

# Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter

Spring 2009

## Permission to stay?



Strangers into Citizens is a campaign led by the Citizen Organising Foundation (COF), the umbrella organisation for London Citizens, who previously set up the Independent Asylum Commission and an enquiry into the Home Office's Lunar House in Croydon, where many people lodge their asylum claims. The Strangers into Citizens campaign calls for some of the estimated 500,000 irregular migrants who are currently residing in the UK without any formal leave to remain, to be given the opportunity to 'earn' British citizenship for humanitarian reasons, and also on economic, security and practical grounds.

The idea of COF is that those who have been here for 4 or more years should be admitted to a 2-year pathway to full legal rights ("leave to remain") during which they work legally and demonstrate their contribution to the UK economy and society. After the 2-year period, subject to knowledge of English and employer and community

references, they would be granted permanent leave to remain. Similar schemes operate with success in Spain, Italy and the Netherlands, and Barack Obama is also pushing for something similar in the US. Bringing people back into mainstream society where they pay income tax on earnings, will shrink the black economy where many such people are exploited by unscrupulous employers. Despite the official government stance, they will never be able to locate and remove all of these people, so Strangers into Citizens argue for the only workable solution which is allowing people an opportunity to prove that they will make a positive contribution to UK society, and then allowing them to do so.

Boris Johnson has put his weight behind the campaign, although of course there remains significant opposition from certain sections of the media and many politicians. A national rally in support of the idea is taking place on the May Bank Holiday, Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May, in Trafalgar Square from midday onwards. They are hoping for up to forty thousand people to attend, with live music, information and speakers. More information can be found at [www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk](http://www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk) Please contact Anna if you'd like to attend with a group of GDWG volunteers.

Nic Eadie

## Thank you Tan...

It is with great sadness that I am writing to say thank you to Tanvier Hussain, our Detainee Support Worker who is leaving us after almost three years in post. Tan has been a very important and much-loved member of our team, who has brought such great dedication and experience to the group. Tan has a long history at Tinsley House, previously serving as the Imam, then later joining GDWG. His command of several languages has been vital in reaching a large number of detainees who we would otherwise not have reached. He is currently progressing well in his studies of both Arabic and sign language too! Tan's skills not only covered supporting detainees, but also to furniture making (please come and check out our lovely clothing shelves!), IT issues, and even keeping our office plants alive! His generous spirit and gentle manner will be sorely missed by all of us here in the office and on the Management Committee. I'm sure I also speak for all of the volunteers when I thank him for his patience and hard work dealing with so many things at once. We wish him all the best for the future.



*Tan with our patron, Baroness Williams of Crosby*

# Brook House now open

## The new centre through the eyes of two GDWG visitors

GDWG volunteer, Lin, who visited Brook House on a tour arranged by the office before the opening of the centre, wrote after her visit that she encountered 'high brick walls with miles of barbed wire, daunting!'... 'I hate that everything takes place in one large area, three storeys high with nothing really being sectioned off. A row of showers stood exposed on an upper stair landing as though an afterthought. I felt uncomfortable with the thought of total exposure, no privacy at all...cameras are everywhere'... 'The outside recreation area was minuscule, a concrete yard surrounded by high straight walls, no chance of ever feeling the sun'.



GDWG volunteer, Bob, was the first visitor into Brook House. 'It took me forty minutes from the time I drove up to being seated in front of I. Having got into the visitor's reception building, I provided a driving licence as ID, the details of which were transcribed onto a paper form, with entry time added and I had to sign this...there was another form...They put a red tape around my right wrist. They offered a locker for sharp items and valuables. If I wanted to leave cash this would have to be counted and cross-checked. I was then escorted to reception in the main building...passed through various security doors into a waiting area. Left

on my own, I then waited for another escort who took me up to the visitors' room reception. ID to show once more, plus a check that I was wearing the red tape, plus a form to sign. I held back facetious comments about 'red tape' which were lurking somewhere not very deep in my brain ready to be unleashed. Pockets were emptied behind a screen and I was subjected to a very thorough frisking. Then metal detected front and

back. Much discussion about why it went beep over my shins covered by trousers and then with skin bared! I was told that everything except up to £5 in money was to be left in a locker (yes, another locker!). Finally I was let through into the visits

room. The detainee I visited said the landline is not working. He wanted to call you to let you know he had moved, but couldn't. The TV in his room is powered up but the picture is unwatchable – some problem with the aerial system. It is tiresome after they have been locked up at 9pm that they can't watch TV. And most important – the staff are pleasant, he said'.

It's clear that there have been a few teething troubles at Brook House, as a number of detainees have called us to report problems. Please let the office know of any issues that come up if you are visiting a detainee at the centre.

## ***Volunteer Interview, by Anna Pincus***

Meet Abigail, a new volunteer with a CV that lists hobbies as varied as sailing (Round the Island Race and across the channel), scuba diving, mountain trekking in Nepal, Romania, Uganda and Ethiopia, running the London Marathon in aid of ActionAid, acting and singing, and working on her allotment!

Since starting as a volunteer in February, Abigail has visited two detainees and feels she has learnt much already from exposure to two cultures she hadn't encountered before. She says it has been humbling to meet the detainees and to hear of their sacrifices and has found them both kind and inspiring.

She didn't expect visiting to be such fun!



Abigail's work experience so far has included working for Tearfund in Darfur and she describes the extremely hospitable people, beautiful landscapes, and the work itself which was undertaken against a tense backdrop of violence

and suspicion. She worked as a parliamentary researcher for the Lib Dem MP Colin Breed in The House of Commons, believes there are not enough women in politics, and found The House of Commons an exciting and vibrant place to work. Abigail stood in a local election in Earlsfield in

London. She left the Commons to take a more international focus and her ambition is to work for the international criminal court. Abigail is currently a member of the Law Society Human Rights intervention team, and if there is a human rights breach reported, she is one of the people that researches the breach for the law society to consider its response. At present she is working

on a report regarding the stoning of women for adultery in Iran.

Welcome to GDWG, Abigail! We are delighted that you have found time away from your law studies to volunteer for GDWG.

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## **Young and alone - Age-disputed minors in detention**

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) make up a significant proportion of all new asylum claims in the UK each year. These young people are typically between the ages of 14 and 17, arrive here without any family to support them and with little or no evidence of their age, leaving them open to the possibility that the Home Office will dispute their age, and try to treat them as adults. If recognised as children, social services have a duty to support them until they reach 18, and Home Office policy is to give them Discretionary Leave to Remain, should their asylum applications fail. There is therefore significant vested interest in the Home Office disputing their ages. Social workers should carry out age assessments on all those who claim to be under 18, but these are far from an exact science, and mistakes do occur. Last year, GDWG saw 28 age disputed UASC in Tinsley House. Unfortunately neither GSL nor Immigration would agree to informing either ourselves or the Refugee Council's Children's Panel, who specialise in work with asylum-seeking children, when age-disputed detainees arrived.

We have recently received the bad news that the Home Office have decided to cut funding for the Children's Panel, meaning that they will no longer be able to do any work with age disputed minors, including those in detention. Last year we referred all 28 of these young people to the Children's Panel, who then typically visited and made their own assessment whether they could assist in challenging any age assessment that had previously taken place, and tried to find appropriate legal representation. This is clearly going to leave a significant gap in provision, which we will attempt to fill as much as we can.

Refugee and Migrant Justice (the new name for the Refugee Legal Centre) recently released a report entitled 'Does Every Child Matter?', which accused the government of routinely flouting their own codes relating to safeguarding children in the asylum system. It's estimated that around 2000 children are detained each year, although the government refuses to release any figures. Many more are left to live in poverty, while at the same time facing a hostile legal system, which commonly leaves them in limbo for many years.

*Nic Eadie.*

*Words from Detention;*  
***Trapped, by John Musato***

I love life and hopefully life agrees with me. Nobody likes the feeling of being trapped, yet we all are somehow. One way or another we're all trapped in a situation and do not completely feel free.

You do not have to be incarcerated in order to feel trapped. You could be free, yet in a relationship where you love your partner so much that you feel trapped. Although love is supposed to be a beautiful experience, we often find ourselves helpless and empty without that one person.

You may love your children, but you may feel trapped with them, because for the rest of your life they will depend on you.

***So how can we feel free?***

The answer is by changing our way of thinking, because the mind is the centre of our focus. For when you feel trapped, it's because your mind tells you so. Of course it's not easy to instantly adjust our mindset. But a journey of a thousand miles starts with one step.

Let's be happy and rejoice on the choices that we make in life.

Let's accept life and the circumstances it brings forth.

Let's be like water and flow around obstacles.

Let's accept that we cannot go through life without making decisions.

Let's all agree that once we make a decision it is final, and we'll embrace and grow from whatever

outcome it will produce. For in reality we are not trapped, our minds are. Free your mind and the rest will follow.

My name is John Musato, a detainee at Tinsley House. I'm not trapped in here. I'm here to expand my mind and meet people of different cultures and backgrounds. I'm thankful to have had the opportunity to pass through here, for I'm not longer naïve to certain people's ways, or ignorant towards their religions and beliefs. I've learnt to live away from my loved ones until I see them again. And I'll have a lot to tell them about my journey.

***Amen.***

Since I came here, I have realised how fortunate some of us are to be living in such a prosperous country full of opportunities. I have realised how people will go through incredible ordeals in search of a better life, yet those that were born here don't seem to realise how lucky they are.

The people I have met in here demonstrate true human survival instinct, and they refuse to be trapped in a hopeless situation. So they dream of a possible brighter future, even if this unknown future may be across oceans and overseas. They risk life and limb in order to better themselves, with the promise one day of returning to their loved ones.

*John Musato, March 2009*

***Introducing Louise Peim, our new Brook House Project Worker***

I just thought I would include a few words to introduce myself to anybody who I haven't yet met. I am the new Brook House Project Worker & a full time employee with GDWG. I used to work with young unaccompanied asylum seekers & refugees for a service provider in Brighton. Working with people in detention brings many different personal challenges, which I am learning to deal with. One of the things that I enjoy about this type of direct work is hearing stories from detainees about their experiences & learning more about various cultures & countries. I have thoroughly enjoyed meeting the many different people who visit detainees & believe this to be a huge perk of the job.

I love to travel & have travelled around parts of south east Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Europe & Central & South America. I am hoping that in the future, I will get the opportunity to travel around Africa. Any good tips on where I should go would be very welcome! I look forward to meeting all GDWG volunteers in due course.

Louise.

## GDWG News

The big news of course is the opening of Brook House. The first detainees were sent there on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March, with the official opening taking place three days later. At time of writing, only one wing is open, with no more than about 30 detainees being held there. Reports from those we are in touch with are quite mixed, with some seeming to like the fact that it is fairly quiet there, while others expressing concerns over such things as the food, limited access to the library and the cold temperature inside.

Our 2008 Annual Report is now out, and should by now have been sent out to all members and other interested groups and individuals. If you do not have a copy and would like one, please contact the office.

The website is still under construction, and has been taking slightly longer than anticipated. However, it is almost there now, and should be up and running before the end of April.

It appears that returns to Somalia are becoming ever more difficult. The IOM has stopped its voluntary returns scheme back to Mogadishu, due to 'political issues', while the European Court of Human Rights is granting interim measures to all applicants issued with removal directions to the capital, pending an upcoming lead judgment on the issue, which should come within the next few months. This should mean that any Somalis who are facing forced return may be able to apply to the European Court to have this removal suspended, and should get some legal advice on the matter.

A big thank you to our two new 'clothing coordinators', Mary and Bryn, who work in the office sorting the clothing donations and packing parcels for detainees. If you know anyone else who may be interested in either sorting or delivering clothes, please let us know.

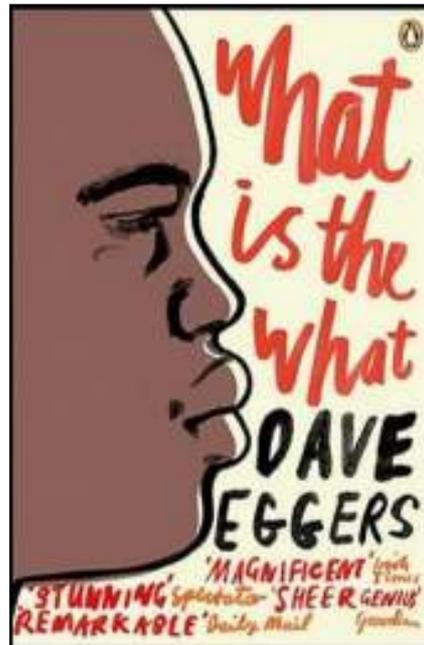
We have just been told that we will not be allowed to take in any toiletries for detainees at Brook House, or Tinsley House after May. This is due to the fear that drugs and alcohol could be smuggled in this way. We therefore do not need any more donations of toiletries. We are however still in desperate need of good quality young men's clothing.

A big thank you to all who attended our AGM on 25<sup>th</sup> March, and especially to Jerome Phelps, Director of the London Detainee Support Group, who gave an extremely interesting talk about his experiences working at both Harmondsworth and Colnbrook IRCs. It was certainly food for thought, and gave us a very valuable glimpse into what the future may hold for the GDWG.

## *Book Review by Helen Robbins;*

### **What is the What, by Dave Eggers**

'What Is the What' spins stories of love, death, childhood, adolescence, human suffering and human nature around the narrator, Valentino Achak Deng, a survivor of the second civil war which violently raged through Southern Sudan from 1983-2005. Valentino was one of thousands of displaced children, known to the rest of the world as the "lost boys of Sudan" who walked hundreds of miles through east Africa to find refuge. Valentino testifies throughout the novel his need to tell stories; from the moment he arrives in America, "when I first came to this country, I would tell silent stories...to all the people of the world and whoever might be listening"... "the stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing...I speak to these people, and I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there."



The architecture of the book is constructed by Valentino, eloquently relaying the horrific experiences of his past to faceless strangers such as "TV Boy" and his "Christians neighbours" after he is assaulted in his Atlanta apartment by two

Americans. The violent, mindless attack leaves Valentino nostalgic for the refugee camps he experienced in Kenya and Ethiopia where "there was no rain, the winds blew nine months a year, and eighty thousand war refugees from Sudan and elsewhere lived on one meal a day". The juxtaposition of ostensibly developed America and war torn Sudan casts ethical shadows throughout the book, coaxing the reader to pause and contemplate what's being said between the lines. 'What is the What' is a story of stories laced with tender moments of hope and depths of despair, that leaves one both joyous and affected.

## **Detained Lives – LDSG's new campaign to end indefinite detention**

Many of us have seen first hand the impact that long-term detention can have on an individual. People held at immigration detention centres are detained indefinitely, or until they are given a date for their removal from the UK. People are not given sentences to which they can see an end to their incarceration & this can have detrimental effects on their mental health, causing immense anxiety & depression.

There has been much controversy here in the UK over the governments proposed forty-two day detention of terrorist suspects, yet reporting on the indefinite detention of asylum seekers seems to continue to go almost unheard by the wider general public.

The London Detainee Support Group (LDSG) carried out some research looking at whether immigration detention achieves the aim of deportation, which is the reason the Home Office give for using the detention system. It concludes that indefinite detention does not work & highlights the inefficiency & ineffectiveness of immigration detention in the UK.

The Detained Lives report states that of the 188 people who were detained for longer than a year that LDSG were in contact with, only 18% were deported. This quite clearly conveys that the detention system is not achieving its aim. It is estimated that detaining these 188 individuals cost the taxpayer £22 million. Perhaps through making figures such as these more widely available to taxpayers through the mainstream media, the predictable outcry about this might have some influence over Home Office policy. The issue of the human cost this has on individuals does not seem to carry such influence.

With the opening of Brook House & the plans to further increase space for more detainees, it seems we shall see more & more people subjected to indefinite detention. To find out more about LDSG's Detained Lives research & campaign, you can visit [www.detainedlives.org](http://www.detainedlives.org)

### **News from the management committee**

As I stated at the recent AGM our most pressing priority has been our response to the opening of Brook House. When Brook House is at capacity that there will be a pool of around 550 detainees to support at any one time. This huge increase has made us question what we will be able to offer detainees. Basic calculations suggest that to provide visitors to the same level, as we have so far at Tinsley House, will mean that we will need around 200 active volunteers. Is this possible? Will we be able to recruit them and will the office staff be able to give the support needed? Is the turnover at BH going to be so fast that we will be unable to get visitors in quickly enough?

So what will we be able to do? We will still visit as we feel that this is the core of what we do. We will have to accept that we will not be able to visit the same proportion of those detained as we have in the past. We may have to adopt group visiting as the London Group have been doing. (They have 567 or so detainees to support). At the moment we have to limit phone cards to one a month but perhaps if we are successful in getting particular funding we will be able to increase this. We will need a good and flowing supply of clothing and we will seek volunteers willing to organise this. It seems quite likely that we will no longer be able to supply toiletries to the centres as GSL are to forbid it. This is presumably because they are fearful of drugs being imported in the containers.

Legal advice continues to be a difficult area. We hoped that when Nic qualified through OISC we would be able to offer some limited legal advice but this has proved impracticable so we decided that we should concentrate on being well informed about who to turn to and directing detainees there. We need to get out into the community more and do more talks to schools, churches and colleges about our work. This should have a twofold result in providing more volunteers and better support for our work.

Finally we have been faced with the loss of Tanvier because we have not been able to raise the funds for his salary. Telling him that his contract was at an end was one of the most difficult things that I have had to do.

John Barrett, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2009

### **Dates for your diary**

**17<sup>th</sup> June, 7pm** – The next volunteer training session for all vols, subject and venue tbc.

#### ***Next group meetings***

**Reigate** – 29<sup>th</sup> April

**Horsham** – 3<sup>rd</sup> June

**Brighton** – 21<sup>st</sup> April

**Crawley** – 20<sup>th</sup> April

**Oxted** – 22<sup>nd</sup> April

#### ***And finally...***

A big welcome to our new volunteers, Lauren Pepperell (Brighton), Abigail Irving (Reigate), Claire Gilpin (Reigate), Taurai Zimbudzana (Brighton), Cathy Merry (Horsham), Cat Scott (Brighton) and Dan Haskell (Horsham). If you know anyone else who would like to volunteer, please let the office know.