

The Saints of the New Millennium Come Together in Woomera

D.A.Y.3 – A Life Changing Experience

“We’ve thought about Woomera, we’ve talked about Woomera and now we’ve been to Woomera.” A

group of thirty young people, young adult leaders, priests and Bishop Hurley recently trekked into the outback, to Woomera, for the third annual Port Pirie Diocesan Assembly of Youth (“DAY3”). Event Coordinator, Ms Alice Priest, the Diocesan Youth Coordinator, said that Woomera had been chosen for a number of reasons, “Firstly, It’s at the geographical heart of our Diocese, it’s also outback – a national theme this year, and it’s

a place that young people are talking about, forming opinions about, but in most cases have never been to.”

This year’s Youth Assembly was about giving regional, rural and isolated young people from the Diocese of Port Pirie the opportunity to come together and build a sense of community and identity through the exploration of the 2002 Diocesan theme of “family.” The assemblies have become a successful means of building friendship, vision, spirit and mission amongst the young people of the Diocese. Participants were engaged in a program that led them to examine their lives, their faith, and their response to the asylum seeker issue as part of the consideration of their place and role in their immediate, church and global families.

In preparing the program for the Assembly Yusuf Sheik Omar, a Somali who has recently been granted permanent political asylum in Australia after spending 2 years in a Melbourne Detention Center, had been invited to come and share his story with the Assembly. Additionally, an application had been made to ACM (Australasian Correctional Management) for permission for young detainees aged between 15 and 22 from the Woomera Detention Center to join in part of the program. Permission was finally granted on the second morning of the Assembly for 6 Christian and Mandaean young adult detainees from Iran to spend the day at St Michael’s with DAY3 participants. What unfolded was a most extraordinary seven hours. Through a process of formal and informal sharing and activities the young people from the Detention Center and the DAY3 participants came to know each other first as fellow human beings, and then as friends.

Most of the 6 asylum seekers had been detained in Woomera for over a year and spoke gratefully of this day being their first opportunity since arriving in Australia to speak and spend time with people from Australia of their own age. Event coordinator,



Who are they? Who are we?

Participants in the Port Pirie Diocesan Assembly of Youth with Yusuf Omar and six friends from the Woomera Detention Center at St Michael’s, Woomera.
April 14-16, 2002

We pray for our family in Christ at the detention center that freedom will be granted to them and that we can appreciate it for ourselves. Amen

(Chris Button, Rosalie Hayek, Matt Whitehead, Rachel Kitto, Jess Rooney, Jay Lopez)

We discovered how we can all be saints in today’s society.

(Iztok Necmeskal, Craig Bryant)

Meeting six of the young people from the Detention Centre, learning the stories that were not too painful to share, were insights we will never forget. Sharing 7 hours with these beautiful young people was for many the highlight of DAY3. Knowing their names, what country they’re from, playing cricket together, eating and laughing together, helped us realise they are people like you and me with both hopes and dreams for the future.

Alice Priest, said that "Hearing firsthand from Yusuf and the young asylum seekers brought to life our consideration of Pope John Paul's call to young people to holiness - to be "the saints of the new millennium." The richest and most challenging aspects of the three days came from one of the detainees personally appealing to us to "be his voice", "to come together and change the mind of our government." Yusuf's words, "You don't know what true freedom is if freedom is all you've ever known," opened us up to seeing ourselves and our lives in a new way." Alice concluded about the event, "You can talk about freedom, you can talk about social justice, you can talk about holiness and by doing so you can learn something. But when you spend a day listening and looking into the eyes and hearts of 6 young asylum seekers, you find yourself confronting Jesus Christ and having your life changed."

Those who attended DAY3 have since responded to their encounter by beginning written correspondence with their new Woomera friends and becoming their best advocates by simply sharing their DAY3 experience with their families, friends, parishes, schools and work mates.

The detainees taught us such an important lesson... Many told their stories of life back in Iran, the conditions they were now facing, the uncertainty of their future and their constant fear of being sent back to their previous life.... and in the words of wisdom spoken to us by Yusuf, a former-detainee now living in Melbourne with a permanent visa, "If freedom is all you've ever known, you don't know what true freedom is".... Many walked away asking, "What can we do? What have we done?"

(Maria Dimitriou, Alice Carter, Michelle Spender, Chantelle Kuhl, Tenille Chartres)



DAY3 participants befriend a young Iranian from the Woomera Detention Center.

Most of us didn't realise how we would feel seeing our new friends wave back through the bus window. The mood changed and we felt that part of us went with them too. We couldn't help but feel part of our family was missing during the emotion filled Mass that followed. Our only comfort is that God and our prayers are with them through their moments of loneliness, despair and feelings of hopelessness.

(Shaji Joseph, Emily Bampton, Gemma Martin, Jade Martin)

We talked to the detainees and realised that they were humans who have been locked in a cage. We too are locked in a cage; the cage of ignorance and unawareness. We are unaware of what really goes on in the center. We can only make a judgement by what the media portrays. After talking to the detainees all that were there have now become educated about what really happens. We have been given the special gift of knowing both sides of a horrific story.

...I want you to ask yourself why we as a nation are afraid of them. ...These people are desperate, and have taken desperate measures to be heard...These people wanted us to be their voices, the Woomera Assembly was their opportunity to give their voice and to be heard for the first time.

And we thank God today that we have freedom to speak that voice.
(Claire Paparella, Leoni Pellegrini, Clare Fantinel, Joanna McMahon)

