

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Youth programs combat peer pressure

A Bahá'í program designed for young people aged between 12 and 15 is helping them develop tools to establish their own values and make independent moral decisions.

Junior youth groups have sprung up around Australia in the past few years, following a curriculum developed at various Bahá'í institutions around the world and based on the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

They have proved particularly popular in Perth, where about 20 groups presently cater for some 160 young people.

The program is designed to empower young people both spiritually and morally, said Shirin Reyhani, who assists in the coordination of junior youth groups in Western Australia.

"It gives them the tools they need to recognise the moral issues underlying the choices they make," Ms Reyhani said of the program. "It also develops the power of expression, enabling them to express their thoughts and ideas effectively to others."

The groups generally meet once a week to play games, discuss issues, explore the arts, study literature and organise community service projects. In the process they are developing skills in step-by-step problem-solving, nurturing virtues, and building social awareness.

The sessions are facilitated by volunteers who are often older youth or young adults themselves. These "animators" serve as a moderator and friend rather than a teacher. They receive special training in how to run the program and must also gain accreditation in the Bahá'í Child Protection Policy, which includes a mandatory police check.

Making moral choices

"It's a pretty good course," 14-year-old Calvin Martin said of the group he attends in Perth. "You get to learn lots of new stuff, and I've met lots of new people ... It's pretty fun - lots of different activities to do."

According to Jani Song, the program has helped her to resist peer pressures to conform.

"When you're in high school, you see the popular, or cool, group and they often take drugs," said Jani, also 14. "You see people drinking or doing other sorts of stuff. And you kind of just want to do it because you want to follow the crowd."

"But when you do these classes, and you really know the reason why not to do it, your brain automatically tells you not to do it," Jani said.

Parents agree that the program helps equip their children to make choices based on their own values rather than on what their peers are doing.

"My main concern is that my son has a strong sense of self to know how to deal with the demands of his social environment and issues that he's up against. That's what I feel he gets from this course," said Vivian Vissac, whose son Yann attends a junior youth group.

"I like the emphasis on developing the wholeness of the students - their inner resources, their sense of self, their sense that they can do and contribute," she said.

Gayle Corbauld has two daughters who attend the program and feels it has enhanced their best personal qualities.

"They also like to sound out some of the difficulties they might have had at school or elsewhere during the week. They can bring them along to the group and they know they can open it up and discuss it."

Participants in a junior youth in Joondalup, Western Australia





Dr Golshah Naghdy

New chairperson for National Assembly

Dr Golshah Naghdy was elected as chairperson of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia at the Bahá'í National Convention, held in Sydney from 26-29 April.

Ninety-five delegates from around the country participate in the annual election of the National Assembly, which is the governing body for the Bahá'í Faith in Australia.

The nine members elected to the National Assembly were the same as the previous year, but two of the office-holders changed. Dr Naghdy is the new chairperson and Dr Vahid Saberi is the new vice-chairperson.

Born in Tehran, Dr Naghdy is an Associate

Professor in the School of Electrical, Computer and Telecommunications Engineering at the University of Wollongong, where she is working on the application of "wavelet neurons" in the development of artificial retina.

She has also made a major contribution to Bahá'í educational programs for children and youth in Australia, and has served as Director of the Education for Peace program since 1993.

The other members of the National Assembly are Mrs Fiona McDonald, Professor Fariborz Moshirian, Ms Kath Podger, Professor Bijan Samali, Ms Tessa Scrine, Dr Marjorie Tidman and Mr John Walker.

Work commences on SA Bahá'í Centre



Bahá'í Centre of Learning for South Australia

Bahá'ís in South Australia have commenced renovation of a heritage-listed building in the centre of Adelaide, destined to become the new Bahá'í Centre of Learning for South Australia.

Located at 263-279 Flinders Street, the building was opened in 1878 as South Australia's first two-storey state school. It functioned as a public school until 1968, and was last used as the Flinders Street School of Music, which closed in 2001. It had remained vacant until the Bahá'í Council for South Australia took ownership in October 2006.

Mildura architect Chris Wates has been appointed as project manager for the renovation, which is being carefully planned to conserve the heritage value of the building. To date four upstairs rooms

have been brought up to functionality following cleaning, painting and replacement of carpets.

Other works in progress include repairs and replacements to some of the five-metre ceilings, replacement of some floors, restitching of a front wall to the rest of the building, installation of disabled toilets, new fire control and security measures, and initial landscaping work.

Once it is fully operational, the building will function as a Bahá'í Centre of Learning, offering study groups, children's classes and other spiritual education programs and functions. This will carry on the use it has had since its inception - education.

The building will also be the permanent seat for the Bahá'í Council for South Australia.

Young Bahá'ís make good citizens

Two young Bahá'ís from opposite sides of the country received Young Citizen of the Year awards from their local councils on Australia Day 2007.

Elham Tahzib, who lives in Sydney, was declared the Hunters Hill Young Citizen of the Year for her achievements at school and her out-of-school activities.

Delshard (Anton) Mozhdahinia, 16, was made Young Citizen of the Year in Albany, Western Australia.

His award recognised his leadership and contribution to Scouts Australia, in which he has been a member of the National Youth Council.

In her acceptance speech, Ms Tahzib said: "My

education at Riverside Girls High School and my involvement in the Bahá'í community have been fundamental in my development and have put me on various paths of service".

"Never underestimate the importance of youth in the community; they possess the greatest wealth of creativity yet to be tapped into. With enthusiasm, ambition and belief in their own capabilities, youth are the most powerful agents of positive change in the community".



Left: Delshard Mozhdahinia

Right: Elham Tahzib receives her award from the Mayor of Hunters Hill, Councillor Sue Hoopmann.

"King of Festivals" marked around Australia

Bahá'ís around Australia marked their most important sacred festival, the 12-day Festival of Ridvan, from 21 April to 2 May.

The Ridvan Festival recalls the first declaration by Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet and founder of the Bahá'í Faith, of His mission in 1863.

An exile from His native Persia, Bahá'u'lláh spent this 12-day period camped in the Najibiyyih Garden on the banks of the Tigris River outside Baghdad. It later became known to His followers as the Garden of Ridvan, which means Paradise.

Bahá'u'lláh described the Ridvan Festival as the "Most Great Festival" and the "King of Festivals". The first, ninth and twelfth days are regarded as particularly holy, and work is suspended on these days.

In all parts of the world, Bahá'ís also mark the first day of Ridvan with the annual election of the Spiritual Assemblies that govern the affairs of the community. Approximately two hundred Assemblies were elected in municipalities around Australia on 21 April. Since the Bahá'í Faith has no priesthood, the Assemblies also perform an important pastoral function.

In Whittlesea, an outer suburb of Melbourne, the Mill Park Library hosted the opening of the Ridvan festival on 21 April. Storyteller Nava Mahdavi entertained guests with an engaging narrative of the events that took place in 1863, and traditional music was performed.

Library users were presented with roses, in recollection of the heaps of fresh-cut roses that were placed each day in Bahá'u'lláh's tent during His sojourn in the garden.

Speaking at the event, Victorian state MP Lily D'Ambrosio commented that the community had come a long way since its small beginnings in nineteenth century Persia. She observed that many Bahá'í beliefs - such as justice, peace and the rights of women and children - were in line with her own, and had influenced her in her role as a member of Parliament.

Whittlesea Mayor Kris Pavlidis reflected on the positive role of the Bahá'ís in Whittlesea, which is the third most multicultural municipality in Victoria. She praised the community for its work on the local interfaith and multicultural committees.

Guests at the Whittlesea celebration were presented with roses.

L to R: Jack Chan (Mill Park librarian), Lily D'Ambrosio MP, Farzaneh Delghan, Mayor Kris Pavlidis, and local Bahá'ís Helen Perkins and Nosrat Delghan. Rear: Inspector Mark Doney



Education needed to end violence



Dr Dorothy Marcic at the Bahá'í House of Worship

Women's rights are everybody's rights, because we will all be better off when equality is achieved.

That was the message of Dr Dorothy Marcic, speaking prior to the International Women's Day service at the Bahá'í House of Worship on 25 March.

There was standing room only in the Temple Information Centre as Dr Marcic, an academic, management consultant and playwright from the United States, addressed the theme of International Women's Day 2007, "Ending impunity for violence against women".

According to Dr Marcic, such violence stems from "a culture where men are more valued than women".

Noting that domestic violence is "a problem in every country", she revealed that her own

mother had been a battered woman who was too scared of her husband to press charges.

Dr Marcic singled out education as a solution with far-reaching impact. "Education gives women choices and confidence", she said.

Microfinance programs for women, public information campaigns, and programs for violent men have also achieved success, she said, pointing out that men must be engaged in the solution as well as women.

Dr Marcic was visiting Australia for the opening of RESPECT, a musical theatre production that she wrote following her research into how women are reflected in popular song. "RESPECT: A Musical Journey of Women" has just opened its Melbourne season at the Palms at Crown and will travel to Brisbane, Perth and Sydney later this year.

Australian women at UN

Two Australian women were among 43 Bahá'ís from 23 countries who formed the Bahá'í delegation at the 51st session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Held at UN Headquarters in New York from 26 February to 9 March, the main theme of this year's Commission was "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child". Accordingly, the Bahá'í delegation included twelve girl delegates between the ages of 13 and 18.

Melbourne Bahá'í Azita Sobhani, a senior consultant in international development programs, represented the Australian Bahá'í Community at the Commission.

"The Commission provided a great forum for networking and for educating oneself around the issues particular to the girl child", she said. "We were exposed to the full gamut of problems, from genital mutilation and dowry deaths to girl trafficking and child molestation.

"It was evident to me that reflection on the spiritual dimension of human beings must be part of the solution if we are going to turn back the tide", she commented.

Australian Bahá'í Penny Taylor also attended the Commission as a representative of the Bahá'í National Assembly of Samoa, where she was then working as an AusAID volunteer. She described the evidence of women's abuse presented to the Commission as "shocking".

"I came away feeling that there is no place in the world where women are safe, respected and valued", she said.

Although a lawyer by profession, Ms Taylor concluded that the law could only be a small part of the solution to violence and discrimination.

"What is needed is a commitment to the spiritual virtues of kindness, forgiveness, compassion, justice, love and self-sacrifice in our communities" she said.

Members of the Bahá'í delegation to the Commission on the Status of Women



Promoting interfaith harmony and respect

When Agnes Kean was first invited to get together with a group of local religious leaders in Melbourne's Springvale back in 1988, she had no idea it was the beginning of a commitment that would still be continuing 20 years later.

Home to many recently-arrived migrants, Springvale had acquired a reputation as a "hot spot" for Asian youth crime. The City Council and key local religious figures wanted to do something to turn the area around, and Scottish-born Mrs Kean, then the secretary of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Springvale, was invited to join them.

Today the Interfaith Network of Greater Dandenong is held up as a model for local interfaith bodies around the country. The "Common Statement" that Mrs Kean helped to draft is a basis used in many other localities.

Mrs Kean has just received an Award for Excellence in Multicultural Affairs from the Victorian Government for her work in promoting interfaith harmony.

Many faiths, one people

"I was at the first annual gathering of the Interfaith Network - it was the start of something good", Mrs Kean recalls.

"That was when the commitment was made to work together in peace and harmony".

The Interfaith Network represents seven major religions and a number of spiritual organisations, reflecting the fact that more than half the residents of Greater Dandenong were born overseas.

The network's vision is "Many Faiths, One People". Every year, in a public ceremony, members renew their commitment to the "Common Statement", which they sign and present to the Mayor.

It expresses their desire to live together in peace and goodwill, and to promote respect and tolerance for the integrity of each other's beliefs, cultures and traditions. The statement urges all citizens to "put aside intolerance, prejudice and divisiveness, to attain peaceful and fruitful co-existence in our City".

The network undertakes a wide range of activities including interfaith gatherings, providing speakers for local schools, and tours

of the area's diverse places of worship for school groups and the general public. The tours have proved so popular that they are booked out until November this year.

A highlight of Mrs Kean's involvement has been helping to organise a number of interfaith services, including those following September 11 and the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, which deeply affected the local Sri Lankan Buddhist community in particular.

"At such times people need to actually go somewhere and do something", said Mrs Kean. "They need somewhere to express how they are feeling".

"Agnes is wonderful", said Helen Heath, the network's current president. "She has been part of the network for 18 years and she's hardly missed a meeting".

Interfaith harmony awards

The work of five individuals in promoting harmony among faith communities was recognised at a special ceremony hosted by the Bahá'í community at Government House Ballroom in Perth on 14 March.

The reception was attended by 250 guests from all religious communities in the presence of Dr Ken Michael AC, Governor of Western Australia, who is the Patron of the Interfaith Harmony Awards.

The Interfaith Harmony Awards are an annual initiative of the Bahá'í community of Western Australia to mark Harmony Day.

This year the Australian Bahá'í community issued a special statement, titled "Seeing Unity in Diversity", to mark Harmony Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

It called on all Australians to seize the opportunities that our multicultural society presents us to build understanding and harmony, and break down ignorance and prejudice.

"In our schools and in our workplaces, in our places of worship and on our sporting fields, in our neighbourhoods and even in our families, we can all reach out in friendship to people who are different from ourselves", it said.



Agnes Kean

*"Ye are the
fruits of one tree,
and the leaves
of one branch.
Deal ye one with
another with the
utmost love
and harmony,
with friendliness
and fellowship."*

(Bahá'í Writings)

New book captures life of Prophet



Illustration depicting the tent of Bahá'u'lláh pitched in the Garden of Ridwan outside Baghdad in 1863.

A mother and daughter have combined their talents to produce a landmark book presenting the life of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Incomparable Friend: The Life of Bahá'u'lláh Told in Stories took more than ten years from its initial conception to publication. The result is a beautifully-illustrated, richly-told publication extending over 200 full colour pages.

Author Shirin Sabri explained that she targeted the book at junior youth, independent readers who were somewhat between the stages of childhood and adolescence, and whose needs she felt were often neglected.

"Their curiosity pushes the author to find out and convey the interesting details of a time, as well as the overall picture", she said.

"They are not only interested in what happened, but in why it happened. As I wrote, I tried to think about this audience and to live up to its capacity".

Illustrating "the greatest story of all"

When Shirin invited her mother, Sue Podger, to illustrate the book, she took to the task with some trepidation.

"Although I had been trained as an artist, I had not done any serious work in water colour for decades", Sue explained.

"And these paintings were to be of great events from the life of a Messenger of God. How could

I even begin to approach this task in a seemly and competent manner?"

After working hard to master modern water colour technique, Sue found producing the paintings to be a spiritual journey in itself.

"Painting these sublime scenes had become like a meditation, one that had me enthralled and would not let me go", she said.

A particular challenge for Sue was the fact that, while the book is a biography of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís do not permit Messengers of God to be portrayed pictorially.

Instead, the full weight of His presence is depicted in the reactions of others to Him, and in places and objects from His life. A number of scenes are painted from Bahá'u'lláh's perspective, so that the reader sees what He would have seen.

Shirin's words and Sue's pictures have been brought together into a stunning whole with the help of skilled book designer Massoud Tahzib, and jointly published by Ilxir Publications Inc. and Bahá'í Publications Australia.

The book is already finding a keen readership among all ages.

In a review, Bahá'í parent and teacher Georgina Sounness described it as "the book we have all been waiting for ... the book I wanted to give my children when they were little".

"It brings to life the greatest story of all times in a setting of beauty", she said.



Shirin Sabri (left) and Sue Podger

Anniversary celebrations in Hornsby

The Bahá'í community of Hornsby Shire, in Sydney's north, celebrated its fortieth anniversary with a special dinner on Saturday 12 May.

The occasion marked 40 years since the formation of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Hornsby. The Spiritual Assembly is the local governing body of the Bahá'í community, formed when nine or more adult Bahá'ís are living in a locality.

The dinner was attended by 150 current and past members of the community and their friends, including representatives of local schools and faith communities. Special guests included federal Attorney-General the Hon Philip Ruddock MP, in whose electorate the community is located, and members of the NSW State Parliament, Greg Smith and Judy Hopwood.

Two founding members of the Assembly, Verna and Neil Podger, were also in attendance.

World citizens

In opening the function, Councillor Felicity Findlay, representing the Mayor of Hornsby, praised the Bahá'ís for their active contribution to the local area.

"Your ideals of community service, inclusiveness and tolerance are an integral

part of the Hornsby community", she said.

Councillor Findlay noted that one of the younger members of the Bahá'í community, Manna Mostaghim, had been awarded by the Council as Hornsby Young Citizen of the Year in 2006 for her contribution in multiculturalism in the Shire.

Guest speaker Dr Eric Kingston, a member of the Bahá'í Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia, explained the role of the Bahá'í administrative bodies and reflected on current activities of Bahá'ís around the world. He highlighted the importance of helping children and youth to develop into "world citizens" through youth programs and spiritual education.

The dinner was one of a series of public events marking the anniversary, which also included a free family fun day and sausage sizzle at a local park.

Since 1967, the Hornsby community has grown to embrace members from twenty national backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural diversity of the Hornsby area.

Philip Ruddock MP with his wife Heather Ruddock, Fahimeh Kingston and Eric Kingston at the anniversary dinner



Bahá'í diploma offered

For the past 13 years, the Three Year Certificate Program in Bahá'í Studies has been taught at the Yerrinbool College, a Bahá'í-based not-for-profit institution located in a small township approximately 100 kilometres south-west of Sydney.

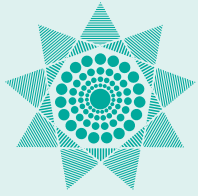
This year, for the first time, the program is being offered at diploma level.

Approximately 60 students and faculty members participated in the annual residential school in January, while the remainder of the program will be completed via distance learning components over the course of the year.

It comprises four streams focussing on Bahá'í history, the Bahá'í sacred writings, spiritual development, and the world order of Bahá'u'lláh.

Students attending the Diploma in Bahá'í Studies residential program





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International news

Memorial for Samoan Head of State

His Highness Susuga Malietoa Tanumafili II, the Samoan head of state who passed away on 11 May, was remembered at a memorial service held in the Bahá'í House of Worship near Apia, Samoa, on 20 May.

The Australian Bahá'í community was represented at the service by National Secretary John Walker, who travelled to Samoa to attend the state funeral.

The first reigning sovereign to adopt the Bahá'í Faith, Malietoa was one of the longest reigning monarchs in the world.

In its message of condolence, the National Assembly praised him for his personal qualities. "He served his nation with



His Highness Susuga Malietoa Tanumafili II in attendance at the 1984 dedication of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Samoa.

distinction for over four decades. His noble and dignified presence in the Pacific will be greatly missed", it said.

A memorial service will also be held at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney on Sunday 17 June at 12.00 noon.

Schoolchildren abused in Iran

Australian Bahá'ís have reacted with distress to fresh reports that Bahá'í school children in Iran, some as young as six years, are being harassed, vilified and held up to abuse.

During a 30-day period from mid-January to mid-February, 150 incidents of insults, mistreatment and even physical violence against Baha'i children were reported in schools across Iran, according to the Bahá'í World News Service.

"Worst of all, the abuse is being committed by school teachers and administrators, in whom

children should be able to place their trust", said Tessa Scrine, speaking on behalf of the Australian Bahá'í community.

The reports come at the same time as a growing number of Bahá'í students are being expelled from Iranian universities. In 2006, a number of Bahá'í students were admitted to Iranian universities for the first time since the early 1980s. As of April 2007, at least 94 of the 178 students - more than half - had been expelled when the universities became aware that they are Bahá'ís.

Temple is a "wonder"

The Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Chicago, has been declared one of the "Seven Wonders of Illinois".

The Temple, which is one of only seven Bahá'í Houses of Worship in the world, was among the top seven sites in the state of Illinois as voted by members of the public.

Standing almost 20 storeys high, its complex lacework incorporates the symbols of the various world religions and quotations from the Bahá'í scriptures.

Australia is home to another of the seven Houses of Worship, while the remaining five are situated in Apia, Frankfurt, New Delhi, Kampala, and Panama City. An eighth Temple is presently under construction in Chile.

