

Human rights hero stands up for funny side of life

IT'S not easy being a humanitarian. Women you date, says Asylum Seeker Resource Centre chief Kon Karapanagiotidis use excuses like "I admire you too much" as they gently dump you. And people give you gifts. Karapanagiotidis has a wonderful set of rainbow-coloured mumus made for African giants.

Using the rationale that in the refugee caper, if you didn't laugh you'd be very sad, Karapanagiotidis will perform five stand-up gigs at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, which starts today.

Called The Hateful Humanitarian, his show aims "to play around with people's perception of me. It's really lovely having people respect what you do, but I'm not all good and I don't like everyone".

He may have helped thousands of refugees, yet he says because he's a vegetarian who's single at 37, some members of his Greek family feel he's a disappointment. He muses that Australian governments have rejected war-torn boat people as asylum seekers yet allow bogans and right-wing politicians to live and breed freely in the suburbs.

He tells how he was bullied for being a "wog" as a child in Mount Beauty - then other wogs at Thornbury High bullied him for reading books.

In nine years, Karapanagiotidis has built ASRC into a thriving hub that employs 25 staff, has 700 volunteers and has helped 7000 asylum seekers with visas, housing, food, employment, legal aid and counselling.

It is his second year doing stand-up at the comedy festival. Last year, his three shows sold out, "and I walked off wanting to pash everyone in the audience.

I felt so alive".

The comedy can't be about asylum seekers, "because most of it is so horrifying and painful and deep".

But he says the two-storey resource centre, in Batman Street, West Melbourne, is "a joyful place".

"We spent the last week doing a play at Trades Hall. It was 20 people recounting their experiences of persecution, torture, war - but we ended each night laughing, dancing and celebrating.

"Comedy is so powerful and important, it's like food and friendship, it's our ability to share something universal together, that we all can relate and connect to.

"It lets us feel a little less alone in the world."

Laughing at things that irritate him helps Karapanagiotidis keep his sanity, he says.

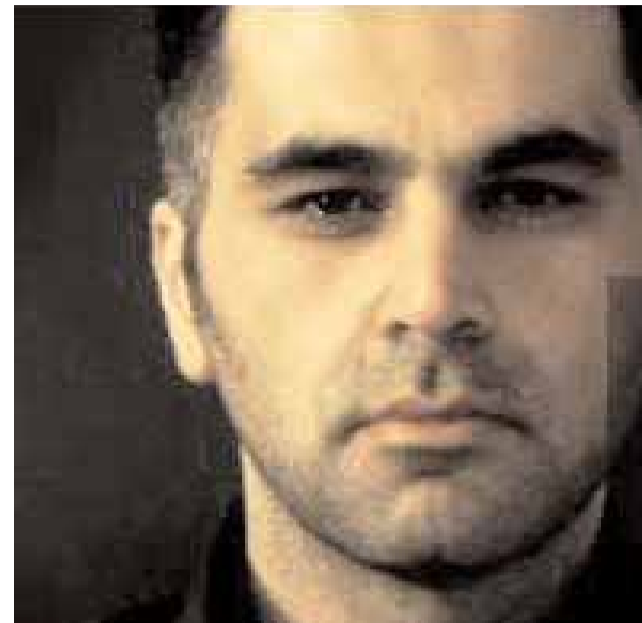
"I'm hoping others walk away feeling less like they're a freak by hearing someone else talk about spending their entire life having people look at them like they're disappointing and ... and going, 'it's OK to be those things'. My best friends are people that don't fit in." He hopes to raise \$7000 for the resource centre.

The Hateful Humanitarian opens April 13. The Melbourne International Comedy Festival, sponsored by The Age, starts today and goes to April 18.

Article from The Age

Kon Karapanagiotidis

Kon Karapanagiotidis' parents arrived from Greece in the 1960s with a suitcase, a few dollars and



not a word of English.

The family lived in Mount Beauty, a small rural town in Victoria, where the parents worked on a farm, then moved to Melbourne when Kon was twelve. He says that it was only through his parents' extraordinary sacrifices that 'I have the honour and joy of spending the last seventeen years doing what I love. Fighting for the oppressed and invisible people of our country, my people, my community, the true unsung heroes: refugees, the homeless, women and the poor'.

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, established by Kon in 2001, has over 700 volunteers who have cared for some 7000 people and provided one million hours of free help worth over 100 million dollars. It has never turned away anyone in need.

Easter feaster

FOR more than a month, Helen Gerassimou and Katina Rerakis have been "trying to fast", but come Sunday, they won't waver. "I'm not very strict now, because I'm old," says Rerakis, "but the last week (Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday) is very sacred." Meat, dairy and, for those last few days, oil are out of the question.

"The week leading up to Easter is the most religious week in the year," says Rerakis, recounting the daily rituals before "Jesus is with us again" and her family celebrates with a feast.

On Thursday they will each prepare koulourakia, the little shortbread-like biscuits that fill Greek homes with the scent of the promise of that feast. They will also boil eggs in red food colouring mixed with a dash of vinegar so the eggs emerge as a symbol of Jesus's blood - and are ready to be cooked with the tsoureki, or Easter bread, on Saturday.

"My grandmother tells me how to do the koulourakia, and when she does it the whole house would smell, but my grandmother says, 'No, you can't eat it,



because we have to feel it, feel that Jesus died for us," says Rerakis, who left Crete for Australia when she was 18.

Rerakis follows her grandmother's recipe (butter, flour, sugar, egg and sesame), but Gerassimou adds wine, olive oil and a dash of vanilla, a variation common in Egypt, where her mother-in-law lived.

On Good Friday, the women and children in their villages would collect flowers before church. They drank water with a dash of vinegar, and they abstained from food.

"Saturday - the men would kill the goat, the ladies clean the houses and make the tsoureki," says Gerassimou, who grew up in Lemnos.

Both women now spend most weekdays in the kitchen at Moonee Ponds restaurant Philhellene. Rerakis's daughter-in-law Susie - co-owner with her husband John, and their business partners, Manny and Alki Gerassimou - says the "mothers" are a key part of Philhellene, arriving early each day to help prepare the provincial dishes for which the restaurant is known.

Philhellene is closed for the double celebration of Greek and Western Easter on April 4 this year. Some traditions have lapsed (they no longer kill the goat, and plant-based food is OK on Good Friday) but Saturday's midnight Mass is observed by all. "No one goes to sleep," says Rerakis, "from the two-year-old up."

She is passionate and a little proud to talk about her customs, but especially animated about the importance of Saturday's Mass. The families file home (usually walking) from church carrying decorated Easter candles called lambades. The table is laid with hand-embroidered tablecloths, the lambades alight in the centre. "And then," Rerakis says with a pause, "we eat."

Everyone clinks a red egg with the person next to them (whoever's is ultimately strongest is blessed with good luck), loudly proclaims "Hristos anesti" (Christ has risen) and reaches for that bread. There's mayeritsa for tripe fans, chicken soup for the rest, then roast chicken and salads.

And on Sunday at Rekaris's Glenroy



home, lamb on a spit basted with lemon juice and olive oil, more red eggs, tsoureki, koulourakia, and fried cheese and mint kalitsounia, distributed by the grandmothers, devoured by the kids. The lamb is eaten with kritiko pilafi (rice cooked in stock), salads, spanakopites, and revithokeftedes (chickpea fritters). Then comes the lute, mandolin, singing, and maybe a few chocolate eggs.

Buy tsoureki and other Greek easter treats at: Laikon Deli, Richmond (9428 8495); Warehouse Deli, Oakleigh (9568 6655); Hellenic Deli, Queen Victoria Market, city (9326 5319). Susie Rerakis recommends the egg loaf at Babka, in Fitzroy (9416 0091) - any time of year.

Article from the Sydney Morning Herald