

Mercy Advocacy

“A blind beggar named Bartimeus was sitting by the side of the road. When he heard it was Jesus of Nazareth, (passing by), he began to shout, ‘Jesus! Son of David! Have pity on me!’ Many of the people scolded him and told him to be quiet. But he shouted even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have pity on me!’ ... Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’ So he threw off his cloak, jumped up, and came to Jesus... ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him.”

- Mark 10 46



Seeding the Future with Others
February 2015





To do some listening and to encourage ourselves to speak, this month we are sharing two intertwined stories taken from an article by Martin McKenzie-Murray in '*The Saturday Paper*' (13-19 Dec 2014).

The first tells of a young asylum seeker who took the hazardous journey to Christmas Island. As with so many others, she has faced grievous losses and spirit-sapping struggles with our bureaucracy. The second speaks of an unnamed advocate who has long and perseveringly sought justice for those who ask for our protection.



What stalling by the Immigration Minister costs those who wait.

In an article in '*The Saturday Paper*' 13-19 Dec 2014 *Martin McKenzie-Murray* shared the story of an Afghan teenager whom he called Shaima.

Shaima is a permanent Australian resident whose mother now lives in secret in locations in Pakistan rotating between friends' homes in fear of the Taliban finding her. When Shaima was 16, a Taliban chief, already having several wives, wanted her as a bride. Her father supported her rejection of this demand. So Shaima was raped and her family attracted the wrath of the Taliban. The family assisted her escape overland through a people smuggler, then by boat to Malaysia and on to Indonesia. Finally, she arrived on Christmas Island.

In 2011 she gained residency in Australia and immediately began the process for a 'split family visa' lodging an application in mid-2011 for her mother, father and brother who were in hiding from the Taliban. The year after she submitted her application the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers led by former Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, released their report. One of the suggestions adopted by the government was that split family visas be scrapped because delays in processing them encouraged distant families to seek reunion via perilous sea journeys. The new rules would not apply to applications made before 13 August 2012, provided 'compelling reasons' of the criteria were met. It seemed Shaima's application was safe.



Shaima found an advocate and a couple willing to house and assist her family on arrival. Meanwhile, she had learned English, made friends and won academic scholarships despite constant worry about her family. In mid-2013 her family undertook security and health tests and provided documentation of their persecution to the Australian Embassy in Pakistan as part of the process begun 2 years previously. A year passed. Nothing happened. Enquiries got nowhere. Finally, in August 2014, this announcement came from the Department of Immigration:

“Those who arrived prior to 13 August 2012, while eligible to propose applications for the Special Humanitarian Program, the applications will receive the lowest priority.”

Less than two months after this, Shaima’s 14 year-old brother walked to a local bakery to buy bread and never returned. Soon after, Shaima’s parents received a letter from the Taliban informing her father that his son had been found unharmed and telling him where to collect him. Although suspicious, in desperation the father went. Two days later the father’s body was found. Shaima’s counsellor wrote to the Immigrations Department:

“Shaima has suffered deeply through the ordeal of waiting for an outcome on her family sponsorship. Particularly given that the family had moved to the very final stages of the processing, as all interviews, health checks and security checks had been finalised and approved. Shaima feels that the death of her father and the disappearance of her brother may have been completely avoided if there was not such a long delay in the allocation of the visa. (This delay) Shaima finds hard to comprehend, especially now she has lost so much.”

Shaima is now on compassionate leave from school. She lives sick with the prospect of becoming an orphan. She wants to return to her mother. Her resettlement means little, if she can’t be reunited with her remaining family member. The 5 December vote in the Senate gave the Minister of Immigration extraordinary powers. He must decide if a teenage refugee should be orphaned because her parent is refused safety. And Shaima’s case is but one of many.



Martin McKenzie Martin's portrayal of Shaima's unnamed advocate.

Shaima's advocate is an elderly nun. To protect her friends, she wishes to remain unnamed. She is small with grey hair. When I meet her, she is wearing a cardigan with a small brooch and gently offers her hand. After we sit down, this modest woman reveals herself as one of the most politically savvy people I have met, possessed of great ingenuity in the art of lobbying. She has met a wide array of politicians, past and present; has assembled alliances and disassembled weaknesses, she has written many hundreds of emails – maybe thousands – to elected representatives, their staff and senior bureaucrats, and made as many phone calls. She knows not just the personnel changes in Parliament House, but also those within the departments they run.

“I got a call from a senior politician once,” she says. “He complained that their faxes were breaking down from constituents sending in too many messages. ‘Sister, can you please tell them to stop?’ he asked. And I rang around and told everyone to send more. I had a terrific network. You have to be creative.”

She grew up relatively poor in a Catholic family of twelve. She tells me that her parents always stressed social justice and that sometimes they would take in strangers and feed them when they barely had food for themselves. They worked hard, the sister knitting clothes for her siblings.

“But we were closed. Racist.” she tells me. “We only mixed with white Anglo-Catholics. That was our world. But when I was young and joined the mission, I moved to Papua New Guinea. I had a whole new learning curve. I spent a lot of time in the villages, in the women's homes. They told me stories. Secret women's stuff. I learnt about their culture. And I loved it. They were uneducated but very intelligent. And I made great friends. If I got the motorbike bogged, they'd come and push it out. And I learnt about religion. That not all Catholic ideas are the best. It broadened my outlook on life. So nothing shocks me now, except for the brutality of this government.”

The sister has had audiences with former immigration ministers, pleading various cases with procedural and legal knowledge. She recently completed her PhD in refugee policy and procedures.

“You could go and talk to (Philip) Ruddock. You could go and talk to (Chris) Evans,” she tells me. “But not Scott Morrison. I walked out from him when he was in opposition. He was on his mantra. We were there for just five minutes. ‘That won't stop the boats, that won't stop the boats, that won't stop the boats.’”



He just said that for five minutes. So I said, 'Thank you very much, Mr Morrison, I think we get the message' and we left. I wasn't going to put up with that bullying."

The sister believes respect is hard earned. Titles, jobs and social status don't automatically confer it. She applies this to herself. When she was young, she found it difficult wearing the nun's habit in public.

"An 80-year-old stood up for me on a tram when I was 22, and I thought, 'This is ridiculous.' People treated us as angels, and it was terrible. I thought, 'Well I'm no angel'. And I was so glad once we got rid of the habits because we then had to earn respect as a nun. We all earn our respect. And expect that of our ministers."

Shaima's advocate continues her support in this time of suffering for this young refugee, separated by 10,000 kilometres and the obscure firewalls of our federal bureaucracy from her mother whom she longs to rejoin.

"I'm holding on to her on a leash," she tells me. "But she just wants to be with her mum. We need something to happen pretty soon. We're getting desperate."



Action:

Like Bartimaeus, we can continue to raise our voice against the odds on the secrecy surrounding Manus Island and the transfer of refugees to Cambodia.

PS Good News:

A small ray of light in the release of our Mater baby Ferouz and family into community detention on a 3-year protection visa.

For it is in giving that we receive







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