

# AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

Volume 11, Issue 3 - October 2007

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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## Dome crowns Hobart Centre



A large dome now crowns the new Bahá'í Centre of Learning building in Hobart, which is scheduled for completion by the end of this year.

The uniquely-designed dome was lifted into place by crane in the presence of local Bahá'ís, civic officials and the media in July.

It covers the 300-seat auditorium of the Centre, part of a complex that includes multiple meeting rooms, a reading room, and the seat of the Bahá'í Council for Tasmania.

The Centre is intended to benefit the people of Tasmania. Once opened, it will be available for use by community groups and individuals as well as business and professional organisations.

### Environmentally friendly

The Centre has been designed to meet high standards of environmental sustainability.

The building is extensively insulated and utilises passive solar design and energy-efficient lighting systems to achieve advanced energy efficiency.

Roof water run-off is directed to below-ground water storage units with 50,000 litre capacity to ensure water conservation.

The project has also striven to use non-toxic and recyclable materials wherever possible.

Most paints and surface finishes are natural, non-toxic and very long lasting, with no

petrochemicals or synthetic pigments.

A low-toxic structural glue, sourced from Germany, has been used for the first time on a project of this kind in Australia.

No old-growth timbers have been used in the structure of the building, which is located on the prominent former ABC site at the gateway to Hobart.

### Far-reaching benefits

Endowed to the Bahá'í community by the Naveed Foundation, the Centre is dedicated to the memory of Hobart Bahá'ís Soheila Mirkazami and her son Naveed, who perished in a car accident in the city in 2000.

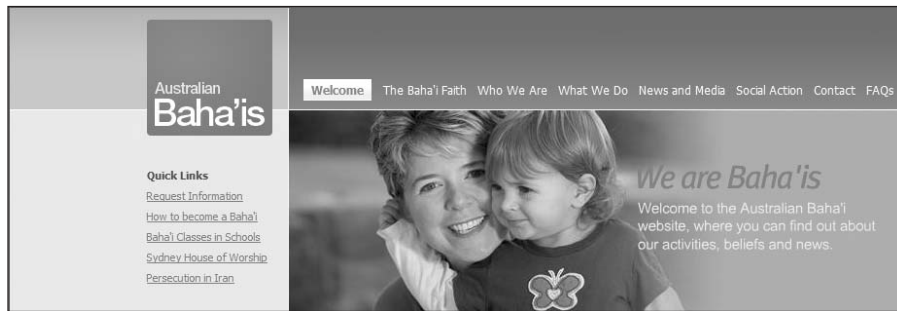
A range of educational programs will be held there, applying the insights of religion, science and the arts to the spiritual, intellectual and social development of the community.

Secretary of the Bahá'í Council for Tasmania, Dr John Davidson, said the Centre would have far-reaching benefits.

"It is our goal for the Centre of Learning to contribute to a peaceful and sustainable world community," he said.

Bahá'í Centre of Learning buildings can also be found in Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth.

# New Web site shows human face



*The new home page of the Australian Bahá'í community*

Profiles of Bahá'í sportspeople, professionals and artists appear on the new official Web site of the Australian Bahá'í community.

AFL star Luke McPharlin tells his story alongside pioneering Rotary member Katina Jones and Aboriginal artist Felix Kerry.

Others who discuss how their Bahá'í beliefs influence their lives include a dynamic young woman who spent her gap year in Alice Springs, and a professor who won a prestigious award as "Australian university teacher of the year."

The site also features a video of the 87-year history of the Bahá'í community in Australia.

## Clear and concise information

Launched in July, the new site also includes a mixture of information sections, news items, and photographs.

Employing an easy-to-use and attractive design, the site is intended to offer a warm welcome to a wide range of visitors. It provides accurate and concise information about the Australian Bahá'í community and activities in which visitors can become involved.

The site also includes links to a wide range of position papers on topics including human rights, the advancement of women, the environment, moral development, interfaith activities, global prosperity and global institutions.

The news section on the home page of the site will keep visitors up-to-date with the activities and concerns of the Australian and international Bahá'í communities.

The site can be found at [www.bahai.org.au](http://www.bahai.org.au)

## Peace education achieves positive outcome

A peace education program inspired by the Bahá'í teachings has helped produce young people who are dedicated to building a culture of peace, according to one of its founders.

Graduates demonstrated a higher spirit of service, a commitment to building peace, and a capacity to empower others to be peacemakers, said Professor Fazel Naghdy, co-founder of the Education for Peace Institute of Australia.

Many were engaged in teaching junior youth, passing on their knowledge and skills to those following behind them, said Professor Naghdy, a Professor of Engineering at the University of Wollongong who has contributed to the program as a volunteer for the past 15 years.

Speaking in September at the National Bahá'í Centre during a reception to mark the International Day of Peace, he said 500 teenagers had graduated from the Education for Peace program since 1994.

"The Bahá'í Faith is about building peace", said Professor Naghdy, who is a Bahá'í.

The core Education for Peace program is offered

to "junior youth" - young people aged 13-15 years, a crucial stage in the development from child to adult.

The 12-15 age group is also the focus of the Bahá'í junior youth groups held around Australia, as reported in the previous issue.

Education for Peace focuses on developing - in both words and actions - four qualities within the students: knowledge, wisdom, spiritual perception and eloquent speech.

Students attend an annual eight-day residential school held at the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning in the NSW southern highlands. They also complete monthly assignments over the two-year program.

Graduates can then complete an Advanced Education for Peace course and go on to attend an Education for Peace Leadership program in which they are trained to work with junior youth.

They may then be selected as faculty members for the core program, providing a continuing source of teachers that helps the program to be sustainable and self-generating.



*Professor Fazel Naghdy*

## Religious leaders meet together

Fifteen Bahá'ís joined more than 150 people representing seven religions and many denominations at the national multi-faith leaders forum held at the Mercure Hotel in Sydney in June.

Hosted by the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO), the forum aimed to bring together members of all faith traditions in Australia to improve communication and understanding, identify opportunities for strengthening relationships, and develop recommendations for government and faith communities.

Keynote speaker Rev Professor James Haire, Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, called on religions and religious leaders to take responsibility for how faiths interact with each other, and to focus on values of transparency, joint action and education.

Professor Haire said that Australia has a real opportunity for getting it right in interfaith relations and thus providing an example for the rest of the world. He encouraged those involved in interfaith dialogue to persevere in their efforts and stressed the need to keep "enlarging the tent" to include those of other traditions.

Monash University academic Professor Gary Bouma said that "bringing people together and building networks is the best way to terror-proof our society."

Other keynote speakers included Cardinal George Pell, Catholic Archbishop of Sydney;



*Some of the participants at the APRO forum. L to r: Rabbi Zalman Kastel, Rev Prof James Haire, Hon Philip Ruddock MP, Josie Lacey OAM, Cardinal George Pell, Ikebal Patel, Prof Desmond Cahill*

Jeremy Jones AM, Executive Council of Australian Jewry; and Professor Desmond Cahill from RMIT University. Federal Attorney-General, the Hon Philip Ruddock MP, opened the forum.

The Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, Mr John Walker, joined leaders of the other faith communities on a panel in the closing session of the forum.

The panellists agreed that faith is a motivation to building a better Australia, not a barrier.

The forum recommendations emphasised the importance of education, accurate media reporting, and strong multicultural and interfaith policies, including support for local interfaith initiatives.

The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations is made up of representatives of major faith bodies in Australia. The Australian Bahá'í Community is one of its members.

## Faiths unite on climate

Representatives from nine faith traditions joined together with climate change experts in a series of multifaith seminars called "Climate - Faith - Change" held in Sydney in June.

Organised by the Faith Ecology Network, the three seminars focused on practical action that can be taken to promote sustainable energy sources, reduce reliance on motor vehicles, and lower energy consumption in buildings, including places of worship.

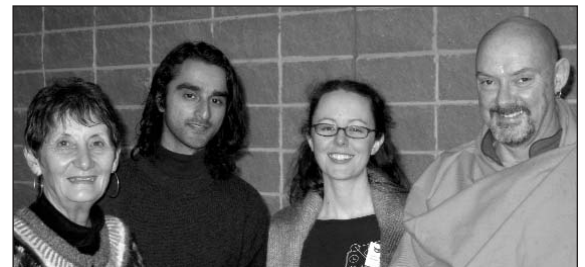
The seminars also featured the launch of a joint statement on climate change.

"In a spirit of cooperation, drawing from our

faiths, we offer motivation and ethical principles to help peoples of the Earth change their ways," the statement said.

"We regard Earth as a gift from a power beyond us, called God by many, and acknowledge that we have responsibilities towards Earth," it said.

"We commit ourselves to change our personal and institutional lifestyles to reduce our carbon and ecological footprint."



*Bahá'í representative Dimity Podger (centre) with fellow FEN members Anne Lanyon (far left) and Mahesh Radhakrishnan, and Hindu holy man Purohit Ramanujaacharya (far right).*

## Hearts need to change: barrister



*Norman Laing speaking prior to the annual service for reconciliation at the Bahá'í House of Worship*

Guest speaker Norman Laing called on those attending a reconciliation service at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney to maintain the grassroots momentum for reconciliation.

"Aboriginal people remain the most socio-economically disadvantaged demographic, and are still a people in 2007 playing an horrific game of catch-up," Mr Laing told participants at a reception before the service.

Most Aboriginal people had not benefited from Australia's increased prosperity in recent years, he said. "Increased prosperity of the middle-class ... creates a greater focus on our own economic position, rather than creating a spirit of generosity."

Held at the close of National Reconciliation Week in June, the service drew on the social justice teachings found in the scriptures of the world religions. Those attending included invited guests, members of the public and Bahá'ís.

Mr Laing called for a sharing of improvements in living standards, health and education.

"It's the hearts of people that need to change," he said. "This goes beyond politics and who is the government.

"It's not a matter of pointing the finger anywhere, but of getting on with the job and fixing the problems."

### Child deaths preventable

Pointing to the Aboriginal infant mortality rate, which is two to three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal Australians, Mr Laing said: "We should not be recruiting one more soldier, nor should we buy one more war plane, whilst we still have children dying because of factors easily prevented."

A Dunghutti man from Kempsey on the north coast of New South Wales, Mr Laing practises as a barrister in Garfield Barwick Chambers in Sydney.

He previously served with the Royal Australian Army Legal Corps and the Australian Military Prosecutions Office, and was a member of the INTERFET contingent in East Timor in 1999.

## From India to Wagga

Bitá and Ali Jaber found themselves thrust into the limelight when they agreed to participate in a new exhibition at the Museum of the Riverina.

Titled "From All Four Corners," the multimedia exhibition uses words, pictures, objects and film to tell the personal stories of migrants who have come to Wagga from around the world.

The Jabers, who are members of the Bahá'í Faith, have made the NSW regional centre their home since arriving in Australia more than 20 years ago. After meeting as students in India, they had been unable to return to their home country of Iran due to the persecution of Bahá'ís there.

After telling their story on film, the couple were asked to describe their experiences before an audience of 300 at the exhibition's opening night in June.

"I count my blessings every day for being able to live in this beautiful country," Mrs Jaber said.

She thanked locals for being very welcoming to new arrivals.

"It was because of those smiles and caring that we could face the problems and challenge the difficulties and so you all have a big share in our happiness," she said.

Media coverage included interviews on SBS Radio and ABC Radio National's "Bush Telegraph" program.

A story in the local newspaper, the *Daily Advertiser*, described the couple's community service in assisting other immigrants to settle in Wagga, and their support for local multicultural groups and Harmony Day.

Both work in Wagga, Mr Jaber for the Roads and Traffic Authority NSW, and Mrs Jaber as a library assistant at Charles Sturt University.

Last year the younger of their two daughters, Nava, who completed her Higher School Certificate at Koorlingal High School, was named the school's Citizen of the Year for her "caring, courtesy and courage."



*Bitá and Ali Jaber with their daughters Sháida and Nava*

# Children learn to put service into practice

Children from the Bahá'í children's classes in South Perth recently put their lessons into practice, raising funds for the WA Cancer Council by holding a "Kidz Café."

The students, aged 10 and 11 years, spent weeks organising the menu, decorations, advertising, uniforms and invitations for friends and family.

When the day came, they worked hard together to serve more than 100 people, keeping their customers happy while raising more than \$900 to help children with cancer.

"Each term the children undertake a service project as part of their classes," said their teacher, Payum Hadian, 26.

"This term they decided to organise the Kidz Café and chose the Cancer Council as the charity they wanted to support," Mr Hadian said.

"By organising activities like the Kidz Café, the children get the opportunity to put into action what they have been learning," he said.

"As they grow older, we hope the act of giving service to the community becomes a natural part of their lives and they develop a world-embracing vision."

## Selfless attitude

The children were singled out for praise by their local Member of Parliament, Mr Kim Wilkie, who learned of their endeavour through the local newspaper.

"What a wonderful result you achieved in raising \$900 for the WA Cancer Council," he wrote in a letter to the students.

"For those so young, your selfless attitude for those children suffering from cancer is exceedingly praiseworthy."

In Sydney, members of the Lane Cove Bahá'í junior youth group, aged 12-15, took time out of their school holidays to paint the exhibition space, foyer and main hall at the Lane Cove Music and Cultural Centre.

"We were so impressed with the willingness of the girls to do such hard work," said Robyn Mah, who is the Director of the Centre.

"They are really delightful and positive young people, a credit to themselves, their parents and their group leader," Ms Mah said.



*Chefs and waitresses at the Kidz Café, South Perth*

Bahá'í children's classes and junior youth groups are held every week in venues around Australia and are open to children from all backgrounds, subject to parental approval.

The classes are conducted in a range of settings, from small groups in private homes to more formal programs held in school classrooms.

Taught by trained volunteers, the students learn about the history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith through stories, songs, craft, games and group activities.

The classes also equip children with the understanding and skills required to be world citizens. Students are encouraged to explore ways in which they can contribute to society and serve humanity.



*Shabnam Fanaian (left) and Sarah Creedy painting at the Lane Cove Music and Cultural Centre*



*Azita Sobhani, who represented the Australian Bahá'í Community at the Commission on the Status of Women in 2007, was one of the participants at the roundtable*

## Roundtable discusses financing for gender equality

Twenty government and non-government representatives came together at the Bahá'í Centre in Canberra in August for a roundtable discussion on "Financing for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women."

This is the priority theme for consideration at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2008.

The roundtable was a new approach to consultations between government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the lead-up to the Commission, held annually in New York from late February to mid March.

It brought together representatives of national women's NGOs, the Australian Council for International Development, the Australian Government Office for Women and AusAID.

"The Australian Bahá'í Community has been represented at the Commission on the Status of Women for over a decade," said Bahá'í representative Tessa Scrine.

"We were delighted to support this roundtable which saw a greater emphasis on engaging Australian women in the issues before the Commission," Ms Scrine said.

### Issues identified

Participants said that "financing gender equality" encompasses gender-sensitive budgeting, development cooperation and aid efforts, funding for the women's movement and other components.

The roundtable identified a range of questions that need further exploration.

What are the gender-related goals of the women's sector and women in Australia?

Can women engage in our current mechanisms and structures for allocating funding and resources, and how can they be adjusted to improve women's engagement and outcomes for women?

How can we estimate the financial resource requirements for achieving our gender goals, and how can the needed resources be mobilised?

Over coming months, women's NGO networks will be consulting with their members about these and other questions and issues identified during the roundtable.

A discussion paper arising from the roundtable is available on request.

## Winners awarded

Winners of the 2007 Advancing Australia Fairly competition received their awards at a prizegiving ceremony held at NSW Parliament House in June.

The Advancing Australia Fairly competition encourages university students to reflect on the development of Australia as a harmonious society. The theme of this year's competition was "What it means to be an Australian."

It is co-organised by the Alfred Dreyfus Unit of B'nai B'rith, the Australian Bahá'í community and the Australian Law Students Association, with the support of a wide range of community organisations.

First prize in the visual section of the competition was awarded

to a combined entry by Sherley Visinoni, Wilari Tedjosiswoyo and Salvatore Mangiafico, higher degree students in the Department of Medicine at the University of Melbourne.

The winner of the essay section was Abhishek Verma, a fifth-year medical student at the University of New South Wales.

The prizes were presented by Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, NSW Minister Assisting the Premier on Citizenship, the Hon Barbara Perry MP, and NSW Shadow Minister for Citizenship, Gladys Berejiklian MP.

Ms Perry praised the competition as "the perfect example of diversity in action."

"This project is an extension of the tremendous and ongoing contribution the organisations make to our community," Ms Perry said.

*Salvatore Mangiafico, Sherley Visinoni and Wilari Tedjosiswoyo receiving their prize in the Advancing Australia Fairly competition.*



# Wisdom Man lives on

When writer Camilla Chance first met Aboriginal elder Banjo Clarke 32 years ago, she sensed their meeting would have depth and significance for the rest of her life.

Today, more than seven years since Banjo's death and four years since the publication of *Wisdom Man: The Compassionate Life and Beliefs of a Remarkable Aboriginal Elder*, her prediction continues to be realised.

Banjo Clarke was an elder of the Kirrae Whurrong, who lived on his people's traditional lands in the Framlingham forest, east of Warrnambool in Victoria.

Soon after their 1975 meeting, he asked Ms Chance to assist in recording stories of his life for eventual publication in a book.

She recorded their interviews over more than two decades and they were published in 2003 as *Wisdom Man*. It was a first-person account of his life and his philosophy of love and compassion for all, recorded in his unique style of speaking.

Published with the blessing of six of Banjo's children and with a foreword penned by former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, the book was welcomed by *The Australian* newspaper as "a considerable work of reconciliation."

It has appeared on best-seller lists, with more than 11,000 copies sold.

For Ms Chance, the book was also a personal tribute to her friend and spiritual companion, both being members of the Bahá'í Faith.

Ms Chance said the book has resonated with readers from many backgrounds, including

those she met during a recent tour in which she told Banjo's story to Spanish-speaking audiences in Argentina and Uruguay.

Adopted as recommended reading for reconciliation groups throughout Australia, the book has also won a positive reception in Canada and the United States. It has been praised by Joe Bruchac, Native American author and leader, who described it as "a moving and inspirational story, one that speaks to our common humanity."

It is used as source material for a course on Australian literature at the Sorbonne University in Paris, and has been translated and published in Korean by Yolimwon Press. The possibility of a Spanish translation is now being explored.

## Unsung Hero award

For Ms Chance, who was born in England, the most profound response came in 2005 at the launch of the book's second edition in Federation Square, Melbourne.

She was called unexpectedly to the stage, where it was announced that she was to receive the "Unsung Hero" award, a presentation normally restricted to Aboriginal recipients.

Asked about the qualities that qualified Ms Chance for the award, Vicki Armstrong, the award's founder, said that Ms Chance quickly empathised with people.

"She is caring, compassionate, understanding and completely non-judgemental," Ms Armstrong said.



Camilla Chance with the "Unsung Hero" award

## Borrow a live book

The NSW regional centre of Lismore has launched the first "living library" in Australia.

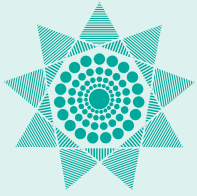
The "books" in a living library are people - usually representing groups frequently confronted with prejudice or discrimination - who can be "borrowed" for a private conversation in a safe space by "readers" who want to know more about the lives of others.

Popular in continental Europe, the living library aims to use personal contact and new

experiences to reduce and prevent racism and challenge stereotypes. The Lismore Living Library holds regular monthly reading sessions and has recently received a grant to establish a national living library strategy.

Amelia Hosseini, a living book representing "Bahá'í youth", is borrowed by a "reader".





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For more information on the stories in this newsletter, or any aspect of the Australian Bahá'í community and its activities, please contact:

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## Secret memo confirms policy

A confidential memo written by Iranian officials in 2006 confirms that expulsion of Bahá'í students from Iranian universities is official government policy.

About 200 Bahá'í students were enrolled in Iranian universities for the 2006-2007 academic year. It was the first time Bahá'ís had been admitted to Iran's institutions of higher education for more than 25 years.

More than half of the students - at least 128 - have subsequently been expelled. The newly-obtained memo reveals that this is official government policy, something Iranian officials have repeatedly denied.

"If Bahá'í individuals, at the time of enrolment at university or in the course of their studies, are identified as Bahá'ís, they must be expelled from university," states the memo, marked "confidential," which was addressed by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology to 81 universities around the country. The Ministry oversees all state-run universities.

## Results blocked

More than 800 of the 1050 Iranian Bahá'ís who sat for university entrance examinations for the coming academic year have not received their test results, allegedly because their files are "incomplete." Without the test results, the

## South African documentary airs

A new documentary about three Bahá'ís and how they practise their faith has been aired on television on South Africa.

Eunice Mabaso has housed hundreds of orphans in her home over the years, providing shelter, love and protection to many children who had been living in poverty on the streets.

Iraj Abedian, an economist and policy adviser to the government, works on a project that assists low-income working people to finance their homes. Tahirih Matthee helps provide training programs for people with no experience using computers and the Internet.

All three are members of the diverse Bahá'í

students have been unable to apply to university for the coming academic year.

In the wake of the new evidence that Iran has lied about its intention to allow Bahá'í students into universities, the international governing council of the Bahá'í community has sent a letter to Iranian Bahá'í youth encouraging them to respond with composure, perseverance, and a redoubled commitment to work towards the common good in Iran.

"With an illumined conscience, with a world-embracing vision, with no partisan political agenda, and with due regard for law and order, strive for the regeneration of your country," wrote the Universal House of Justice in its letter dated 9 September 2007.



The Bahá'í cemetery near Najafabad, Iran was destroyed by bulldozer in September, demolishing more than 100 graves. It was the second Iranian Bahá'í cemetery to be destroyed in recent months.

community of South Africa. They reflect on how their faith inspires their work.

*Bahá'í Faith: A Way Forward* can be seen on the Web at [www.doubletake.tv/cms/way-forward-english](http://www.doubletake.tv/cms/way-forward-english)

