THE OTHER SIDE –
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STREETWISE RESOURCE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
ABOUT REFUGEES

“They shouldn't be here in the first place. None of this would have happened if they hadn't come to Australia.”

“Everyone in Australia's from somewhere else, unless they’re Aboriginal. Man ... we came on boats, too.”

LIZ SKELTON
GENERAL MANAGER
STREETWISE COMMUNICATIONS
Streetwize Communications is a leading not for profit national organisation specialising in researching and communicating social issues to young people and other hard to reach groups. For over 19 years, Streetwize has been developing comics and resources on a range of issues including health, education, employment, the law and Indigenous specific issues.

The strength of the Streetwize approach lies in the ability to reach young people, particularly those disadvantaged in their access to mainstream sources of information.

At the heart of each Streetwize project is a series of consultations with young people and professionals from the appropriate target audience. These consultations take place wherever young people are to be found, in schools, in youth and community health centres, in juvenile justice centres and through various community organisations. These sessions occur at two stages of the production process, at the research stage to assess the attitudes, behaviour and information needs of the target audience and at the feedback (or testing) stage. At the second stage we trial the draft resource to assess its’ effectiveness in conveying the information, in an accessible and entertaining manner.

This approach – along with the comic style – has been independently evaluated and proven to be an extremely effective way of reaching diverse groups, particularly those who are often excluded by traditional media and communication channels and have low literacy skills.

The main ethos and driving force behind the Streetwize process is to provide young people who are marginalised with credible, non judgemental and entertaining information to enable them to make informed choices about a range of important issues which affect their lives.

**STREETWIZE aims to:**

- educate young people on specified issues
- produce culturally appropriate, easy-to-read, entertaining resources in consultation with young people
- promote self help and informed choice in relation to the issues
- provide service providers with an accessible and credible resource.
- provide information on relevant education programs and support services.
- distribute resources effectively to reach young people and others in the target group
The research and feedback process has enabled Streetwize to be credible and popular with disadvantaged groups that are traditionally seen as hard to reach. Some of the target groups Streetwize have worked with are as follows:

- Young People
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Social/economically disadvantaged
- School students
- TAFE and university students
- Homeless young people
- Unemployed people
- Sex workers
- Women
- People with disabilities
- Detainees
- Community, Health and legal services in touch with young people

One of the keys to Streetwize’s success in reaching its target audience is the process of quantitative consultation process. Whether the final product is a comic, educators’ kit, website, or audio resource, our development process is the same. The Streetwize process has four key phases which are best illustrated by way of example. Streetwize initiated a project now called “The Other Side” in May 2001. The original aim of the project was to provide easy-to-understand information for refugees and asylum seekers about their refugee status and what to expect on arrival in Australia. The need for such a resource came from our contacts with community groups working with asylum seekers. In the meantime, the Tampa incident happened. In the months proceeding whilst involved in research on other issues with young people we became aware of the confusion and lack of knowledge young people had around this issue. The project changed to targeting young people in the general community about refugees when it became evident that there was poor understanding of the facts about refugees in the general population. An application was submitted for funding and was received from the Myer Foundation. HREOC had also produced a report called *Face The Facts* which identified common myths around refugees and asylum seeker. From here we consulted with young people around NSW to research their levels of knowledge and attitudes around refugees and asylum seekers.

The first step in the research process was a Brainstorm meeting of relevant stakeholders and service providers in the refugee support sector. This Brainstorm identified the key issues affecting asylum seekers in the Australian community and also the myths perpetuated about asylum seekers.

The Brainstorm was held in January 2002 and played an essential part in focusing and prioritising the issues, clarifying some gaps in knowledge and
identifying important stakeholders in the community. The key issues identified informed the basis of the topics raised in the subsequent focus groups.

Key organisations involved in the process included HREOC, STARTTS, Edmund Rice Centre, Legal Aid, Migrant Resource Centres, and the NSW Department of Education.

The Brainstorm examined many of the prevalent myths about asylum seekers in the Australian community. The group believed that it was important that the resource communicate facts to counteract the many myths.

The second phase of the project involved literature reviews, interviews with relevant workers in the field, and focus groups with young people from the general population. These groups included young people who were refugees, as well as one-on-one interviews with young refugees. Focus groups of young people were held to research their attitudes and level of knowledge on the issue. The focus group research took place in various parts of metropolitan Sydney and regional NSW. In total, 84 people were consulted in the research phase, including the Brainstorm participants, specialist researchers, youth workers and teachers. Focus groups were held in schools, youth centres, and an intensive English centre. The schools attended ensured representation from a range of different socio-economic backgrounds.

51 young people participated in the focus groups held. The composition of the groups were as follows:

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<th>Age:</th>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Ethnic Background:</th>
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<td>10-13: 5</td>
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<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
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<td>Female:</td>
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<td>Regional: 15</td>
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<td>20-30: 2</td>
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At least 9 of the young people consulted in the focus groups had immigrated to Australia as political or economic refugees. First hand accounts of the experiences of asylum seekers came from interviews with individuals, all of
whom were older than the target audience. These people came from a variety of backgrounds and refugee experiences, including asylum-seekers and "offshore" applicants for humanitarian resettlement. With their permission, aspects of their stories were used in the storyline of the comic to ensure the situations were realistic. The interview subjects came from the following countries:

- Afghanistan
- Lebanon
- Iraq
- Burma
- the former Yugoslavia

The focus group research confirmed that common myths regarding refugees and asylum seekers influenced young people's understanding of this issue. The responses of group participants ranged from sympathetic to hostile in almost equal numbers. Sympathetic, neutral and hostile respondents had little factual information to support their opinions.

The myths identified by Brainstorm participants were regularly repeated in the focus groups with young people as well as additional issues being raised around where young people currently received information from and what they saw as solutions to the refugee issue. The findings of the research were as follows:

**Myth #1: "That refugees are in Australia illegally."**

There was a common perception amongst most of the focus group participants whether sympathetic, neutral or hostile that "unauthorised immigration" to Australia was illegal. No participants revealed knowledge of Australia's treaty commitments or obligations under law to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

"I don't like them. I've seen 'em on the news."

"They're boat people, who come in boats. Illegals."

"They're coming here to overpopulate our country."

"People who run away from their countries because of war and stuff."

"They're all bums"

**Myth #2: "That asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers' taking places from 'legitimate' immigrants."**

Focus group participants demonstrated a lack of knowledge regarding the quotas and procedures for refugee entry to Australia. Some young people from migrant
backgrounds believed that the intake of asylum seekers to Australia delayed immigration procedures for people seeking family reunion and other kinds of visas. Other participants expressed the opinion that asylum seekers were simply impatient.

“In my country there’s a problem - in the embassy; they’re selling papers. You have to pay if you want to leave.”

“They’ve got no homes, they don’t like where they live. They wanna come here because they think Australia’s something big. Got a good economy.”

**Myth #3 "That asylum seekers are dangerous, possibly terrorists or rapists."**

Some focus group participants held the belief that mandatory detention was necessary to screen groups of asylum seekers for terrorist connections. Much of this fear was based on the aftermath of September 11 with suggestions of refugees being terrorists made in the Australian media.

Only 11 of more than 13,000 people who sought asylum in Australia in recent years were rejected on ‘character grounds’.1

"They want to overrun our country.”

"The people are coming because some of them are terrorists. This is why the Australian government does not want the refugees here...they want to do what they did to America.”

“Muslims can go back”

“... people have a large prejudice against Lebanese people, and they have a very narrow-minded view. They think we’re all rapists, but if they came here they’d know that’s not true. But they’ve been poisoned - they’ve been poisoned by the media.”

“I think the attitude has changed since September 11. Before that, Australians did not care. They did not notice”

“No, it’s too dangerous. They must go into camps”

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Myth #4 - "That Australia is inundated with asylum seekers" and "that Australia can't afford to resettle refugees."

Only a couple of the fifty-one young people interviewed for this project guessed anywhere near the correct number of asylum seekers who arrive in Australia each year. Overwhelmingly, the young people from the focus groups believed the number of people seeking asylum in Australia was much higher than the 1999-2000 figure of 5870 arrivals in a twelve-month period.

"20,000 each year"

"About ten million."

"What about all the homeless people we have... and we’re giving them stuff to smash up! I’d help our homeless people first."

“There are heaps of other places they can go. There’s no need to come here”

"Can’t they go to Africa? That’s close by."

"Australia takes hardly any refugees compared to the rest of the world."

"Speaking common sense, if you’re jumping on a boat to go somewhere, you’re not going to go to another poor country."

Nothing, compared to other countries. Maybe even less than a couple of thousand. I think that the media play up a lot more people than we have - like we’re going to get overwhelmed or something

Myth #5 - "That asylum seekers are 'ungrateful' and that asylum seekers receive large 'welfare handouts'."

Although opinion on the policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers differed greatly amongst individuals and groups, most young people interviewed believed that the Australian government provided a high level of welfare and other support to asylum seekers and refugees. Overwhelmingly, young people believed that detention centres provided comfortable accommodation, English lessons, personal items, high-level healthcare and regular meals to detainees. Several
young people were critical of the "ungrateful" behaviour of detainees, based on media reports that depicted these people protesting their conditions or rioting. There was a common perception also that on release from detention people granted refugee status received unemployment benefits, free places to live and a higher level of government services than other Australians. Some young people believed that the prospect of "getting the dole" was a motivation for people to seek asylum in Australia.

“They smash things up and they’re ungrateful.”

“They come to get the dole”

"We give them everything. They never have to do nothing”.

"They don't treat their houses right, so they shouldn't have none."

"They’re given food, shelter, clothes, a house."

"We pay them to come into our country. From the moment they jump off the boat.

“They get free food and stuff. I don't reckon they should be here if they aren't going to be grateful”

Other responses were more sympathetic:

"Would Australians be grateful if they were placed in something like that....(detention centres) ?"

"They live in harsh physical conditions."

"They get tortured."

"They want to stay in Australia, not in a detention centre. So why not try everything? Why not try to kill themselves? Can't hurt."

In addition to the myths young people talked about where they got their information about refugees from. Most young people gained their information about refugees from the media. The majority were very cynical about the information they received perceiving it to be biased or only showing one side of the story. Others said they were more influenced by what their parents thought. Some young people believed any information covered by the media must be correct information:

" Before they put it on the news, I didn't even know what a refugee was. But I started watching it - they had all these people locked up in cages like they were
animals. People were starving - they were locked up like animals! We’re all humans - whether we’re black, white, Chinese, purple..."

"Nah, they (media) make most of it up."

"It's propaganda"

"They make Muslims look less than animals."

"It's not a fair coverage. They only show you one side."

"Man, this country’s got blinkers on. They can only see what’s in front of them, and in front of them is John Howard"

"I think that most people only watch Channel 7, Channel 9, Channel 10 news, and they don’t get the full stories"

If it’s on the news, I’ll believe it."

"If it’s on TV, it’s true."

Many young people identified their own solutions to the refugee situation. Again the responses ranged from hostile to sympathetic with the majority of young people believing refugees should be allowed to rebuild their lives, get a job and an education.

“I'm so lucky I was born on this side of the world where everything is perfect and wonderful. I think we should treat them the same way we treat our own children."

"In the Koran it says, if someone comes to your country, you have to let them in no matter what"

"Australia sent its troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to fight the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. People have been displaced in those wars. They’ve suffered. I think we should let them stay"

"Australia could take everyone, we're big enough. We've got heaps of land"

"Take them into Australia - why not? Why not?"

Other less sympathetic responses included:

"Turn the boats around and send them back"
I’d send them back if they’re going to make our country look bad

"Send ’em back swimming"

"If we let ’em in, more will come, and they’ll keep coming?"

"They should be taught how to respect this country and they shouldn’t get an education.

A final issue raised by young people was the need to raise awareness about this issue and see “the other side: which they felt they rarely saw. Many young people had a lot of questions and didn’t trust the sources of information they were receiving:

"Really, we only see what they want us to see.“

Can you get cameras in the detention centres? We won’t know unless we see them.

"The comic could show something from the refugees point of view, not the government's or the media.

"We need to remind people they came on a boat, too." "My Mum definitely won’t get on a plane so I know she came by boat."

"Refugees - we are, they are.

"Tell them we're all equal, no matter what

"Get out and talk to people from different schools. Get people to talk at schools where there’s no multiculturalism."

The comics are a good way for Australians to learn

Others felt assimilation was difficult:

"They have to know that they’re totally different. Different nationalities, different religions, language, everything."

The third phase of the process involved the development of a script and draft comic addressing the following areas:

**Content**

The comic should depict interaction between a diverse group of young people, some of whom are refugees, and some of whom have poor understanding about
refugees. The latter group will reflect some of the misconceptions held by the young people in the focus groups.

The Experience of Asylum seekers in the Community
The comic should include a story of an asylum seeker’s persecution, escape, survival, detention and release to present the target audience with a credible and engaging account of refugee experience.

Additional Information
The comic should be extended to include references to sources of factual information about asylum seekers and refugees to enable informed choice.

The fourth stage of the Streetwize process involves consultations to gain feedback on the draft comic. Copies of the draft comic were circulated to the brainstorm participants, the young people, refugee support organisations, youth workers and teachers who participated in the initial field research. A second series of focus groups were co-ordinated specifically to gain feedback on the draft. This ensures that the resources produced reflect the issues, language and concerns of the young people and that the information is accurate and up to date. Two rounds of feedback took place due to the controversial nature of this issue.

The Streetwize feedback process seeks comments from the research participants in these areas:

- Overall effectiveness of the story
- Main issues and information recalled
- Opinions about the characters
- Opinions of the artwork
- Prior knowledge about the topic
- Clarity of Information
- Sensitivities to the issues raised by the comic
- Any other questions or issues a redraft of the comic can resolve

In addition to the feedback consultation with young people, twelve key refugee support organisations were consulted for their feedback which was very positive and saw the comic as realistic and informative:

*Overall felt even without alteration the comic is a useful document and is thought-provoking and interesting enough for young people. Particularly pleased with the anti-racism slant of the comic. Looks good overall*” (STARTTS)

"I've had a good read of the draft and think overall it works really well! It's great how you've conveyed so much info. in a really accessible and realistic way. The
story is good as it's believable and you grab the audience's attention on the opening page. " (Legal Aid)

"Shows refugees being resourceful, gives insight into the situations they are fleeing. Gives a human face." (Edmund Rice Centre)

61 young people were consulted in metropolitan and regional NSW. Generally, feedback to the draft comic from the target audience was positive, and many constructive suggestions were made to improve the draft in terms of both its style and content. On the whole, the young people consulted in the feedback groups felt that the story was realistic and believable with a clear message and useful information.

“In my personal view, it is. As an Aboriginal person, you know a lot about racism, and that racism comes through in the comic. It's bad, but people are that way, and you've got to talk about it to stop it, you know?"

I’d call the comic factual. It's solid factual information you can use

"It shows people looking for a better life - it's human, you can understand that"

Some negative reactions to the draft comic came from a belief that “there are two sides to every story”. The young people who made these comments told us that they believed the comic to be unfairly biased in favour of refugees. When we asked them for suggestions about how they would improve the comic, their response was to tell us that many refugees in Australia are "criminals and terrorists". As no factual evidence exists to support this belief, it is important to recognise that the 8-page comic alone can't counter all the misinformation and prejudice surrounding the issue of refugees in the community.

"It's not balanced. What about the other side of the story? What about those Lebs raping women in Lakemba"

"You need to present both sides of the story - the anti-refugee view, for it to be balanced"

In addressing this issue realistically and portraying the views the majority of young people had, the challenge for Streetwize was to depict those views which could be perceived as racist and successfully challenge those views with factual information. This provoked some strong reactions from young people who believed that the middle-eastern characters in the comic were portrayed as terrorists. Given the understandable sensitivity of young people from Muslim and Middle-Eastern backgrounds to these issues, it was important that we clarified the country of origin of the character who becomes a refugee and addressed stereotypes of middle-eastern people in the comic. To do this properly and
respectfully it was necessary to consult further with young people from these backgrounds in an additional feedback session.

"Its.(the story) making Middle-Eastern people look bad

It shows all boat people are from the Middle East - it also tells you to hate Muslims because they’re terrorists."

I think you should burn in hell for your criticism of the Middle East

The comic was changed to address issues raised by stakeholders and the target group. Further consultations were held with key stakeholders and it was decided to extend the comic to 12 pages to enable information pages to be added with factual information addressing many of the myths. A second round of feedback with a second draft comic was undertaken with 96 young people around NSW including some interviews with detainees in Villawood Detention Centre.

The overall impression of the comic was that it was informative, believable, two sided and useful. Suggestions were made on how to increase the comic’s aesthetic appeal as well as how to best present the data.

There were variations of opinion about language, clothing and cultural sensitivity that were reliant upon student’s respective relationship to the subject matter. The refugees that were spoken to held strong opinions as to what was culturally appropriate for an Iraqi girl, whilst young Australian girls were more interested in the ‘love tale’ of the two main characters Matt and Yasmeen.

The comic appealed to young people for different reasons, which was its’ strength. The additional four pages also helped to consolidate many of the assumptions made in the comic. The comic gained credibility amongst the students due to its ability to verify its claims with the information.

I thought the story was appropriate and most of it rang true. It dealt with discrimination and I think it will leave an impression on readers.”

“Both sides of the story were shown

“I think the main message in the story are not to judge anyone who us a refugee as a terrorist or a criminal until you hear their story”

I must admit, I came here not knowing much about refuges apart from the news caption or a bit I read on the net. I was not going to come to this workshop because I didn’t have a particularly strong opinion, but after reading this, I feel as though I have some basic facts to stand on. I really enjoyed it. It is an accurate example of both sides of the story. I was quite impressed”
Some suggestions were made to improve the resource. These changes have been made and the comic has been developed to final art. Streetwize is now seeking final funding to print the resource and distribute it nationally. In total 210 young people were consulted in the development of this resource from a range of socio-economic groups from metropolitan, regional and rural areas. This process of collaboration with the target group ensures that the end resource is not only credible and factual but that the information will be read by young people and retained. Previous evaluations of Streetwize resources have indicated an 80% recall rate of the main messages, 6 months after reading the comic. The comic has now been developed to final art and Streetwize are seeking the final funding to print and distribute the comic to young people around Australia.

This project illustrates the importance of being aware of the changing nature of social issues and developing processes which are responsive to the needs of the target group and the community. This project was able to respond to a more contemporary issue of informing young people in the community with factual information and dispelling myths, thus enabling informed choice on an ongoing issue.

Through this consultative process, Streetwize gains a significant amount of data on young peoples attitudes towards specific issues. Streetwize believes this data can play an important role in informing social policy by giving an overview of young peoples’ attitudes towards specific issues at any one given time. This qualitative data also provides insights into how complex issues can be addressed with ‘hard to reach’ young people.

Streetwize believes their process of consultation offers enormous potential for collaboration with academic researchers, government departments and NGO’s to work together to inform and influence policy on social issues affecting young people in Australia.