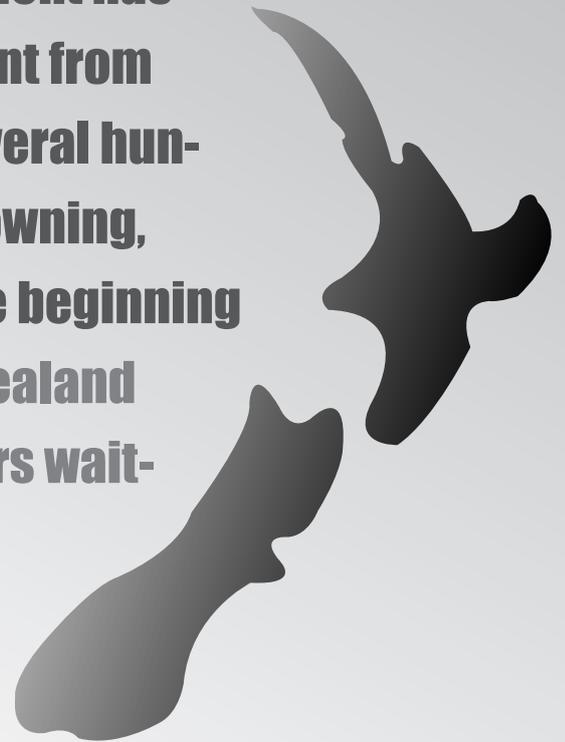


The first anniversary of the Tampa incident has passed without official acknowledgment from the government. Their refusal to let several hundred asylum seekers, rescued from drowning, disembark onto Australian soil, saw the beginning of the so-called Pacific Solution. New Zealand offered to take 131 of the asylum seekers waiting for processing in Nauru. Amongst this group were 38 ‘unaccompanied minors’.



The Tampa Boys

SUE ROXON spoke to Yolande Johnson, physiotherapist at the Refugee Survivors Centre (RAS) in Auckland for the story of what happened to these boys when they first arrived in Auckland.

Upon arrival at Auckland in early October 2001 all asylum seekers were taken to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, which became a temporary detention Centre. They attended a six-week cultural orientation program that included English lessons, medical and mental health screening, treatment, and processing of applications for residency before moving into the community. The Tampa arrivals, who doubled the number of arrivals normally processed at the centre, took three months to process.

“When the asylum seekers arrived, they were very relieved and immensely grateful to us for welcoming

them, but they were also highly traumatised.” Yolande said. “Many were confused and didn’t know what country they had actually landed in. But of all the horrific experiences that had led to their flight from Afghanistan, the journey on the boats was foremost in their minds. They all said that their experience with the Australian navy vessel HMAS Manoora had been dreadful. They were the most traumatised group of arrivals the centre received in the two years Yolande has been working there, and “every intake of refugees from the ‘Pacific Solution’ has been similar to this first group,” she said.

The asylum seekers were initially assessed by the mental health team and divided into stress

The Tampa Boys

assessment groups. These groups, which were developed as psycho-education groups, allowed a space for the sharing of information about stress and about RAS, and for trust and rapport to develop among the participants. It also gave the group leaders a chance to find out what further help asylum seekers needed and identify individuals at risk of self-harm and in need of individual intervention. Out of these initial groups, one women's craft group was formed, which eventually became a psychotherapy group, once trust was formed. Group activities were used as a therapeutic medium to build trust among women.

The Stress Assessment groups, which were split between men and women, began with a large body outline drawn on the whiteboard and each participant was invited to describe their individual symptoms, each of which was marked on the chart. This exercise, in the normalising of post traumatic stress symptoms, always generated a lot of laughter as the unfortunate figure on the board began looking like a cartoon character who had stuck its finger in a light socket, with colours, lines and squiggles bursting out from all over its body. The tone of the groups was deliberately kept light and humorous, and the groups carefully finished with relaxing diaphragmatic breathing to avoid leaving participants in a state of emotional arousal.

After the chart exercise revealed the commonality, as well as the extent, of their symptoms, each participant was asked to identify and share their own individual ways of coping with their symptoms and stress levels. This step increased participants' understanding of each other as well as creating connections. "People who coped by being alone were better understood and their need to be by themselves was respected, and people who liked walking discovered each other and began walking together." The group leaders also suggested various non-drug stress management techniques and their suggestions were also discussed and tried on the spot," Yolande said.

Yolande, an ex-dancer and body therapist, aimed to make the groups' activities as physical as possible. She developed an exercise and dance group for those women who responded positively to this approach. This group was so successful with Middle Eastern women that news of it travelled the Pacific, and Yolande discovered that women still waiting in Nauru were being contacted by the women at Mangere and told to make sure that they got 'that blonde woman' when they arrived at the Centre!

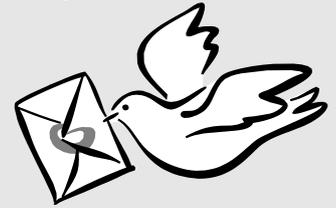
Her emphasis on physical exercise also appealed to the unaccompanied boys, who had been placed in their own assessment group. These boys, all Farsi speaking, from Afghanistan, and aged between 14 and 17 years, had mostly formed a natural group on the boats, and Yolande found them to be very expressive and forthcoming when talking about themselves, their feelings and experiences. "Although they had started playing soccer as soon as they arrived, they were all highly traumatised, and all missing their mums. Some even said they were missing hugs and cuddles," according to Yolande. She felt that the boys' need for touch and contact was an overwhelming one, and she decided to address this by offering them to form a massage and self care group. It met weekly, for two hours, over a period of six to eight weeks. They were also invited to participate in a weekly talk group, an exercise group, and all were receiving individual counselling. This was in addition to attending school from 9 am to 3 pm.

"Because I was planning to teach massage techniques, the fact that I was a woman was a potential problem, so at first I used my partner, Lasse, who is also a body therapist at RAS, as my model. The boys knew he was my partner - this was important to establish safety. The next time the group met, however, Lasse wasn't available, and so I asked for a volunteer from the group. Each time I had the group, a different boy volunteered without prompting! When they felt comfortable I invited the model to practise on me. I would help the group individually, guiding their hands with mine to correct the techniques, each time asking permission to touch them first."

The boys worked on each other while sitting down, as this was a safer and more empowering position than lying down. They would start with diaphragmatic, relaxing breathing. They practised finding acupressure points on each other's heads and necks. Yolande also taught them how to hold the head of someone in distress, with one hand on the forehead and another on the back of the head, in order to help them relax. The boys learned how to have "listening hands" – hands that 'be' rather than 'do'. They learned how to listen to what the body is saying through hands, which are 'being' rather than 'doing'. This is one of the principles of BodySense therapy. Yolande felt that in order to look after each other as well as themselves, the boys needed to understand how feelings are expressed by the body, and to learn to listen to another's feelings, as expressed through their bodies, while differentiating these feelings from their own.

CALL FOR LETTERS

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These concepts underpin Yolande's own work as a BodySense therapist and teacher, and are highly sophisticated ones and she said the boys loved learning about bodies in this way. "They loved the idea that bodies tell a story as surely as words do, and that we can learn to read this story. They really took to body awareness exercises and were always eager for new techniques." The majority of boys were so keen that they chose to continue the group through Ramadan.

They learned how to massage each other's neck and shoulders, and the art of foot and hand massage. Later they practised massaging each other's backs. "There was lots of giggling and ticklishness to start with but this lessened with time as they felt safer and became more relaxed and comfortable."

"The group provided also an opportunity to chat about what was concerning them at the time - the inadequacy of the food during Ramadan, and jobs and careers, and their futures. They all wanted to be physios! In Afghanistan, of course, 15 and 16-year-old boys are starting to shoulder the responsibility for supporting their families."

Over the duration of the group, the boys reported feeling 'lighter' and that their aches and pains and headaches disappeared. Yolande attributes this to both the touch, and to the relief of their fears and anxieties. She says they became more trusting and felt safer, as well as feeling more empowered through the knowledge and understanding they had gained. They became more confident and relaxed.

After being granted residency they left the camp and the boys - except for one whose application for residency was rejected - became the responsibility of the Child, Youth and Family Department. With the exception of two boys, the others now live together in a hostel with hostel parents, and go to school in the community. One boy, who lives with his sister, joins the others on weekends at the hostel. Their care has shifted to school counselors as their problems became oriented towards their present lives rather than related to their traumatic experiences and issues of cultural adjustment.

Their social worker thinks they are a complete success story, happy and well-adjusted teenage boys - well adjusted to Kiwi teenage culture, that is! Since the NZ government has decided to use some of their Humanitarian Entrants quota to reunite families, the boys' parents may be arriving in 2003. Yolande says with a laugh, "We are expecting a rush of referrals when the parents arrive". Watch this space to see what happens! ■

RefugeeTransitions plans to begin a letters page from the next issue. The editors feel that a letters page will afford you, our readers, to express your views on refugee, human rights and migration issues, as well as matters relating the treatment of torture and trauma survivors. It will also give you a forum in which to respond to matters raised in our pages.

Finally, it will also give us, the editors, an opportunity to receive feedback from the readership.

We hope to continue to build our magazine into a forum for discussing refugee and related issues, raising concerns and sharing ideas. We also invite any comments about the magazine itself, positive or negative, and any suggestions you may wish to make.

So please, keep in touch, and share your ideas with us and all **RefugeeTransitions** readers. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Letters to the editors may be addressed to:

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Anonymous letters will not be published, although names will be withheld at the request of the sender.