

# Bridging Lanka

January to April, 2016



## Highlights....

- New recruits bring fresh energy and widen our skills base;
- Progress with ongoing initiatives presented at our inspiring first AGM;
- We gain a glimpse of asylum seeker perspectives of the future.



Bridging Lanka welcomes new collaborations but what are we in for with Sri Lanka Unites' Thevuni, Manesh and Ramzi?

**B**ridging Lanka straddles two legal realities. It is registered both in Sri Lanka and separately in Australia. The majority of the development work occurs in the northern Sri Lankan Province in the District of Mannar. Significant action also happens in Australia to facilitate that development in Mannar. Dedicated Sri Lankans and their friends in Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and Sydney work towards realising a reconciled Lankan community in Australia and a reconciled and developed Mannar District in Sri Lanka. This particular report captures the Australian side of the story.

Many activities were undertaken during January and April. Bridging Lanka held its inaugural AGM, a warm and inspiring event where Professor and Mrs de Kretser, our Patrons, launched the *500 Bridging Club* to attract regular givers. The directors considered responses to vexed issues like the fate of asylum seekers the Australian government planned to return to Sri Lanka and the likely long term fallout from anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka that the government failed to curb. Bridging Lanka also waits patiently for the outcome of our application for charitable status including the important gift deductible recipient notification which would allow us to give donors a tax receipt.

We sincerely thank all our exceptional volunteers and supporters who keep making it possible for us to continue our challenging work in Mannar. In an outcome-driven development sector, it is heartening that many of you accompany us on an oft arduous journey where enduring relationships and genuine change are valued over glossy reports and limited project timeframes. Happy reading!

2016

January



### Children's Playground in the making

Graham, Angela, Marc and Tobias continue designing the Santhipuram children's playground in preparation for Graham's visit to Mannar later in the year. Chilled beers and wine at the Powerhouse in Brisbane obviously help with inspiration.



### Global Development Group

Bridging Lanka's operations don't fit neatly into any agency's pigeon hole. Lindy and Jeremy, Brisbane directors, spend time with GDG staff for greater clarity on their expectations of us and the services they offer.



### Talking English

Jeremy catches up with Margaret Bornhorst who, along with Ellen Dunn, coordinate our English language program in Mannar. Much of the discussion in Noosa focused on instigating a more doable learning program.



### Our finance angels

Lindy Drew-Tsang, one of our Brisbane directors, visits Noosa to identify what needs to happen to complete the audit for the previous financial year. Karen Mitchell, a chartered accountant, and her able assistant, Helen Bandera, do this on a pro-bono basis. An amazing duo!



### New treasurer gets to work

Phil Chick joins the team of Bridging Lanka directors and takes on the duties of treasurer. Phil from Brisbane wants to transfer our financial reporting to the clouds using the Xero platform so here comes a bucket full of enthusiasm and new ideas!

# January



## Initiatives of Change comrades

Jeremy revisits his former Armagh House residents in Melbourne, many of whom helped with Bridging Lanka's work. You can't live with people for three years and not feel a special and enduring connection.



## Our Urban Improvements committee

A special get together for our urban planning team who have contributed in significant ways to Mannar's development. Chaired by Steve Dunn, one of Australia's most senior town planners, this group is currently focusing on protecting Mannar's kulams (ponds).



## Lounge room reconciliation

For the past five years, this dedicated group of Sri Lankans from various ethnic and religious backgrounds meet in Melbourne to solve the many operational issues on the ground in Mannar.

# February



## Following up

John Nguenhuy volunteered for 2 months in Mannar developing software to capture guest house data for Mannar's fledgling tourism sector. We continue to be interested in volunteers' growth and development.



## Recruiting new volunteers

Director, Steve Dunn, grabs a cuppa and a chat with Arundathi Walgama, an environmentalist, who wants to volunteer for the kulam project. Aru is from Kandy, Sri Lanka and wishes to return to the country permanently.



## More tours – looking ahead

We met our fabulous partners from Uniting Journeys – Jim, Cynthia and Larry to plan our next tours to Mannar.

# February



**Board of directors meeting** - The directors gathered in Melbourne and were connected via Skype to two additional directors in Brisbane. Staffing issues in Mannar needed urgent attention but the main focus was the final preparations for Bridging Lanka's first AGM, the following day.



**LEFT:** Patrons, Prof & Mrs de Kretser continue their support of us.

**RIGHT:** John talks about the changes in his life since volunteering with Bridging Lanka.

**BELOW:** Hands up all those who have now been to Mannar!



## Bridging Lanka inaugural AGM

A highlight of the year was the AGM. There was a palpable feeling of warmth amongst the 40 or so who attended. They believed in our efforts to develop a war-affected and isolated part of Sri Lanka's north. Thanks to Initiatives of Change for providing a magnificent venue and to Ellen and Marion for catering excellence!



# February



## Chillin' conversations

Relaxing conversation over food is a good way to check out Bridging Lanka and its director, Jeremy. Tamils and Sinhalese sharing a curry, asking questions, finding things in common and feeling comfortable in each other's presence is time well spent. Don't we all share the same humanity? Thanks Praba for arranging a great evening in Dandenong.

## Preventative conversations

Dave Andrews' most recent publication, "Jihad of Jesus" is having a significant impact on Christians and Muslims alike. Dave introduced Jeremy to Majid Khan, a devout Muslim and an inspiring advocate for racial harmony and a deeper religious tolerance. The meeting focused on responding to the threat of the radicalisation of young Muslims in Sri Lanka as a result of recent and continuing anti-Muslim riots.



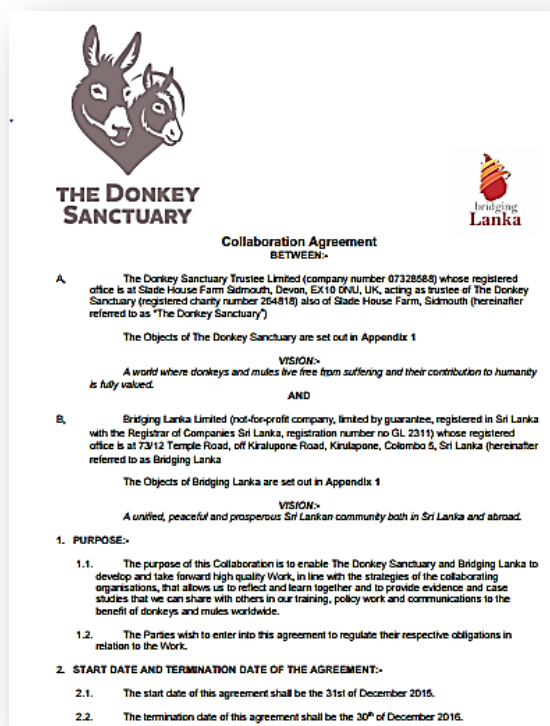
## Signed, sealed and delivered!

On 4<sup>th</sup> February the fateful email arrived telling us that The Donkey Sanctuary UK had signed a Collaborative Agreement with Bridging Lanka and the first tranche of funds was in the Bridging Lanka bank account.

"The purpose of this Collaboration is to enable The Donkey Sanctuary and Bridging Lanka to develop and take forward high quality work that allows us to reflect and learn together and to provide evidence and case studies that we can share with others in our training, policy work and communications to the benefit of donkeys and mules worldwide."

We were over the moon because now we have the funds and technical support to implement our signature projects – the donkey clinic and community education centre as well as the donkey assisted therapy centre (DAT)!

Many thanks Stephen Blakeway and Sally Price (UK) for guidance and making it happen. Most especially we want to thank and acknowledge Dr. Ramesh Kumar from The Donkey Sanctuary India who has believed in us, advocated and supported us through hard times and been an inspiration to us all.



# March



## Spreading the message

Jeremy was invited to speak to BrisWest, a group of women committed to their local community and also to the WOMBAT group (**We Offer Manna, Balm And Time**) who have supported scores of refugee families settle in Brisbane. Both groups' perspective on 'community' encompasses a 'local' as well as 'global' outlook. Their response to hearing of our work in Mannar was overwhelming. They gave generously to our livelihood projects in support of widows and other vulnerable women.

## Public shows of unity

Jeremy was invited to speak at the Harmony Day event in Melbourne where hundreds of Tamils, Muslims, Sinhalese and Burghers gathered. He spoke about the dark road of reconciliation and examples of 'moments of reconciliation' when small but significant shifts took place. A cricket game, rousing speeches and an awesome choir were highlights. There, Jeremy met an inspiring young man from Mannar, Disman Crooz, who pledged to help BL's efforts.



## School kids motivated

Jeremy spoke to a large gathering of social justice students at Penleigh & Essendon Grammar School in Melbourne. The students were very interested in the use of donkeys in development work.

# March

## 'Looking ahead' conversations

The Australian Government has been tough on asylum seekers. Thousands who have come from Sri Lanka are currently on bridging visas. Soon the government plans to return large numbers of asylum seekers to Sri Lanka. What issues will these returnees face as they reintegrate back into their villages and communities? Is there a role for us in their resettlement?



With the help of Renuka and Praba, Bridging Lanka directors, we held a focus group of asylum seekers from Mannar to understand their thoughts about an eminent future. We asked many questions:

1. **How has living in Australia changed you?** a) beliefs; b) attitudes; c) skills; d) future outlook
2. **For those who return, what fears or challenges might they face?** a) village/community/friends' responses; b) employment / study; c) fitting back in – changed attitudes, behaviours; d) straddling two cultural mindsets
3. **How will YOU survive?** a) living arrangements; b) money; c) social networks; d) any future plans to leave Sri Lanka
4. **What types of support would returnees need?**

From the answers we gained valuable insights into the thinking of this group. It was a first step in exploring what may be a role for Bridging Lanka in this matter.



## Addressing conflicts

Serious staff relationship issues had surfaced within the Bridging Lanka staff team in Mannar. The issues threatened to derail important projects and undermine our 'bridging' philosophy. Warren McMillan, director of Partners in International Collaborative Community Aid, introduced us to a gifted psychologist, Judy Rafferty from Toowoomba, who offered to come to Mannar. Many conversations ensued to provide background info.

## Sri Lanka Unites

Long conversations were held with the Sri Lanka Unites crew - Ramzi, Thevuni and Manesh who came to Australia for Harmony Day celebrations. The focus of discussions was how to engage youth for change. It was a privilege to also share thoughts with Prof Siri Hettige from Colombo University and the current Chairman of the Police Commission.

## Diasporas in action

Our wonderful Melbourne-based supporters from Diaspora Action Australia, continue to look out for us in many ways. Our meeting was twofold – to identify funding sources for our proposed Sri Lanka 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, “Exposure Visit” to the homeland, to reconnect with life back there, search for some sense of truth about what happened and reengage with identity; also whether Jeremy would be a presenter at Australia’s first diaspora conference, “Diasporas in Action” later in the year.



# March

## Technical stuff

Designing our projects for a complex context like Mannar consumes many hours of time doing the ‘invisible’ technical stuff. Ranjit Bhagwandas, from Melbourne, helps with identifying the ‘project logic’ and appropriate evaluation tools for our work. The latest effort was to clearly outline the multiple goals for our women’s catering service. They included annual targets for economic, social and mental wellbeing for the widows involved in the micro enterprise. Ranjit’s expertise in evaluation, an astute ear for honing in on the crux of a matter and a shoulder to cry on when things get tough, have been invaluable.



## Making loose plans for future collaboration

Part of Bridging Lanka’s approach is to engage many players in deep conversation about issues including the role of the diaspora, the inhibitors to peace and reconciliation, challenging youth issues, ethnic and religious conflicts, politics, and the list goes on. Represented at this gathering were representatives from the Centre for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka Unites, the Uniting Church and Sri Lanka Police Commission. Through such gatherings partnerships are formed and collaborative pieces of work are galvanised.



## Another volunteer signs up

Jordan Green plans to volunteer in Mannar next year but has already signed up as a member of Bridging Lanka’s Urban Improvements committee. Jordan is a town planner in the private sector and also in local government. He is currently undertaking a Masters of International Urban & Environmental Management at RMIT University. Here he is chatting with Steve and former volunteer, John.



## Reconciliation dinners

The connecting power of food can never be underestimated. In the breaking of bread together we discover the deeper realisation that “all is unity”. Here Tamil, Sinhala and Burgher Sri Lankans are buoyed by what we share in common.

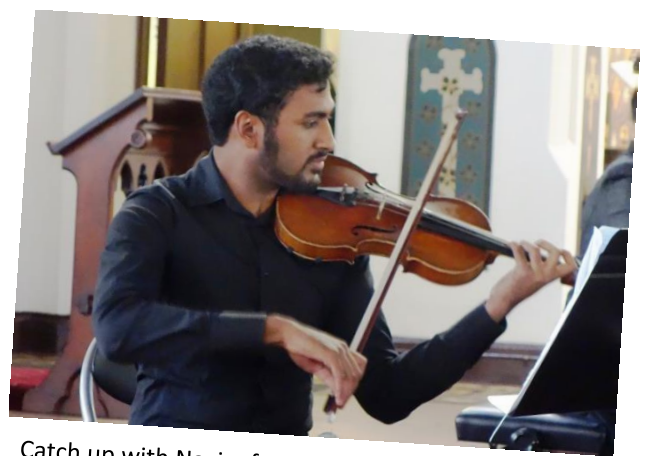
# April



# April



Another visit to our accounting angels by directors, Mary Maher and Phil Chick to settle on a reporting system for the new financial year.



Catch up with Navin, former volunteer



Praba's birthday celebrations!



The Urban Improvements committee tend to the final arrangements for the group of volunteers heading to Mannar.



Steve, Jeremy and Lindy attend the GDG conference in Singapore



Three Bridging Lanka musketeers – second day, Singapore



GDG director, Kelley, leads a dynamic conference session

## to support our work ...

### Contribute financially

#### 1. Simple donation by bank transfer

**Account name:** Bridging Lanka Ltd; **Bank:** Commonwealth; **BSB:** 063 010; **Ac no:** 1183 7067

**Reference:** your name

After the transfer, email [director@bridginglanka.org](mailto:director@bridginglanka.org) to inform of the donation amount, your name and postal address and a tax receipt will be posted to you.

#### 2. Cheque

Make the cheque out to **Bridging Lanka Ltd** and post it to:

Treasurer, Bridging Lanka

28 Mellor Street,

Kedron Qld 4031

AUSTRALIA

Include your name and postal address and a tax receipt will be posted to you.

### Volunteer with us

**Get involved in Sri Lanka** - development projects, business advice and planning, volunteering, proposal writing, government negotiations, skills development, English language teaching, graphic design, catering

**Get involved in Oz** – communications, dialogue discussions, project management, organisational development, fundraising, committee roles (advocacy, PR, finance, web, admin, strategic planning)

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Thank you for your support



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