

Foreword

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This fine account introduces the reader to a special group of children and young people who have experienced more challenges in their short lives than most individuals could expect to face in a series of lifetimes. These are the young persons who migrate to Australia as refugees, or humanitarian immigrants, and who eventually become permanent members and citizens of this great country. The book is a collection of essays by individuals – many of them experts in their field – who are committed to devising laws, systems and processes that will maximise the potential and chances of these young people. I was privileged to meet many of the authors at a conference at the University of Sydney which had attracted a number of very distinguished individuals. Among them were Mr Richard Towle, Regional Representative for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and Professor Yanghee Lee, Vice Chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

I consider that I had an idyllic childhood, like many Australian young people. I was born in the Riverina district of New South Wales, a lush part of the State, famous for its sheep. I was raised amongst a fine community of Aboriginal people, the Wiradjuri, who were my friends at school and who taught me a great deal about poverty and disadvantage. I learned also from their immense courage, of the ways in which they were able, with the help of a good society, to transcend that disadvantage.

It was through my schooling later in Sydney that I came to understand the power of education, and the world of achievement that opens for young persons who are given access to all that our society has to offer. I trained as a doctor and psychiatrist but was also inspired by the gift of violin lessons and the joy of participating in student orchestras. However, the greatest privilege beyond family was that of working with young people from a refugee background. Like the authors of this book, I also can relate to how a little can go a long way when a disadvantaged child is given encouragement and opportunity.

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What had happened after the Vietnam War, as some may remember, is that many Australians felt deeply for the plight of the people of Indochina, and concerned for their wellbeing, for their future. Many of our young soldiers returned to Vietnam immediately after the war to help repair and regenerate areas where damage had been done. In Australia, we had accepted a number of the refugee children, who were living in the outer suburbs of our major cities. At the height of the influx of refugees after the South East Asian conflict, there were close to 30,000 young people who were in Australia without responsible adults in their lives. A wonderful group of committed people in the community stepped up to help these children. Initially, they were teachers from the public schools in Sydney, particularly those schools that were close to the Villawood refugee and immigrant centre. They immediately made representations to take those children out of the immigration centre, at least daily, so that they could attend school at places like Chester Hill and other districts with significant multicultural families, so that those children did not feel conspicuously different.

One of the major private boys' schools felt that these children needed an opportunity to feel and see a positive side of life. So they invited the children out on weekends, from Friday nights through to Sunday afternoons and then also during the school holidays. At that stage, I became involved, which was a unique privilege.

At the time, I was indeed fortunate to have the role of director of an adolescent unit situated in a magnificent mansion that had been built by a philanthropist in the early part of the 19th century; an immigrant from Scotland called Thomas Walker. He had built this fine complex surrounded by beautiful grounds to be used as a convalescent home, so that 'the people of Sydney could be nursed back to health within its walls', free of charge. Amongst the many eminent but impoverished citizens who had been 'nursed back to health within its walls' was one of Australia's greatest writers, Henry Lawson.

One could not help but respond to these beautiful refugee children. In regard to the wisdom of our conservative government at the time, they not only did not hesitate to take those children, but they asked the wider section of society to respond also. The Prime Minister of Australia during that period was Malcolm Fraser. The Presbyterian organisation Burnside Homes said, 'We do not want to separate these children from one another; we do not consider that they should be separated'. The children were classified as 'detached,

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unattached'. They were not designated as 'orphans', because it was not known whether their parents were deceased or still alive. This was especially so in the case of the young ones who had fled Cambodia, where the Khmer Rouge had systematically separated families and children, especially the young men, taking them to different parts of the country. Those who were able to come to Australia were dealing with the grief and trauma of not knowing whether their siblings, their parents, were alive. This was the situation to which the government and the community had to respond. An integrated humanitarian journey of hope and excitement was to follow.

The various churches and some charities became involved; also the public schools and the private schools became involved. There was one directive: the children were not to be separated and adopted into disparate families. They were not to lose their language, nor their culture. They were to be kept together in the first instance with house parents of like ethnicity and language. And this was surely wisdom applied in a most humanitarian manner.

Thus the program brought together individuals from the caring agencies and charities, the public schools and private schools. The workers included child psychiatrists working in hospitals and community health services such as myself. The programs were designed to empower these young people. Indeed, so many of those young people went on to complete their studies and fulfil their fine potential.

Today the issue of children and young people displaced by war and violence is as serious as at any time in human history. The challenges facing government are enormous. As this book reminds us, Australians have a great capacity to show compassion and to reach out to persons in need. We have only to look around to see how the achievements of the young refugees with whom we worked so many years ago have enriched this country. I am heartened to see that the spirit of compassion and intelligent endeavour is still alive amongst our settlement workers and thinkers. I am equally delighted to read of the resilience and enthusiasm of the next generation of young persons to whom Australians are reaching out.

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