

Virginia Jealous' association with asylum seekers from Afghanistan has completely changed her life.

And the development worker for one of the regional non-government organizations in Suva will defy anybody who suggests that most asylum seekers seeking refugee status, particularly those that she has formed a bond with, be sent back to where they came from.

Virginia's three-year involvement with asylum seekers, branded as the "boat people" could best be described as a blessing in disguise.

For when many people in the Southern Hemisphere felt that asylum seekers were the least of their worries, it was people like Virginia and her friends who made a difference in their lives.

Virginia was living on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, the Australian destination of many asylum seekers, when in August 2001 the MV *Tampa* arrived - the famous big red boat with 438 mostly Afghan refugees on board - and put Christmas Island firmly on the map for its 15 minutes of fame.

"Before this time I was not particularly involved with refugee issues or with Afghanistan but being on a small island in the middle of a huge ocean where boats arrived with terrified, filthy, hungry people on board - watching those people land and looking into their faces turned the whole political issue of refugees into a personal issue for me," she said.

Afghans were incarcerated for anywhere between a few days and many months behind razor wires in temporary detention on the remote island.

In an interview with SUNday, Virginia said she and a few other local people became involved in the plight of the Afghans and since it was impossible for these refugees to have visiting rights, they assisted wherever possible.

"During that time we set up a local network of support people who were either raising awareness of the refugees, or talking to media, or lobbying politicians, or taking comfort packages to the kids in detention. Then a Pacific focus came into play when these people we hardly knew, and rarely if ever met on Christmas Island, moved to Nauru."

She said in a peculiar way it was much easier to be in touch with people on Nauru because they had better phone and e-mail access compared to Christmas Island.

"We set up a penpal network, families writing to families for example, a lifeline to the world outside really."

Before moving to Fiji, Virginia and her friends on Christmas Island spent a lot of time learning about Afghanistan.

"We were developing these amazing relationships with people we'd never met from a country we knew little about. So I started reading travel books and reading about Afghan history and just learning and learning about what there was to learn about Afghanistan."

Out of that came information about the extraordinary group called the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which was set up in 1977 in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. RAWA was a group of extraordinary women who did extraordinarily brave and subversive acts during the Russian occupation. But when the Russians left, Afghanistan was taken over first by warlords and then the infamous Taliban came to power. The members of RAWA, who thought they were fighting for social justice and the liberation of Afghanistan, found themselves in many ways in a much worse position than when the Soviets were in occupation, and most of the women fled to refugee camps on the Pakistan border.

There they continue to work on health issues and educational issues specifically focused around women and children, and even their spokeswoman still travels under a false name for her own safety.

"Involvement with Afghanistan is quite weird, because unless you are a development or aid worker, you're unlikely to have been there or have personal connections there. But many women from outside Afghanistan are conscious of their privileged position and really want to support women who don't have the good fortune that we have. Luckily the group of women who formed RAWA came out of an Afghanistan in the 70s where women had been well educated, there was a middle class of women who had lived a comparatively liberated life and they were able to organize themselves.

"There are women individually doing great work everywhere, but who haven't had the ability to form themselves into such effective groups and networks".

Given Virginia's interest in Afghanistan, and her connections with Afghans on Nauru, she was asked to be the contact person for SAWA (Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan) when she came to live in Fiji, where she raises awareness of the Association's work in Afghanistan, and continues to support asylum seekers on Nauru.

"What interested me when I arrived in Fiji was how the 'Pacific solution', as Australia calls the detention of asylum seekers on Nauru, didn't really seem to be a Pacific solution at all - it seemed more like just a 'Nauru solution'. And when

I talk to people in other parts of the Pacific about it, either little is known or people feel generally terribly sorry for the detainees who have now been sitting in legal limbo on Nauru for up to two and half years.

"I suppose in terms of what I would like to do in raising awareness in Fiji about Afghans is to let people know there are international support networks that can help, and that the situation in Afghanistan isn't actually far away, it's only a flight away to Nauru. What's going on in Afghanistan now directly impacts how and where the Afghans on Nauru will be able to live the rest of their lives.

"It would be terrific for all of us who have associations with the Pacific whether by history or by geography, to write – for example - to Australia about the detainees on Nauru; it would also be terrific for groups of young women and girls in Fiji to write to some of the teenage girls and families who are on Nauru. That kind of linkage between people allows us to make some sense of the globalised world," she said.

Virginia told SUNday she has two particular friends on Nauru - one of whom has finally being granted refugee status and the other who has had his third appeal rejected.

The first had left Afghanistan with his much-loved young wife partly because, as he said, 'In Afghanistan women are treated like dogs'. She drowned in the Indian Ocean when their boat sank, and is now buried in the Muslim cemetery on Christmas Island as. He has been on Nauru for over a year.

"The other is an extraordinary young man who has been very vocal on Nauru in terms of getting information out, and I wonder if that's jeopardized his application for refugee status."

About 138 Afghans were granted refugee status within the last month but haven't moved anywhere yet. Another 56 Iraqis are on a separate camp on Nauru.

Virginia said when the last of the Afghans left Christmas Island, the temporary detention center there closed down. Some months later, in 2003, a boat load of Vietnamese people almost reached the coast of Western Australia, but the Australian Government reopened the Christmas Island detention centre and moved them there. It is understood that two of the Vietnamese families have recently been granted refugee status, but the majority had their applications refused and are going through an appeals process.

Virginia said that before the boat people had started arriving on Christmas Island the Taliban were already in the news, and the world had some idea what was happening to women in Afghanistan. Likewise Saddam Hussein was still in power in Iraq, and many Iraqi people were fleeing his regime.

But she said it was very unfortunate timing when the *Tampa* arrived on Christmas Island, as it was only about a fortnight before the Twin Towers were attacked. "And after 9/11 was not a good time to be a brown-skinned Muslim looking for asylum anywhere in the world."

Although she hasn't started lobbying for support in the country, Virginia would be very interested in sharing information with anybody who is interested in what is going on in Afghanistan.

Virginia brushed aside suggestions that asylum seekers were only looking for an easy way out.

"It's been my experience that none of the Afghans that I've met has chosen the easy way out. When you live in a land-locked country, you've never seen the ocean in your life, you have little money - and the way that you get money to leave is when your extended family or community pay for you to go because they recognise that you are in danger if you stay - then you spend weeks if not months being transported from Afghanistan to Indonesia where you sit in crowded rooms waiting for overloaded boats to take you offshore - this is seriously not an easy option."

Citing an example, one of the asylum seekers whom Virginia knows chose to take his dead wife's body from Australia back to Afghanistan with his three small children; but it was still too dangerous to stay and he and the children immediately fled again to Pakistan where they remain. He had been a school teacher in a small village in Afghanistan and had been taken away for questioning by the Taliban. Although not badly injured when released, his village community recognized that as an educated school teacher he and his family were in danger, and together they collected enough money to get him and his family out to safety. "Just getting the money together is an incredible effort, but it can also be dangerous for communities to do because people know - the Taliban know - that yesterday this man was here with his family- and now he is gone-how did he manage to get away? You know it is not easy to become an asylum seeker, it really isn't and I can't stress that enough in my experience with Afghans.

"And of course they are looking for a better life-yes, if you were persecuted and terrified and you couldn't send your girl-children to school and there's no doctor for your wife and your children to see because women aren't allowed to go to male doctors –of course you would be looking for a better life. Wouldn't we all."

"There are documented cases of at least two Afghans detained on Nauru who took a voluntary repatriation package and who have been killed since returning to Afghanistan. So yes, it's still very dangerous. Some people who have taken the repatriation package - which essentially gets you back to Kabul with about A\$2000 per adult - have immediately fled to refugee camps on the Pakistan or Iranian border because its just too dangerous. Most of the Afghans I know have not

taken the repatriation package. They are from an ethnic group called Hazara, and historically they've been terribly persecuted in Afghanistan.

"If living in detention on Nauru is preferable to going back home, then they must be really scared to leave."

Relating another story, she spoke of a young man who has just been granted refugee status.

"He was 14 or 15 when he left Afghanistan four years ago. One of his arms doesn't work very well and he lost a couple of fingers in an attack by the Taliban. Given that he had survived that event, people got together to get him out. He had never been outside of Afghanistan before, and ended up in Jakarta waiting for a boat. The first boat he went on was 50 metres out to sea and sank because it was overloaded; but it was close enough for people to walk back to shore. He refused to get on a second boat, which was also overloaded. So this young man thought that there was some message here—that maybe God was speaking to him, and that maybe he shouldn't go. Instead he thought he'd better teach himself how to swim. He got on the third boat, and this sank at sea—two women drowned, but because he'd learned to swim he managed to not only save himself but to hold up one of the bodies of the dead women in the water until they were rescued. She is also now buried on Christmas Island.

"Those are the sorts of stories I hear, about the length of time it takes, the reasons people flee, and the stuff they go through. And this young man was a minor, still only a child really. It's just extraordinary. His will to survive was so strong."

Speaking as a refugee advocate, Virginia said the issue of asylum seekers worldwide remains huge.

"But it seems that the 'Pacific solution' has served Australia's purpose. There are certainly fewer numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Australia than they were before. Nauru is only a temporary measure; but applying for refugee status is a long process that can take years and Nauru doesn't have the infrastructure to support refugees in the long term.

"Where possible, refugees go to places that have support-structures set up, good social security and health and education systems for example. It would be very unfair for Australia to ask poorer neighbouring countries with their own domestic problems to take these people permanently," she said.

On whether she was enjoying what she was doing, Virginia said, "I can be quite obsessive about what's going on. It can be an emotional roller-coaster, building close relationships with people you may never actually meet.

"The opportunity I've had to be involved with people from Afghanistan – this sounds a bit pretentious – has completely changed my life. It's the same for many of my friends who have had the same sort of involvement. It's humbling to receive letters from people who have been treated so uncaringly by my government. Their letters are full of patience, tolerance, love and understanding. Just their level of forgiveness and acceptance of what's going on shames me, and I don't know that I would be able to behave in the same way under the same circumstances. They have taught me lessons about patience. "

Virginia believes that it's just by luck of birth and geography that what the refugees are going through is not happening to her, or to any of us.

"There but for the grace of God go I. In another time and place that might be me, and I would really want people to be helping me."

Asked if all refugees seeking asylum were genuine cases, she said, "I don't know what a lawyer would say to that. But I believe that anybody who is prepared to put themselves through what these people have gone through is genuinely afraid of being in their own country, and as such we have a genuine duty to protect them as long as necessary."

Virginia is the Fiji contact person for SAWA-Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan. For further information info@sawa-australia.org or www.rawa.org