

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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Thank you teachers



"This is the first time in 18 years of teaching that someone has recognised and appreciated the work I have done as a teacher". Comments such as this were heard around the country as Baha'is from Cairns in the north of the country to Hobart in the south, Wollongong in the east and Perth in the west took time out to thank teachers.

In the Melbourne suburb of Eltham, teachers, school principals, a local mayor and members of parliament gathered at a dinner and special presentation for teachers. The Victorian state Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Liz Beattie, was the keynote speaker.

"I commend the Manningham Bahá'í Community for hosting this dinner to pay tribute to teachers. They are not always given the generosity and the credit that they deserve," she said. Mrs Beattie encouraged the audience of 160 to reflect on the effect that their own teachers had made on their lives. "It is important that as a community we acknowledge not only the dedication of teachers, but also their professionalism" she said.

The highlight of the evening was the presentation to teachers. Mrs Beattie presented six school principals with books for the school library and 80 school teachers with certificates of appreciation. Fifteen volunteer Bahá'í children's class teachers were given certificates of appreciation by National Bahá'í Education Officer and member of the national governing body of the Bahá'ís of Australia, Kath Podger.

Teachers present were delighted that their service to the community was recognised. "I feel so honoured - thank you" remarked one teacher. "Wonderful night, great community job" said another.

Children show appreciation

Bahá'ís in other places showed their appreciation of teachers by organising special morning teas, dinners and presentations at school assemblies. In the weeks leading up to teacher appreciation events, children attending Bahá'í religious education classes in government schools and after school Bahá'í education classes were encouraged to recognise the contribution that teachers make to their lives and show appreciation to their teachers.

One such child was 10 year old Amelia Mahboobi, who captivated the audience at another dinner held in honour of teachers in Melbourne. She told the teachers, "You are like a miner that is striving every day to search out and discover new, hidden jewels within the tunnels of the mine. Thank you for helping me to discover the gems that are hidden in me."

Teacher appreciation events are held throughout October to mark World Teachers Day, which was initiated by UNESCO in 1994. It is recognised internationally on 5 October and in Australia on the last Friday of that month.



Above left: Victorian Parliamentary Secretary Liz Beattie (right) presents a gift to Rose Walthers, the assistant principal of Bulleen Heights School

Above: Darwin Bahá'í Jane Baker-Jones (centre) makes a presentation to teachers at Nakara Primary School in the Northern Territory

Film festival a hit



Winning filmmaker
Farnaz Fanaian (centre)
celebrates with family
members

Budding filmmakers emerged from around Australia to participate in the inaugural Bahá'í Film Festival, held before an audience of 700 people at the Sydney Bahá'í Centre in October 2004.

The festival attracted 28 entries from Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Entrants had to produce a short film between five and ten minutes long exploring the theme of "Harmony".

The top 14 entries were screened to the appreciative festival audience before the five-member judging panel gave the award for Best Film to "Sweet Differences", by Wollongong-based Farnaz Fanaian and Antonio Devante.

"Sweet Differences" tells the story of a Spanish boy growing up in Australia, who struggles between his family's traditions and the values and lifestyle of his peers. His relationship with an Australian girl is initially a source of conflict, but by the end of the film it is the girlfriend who becomes a bridge between the son and his mother.

Filmmaker Farnaz Fanaian says the project was inspired by her own experiences growing

up as a migrant in the NSW town of Kiama. She has just completed her Masters of Journalism at Wollongong University, and hopes to go on to make documentaries.

Dr Michelle Langford, a media lecturer from the University of Technology Sydney, praised the festival as a community initiative designed to foster creativity and talent.

"I see initiatives such as this as a wonderful way to introduce young people especially to the experience of making film, that with any luck might lead to them becoming our filmmakers of the future", said Dr Langford, who attended the festival.

"The festival aims to create artistic capacity and harmony within the community and its vision is to promote the Bahá'í principles of peace and harmony through the film medium", explained festival organiser Mehrzad Mumtahan, who hopes that it will now become an annual event.

Further information can be obtained from the festival website, www.australianbahaiilmfest.com.

Education for Peace Institute formed

A Bahá'í-inspired institute was established in 2004 with a commitment to assisting in building a culture of peace.

The Education for Peace Institute of Australia is a not-for-profit non-government organisation that offers a range of programs for children from eight years to adult. Its programs are based on the Education for

Peace curriculum which has been developed and applied in various forms in the Bahá'í community

over the past 12 years.

Based on the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, the programs start from the assumption that human beings

have a spiritual reality as well as a physical one. Peaceful attitudes, deeds and relationships, including inner peace, are manifestations of this spiritual reality. Hence the programs are designed to empower participants to discover their inner self, cultivate their spiritual qualities, and channel them towards building a culture of peace using the skills required for peace making. They aim to develop self-esteem within a peaceful and supportive, yet creative and dynamic learning environment.

Through the Institute, it is hoped that these programs can now be offered to a broader audience. They are available in a range of formats including distance education, classes, camps and residential schools. The institute currently has an annual intake of 400 students.

Further information can be obtained by emailing enquiry@efpi.edu.au



Education for
Peace students

South Australian woman makes Rotary history

South Australian Rotarians have marked the organisation's centenary year by choosing Katina Jones as their first female District Governor.

Ms Jones, who is a Bahá'í, was inducted on 4 July 2004 at a ceremony in Adelaide. District 9500 is one of the largest Rotary districts in the world, covering most of South Australia and extending as far as Alice Springs. It has 50 clubs with more than 1500 members.

In April 2005 Ms Jones will welcome hundreds of these members to their Centenary Convention in Alice Springs.

Ms Jones was first invited to join her local chapter of Rotary, Adelaide Light, in November 1996, becoming its first female member. After six months, she was elected to serve as club president.

She says she joined Rotary because it was an opportunity to live her values and to influence change. In her new role as District Governor, she has a chance to make even more of a mark.

"As District Governor so far, I have introduced a new organisational structure which includes a consultative committee", Ms Jones said.

"The organisational chart is in the shape of a circle with the District Governor in the middle instead of the top as in traditional charts. The concept is that our district has a fluid structure and people work together".

"Traditionally, Rotary's concept of management is that the DG can do whatever he likes. I have encouraged a bottom-up approach and conducted training programs in consultation skills and have included everyone in the decision-making process".

This will be a busy year for Ms Jones. She is also the chairperson of the Bahá'í Council for South Australia, director of her company, Equals International, a mother of four and grandmother.



Katina Jones with her husband, Jeffrey

Rhodes scholar seeks to make a difference

The recipient of the 2005 Rhodes Scholarship for Victoria is Farnaz Sabet, a 24-year-old Bahá'í medical student.

Born in Iran in 1980, Ms Sabet's family fled to Zambia the following year to escape from persecution, migrating to Australia when she was four. She has just completed the sixth year of her medical degree at Monash University.

She plans to devote her time at Oxford University to a Masters in Development Studies, which she hopes will complement her medical knowledge with the skills need to effect a broader transformation in communities.

Ms Sabet says her work in disadvantaged communities - including serving at Bugando Hospital in Mwanza, Tanzania, as well as a five-week stint at Kintore in remote central Australia - has taught her that medical skills can have only limited effect in improving a patient's well-being when adequate health can be prevented by many non-medical factors connected to social, political, cultural and power structures.

"My medical education now has to be balanced by humane and spiritual concerns", she said. "I want to understand comprehensively how progress occurs and gain as many insights and skills as I can to enable me to instigate and appreciate the impact that change can bring."

A Rhodes Scholar is selected as much for their personal qualities, community awareness and diverse interests as for their outstanding academic abilities. Ms Sabet says she was taken by surprise when she received the prestigious award, which followed a series of rigorous interviews.

"I was utterly taken aback when they finally selected me", she said, "because I sought only to be true to what I am, and never tried to tell them what I thought they wanted to hear".

Ms Sabet is undertaking an internship at the Royal Darwin Hospital this year, before taking up her scholarship in 2006.



Farnaz Sabet (photograph courtesy of The Australian)

White ribbon day celebrated



Heather Wain, National Secretary, UNIFEM, attending the White Ribbon Day function with Cathi Moore, Board Member, YWCA Canberra.

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (IDEVAW), also known as White Ribbon Day, was marked in Canberra on 25 November 2004 by an event co-hosted by the Australian Bahá'í Community, Amnesty International Australia, the National Council of Churches, UNIFEM, and the YWCA.

One hundred people attended the function, held in the ACT Legislative Assembly building. Attendees included Ngunnawal elders, members of government, and heads of human rights and women's organisations.

Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, said that it is important for all men to declare publicly that they will not condone or tolerate violence against women. She described violence against women as an insidious blight on Australian society and called on perpetrators of violence within families to consider the rights of their children, who are being forced to grow up in a culture of trauma and violence.

Men must commit to equality

Mick Gentleman MLA, representing the ACT Chief Minister, gave a thoughtful speech about the role that men can play in changing a culture of violence against women.

"If this situation is to change, men need to be part of the solution", he observed. "Men must commit to full equality for women ... The culture of silence surrounding violence against women must be broken. We must talk about this violence, we must teach our children never to practice or condone violence.

"And perhaps most importantly, we as men need to stand up and say to other men that violence against women is absolutely unacceptable".

Other speakers included Commander Steve Lancaster, representing the Australian Federal Police, Menslink CEO, Richard Shanahan, and Australia Institute Research Fellow and White Ribbon Day Ambassador, Michael Flood. The Canberra Raiders sent two team members to the event so that they could officially receive white ribbons to show the National Rugby League's support for IDEVAW.

"Soul 2 Soul", the ACT Bahá'í Community's youth dance group, ended the program with a powerful drama/dance on domestic violence.

In December 1999, the United Nations General Assembly declared 25 November the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The wearing of a white ribbon on this day is a pledge never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women.

Children took over the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney on Sunday 21 November 2004 for a special service to mark Universal Children's Day. Children read all of the texts at the service, which is an annual event, as well as performing in a choir. Afterwards they participated in a range of activities including face painting, art and dance performances.



Men must be engaged for equality to be achieved

Full equality between women and men can only be achieved with the involvement of men and boys, and their role requires far greater attention and action, as well as the allocation of appropriate resources.

This is the position advocated by the Australian Bahá'í Community's submission to the Office for Women as part of the review of Australia's progress in addressing the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.

The submission acknowledges that progress has been made in promoting the advancement of women in Australia over the past decade, particularly in the fields of education and training.

"It is a matter of concern, however, that almost ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women ... there is still considerable progress to be made in achieving the objectives of the Platform for Action", it says.

Not just a women's issue

Recognition that equality is not just a "women's issue" is critical to greater success in this field, according to the submission.

"While in no way devaluing the important work undertaken by women, women's organisations and women's agencies, the role of men and boys in the full realisation of the objectives of the Platform for Action is of decisive importance and requires far greater attention and action, as well as the allocation of appropriate resources by Government and civil society", it says.

While the consultations on the role of men and boys in gender equality that were conducted

with national women's secretariats by the Office for Women in 2004 were welcomed, such consultations must be extended to include men themselves, the submission says.

It further recommends the establishment of a national expert or advisory group, comprising both women and men, on the role of men and boys in gender equality.

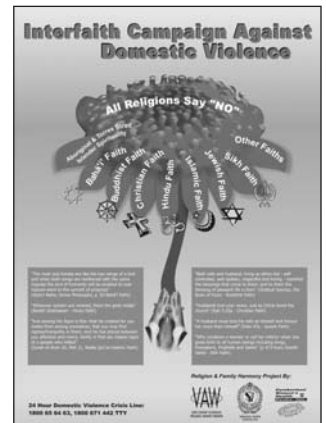
Oneness of humanity

While the submission notes the importance of legal and other institutional reforms in achieving equality, it recognises that these must be accompanied by a shift in attitudes: what it describes as "an infusion of spiritual values".

"Such [legal and institutional] changes can only be effective ... if they occur in tandem with the profound evolution of personal and social values and attitudes, which will ultimately transform the underlying ethos of social institutions", it says.

This attitudinal change should be grounded in the broad principle of the oneness of humanity. "It is in the recognition of the oneness of humanity that hearts will soften, minds will open, and the attitudes of men and women will be transformed ... if we are to establish justice, peace and order in an interdependent world, this principle must guide all interactions, including those between men and women".

To this end, the submission calls for an expansion of human rights and values education initiatives in Australia. It also highlights the role that religious leaders and people of faith can play in "reaffirming and promoting those values that can inspire in individuals the will to implement the Platform for Action".



Members of the Bahá'í community of Baulkham Hills, Sydney worked with representatives of other religions in the development and launch of a multi-faith poster against domestic violence in 2004. The poster carries the slogan "All Religions Say NO", accompanied by relevant quotations from the Scriptures of seven different religions.



800 mourners attended the special service for victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami held at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney on Sunday 16 January. A multi-faith memorial service organised by the Bahá'í community of Kingborough at the Hobart Town Hall on the same day was attended by over 200 worshippers. Bahá'í communities around the country hosted or participated in inter-faith services to pray for the victims of the tsunami, express support and collect funds for relief and reconstruction efforts.

Melbourne hospital hosts Tranquillity Zones



Dr Naysun Saeedi

Bahá'í staff and students at the Royal Melbourne Hospital have worked together with its Pastoral Care and Chaplaincy Department to offer regular "Tranquillity Zones" to patients, their families and hospital staff from all religious backgrounds.

Held every second Friday afternoon at the hospital's "Place of Worship", the half-hour events are billed as "an oasis of calm and well-being for your body, mind and soul".

Following a simple format, the Tranquillity Zones comprise short readings from the world's various sacred Scriptures. Carefully selected relaxing music, dim lighting, candles and flowers are used to create a tranquil atmosphere that encourages everyone to reflect on the words and find their own levels of meaning.

No-one interprets, no-one seeks to impose their knowledge, no-one teaches a particular method and no-one charges any money. The events are designed to be reliable and spiritually supportive; inclusive and non-threatening; free of all proselytising; and sensitive to the needs of patients and staff.

The term "Tranquillity Zone" was coined in the United Kingdom, but similar down-to-earth group meditations are held in all kinds of places by Bahá'ís to bring together participants from diverse backgrounds.

Aid to healing

"Hospitals are ideal places for Tranquillity Zones because they provide a much needed spiritual focus in a highly pressured workplace, especially during times of difficulty", said Dr Naysun Saeedi, a resident psychiatrist at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, who is also one of the organisers.

"They can also aid the healing process, offering patients and their families a chance to take time out during a difficult period, reflect on their spiritual well-being, and replenish their inner strength", he observed.

Initiated in November 2004, the Tranquillity Zones at Royal Melbourne are already attracting regular attendees. According to Dr Saeedi, the feedback has been very positive.

A series of Tranquillity Zones has also been running successfully in a high school in the Melbourne suburb of Balwyn for over 18 months, where it meets similar needs of students, particularly those under the pressure of assignments and exams in their final two years of school.

Tranquillity Zones are also held in homes, community halls, parks and on beaches: whenever and wherever they are needed.

Bahá'í Faith an independent religion

It is a common misconception that the Bahá'í Faith is syncretic, or that it is an amalgam that adopts elements from a number of different religions.

This impression is perhaps understandable, given that public Bahá'í services often include selections from the Scriptures of a number of religions.

However, it is also incorrect. The Bahá'í Faith is an independent religion. It has its own laws and its own Scriptures, which are used in internal Bahá'í worship and reflection. These are the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, who lived from 1817 to 1892. Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh was a prophet or messenger of God and that His writings are the revelation of God's message to humanity for modern times.

Bahá'u'lláh is regarded by Bahá'ís as the most

recent in a long line of prophets that includes the founders of all the great religions - Abraham, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and others whose names are lost in the mists of time. Each brought to His time and people what Bahá'ís believe is the "progressive revelation" of God's will to humanity. Hence all of the Scriptures are respected as divinely inspired.

It is this belief in the essential oneness of all the religions - what Bahá'u'lláh described as "the changeless faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future" - that underlies the Bahá'í commitment to working with other faiths to promote unity between all religions.

A recently-released report on "Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia" acknowledges the inter-faith work of the Bahá'í



community. Authored by Desmond Cahill, Gary Bouma, Hass Dellal and Michael Leahy, the report notes that "the Bahá'í community has been very active in bringing faith communities together" with exhibitions and other activities. Public Bahá'í devotional services, sometimes known as "Tranquillity Zones", at which participants are invited to read from any of the Scriptures, are also increasingly common in all parts of Australia.

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í Faith remains a separate religion. The fact that it arose in an Islamic environment, and that its founders and early adherents had been Muslims, does not make Bahá'ís Muslim any more than Christians should be considered to be Jewish. Today Bahá'ís around the world come from all religious backgrounds, but they must withdraw from their previous religion when they become Bahá'ís.

Sirus Naraqí - a lifetime of service

Professor Sirus Naraqí, a leading and much-loved member of the Australian Bahá'í community, passed away on 18 August 2004 after a prolonged illness. He had been Professor of Medicine at the University of Sydney and Associate Dean at Nepean Hospital, Penrith since 1998.

Described in an obituary published by the Medical Journal of Australia as "an inspiring and warm-spirited doctor with a deep commitment to bettering the lives of the underprivileged", Sirus Naraqí was born in Iran in 1942. He trained and worked there as a general practitioner before completing his postgraduate medical training in the United States, where he later practiced as a specialist in internal medicine.

Due to his desire to serve in areas of greatest need, he moved to Papua New Guinea with his family in the 1970s, taking up the Chair of Medicine at the University of PNG in 1983. There he made a significant contribution to research on malaria, snakebite, meningitis and other rural health issues facing the region. He also worked towards improving the country's health infrastructure, placing particular emphasis on the training of local doctors and specialists. In 1999, he was awarded a CBE for his work in Papua New Guinea.

Speaking at a symposium held in Professor Naraqí's honour at the University of Sydney less than a week before his death, heart specialist Professor Sir Isi Kevau described him as a "special chapter in the history of medicine in Papua New Guinea".

"I thank God that we in Papua New Guinea were given the opportunity to cherish the knowledge and wisdom that this very special

individual exuded in the 18 years he lived in the country - he has a very special place in God's garden of roses", said Sir Isi, the first Papua New Guinean medical professor, who was trained by Professor Naraqí.

Following his move to Australia to take up the position at Sydney University in 1998, Professor Naraqí became one of the founders of the new Nepean Research Foundation, and quickly demonstrated his remarkable abilities as a teacher.

"He is ... a well-loved academic among medical students who have respected his dedication to his profession and his generosity of spirit in the training and mentoring of professionals", read a tribute published at the symposium.

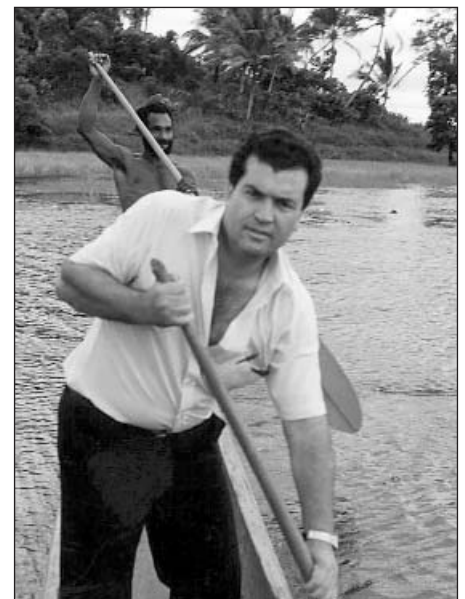
Professor Naraqí had served as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors, the highest individual rank that can be bestowed in the Bahá'í Faith, since 1985. In this capacity he provided advice and encouragement to Bahá'í institutions and individuals throughout the Australasian region.

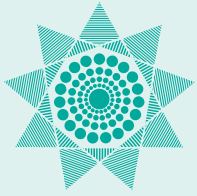
The Medical Journal of Australia obituary observed that "The entirety of Sirus - his personal and professional actions - was inspired and strengthened by his Bahá'í faith".

More than 700 mourners attended his funeral in Mona Vale, Sydney. Professor Naraqí is survived by his wife Mitra and children Ladan, Naysan, Anisa and Gulita.



Sirus Naraqí spent much of his free time visiting remote areas of Papua New Guinea providing medical treatment.





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Cultural destruction continues in Iran

The Australian Bahá'í community has spoken out against the continued destruction of sacred and historic sites in Iran. In a half-page advertisement published in the Weekend Australian in September 2004, the community described a series of demolitions that point to a campaign of "cultural cleansing" by Iran's ruling authorities, who are determined to remove all traces of the Bahá'í Faith, the country's largest religious minority.

The community was prompted to act by the demolition in Tehran of the stately home (pictured right) of Mirza Abbas Nuri, father of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Mirza Abbas was a renowned nineteenth century provincial governor and widely regarded as one of Iran's greatest calligraphers. The statement, which can be found on the national Bahá'í website www.bahai.org.au, describes the house as a "precious example of Islamic-Iranian architecture" which has been destroyed solely out of the hatred that Iran's extremist mullahs hold towards the Bahá'ís.

Earlier in 2004, the gravesite of Quddus, a prominent figure in early Bahá'í history, was razed to the ground despite protest from Bahá'ís around the world.



UN passes new resolution

In December 2004, for the 17th time since 1985, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution expressing "serious concern" over the human rights situation in Iran.

The resolution specifically noted "continuing discrimination against persons belonging to minorities, including Christians, Jews, and Sunnis, and the increased discrimination against the Bahá'ís, including cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, the denial of free worship or of publicly carrying out communal affairs, the disregard of property rights, the destruction of sites of religious importance, the suspension of social, educational, and community-related activities, and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, and other benefits".



The Brilliant Stars Bahá'í Children's Choir performed for the third year in a row at the Christmas Carols at the Fremantle Hospital Children's Ward in December 2004. The choir is a group of children aged six to 14 years who have been performing songs of peace and love at community functions in Perth for the past four years.