org.au
ABN: 47 164 509 475

How can I donate to support the work of the centre? Direct credit from your account or by credit card.

Please instruct your bank to credit our account as follows:

Account name: Asylum Seekers Centre Incorporated
BSB number: 032023
Account number: 150833
Bank: Westpac Banking Corporation
Branch: 547 Crown Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010
Reference: Please enter our name as the reference until you receive our reference number.

Kindly return this section to us and we will provide you with a reference for use with further donations.

Direct credit / Credit card (Please indicate)

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Name: _____

(as it appears on credit card)

Credit card No: _____

(please circle) Bankcard / MasterCard / Visa Card

Expiry date: _____

Signature: _____

I wish to commit \$20 \$40 \$60 _____ per month.

I would like to donate _____

