

# AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

Volume 10, Issue 3 - October 2006

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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## Peace draws crowds

Over 800 people flocked to Sydney's Bahá'í House of Worship on Sunday 24 September to attend a special service marking the International Day of Peace.

The House of Worship, on Sydney's northern beaches, was filled beyond capacity for the service, which comprised readings from the scriptures of the great world religions and performance by the popular Bahá'í Temple choir.

Dr Stella Cornelius AO OBE, one of the "Elders" of the peace movement in Australia, led a dialogue on peace in the Information Centre prior to the service.

Founder of the Conflict Resolution Network, Dr Cornelius has been widely recognised for her work for peace in Australia and abroad. She was one of 1000 women worldwide proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

## Peace is the way

The scene for the day was set with a reading of the message of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, for the International Day of Peace. Mr Annan called on all people to "pledge to do more, wherever we can make a difference, to bring about lasting peace".

While there are fewer wars today than in past decades, he said, there are still far too many. "Every casualty of conflict is a failure, which reminds us how much more there is to do".

Opening the dialogue, Dr Cornelius invited participants to share their vision of what the process of building a world of peace would look like, quoting the statement of Gandhi that "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way".

Reflecting on some of the positive developments since her own youth, she observed that great progress had been made towards gender equality and the acceptance of multiculturalism.

Commenting on the need for "good news" stories to appear in the media, Dr Cornelius observed that an achievement that gave her great pleasure was the establishment of the Media Peace Awards, which honour the greatest contribution



in the media to the resolution of conflict and the building of a peaceful society. The awards have been presented annually since 1978.

On the potential role for religion, Dr Cornelius commented, "I think religion can be a magnificent tool. It can also be a dreadful weapon. But that is the abuse of religion, it is not the original heart intent of the religion".

Speaking on the role of the United Nations, Dr Cornelius contrasted the vast sums that member states expend on their own military forces with the modest amounts dedicated to peace-keeping. "Any household would say, let's reverse that", she concluded.

Dr Cornelius described coming to the Bahá'í House of Worship as "a little like coming home", recalling that the Bahá'í community had been among the earliest supporters of the Conflict Resolution Network which it was formed in the early 1970s.

She invited those present to continue the dialogue on peace into the long distant future, and to consider themselves as "peace builders".

## MPs speak out for minorities in Iran



*Bahá'ís in the electorate of Mayo met with Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to thank him for the support provided by the Australian Government and Parliament in speaking out about the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran*

For the second time this year, federal members of Parliament from both sides of politics have spoken out about the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

On 4 September, the House of Representatives gave bi-partisan support to a resolution supporting the rights of Bahá'ís and other religious minorities.

In moving the resolution, Bruce Baird MP noted that: "There is particular discrimination against Bahá'ís, and that discrimination is a particularly alarming example of the attitude towards minorities in Iran".

The resolution noted the serious discrimination that exists in Iran towards Bahá'ís, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Sabian Mandaeans. It called on Iran to recognise the legitimate rights of minorities, involving their access to university training and enrolment in professions, and requested continued dialogue with Iran by the UN Human Rights Council.

Speaking in support of the resolution, Stuart Henry MP commented that for Australians, "the concept of persecution for practising a faith that promotes peace, tolerance and harmony is a

foreign concept. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and many people practising the Bahá'í Faith in Iran have undergone torture, abuse and humiliation, simply because they choose to practise this faith that they believe in".

"Fears for the safety and welfare of Bahá'ís in Iran are real and well-founded", added Kirsten Livermore MP. "They are fears shared by governments and human rights agencies around the world".

Other members who spoke in support of the resolution were Laurie Ferguson, Judi Moylan, and Maria Vamvakinou.

### Developments welcomed with caution

Late in September, the Australian Bahá'í community received the news that for the first time in decades, more than 300 Bahá'í students in Iran have been admitted to universities.

"We welcome these developments, and take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the Australian government, universities, nongovernmental organizations, academics and students for their help in drawing international attention to the denial of the right to higher education for Bahá'ís in Iran", said Bahá'í spokesperson, Tessa Scrine.

"It is too early in the process, however, to be fully confident that the Bahá'í students' access to education will be on a par with their fellow Iranians", she cautioned.

"There remain many milestones and more time to pass before such progress can be said to have been secured".



*Professor Fariborz Moshirian with local Bahá'ís Pym Trueman and Sue Bushnell at the celebrations in Kingborough*

## Kingborough celebrates anniversary

Members of the Bahá'í community of Kingborough, in Tasmania, celebrated the 20th anniversary of their Local Spiritual Assembly in August.

The Local Spiritual Assembly is an elected body that looks after the affairs of the Bahá'í community. An Assembly is elected in any locality where nine or more adult Bahá'ís reside. While the Bahá'í Faith has been present in Tasmania since the 1920s, the Kingborough Assembly, south of Hobart, was first formed in August 1986.

Attended by more than 100 people, the celebrations were opened with a welcome to country by Aboriginal Elder, Eva Richardson. Professor Fariborz Moshirian, from Sydney, was the guest speaker.

Local Bahá'í Sue Bushnell presented a history of Kingborough Bahá'ís, who have been actively involved in community work including inter-faith dialogue and worship, reconciliation and cultural harmony, education of children and adults, and the advancement of women.

# Musicians shine



*Adelaide musician Felix Kerry*

Two young Bahá'í musicians have recently received awards for their work in very diverse fields.

Adelaide Bahá'í singer/songwriter, Felix Kerry, was named the 2006 South Australian NAIDOC Artist of the Year in July, in recognition of his work with Aboriginal communities in the performing arts field.

Over the past two years, Mr Kerry, aged 26, has spearheaded a series of arts workshops for indigenous youth in regional areas of South Australia. Conducted during the school holidays, the workshops aim to build self-esteem by encouraging self-expression through music, painting, drama and film. They also draw on Aboriginal history and stories to inspire the participants to view their culture as a source of pride.

"Drama and music are great avenues to help build up self-esteem among Aboriginal kids", said Mr Kerry.

"I think it's important to share your experience and give teenagers some motivation to reach their potential".

"Winning this award has been a huge honour for me and I hope it gives other Aboriginal musicians some encouragement to follow their passion", he said.

Born in Thursday Island to a Papua New Guinean father and a mother of Torres Strait Island and Aboriginal heritage, Mr Kerry became a member of the Bahá'í community in Thursday Island before moving to Perth in his late teens to join the Bahá'í-inspired youth performing arts company, Artworks.

Having overcome a childhood scarred by alcohol-fuelled violence and abuse, he is now in his second year of an Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Studies in Music at the University of Adelaide, as well as being a regular performer in

Adelaide with his band, The Strange Breed.

Other recent work includes writing the 50-minute musical score for the award-winning Crossing Paths dance spectacular that was performed at the 2006 Adelaide Fringe Festival.

## Music "a ladder for the soul"

Melbourne pianist Amir Farid, aged 25, recently won the Australian National Piano Award, described as our top national piano competition.

Mr Farid played a gruelling week of elimination rounds to be selected as one of the three finalists, and eventual winner, in the prestigious competition. The grand final was broadcast live throughout Australia on ABC Classic FM.

Asked about how his faith influences him as a musician, Mr Farid said "I have always believed that music is the most effective means for a human being to get in touch with their spirit".

The Bahá'í scriptures describe music as "a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high".

"This quotation provides me with the inspiration to seek ways in which I can channel this power to benefit my audiences", said Mr Farid.

Well known to Melbourne classical music audiences, Mr Farid is also pianist of the youthful Benaud Trio (playfully named after the former cricketer), which won the trio section of the 2005 Australian Chamber Music Competition. Earlier this year, the trio completed a residency at the Banff Centre in Canada.

Mr Farid's parents left Iran in 1979 against the backdrop of the Islamic revolution. His father, a well-known actor in his homeland, realised that he would no longer be able to obtain work, and may even become a target of persecution. The family settled in Australia in 1985.



*Pianist Amir Farid*



Children performed the song "I think you're wonderful" for their teachers at the annual Teacher Appreciation Night hosted by the Bahá'í community of Banyule, Melbourne, on 6 October

## Why we appreciate teachers

Every October, in all parts of Australia, Bahá'ís take time to express their appreciation to teachers.

Coinciding with World Teacher's Day, these efforts range from offering simple gifts of flowers and home-made thank-you cards, to providing morning tea for staff at a local school, to hosting formal dinners. At least 75 such activities took place around Australia in 2005.

No matter how simple or complex the event, the underlying spirit is the same: to convey recognition and appreciation to people whose work is of fundamental importance to the progress of our society.

The Bahá'í Faith places great importance on education. The Bahá'í Writings describe the promotion of education as "the primary, the most urgent requirement ... it is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward".

Accordingly, the role of teachers in society is of primary importance. In the Bahá'í Writings, the education and training of children is described as "among the most meritorious acts of humankind" and "a service than which none is greater".

Despite the best efforts of educational authorities and others, however, the value of teaching as a profession has declined unchecked around the world, and the moral authority of teachers is eroding. This pattern must be addressed and reversed.

Naturally, the provision of appropriate material compensation to teachers is one means by which our society expresses its recognition of the importance of their role. The allocation of adequate resources and training is also very important. But this is not, in itself, enough.

The Bahá'í community believes that a broad-based community education program is essential to restore teaching to its rightful status. This program should take place at the grass-roots and reach out to all parts of society - extending beyond school communities to corporate and other sectors.

For our part, children enrolled in Bahá'í education classes are taught about the important role of teachers, and encouraged to show appreciation to them.

The Bahá'í community has found that teacher appreciation activities make all of us - children, parents, and other community members - reflect on the important role that teachers have played in our own lives.



Mehrzad Mumtahan looks on as student Gandaki Mununggiritj takes over filming

## Filmmaker shares his skills

Bahá'í filmmaker Mehrzad Mumtahan visited Eastern Arnhem Land in May to teach filmmaking to Aboriginal teenagers in Yirrkala, near Nhulunbuy NT.

Initiated by Steve Johns, the local Drug and Alcohol Prevention Officer, and sponsored by the Nhulunbuy Rotary Club, the purpose of the visit was to involve young Yolngu people in producing a video on alcohol awareness for the community.

Following various workshops at which year 9 and 10 students from the local high school were trained in the basic skills of filmmaking, the young people helped produce a 6-minute music video in which they starred.

"The kids had a great time and Mehrzad was blown away with their ability to learn", commented Mr Johns.

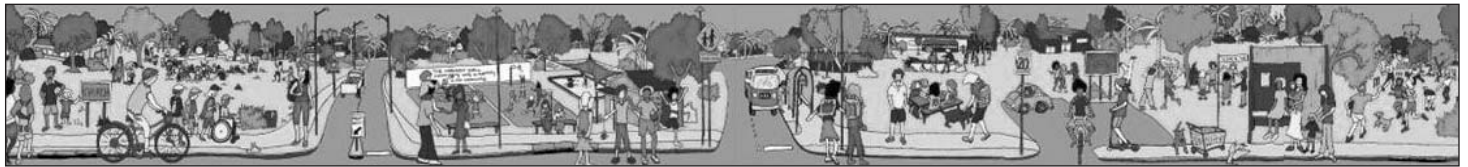
"The video aims to show these students as role models to others in the community who don't go to school, and to represent them as a group of happy, healthy and talented young people who don't use alcohol or drugs and are proud of their Aboriginality", said Mr Mumtahan.

A second video on alcohol abuse, written and performed by local teenagers, is currently being made.

Mr Mumtahan is also the CEO and artistic director of the Bahá'í-inspired Harmony Film Festival, which will hold its third annual opening night in Sydney on 4 November.

The festival was founded to foster artistic expression at the grass roots, and to promote peace and harmony through the medium of film. Further information on the film festival can be found online at [www.harmonyfilmfest.com](http://www.harmonyfilmfest.com).

## Harmony Wall takes shape



Students from Palmerston High School in Darwin, together with local youth groups, have been busy painting a 35-metre long mural to reflect the harmony and diversity of life in Palmerston.

Dubbed the "Harmony Wall", it is located in the netball/tennis courts opposite Palmerston High School. The mural design was inspired by year nine art students, who participated in a series of workshops conducted by the project coordinator, Joseph Gordon. It reflects the residents of Palmerston in their day-to-day activities - riding bikes, walking dogs, flying kites, playing tennis and netball - and also incorporates local landmarks.

"The project aims to celebrate diversity, to promote cross-cultural coordination and

community participation, and to raise awareness of the various faiths, cultures and traditions in Palmerston", explained Mr Gordon. An engineer by profession, he is a member of the Bahá'í community of Palmerston and the active facilitator of the local Bahá'í youth group, members of which have assisted in painting the mural.

"The Harmony Wall provides a creative outlet for Palmerston kids. At the same time, they are gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural diversity and social history of their community", he said.

The mural painting was completed in October, with enthusiastic participants devoting hours of their school holidays to the task.

*The design for the Harmony Wall mural*

*Final touch-ups as the mural nears completion*



## Kids inspired at Cultural Fest

At Townsville's recent Cultural Fest - an annual event that has grown to become North Queensland's most popular festival - young members of the local Bahá'í community organised the Kids Korner tent, providing fun and inspiring activities for children aged between 2 and 15 years.

The Cultural Fest is a major community event in far north Queensland, celebrating the diversity of cultures in the north and their commitment to unity. This year a crowd of 80,000 (over half the population of the greater Townsville area) enjoyed three days of entertainment, food and cultural activities.

Thousands of children and their parents took part in the Kids Korner festivities, which ranged from making friendship bands to Aboriginal dot painting, arts and crafts, games and face painting.

"We decided to base all the activities, games and lessons on the virtues that are common to all the world's religions", said Sepeedeh Daliri, one of about 15 young volunteers who organised and ran the program.

"Our aim was to create a three-day program that was not only entertaining, but also developed spiritual values, raised cultural awareness, and promoted the embrace of diversity", she said.

Cultural Fest has been running annually for 12 years, and the Kids Korner has been organised and run by the Bahá'í community throughout this time.

*Face painting in progress at the Cultural Fest*



# Conflict threatens Bahá'í World Centre



*Sydney's Fanayan family on their pilgrimage, together with Dr Peter Khan, a member of the Universal House of Justice*

Dozens of Australian Bahá'í volunteer workers and pilgrims were inadvertently caught up in the recent outbreak of violence on the border between Israel and Lebanon.

The Bahá'í World Centre, which contains sacred places of pilgrimage as well as the administrative headquarters for the worldwide Bahá'í community, is located in Haifa, Israel - a city which received a heavy bombardment of rockets during the month-long conflict in July and August.

While the attacks saw all Australian Bahá'ís anxiously scanning media reports for references to their holy places, Bahá'í pilgrims and volunteers in Haifa were particularly affected.

## Australians in Haifa

Reza and Tahareh Khanlari had not long embarked on a 30-month term of voluntary service at the Bahá'í World Centre when the conflict broke out.

In a letter to their home community of Tamworth, published in the Northern Daily Leader in August, the couple thanked the many friends and acquaintances who had contacted them to ask about their safety.

"For many the sounds of war are unfamiliar and quite scary", said Mr Khanlari.

"Unfortunately I have had my fair share of first hand experience of war and so I am very calm about this crisis and hope and pray that it will be over soon".

Despite the sounding of loud air raid sirens

"almost every day and many times per day", the close proximity of bomb shelters in their apartment building and workplaces helped them to feel safe, he said.

While acknowledging that the dust and smoke of war made them "miss the clear blue skies and clean air of Tamworth", the couple were committed to continuing their term of service.

"For us this is a dream come true, to work and serve our Faith in the Holy Land", Mr Khanlari said.

"This ancient land is holy for the Jews, Christians, Muslims and Bahá'ís and we feel that we are truly blessed to be here".

Similar sentiments were expressed by Fay Fanayan, a Sydney Bahá'í who arrived in Haifa for a pilgrimage with her family shortly before the rockets began to fall.

"It was frightening at the beginning, especially for the children", said Mrs Fanayan, who had travelled with her husband, Hossein, and daughters Sarah (12 years) and Emma (9).

The Fanayan family were part of a group of 172 pilgrims from 16 countries who were in Haifa at the time of the attacks. While their pilgrimage program was severely truncated, they were eventually able to reach the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh at Bahji, the holiest spot on earth for Bahá'ís, travelling under the cover of darkness at midnight on the final night of their visit.

"Despite the difficulties, we were looked after unbelievably well", said Mrs Fanayan.

"I had faith that we would be protected. We and the other pilgrims just kept praying for world peace, even as the rockets were falling", she said.

"It was certainly a unique pilgrimage that we will never forget".

Following the ceasefire, the world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, shared the welcome news that no damage had been incurred by the holy places, and the Bahá'ís in Haifa remained in safety.

"Our hearts reach out to the innocent victims on both sides of the fiery conflict", the Universal House of Justice wrote in a letter addressed to the Bahá'ís of the world.

"Their relief from grief is the object of our ardent prayers".

## Historical origins

The location of the Bahá'í World Centre dates back to the exile of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, to the prison city of Akka in 1868. Akka is located a short distance across the bay from Haifa.

Bahá'u'lláh was exiled from His native Persia (Iran) in 1852. Held as a prisoner in Akka by the Ottoman Turks, He passed away in 1892 and was interred at Bahji, an estate just north of Akka. His shrine, set amidst beautiful gardens, is the holiest place on earth for Bahá'ís, which they are obliged to visit on pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime.

It was Bahá'u'lláh who instructed that the spiritual and administrative centre of the Bahá'í Faith be permanently fixed in the Haifa/Akka area. He also designated the place of interment for the remains of His forerunner, the Báb, on Mt Carmel in Haifa. Today the Shrine of the Bab is a majestic building with a golden dome overlooking the bay of Haifa, around which the gardens and buildings of the Bahá'í World Centre have been gradually constructed.

The Bahá'í World Centre has about 700 staff from approximately 80 different countries, who volunteer to serve for varying periods of time. Every two weeks from October through to July, more than 200 Bahá'ís from around the world arrive in Haifa to participate in the nine-day pilgrimage. Since the number of pilgrims is strictly limited, many have waited more than five years for their turn to come.

## Prayers for peace

While the conflict was taking place overseas, in Australia the National Bahá'í Youth Committee joined together with the Australasian Union of Jewish Students, the Muslim Students Association



*The Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel in Haifa*

of Australia and the Australian Catholic Students Association to call for prayer for peace in the Middle East.

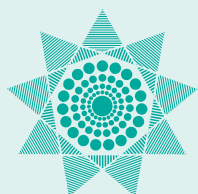
Collectively representing thousands of students across Australia, the four groups came together in July to announce a united national prayer chain for peace. In a joint statement, they expressed the hope "that we may encounter one another in harmony, having deep concern for the victims of violence, and for all those who suffer".

"We hope that all may be inspired by the wisdom of peace, the strength of justice and the joy of fellowship", the statement said.

"Setting aside our differences to unite together is vital", observed Faya Hayati, the chairperson of the National Bahá'í Youth Committee. "Unity is the starting point for solving the world's problems".



*Elder Uncle Max Eulo prepares to conduct a smoking ceremony to open a 24-hour peace vigil at midnight on 21 September. Held in Victoria Park, Sydney to mark the International Day of Peace, the vigil incorporated prayer and meditation from a wide range of faiths and peace organisations, including the Bahá'í community of Sydney.*



*is a newsletter published by the Australian Bahá'í community.*

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## Human rights under threat in Egypt

The Egyptian government's policy of requiring citizens to state their affiliation with one of three officially recognised religions on their national ID cards has received considerable attention in recent months, sparked by the case of an Egyptian Bahá'í couple seeking not to have their religion falsely identified on government documents.

Media throughout the Arab world have reported extensively on the case, which came to attention in April when an administrative court ruled in favour of the couple, ordering the government to issue ID cards and birth certificates that correctly state their professed religion as members of the Bahá'í Faith.

Under pressure from conservative elements of Egyptian society, the government has appealed the decision to the Supreme Administrative Court, defending its policy of requiring all citizens to state affiliation with either Islam, Christianity or Judaism.

Possession of an ID card is a legal requirement in Egypt, and a valid ID is essential to access basic citizenship rights including employment, education, medical and financial services.

Bahá'ís are prevented by their faith from lying about their religious beliefs. Moreover, it is a crime to provide false information on any official document in Egypt.

Already postponed twice, the hearing of the government's appeal is now scheduled to take place on 20 November.

## "A daily struggle"

"Bahá'ís face a daily struggle now," said Bahá'í representative Dr Basma Moussa, addressing a symposium on the issue of religious affiliation on ID cards hosted in Cairo by the National Council for Human Rights in August.

She pointed out that without ID cards, Bahá'ís are unable to register for school, attend university, address questions on military service, apply for jobs, process banking transactions, or properly receive salaries.

"It is obvious that limiting the religions on the ID card to the three [official religions] interferes with the freedom of those who believe in religions other than those", she said.

Dr Moussa stressed that members of the Bahá'í community, whose presence in Egypt dates back to the 1860s, are seeking no more than to be able to exercise their rights as citizens.

"We are asking that, on official papers, you either list 'Bahá'í', or 'other', or a dash - or just leave it blank", she said. "This is actually all that we have asked of governmental agencies over the last few years".



*Students with their teacher at the Ocean of Light School*

## Tonga school celebrates 10 years

The Ocean of Light School in Tonga celebrated its 10th anniversary in July with a devotional program and performances by each class that highlighted the cultural diversity of the school.

Established in 1996 as a social and economic development project of the Bahá'í community of Tonga, the school has grown from nine pupils to a current student population of over 300. Apart from Tonga, the staff come from countries as far afield as Australia, Fiji, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States.

Speaking at the celebration, the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Tonga, Dr Fred Sevele, praised the school for its distinctive educational philosophy, which integrates academic, physical and spiritual development.