



West End Refugee Service

strength through support



Issue 58 July 2014

Welcome to the July edition of the WERS newsletter!

Myth Buster: Busted

'They're only here for the benefits' – complaint of the uninitiated. And so they are, to be blunt, but not the ones that you fear. It's the benefit of a door, not needing constantly watching. Or glancing over your shoulder, for a friend, and not a foe. The benefit of no persecution, for being judged to be wrong, by somebody else's standards. And not having to worry that your loved one's kiss goodnight, will be permanent.

Jennifer Wilson

New faces at WERS

We have all been very pleased to welcome two new faces to the WERS team. Vanessa Nogueras took over as Office Manager in May and Carol Gorman joined WERS at the beginning of June as the other half of the Volunteer co-ordinator job-share.



'WERS is a great place to work. My colleagues are friendly and devoted to really helping asylum seekers and refugees, which is amazing to see. I am really proud to be a part of the team and I look forward to contributing to the organisation's continued support for people who need it so much.'

Vanessa

Bishop Martin



Bishop Martin, one of our patrons, is retiring in September. No organisation could have had a better patron. Bishop Martin has given amazing support over the last 15 years both to WERS and also the asylum cause, frequently speaking out on asylum issues from the pulpit and in the House of

Lords. On a personal level, he has also given me wonderful support and encouragement throughout that time, from the earliest days when WERS was just an idea right through our challenging journey at WERS as it grew and developed.

Everyone at WERS thanks him and sends our very best wishes to him and Marlene for a long and happy retirement. We will miss him very much!

'I am really pleased that I found WERS (or maybe WERS found me!). I think that it is an amazing charity that makes such a difference. I am very excited about being part of the team'.

Carol



Newcastle: City of Sanctuary

We are thrilled to bits that Newcastle was awarded National Recognition as a City of Sanctuary in June at a special event in the Civic Centre. The certificate was presented to the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Cllr George Pattison by Tiffy Allen, City of Sanctuary's National Co-ordinator.



The co-ordinator of Newcastle: City of Sanctuary is Sarah Smart who is also one of WERS' Volunteer Co-ordinators. Sarah's hard work and enthusiasm has been key to the continuing success of this initiative.

Australia's shame: Sri Lankan asylum seekers remain incarcerated at sea

Australia's woeful record on asylum has reached an all-time low with two recent news stories involving Sri Lankan asylum seekers. In the first, a boat carrying 41 Sri Lankan asylum seekers heading for Australia was intercepted and those aboard were handed over directly to the Sri Lankan navy at sea. They were then handed over to the Sri Lankan police and charged with leaving their country illegally. Their fate is unknown.

The Australian government's extraordinary attempts to screen the asylum seekers' protection claims by teleconference while at sea have been robustly criticised by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) who questioned the legality of such behaviour under international law.

The widely held concern that, by handing over the men and women directly to the Sri Lankan authorities, the persecuted were being sent back to the persecutors, was dismissed by Australia's Prime Minister, Tony Abbott as shrill and hysterical. He commented:

'Sri Lanka is not everyone's idea of an ideal society, but it is at peace.'

In the second story, the news broke that 153 Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers, including 37 children are believed

to have been held on board an overcrowded Australian Customs boat for a month somewhere in the Indian Ocean. The boat was intercepted near the Australian territory of Christmas Island. The Australian government have repeatedly refused to say where the asylum seekers are or what was to happen to them. Shocking images and testimony are now emerging of the barbaric conditions on the boat. A photograph of bunks tightly stacked together in the boat's hull which has no windows has revealed conditions far worse than in prisons or detention centres. The asylum seekers have no freedom of movement with the men separated from their families. They have been denied their right to apply for protection visas and denied access to interpreters. Immigration officials reportedly only asked for basic information of names, dates of birth and addresses with no questioning as to why they had fled from their country. Their future remains unknown. Disgraceful.

The 2014 WERS AGM will be held on Thursday 2 October at 6pm at our usual venue, Westgate Baptist Church.

We are very pleased that Mike Kaye, Advocacy Manager at Still Human Still Here will be our speaker.

Still Human Still Here is a coalition of over 60 organisations that are campaigning to end the destitution of thousands of refused asylum seekers in the UK. The coalition believes that the current policy is inhumane and ineffective and is campaigning for a number of significant changes to policy, including providing asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute with sufficient support so that they can meet their essential living needs until they are returned to their country of origin or are given permission to stay in the UK.

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