

WARRNAMBOOL RAR 'POTLUCK DINNER'

At a recent 'Warrnambool Rural Australians for Refugees' meeting, a young woman came along who told a little of her story of teaching refugee and asylum seeker children on Manus Island and Nauru. This is not something most of us are privy to. The Australian Government has introduced laws to prevent people employed in our offshore detention centres disclosing information about what goes on there. Much of what we hear is filtered and modified by media and/or politicians. This was the spark for what became the 'Warrnambool RAR Potluck dinner' with Meagan Becker and Pamela Curr as guest speakers on Saturday evening, May 7 at the Warrnambool Uniting Church.

Pamela has worked for the past seventeen years as Human Rights Advocate for the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in Melbourne. Meagan's employment was with *Save the Children*. It was a fantastic opportunity for about sixty people to hear some stories and ask lots of questions over a pretty impressive shared meal.

What we heard were stories of such cruelty that I want to believe the Australian public would not condone if they accepted their veracity. Stories of children growing up (3-4 years is a long time in a child's life) in prison camps. Stories of young women released into temporary housing where they are not safe from violence. Stories of people warehoused for so long they lose hope and perform acts of self-harm. Self-harm to the point of death.

Meagan and Pamela did not dwell on the atrocities. They answered our questions. They responded to some of the myths we have accepted from our politicians and media. Confirmed facts about the unjust system we currently have as our response to people seeking safety. Reminded us seeking asylum is not illegal. These people have done nothing wrong.

Meagan particularly stressed the joy of working with the children, responding to their desire to learn. Pamela remains optimistic that change will come. She sees a system in crisis and sees options to replace it. We have done it before. Malcolm Fraser led the Australian Government in a compassionate response to Vietnamese people arriving here by boat in the 1970s. Our current treatment of a few thousand individuals is nothing short of immoral. It must stop.

Katherine Stewart
Warrnambool RAR member, Love Makes A Way participant, St Pius X West Warrnambool Parishioner

