Remembering the SIEV X: Who Cares for the Bodies of the Stateless, Lost at Sea?

BETH GIBBINGS

Abstract: The SIEV X was a tiny fishing vessel traveling from Indonesia to Australia in 2001, carrying around four hundred people seeking asylum after fleeing from the warfare and persecution predominantly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many were women and children trying to enter Australia to join fathers and husbands already granted refugee status but not allowed to bring in family members because of new Australian laws on “Temporary Protection Visas.” Of these, 353 drowned when the boat sank in international waters. The conservative Australian government denied responsibility, using the event in an election campaign to play on fears about illegal entry and border defense in the Islamophobic climate in the aftermath of 9/11. Yet many everyday Australians eventually became involved in a collaborative design process to create a memorial to those asylum seekers. This article discusses the debates around memorials for those lost at sea, and particularly for those who might be portrayed as enemies or “illegal immigrants” whose coming threatens national borders. It identifies the conditions under which the campaign to commemorate those who died on the SIEV X moved from being a minority interest to become a cause so widely supported by Australians across the country that the memorial was eventually erected in the heart of the national capital.

Keywords: SIEV X, public memorials, community engagement, refugee policy, Muslim refugees, boat people, human rights, Australian immigration.

'I remember the Bali bombing, the victims of Bali. I still remember them. I remember the victims of 11 September, I still remember these people. Why didn’t they remember us, also we are human. . . . I just want to tell the Australian people...”

The Public Historian, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 13–30 (February 2010). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2010 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions Web site: www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp. DOI: 10/1525/tph.2010.31.4.13.
and the Australian government that we are human, we look for peace, we look for future for our children. That’s it. We are human.”

SIEV X survivor, Amal Basry

IN CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA’S CAPITAL, stands the memorial to the SIEV X, a leaky fishing vessel carrying asylum seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran that sank in international waters between Indonesia and Australia on October 19, 2001. The memorial consists of a trail of 353 decorated poles set at two heights, representing the adults and children who had perished. The line of poles emerges from the edge of Lake Burley Griffin and widens out to create a boat shape less than the length of a tennis court. It then winds across grassy parkland for 250 meters before ending alongside some gum trees. The victims whom the memorial honors died in the month after the attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center in New York. While those deaths have remained vividly in the memories of people around the world, there would have been no memorial for the drowned from the SIEV X without the committed actions of ordinary people trying to change the way that history is understood in Australia.

There were some four hundred people on board, all stateless because they had fled across international borders seeking safety. Some had escaped persecution in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq; others had been exiled to refugee camps in Iran. There were as well Afghans, Palestinians, and Algerians. Many were women and children who were making the journey in order to link up with husbands and fathers already in Australia. These male family members, in the main, had gained refugee status under the draconian system that prevailed in Australia whereby they had been placed on Temporary Protection Visas, which precluded the possibility of family reunion. These fathers would never have been allowed to bring their families into the country to join them. So illegal fishing vessels seemed like the only way that a family could be reunited. Many who drowned on the SIEV X were young: 146 children, 142 women, and 65 men were to die. Of the total number on board, only 45 were rescued.

This is a story about history told in the public sphere: about who is remembered and about who takes responsibility for such tragic deaths. I am writing this account as a public historian who participated in the campaigns to create the SIEV X memorial. Through this article, I am seeking firstly to record a unique set of events, which were inevitably local. Yet more broadly, these events open up to view the way that different versions of the past confront each other in any attempt to create a public memorial. As a participant, I came to see that the tragedy of the lives lost on the SIEV X would carry no broader impact unless the facts could be represented as a narrative that not

2. SIEV X was an acronym for Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel, with “X” standing for “unknown.” The term was coined by SIEV X researcher Tony Kevin.
only told the stories of the specific human experience but which held out some hope for a better future. There were to be three crucial elements to the eventual achievement of this goal. Perhaps most importantly was that the voices of the survivors found a space from which to speak and be heard. Secondly, the creative process in developing the memorial became dispersed among a wide and youthful population of Australians, allowing them not only to feel the emotional impact of the deaths but to develop a sense of shared responsibility that such a tragedy should never be allowed to happen again. And finally, the bodies, particularly the small bodies of the children, which had been lost so completely into the ocean, were made visible again through the symbolism in the memorial of the simple, differently sized poles. So this is not only a local Australian story but also a larger narrative about what it takes to allow us to reimagine the bodies of the lost.

It is neither natural nor inevitable that death will be commemorated, not even that of the innocent and the young. Instead, the decisions to memorialize are the result of battles over how to know the past, how to accept or allocate responsibility, and how to link grief to wider stories of collective hopes for the future. This story deals particularly with the question of how deaths can be remembered and mourned without bodies after a tragedy at sea. Just as much, it asks why the state and its citizens were involved in the deaths of people for whom there are not only no bodies but no citizenship. Why was the Australian state asked to mourn these deaths and erect a memorial in its capital? Why did it resist? And why did citizens of Australia take up the process of grieving for the drowned and stateless?

**Deciding Whom to Mourn**

Australia is an island and historically has been dependent on sea travel for trade and maintenance of international contacts. For centuries, the northern coast of Australia was linked to what is now Indonesia through the trading networks of the Macassans. More recently, since the British colonization in 1788, shipping contacts have multiplied across the Indian and Pacific oceans, linking Australian ports with South Asia, East Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The dependence on the ocean meant that deaths at sea were fearfully common. So there are many stories of shipwrecks in Australian history—some told as adventures, some as personal tragedies, some as military battles. The absence of bodies has not stood in the way of commemoration, but the status of the lives that were lost—both personally and symbolically—has been important in shaping their memorials. Travelers and immigrants have all been mourned in Australia, like those on the sailing ship *The Dunbar*, lost in 1857, despite not having yet arrived on Australian shores or become citizens.3 Most

---

celebrated have been the naval crewmen who lost their lives in battles at sea, like the full crew of *HMAS Sydney* that went down off the coast of Western Australia in World War II. In the case of the *Sydney*, not only were there no bodies—there was no boat. The hull of the vessel was not located until 2009. Yet these men were mourned and celebrated, symbols of courage, loyalty, and for many, the futility of war.

Yet people of non-European nationalities—fishing people from Indonesia, for example, who lost their lives off Australia’s northern coast, were seldom noticed. Those who were seen as enemies and who had transgressed these sea borders have been completely dehumanized, whether or not their bodies were recovered. Other people defined as “enemies” have been ignored or depicted as if they were not human. This has been the powerful argument of Aboriginal people as they have struggled to have their defense of Australia from the British invasion recognized in memorials.4

So deaths at sea are common in histories of Australia, as are the questions of where borders lie at sea and how they might be defended. The story of the SIEV X raised these issues, and so it challenged many of the established themes in Australian history.

### The Story of the SIEV X

The SIEV X set out from Banda Lampung in Indonesia on a voyage to Christmas Island on October 18, 2001. Reports from survivors5 indicate that it was overcrowded with refugees, so full that additional decks had been built from chipboard to cram in more people. Many stood, while women and children huddled below. Some of those about to depart had questioned the boat’s ability to survive the journey to Australia. They were told that it would take them to another bigger and better equipped vessel. Several would-be passengers left the boat; others told of being forced on board at gunpoint by Indonesian police.6

“We felt like sardines,” said Najah Muhsin, SIEV X survivor now living in Sydney. “People were packed on top of each other, a small ship with people seasick, and women and children afraid and crying.”7

The boat sailed for a day in stormy weather before the engine seized, the pumps failed, and the boat began to take on water. Eventually at 3:10 p.m. on

---

5. For an archive of testimony see www.sievx.com
7. Transcript of a videotape made of the survivors of the SIEV X disaster at Bogor in the week following the shipwreck, translated by Keysar Trad. Available at http://www.sievx.com/articles/disaster/KeysarTradTranscript.html
Friday 19, October 2001, it sank in the Sunda Strait, about one third of the way to Christmas Island. There were not nearly enough life jackets for the number of people on board. Initially over one hundred people were clinging to wreckage, but as the night wore on, more and more lost their grip and disappeared into the water. During the night, three large boats came into the area and shone lights on the figures in the water, but as survivors reported later, none of the vessels made any attempt to rescue them. It was reported that several people simply gave up and disappeared when they discovered that their family members had drowned. Such was the fate of a thirteen-year-old girl.8

In a video recorded in the week following the sinking, Ahmed Hussein talked of the dead:

“Wherever you look you see the dead children like birds floating on the water, those who survived 22 hours in the water saw the dead bodies of women and children with cuts from nails on the boat and with scars from where the fish were biting at them in the water.”9

These were the same children who only days earlier had been excited about going to Australia. “Will there be Playstations?” they had asked fellow traveler Amal Basry. “Australia is like paradise,” she had answered them.10

Forty-five survivors were picked up the next day by Indonesian fishermen and taken back to Jakarta, where they were interviewed by United Nations officials and unidentified Australian officials. Some survivors were quickly given permanent status in other countries. Many of those with husbands or family in Australia were forced to remain in Indonesia for up to nine months before they could join them.

Why This Was an Australian Nation’s Story

Some passengers on the SIEV X had chosen Australia as a destination because they had heard of its freedoms and believed that Australians were not racist.11 The reality was that the four hundred predominantly Muslim refugees on the SIEV X had set out from Indonesia at a time when there had been a marked increase in anti-Muslim racism in Australia that was fanned by a xenophobic government that propounded anti-refugee policies on the grounds that the nation should defend the island borders from all unwanted intruders.

Racism is deeply etched in the history of Australia. Early on, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment had emerged among Anglo Australians and from the mid-nineteenth century, conflict with the Afghan cameleers in the arid in-

land deserts was recorded. Tensions worsened from World War I, when the myth of Australia’s heroic identity became entrenched with the Australian involvement at Gallipoli in the British campaign against Turkey. Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment re-emerged in the early 1990s with the first Gulf War, when the Australian media played an invidious role in creating fear of Arabs and Muslims. Before the recent conflict in the Middle East, Australian fears about illegal immigrants had been focused on South East Asian asylum seekers, particularly from Vietnam. By the end of the 1990s, the boats which intermittently brought asylum seekers and refugees to Australia’s northern shores were most likely to be bringing Iraqis, Afghans, and Iranians.

Alongside this under a conservative government was the escalation of the political use of race, exemplified by the rise of Pauline Hanson in the late 1990s, an independent but far right politician who argued against non-European immigration and preferential treatment for Aborigines. Popular support for Hanson’s extreme views shifted the public debate to the right, and allowed the conservative government, under Prime Minister John Howard, to take an increasingly hostile stand towards both Aboriginal people and asylum seekers.

One result was the introduction in 1999 of a severe restriction on the rights of those people who had been recognized as refugees. The Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) was seen as a key element in deterring refugees, a message to people smugglers, and a way to stop the boats from coming. Initiated by Hanson and endorsed by the Howard government, this measure stripped refugees of economic and social rights. This meant that they were denied many of the rights that are guaranteed under the UN Convention on Refugees. Particularly egregious was the withholding of the right of “Family Reunion” that previously had enabled refugees to sponsor their own family members. This interfered with the traditional pattern of migration, whereby a single family member, commonly male, might go ahead and then sponsor the rest of the family to join him.

The Temporary Protection Visa was brought in at a time when conditions were worsening both inside Iraq and in refugee camps in Iran. Iraqi refugees started moving out of Iran in 1998/99 when Iran was threatening to send them back to Iraq. In the light of the urgency of the conditions in Iraq, Iran, and

Afghanistan, it is not surprising that there was an increase in the numbers of boats carrying asylum seekers to Australia.

In the 2001 election, the conservative Liberal government escalated the rhetoric of anxiety about “waves” of asylum seekers descending on Australia, which appealed to voters who “feared their country was being invaded by Muslim boat people.” In late August, Australian authorities would not allow a Norwegian container ship, the Tampa, to enter Australian waters after it had rescued 433 Afghan asylum seekers stranded at sea 140 kilometers north of Christmas Island. The crisis was resolved only when the neighboring government of New Zealand agreed that the refugees’ claims of asylum could be assessed in their country and when the government of the Pacific island state of Nauru bowed to Australian pressure to receive the remaining Tampa asylum seekers into detention for processing in what Australia referred to as its “Pacific Solution.” While the Tampa was still being held off Australian land, the government introduced its Border Protection Bill (August 29) that aimed to prevent “unauthorised arrivals” from landing on Australian territory. The new border protection strategies included the excision of Australian offshore islands from the nation’s migration zone. In addition, with Operation Relex, the government began the intensive surveillance by patrol boats of the seas to the north and east of Australia in order to locate and turn back all potential refugee boats.

Concurrent with this were policies that further denied the refugees’ humanity. Defense personnel were instructed not to take “humanizing photos” of the asylum seekers on the boats. Journalists wanting to tell the refugees’ human stories complained that they were routinely denied access to asylum seekers.

The events of September 11 in the United States then grabbed the attention of the world, and, because it was a Middle Eastern Islamist extremist group which claimed responsibility, it appeared to vindicate the extreme and unprecedented policies being developed by the Howard government to exclude Muslim asylum seekers. Soon after, on October 6th, an incident appeared to have occurred which offered further justification for the government’s harsh policy. This came to be known as the “children overboard” incident, in which senior federal ministers claimed that asylum seekers, identified as coming from Afghanistan and Iraq, had thrown their children into the water as blackmail to stop their illegal entry boat from being turned back.

19. Almost all of those who went both to New Zealand and to Nauru were eventually assessed to have been “genuine refugees” under internationally recognized criteria.
21. Ibid.
Popular media like talkback radio and the tabloid press uncritically accepted such statements without checking their truth. The Prime Minister took the opportunity to say: “I certainly don’t want people of that type in Australia!” Overtly and covertly, as media analysis of the period demonstrated, the identity of “that type” of asylum seeker was widely understood to be Muslim and middle eastern. The “children overboard” story was later shown to be a lie in a series of media exposés and in a Commonwealth Senate inquiry convened in 2002 to investigate the incident. By fanning the story during the 2001 election campaign and linking refugees to the possibility of terrorism, the government kept race and religion at the forefront of voters’ minds.

It was in this climate that the SIEV X sank. The event was reported briefly in the media, telling the stories of little children who had drowned and men waiting in Australia for families who weren’t ever going to join them. Bereaved men were relating their loss to the visas that kept families separated. “If I could have brought my family here this would not have happened,” said one. Islamic leaders were connecting the deaths to the election campaign: “Lives are now being used to win a few votes. Winning votes should never be a justification of sacrificing innocent women and children.” Questions about Australia’s responsibility later were canvassed by activists, journalists, and parliamentarians. In addition to the role of the TPVs, there were widespread suspicions that Australian surveillance patrols by air and sea had in fact been aware of the SIEV X and its deteriorating condition but had taken no action. In their analysis of the 2001 federal election, respected investigative journalists David Marr and Marian Wilkinson came to the conclusion that when the SIEV X sank, “Australia hesitated to rescue. Not refused, but hesitated.” This is significant, given the number who survived the sinking only to drown in the hours before rescue. Opposition Senator John Faulkner was later to raise questions in parliament about the role of Australia’s People Smuggling Task Force in Indonesia in October 2001, with specific questions with regard to sabotage of vessels.

24. Ibid.
27. “Overboard Lie Exposed,” The Australian, April 18, 2002; Australia, Senate, Select Committee for an Inquiry into a Certain Maritime Incident (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).
28. Australia, Senate, Select Committee for an Inquiry into a Certain Maritime Incident (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).
29. Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar, and Jock Collins, “Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalizing the Arab Other” (Sydney: Institute of Criminology, 2004), 60.
31. Ibid.
The government distanced itself from the tragedy, with the Prime Minister saying, “We had nothing to do with it.” Despite evidence that the boat sank in international waters, he repeatedly related how sad he was about the incident that had happened “in Indonesian waters, not in Australian waters.”34 Stories about the SIEV X were soon overtaken by other issues in the media. As journalist Anne Summers later wrote, we “averted our eyes” when the boat sank.35 It seemed that on the whole Australians didn’t know that 353 people had drowned on their way to create a new life in their country, or if they did, felt it wasn’t their responsibility, so how could those who had been lost be remembered by the nation?

**Making the Nation Accept Responsibility**

In 2003 I was invited by project originators Steve Biddulph and Rod Horsfield to take up the role of coordinator of the SIEV X Memorial Project, a not-for-profit group funded by donations. In the beginning this meant being part of a team of four working from rural locations in different states. We linked in with landscape architect lecturer Dr. SueAnne Ware. Volunteers later joined the team, but throughout its existence the project was small, collaborative, and funded through donations and personal contributions.

As part of the project team I was to be confronted by many challenges, some encountered by those involved in memorials the world over, others specific to creating a memorial to the SIEV X in Australia. Two imperatives arose out of the Australian circumstances of the time. One was to give respect to the humanity of those individuals who had wanted to make their home here. The other was to reflect on Australia’s role through its policies and attitudes to refugees in how and why these people died, and how things might be done differently in the future.

To achieve this we would need to engage with the question: how do you memorialize nationally an event that has not taken hold in the collective conscience and where the national role may well be a shameful one? This is not an unfamiliar question for Australians, having had to negotiate the negative social value surrounding Aboriginal massacre sites.36 Intrinsic to this negotiation is an awareness of what histories can or cannot be told. In 2005 Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley installed her sculpture “Witnessing to Silence” outside the Brisbane Magistrate’s Court. It was a physical expression of ninety-four Aboriginal massacre sites, a meaning that she didn’t reveal for many years.

34. David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, 240. This despite strong repeated evidence to indicate that the boat sank in international waters.
With ten years of a conservative government, “there are different degrees of what’s accepted and what’s not accepted, we are always manoeuvring through and being strategic about the work that we make.”

We have recognizable ritual formulas for commemorating proud moments. The question of “How does a state incorporate shame into its national memorial landscape?” has haunted postwar German memorial artists, leading to counter-memorials with an aim “not to console but to provoke.” The proposal for a German national Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe needed to bring together the role of remembrance, whilst integrating responsibility. The final result was a unique example of a nation attempting to “make such a crime perpetrated in its name part of its national identity.”

Public historians have engaged with memorial-making through scholarship on memory and activities such as working with community groups to have previously unacknowledged identities expressed or working with those engaged with sites of trauma, to create “historically located” markers for future generations. The purpose of preventing horrific circumstances from being repeated was at the center of campaigns by a broad coalition of memory activists in Argentina to preserve a site of state torture as a museum dedicated to highlighting “the Disappearances.” A plaque outside was to read “this was a place of murder and torture—let it never happen again.”

Dr. SueAnne Ware had worked with students on a project to investigate anti-memorials to undocumented workers who died when crossing the border into the United States. These works offer an alternative to conventional normative memorials. Their impermanence and changing form take into account the changing nature of memory over time, and have a role in ongoing debate. Being “a kind of design activism,” the physical forms stand to contribute to social change.
Memory scholars have seen the telling of the story as an integral part of the memorial process, or even enshrined as the memorial itself. In Italy, Alessandro Portelli talks of a “civil morality” to tell the story of remembrance of a wartime massacre by fascists at Fosse Ardeatine. His book was not just a telling of the story, but “an active intervention in history.”

It was to designs and processes like these that the SIEV X memorial group began to look. The absence of bodies prescribed particular ways of remembering. Ephemeral approaches to memorialization became one of our strategies towards the memorial becoming permanent, and telling and re-telling the story of the journey was to become an integral part of the process. More complex was the role of incorporating Australia’s responsibility, when the people of the SIEV X, like Aborigines before them, had been presented as the enemy in political strategies and the popular media. This was emphasized in later comments by Jim Lloyd, a conservative federal minister who argued that the SIEV X memorial “trivialised other memorials.” National memorials, he contended, were for people who died serving or defending the country, whereas the SIEV X victims died “illegally trying to enter the country.”

**Finding a Place**

For the SIEV X memorial to be a national response, it would need to be sited in Canberra, the Australian capital, a place visited by more than 100,000 school students each year. There were already many national monuments in Canberra, as befitting the seat of government, and one of the intentions of the SIEV X organizing committee was to establish that this boat, its passengers, and its loss were a real part of the national story. The team chose a site opposite Parliament House across from the central Lake Burley Griffin in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) within which Canberra is located.

Giving expression to Australia’s national identity in Canberra comes under the control of the federal statutory body, the National Capital Authority (NCA). They have responsibility for overseeing commemorative memorials that they see as “informing current and future generations of the values held by the Australian community at particular points in time.” Predominant in Canberra’s commemorative landscape are military memorials, capped by the Australian War Memorial. However the NCA acknowledged a desire to encourage a broader range of Australian cultural narratives, with underpin-
ning values that included democratic principles, tolerance, freedom, and social justice for all.\textsuperscript{50} So it seemed that a SIEV X memorial would sit well in Canberra.

But fundamentally, the location of the memorial in the national capital was important as a symbol of what we hoped the underlying result would be: the recognition across the nation of this story as belonging to its history. This meant that ordinary Australians had to be able to take this story to heart. In this there have been two key elements, suggesting just how diverse the work of public historians and activists must be. One was the existence of survivors of the ship, without whom it would have been far more difficult to tell the story, and who could link their memories to the stories of the bereaved fathers in Australia who had been waiting for their families. The other was the evolving strategy for the design and creation of the monument.

\textbf{The Story and the Survivors}

Education was central to the early thinking of the group, both in the formal sense of knowing we wanted to involve schools and learning institutions but also in the informal sense of expanding the understanding of ordinary Australians about the tragedy of SIEV X. So the effective linking of history with education and learning was to be central for us all. The memorial team started with young people, whom we hoped would “see the SIEV X tragedy on a concrete, human level away from political and media influence as to the relative value of human lives.”\textsuperscript{51} In 2004 the Memorial Project launched a nationwide competition, which invited high school teachers of visual art to encourage their students to enter designs for the memorial. The designs would then be exhibited widely to extend awareness to the general public, before moving on to build the actual memorial.

This meant that the story of the people on the boat would have to be pieced together. Much of the documentary evidence about the SIEV X was not available to the public. Survivors talk of being shown a photo of their boat before it sailed by Australian authorities in Indonesia; this photo has not emerged into public.\textsuperscript{52} There is little physical evidence. For instance survivor Faris Kadhem has kept the trousers he wore on the boat, and was sent a doll and bag that his daughter left behind in Indonesia before drowning on the journey. The connection of the Australian community to the voyage and its role in history was to come through the stories of the survivors who took the role of witnesses. Their memories not only gave the voyage a presence, but when the

\textsuperscript{50} NCA, \textit{Guidelines for Commemorative Works}, 7.

\textsuperscript{51} S. Biddulph, “The SIEV X Memorial Project” in Rosa Monacella and SueAnne Ware (eds.), \textit{Fluctuating Borders, Speculations about Memory and Emergence} (Melbourne: RMIT University Press, 2007), 71.

\textsuperscript{52} David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, \textit{Dark Victory} (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005), 238.
Australian Federal Police were withholding a list of SIEV X passengers for “operational reasons,” they were able to contribute names and family relationships of some of the people who died.

Seven survivors settled in Australia, six of whom were to engage with the memorial process. Others connected to the voyage emerged as the project went on. At first we relied on recreating stories from available material, but as the survivors themselves began to be present at the exhibition launches and bereaved fathers attend the memorial events, they were able to tell their stories in person.

We developed a video for the schools, Untold Tragedy, which told the story of Sondos Ismael, a SIEV X survivor whose husband was on a Temporary Protection Visa in Australia. Their three daughters had drowned on the boat. The film drew on biography and history to tell of her life leading up to the voyage, in which her family had fled Iraq after her father was executed by Saddam Hussein’s regime. This film was to be used in school classes to assist students in articulating their own responses in the form of a memorial design.

Those who submitted designs showed their compassion in their responses. One student’s design was a bridge from land to lake, with railings inscribed with Braille literally asking the question “are we blind to the plight of these people?” Instead of submitting a design, three Victorian students wrote a letter to the asylum seekers of the SIEV X. The works from the schools were photographed and the images uploaded to the project Web site at http://www.sievxmemorial.com/ which enabled an ongoing virtual memorial whilst the physical side of planning continued.

The process of presenting the issues in this way in Australian schools had a number of impacts. One Queensland teacher talked of her students’ involvement as “not just awareness raising but life changing.” While this process would ultimately result in a design for the memorial, its most important outcome was that at every step, young people were engaging with the stories of the real people who had been on that boat and so keeping the stories and their meanings alive.

The exhibitions of the designs in various towns and cities around the country again drew on the life stories of the survivors. Amongst the 350 people who attended the first Sydney launch in October 2004 were Sondos Ismael, her husband, and their new child. Amal Basry rose and told the story of the sinking of the SIEV X. “My watch stopped at 3.10 p.m.,” she said, “so I know the time that it sank.” During her speech, she cried—she hadn’t seen Sondos since they’d been in Indonesia after they were rescued. Later, in Melbourne, she was to see fellow survivor Faris Kadhem in the audience. “Excuse me,” she said as tears welled up. “I saw that man say goodbye to his wife and child.” No one who attended any of the launches will forget these moments. The visitors’ book spoke of the shame for this country that the event had occurred and of the hope the exhibition gave for the future. Visitors wrote of a “depth
of response from our young people who will take this history into their futures.”

The exhibitions underscored the reality of the task the students were undertaking by linking their efforts to understand the past with the presence and living memories of the survivors and the families of those who had drowned. Video documentation of the exhibition and its launch were sent back to schools that had participated. The donation of key student artworks to the National Maritime Museum meant that these designs would be available into the future for public access.

In 2005 in Canberra Amal Basry again spoke, her last anniversary address before her death from breast cancer the following year. She talked about a student’s contribution that appealed to her. She liked the large photo of a woman’s scarf and child’s teddy bear, stranded on wire overlooking the sea, because “It shows the dreams of the women, the dreams of the children.” In an interview with the territory television program Stateline, she talked about the need to be treated with humanity. “I just want to tell the Australian people and the Australian government that we are human, we look for peace, we look for future for our children. That’s it. We are human.”

**Designing and Creating a People’s Monument**

The design exhibition launches had been part of an ongoing process of consultation to build support for the memorial and its proposed location. So by the fourth anniversary of the sinking, a range of notable stakeholders were now in support of the Canberra site, from the ex-Governor General Sir William Deane and the Canberra Islamic Centre through to museum curators and teachers.

The eventual design for the memorial was developed out of a concept by Brisbane schoolboy Mitchell Donaldson. It consisted of a procession of white poles that would expand to encompass the exact dimensions of the boat. Each pole would be decorated with a panel of artwork contributed by schools and communities from all over the country, each honoring a single parent or child from the SIEV X. This collaborative approach was to be contrary to the usual nature and process of commissioning a named sculptor to produce a memorial.

This time we enlisted church congregations and refugee advocate groups as well as schools to be involved in the project. Groups were sent the name of the person their pole would commemorate. As a full list of the victims was not available, many groups were allocated names such as “unknown boy” or “unknown mother” to base their work on.

53. SIEV X memorial exhibition comments book.
55. A partial list had been compiled by historian Marg Hutton and published on the Web site sievx.com.
Sue Hoffman, refugee advocate from Western Australia, talked of making the poles with Perth man Mohammad, who with his brother-in-law lost fourteen family members on the SIEV X.

“For the decorated bands near the top of the poles, the men have chosen to write the name in Arabic script. Once printed we painstakingly cut around the letters with a blade to make stencils, using a similar technique for the borders. Using the stencils we spray paint each name onto a pole. The whole exercise takes many hours spread over a number of weeks. It takes an emotional toll on the men. The Arabic writing to me is just Arabic writing but to them it’s the name of their wife, their child, their brother and the pole is the nearest they’ll get to a headstone. . . .”

The poles were decorated with images of mountains and valleys, kookaburras, painted butterflies, stars. Each had been prepared by a different group such as “Timbertop Geelong Grammar, Victoria” and “The People of the Kalang Valley, New South Wales.” Muntazar Al Alawi had decorated a pole on behalf of his Sydney college. Five birds, the Islamic symbol of death, represented five of his relatives who had died on the SIEV X: cousins, niece, and nephew.

As our team began to handle the poles, we were able to feel the immensity of the tragedy physically. We affixed plaques with repeated family names—

Zaynab Sobie, wife of Ali-Mehdi Sobie; Donya Sobie, 14; Marva Sobie, 12; Hajaran Sobie, 10. Each pole was becoming more than just timber, and those who travelled on the SIEV X were starting to have individual recognition by Australians.

Hundreds of school students and community groups who had created artwork for the poles travelled to Canberra to be part of the 2006 ceremony. Some came by bus; others drove with their pole on the roof rack, or jammed into the body of their car. Many groups had also erected a small memorial in their church or school grounds—some used offcuts from their designed poles; others small replicas of the final design. Through the process of the creation of the memorial, geographical and emotional links were being made between far-flung locations and the Canberra site. Dedication services were held. A Queensland student wrote a service to bless her school’s pole before sending it to Canberra:

“We honour you—un-named one. We know you were 8 years of age when you drowned. ... We honour your family and we will continue to—especially till the day comes when we will know your name. We send this, your memorial pole, to Canberra today.”

The Memorial Event

The memorial ceremony of October 2006 provided further opportunity to humanize each life that had been lost. The National Capital Authority had refused our application for even a temporary structure, basing their decision on a rule that commemorative subjects could only be considered at least ten years after the event, with the reason for such a “cooling” period being to confirm their national significance over time. This led us to consider a temporary memorial.

Instead of installing the poles into the ground, six hundred volunteers held the poles in a memorial ceremony attended by two thousand people. Family members of those who had drowned created the shape of the 19.5 metre long SIEV X, standing with the poles dedicated to their loved ones. Together the poles were raised, held, and then gently laid down. The poles were not just standing in for grave markers but for the bodies themselves.

Through the process of the ceremony, the land had been changed and the site sanctified. Faris Kadhem wrote to the schools involved:

“Please let all involved know that I feel I have a place to visit my daughter and wife for the first time since the tragedy.”

57. SIEV X Memorial Committee, SIEV X Memorial, educational booklet (Launceston: 2007), 9.
58. Letter from Cultural Advisor, National Capital Authority to SIEV X Memorial Project, September 2005.
This ceremony connected Australia’s symbolic center with the waters where the SIEV X sank, creating continuities between the bodies at sea and those on shore,60 “asserting a kinship with the bodies expelled to the limbo of not-Australia.”

In 2007 the project team was granted permission for the poles to be positioned in the ground for ten weeks as a temporary art installation. This time we were able to install the poles systematically, placing them in their family groupings. At a working bee, Faris Kadhem talked about individuals named in the plaques. “This man here, he was an electrician. He tried so hard to make the engine start. He got so angry that he didn’t have the right tools and couldn’t fix the engine. Why didn’t you say here that he was an electrician?” he asked me. He sent videos of the 2006 ceremony to survivors in Scandinavia, Canada, and New Zealand. In his reports back to Australia he has said: “They want everyone to know that they are so grateful that Australia is doing this.”

At the 2007 launch of the standing memorial the ribbon was cut by 6 people, including the Iraqi ambassador on behalf of the peoples of Iraq. The memorial was awarded a twelve-month extension by the Australian Capital Territory government with National Capital Authority approval pending.61 It was a decision that the federal government was not happy with. The previous year they had voted down a proposal by the nongovernment parties to make the memorial permanent. The memorial was just protest art created by activists and should be pulled down, said Federal Territories Minister Jim Lloyd.62

The Outcomes: Making the Lost Bodies into Human Lives and Futures

The memorial is much more than political, said organizer Steve Biddulph.

“It is about morality, about absolute standards of right and wrong. It is about the sacredness of human life and about how humanity must transcend politics in times of emergency and need.”63

At the dedication of the memorial in 2007, Mr. Jon Stanhope, Chief Minister of the ACT, talked of how the SIEV X memorial was at that stage temporary. He spoke of how in some ways this was appropriate, as there was unfinished business in the history of the SIEV X, with over two hundred of those being

61. The NCA delayed making a decision until after the election, and then again until the new Labor government could be briefed. The memorial continues to have temporary permission to stay standing, with negotiations for permanence ongoing.
remembered remaining nameless. Not only did these unnamed children lost at sea have no opportunity to leave their mark on the landscape, but their names could not be traced out on a headstone, nor inscribed on a death certificate.

There are still unanswered questions. Under the new Labor government, the Temporary Protection Visas have been abolished, though there has not yet been a judicial inquiry into the circumstances of the SIEV X sinking. While the memorial stands in Canberra, its tangible presence reconnects Australia’s political center with the waters that surround the island. It tells the story not just of the people who drowned, but of how these human lives have been valued. Thousands of Australians took a role in generating a different history, renegotiating Australia’s responsibilities to the stateless, and showing that these lives should be included amongst those that are worth remembering. The memorial has a message for the future: that no asylum seekers or boat people can be treated the same way again.

The story has become visible as history. The memorial has been important in achieving this, but it is the end result, not the cause. Instead, this has been because the memories and experiences of the survivors, supported by the research which has produced the text, facts, and figures to contextualize their stories, have finally been able to circulate widely at a grassroots level in many Australian communities. And this has been because of the hands-on, working process in schools and small community groups in which ordinary people took these stories into their own lives in order to imagine how to create the designs for the memorial and for the constituent poles. It has meant they had to listen carefully and think hard about those stories, before responding.

And finally, the memorial they made, the large and small poles with their simple and moving designs, brought the bodies themselves back into visibility. In emphasizing the humanity and the frailty of the lives of those people, it is a reminder that they are just like all of us, people who had wanted a better life and had risked all in the struggle to find it.

Beth Gibbings is a consultant historian and educator who coordinated the SIEV X memorial project from its inception, working collaboratively with over two hundred school and community groups. She graduated from the Applied History Program at the University of Technology, Sydney.