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Standing on common ground

WHEN Mohammad Faisal arrived at a Brisbane private hospital last August after spending nearly five years in offshore detention, most of it on Nauru, the reception from some of the other patients was less than welcoming.

One, in particular, was so upset that "illegal immigrants" from the Middle East were taking the beds of Australians who needed treatment that he made it his mission to have Faisal and two other asylum seekers already at the hospital moved somewhere else.

"I knew nothing of him. I just put him in the same bracket I put every person who came from somewhere else — I just didn't like him," says Alan Burrows, 59, a Vietnam veteran whose post-traumatic stress disorder was diagnosed only four years ago.

Not only did Burrows make his feelings known to anyone in authority at the hospital who would listen, from the administrators to the nurses, he encouraged other patients to take the same stand.

"I was quite upset because I knew the hospital was full and there were other veterans waiting to come in and I thought it was wrong. So for the first 10 days, I made a real nuisance of myself to the authorities and nurses and even asked my wife to take me home. I just didn't want to be there with *these people*."

Then, late one evening, Burrows was sitting in the corridor when Faisal appeared with a plate and offered him a slice of watermelon. "My instinct was to say no, but I finally took a slice and, later on, he came back and asked if he could sit with me."

Their conversation over the next two or three hours was, in Burrows' words, a life-changer. Faisal, 27, told his story, from his childhood in Iraq to the decision to flee Saddam Hussein's regime, to the experience with the people smugglers and, finally, what happened on Nauru.

"I just couldn't imagine, given my background, how anyone could endure what he has endured and we became better than friends."

Burrows also told *his* story to Faisal, of how he joined the navy at 17, served in the Vietnam War and became "a redneck racist" — and how he was prone to bouts of depression and seemingly inexplicable anger, unaware that these episodes were the result of his wartime experience as a 19 and 20-year-old.

"I told him to forget about the past, that he had a good heart and a good family," Faisal recalls.

The next morning, Burrows went to see the dozen or so people to whom he had complained and apologised. When his wife, Kaye, arrived later to be told that Faisal, the man her husband had demonised for 10 days, was now his friend, her response was a very sceptical "oh yeah".

Six months later, she credits Faisal with playing a crucial role in Burrows' recovery. "It's just been incredible," Kaye tells *The Age*. "Life in general from that day on has just blossomed."

And Burrows? He says he is honoured to have become Faisal's Australian "father" and proud to say he is not a racist. "He comes to me if he has a problem and, while I don't presume to give him advice, I can tell him how I handle things these days."

Burrows is not alone. If there is one common thread to Faisal's experience seeking asylum in Australia — and being declared by ASIO to be a threat to Australia's national security — it has been his capacity to leave an indelible and positive impression on those he has encountered.

Today that disparate band of Faisal supporters, stretching from Nauru to Australia, is overjoyed at the news that took too long to come. ASIO has reassessed him and found he is no threat after all and the Howard Government has agreed to recognise his refugee status and give him his freedom in Australia.

The decision brings to a close the first chapter of the Government's Pacific Solution, the hardline border protection policy that meant 1232 asylum seekers who attempted to come to Australia by boat from late 2001 were held on the tiny, near-bankrupt island of Nauru. (The second chapter is just beginning for eight Burmese asylum seekers who were intercepted late last year.)

But the decision also raises some troubling questions about how, after Faisal and another Iraqi, Mohammed Sagar, were found to be refugees, ASIO deemed both men to be security risks after interviews conducted on Nauru.

The ASIO assessments effectively tied the hands of former Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone, who acted late in 2005 to free the other detainees remaining on Nauru after being advised that several were suicidal. The ASIO assessments also meant third countries were less likely to offer either man protection.

In the end, Faisal was evacuated after a number of acts of self-harm and warnings from health professionals and the Nauru Government that he was going to take his life.

Sagar was eventually offered protection by a Scandinavian country after four other countries turned down approaches by the United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR. He will soon leave Nauru, having been in offshore detention since he was rescued in the infamous "children overboard" episode of October 2001.

The irony of Faisal's situation is that it was the inhumanity of the system that eventually saved him. Had he not been driven to suicide on Nauru, he would not have been flown to Brisbane and been in a position to make a new application for protection, which in turn triggered the fresh security assessment by ASIO.

Sagar's mental toughness meant he could last longer on Nauru and this, in turn, meant there was no trigger for ASIO to reopen his file. Clearly, neither man is now regarded as a security threat and both insist this was always the case.

"I'm thrilled at the news, but numb," says Susan Metcalfe, who has been the most steadfast supporter and advocate of both men since she met them on Nauru almost two years ago when she was studying the plight of asylum seekers.

"It's just all been so unnecessary and painful to watch both Mr Faisal and Mr Sagar go through this."

Metcalfe has seen Faisal at his best and worst and says there were many times when he was "hanging on by a thread". His trauma became her trauma as she watched his mental state deteriorate, powerless to offer the one thing he craved — his freedom.

Also delighted and relieved is Faisal, who says he bears no ill will at all to those responsible for the policy or the decisions that reduced him to a suicidal mess.

"I am not angry. I just feel tired," he says.

His greatest joy is that he could finally tell his parents, who remain in Baghdad, the truth about his situation. In the 18 months since he was first deemed a security risk by ASIO, he says he has felt compelled to lie to stop them worrying about him.

Maintaining the pretence that he was free and happy and doing well in Australia when he was at his lowest ebb was, he maintains, the hardest part of living in limbo. It was the support of those on the outside, like Metcalfe, and friends he made in hospital, like Burrows, that sustained him.

Among them is Christopher "Ringo" Nicholls, 52, another former soldier who is receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and an old injury that causes great pain in his back and legs. Nicholls also credits Faisal with changing his attitude to others and his outlook on life.

"He has taught me to look for the good in people and not the bad and to try to help them to see that themselves. He's like a messiah to me and I only wish I'd met him as a younger man," Nicholls says.

"When I was younger I was really aggressive in the army and, if I'd known him then, I wouldn't have been so aggressive. He has made me a better person. He's just a kind bloke, willing to help anybody in need, who wants to be free and earn his own way, pay his own way and help other people."

Justin Campbell, 34, who shared a room with Faisal for several weeks, was sympathetic from the outset. He has been struck by the Iraqi's ability to change the perceptions of others. "He has changed so many people — they all love him," he says.

Like the others, Nicholls is baffled that ASIO could have found Faisal to be a security threat in the first place — and that it took so long to establish what was obvious to him from the start.

"I understand the country's need for security, but 5½ years? If a member of the Government came to see him, it would only take one day to learn that this guy is not a threat to this country and that he's a loving person."

Faisal's lawyer, Robert Lachowicz, agrees, saying the case highlights serious problems with detaining asylum seekers in remote offshore places without support from lawyers and support agencies who can ensure that they are able to present their case.

"This terrible injustice may have been avoided if there had been full access to lawyers to clarify any wrong perceptions, and proper security review processes were available," he says.

Metcalfe is convinced that it will take Faisal time to deal with the trauma he has endured during more than five years in detention.

"The healing will begin with being able to make decisions for himself and just being free to walk down the street."

Faisal acknowledges as much when he concedes: "I am very happy, but the happy is very late for me."

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