A Report on the 4th National Rural Australians for Refugees Conference

But first let’s take a moment to remember our roots ...

1st Rural Australians for Refugees Conference - The Mudgee Muster - Dec 2002

The Mudgee Get-Together was a really terrific event and our thanks again to Mudgee RAR and to Bruce Haig and Joc Stenson in particular. And from Anne, Helen and Susan, the three women who 14 months ago thought they ‘should do something’, a huge thank you to all of you in rural Aust who have made RAR. We might have had the idea, but unless you’d turned up in your numbers and proved to be the energetic, dedicated, passionate people you are, RAR would still be just an idea. We’re handing the baton over, but we’ll still be around - impossible to leave such a wonderful organisation and impossible to walk away until asylum seekers are released from detention and welcomed into our communities. Here’s to a feisty 2003! Conference Report, 2002

2nd Rural Australians for Refugees Conference - Albury Wodonga - 6 – 8 February, 2004

On all counts, the second National RAR Conference was a great success. Registrations far exceeded expectations, with the three hundred plus people who attended sometimes stretching the venue to capacity. Nobody seemed to mind; the workshop program provided ample choice for different interests, and there was plenty of time for networking. Conference Report, 2004

3rd Rural Australians for Refugees National Gathering – Bundanoon - 19-20 March 2005

Southern Highlands RAR are to be thanked for their generous hospitality and a superbly organised conference. It was great to catch up with old friends and recharge the batteries. A big thank you to everyone who attended particularly to those who gave their time so generously to conduct workshops, as well as the guest speakers and especially Joan and Alan Neild from Whyalla RAR and Bernadette Wauchope from Port Pirie who travelled from South Australia to take part in the event. Conference Report, 2005


Over 150 people attended, most for the full conference, others coming for one or two sessions of special interest. Thank you to all who came. I heard many people, quite rightly, congratulate the Conference Committee for organising a successful conference, but if no-one had come, their success would have been empty. So thank you all for travelling to Bendigo, especially those from interstate. And also thank you to the groups and organisations and individuals beyond RAR who came. For this is what we need, to unite and become a strong voice together. And a special thank you to all who spoke or facilitated workshops, or provided beautiful food and music. The words I have heard most during the week since has been restored, revitalised, inspired. So thank you all.

Do you want a …

5th Rural Australians for Refugees National Conference?

Obviously this is a big ask for any RAR group or groups. But the rewards are great.
The 4th National RAR Conference – 3rd and 4th September 2016

Saturday began early with Chris Cummins welcoming us all and reminding us that we were meeting on the traditional lands of Dja Dja Wurrung or Jaara people, and the Taungurung peoples.

Chris also reminded us of why we do what we do, with her very personal story of Jamila, a woman Chris had met while working as a torture and trauma counsellor on Christmas Island. Chris has a briefcase full of such personal stories, as do many others who have worked closely with the men, women and children whom our various governments have imprisoned for no other reason than seeking refuge in our country.

Chris then introduced the Founders of Rural Australians for Refugees: Anne, Susan and Helen.

Anne spoke of RAR beginnings in September 2001, just after the Tampa affair. She spoke of things that are sadly all too familiar today, of the hostility of the Howard government, of punitive detention and the opening of the offshore centre on Nauru.

Helen had worked with refugees in southern Africa and the Middle East. Susan’s family had been refugees from Hungary. And these three women decided the phrase “think global, act local”, would be their starting point in their rural town of Bowral in the Southern Highlands of NSW. And they called a public meeting.

Here is an extract from the first RAR newsletter – 1 November 2001

Just over three weeks have passed since RAR’s first meeting at Bowral on the fifth of November, and the response we have had from all over the country is remarkable. All our time since has been spent in networking emerging groups, and in beginning to co-ordinate some of the terrific initiatives and ideas coming from all over.

RAR Groups
RAR groups are forming in:
1. Lismore, NSW
2. Wangaratta, Victoria
3. Bathurst, NSW
4. Albury-Wodonga, Vic-NSW
5. Castlemaine, Victoria.
6. Albury-Wodonga, Vic-NSW

RAR groups on the way:
1. Tathra, NSW
2. Braidwood, NSW
3. Wagga Wagga, NSW.
4. Port Hedland, WA
5. Denmark, WA
6. Armidale, NSW
7. Bellingen, NSW.

From left: Chris Cummins, Anne Coombs, Susan Varga, and Helen McCue

Other rural groups which may come under the RAR ‘banner’ –
Julian Burnside
Though Julian was due to speak at the Conference, he was unexpectedly unable to attend. He had a cold severe enough to confine him to bed, something rare in Julian’s world.

I am including a short biography here as Julian Burnside AO QC is patron of Rural Australians for Refugees. And while I expect very few readers of this Conference review are unaware of Julian’s endless advocacy on behalf of people seeking asylum in Australia, there may be a few people who do not know of the extent of his work.

Julian began as a blue blood corporate barrister, revelling in the intellectual cut and thrust of the courts. Yet almost by accident he developed a moral purpose, pouring his talents into human rights cases and the arts.

Julian Burnside is a Melbourne based barrister specialising in commercial litigation, he joined the Bar in 1976 and took silk in 1989.

He acted for the Ok Tedi natives against BHP, for Alan Bond in fraud trials, for Rose Porteous in numerous actions against Gina Rinehart, and for the Maritime Union of Australia in the 1998 waterfront dispute against Patrick Stevedores.

He was Senior Counsel assisting the Australian Broadcasting Authority in the "Cash for Comment" inquiry and was senior counsel for Liberty Victoria in the Tampa litigation.

He is a former President of Liberty Victoria and has acted pro bono in many human rights cases, in particular concerning the treatment of refugees.

Passionately involved in the arts, he collects contemporary paintings and sculptures and regularly commissions music. He is married to artist and humanitarian Kate Durham. He is Chair of Fortyfive Downstairs a NOT for profit arts and performance venue in Flinders Lane, Melbourne and Chair of Chamber Music Australia.


In 2004 he was elected as a Living National Treasure. In 2009 he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia. In 2014 he was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize. In 2015 became official patron for the Rural Australians for refugees.

Julian has represented many blue-chip clients, but is best known for his work on human rights cases. Kate and Julian set up 'Spare Rooms for Refugees' and they opened their home to refugees.

“Kate set up “Spare Rooms for Refugees” partly as a symbolic response and partly as a practical measure, because people who come out of detention centres need somewhere to live. Kate had the simple practical idea that many Australian houses have got a spare room, so that's a neat way of solving a housing problem. You can't encourage [other] people to do that and not do it yourself. So, we've had refugees living here since early 2002.”

Julian Burnside on Talking Heads
2008
Pamela Curr

After working in Australia as a nurse and midwife, Pamela worked overseas before returning in 1992. She then undertook a diploma in welfare studies. This led to an Arts degree focusing on community development. She worked as coordinator of the FAIRWEAR Campaign supporting outworkers in the fashion industry to get fair wages and conditions.

In 1999 Pamela’s growing awareness and concern with the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers being detained in appalling conditions, led her to the refugee advocacy movement.

Pamela joined the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre as the Campaign coordinator in 2004 as a campaigner and advocate, spearheading campaigns against the Temporary Protection Visas and the practice of charging asylum seekers for their time in detention. She helped in the release of detainee Cornelia Rau by working with a trusted female journalist to find Cornelia’s family when all other avenues failed.

In the past year she has taken on the role of Refugee Rights Advocate in response to the deteriorating conditions for the women, men and children in detention centres and in the community. In this role she lobbies the politicians and the department for changes to legislation, seeks legal representation for refugees and asylum seekers in detention, writes submissions, appears at hearings, briefs the media and talks to schools, universities and community groups about the issue.

**Whether On Nauru Or Australia, The Detention Industry Harms Women** by Pamela Curr – New Matilda, March 2016

*From major traumas to small, everyday intrusions, detention grinds women down. The struggle for our rights is not over until all women are treated with dignity and respect, writes Pamela Curr.*


*Rape, sexual assault and other forms of degradation typify detention for women in Australia’s processing centres. They must have the right to live free from violence*

**Musical Interludes …**

Fay White’s lovely voice was complemented by harmonies from her husband Terry, and friend Ellen O’Gallagher

Local Choir, Gorgeous Voices entertained the Conference with their moving songs

Fay sang again later in the day at the Conference Dinner
We take pleasure in thanking Bendigo facilitators of our 3 Saturday morning sessions

- **Think National, Working Local - RAR groups**
  Helen Musk (Bendigo RAR)

- **The Ripple Effect - Growing the National RAR Network**
  Bonnie Carter (Grampians/Gariwerd RAR), Terry White (Maryborough RAR), and Philip Ashton, filmmaker

- **The power of one message - Media & Refugee Advocacy**
  Anthony Radford (Radford Media)

Anthony Radford was also one of our wonderful Media Panel in Saturday afternoon along with Nick Olle and Ben Doherty.

**Anthony Radford** is a two-time Walkley finalist and Walkley Award winner, whose stories about securing Bendigo’s water security also led to a Melbourne Press Club Quill Award. He was editor of the Bendigo Weekly Newspaper for a decade. Two years ago he started his own media and lobbying company. He worked with Ben Doherty at the Bendigo Advertiser for 18 months, and gave Nick Olle his first job in journalism.

**Nick Olle** has been a professional journalist for 15 years. He has worked across print, radio, television and online for outlets in Australia, South America, North America and Europe. Between 2005 and 2013 Nick covered South America for the ABC, NPR and other organisations.

In 2014 he was awarded the Australian Human Rights Commission’s media award for “At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard’s Story”, a first-hand account of life inside an Australian detention facility told from the perspective of a former employee of Serco, the multinational service provider running the nation’s onshore centres. It was the last and most successful story published by The Global Mail. Nick was nominated as a finalist in the 2014 Walkley Awards for Excellence in Journalism.

After The Global Mail ceased operations Nick worked as a producer for the SBS television programs Insight and Dateline. He is now a field producer for the national current affairs program The Project,
broadcast on Network Ten and WIN. Nick is passionate about human rights and maintains a keen interest in Latin American culture and politics.

Ben Doherty is a foreign correspondent, photographer, and video journalist, currently working as immigration correspondent for The Guardian, based in the Sydney newsroom. He was formerly Southeast Asia Correspondent for The Guardian, and South Asia Correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald. He has reported from more than 20 countries across Asia, the Pacific and Africa. In 2008 he was awarded Australian Young Print Journalist of the Year. He has twice been awarded a Walkley Award, Australia’s highest journalism honour, most recently in 2013 for an investigation into Bangladeshi sweatshop labour conditions.

He holds a Master of International Law and International Relations from the University of New South Wales, and in 2015, was a visiting fellow with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. His dissertation was titled Call Me Illegal, and examined the semantics of asylum: the language used to describe asylum seekers in political and media discourses, and its impact on public opinion.

**Changing the Conversation**

When we were originally deciding on what the Conference theme would be, we knew we had to look at the current narrative around people seeking asylum, the negativity in the mainstream media, and the deliberately and belligerent language of the government discourse.

The intentional conflation of people fleeing violence with harsh, brutal groups has become so much a part of the story Australians have been fed, that many normal good-hearted people can no longer see beyond the government lies to see the truth. People’s fears have been worked on for many years now, that countering those fears and the misinformation is a huge challenge for refugee advocates.

If ever you doubt the phrase, “Refugees are Assets” … just talk to …

**John & Margaret Millington**

John and Margaret Millington relocated from Gippsland to Nhill 33 years ago when John was appointed General Manager of Luv-a-Duck, a commercial duck growing company which at that time was producing about 5000 ducks each week. When John retired in 2013, that number had increased to 100,000 ducks per week. In those 33 years, John established a reputation as an outstanding community and business leader. In 2012 he was awarded an OAM for his contribution to Aviculture and the wider Community. He also received a ‘Paul Harris Fellow’ and is currently Assistant District Governor for Rotary District 9780.
John and Margaret have also been tireless campaigners for the implementation of a Real Time Monitoring System for Pharmaceuticals following the death of their son from an accidental overdose of Prescription Medications.

In 2015 Margaret was also awarded an Order of Australia medal for her contribution to Real Time Monitoring of Pharmaceuticals, Road Trauma and service to the wider Community and is also the recipient of a ‘Paul Harris Fellow’. Margaret attributes her successes to her friends, her family and her faith.

Both love the Nhill community because it is inclusive and welcoming. They believe the resettlement of the Karen refugees has been one of the most rewarding things they have ever done, their proudest achievement is their family.

Both are very inspiring individuals who always puts others first and work tirelessly to make the wider Wimmera region a better place.

A study of a refugee community in western Victoria's Wimmera has recognised the social and economic contributions the settlement program has made to the local area. ABC News – April 2015 Karen refugees make $40m contribution to Nhill economy in Victoria's Wimmera study finds

Joint funding from the Federal Government and the Hindmarsh Shire Council helps more refugees find work in the western Victorian town of Nhill.
Hani Abdile was undoubtedly the star of the Conference.

Hani is a 20 year old student currently residing in Sydney where she is studying to her high school certificate.

Hani is on a Bridging Visa patiently waiting for her asylum claim to be processed. Forced to flee her homeland of Somalia at the age of 14 Hani journeyed into Ethiopia.

After spending a year working in a market and as a housemaid Hani decided to return home in the hope she would find safety and sanctuary. Unfortunately Hani was faced with the threat of the Al Shabaab militia forcing young girls into marriage.

Her family arranged her escape, she travelled to Kenya and then on to Malaysia, Indonesia and a boat to Christmas Island.

Hani was 17 years old and determined to learn English and access an education.

Hani was detained on Christmas Island for 11 months and another 8 months in community detention in Sydney, during this time she joined an online writers group “Writing through Fences” established by Castlemaine writer Janet Galbraith. Hani was introduced to the power of poetry and the strength in the spoken word. In 2014 Hani was finally enrolled in school for the first time in her life and started reciting some of her own poetry.

In 2015 she was recognised for community leadership in Performance Arts for her poetry reading and she was presented with the Civic & Citizenship award by the Parliament of NSW. In 2016 she was awarded the Western Sydney refugee youth award and only 2 weeks ago she was awarded The Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies NSW young person’s award 2016.

You can listen to Hani on YouTube

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Sunday morning: 2 Workshops based on changing the narrative, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre’s “Words that Work”, and Amnesty International Australia’s “Changing the Conversation”.

Message from the ASRC:

Our Government’s treatment of people seeking asylum is no longer fair, and does not treat people with dignity and respect.

We can create a process that assesses people’s cases for asylum fairly and efficiently, and treats people with dignity and respect while they live in our communities.

A very special thanks goes to our caterers, Bendigo’s wonderful Karen Community
Outcomes from the Conference:

The first looked inward at the RAR Network and supporting the wonderful work of all the RAR groups around the country, while the second looked towards the bigger picture of changing the policies, and the third aims to help ensure people are welcomed in to our communities.

1. That the RAR Network continue, and a group of 3 or 4 people be formed to guide and coordinate it. This group to be called the National RAR Team. That this group will be a coordinating and advisory body (rather than management).

2. That we immediately explore ways to form a loose coalition of all existing refugee networks which could activate national campaigns, national days of action, etc. That this umbrella group consider being called Australians for Refugees.

3. The Welcome Scroll
   There are 143 Local Government Refugee Welcome Zones in Australia

   Rural Australians for Refugees are sending the Welcome Scroll to all Australian States to have Local Governments reaffirm the Declaration they signed. We are asking Local Governments everywhere to remind Australia that they are Refugee Welcome Zones.

   **Refugee Welcome Zones committed in Spirit to**
   - Welcoming refugees into our community,
   - Upholding the Human Rights of refugees,
   - Demonstrating Compassion for refugees
   - Enhancing cultural and religious Diversity in our community.

   **Welcome Scroll is launched on 3 September 2016**

   After Asher Hirsch from the Refugee Council of Australia and Jan Govett from Rural Australians for Refugees presented the Scroll, Mayor Christine Henderson from Mount Alexander Shire and Mayor Rod Fyffe of the Greater City of Bendigo were the first to sign the Scroll
Among the RAR Conference Participants … …

- Wild Dingo Press - Catherine Lewis
- RAR - Rural Australians for Refugees
- Bendigo RAR
- Bendigo Friends and Mentors
- YPR – Young People for Refugees
- Writing Through Fences
- Pledge to Asylum Seekers
- RCOA – Refugee Council of Australia
- ASRC – Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
- RAN – Refugee Advocacy Network
- RAC – Canberra
- Pledge to a Just Refugee Policy
- Labor for Refugees
- CRAG – Combined Refugee Action Group
- SE NSW Regional Refugee Network
- Castlemaine Play Rug group
- GADRC – Grandmothers against Detention of Refugee Children
- AIA – Amnesty International Australia
- And a myriad of Rural Australians for Refugees groups

Wild Dingo Books donated half of their sales made at the Conference – many thanks to Cathi and Iris

And a very special thanks to Doug, our sound expert

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And on Facebook and Twitter