

THE BIG PICTURE » SERIES BY EMMA DAVIES

THE AGE OF ACTIVISM



Grandmothers

Against Detention



YOUR GRANDMOTHER JUST GOT A LITTLE COOLER THAN YOU.

AT PEACEFUL VIGILS outside politicians' offices, at the foreboding fences of immigration detention centres, at cacophonous rallies in the streets of the CBD, you'll see them. Dressed in vibrant purple T-shirts, they're hard to miss. But something else makes them stand out; they're all grandmothers. The Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children.

The NSW branch has more than 300 members. Some of the women are new to campaigning, others have decades of experience. All have a lifetime of compassion and plenty of passion – and they're not afraid to use it.

Marty Morrison, 88 (pictured immediately left), has been an activist since childhood. Growing up in the US during World War II, she was shocked to see how her father's church aided in the internment of Japanese Americans. Aged 13, she became an activist. She hasn't stopped. "It really directed me in a way that I've never been able to escape from," she says. "That lack of compassion for people who you don't want to like. And why?"

Margaret McDonald, 71, joined the Women's Electoral Lobby in the 1970s, and later became CEO of the Family Planning Association. "There were a whole range of issues that now young women don't even have to worry about because we fought for them: sexual harassment laws, equal opportunity, access to contraception," she says.

Isobel Bishop, 80, travelled the world supporting marginalised communities. "I've been taught by the best teachers, which is life and people," she says.

But it is the plight of child refugees, who make up half the world's refugee population, that has united the grandmothers. GADRC was first established in Melbourne in 2014. Gaby Judd, 69, set up GADRC NSW in 2015 after her first grandchild was born. She visited Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney and found it difficult comparing the freedom her grandchildren had to those in detention. "I just couldn't reconcile the two," she says.

Judd says that some people laugh when they see them at protests, but those people are clearly underestimating these formidable women, who are reinventing the role elders play in our community. The women of GADRC are looking after people in need with placards and sit-ins, instead of (or as well as) cookies and knitted goods. Yet the virtuous image of a beloved grandmother is certainly helping their cause.

"Everyone has a kind of grandmother connection," explains Gael Walker, 71, grandmother of seven. "It's a person that's loved and respected." Mostly, they hope they'll encourage change.

"Unless people complain or join organisations that fight against this sort of injustice, well, nothing would happen. Sometimes it's a real long struggle, but that's no reason to give up," says Michelle Cavanagh, 73.

Towards the end of our interview, I ask Marty Morrison if she will always be an activist. She laughs. "Oh yes, it's in my blood, I'm afraid."

by **Emma Davies** (www.emmadaviesphotography.com.au)

» *Find out more at gadrc.org.*



**"I FEEL THAT WE'VE ALL GOT WITHIN US
THE CAPACITY TO CARE, TO HAVE COURAGE,
TO BE CREATIVE AND BE COMPASSIONATE,
AND WE CAN DO IT!"**

**ISOBEL BISHOP, 80 YEARS OLD: DID A SIT-IN AT PARLIAMENT
HOUSE, AGE 79. WORKED WITH MARGINALISED PEOPLE
AROUND THE WORLD, LIKE SOUTH KOREA AND INDIA (RIGHT).**

"I TRAVELLED OVERLAND FROM LONDON TO AUSTRALIA IN THE 60S AND IT REALLY CHANGED MY THINKING. IT'S JUST A WHOLE OTHER WORLD OUT THERE OF PEOPLE THAT DON'T HAVE WHAT I HAVE."

GABY JUDD, 69 YEARS OLD: PSYCHOLOGIST, FOUNDER OF GADRC NSW AND WORLD TRAVELLER (IN NEPAL, 1969, RIGHT).



"ALL OF US APART FROM INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS ARE HERE THANKS TO CONVICTS, IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES."

MICHELLE CAVANAGH, 73 YEARS OLD: AUTHOR OF MARGARET HOLMES: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN AUSTRALIAN PEACE CAMPAIGNER. BELOW WITH HER PARENTS, KATHLEEN MARY (NEE FORDON) SHIPPAM AND ALFRED RUPERT WITHEY SHIPPAM.

