

RAR National Conference – Bendigo. 3-4 September 2016

The fourth RAR National Conference held on 3 & 4 September saw only approximately 200 people register for the entire weekend. But the decision to make single and half day sessions brought the numbers attending to over 300.



The event went very smoothly, due to enormous efforts over several months by a few members and a coordinated effort and energetic support over the weekend by many members and supporters.

All food for morning and afternoon teas and for lunch was provided by the wonderful Karen people who have settled in Bendigo.



Following Registration and Acknowledgement of Country, the conference was officially opened by Conference Facilitator, Chris Cummins. Chris spoke from experience of her time on Christmas Island as a trauma counsellor. She spoke of the people she had known personally.



We were fortunate indeed to be able to welcome to Bendigo the 3 wonderful women who founded RAR in 2001, Anne Coombs, Susan Varga and Helen McCue. They reminded us of how RAR began, and the amazing response they had seen in rural communities.



The morning continued with a series of workshops: **The Power of One Message** - Media & Refugee Advocacy (Facilitator – Anthony Radford, Bendigo Journalist), Think National, Working Local - RAR groups (Facilitator – Helen Musk, Bendigo RAR), and The Ripple Effect - Growing the National RAR Network (Facilitators – Terry White & Bonnie Carter from Central Victorian Refugee Support Network)

Morning tea was followed by the same 3 workshops being repeated twice, thus enabling people to attend all 3, or have time to network if they preferred.

The morning session concluded with music from local choir, Gorgeous Voices, and a five-minute challenging - **Where to from Here for National RAR** (Facilitator, Marg Leser). The answer to the question was greeted by an overwhelming affirmation for the need for a national organisation, but no clear indication of how this was to be achieved.

The Afternoon session began with Maryborough RAR member, Fay White's beautiful songs, and an address by Pamela Curr from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.

This was followed by the amazing John & Margaret Millington gave a presentation of how they had initiated the "Successful Settlement of Karen Refugees" in Nhill, and how that had changed the town's economic decline around.





A media panel with Walkey Award Winning journalists Ben Doherty, Nick Olle, Anthony Radford spoke of their frustrating experiences of reporting information the government wanted hidden. They were very generous with their answers to the many questions from the audience during the following Q&A.



Conference Photo 2018 – taken before walking together to Bendigo Council Offices



Conference Delegates helped launch the Welcome Scroll, a *National RAR* and *Refugee Council of Australia* joint project that highlights the local governments that have declared themselves Refugee Welcome Zones.

Bendigo Town Crier for a Day, John Trainor, introduced Asher Hirsch, RCOA, Mayors Fyffe & Henderson from Bendigo and Mt Alexander Shire, and Welcome Scroll Co-ordinator, Jan Govett.

It is planned that the Welcome Scroll will travel through every Australian state and territory.



The **Conference Dinner** on Saturday night was at the iconic Shamrock Hotel, where guests were entertained and informed by songster Fay White, performance poet Hani Adbile, and refugee advocate Pamela Curr from the ASRC.



Sunday morning there was more from our poet Hani Adbile, and 2 more workshops - Amnesty's "Changing the Conversation" workshop and the ASRC's "Refuge from our Rhetoric".

It had been planned then to introduce the new National RAR admin Team, but as there were no nominations to form an executive, or volunteers to assist, the continued administration was left solely in the hands of Jan Govett from Bendigo RAR, as it had been for the previous 2 years, with tentative oversight by the Central Victorian Refugee Support Network.

Conference Concludes: Where to from Here?

The Conference heartily endorsed the idea of a National body for RAR, but without an organising committee, there is little likelihood of establishing a national voice.

It was hoped that people would volunteer over the next few weeks.!

ARAN – the Australian Refugee Action Network

There was one further outcome from the conference, the idea of a national umbrella organisation which would embrace all refugee support and advocacy groups, including RAR. From this proposal grew ARAN – the Australian Refugee Action Network.ⁱⁱ

NB When the Conference costs were finalised, the Conference Committee were able to refund the money they had borrowed from Bendigo RAR. And, having made a slight profit helped by a number of generous donations, there is even some seed money for the new RAR Executive ... when it eventuates.

ⁱ It was not until May the following year at the **Inaugural ARAN Conference** that a National RAR executive was formed.

National RAR Executive 2017

- President – Marie Sellstrom – Mansfield RAR
- VP – Ruth Fluhr – Euroa RAR
- Secretary – Penny Vine – Albury RAR
- Treasurer - Margaret Rasa – Castlemaine RAR (Margaret also became the RAR rep on the ARAN Committee.

ⁱⁱ **ARAN** – Formed from a group of 4 people following the 2016 RAR Conference in Bendigo

The inaugural committee consisted of -

- Jan Govett – RAR and GADRC
- Marie Hapke - RAN
- John Minns – Canberra RAC
- Linda Cusworth – CRAG

The first nominated committee was elected at the Inaugural ARAN Conference in Canberra in May 2017.

For further information about Rural Australians for Refugees

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- <https://www.ruralaustraliansforrefugees.org.au/>

