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Statement for the Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Inquiry into Detention

Emily Ackland

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There is a line in 'The Power of One' where the little boy scarred with the trauma of South African Apartheid sits alone on a wall and says that he can feel the great stones of sadness in his heart.

I carry the sad stones in my heart too, and have still got many tears I have not yet cried as I continue into my third year through the labyrinth of DIMIA, Detention and Depression... like many before me who have been poisoned by the system, deafened by the rhetoric and silenced by the abuse.

It was against this backdrop that I met K - the man who is now my husband, when I visited Maribyrnong Detention Centre in Melbourne mid 2003.

After my initial visit, and being stunned by the inhumane prison and shocked at the immigration policies I was learning about; I inquired about offering a Volunteer Art Program inside the detention centre, to give me a chance to spend more time with the people inside than just the allocated visiting hours spent under surveillance in the visitors centre. It was 3 months later when I finally got permission to do this.

By this time, K and I had already developed a very strong friendship, which was obviously becoming something stronger each day.

In order to let me into the centre as a volunteer, I had to sign documents stating that I would have no personal / political / social contact with any detainee. I was asked if I had been involved in any demonstrations, or political activity.

Each week I spent an average of 8-10 hours inside the centre, teaching and creating art with men, women and children asylum seekers. One 5 year old boy from Iran who had been born in Detention recounted to me all the grown ups he had seen try to kill themselves. He also told me his 11-year-old sister had tried to copy them once.

My major project with the men was to design and paint a mural on one of the outside walls. We spent 6 weeks talking and creating this combined mural that was full of images and symbols and words from their languages that spoke to them of peace and freedom.

The week before we were due to start painting, I was asked to submit a draft copy of our design for Approval from DIMIA /ACM. I was notified the day before we were to start painting that the design was not appropriate as it had an image of a sailing boat in it, thus portraying the idea that they were "encouraging boat people."

After several months of teaching art, ACM was handing over the tender to GSL. In this time, all volunteers and staff had to re-apply for our positions, and there was about 4 weeks where we weren't allowed in. We had to have new police checks and everything done. In this time (Early December 2003) I decided to go and take a Christmas present for K as I was going away and wouldn't see him for a while.

The next day I got a very official sounding phone call from the new manager of the centre to inform me that I had been in breach of my contract and would therefore be barred from entering any detention centre in Australia for ever.

After weeks of petitioning and pleading, I was finally allowed back in to visit K: "under supervision" for a 3 month probationary period. I was no longer allowed to teach art, but was permitted to see K: with security guards sitting very close to us, watching and listening to everything we talked about during our visits.

I put in a request to have a photo taken with K: to show my family and friends back in Sydney this man who had come into my life and who I was now in a very serious relationship with. The request took 3 months to be processed, and the day before I left to go on holidays to Sydney: (the GSL manager) told me that the request had been approved, and that when I returned from my holiday to Sydney, the photo would be taken. I received a phone call on my second last day of holidays on my mobile phone from Mr: to find out when I was coming back and to confirm the upcoming photo shoot.

The photo shoot never happened in the end. I arrived back in to Melbourne, keen to catch up with K:, after not speaking on the phone for a few days. I went to visit K:, and was told that he was no longer in the centre. That was all they told me. They would not release any more information than that due to their 'confidentiality laws' (despite the fact that I was an authorised by K: to discuss any matters with his DIMIA case worker).

For 4 days I had no idea where he was. On the 5th day someone told me they thought he was taken to Baxter. I rang Baxter, and they had no record of him. I phoned prisons, deportation hotlines, DIMIA officials in Canberra.... No one could tell me anything.

After 7 days of panic I finally spoke to K:, his voice albeit unrecognisable. His detention days were never the same from that point on.

K: was bashed by GSL guards several days before I got home from Sydney, and taken by force into isolation where he spent more than 48 hours. His shoes, belt and shirt were taken off him. He did not eat. He requested medical attention from a doctor many times but was refused until days past and he was seen to very briefly by the DIMIA contracted doctor, who looked at him and told him he was fine. There were no photos taken of his injuries. He was taken from isolation at midnight the night before I returned to Melbourne, handcuffed so tightly that it broke the skin around his wrists- and put in a caged in security van and driven with police escort to Adelaide. K: was not offered food, water or a toilet stop for the entire 10 hour drive. K: was never told where he was going or why. The following week, 16 other detainees were flown from Maribyrnong on a charter plane direct to Baxter. Until this day we don't know why he was taken by force.

The GSL manager from Melbourne had written in K:'s file that he was to be considered a 'High Risk' Detainee. I have read K:'s full GSL/ACM dossier and up until that point, he is described by ACM as being polite, gentle, respectful, compliant.

It was this remark that was to change K:'s experience for the rest of his imprisonment. As soon as he arrived at Baxter, he was taken to the Management Unit, where he was still in his pants, no shoes, no shirt. He hadn't eaten, and was extremely dehydrated and disorientated. When I finally found where he was, The officer who

answered my phone call would not put me through to speak to him, as he was being held in isolation.

K was in Baxter for 18 months. He was never allowed to go on an outing, swimming, shopping or any of the other activities the regular detainees participated in on the odd occasion. Each time he was required to go to court, or to the hospital- he was taken handcuffed and under 4 security guards.

Baxter was an intensely depressing place- much more than Melbourne... So deeply isolated and designed to break people, slowly but surely. Each compound is fenced in, each fence is topped with razor wire, and many are charged with electric currents., Baxter is visually and physically mentally and socially destroying. It is set up to make it as impossible as they can for lawyers and supporters, advocates and the media to access it.

Unlike Maribyrnong, there was little sense of community in Baxter. Most of the detainees had come from Woomera, Port Headland and Curtin- where at least there was a sense of community and mateship... Baxter aimed to break that down into a very clinical, isolating depression, where guys had individual cells rather than dorms, and had to make special requests to visit friends in other compounds. In Maribyrnong during ACM days, they participated in weekly meetings, at which they could raise any issues people wanted to discuss. There was nothing like that in Baxter. Here you were purely a number in a massive complex in the middle of the desert.

This added to the sense of powerlessness and emasculation that the men were feeling. On one occasion K's compound was being closed down, and they were moving the guys to a different compound. No one had told K about this, until the night before, when he heard a rumour that something was happening.

The next day, he was asked to pack his belongings and move out of the compound. K had acquired many things like a computer, a guitar, keyboard, hi-fi system etc by this stage, and was unable to simply pack everything up straight away. He asked for more time, but the officer told him he must take what he could carry and get the rest later.

He was moved with no explanation as to why- and was in his new room for 3 days with no blankets or spare clothes while he waited for someone to take him back to his old room to get his stuff.

On the 4th day, he received a letter from the Federal Court requiring him to submit forms by a certain date that didn't leave him much time to prepare. So, K once again asked for an officer to take him to his previous room to collect his court papers urgently. He was told that the officer on duty would definitely take him over some time that morning (it was a Friday). K waited in front of the officers station from 8:30am until after 5pm in the evening, and despite regular inquiries throughout the day, he was told they were busy.

K eventually left the compound by himself (by walking through the opening gates as the rubbish truck exited the compound) to get the papers. He walked not more than 200 meters when an officer started chasing him. K climbed onto the roof, and the officer ran after him. He called the operations manager, , who came up on the roof with K and talked him down, assuring him that he would be able to collect his stuff, and go back to his normal compound. He agreed to come down, only to be met by a van full of 10 officers in riot gear, who immediately surrounded him and carried him back to the management unit. They held him here for

3 weeks, after writing a report that stated that K violently threw rocks at officers while escaping the compound. They also reported that K bit on the ankle.

This happened in September 2004. About 3 weeks after this incident, K had to see about organising our wedding for the 18th of December. In this meeting, was jovial about the whole thing and told K to forget about the biting thing, that it was finished with- 'no big deal mate'.

On the morning of the 14th of December, 4 days before we were to get married, K woke up to officers telling him he had to go to court, as was charging him with assault for biting him. It was 7:30am, only 2 hours after K went to bed... he was only wearing his underwear. When K refused to go, as he knew nothing of the case... they forced him violently onto the ground and called the response team. 8-10 officers in riot gear came into his room, one holding a video camera, while one- either or (the two voices K could recognise) penetrated his anus with what he thinks was there pointer and middle fingers. This event was the single most traumatic and de-humanising abuse that K suffered in 2 ½ years of detention.

They took him, hand and ankle cuffed with a muzzle like helmet on – still in his underwear, to Management. They told us both that our wedding would be cancelled. We already had relatives travelling from Brisbane, Tasmania, Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne to be at our wedding.

They finally let the wedding go ahead, and we have been married for almost a year now. K was finally released on a BVE in May 2005. He was granted work rights not long after, and 2 days later was told his case was rejected in the High court. We moved to Coffs harbour where we both found great jobs. However, Things continued to be uncertain for him, and the traumatic memories of the abuse (most of which I have not mentioned here) were slowly healing as we went through months of intense counselling. 2 years after K was granted his BVE (May 2007), the Department of Immigration notified us that they were not going to renew it and that left K without a visa; as an illegal, unlawful non citizen...this meant he had to be put back in detention (mind you, we already had one child by then and I was pregnant with our second) Instead of being sent back to Baxter, K was placed in Community Detention; this meant he had to stop work, and report to Dimia every week as well as being monitored by a Red Cross case worker; and due to my pregnancy I also wasn't able to work so we had to leave our life in coffs harbour, our jobs, our church, our friends etc. We moved to Sydney to be close to my parents and it wasn't until September 2007 that he finally received a Spouse Visa. It is still not full Permanent resident status, that is something he will have to wait at least another year for and then a further 2 more years to become a citizen; totalling around 8 years from his arrival here. One of the most damaging and traumatising moments of our ordeal came only weeks ago when we received an invoice from the Department that instructed us to pay the \$161,000 owing in detention costs to re-imburse them for K's time in Baxter and Maribyrnong Detention Centres. This is almost too traumatic to talk about and is currently being investigated by our local MP; we continue to seek healing for the trauma and memories that detention has poisoned us with. By God's grace we will seek to forgive but we cannot forget what has been done in this nation in the name of "Border Security"

One day the stories like K 's and thousands of others will be told without fear –
“Justice will come in the dessert”...Isaiah 32:16