



THE NEW ZEALAND
SOCIETY OF AUTHORS
PEN NEW ZEALAND INC | TE PUNI KAITIHI O AOTEAROA



I act as PEN *Writers in Prison* coordinator for the NZ Society of Authors. PEN headquarters is based in London, and each region of the world is looked after by one person.

PEN headquarters sends out information about writers who have been persecuted, jailed, harassed or sometime killed because of their writing. They supply addresses of officials to write to, in the hope that protests from around the world will embarrass a government into relenting. Sometimes it works.

Even if it doesn't, it helps a prisoner and his or her family know that people around the world are thinking of them and working for them.

My role is to pass the information from PEN headquarters out to all the NZ letter writers on my list.

My system is:

- I receive the RAN (Rapid Action Network) or other bulletins from the UK.
- I write my own letters, and put them and a copy of the RAN into a new document, saved under the date, country and victim.
- I email my letters where there are email addresses, or print them out and post them for places like China that don't give email addresses. In some ways it's great being the coordinator because I have to respond to every one, which saves the dither of working out whether I can afford the time today!
- If there's one I can find (not always a NZ one) I add an embassy address to my document and write to them as well. For some years the Mexico embassy in Wellington had an amazing person who responded to every letter we sent. I heard through the grapevine that some embassy officials - and I suspect this was one - were grateful for our letters because it gave them a chance to protest about conditions in their country. At that time Mexico had writers being murdered so often I practically had the embassy on speed dial. I really did wonder how journalists could keep being so brave.

- Once all the letters are done I forward the RAN email, with my new document attached, to all the NZ writers on my list. Their addresses are in the BCC box. That way no one can see another person's address.
- I also BCC my writers all into my emailed letters, which hopefully can speed up the process of them doing their own letters.
- Then it's my writers' turn. I have a few who respond to every RAN. Most only do it occasionally. It's fine not to do them all – even one a year is better than none, and worth staying on my list. A couple of people only get one or two RANS sent each month, which reduces their guilt for not responding to them all.
- When the writers do their email letters, I ask them to BCC me into that, so I know who's responded to the RAN. Then I compile a list of these respondents for the UK. If it's a country like China with no email addresses there'll often be an embassy email they can BCC me into. Otherwise some just drop me an email to let me know they've responded.

As I said, I write to every appeal, just because I have to in order to complete the process of passing the RANs on. However, very few of the writers on my list do. Some do it regularly for a while, then life gets in the way and they stop, and they come back to it later. The most important thing is that they don't feel guilty about the ones they haven't responded to, but feel very proud of the ones they have. If there's anyone out there who would like to join my list, I'd be very grateful – and so would all those harassed writers out there.

Lesley Marshall

editline@xtra.co.nz