

REFUGEE REALITIES

In connection to Refugee Week June 19 – 26 2016, a public gathering was held on Saturday night, June 25 at the Ballan Mechanics Institute where those attending were treated to a glimpse of life in refugee camps. The evening was entitled *Refugee Realities*.

Sharing in a meal similar to what is eaten by Syrian refugees in camps across Turkey and Greece, we helped ourselves to bowls of vegetarian bean stews or thick soups plus bread and water provided at our tables.

I noticed from the captioned photographs displayed near the Mechanic's entrance that in Jordan at the Talbiah Camp, families receive food rations but parents often skip meals so their children can eat. If I ever needed reminding that I have never known hunger, this was one of those nights.

Two eloquent guest speakers spoke about their experiences as refugees, Rebecca Gatwech from Ballarat who lived in a camp in Kenya before coming here about fifteen years ago and Rohullah Hossaini currently living in Swan Hill.



Sr Kathleen Moran, Elaine Conlan, Angela Kearns



Q & A with facilitator Uniting Church minister Jenny Hayes, Rebecca Gatwech, Karen McGrath and Rohullah Hossaini

A third speaker and a very passionate advocate for refugees was Karen McGrath from the aid agency Act for Peace. Spending two weeks in Talbiah Camp during October 2015, Karen was profoundly affected by her visit. She photographed and listened to the refugees' harrowing stories of trauma and loss and their struggle for survival. Sadly, the conflict in Syria today is still raging with no end in sight.

A safety release valve called live music was played with gusto by three energetic and passionate Africans on drums. Celebrating life and sharing their musical culture these gentlemen soon had most of us (me included) swaying in the aisles.

Refugee Realities was by any measure, an evening of contrasts. Thank you to the organisers and their wonderful team of volunteers, the three guest speakers and musicians for taking us behind the headlines and the plight of refugees.

*Photos and text by Concetta McFall
This story first appeared on the Ballan & District Community House Facebook page*



Photo 1: Colleen and Bill Ryrie

Photo 2: Rohullah Hossaini, speaker with friends from Swan Hill

Photo 3: Marlene Burvill