



Initiatives of Change

A hope for Afghanistan

In 2010 women from the Creators of Peace program responded to an appeal from Afghan Australian charity worker Mahboba Rawi OAM to help her send two young Afghans for a six-month internship at the IofC centre in India, Asia Plateau. Funds were raised at public and private events across Australia. (See Newsbriefs, October 2010). Australians Keith and Rachel Mills recently joined the Asia Plateau interns program and met the Afghans. Keith sent this account:



Khalid Mohamadi (left) and Javed Orya (right)

Afghanistan is a place that many of us think has been left behind, war-torn and forsaken by its maker. The story of two young men I met in Asia Plateau, Panchgani, challenges this notion.

In the photograph they seem no different to boys the world over. T-shirts, jeans, ready smiles. You do not see the remarkable story of change behind their happy faces.

Khalid Mohamadi and Javed Orya lived out their childhoods under the oppressive Taliban regime. Khalid was born with only one arm. He was still a child when his father and grandparents were executed outside their home. The government was punishing those who did not speak Arabic. Khalid's family spoke Persian.

With women not able to leave the house under Taliban rule, Khalid became, at six, the family's sole bread winner. He scratched a tiny living by selling biscuits on the streets.

Four years ago, at fifteen, he lost his eighteen-year-old sister to cancer. She had received no medical attention. A deep anger filled Khalid's heart. He hated his uncle for refusing to assist the family financially, especially in his sister's time of need. He hated his other sister who was also unable to help. He hated the regime which had impoverished and murdered his family. And he hated God who had seemingly cursed his family, his body and his future.

Then Mahboba Rawi, founder of the charity Mahboba's Promise, selected Khalid and Javed for the two internships and the young men found themselves in Panchgani, India. Asia Plateau was a strange place to them, with an emphasis on quiet time, personal change and something called The Inner Voice. Sullen and introverted, they initially stayed in their rooms, emerging only for meals. They kept their eyes down and spoke to no one. Within a week, they

both wanted to go home.

Whether it was a single event, or the gradual effect of exposure to warm-hearted and dynamic people, a transformation started in the hearts of both young men. They began to talk, to smile, and to share their story with people eager to listen. Khalid was provided the money for a prosthetic arm. Whole in body and peaceful in spirit, his first endeavour was to write letters to his uncle and his sister, asking forgiveness for his years of bitterness. Before he and Javed returned, generous individuals at Asia Plateau donated a laptop for his sister's studies.

Khalid has decided he wants to be a doctor, to help the disadvantaged communities in his country. He and Javed have taken much value from their time at Asia Plateau, yet have given more in return. For me, it is the gift of a changed perspective on what I believed to be a country under a curse. To show this photo, to tell this story, to combat stereotypes and broadcast the extraordinary lives of two simple boys with an inspiring tale - that is my gift.

- Keith Mills is a teacher on the NSW Central Coast

NB: Latest news is that the next two Afghan interns have already been selected by Mahboba Rawi and will arrive in Asia Plateau this month from Kabul. For more information on this, and to make donations, please be in touch with Caroline Edwards at cedwards@tpg.com.au

"A country without family conflict..."

In a report on his time at Asia Plateau Khalid writes:

One of my dreams for my country Afghanistan is for a country without family conflict. When I remembered my own family in one of my quiet times, I myself had some conflict. So I started changing myself to end a very small part of that conflict in my country... Javed also

brought some changes in his life.

The idea is to turn people's lives to four absolute standards that are honesty, purity unselfishness and love. We met a lot of people who really inspired me by their life stories. When I heard how people round the world suffered from war, hunger, family conflict,

relationships and so many other things, I forgot about myself, what I faced in my life even when I was a child. And I understood that not just in Afghanistan but all over the world people suffer from so many things.

'On the way to change': insights from Life

Twenty-one people with an age range of 18-50 met at Armagh, the lofC centre in Melbourne at the start of the 20th Life Matters residential course. Many faces of Australia were represented: Indigenous, Anglo, African, Nepalese, Chinese, and overseas applicants came into the mix from Cambodia, Kenya, and Papua New Guinea.



The 20th Life Matters Course

Although some of us in the faculty have worked on many of these courses, with similar topics and themes, each experience is unique - as unique and powerful as those new people who participate.

The themes - in part illustrated by panels of Melbourne residents - of Identity, Exploring Change, Building Community, Forgiveness, Searching for Meaning, Decision-making, Relationships, story sharing and Keeping the Flame Alive are not unique. But the lively discussion and deep sharing that ensues make for a rich opportunity for all present to learn and be inspired.

Below are comments sent for *Newsbriefs* by some of those who took part:

Melissa Cook, student of Speech Pathology, Brisbane: One of the ideas that has impacted me the most is that we are all capable of being change-makers and that change needs to start with ourselves. We all have a responsibility to participate in our global community.

Chloe Jiang, student of Arts Management, Harbin, China: I didn't feel different after the course, mainly because reflecting during nine days about my previous 25 years exhausted me. It's not that easy and happy to discover what you missed, mistook or cheated in your life. I had to sleep for 3 days in order to recover.

The changes began on the fourth day. Something powerful came into my life little by little. I vividly remember the picture of William Nguyen (a session

leader) pulling the rubbish out of the dirty water to make space for the clean water. I realised this is what Life Matters has taught me.

I am on my way to change even though sometimes it is hard. I tell myself to stop hiding my problems from others and pretending I am good, though facing and fixing them takes time and I need people's support. To stop gaining others' affections by sacrificing, but to accept and love myself. To accept that I deserve to receive love from others. To stop feeling guilty and miserable about what I have been through, but telling my heart: "Hi, I've been there. Everything's going to be all right."

I didn't get my dream house, or million dollar shoes, or a girl's best friend (a diamond!) in these nine days, but desire won't enrich my heart and the amazing thing is I am happy. What I want to do is to tell others, everyone's life matters, everyone deserves their own happiness even if they haven't noticed it yet, it just hides in the corner of your heart.

Kym Brahim, working with Employment and Training at Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation, NT: I was undecided about attending the course because my family situation had been impacted recently when I was separated from my children and their mother. However I followed through with the commitment to my organisation which was sending me.

One of the first participants I met, an Ethiopian Australian, initiated a

discussion with me, an Indigenous Australian, about identity and the challenges we faced. At that point I understood this journey was not just about me but a mutual sharing of knowledge and experience.

I have felt nourished by the spirit and soul-food. Returning to my community I now face multiple issues, personally, professionally and globally. But I have faith and belief in myself to be the change I wish to see in the world and to stay true to the guiding thoughts, ideas, experiences and principles.

Namikili (Shirley Lewis), repair and maintenance manager at Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation, Secretary of Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation, Tennant Creek, NT - servicing over 10 different language groups: I am part of a transition created by the Intervention, transferring our houses over to the NT government for 60 years to lift our living standard.

The course helped me to release a lot of anger and sadness over what has happened to my ancestors. I have shed a lot of tears here. There are 15-20 people per house in Tennant Creek. The houses need repair and I help to oversee that. No new houses have yet been built.

Understanding all the injustice done is something I am still dealing with. Coming here and meeting people from around the world helps me forgive what has happened, and to forgive myself. If it wasn't for this trip, I'd be a walking time bomb.

Dorothy Katinyeri, Indigenous health worker from the Coorong, SA: I left Armagh a changed person, overwhelmed by the friendships, sharing of stories and diverse experience. The connection established by the group is indescribable. It is as if I have known them for ages. I have taken away amazing memories for life.

Veronica Wilson, also from the Coorong, had painted a picture during the course expressing her deep hurts over the loss of her culture: "I now have a more positive outlook on life and my personal relationships have improved."

Anne Gibbons, community worker from Tailem Bend, SA, was a participant in 2010 and returned to assist this time: Because I was able to talk openly to

Matters Course participants.

others about my experience in 2010, I was able to support two new friends from the Coorong and my Melbourne cousin to attend the course. Another aim for me was to consolidate my learnings. I realise I have indeed developed a strong foundation in my life on which to base my decisions.

Andrew Holden, primary teacher from the Gold Coast, QLD: One of the biggest things I learned in Life Matters is the power of forgiveness. I discovered that I needed to forgive myself for ways in which I have behaved in the past. I had started to put things right in my life but still found it hard to move forward without taking this crucial step. But to forgive yourself you may also need to put things right with other people first.

Mark Lahring, boilermaker from Darwin, NT, shared the thoughts that had come to him about his life at the public evening: "Take pride in yourself and where you come from. Yes, you are large; you are adopted. But remember there are many people far less well off than you are. Think more of others."

Lydia Loko, student from Papua new Guinea: Even though I don't show it or haven't said much, I have collected many treasures along the way, all held deeply within my heart.

Catherine Anderson, engineer, Brisbane: The concept of "quiet time" gave me the opportunity to look within. Analysing myself against the measures of honesty, purity, love and unselfishness

highlighted areas which called for change in my life as well as issues that were burdening me. The topic of "Active Listening" had a profound impact. I decided to consciously put aside preconceptions and greet each new person with a blank slate. Listening to Shirley, Kym, Dorothy and Veronica highlighted for me the full history of my country. I have decided to deepen my understanding of the Aboriginal culture.

Neang Sovathana from Cambodia, studied International Relations and is employed by Friedrich Naumann Foundation promoting democracy, the rule of law and human rights: In 2010 I took the big step to be president of the Initiatives of Change Association.

'The concept of "quiet time" gave me the opportunity to look within.'

I thought I could handle everything. While away from my talk show, my class, my family and my email, with lots of quiet moments given during the course, I have had the chance of meditation and prayer, to reflect on my personal life and my work more carefully. I noticed that I was running too fast and not reflecting enough.

That's why I got so tired.

I was pleased to serve homeless people with a nice warm meal.*

Apart from the course itself, I was inspired by other meetings. The way Cambodian refugees in the Cambodian Association of Victoria help each other made me proud. In the IofC centre a group of young-at-heart women aged 40-85 gather, some of whom have met regularly in this house for more than 50 years. I was wondering where this commitment comes from? What they do is simple: meeting up, sharing about this and that, updating each other on their lives, and praying for each other and the world. Sitting in this circle of women reminded me of how much more commitment I need.

Nethanet Assefa, Sydney, Ethiopian/Australian, degree in Public Health: I have grown up in a fairly privileged environment. Working in the soup kitchen in Collingwood* was an eye-opener. I was new to the concept of "quiet time" and after a couple of sessions of just staring into space, I finally learned the art of allowing myself to stop and think. I find this technique so refreshing and now practise it weekly. Sharing our stories helped me release deeper underlying emotions I still hold about my sister and loneliness.

(*All Life Matters participants spend one evening helping to serve meals to disadvantaged people in the city.)

- collated by Rosemary Thwaites

APYC 2011 at Phillip Island

This year in July (18th - 24th) IofC Australia will host the Asia-Pacific Youth Conference (APYC) at Phillip Island near Melbourne.

The APYC will bring together young adults (18-35 year olds) from all over the region, focus on developing the leadership skills and positive change-making capacity of those who take part, and offer an opportunity for constructive dialogue between the representatives of communities and countries that have experienced conflict. We believe it can empower individuals and strengthen networks through the initiatives that grow from it.

This will be the 17th conference of its kind but the first time for Australia to act as host.

The conference is being run on an entirely voluntary basis. If you would like to offer a scholarship (\$500) or a half scholarship (\$250) to support a potential participant from Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, India, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Solomons or Fiji - or for that matter a local in a financially disadvantaged situation - it would be much appreciated (you can nominate the country of your choice).

Any contributions, large or small, will be gratefully received and may be given either through internet banking on

the APYC website at www.apyc2011.org or by cheque to Moral Re-Armament.

We would warmly welcome anyone willing to give a hand - from helping at the conference site to administration, to music and photography. Please visit our website <http://www.apyc2011.org/get-involved/volunteer>. Friends or families who would like to welcome overseas participants to visit, and/or offer a place to stay a couple nights after the conference, would also be a great blessing.

- the APYC team

My Japan experience by James Cordiner

While completing my Japanese studies major in Tokyo last year I was able to link up with the IofC Japan team.



I attended some of their international cultural exchange gatherings and conferences, met a range of interesting people from Japan and abroad, and got to talk on a deeper level.

I was also touched by the hospitality which is a glowing characteristic of the Japanese. A couple of families looked after me like an extra member of the family. It makes Japan a second home for me.

After finishing my studies I did an internship at the Tokyo office for five months, upgrading their website and helping out with events. One issue I tackled was getting the message of IofC

across to an audience with no background in it. Working in Japanese proved an interesting challenge! My goal was that young Japanese people desiring to be change-makers could find this website in Google or from a friend's recommendation and be able to understand and be inspired by it. I believe I made a good start. Our own personal transformation is important, but websites and other media play a part in providing the bigger picture.

IofC Japan has been focusing on organising school visits with teams of international youth and encouraging the young generation to make international friends and visit other centres overseas. Similar to many western IofC communities, Japan has been struggling to find committed young people to join. I was happy to make friends with many and look forward to seeing some of them come to Australia.

It took me over a year to start enjoying my time there. I was struggling to make close friends and blaming the Japanese culture. When I realised that this negative thinking was just me making it difficult to befriend Japanese, things changed.

Those last three months are memories I will have for life. Saying goodbye was hard, because I suddenly did have a lot of close friends I did not want to leave. I was humbled by their openness and lengths they went to out of friendship. One tennis buddy, whom I had only met twice, made sure he could see me at my farewell, travelling two hours at night by car during a busy working week, before having to travel another two hours back. What I was really blessed with in Japan was friends, and I got to understand that friends are what really matter.

- James Cordiner is a graduate of Sydney University and works in web development.

Japanese apology to former Australian prisoners of war

The ABC has reported a moving event which took place in Japan on 3 March.

A group of five Australian diggers, now aged between 85 and 94, were invited to Japan by the country's foreign ministry and met the Foreign Minister, Seiji Maehara, who offered them an apology for their suffering as prisoners of war.

One of them said: "I believe very firmly if any individual holds bitterness, there's only one person who suffers. That's the person who is being bitter." Yukihiisa Fujita, Japanese Government MP, who worked with IofC for many years on a full-time basis, added:

"I think in order to have a better future, it's very important to put right what was wrong in the past."

Fujita had helped to instigate the invitation to the Australians.

You can read the whole report at this link: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2011/s3154762.htm>

Mahboba Rawi in New Zealand

Invited by the Pan Pacific South East Asian Women's Association and Creators of Peace, Mahboba Rawi visited NZ in February.

She addressed high schools, met the deputy director, Humanitarian and Peace group and staff members in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and visited women at the Wellington mosque. Radio NZ taped an interview. People contributed towards Mahboba's vision of 50 Afghan orphans sponsored by New Zealanders. She expressed gratitude for the training given at Asia Plateau, India, to interns from Afghanistan (see page 1).

Planning to go to Caux this year?

International IofC Conferences in Caux, Switzerland, 3 July to 8 August, 2011

Programme of conferences:

3 - 8 July 2011

Transform yourself – Transform the world around you

Training by Initiatives of Change

10 - 17 July 2011

Caux Forum for Human Security (CFHS) Caux as a resource for the world's peacemakers

26 - 31 July 2011

Learning to live in a multicultural world Diaspora and peacemaking in Europe

2 - 8 August 2011

Trust and integrity in the global economy (TIGE)

Exploring ways to help create a just and equitable global economy.

Anyone needing a Swiss visa is asked to apply ten weeks ahead of planned arrival.

For the Caux Forum for Human Security a personal invitation is needed due to limited space; expressions of interest are welcome.

An informative brochure on the CFHS is available from Peter Thwaites,

Ph: (02) 6278 4117

All information is most easily available on the Caux-IofC website:

<http://www.caux.iofc.org/> also from Armagh and other IofC centres.