

## ΕΤΕΡΩΝΥΜΑ

Γράφει ο Κώστας Καραμάρκος → <http://endeaneos.blogspot.com.au>

# Kon Karapanagiotidis: working with refugees and asylum seekers...

(PART 1)

**W**ith the refugee crisis in Europe occupying centre stage in the public sphere worldwide, including Australia, my mind and my thoughts go back to a discussion I had two years ago, about these 'outcasts', with Kon, or Konstandinos, Karapanagiotidis OAM, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Australia's leading asylum seeker organisation. This discussion, published in Neos Kosmos English Edition, is a useful reminder and a good introduction to this subject, if we are to move away from slogans and simplistic outcries...

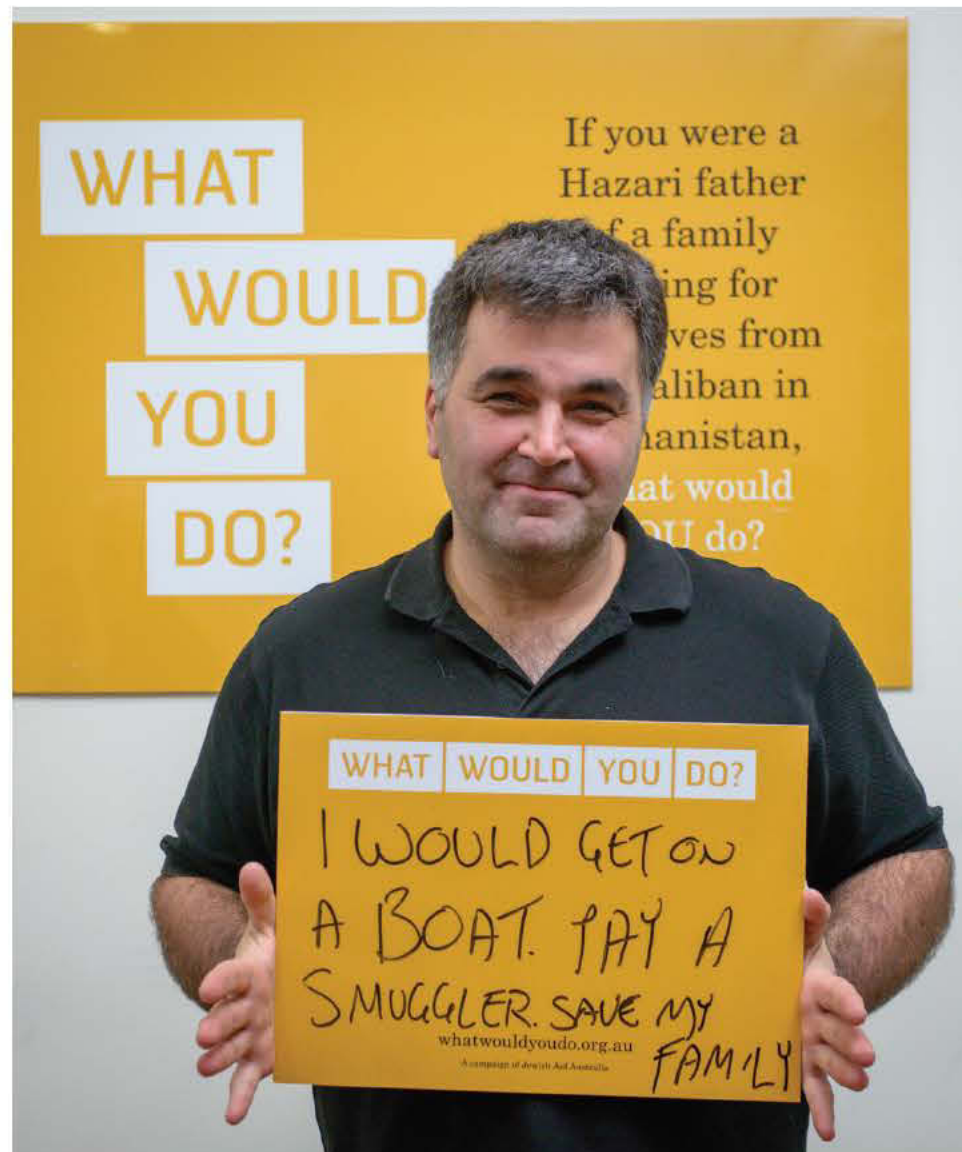
Kon participated in the 2020 Summit Conference organised in 2008 by the then Labor government of Kevin Rudd, a summit where representatives from all walks of life in Australia attempted to define a national agenda for 2020. During that year he was voted as one of Australia's 20 Unsung Heroes as part of the launch of the new Portrait Gallery in Canberra. Furthermore, he was also voted as one of Melbourne 100 most influential people in The Age Melbourne Magazine.

In order to be able to view the issue of refugees and asylum seekers through the eyes of an expert, and a human rights activist who also happens to be a Greek Australian, I visited Karapanagiotidis at the Asylum Seeker's Resource Centre which was located at the time in West Melbourne.

Asked about his personal path, the influences that led him to work with asylum seekers, he told me that the inspiration very much came from his family.

«Both of my parents came from families of farmers in Greece, both came in Australia on separate boats in the 1960s. They lived very harsh lives of poverty. My father was a Pontian, the son of refugees who escaped the Pontian genocide. He had to leave school at the age of nine because he had to raise a dowry for his sisters. My mother came from Messinia and she left school at the age of twelve.»

Kon grew up in the 1970s and in the first half of the 1980s in Mount Beauty, a small Victorian town 350



kilometres north east of Melbourne. «We were one of two Greek families. My parents were abused for speaking Greek in the streets. Every second word that I could hear was wog this and wog that, I experienced a lot of bullying.»

He spoke passionately about his upbringing. «From a very young age you learn work ethic, sacrifice, and community, you look at how your parents were exploited. My father would be up at 3-4 o'clock in the morning and he would stay up until 10 o'clock at night. He worked in the tobacco fields and when we moved to Melbourne both of my parents worked in factories. My parents raised me teaching me to care about the community, to live with honour and have integrity and principles.»

«I look at refugees now and I think, they might have been my parents. My mother sees the way refugees are treated and say 'this could be me',» he stated.

I asked him how he came to work with the refugees and the asylum

seekers.

«At eighteen I went off to La Trobe to study for my first degree in behavioural science. I am on a scholarship now doing my sixth degree, an MBA at Melbourne Uni's Business School. I have a degree in social science, I have a degree in law, I have a Master's in Social Development and a Master's in Education. For me, education was precious because my parents never had it. Education for me is power, choices, ability to give back.»

«When did it all start for you Kon?» I asked him.

«I started doing volunteer work at the Uni. Between eighteen and twenty-eight I went and volunteered in about two dozen charities, I was working with terminal kids at the children's hospital, I was working as a crisis councillor with sex workers and others. I was with people who had HIV, I was with mentally ill people. Society has forgotten about all these people. They are excluded from the economy, from

opportunity. Poverty is what they all have in common, and for me, I found a place where I belonged and where I could make a positive difference. Our first Asylum Centre started in Nicholson Street Footscray on June 8th 2001, in a small space offered by a friend. We started it with my TAFE students who could not get a placement while doing their courses in the western suburbs. We started off as food makers.»

When asked how far they have managed to go since then, his response was impressive. «It's the largest organisation in the country. It has helped 10,000 people so far [that is until mid-2013] from 98 different countries. It has 872 volunteers and 45 paid staff, and in a few days we are opening up a second ASRC in Dandenong (located at 179 Lonsdale Street, Dandenong).

«The centre has an annual budget of approximately four million dollars. Almost 50 per cent of its funding comes from philanthropic foundations, 6 per cent from the state government and the rest from individual donors, from appeals and from other sources.»

«We have two social enterprises for catering and for cleaning,» Kon mentioned. They run 23 different programs, for health, employment, teaching of English, and the other needs of asylum seekers. «We provide a hot meal for 750 people every week at 50 cents per person, we provide 250,000 hours of free assistance every year, thanks to our volunteers and the good will of the wider community we provide food services worth 25 million dollars a year,» he told me, and he went on to stress the good will of the wider community.

«Dozens of lawyers, doctors, nurses, English teachers, and others come and help us. At our volunteer information night we have turnouts of 400 people.»

Don't miss part 2 in next Wednesday's edition