

GDWG Newsletter Spring 2011

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

Happy Birthday GDWG!

Volunteers, friends, ex-detainees, and supporters filled Crawley United Reform Church on 1st March to celebrate 15 years of GDWG. Our thanks to the sub-committee : Mary Barrett, Felicity Dick, Christina Fitzsimmons, Rosemary Cordan, Ann Locke, Jennifer Tindle and Wendy Wilson for putting the event together and thanks to volunteers including Luz, Katie, Jo and Elaine who helped on the night. Thank you to everyone for coming!

With tabla music in the background, delicious food made by Brighton Voices in Exile, and balloons in the foreground, we met old friends and made new ones. Friends previously in detention travelled from across the country to see their visitors

again. Martin travelled from Germany to be reunited with Jim who visited him in Tinsley House when he was just fourteen years old, declaring in his speech 'Mr Jim did for me more good than he can ever imagine himself. Where ever I was, after being detained from Gatwick, I was always thinking of Mr Jim. He will always have a place deep in my heart!'



Sheila Hancock chats to guests at the event

Baroness Williams and Lord Dholakia shared the platform with Sheila Hancock who had 'stood up' Andrew Lloyd Webber and the premiere of *The Wizard of Oz* to comper the event. 'I was so ashamed to discover that we treat people like this' she declared with passion. The event launched the audiovisual slideshow 'Lives in Limbo' and a publication 'Common Ground' with reflections on fifteen years of GDWG.

Responses to the event were heart warming. One volunteer wrote 'I am grateful to be a part of such a great organisation... You feel slightly isolated when you visit... It is on evenings like last

night that it all comes together and you really realize how many people are helping and have been helped by GDWG'. Another wrote 'we enjoyed it immensely. It's really good to be with people of like minds and pure hearts... we've decided to take up drumming as a family!'

Thanks to GDWG from our special guests

We had been so happy to take part in the celebration – it was a really marvellous evening! It was a great pleasure to meet so many interesting, kind people. The work of the GDWG is really admirable – specially during this evening I was always thinking about what Martin told me about his time in prison here in Germany. Nobody takes care for the detainees in Hannover. I can hardly imagine how terrible one feels being in prisons without having done something bad or illegal. How lonely one must feel without any contact or help! For Martin and me it was a great honour to be your guest! Thanks again for all the efforts you and Anna made to help getting a visa for Martin. He was so happy to see you again – it was a great experience! Whatever we can do to support GDWG, even from far away, we will do with great pleasure!

Ruth, Oldenburg, Germany

Inside this issue:

Pease Pottage family pre-departure accomodation	2
New phone system at Tinsley	3
A voice from detention	4
The Orchid Project	5
Recipes from around the world	6
Volunteers' page	7
Film review	8

Age assessments in detention

I often sit opposite people I am visiting thinking how unfairly they have been treated. Having recently attended some age assessments as an independent observer this opinion has only been reinforced. Two out of three of the recent cases I attended were assessed as children. Both had fled from Afghanistan and witnessed the 'war on terror' in action and were now unlawfully detained in the UK.

The age assessment takes place in an interview room with two social workers, an independent observer and the young

person. The social workers ask a varied set of questions trying to establish a narrative history. They normally begin by trying to ascertain the family structure then move on to what life was like growing up in the family and, if applicable, any educational background. The role of the independent adult is to support the young person helping them to understand the process, ensuring the person understands what is being asked and letting the person know that he can have breaks. Depending on the time frame, I try to visit and make contact with the young person prior to the age assessment, so I can form some sort of

a relationship with them and also talk about what they should expect at the assessment.

The Refugee Council have offered to provide us with some training that will focus on the role of the independent observer and the policy and legal aspects surrounding age disputed cases. The training will be held on Thursday 12th May in Three Bridges. If you have not yet expressed an interest and would like to come along please let me know.

Hannah Jackson

Pease Pottage: Child detention by another name?

With the government's policy to stop detaining children in detention centres now in force, the UKBA have devised a new process by which to return families to their countries of origin. A four staged approach will be taken. Once families receive a refusal from the Home Office on their application, they will be offered an assisted return package. Upon failure to accept this offer, their case will be moved to the 'required return' stage. Families will be required to ensure that they make their own way from their residence to the port, and effect their own removal from the UK. If families fail to do this, they will enter the 'ensured return' stage.

This is where the 'pre-departure' accommodation, located at Pease Pottage, will be utilised to enforce return. The UKBA have stated that the accommodation will be used for

'families who need a more secure level of accommodation'. The UKBA have assured that families will be held for no longer than 72 hours, in line with the period of notice given for removal directions. However,



Crawley Forest School: About to be converted to a family pre-departure centre

where legal challenges against removal are made, length of stay may be extended to seven days.

Families will be accommodated in one of seven self-contained flats.

Barnado's (rather controversially) will be providing on-site welfare support, and G4S hold the security and management contract. GDWG have made attempts to contact both UKBA and Barnado's to determine whether we can provide any further support for families, but have not yet had any definitive answers. Work has begun on refurbishing the building, and the accommodation is due to open in July.

With the pre-departure accommodation and the opening of the new family suite at Tinsley House, it seems the coalition's pledge to end the detention of children in the UK was not quite what it first promised to be.

Louise Peim

News in brief

- We are preparing a bid to the Big Lottery, and as part of this we require feedback from both visitors and detainees. Please could all visitors remember to complete a volunteer feedback form after the detainee you are visiting has left. If you think your detainee would be willing and able to complete a detainee questionnaire, please let the office know.

- Nic met with our local MP, Henry Smith, along with Eiri Ohtani from the Detention Forum in March. We discussed developments at the Gatwick centres, and we invited him to be a member of a cross-party group of MPs who will meet twice a year to discuss the issue of detention in the UK.

- The new £1.3 million family centre at Tinsley House is due to open soon. This replaces the previous family unit at Tinsley. The new unit will apparently be used only for 'border cases', those families who are refused entry at the airport and are waiting for the next available flight out of the UK, and families who pose particular security problems, and for whom the Pease Pottage centre would not be suitable.

- The Archbishop of Canterbury recently visited Brook House, along with the Bishop of Horsham. Louise was invited to a lunch with him at the centre, before he was taken on a tour of the facilities.

New telephone system being trialled at Tinsley House

A controversial new telephone system is currently being trialled in Tinsley House, with the idea seemingly that it will be rolled out to all other removal centres should it prove to be successful. The new system works on a mobile phone network, with detainees at Tinsley being issued with a special mobile when they enter the centre. Detainees will not be allowed their own mobile phones or SIM cards, and will have these taken off them upon entry. SIM readers will allow detainees to copy their contacts from their own mobiles onto the new phones, but they will have a different number.

A telecoms company, GCC, have installed and are operating the system, and are charging detainees to make calls with the new phones. They claim that their rates are competitive when compared to the main pay-as-you-go tariffs of the major mobile operators. Apparently the system will also allow UKBA or G4S the ability to shut down the whole system in the event of a large-scale disturbance, as there have been allegations in the past that previous riots have been orchestrated using mobiles.

GDWG have a number of concerns about this new system, not least that it will not allow detainees any choice over call charges, as they will have no choice but to use the new mobiles at the rates specified. When compared to some mobile phone providers, especially those who specialise in international calls, the rates are significantly higher than what is on offer currently. We have spoken to a number of detainees who currently pay just 1p a minute to call internationally, but this could rise to as much as 58p a minute to certain countries. National rates are also significantly more than detainees would be able to get from other providers. This could impact heavily on the ability of detainees to contact their external support networks of family, friends, lawyers and other supporters, both here and in other countries.

There has been considerable discontent from within Tinsley to the new system, and we are trying to monitor this. Please let us know if your detainee tells you that this new system is impacting on their ability to communicate with the outside world.

Detainee pages

Life in detention: a voice from the inside

Your life is on hold when you are in detention. You don't know how long you will stay or when you will be released or if you will be sent back to your own country. Every day is the same: you are woken up at 8am: you have to sleep the time they want you to sleep and wake up the time they want you to be awake. There is not much to do. Some detainees play pool, some work around the building, some go for a smoke. The staff monitor everything you do and everywhere you go. Lunch is at 12.30pm; every day there is the same food – it is not good food and there is not much of it to eat. I really miss cooking and eating good food. Most of the time people stay in their rooms.

When you are sick and you ask to see the medical centre, you are told to put your name on a list. Sometimes it takes a long time to see a doctor. They talk to you harshly. They treat you like a child, telling you what to do or how to talk. Detention is a waiting game that will never end. You have different people with different cases; some can cope and some can't.

It costs £68,000 each year to keep me here, whereas, before I was detained, I had been paying my taxes and my National Insurance for years, supporting my family, being a good citizen. We are here because we are being used to protect the government's policies. But some detainees have been detained unlawfully in here, starting from age 14, in the name of British politics. Some detainees have good reason to stay here in the UK; some don't. If you do, you will be asked to provide documentary evidence, and the assumption will be that you are a liar and a criminal. However, if the UKBA want to remove you from this country, they will do it by any means possible. They will even threaten you with prosecution or worse. Sometimes they will not even ask for travel documents: they would even drop you in middle of the sea!

Sometimes you have to be escorted to a different place to sort out an issue or to be transferred to a different centre. When that happens, you are woken at 6am and taken to a holding area where you will have to stay for at least

two hours before the escorts arrive. When the escorts process you it can take another hour or so, then you are handed over to them for transport. But a simple one-hour drive from A to B becomes a long day of being taken from a police station somewhere to collect a person, then to another centre to drop that person off, then to another police station to collect another detainee and then finally to your own destination. So that can take three to six hours. Sometimes if you're lucky and the escorts are good you will be given water and a biscuit to eat, but if the escorts don't care you will get nothing all day.

That's why I always say they can lock the lock but they can't stop the clock. All of this is a life-changing experience that opens your eyes and makes you strong. It all makes a story, a history, that will always be there at the back of your mind. You can tell your story and you can learn from your story. By talking to people you can make changes. I know that this is true.

Gatwick Detainee, March 2011

The story of a pastor who fled Guinea because he contested FGM

My story begins in my home country Guinea. I was a pastor of the Nongo Baptist church from 2000 and involved with an NGO campaigning against and educating people about female genital mutilation, HIV and other sexual diseases.

What made me passionate to start campaigning against FGM was when I witnessed first hand a girl who bled to death after circumcision. They lay the girl on a bed of grass in a tractor trailer and tried to take her to the nearest healthcare which was 3 kilometres away down a badly potholed road. Sadly she died before she arrived because the bumpy road made her bleed even more. If you die in the village like she did then they just bury you with no record and the authorities will never know the cause of death. In any case the government of Guinea doesn't prosecute against FGM despite it being unlawful.

As part of my work I was appointed a group leader and sent with 3 of my colleagues to a village in the country side. There I set up a Christian fellowship whilst continuing my campaign work doing workshops with mothers. We campaigned for a year in the village and the wider area.

In the month of November during the dry season in 2006, the villagers were performing female circumcision in the bush. The age bracket for girls who are subject to this is between 3 and 14 years. They often brainwash the girls by say-

ing they will be dirty women if they don't have it or that nobody will marry them and they will not have children.

There is a custom that if girls don't want to be circumcised their elders can not force them. In all that day, 6 girls refused to be circumcised. They came to take refuge at my



house but I knew I couldn't look after them so I sent them to the chief.

Later I went to teach Baptism class in a compound in the village. Whilst I was teaching a friend came to the compound and told me that my house was on fire. It transpired that some youths from the village as well as the parents of the girls who had sought refuge in my house were responsible. They were so angry that I was campaigning against FGM and that their girls had refused to undergo it, that when they came to my home and found I was not there they set it alight and dragged my family away.

My friend was really worried for my safety and urged me to make my way out of the village saying someone would kill me if I didn't. That night I escaped to a nearby village just 3km

away. My friend also helped my family out of the village. It was clear I couldn't go back. I then fled to Conakry - the capital of Guinea - where I sorted out all my travel documents and flew to the UK in December 2006 for my safety.

After I arrived in the UK I decided to contact the pastor back in Guinea to discuss potentially returning home. He said that when I flew to the UK my family had travelled to Conakry, where they thought they would be safe, but were soon tracked down by the angry people from the village and were attacked. This is evidenced by photographs and a police report. The attackers said they would be back. The pastor explained that if I returned to my country my life would still be at risk.

When I related my story to the Home Office in the UK, I was granted temporary admission. Then in 2007 my case was refused. The Home Office accepted my story as truthful, but my case was dismissed on the grounds that they said I could relocate to another city in Guinea where I would not be recognised. My case is still pending.

Ex-Gatwick detainee

Orchid Project is a new, single issue NGO working for a worldwide end to female genital cutting. We will work with grassroots delivery partners around the world who enable communities to make their own decision to end the practice. We communicate this message of hope and that an end of FGC is possible, and we advocate at a high level for change around the world.

www.orchidproject.org

Recipes from around the world

A big thankyou to the two Brook House detainees who supplied these recipes to their visitors

EKITOBERO RECIPE (Ekitobero means something along the lines of 'stew' in Uganda)

INGREDIENTS

A whole chicken cut it into pieces to your desired size and wash it clean.

cooking oil - sunflower or other, onions, tomatoes, green pepper,

METHOD

Put five tea spoonful of cooking oil and heat it for about two or three minutes

Now at this point use a spoon or your hands to put pieces of chicken and be very careful because the cooking oil has been heated. As you put chicken it splashes make



sure it doesn't burn your face or fingers.

Now after putting all pieces leave it about two minutes and start using a big spoon to change it upside down again and again leave it for couples minutes

Then put tomatoes and mix them until they get dissolved into the chicken then put carry powder and mix it properly, yes at this point your water should be ready with you in cup or in anything.

After putting water put salt. You can put on and half tea spoon of salt depending on your desired taste and cover it and leave it for about (15 or 20 minutes) to get cooked properly but you can always check to see if it's ready or not because sometimes if you forget to check it may run out of water before it gets ready so it's good to check if necessary and add some water but if it's unnecessary then leave it to be cooked properly and that's all enjoy your meal.

Jollof Rice - recipe from Gambia

Ingredients

(quantities required are whatever suits you and your tastes)

Chicken
Rice
Water
Onion
Chilli powder
Black pepper
Tomato puree
Oil

Mixed vegetables - potatoes, cabbage or whatever you have available

Maggi (Oxo) cube



Method

1. Prepare chicken by cutting into strips and coating in chilli powder and all purpose seasoning.

2. Pour oil into pan and heat till hot. Add strips of chicken and seal in the hot oil. Chop onion (1 or 2) and put some black pepper and tomato puree mixed with the onions - add to pan.
3. Cook for a maximum of 10 minutes.
4. Add water and cook for half an hour.
5. Let the water boil with the meat until when the water reduces and put salt and maggi cubes.
6. Add rice and cook for 15 or 20 minutes till the rice is cooked.
7. Serve!

Meet Mary Barrett.....



Sheila Hancock commented on the 'wonderful name' of Brighton Voices in Exile (BVIE) at our GDWG celebration in March. Many visitors and friends commented on the delicious food. And one of the people busy serving food prepared by members of BVIE was Mary Barrett, Chair of Trustees of BVIE and a visitor with GDWG for fourteen years.

Mary describes the wide range of activities undertaken by BVIE – all from the basement of the Priest's House, St Mary Magdalen's Church in Brighton. The catering project in

the converted laundry gives members of the group work experience and contributes to the income of BVIE. There are plans to offer cookery lessons to people who benefit from the weekly food parcels distributed by BVIE on behalf of the Red Cross. The group offers destitution support, in depth casework, a monthly women's group and even the occasional percussion workshop!

It is a sense of justice that motivates Mary's work for both BVIE and GDWG. Experiences of laughter and smiles in the visits rooms at Brook House and Tinsley House – seeing people find a glimmer of hope in their lives - are something Mary finds tremendously affirming. Mary says she feels she has gained more from visits than she has given.

From a background as a BBC radio

Volunteers pages

studio manager specialising in radio drama, working on technical production and sound engineering for actors such as Alec Guinness and Robert Powell, and producing sound effects 'popping champagne corks and clashing swords', Mary later moved to the sphere of further education and was manager of post 19 education at Sussex Downs College. This is all a long way from GDWG visits but Mary reflects that her strong Catholic faith underpins every aspect of her life. And when she isn't working for BVIE and GDWG? Her family, the grandchildren, her interests in music and theatre, and gardening – growing vegetables – are her passions.

To find out more about BVIE or to book their excellent catering please follow the link to www.brightonvoicesinexile.org

By Anna Pincus

Reflections on visiting

By Nic Oestreicher

Last week I sat opposite a man from Sudan for the first time, on the blue chairs in the Brook House visits room. I'd visited four other detainees before Ali, and had 'successfully' negotiated those potentially difficult first meetings. But this time was different. As I watched him walk in I knew immediately that I had never met a person with so much suffering in their mind and body, and this bought with it an instant of panic. How could I help? How could I possibly make a difference? I knew he had been tortured, and other

'facts' about his life. I began to think of which organisations could help before he'd even sat down. And then we shook hands, and all thoughts fled, overridden by a powerful sense of helplessness. There is nothing to do in the visits room. You can't take anything in; it's just you, the other person and a tiny coffee table between you. All I could do was acknowledge my own helplessness. I think that when you are faced with such huge suffering, all strategies fall apart. There's a realization that there is, at this moment, *nothing* you can 'do'. And you're left with the only thing that you *can* give, which is love. The kind of love which can tolerate pain without looking away, which can give

another's suffering some space rather than subtly denying it by offering advice, sympathy, even hope. All of those things are humane and important responses, but sometimes I think suffering is crying out simply for the silent witness of another human being. Over the last 6 months volunteering with GDWG I have heard many stories, learned the ropes of the detention system and found some small ways of helping. But through that single meeting I feel I understand better the nature of this role and what is being asked of me, which is to be willing to learn real compassion.

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Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group is a registered charity, set up in 1995 to offer friendship and support to asylum seekers and other immigration detainees held in detention at Gatwick Airport.

Dates for your diary

Next area group meetings:

- Brighton: May 5th
- Crawley: May 4th
- Horsham: May 4th
- Oxted: June 14th
- Reigate: May 5th

April 19th: Detained Lives roadshow,
Community Base, Brighton

Film Review: Getting Out

'If I was born gay, why was I born in Africa?'

I recently went to the London screening of *Getting Out*, a 60 minute documentary about lesbian, gay and transsexual asylum-seekers. The film focused on two asylum seekers, Florence and John, who both fled Uganda and came to the UK to claim asylum. It showed why they had to leave Uganda and their battle to be given refugee status in the UK.

One of the issues touched on in the film was just how crucial first asylum interviews are, and how the first assessment is paramount to the individual's credibility. One scene showed a young female asylum seeker queuing up for months to try and claim asylum in South Africa, standing in a queue day after day, living on the streets and waiting to see someone. When she finally did get the opportunity to talk to an immigration officer she had to talk about her sexuality having never confided in anyone before. She had fled a neighbouring country and come to South Africa because people had grown suspicious of her because she wasn't married. The local police, the villagers, everyone had turned against her and she knew she had to leave. In

her country of origin she had learnt never to express herself and talk about her feelings to ensure her own safety, but now in a foreign country and very much alone she was interrogated and asked questions she had never even considered, and didn't have the answers to. The officials were using terms to define her that she didn't understand. She was refused asylum.



The notion of identity and stereotypes was prominent throughout the film. There were interviews in various sub-Saharan African countries that showed how many Africans view homosexuality as being a 'foreign and western concept'. Interviewees in the film objected to being told that their homophobic attitudes were wrong especially when many of their beliefs are based on religious doctrine that was originally introduced through colonialism and contact

with the west. It was mentioned in the Q&A afterwards that the international community is considering withholding international aid unless certain countries decriminalise homosexuality. The two main people featured in the film, John and Florence were at the screening and they both strongly objected to the idea and said it would result in individuals or gay activists in these countries being punished. Trying to engage and influence people's attitudes is a hugely complex area. In 2006 South Africa introduced same sex marriages. However this doesn't change people's mindsets, as every month in Cape Town there are roughly ten rapes on lesbians, known as 'corrective rape'.

It made me think about all the homosexual asylum seekers that have been refused asylum in the UK on the grounds that they can return to their country of origin and behave 'discreetly' to avoid persecution. The Home Office is unable to state how many people were refused asylum on these grounds prior to a recent ruling that has recognised gay asylum seekers as being in need of protection.

Hannah Jackson