

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Creator of RESPECT to visit Australia

Academic. Singer. Organisational consultant. Author. Management trainer. And the creator of a popular new musical soon to open in Brisbane.

All these words describe one talented woman - Dorothy Marcic.

Arriving in Australia next month for the latest chapter in what she acknowledges is an "extensive and varied" career, Dr Marcic's visit will include a guest presentation at Sydney's Bahá'í House of Worship on 25 March.

Just add music

Presently an adjunct professor at Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management, Dr Marcic has taught at several universities in the United States, and is a former Fulbright Scholar at the University of Economics-Prague. She is the author of 12 books, mainly in the management field.

In the late 1990s, while searching for ways to enliven her leadership programs, she experimented with adding music.

Her resulting research into popular music led to a book, "RESPECT: Women and Popular Music", which traced how women's progress is reflected in popular song. The book then formed the basis for a one-woman show that she performed all around the United States and overseas.

That show has now grown into "RESPECT: A Musical Journey of Women", a four-woman musical theatre production that has been performed across the United States. It is set to open its Australian season at Brisbane's Twelfth Night Theatre from 21 March. The show will star Rhonda Burchmore and Lucy Durack.

Inspired by equality

A Bahá'í for many years, Dr Marcic says it was the Bahá'í teachings on equality of men and women that inspired her to write RESPECT.

The show outlines the journey of women in the 20th century, as reflected in top-40 female song lyrics: from the co-dependence of "I Will Follow Him" to the anger of "These Boots are



Dr Dorothy Marcic

Made for Walking", the cynicism of "What's Love Got to Do with it", and finally to the strength of "Hero" and "I Will Survive".

"Even before I wrote the book and musical, my work has been about touching people's hearts and minds," Dr Marcic said.

"Integrating the issue of the equality of men and women into the medium of musical theatre makes telling the story of the difficulties and suffering more bearable".

"And you don't listen to songs the same way after seeing this show. You're suddenly going, 'What is the real meaning of that?'"

"It's fun, it's entertaining, but it also gives you an awareness of the human condition".

A percentage from the show's ticket sales and merchandise funds The Respect Project, which uses the arts and workshops to help women gain self-respect, transform their lives, and make a difference in the community.

Dr Dorothy Marcic will address a reception in the Information Centre at the Bahá'í National Centre on Sunday 25 March at 10 am. She will speak on "Ending impunity for violence against women", the official theme of International Women's Day, which falls earlier in the month. The reception will be followed by the International Women's Day service.

Brisbane Bahá'í helps change lives



Lim Soon Kam with his award

A member of the Bahá'í community of Brisbane, Mr Lim Soon Kam, has been awarded the Outstanding Young Malaysian Award 2006 for Moral or Religious Leadership.

Presented by Junior Chambers International Malaysia and the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, the awards recognise young Malaysians "whose dedication to their profession or life undertakings has resulted in exceptional achievement, in the form of significant contributions to the progress or welfare of the community at large".

Mr Lim, who is now a student at Queensland University of Technology, was the initiator and founder of the Bahá'í-inspired Community Learning Centre in Jenjarom. The Centre provides programs in spiritual and moral development for children and junior youth.

Jenjarom, a so-called "new Chinese village", was Mr Lim's home town. Due to social disintegration, it had a notorious reputation for various social ills including gangster activity, gambling, prostitution and drug trafficking. Mr Lim was inspired to initiate the programs in Jenjarom after witnessing the fate of many of his school friends.

"A few of my childhood friends were killed in gang fights", he said.

"Some indulged themselves in drugs. Many were school drop-outs who, in their pursuit for wealth and status, resorted to selling drugs and ecstasy pills, smuggling and gambling".

Since 2004 more than 200 young people in Jenjarom have completed programs at the Centre. Many of the participants say their lives have been transformed as a result.

Speaking at a dinner held in his home town to celebrate his achievement, Selangor State Assemblyman Dato' Eei Kim Hock described Mr Lim as "a model of what today's youths can do for their community".

"I hope he will continue to actively help improve the lot of others", he said.

Mr Lim is presently undertaking a PhD in sustainable construction under a scholarship awarded by the Cooperative Research Centre for Construction Innovation at the Queensland University of Technology.

Chief Operating Officer of the Centre, Peter Scuderi, said: "In his studies as well as his community work, Mr Lim reflects an admirable desire to build better communities. We are delighted to have someone of his calibre as one of our scholars."

Bahá'í students make Uni-Tea



Members and friends of the Bahá'í Society at the University of Wollongong

As part of the university's International Week in 2006, the Bahá'í Society at the University of Wollongong held a stall offering "uni-tea for unity": free cups of tea from all around the world, representing the richness to be found in global diversity.

Students were also offered lollipops with tags stating "Racism Sucks", and multi-flavoured jelly babies from a "unity in diversity" bowl.

Intended as a light-hearted way to promote tolerance and the elimination of prejudice, the initiative proved so popular that it won the annual "campus engagement" award for 2006, presented to the society responsible for organising the most effective and popular student interactive event on campus.

Bahá'í societies exist at most universities around Australia. Membership is open to all students.

Bahá'í Temple welcomes other religions



Members of the Women's Interfaith Network following the service.

L to R: Natalie Mobini-Kesheh (Bahá'í), Vasantha Perananthasivam (Bahá'í), Monika Smith (Quaker), Sarah Taouill (Muslim), Caroline Haski (Jewish), Josie Lacey (Jewish), Rev. Pravrajika Ajayaprana (Hindu), Ven. Chokyi (Buddhist), Diane James (Bahá'í)

Prominent women from seven faith communities participated in an inter-faith service held at the Sydney Bahá'í House of Worship to celebrate Human Rights Day on 10 December 2006.

Women from the Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Quaker and Bahá'í traditions read from their sacred scriptures before a packed auditorium in the House of Worship.

The readers were members of the Women's Interfaith Network (WIN). Launched in Sydney in 2001, WIN is a gathering of women from different religious traditions who meet and work to promote harmony, understanding and respect among the followers of the various world religions.

The service bore witness to the Bahá'í call to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship".

Religious freedom anniversary

A reception was held prior to the service to mark the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Guest speaker Ian Lacey AM spoke about the role of law in protecting freedom of religion. Mr Lacey is a solicitor and councillor member of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the national representative body of the Jewish community.

Mr Lacey explained that the relevant international law is set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which provides that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

This freedom may only be limited as needed to "protect public safety, order, health, or morals or

the fundamental rights and freedoms of others".

Mr Lacey pointed out that, despite having ratified the Covenant, Australian law in this area remains extremely limited.

Only Queensland and Victoria have legislated to provide protection against religious discrimination and the incitement of religious hatred.

Mr Lacey observed that "the scourge of severe religious persecution" remains a serious problem in many countries.

"We still live in a world in which people are actually being executed and imprisoned and murdered and tortured because of their religion," he said

The prospects for achieving change through the United Nations are limited, Mr Lacey acknowledged. Rather, "freedom from religious persecution has to depend on the active support of people of goodwill throughout the world, and on representations by sympathetic democratic governments such as Australia".

Mr Lacey complimented the Bahá'í community and the Women's Interfaith Network for coming together "to promote inter-religious harmony and to contribute to international pressure for freedom of religion everywhere".

Ian Lacey with John Walker, National Secretary of the Australian Bahá'í Community



Youth offer a year of service



Shameem Taheri-Lee takes some time out on the Mt Gillen track, NT

When 17-year-old Shameem Taheri-Lee finished high school in Perth in 2005, it wasn't celebrating, going to university or finding a job that was uppermost in her mind. It was service.

Like many young Bahá'ís, Shameem was keen to embark on what is known as a "youth year of service".

Bahá'í youth around the world are encouraged to offer a year of voluntary service to humanity at a stage in their lives when they are unburdened by family and other responsibilities.

Similar to the increasingly popular "gap year", it can be undertaken at home or abroad, before, during, or after university studies, and in any imaginable field, from gardening to teaching to dancing. The one common thread is the concept of service.

"I've always wanted to dedicate a year to service to the community and ultimately to humanity", said Shameem, who had watched her cousins embark on their own years of service.

"The whole purpose of being a Bahá'í is to love humanity and try to serve it, to work for universal peace and brotherhood".

Shameem elected to spend her year in Alice Springs, having become fascinated with the area as a result of a conference presentation.

Her work was varied, including running programs for the moral empowerment of young people, teaching Bahá'í children's classes and holiday programs, and facilitating study courses for adults. She also supported herself with a part-time job.

Now back in Perth to commence study for her Bachelor of Music (Jazz Performance) at the WA Academy of Performing Arts, Shameem said her year of service helped to prepare her for the next stage in life.

"I've come back with much more - more knowledge, spiritual insights, skills and experience - to bring to my studies and service in my community", she said.

Deeds not words

Unlike Shameem, Sydney lawyer Penny Taylor, aged 30, chose to defer her year of service until she had developed her professional skills.

She is presently working as the Legal Advisor to the Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development in Samoa, under AusAID's Australian Youth Ambassador Program.

It's a role that enables her to exercise her passion for the wellbeing of women and children, as she drafts and reviews national law and policies to support women's and children's rights.

"Bahá'u'lláh teaches 'Let deeds not words be your adorning'", said Penny, explaining the motivation behind her year of service.

"I don't want to spend my life talking at dinner parties about the sad state of the world. I want to do what I can.

"The position in Samoa involved an 85% pay cut, but also the opportunity to contribute in a concrete and lasting way to the wellbeing of women and children in a nation officially ranked as one of the world's least developed countries", she said.

"What's more valuable in the end?"

Penny agreed that her year of service had resulted in many new insights and increased self-awareness.

"I have realised that all cultures have their strengths and weaknesses, and when you piece them all together, taking the best bit of each, you wind up with something wonderful", she observed.

"I also hope that the pace and priorities of life here, where everyone has time for friends and family, and few things are worth getting stressed about, is something I can maintain on my return to Australia", she added.

Penny Taylor (left) and her colleague, Louisa Apelu, travel by ferry in Samoa



At the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney, young volunteers from around the world work and live side-by-side.

One of only seven Bahá'í Houses of Worship in the world, it is a popular destination for youth from overseas, whose work can range from gardening to guiding visitors to administrative work in the Bahá'í National Office.

In January 2007, the "youth houses" that provide volunteer accommodation in the Temple grounds were home to young Bahá'ís from the USA, Japan, New Caledonia, Finland and Italy, as well as Australia.

According to 19-year-old Laiafi Beru Soalo, a volunteer from New Caledonia, it was the experience of working with people from different backgrounds and cultures that formed the most interesting aspect of his year of service.

"It was all about communication – learning how to communicate and say things in the right way", commented Laiafi, who assisted with IT development at the Bahá'í national centre.

"You also learn a lot about yourself – your potential and who you really are", he added.



Laiafi Beru Soalo at work in the Temple basement with fellow volunteers, Sam Ehsani and Akiko Kusaka

Students to "Advance Australia Fairly"

The Australian Bahá'í Community is the co-organiser of a new competition that encourages tertiary students to reflect on what being Australian means to them.

Conducted under the banner of "Advancing Australia Fairly", the competition has attracted support from a range of community and religious organisations including the Alfred Dreyfus unit of B'nai B'rith, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, Uniting Church Education, Buddhist Council of NSW, and Hindu Council of Australia.

University and TAFE students from any discipline are invited to submit a short essay of up to 800 words on "What it means to be an Australian". Responses can also be expressed in the form of a graphic image or photograph, supported by up to 300 words.

"Australia is a country of diversity, and that is something that should be embraced", said Faraz Maghami, President of the Australian Law Students Association, which is spearheading the competition on university campuses around the country.

"The challenge for our generation is to keep building unity in diversity. That's why we are trying to get students thinking about what makes us Australian, the national values that we share, and how we can promote a fair and just society where diversity is seen as a source

of strength, rather than fear", he explained.

"Today's university students will be tomorrow's leaders", said Ernie Friedlander, Chairman of the Education Task Force for B'nai B'rith, and a key organiser behind the competition.

"Their contribution will be critical in shaping Australia as a united and harmonious society that is an example to the rest of the world - and we want them to start thinking about it now".

The winning entry in each format will receive a cash prize of \$4000, with \$1000 for the six runners-up in each section. The winners will be announced on the World Day for Cultural Diversity, Dialogue and Development, 21 May 2007. Competition sponsors include Westfield and Meriton.

About 700 youth from Australia and around the world attended the national Bahá'í youth conference, held at La Trobe University, Melbourne, from 4-7 January.

Dubbed "Designing Destiny", the conference aimed to be a catalyst for youth hoping to make a positive impact in shaping the future of their local communities.

Below, a group of conference participants take a break from the formal sessions.



Global violence against women "an epidemic"

In support of efforts to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Bahá'í International Community has issued a statement outlining a range of pro-active means for addressing what is described as the "relentless epidemic of violence against women and girls".

Titled "Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls", the statement acknowledged the progress that has been made in the status of women over the past 50 years.

It also noted the more recent leadership shown by international institutions in putting the issue of violence against women and girls on the global agenda.

There remains, however, "a massive divide" between the international legal apparatus and the cultural change required to stem the tide of violence against women.

As a result, few states can claim even the smallest reduction in its overall prevalence, according to the statement.

The era of developing legal frameworks must therefore be followed by an emphasis on implementation and prevention, the statement argued, in order to create the social, material and structural conditions in which women and girls can develop to their full potential.

Individual transformation needed

What is needed is "not only deliberate attempts to change the legal, political and economic structures of society, but, equally importantly ... the transformation of individuals - men and women, boys and girls - whose values, in different ways, sustain exploitative patterns of behaviour", the statement said.

This endeavour needs to take place at every level of society, from the development of educational curricula that cultivate moral capabilities in children, to efforts to promote equality and healthy male-female relations within the family, the allocation of government resources to provide accessible social services and law enforcement, and a dramatic increase in the power, authority and resources dedicated to women's human rights and concerns at the international level.

The statement singled out the role of religious leadership, noting that "many voices raised in the name of religion constitute the most formidable obstacle to eradicating violent and exploitative behaviours perpetrated against women and girls".

It called for religious leaders to "state unequivocally and become the standard bearers of the principle of equality of men and women", noting that "religious practices and doctrines in flagrant violation of international human rights standards must be subject to deeper examination and scrutiny, bearing in mind that all religions contain the voices of women".

At its root, the statement concluded, violence against women and girls cannot be prevented without addressing its spiritual dimension.

"It is this inner, ethical and moral dimension which now stands in need of transformation and, ultimately, provides the surest foundation for values and behaviour which raise up women and girls and, in turn, promote the advancement of all of humankind", it said.

The full text of the statement can be found online at www.bic-un.bahai.org/06-0702.htm

In Canberra, White Ribbon Day Ambassadors handed out white ribbons and balloons on 25 November to raise awareness of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women - White Ribbon Day.

L to R: Margret Moreton, Secretary, UNAA; Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Relationships Australia; Scarlett Feltham, ACT Bahá'í Community; Mick Gentleman MLA; Katy Gallagher MLA, Minister for Women; Libby Lloyd, Immediate Past President, UNIFEM Australia



Religions unite on climate change

Fostering the concept of world citizenship is a practical and necessary strategy to confront the global challenge of climate change.

That's the view put forward in a statement contributed by the Australian Bahá'í Community to a new publication issued by the Climate Institute, titled "Common Belief: Australia's Faith Communities on Climate Change".

Believed to be a world first, the publication brings together statements by 16 Australian faith communities, calling for united action on climate change.

The Bahá'í statement argued that the resources required to respond to climate change - financial, technical, human or moral - will only be released when peoples and governments accept "a shared and connected sense of responsibility for the fate of the planet and for the well-being of the entire human family".

The concept of world citizenship provides such a global ethic, with the power "to move hearts, change minds, and inspire action", the statement said.

World citizenship is characterised by "a wider loyalty, a love of humanity as a whole". It

encompasses principles of social and economic justice, non-adversarial decision-making, equality, harmony, and a willingness to sacrifice for the common good, the statement said.

"Only a vision of a global society, supported by universal values and spiritual principles, and founded on justice and equality, can inspire individuals and government to take responsibility for the long-term care and protection of the natural environment", it concluded.

Religious leaders gathered at the publication launch, held in December at the Police and Justice Museum in Sydney.



Australian concern for Bahá'ís in Iran

The Australian government was co-sponsor for a resolution, passed by the United Nations General Assembly in December, that expressed serious concern over the human rights situation in Iran, including the escalation of violations against Bahá'ís.

The resolution called on Iran to "eliminate, in law and in practice, all forms of discrimination based on religious, ethnic or linguistic grounds".

It paid particular attention to the worsening situation facing Iran's 300,000-member Bahá'í community.

The resolution noted state monitoring of Bahá'ís, an increase in arbitrary arrest and detention, destruction of sites of religious importance, suspension of community activities, and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, adequate housing and other benefits.

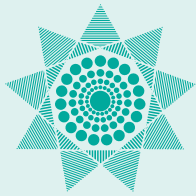
Higher education setback

Towards the end of 2006, for the first time in more than two decades, it was reported that Bahá'í students had been admitted to universities in Iran. As of the end of December, 178 Bahá'ís had been accepted into universities and had begun their studies.

However, in an apparent setback, an additional 43 students have been expelled when the universities became aware that they are Bahá'ís.

"We very much hope that these are isolated cases and that they do not represent a pattern or reflect government policy", said Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson, Tessa Scrine.

"In a very perfunctory manner, these students have been denied their right to pursue their education, solely on the grounds of their adherence to the Bahá'í Faith".



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International news

Egyptian court rules against Bahá'ís

In a judgement passed down in December, Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court has ruled against the right of Bahá'ís to be properly identified on government documents.

The decision upholds current government policy that forces citizens to identify themselves on their state identity cards with one of the three official recognised religions - Islam, Christianity or Judaism.

Members of other religions, including Egypt's small Bahá'í community, are compelled either to lie about their religious beliefs, or to give up their ID cards. The ID card is essential for access to most rights of citizenship, including education, financial services, and medical care.

Mothers initiate change in Papua New Guinea

A group of mothers living in Mom Village, on the remote Karkar Island in Papua New Guinea, have successfully initiated the construction of their own village medical aid post.

The women, who are Bahá'ís, proposed the project four years ago to their Local Spiritual Assembly, the governing body for the Bahá'í community. An action plan was conceived, and the women began a fund-raising drive.

By January 2006 they had raised enough to start building a medical aid post for their village of about 3500 residents.

Previously, village residents had to travel more than 10 kilometres, usually on foot, to reach the nearest aid station. Since its completion in July, the government's district health office has allocated a trained nurse to work in Mom Village.

A frequent visitor to the island, Abegul Bodick, said the women were "inspired by Bahá'í teachings on women's equality and participation" to address the problem of the lack of health services.

The project encapsulates key aspects of the Bahá'í approach to social and economic development: empowerment of women, the use of inclusive consultative methods, and collective action at the grassroots, enabling

According to the BBC World Service program *Reporting Religion*, "Bahá'ís in Egypt can't officially be born, die, or live normal lives".

"We deplore the Court's ruling in this case", said Bani Dugal, representative of the Bahá'í International Community.

"Our hope now is that the public debate over this issue will cause the Egyptian government to rectify its discriminatory policies ... either by allowing Bahá'ís to be listed on government documents, by abolishing the religious affiliation listing entirely, or simply by allowing the word 'other' to be legally included on state identification forms".

Further information on the case can be found at www.news.bahai.org

small groups of individuals to effect change in the towns and villages where they live.

"If Christian churches can establish aid posts and schools to serve the general public, why should we not do the same as Bahá'ís?" said Nang Kubulan, an elder in the community, who was undeterred by the limited resources available.

"We have the support of each other, and can start from scraps if we work together", Ms Kubulan said.

The women have announced that they are now working on their next project: creating a water supply system for their village.

The Bahá'í community of Papua New Guinea celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2004. The community includes thousands of Bahá'ís, with more than 250 Local Spiritual Assemblies spread throughout the country.

Bahá'í mothers of Mom village, standing in front of their new medical aid post

