

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Talk presented by Sigrid Kropp

I have been Lucky. My family has never had much money, but we also have never lacked for the necessities. I am certainly not wealthy. I do have some disposable income, but no savings I am however, RICH.

Even when my marriage went down the tube, and I had to swallow my pride, and negotiate the embarrassment of seeking a 'single parent's pension. When I was treated with disrespect by the Centrelink staff, interviewing me in front of others in the queue behind me. Asking me very personal, and very private, questions in public. Even then, I was Rich.

I am rich in a way I don't often stop and acknowledge. I struggled with my task for today. It wasn't until yesterday afternoon that I felt able to articulate why 'Social Justice' called me. I actually do very little because to do more would require me to change my hectic, but comfortable life style to something not so comfortable and much more confronting.

Whilst I was teaching at Melba High school I came into contact with a number of refugees in the school and also in my classroom. I also befriended a neighbour from Kosovo, she was so traumatised that when I took

them to the Australia day fireworks she went into shock. She was so traumatised that later, after we had experienced a spate of 'egging' in the neighbourhood she withdrew in despair and fear, eventually committing suicide. This then was what sparked my interest in Refugee Resettlement. I was in no position to DO anything other than be a champion for refugees in my school community. Even now,

I am rich in a way I don't often stop and acknowledge.

I do only admin support and even that is very limited.

So, why did yesterday provide some insight? I went to see Phantom of the Opera with some of our students.

Afterwards we spoke with a number of the performers. They were very generous with their time. Our drama teacher commented on how she had never had such open and free access to performers either in England, from where she hails, or in Sydney. On the way home I recalled the many occasions when I have met people who lead lives

that differ to ours. Some of those meetings have been due to my various careers, but all of that makes me rich.

Even when I had no money to buy my boys Christmas presents, we were rich. V de P delivered a Christmas hamper on Christmas Eve morning. Not long afterwards an anonymously donated box of exotic fruits was delivered – peaches, cherries, strawberries – all fruits we had not eaten for some time.

Soon after and before the shops closed we were presented with an envelope containing \$100. Again from an anonymous donor. However, it was not the material gifts that made me rich, it was the fact that people cared.

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It is the fact that I have had an education, I have had choices, not always have I

made wise ones, but I had choice.

I have had and still have opportunities.

Sometimes situations and times have not given me the choices I **wanted**, but even reduced choices and opportunities have been rewarding. I could not remain in the navy when I married, but I did get called back into the reserves. I see the women who are serving, are senior officers and I am a little jealous. However, then I remind myself 'I was one of the trailblazers, so come on Sigi'.

When our Parish started the family groups I met Marlene and Bev Purnell. I was also on the St John's Parents and Friends association. Bev and a couple of fellow association members spoke about Social Justice, and yes, I was hooked.

At that time we had a large Social Justice group with many in positions that gave them skills to write submissions to enquiries. I remember the quite major submission made to the Commission on the Aging, thanks in large part to Bev. My first independent action as opposed to my frequent verbal contributions was the Sorry Book. I brought it to the Church and by the end of the weekend we had six signatures. That was a bit of a wake up call. No, not

everyone who attends church has the same social belief or values, BUT it makes them no less genuine, good or Christian. Just different.

When our group became smaller and smaller it made sense to make Informing and Educating on issues a priority. It is perhaps not a major task that will leave Billboard sized markers behind. But if I can be part of a group which provides information and raises issues that make people think, reflect and make informed decisions then I will continue to belong to our Social Justice Group.