

Joan, ChilOut Ambassador, 2004

Joan, 17, who has just started university, hails from Ulverstone, north-west Tasmania. She is part of the social justice network in her community and the online advocacy group, 'Nauruwire', and writes to many Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers on Nauru.

On meeting politicians, Joan says:

Amanda Vanstone didn't really seem to be listening to us, but besides that she was okay. Letting the politicians know of personal stories and how policies affect people might create some change or at least recognition of what is happening so they would want to act upon it.

I think some politicians act like animals or like children as we saw at question time, and some just don't seem interested like Larry Anthony or Ms Vanstone. The ones who want to help you, like Andrew Bartlett and Linda Kirk, you can see their hard work.

Joan's report on the ChilOut Ambassadors' trip to Canberra, 11 March 2004

I anxiously waited in Melbourne with my purple tie and beanie wondering what I had got myself into. *Maybe this isn't really happening.* Hannah and her mother then approached me and we introduced ourselves and talked about the things we do. Soon we headed for the plane and met with Bonnie along the way.

We soon made it to Canberra — well it didn't seem like the next day something big would happen. We met up with one of our (wonderful) billet Gerry who also showed us around Canberra, and the embassies, and us girls talked like we were old friends, and I found out they were just as passionate as I am against children in detention. We met our other (of course wonderful) billet, Rae and settled down at their house for a while, and we talked about different things, Bonnie showed me her letters, and shirt and I finished writing my letter to Amanda Vanstone.

We then took a taxi to the best Turkish restaurant in town, where we met up with all the Chilout crew (including Alanna, Dianne, Krystal, Sayed, Zahra, Nahid, Fabienne) and families. Besides joking around and playing name games we got down to business discussing what was happening the next day and what we were going to talk about. This then sort of shook me, having no idea what to expect the next day.

Zahra was sitting next to me, and it was going to be that when she spoke she always moved me, always made me cry, earlier when Sayed and Nahid spoke I felt like that too, I put my arm around Zahra, I just wanted to tell them that I wish I could take away all their sorrows, I wish I could have it, rather than they suffer.

So after all that we went home, (lots of anxious energy!). The four of us (Hannah, Fabienne, Bonne and I) couldn't speak for a while, and I thought, hmm I wonder what we're going to have for breakfast?

Then verbal action started rolling! I had made this speech that sounded so perfect and now I was nervous and couldn't say a word. It took me a while to sleep, I prayed and soon enough the big day had arrived.

I woke up straight away (keen, 6:15 am). Hannah, Fabienne and I went on a later taxi as Bonne had an interview. We met at the back of Parliament House and caught Larry Anthony going for a jog (and still doing so when we were supposed to meet him, because obviously that's more important than seeing us, sarcasm intended).

The security guard 'officials' were shifting us about — it was so funny — apparently John Howard was entering the building and we could be a form of protest with our shirts saying "Children out of detention!" We got through the security and our first stop — breakfast with Amanda Vanstone (and her advisor).

My impressions of Amanda Vanstone — well at first reasonable, perhaps human, she even said 'compassion' once, we said what were going to say. I had spoken after Sayed, and was still a little teary as after Nahid spoke, tears came from Zahra's eyes, which set Nahid off, and then Bonne comforted Zahra and then Nahid started crying too, and then tears started forming in my eyes.

My voice was a bit shaky but it went something along these lines "Hi, I'm Joan Cortez, I'm 17 and I go to the University of Tasmania, and I'm passionate about this subject because my friend and I write to many refugees on Nauru island, and from what I have heard from these people and read about detention centres such as from Tom Mann's experience, it is obvious that this is not the best place for children to grow up in, surely Minister there must be another way to deal with this, there must be an alternative to mandatory detention?" I heard the experiences of my new friends:

Bonne — of her school friends who are refugees, who have taught her many new things, culture and language, and the uncertainties they face.

Hannah — who writes to many refugees in Baxter and Nauru, and how she has written to a person for three years and has watched him deteriorate.

Krystal — how she writes to people on Nauru, how she had lost her dad and how she can relate to some of their experiences.

Sayed Reza — who told of his experience in the horrible war in Afghanistan, his brave journey by himself to get to Australia, being on the boat and being in detention and the uncertainty of being on a TPV (temporary protection visa).

Nahid — who also came from Afghanistan, who was also in detention centres, and continues today to face uncertainty on a TPV.

Zahra — who had the experience of a refugee camp in Pakistan, but was lucky to come to Australia on a humanitarian visa [this was before the TPV regime was established]. She feels for best friend who is on TPV, already losing so much and told how hard it was, asking the Minister to consider this.

Fabienne — who writes to refugees on Nauru, asking the Minister to consider the significance of the early years of development in a child's life, and obviously there must be another way.

We got to know each other throughout day, I feel for them and I am so proud of them all.

Then Amanda started speaking, she went on about how great the Government's policies are, I'm so proud of Bonne when she said, "Excuse me Minister, but could you tell my friends who are eight years old and five years old that?" Amanda was silent for a moment and then snapped at Bonne, clearly moved, saying she doesn't answer individual questions. She said if people don't like Nauru they can always go back, I just don't know how she could say that when there were three of us saying what it was like. The sad thing is she actually believes what she is saying. Her advisor said an analogy about a rich mansion and a poor person who wanted to be there, referring to the refugee, I thought it was so irrelevant, maybe he could have said they had to go back to a bush fire, but then why wouldn't you welcome a stranger? After being there, I was so relieved, I could also see relief in Sayed's face, and I just felt like laughing again.

Stephen Smith — he listened to us, had his say about Labor's new policies (which sounded great by the way) — but I wonder too if it will really happen or if it's just an act.

Linda Kirk — wonderful lady!

Jacinta Collins — I liked how she told us the story of hope! And I think I've seen her on TV before!

Larry Anthony's Advisor — well what can I say? He basically said it's not in their department's area, even when Alanna [from ChilOut] mentioned that the Australian government is responsible for the welfare of all kids in Australia even the ones in detention centres.

Human Rights Sub-Committee — I felt very privileged, I remember speaking with so much passion, and everyone else spoke with the same passion and spoke so well. Alanna had said afterwards that it was the best we had spoken. I just felt so lucky to be in the same room as **Natasha Stott Despoja**! Omigosh! I got a photo with her!

Lunch — it was absolutely wonderful, as we hadn't eaten breakfast and were starving! And even better who's to shout us but **Andrew Bartlett**!! Omigosh — topping up the best day ever! I felt so blessed to have met him, I had heard about all these great things he is doing for refugees. I spoke to him and told him that I wrote a letter to the editor about him that got published and I thanked him for all the great work he'd been doing! And I was so lucky I also got a photo with him! I also met **Tanya** at lunchtime too and she's a sweetie! I heard she been doing some great work as well, with a friend I write to.

Press conference — was very professional, but there were lots of lights and cameras! I seriously haven't been exposed to this in all my life. When we spoke we were all naturals! Nahid and Hannah presented the petition to Andrew and Tanya.

Question time — reminded me of how politicians are like animals or children the way they act. The highlights — well! Bonne and I blew kisses to John Howard (actually mine was going to be for Mark Latham but he turned around so it hit Johnny) and it was so funny, this person I had seen on television before was like shocked he couldn't stop staring, I think he couldn't believe I just did that! When we got up in the end, Sayed and I started waving to John Howard and he waved back and we both showed our shirts, look at us! (yeah!) I think others were doing the same too. I think we kind of got in trouble, but we were leaving anyway.

We had a little ceremony outside Parliament House, and were presented with certificates (wow!) and then there were our goodbyes. I couldn't believe we as a group had gotten

so close in the two days and then we had to leave again. I had all these mixed feelings, I felt so tired, drained, sad and proud. Zahra, Nahid and Sayed were driving back to Sydney. Krystal and Fabienne had other rides and it was just Hannah, Bonne and I again. Being in the plane again, I felt so washed with sadness. I was sad for my new friends who had pains in their life, for my friends in Nauru who had to keep waiting and everyone who was suffering. In Melbourne, we were greeted with Hannah's parents, we had a last photo and then I said goodbye to Bonne who was catching another plane. By myself, I waited an hour, had Hungry Jacks, another hour plane trip home and then an hour and a half car trip back. In the car I listened to Moshen, in my head "every time I sleep, I look for dream of love..." and I was back in deep contemplation. I was so glad to be home.