

SISTER ACTS

The life and times of Brigid Arthur

by Jock Serong

Twenty years ago, I had reason to visit someone in the Maribyrnong detention centre, in Melbourne's inner west. The people who sent me told me to meet a nun outside who would introduce me to the detainee. I spotted her in the car park: a small woman, casually dressed and watchful, propped on two crutches. In answer to my query, she muttered something about her hip. After we passed through security – a processing desk, a metal detector and some suspicious looks – we were dumped in an interview room and the door slammed shut behind us. Immediately, the nun began producing an astonishing array of stationery from within her clothing: pens, highlighters, Post-it Notes, paper. "They won't give them stationery in here," she said. "And no one pats down a nun."

Sister Brigid Arthur had already had a long and meaningful career as a teacher by then. She was in her mid sixties and had begun working intensively with asylum seekers. She's 86 now. This work, which may ultimately be the defining mission of her life, has been a 20-year odyssey atop a whole lifetime.

It's a favoured trope of the border security hardliners that anyone who advocates for asylum seekers must be soft. To spend time in the company of Brigid Arthur is to see the fallacy of that notion. Seated in her small

office in the Brigidine Sisters' Port Melbourne convent, she talked to me about her life: a flow of stories over the droning of a blow heater and the blips and chimes of a busy desk. She's swift, sharp and erudite, with a manner flitting between warmth and owlish vigilance, and has a face that creases with care. When she says the word "awful", a word she uses a lot, her face pinches towards its centre with concern. She is nobody's fool.

MARIE ARTHUR ("Brigid's just a name I took when I entered the order: one of the least awful ones") grew up on a modest farm outside Kaniva, in Victoria's Wimmera district. There were eight children in the Arthur family. "I'm the eldest," she says. "So I'm the boss." Six would become teachers. The area was very Lutheran and Catholics were rare, but the Arthurs weren't overly devout anyway. "I went to a little state school for eight years. One teacher, one room. I was the only one in my grade. I think I've still got a little card that says 'best workbook in Grade 4'. I used to think that was good till I realised I was the only kid in Grade 4."

The family was neither poor nor wealthy. Her father was very placid, though it seems her mother was anything but. "Mum had gone to a Catholic institution

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– her mother had died and she’d boarded at a place in Ballarat run by nuns. She could be quite feisty and very into justice stuff.” Brigid likes to explain her ideas by telling these stories, but in a way that’s clipped and understated. In explanation of her mother’s “justice stuff”, she launches into such a story.

“We had a woman living with us, a vulnerable lady who’d married a drinker, and they had lots of kids and he was violent to this woman. And my mum was outraged. She would take this man to task in no uncertain terms. Her justice issues were around: *How dare he*. How dare he do this, to this woman who was quite vulnerable, really.

“We were going into town one day. I was probably about 10 or 11. Mum was driving, with just me, and she realised that the cloud of dust over in the paddock was Harry – that was his name – driving his tractor. So she said, ‘You wait here, I’m going across there.’ She pulled up – this was out in the middle of the country – and she got over the barbed wire fence and she went over, and she had to get right in front of the tractor because tractors in those days made a lot of noise. She waved him down, made him stop, made him turn off the tractor. They were too far away for me to hear, but I had a fair idea of what was happening. And she marched back to the car and got in.” Seventy-five years later, the moment is perfectly clear in her eyes. “She was always ready to stick up for the underdog.”

The children were all sent to boarding school. “Dad went along with it, but Mum was the driving force.” Marie, as she was then, went to St Brigid’s school in Horsham, her first experience of the Brigidines. She liked learning, but the path from there to deciding to become a nun seems lost in time now. “God knows why I did. I’ve got a vague idea, but why you stay is far more important. I think that’s the same about marriage: why’d you marry this person? More importantly, why’d you *stay* with this person? I definitely thought I could leave,” she says with a laugh. “And here I am, 66 years later.”

The driving force might be a movement called Young Christian Students (which graduates into Young Catholic Workers after school), whose methodology can be reduced to “see, judge and act”. “It was probably the biggest single factor in shaping who I was. You talk about the things you see around you, good, bad or indifferent, and you settle on a few things you might do something about: things that are out of kilter with how you think people should be treated. And if you’ve seen and you’ve judged, then what are you going to *do*?” In Brigid’s plain diction, it sounds like an antidote to the

simmering impotence of social media. The Young Christian Students wouldn’t settle for keyboard warfare.

Eventually, Marie Arthur joined the Brigidines, a teaching order – “down-to-earth people, pretty ordinary” – conscious of the need to follow justice issues, and pragmatic about politics. It doesn’t move in lockstep with the Vatican, though the current Pope’s positions on issues such as workers’ rights and asylum seekers are welcomed, to a point. “I’m not influenced by official Church positions – I differ on a number of major issues.” This might be what the writer Fiona MacCarthy meant when she spoke of “the practical uses nuns have made of their apartness”.

Brigid cites LGBTIQ rights as an area where “the Church is obviously out of kilter with the reality of people’s lives”. And she doesn’t stop there. “They’ve been very slow in talking about domestic violence and women’s rights, and are still light years away from saying we’re all absolutely equal.”

There is a sense that Brigid would grudgingly accept the Church’s differences of doctrine, or mere failings, if they didn’t extend to the monstrous hypocrisy of sexual abuse. “It’s been their weak area of credibility. Officially the Church has obsessed over questions around sexual morality. Much of this teaching has long since been ignored by ordinary Catholics. It seems some of those who’ve taken the high moral ground on abortion, contraception, sexual relations outside marriage, divorce and so on have themselves been engaged in sexual abuse or were complicit in it happening. The hypocrisy of this has left the Church very wounded.”

There is life in the sprawling convent as we’re talking – people dropping by and asking for things – but it seems a cavernous space for a handful of people. On the subject of the Brigidines’ decline, Brigid is remarkably sanguine: “Oh don’t worry, we’re at the end of an era,” she says briskly. “We won’t be around, that’s just reality. Does that matter? No, most groups come into existence for a certain time to do a certain thing and go out of existence. It’s important that things get done, absolutely. But they can be done by other people. In this building, even, our schools have been given over to a group of laypeople and there are people out in the community, really good people. Even though most of us are old now and in the last chapter of our existence, we lend our voice to some things that are terribly important.”

FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS, Brigid taught and worked as a school principal, including a stint in the South Bronx, in New York City – “this little school in the middle

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of burnt-out tenement houses, the poorest of the poor areas” – in 1974. “The kids were juniors, all boys except for one girl – God knows how that happened. She hardly ever spoke, and I thought she hated me. But on the last day she hung back, behind everybody else, and I thought: *Now she’s going to tell me how bad this has been*, and she thrust this thing into my hand, and it was a little present with a note saying thanks for being kind to her.

“The boys, when I first went in there, they were atrocious, just swinging from the rafters ... I managed to get them quiet enough to say, ‘I gotta have a serious conversation with you. This is a waste of my time and yours.’ And in amazement, they said, ‘Miss, we’re *good* for you.’” She laughs at the memory of it. “‘Hell, I’d hate to see it when you’re bad for somebody.’”

She could see that the school’s English curriculum was totally alien to the predominantly Puerto Rican and African-American kids: “Fancy trying to teach Shakespeare’s sonnets to kids in the South Bronx! I tried to say, ‘Underneath it all, this short story is about what you’re experiencing, too.’ We’d always have a bit of time for them to explore what their reality was, and then link it.”

But Brigid’s longest stint as principal was her 14 years at Marian College in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine West, immersed in a racially diverse community and living in nearby Ardeer, which was “full of older women who’d gone through the Second World War”. They were Polish, Ukrainian; women who’d been forced across borders or lived under the houses of German farmers with their animals. “I loved their stories – they touched me so much.”

Into an ethnic mix dominated by Greeks, Italians and Maltese, the Vietnamese arrived at the end of the ’70s. Sunshine West was full of factory workers clinging to the minimum wage. Squeezed out of those jobs, the Vietnamese took work in the textile industry. “I got very interested in the places that were screwing them over piecework,” Brigid says. “When you visited the homes at night you were a bloody nuisance because everyone in the family had work to do – all these shirts or whatever around the room, on every chair, and the kids, as soon as they went home from school, had to do their bit putting in the zip or doing the buttons or packing something.” As she gradually evolved away from teaching, asylum seekers became Brigid’s focus. She now describes herself as one of the coordinators of the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project, which does four things: provides practical help with issues such as rent and utilities, friendship, food and legal advice; networks with other sources of support; advocates on behalf of

asylum seekers and refugees; and, lastly, educates the wider community.

“We do a lot of housing, not because we want to, but because the government won’t give any kind of income to asylum seekers, so they’ve got no money for rent.”

It’s apparent that the Brigidines’ approach is highly adaptive so they can attack the problem from multiple angles. The Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project owns some houses, and rents other ones at concessional rates. It also steps in for asylum seekers who can’t meet their own rent, and brokers arrangements where homeowners take in a family. The balances of personalities, cultures and homes can be difficult to get right. “We’re pretty careful about that.”

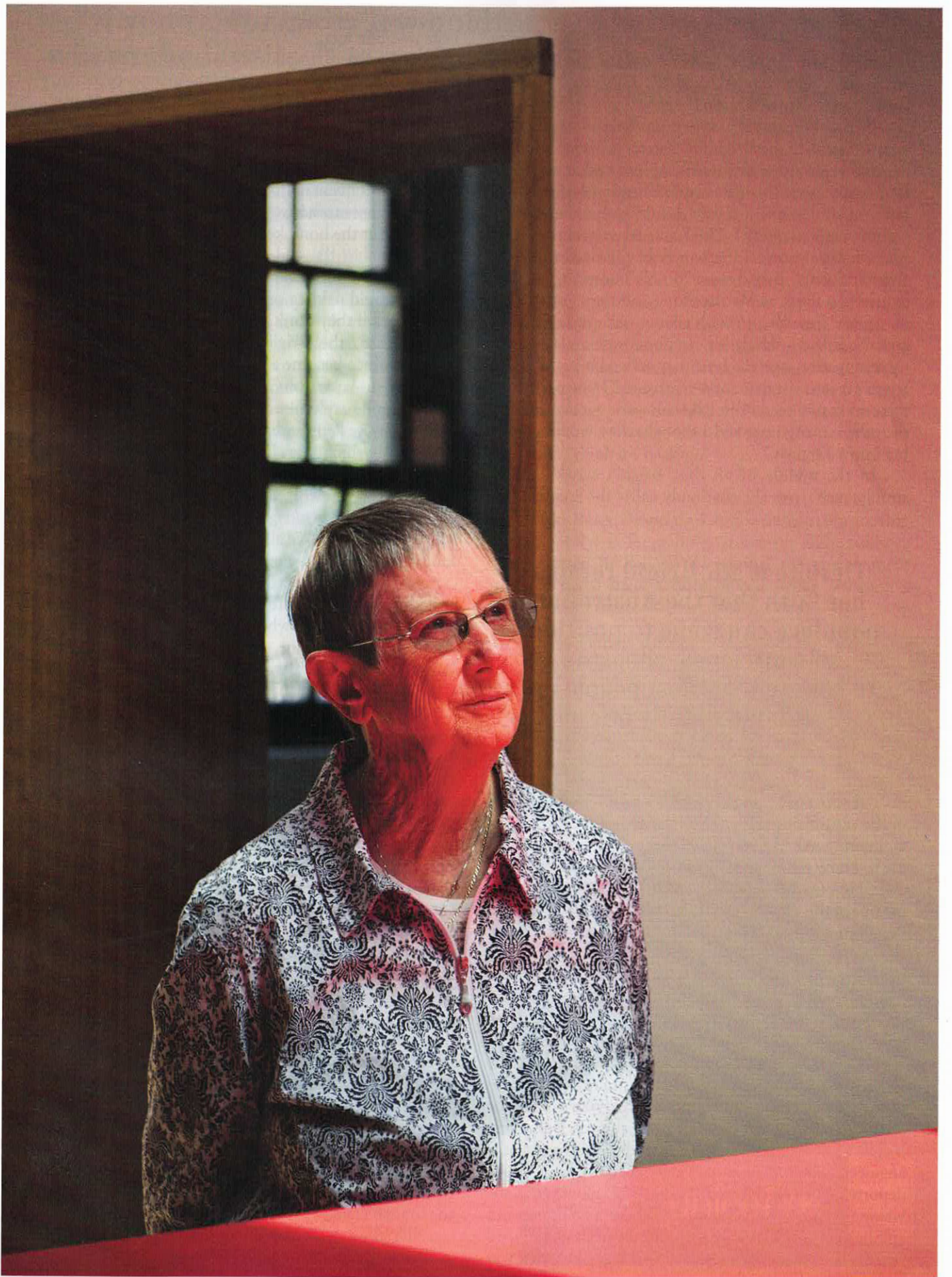
The entire project is run by a small team, and beyond that core group there are about 200 volunteers doing significant work. “Some of those people just keep befriending families over years ... they’re just part of the family now.”

And of all of them, all the nuns and staff and volunteers, Brigid’s pretty sure she’s the oldest. “I’m sure I am. *No one’s* older than me.”

“IN ONE WAY it was serendipitous,” Brigid says, of her turn from education to asylum-seeker activism, “but it’s been a clear path in another way. I don’t think you can study history or international relations, or anything much, without coming up against questions of colonialism, nationalism, borders, the disparity of wealth across the world. Things where mankind – humankind but often *mankind* actually, not very often woman-kind – has managed to set up structures that are just so blatantly wrong. West Sunshine, and living in Ardeer, opened me up to see people with huge courage. What comes out of refugee work overall is hopelessness on one end of the spectrum, and on the other end, just extraordinary courage.”

Back before the asylum-seeker project, the Brigidines had already formed a social justice group, linked to their housing work. “We didn’t know a hell of a lot about housing. We were going round in circles, trying things, and it led to asylum seekers. This was maybe ’98. We didn’t even know detention centres existed, but we had an empty house and we decided to give it to somebody in need, some El Salvadorian people. That was probably the first group of refugees we got to know well.

“Then we learnt that at the Enterprise Hostel in Springvale there were Cambodians who had no English,



and as teachers we thought we'd offer to go in to do some teaching. We tried to get in and couldn't. We were talking to them through the fence. All of a sudden, a few weeks later, they were whisked off. Taken to Port Hedland, I think, into detention there."

If the bureaucratic intention behind this move was to dissuade the Brigidine Sisters, it backfired. "We decided to do more about this asylum-seeker stuff. We found out about this detention centre in Maribyrnong, but you couldn't visit if you didn't have a name – you had to visit *somebody*." The Kafkaesque game was that nobody would reveal the names of the detainees. "By sheer accident," Brigid says, "one of our group met the cousin of a cook at Maribyrnong and they got this list of names. I'm sure it wasn't supposed to be floating around. It had a whole lot of columns: name, nationality, occupation, age, the boat they arrived by... I said I'd try to get into the detention centre, and I saw on the list there were two men from Pakistan – one a journalist and the other an engineer, and I thought they would probably know English."

In the middle of all this, Brigid's world took a strange turn – one she charitably calls "the accident".

Despite it all, Brigid retains her faith that the Australian populace can come to positions of conscience, choosing to believe that most people are fundamentally fair.

"It was 2000," she says with a sigh. "I was waiting in the car outside a friend's house to see them. Nine at night, in North Melbourne. A bloke comes along, wanting to know the time, so I stupidly wind down the window. He puts his hand in, yanks the door open, yanks me out of the car, and I wind up behind the wheels, and I can't move. And I'm thinking, *Bloody hell, he's going to run over me*. So I'm screaming, and that car, which had never *not* gone – never ever – it didn't start. He couldn't start it. I found out afterwards I'd broken my hip. Some good Samaritans came to my aid, and God knows where the man went."

Brigid was immobilised, still recuperating, so she began writing to the two Pakistani detainees in Maribyrnong. "I didn't get any answer at all – it was like the dead-letter office." When she had recovered enough, Brigid went in, and asked to see the journalist and the engineer. "And they said, 'The journalist one's been deported, but you can see the other one.'" I waited in the waiting room, on my sticks, and this bloke comes out and he's on sticks, exactly the same as me! He'd slipped on tiles or something and broken his leg." The man was

desperately lonely. Brigid promised to come back, and began visiting him.

This led to an introduction to a young Pakistani student in detention who, because of the manner of his entry to Australia, qualified for release on a bond. "I made enquiries and found out it was \$3000, so I came home and said, 'We must be able to find that.' And we did."

The young man was placed in a house close to the Brigidines' convent in Port Melbourne. The nuns sought more detainees to house with him so he would be supported. "But the bond kept going up: it was \$3000 then \$5000, then in the end [the government was] asking \$50,000, and there was no way we would or could pay that. But we'd paid 12 or 13 of these bonds, which you do get back if they don't abscond."

By then, the Brigidine Sisters were committed, and have since become a central pillar in asylum-seeker advocacy in Australia. Over the past 20 years, through the byzantine asylum-seeker policies of several governments, they've kept finding a way. "I keep thinking they can't do anything worse, and then they do, but I think we are at the low point, probably. Back in the Howard years it was awful, but you thought, *They're making it up as they go along*. It'll change, because it wasn't so long-term then. We all thought it wouldn't go on for long, that somebody would see it was no good."

At first there were MPs who would admit to the Brigidines off the record that their policies were cruel. "There's a few people who will say that now, but mainly they toe the party line, and we know what the party line is on both sides. Twenty years later, you don't have the feeling they'll change all of this and it'll be better, because they *haven't*. They've kept this going and they could keep it going for another bloody 20 years."

The federal Liberal MP Russell Broadbent is an outspoken critic of such asylum-seeker policies. He's known Brigid since she started her work in the field, and describes her as "a source of great wisdom and genuine support for the positions I've taken". It's well documented that Broadbent's positions, including crossing the floor in opposition to the Howard government's off-shore processing bill in 2006, have placed him at odds with his party. "Brigid's support has been constant," he tells me. "I can't do what I do without it. She comes to you with open hands and an open heart."

I suggest to Brigid that the upwellings of public rage around children overboard and the *Tampa* incident seem to have dissipated, leaving widespread indifference in their wake. But she lives in hope of a tipping point. "When I was teaching, I used to say to the kids, 'Never despair, even though you're up against it. Keep trying, keep adding your voice, because like the snowflake, a lot of snow falls and the branches seem to be holding up the snow, and then one snowflake is enough to actually make that branch crack. Something makes the branch crack.'"

She admits a lot of moments *could* have been tipping points in government policy but weren't. "I thought

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for just a minute that it might’ve been the family from Biloela, and what’d they do? They cynically shut up everybody by saying, ‘Oh, we’ve done what we should do.’ They’d in fact done nothing.”

Despite it all, Brigid retains her faith that the Australian populace can come to positions of conscience, choosing to believe that most people are fundamentally fair. “Most of them would, if it didn’t cost them too much, want something decent to be done in our name. But there’s a big hiatus between that and the government. I don’t know how you could get on such a trajectory. They still trot out this line that ‘there’s gonna be a huge number of them and they’ll come and overwhelm us!’ That makes me really, really angry. They know it’s just a furphy. They know the narrative holds no water whatsoever, but because they’ve said it over and over again, they have such a number in the population who believe it.”

Which leaves us with resistance, and anger. Nuns have a history of disobeying bad laws, I suggest. “We

protested outside MPs’ offices, and on a couple of occasions I got ‘arrested,’” she says, miming air quotes. “It was passive resistance, refusing to leave.”

The philosophical basis for law-breaking, as Brigid sees it, is the obligation to do the greatest good in the face of a dilemma. “So if you’re normally law abiding but here’s an occasion where the law itself is going to cause hardship for people, then I think your obligation is to disobey that law. That’s a moral obligation.” And “passive resistance” of the Brigidine variety is not exclusive of anger. “Oh no, I think it’s important to *be* angry. Just being angry for the sake of it is no good, but if it gives you the impetus to keep trying to do whatever you can, then I think it’s healthy.”

LATE LAST YEAR, Brigid took to the ramparts in another cause entirely: as litigation guardian for eight students who claimed in Federal Court that the environment minister owed them a duty of care when assessing a

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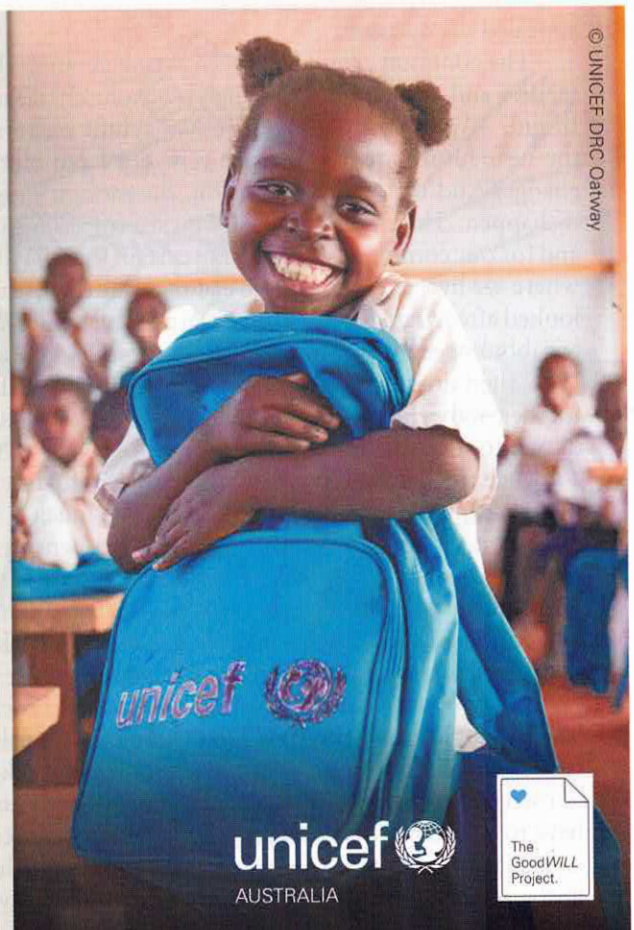
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mine proposal. Brigid was 85 at the time; most of the students were around 17, and scattered across four states and multiple time zones.

As the plaintiffs’ lawyer David Barnden observes, Brigid “has an amazing understanding of what happens at a political level and how it affects vulnerable people at the coalface”.

“Well, I’ve been a litigation guardian before,” Brigid says, “for Indigenous kids, asylum-seeker kids, other asylum seekers who couldn’t represent themselves, mainly for mental health reasons. The lawyers needed a litigation guardian, so they approached me.” She shrugs.

It’s the 17-year-old lead plaintiff, Anjali Sharma, who points out to me that as litigation guardian, Brigid has put herself on the hook for any potential costs order. “Without her taking that risk, we couldn’t have done it,” Sharma says. Brigid has “gone close” to incurring costs once or twice, and has also been in the position to chase costs but has declined. Ultimately, the students’ case was successful, but the federal government has appealed the decision.

The common ground between caring about asylum seekers and about climate change is absolutely clear to Brigid. “Apart from anything else, asylum seekers in the near future are going to be refugees from climate change. And the longer it goes on, the more it’s going to happen. The other angle is, we care for each other and for our community by making certain that the place where we live, the country we claim as our own, are all looked after. Care for people and care for place are inextricably linked.”

Brigid doesn’t see the litigation as a sustained shift, for her, into climate activism. But she will always be drawn to it by the human dimensions involved. “I was a science teacher, and I’ve always been interested in the miracle of life. The miracle is that until we muck it up, most of it actually works. But we have a propensity for mucking it up, because we get selfish and greedy, and we think we’re entitled to get richer and richer and have bigger houses and bigger whatever. Now I sound like a rabid socialist, but I do think enough’s enough.”

When I put to her that she might indeed be a socialist, she laughs uproariously. “Don’t think so. Socialists tend to be very humourless people. No, I think working to own things is a great sense of achievement, but I don’t have to own more than I need. When you meet real capitalists, they’re pretty awful too. I think I’m somewhere in the middle. It’s awful that some people don’t have a chance to own anything.”

By now I’m alive to the possibility that labels won’t work here, and that Brigid is one of those rare individuals who lives by well-settled ethics, outside of familiar paradigms. Her frame of reference is often Australia. Might she be a patriot? “Ugh. Nationalism is awful.” A proud Australian, then? She thinks a little longer. “No. I think I used to be, but no, I’m so disturbed by a lot of what Australia stands for now that I’m not proud.”

She eventually concedes that she might be stubborn. “Yes. Both in education and in this stuff, I haven’t given up, though I’ve been swimming against the tide most of the time. I’m not a swimmer, by the way. I’d call what I do ‘dog paddling.’”

THERE IS A MOMENT, late in my long discussions with Sister Brigid Arthur, when she’s thinking about the people she works for. Uncharacteristically, her voice falters. “Ah, hmm ... maybe ...” Then she tells me this story:

“There’s a man, oh a beautiful man – an Afghan. Came out here, got his family somehow to Quetta in Pakistan, a very common story. When he got travel rights he went back: his wife was dying of cancer. When she died, the eldest daughter – she was only 18 or so – looked after her three brothers. He went over again because he’d heard his daughter was in trouble. He met some men who had abducted her, handed over the money that they were asking, 5000 or whatever. They said go to a certain street corner and your daughter’s in a car there. And there was a burnt-out car with four bodies in it. His daughter was among them: these men had burnt the car with these women inside. Ah, dear God.

“He had to leave the other boys and come back, and he’s been working, for years now, to get those kids out. He works in a restaurant in Sunshine, making flatbread. I’ve been seen him working, bent over this really intense heat. He works seven days a week, long hours. And he’s made enough money to put a deposit on a house, because he still thinks those boys are coming.”

Up to that moment, we had been talking about motivation, about ideology. Seeing, judging, acting. Why does someone devote their working life, their *life*, to this work? Until Brigid told me the story about the Afghan man, I must have been looking for a theoretical basis: it’s Catholic teaching, it’s the Brigidines’ way. Maybe it is those things, to an extent. But inescapably, I came to the conclusion that Brigid saw people suffering, like the Afghan man has suffered. Where others might have settled for tidy excuses, she has found it impossible to look away. **M**