

Hannah, ChilOut Ambassador, 2004

Hannah, 16, from rural Victoria, is a year 11 student at Castlemaine Secondary College.

Hannah writes to two asylum seeker detainees in Australia and some others detained on Nauru. Hannah was a *Girlfriend* magazine "Girlfriend of the Year" finalist in 2003, chosen because of her involvement in refugee activism. In February 2004, she appeared in *Girlfriend* again with a report on her last visit to Baxter detention centre.

Ambassador for the day: Hannah speaks about her experiences in Canberra, Thursday, 11 March 2004

It didn't really sink in how big this was until the night before when I was seated at a fantastic Turkish restaurant with seven amazing young people. After feeling so alone in my passion I am surrounded by all these like-minded wonderful beings who are all here for the same reason — it's an uplifting feeling. Wednesday night was a sleepless one for me. I spent it going over and over what I wanted to say to the Minister for Immigration, Amanda Vanstone. At all those rallies, through all those letters and now here I would be right with the source of this pain. I didn't want to stuff it up. I saw it as my chance to get my point of view across.

I'd often envisaged this moment. What would I say? What would I do? Would I shake this woman? Tell of her of the pain she has caused? Would I beg her on two knees, crying and wondering why she can't help these kids?

Instead I am calm, sitting at a table cluttered with coffee cups and plump chocolate croissants. I do not utter a word until my turn.

As we all sat picking at our chocolate croissants the next morning, we went around the circle. Each young person had something profoundly touching to say, when it was their turn and they all got it across beautifully. I just wanted to hug them all as they sat there bravely telling the Minister their story, some with tears cascading down their cheeks.

When it came to me I tried my best to look her right in the eye. "My name is Hannah I'm 16 from Rural Victoria," I started. "I care about children in detention because over the past almost three years I have written to and seen some kids deteriorate in these centres, they have already suffered a loss of culture, family, home, now they are suffering a loss of freedom," I took a breath, I could feel my hands shaking.

"Is it absolutely necessary to lock up children in order to protect our borders and if it is, as the case seems to be, does that not mean there is something profoundly flawed with our policies?" She sits there and nods for the next person to go. No sign of emotion on her face. When we had all finished I sat there shaking trying not to scream with anger as

she went on about immigration and the fact that they can always go back.

I left her office feeling sick and down, I couldn't believe the situation was so hopeless as she put it forth. It was like she'd spent the whole time making up excuses. I was soon cheered up as my fellow Ambassadors and I got bubbly with excitement as we trooped around Parliament House.

I left the Shadow Minister's office feeling much better and the rest of the politicians for the day were all lovely and open to our comments. Except of course the Minister for Children with his busy schedule. Interesting to see him going for his morning jog earlier though.

Security told us to move this way and that all day but we didn't mind, I guess it was part of the experience. Meeting Andrew Bartlett was a thrill but the butterflies wouldn't completely disappear until after the press conference. I found that more terrifying than meeting the Minister. But it went well with tears being shed throughout the whole audience.

By this time we had our little spiels down to a fine art and were acting like pros. After the press conference we relaxed and went and saw our good friend John Howard in question time. We then received certificates and were rushed off for quick goodbyes. The whole day went so quickly and it wasn't until I was safely back in Victoria that it really sank in as I excitedly told my parents the tales of the day.

Being a ChilOut Ambassador to Canberra has helped me look at how I want to spend my life and I met a lot of inspiring people!! It gave me an insight into how Parliament worked. I was so excited to get back and tell my legal teacher what I'd seen.

Sadly all the preconceptions I had of the Liberal party and Amanda Vanstone were proved right, but some other politicians gave me a string of hope in how much they cared and respected us (especially the Human Rights Sub-Committee). I only hope that this is a small step to doing bigger and better things with them.

It was such a wonderful thing to do and has only inspired me to do more. Thank you everyone involved for an AMAZING experience...