

Library staff harassed

Canberra is usually seen as a very liberal-minded, tolerant place to live. Which is why the events of early August came as such a shock to many. What happened? The ACT Library Service was forced to remove a display from the Tuggeranong public library after library staff were threatened and harassed.

The display, mounted by the Refugee Action Committee (RAC), depicted what life is like for children held in detention centres. The display contained a mini-detention centre with exaggerated hand-made black foam barbed wire. Much of the display was created by school students and highlighted the suffering of asylum seekers and their children while in detention. The display came about to highlight the national inquiry into children in detention, undertaken by HREOC — the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission — and due to be handed down at the end of 2002. Students wanted to use their artwork to express their sympathy and support for children and young people living in detention. Complementing the display was material for patrons to take away — including articles by some of Australia's leading medical experts who have confirmed the detrimental effects of mandatory detention, as well as material contained on the Government HREOC website. The display at Tuggeranong was actually a pared-down version of the display that had been shown at both the Belconnen and Dickson libraries, which had included 'refugee-scapes' featuring quotes from women and children in detention.

This was the third library which had hosted the display, and at each of the libraries staff were subjected to verbal abuse and in one case a staff member had a part of the display thrown at her. ACT Library Service had to ask RAC to take down the display, in the interest of the safety of their staff.

The display was part of the ACT Library Service's public display program that gives space to community groups to provide information to the wider public. Controversial subjects are not uncommon — in the last few years, displays have included topics such as abortion, euthanasia, the republic and sexually-transmitted diseases. None has provoked such an extreme response from patrons as this.



Photo: Richard Briggs

Refugee Noori Wazefodost helps remove the display. Photo: courtesy of Canberra Times

Merilee Pigram from the ACT Library Service said that the decision to remove the display was not easy to make, as the library prides itself on encouraging discussion and supporting different viewpoints. She said that the decision was based on occupational health and safety issues, namely that all employees have a basic right to work in a safe environment, and that staff safety had to take precedence.

RAC's Claire Bruhns said that the aim of the displays was to counter government propaganda and raise public awareness of the fact that mandatory detention causes harm. The fact that much of the information contained in the displays came from medical experts and the government's own websites demonstrates that the views expressed were not from a radical 'fringe' group.

Claire said that although the display was only there for seven days, thousands of copies of articles and submissions were taken by students and other patrons visiting the library. And the good news is that the publicity generated by these unfortunate events has meant that the display is now in great demand — it will be featured at the Canberra Playhouse for four days during youth dance performances, at the Legislative Assembly for the launch of the ACT Churches Council's refugee kit, and at a local church for Refugee Sunday. Queensland Amnesty International Schools Program has also approached RAC to see if the display can travel around Queensland schools and one of the Sydney grammar schools has asked to feature the display. Other groups interested include a number of Rural Australians for Refugees Groups.

ALIA is currently undertaking a review of library and information services in detention centres. While the review is not yet complete, Alan Bundy, the driving force behind the project, said that 'the report will reveal a generally very unsatisfactory situation in terms of access to a broad range of informational and educational resources, and include recommendations for improvements.' It is expected that the review will be finalised by mid-September, and will be discussed at the next ALIA Board of Directors meeting in November. ■

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