

Minutes of Buddies Meeting: 26 February 2017

Chairperson - Gabby Sutherland, notetaker - Carol Boulanger

Apologies: D'Arcy Buick, Audrey Raymond, Brenda Smith, Rada van der Werff, Fergus FitzGerald, Libby Morrison, Grant Allen

Gabby welcomed newcomers.

Guest Speaker

Ehsan Azadi, immigration lawyer and founder and principal of Arc Migration in Brisbane

Mr Azadi informed the meeting that a third group of asylum seeker applicants had recently been granted Safe Haven Enterprise Visas – including an individual supported by Buddies – adding to the other two Buddies-supported visa applicants that his agency had successfully assisted.

He reminded us that the immigration lawyer must be passionately engaged but also totally objective from a legalistic viewpoint. For this reason, his agency gathers very detailed information from applicants before taking on new clients. Especially since the changes to immigration law in 2012, political forces weigh heavily against visa applicants, so their credibility in meeting the very strict guidelines for acceptance as refugees is extremely important.

Mr Azadi explained some differences between the 3-year Temporary Protection Visa and the 5-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa. Persons issued a 3-year TPV can live and work anywhere in Australia, but must go through the entire application process again at the end of each 3-year period; if the situation in their home country is considered to have been resolved at any time, they may be unsuccessful in their next application. The 5-year SHEV visa might offer a pathway to permanency and Mr Azadi counsels clients who are on the 3-year visa to begin their application for the 5-year visa as soon as possible after the granting of the 3-year visa.

Applicants granted a SHEV visa must relocate to an approved regional centre and find work or study there, though at present they are not eligible for HECS payments. (Mr Azadi was hopeful that HECS might become available to visa-holders soon.)

Mr Azadi answered a number of questions from persons attending the meeting.

Finance

Margaret Norman gave details of income from various sources totalling \$1099. She also noted that the current available balance of \$5540 was not much more than the \$5000 payment in support of migration services that would likely be coming up for approval soon.

Walk from Adelaide to Canberra

Helen Thomas reported her moving experience in joining the final leg of this event – begun by Adelaide lawyer Adam Richards and his 12-year-old son Ned. Many had joined along the way and the event generated good publicity. It ended in a welcome on the grounds of Parliament House.

Asylum seeker looking for work

Denise Williams described the plight of Cleo whose visa will expire in April. Cleo has cerebral palsy and recently moved from Caloundra Hospital where she had been living to a Nambour nursing home. She is desperately seeking data entry work so that she can get a new visa and then maybe a place to live.

Events coordination and fundraising

Carmel Dobson spoke about a number of activities in the pipeline:

Buddies 15-year celebration - Carmel suggested a buy-your-own-dinner social event, purely to celebrate the upcoming 15-year anniversary of Buddies' operation on the Sunshine Coast. The evening might be held in May and the Buderim Tavern and Kawana Waters Hotel were suggested as possible venues.

Annual fund-raising dinner - The idea of an annual fund-raising dinner was also discussed. Carmel is asking members who might have contacts who could be drawcards to get in touch with her. She is also seeking ideas about how to entice people to come along – and donate!

Other events - There was brief discussion about Harmony Day, Forums to be held at USC and the Walk Together event in October. Denis White suggested that Buddies might like to explore having a food stall or selling tickets at the upcoming Renewables Expo in June.

Sudanese asylum seeker needing our support

Bronwyn Bell spoke about Nazar, who was recently granted a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa, and who recently received the sad news of the death of his wife just hours after he'd arrived on the Coast to begin his search for work here. He now has two young daughters back in his home country who are living with elderly grandparents, both of whom are seriously disabled. Charlotte Yellowlees from Salvos Legal is providing pro bono legal advice on the possibility of bringing the girls to Australia. There are no visa options.

Fund-raising concert

Kayla Szumer gave early notice of our annual fund-raising concert to be held on Sunday 30 April at the Caloundra Uniting Church. A quartet (with piano) will play Beethoven and Brahms, and admission will include afternoon tea.

Learn English Holiday

Kayla provided an update re the upcoming vacation program of English language classes and family billeting to be held during the first week of school holidays (2-7 April). Thus far 31 persons are expected to take part. More help is still needed for persons to provide various kinds of support for the daytime program at St John's College, Nambour. A 2nd week will be offered in September.

Toowoomba veggie collective

Stephanie Akers told the meeting about a friend near Toowoomba who has made some of her property available to a group of Africans who are growing some of their vegetables and selling them at local markets. The home-grown produce, not easily available elsewhere, is proving popular. Stephanie alerted us to their crowd funding campaign to purchase a trailer to assist in taking produce to market.

Refugee Alternatives Conference in Sydney

John Brinnand gave a brief report on this February conference, aimed at improving policy, practice and public support. Conference speakers – 45% of whom had refugee experience – spoke about changing the narrative to emphasise refugees as an asset, not a liability. John recommended a book launched at the Conference by oral history group Behind the Wire: Stories from Detention: They Cannot Take the Sky. The full conference details are at www.refugeealternatives.org.au.

Next meeting

Sunday 26 March. Chairperson – Thorsten Kels, notetaker – Penny Rivlin.

Gabby reminded us of our practice of bringing a plate of finger food for sharing after the meeting.

The meeting closed at 12:45pm.