

Barbara Lloyd tells her story of providing asylum for Ali and Hadi,

two Hazara Afghani boys.

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Last year I was angry about the injustice of our media and our politicians. Were the asylum seekers arriving by boat a vast horde of Muslims with an agenda to change our nation? Or were their lives and futures so dire that they chose a dangerous journey and self-exile in a foreign land? Could we as Australians be manipulated to become blind to structural injustices as happened to the German Christians during World War II?

My reflections in scripture took me to Jesus and his actions and words about the Samaritans, at a time when "...Jews do not associate with Samaritans"? (John 4:9) It was a Samaritan who was a good neighbor; a Samaritan was the only one of the ten healed lepers who returned to praise God; and it was a Samaritan woman who Jesus declared himself to and through whom many came to faith.

At this time I heard Deborah Storie and Jessie Taylor speaking at the Christians for Biblical Equality International Conference in Melbourne. Deborah had worked in Afghanistan and spoke of the realities of life for women of the minority Shi'a faith. Jessie shared some personal stories from Hazara people who had used people smugglers to come to Australia. She told of families who couldn't afford the journey but could borrow enough from money lenders to send a son to safety. And she told us how she had welcomed one such fifteen year old into her own home. I thought "I could do that!" Conversations with my children (only one still at home) gave me the assurance to act.

In August 2010 I became "Aunty" to two Hazara Afghani boys. I have been blessed by the presence of Ali (16) and Hadi (17) in my home and life. They have both been assessed in Australia as refugees (as have 96% of Afghani boat arrivals.) I could not afford to support them myself but the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) pays their board. The fact that they are Muslim believers means that they are easier house guests than some teenagers: they do not drink, date or use drugs. They had already been taking responsibility for themselves in a group living setting and have continued to do their own laundry and like to cook sometimes. Apart from a few adjustments to cooking and shopping (to meet Halal requirements) having the boys with me is straightforward. DHS continues in the role of "guardian" until the boys reach adulthood.

Ali's family left Afghanistan to take refuge from the Taliban in Pakistan but they are still exposed to violence from Sunni Muslim extremists. They cannot move freely so they are unable to register as refugees. Ali's older brothers went to buy bread together and disappeared in Pakistan when they were 14 and 15. This is why he was sent to safety. Hadi's family are still in Afghanistan and their home village remains a dangerous place.

The boys ring their families each week, and hope that their split family visas will be approved. They worry about delays, about their families' security, and about pressure from money lenders to repay the debts that were incurred in getting them to safety.

Ali and Hadi have helped me to realize how presumptuous I had been in accepting a stereotype of what it means to be Muslim. They have also been quick to admit that they had accepted a stereotype of western Christians taught to them by people who had never known any Christians.

It is good to hear the boys laughing together with friends and talking about their future. They are feeling more at home each day, and my son wrote on his Facebook status yesterday "Came home to music blaring, an empty ice cream tub on the table, and the boys asleep on the couch. Could be brothers!"

There are currently 1025 children living in detention, and many are teenagers who are here without relatives. Finding community places will be a challenge. If you would like to help, and live in Victoria, contact the Refugee Minor Program, run by DHS from their Footscray and Dandenong offices. In NSW, contact Jesuit Refugee Services , and in Queensland, Anglicare. For other places, try the Red Cross, which oversees the program nationally, Anglicare or St. Vincent de Paul.

For further information about refugee minors in Australia, see

www.abc.net.au/news/events/castaway-kids/