

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

6 Raglan St, Manly, NSW, 2095

Website: www.northernbeachesrefugees.org

Email address: nbrs@optusnet.com.au

Patrons: Bishop David Walker

Tom Keneally

Des Hasler

Welcome to the NBRS Winter 2008 Newsletter

It has been a good six months. We have helped almost 300 people this year bringing the total to 1,400. We have been a little quieter as there were fewer refugee visas granted. This was because many of the refugee visa allocation was used by those who have Temporary Protection Visas (TPV). The Government has been changing these to permanent protection visas. (TPV's were given to some of the asylum seekers who have come to Australia over the last few years.) This visa category has been abolished. We expect the next year will be busier as there should be a full allocation for offshore visas.

New Loans.

We have been asked on many occasions to help with loans for different difficult situations. We haven't had the flexibility or the money to be able to help. E.g. If you want to apply for a visa for a spouse or one of your children the application fee is about \$1,400. There are many reasons why it might be better to apply for one of these visas instead of a refugee visa. They have different criteria and can be a lot quicker to be granted. (Currently refugee visas take about two to two and a half years.) They are worthwhile cases and are still about helping refugees come to Australia and reuniting families. For many refugees it is difficult to save money as they may not be in full time work and there are always the needs of the family in the homeland or refugee camps. Without the application fee they can't apply for the visa. When we started NBRS we asked for donations to assist with travel costs for refugees who have been granted visas. We saw this as the biggest need. We can only use the money we have raised so far for travel costs.

We have decided that we will raise some more money and broaden the criteria for loans. The loans will still be to assist refugees. They will be interest free. Donations are tax deductible and should be payable to Centacare a/c NBRS.

Thomas

One of those we have helped is Thomas. We assisted with his fare when he came to Australia just over two years ago. He is from Sudan. He is studying Medical Science at University. He wants to continue on to become a doctor. That will depend on his marks. He called recently to see if we could assist him.

His father had six wives. Thomas's mother was the first wife. In 2000 his father was killed leaving his family destitute. They fled to Uganda. Thomas is the oldest son so it is his responsibility to support the others. He has been working two jobs while studying. He works over 20 hours a week on top of the study time.

He sends money to pay for the housing and school fees of his 38 family members who are refugees in Uganda. He wanted to know if he could borrow the rent so that he could work fewer hours and devote more time to his studies. The study has been

hard. Firstly he needed to raise his educational standard. Then he needed to improve his English so that he could more easily understand the lectures. He would like to improve his average to distinction which will improve his chances of been accepted into medicine. He needs to work less and study more but he also needs to help his family. He wants to get them all through high school. There is work in Africa for people with high school education.

He is also trying to sponsor some of the family to join him here.

Thomas is a very impressive young man. He is 25 working 20 hours a week and studying full time. He also supports 38 family members. He needs some help.

We agreed that we will help him. We would lend him the rent and he will repay it as he is able. If he can become a doctor it will be fantastic. A small amount of help from us will have huge benefits.

The Twins

We helped a family of five from Sierra Leone four years ago. There were twin girls of 17 and twin boys of 15 as well as mum. The family really connected with me as I am also a twin and there is another set of twins in my family. There aren't many families with two sets of twins in them.

They arrived on a cold wet winter's morning. They needed a ride home and I took them to a small two bedroom unit in Lakemba. It wasn't the nicest unit I have visited! There were already two brothers and one sister living in the unit. Consequently there were eight living in the unit until they could find a new place. The newly arrived spoke almost no English. Whenever I visited, Mum was always well wrapped and in front of the fire.

The twins started school the week they arrived. Whenever I visited they were always studying. Once they were well established I saw less of the family. I saw one of the older brothers from time to time. Early this year I ran into the older brother at a wedding and asked after the twins. He told me that they were at the wedding and we went to their table. I was greeted by two very beautiful young women who I wouldn't have recognized. They spoke perfect English with an Australian accent. They told me that they had just finished school and were now at university as were their brothers. Three were studying medical science with the idea of becoming doctors if they could maintain the marks and the other was studying business/economics.

A wonderful achievement and reward for all their hard work.

Sierra Leone Athletes.

The athletes we assisted are getting on very well. They will soon qualify for citizenship. Some of them are waiting for their wives and children to arrive. They are all working except for the youngest, Isha, who is still studying at TAFE as well as training. Musa is doing very well at weightlifting. He is close to representing Australia. Dady Alie, Bangalie and Albert are also doing well with their running. Hassan and Marion have started training again. Gibrilla is getting distinctions in his building course at TAFE. We expect his wife and children will arrive very soon. Mohamed will finish his panel beating apprenticeship in September. Lamin will also be reunited with his wife and children this month. They were to arrive last week but the first flight was overbooked so they were rebooked two days later. Unfortunately while they were at the airport ready to depart, the airport was closed as the Guinean Soldiers were in the streets protesting. It was very tense as it looked like an attempted coup. The family will arrive in two weeks. Alhassan, Musa and Sandy are working for Harris Farms and doing very well. Alie is working as a security guard at the Central Courts. Sarah is working at a nursing home.

Most importantly they are safe and happy. They are taking advantage of the good things that Australia has to offer.

It is hard to believe that it is already two years since they arrived.

Sahr Saffa

Two years ago we were asked to assist a young Sierra Leonean who had come to Australia for a youth conference. He had been working for the UN in the disarmament and rehabilitation of rebel soldiers. The UN sponsored and paid for him to come to the conference. While he was here he called his sister in Freetown. She told him that some of the rebel soldiers had gone to her house looking for him. They assumed that he must of stolen the fare to come to Australia from the funds to used to resettle them. They beat and raped her and ransacked the house. They told her that when Sahr returned they would kill him.

Sahr applied for refugee status in Australia. It was a poorly prepared application and it failed. He then went to the Refugee Review Tribunal where he also failed. They didn't believe his story. We wrote the Minister of Immigration asking that he use his powers to grant a visa. Sadly he refused. There was a story in the Sydney Morning Herald about Sahr. As a result of this story a newspaper article from Sierra Leone from 2006 came from Sierra Leone. It confirmed that his sister had been raped and beaten; it also confirmed that Sahr's life was threatened. Sadly the Immigration Department wouldn't reconsider the case. They don't see it as new evidence.

He has been told that he will have to return to Sierra Leone. It is a tragedy. Sahr is an intelligent young man. He has been offered a place at university to study for his masters degree. He also has been a great help to many of the young Sierra Leoneans in the community. He will leave Australia in early June.

It is very difficult to understand why the Minister won't intervene in the case.

Saffa

Saffa came to Australia in 2000. He was detained before being granted a temporary protection visa. This meant he wasn't able to apply for his wife and children to join him. He was given a permanent protection visa and sponsored his family. They were granted a visa but it only had six weeks before expiry. The family is in Pakistan and need an exit visa. This has taken more than six weeks so the visa has expired. We are trying to get both the exit visa and the extension so that they can come. It is a real rollercoaster ride of emotions; one minute great happiness as the visa is issued and then the sadness that the visa expires. Stress is a major part of the life of refugees and their families. It will be a wonderful day when they finally arrive.

Saffa met Len on the street when he asked for directions when going for a job interview. Len drove him to the interview and they became friends. Len and his wife have being a huge help including driving and English lessons. They will help with the process of renting a house when the family arrives. Making friends with the wider community makes such a difference in refugee's lives.

February 20th.

On February 20th we had 46 people arriving on one flight. It was wonderfully chaotic with people everywhere. Each time a family arrived cheers went up and people streamed down the arrival corridor. Hugs and kisses with shouting and laughter. It was an amazing night. Among the arrivals were three families of Sierra Leonean Journalists who we had sponsored. They spent two nights in Sydney so that we could get to know them and allow them to be reunited with some of their colleagues from home. It was a busy two days! They have moved to Lismore where they have been helped by the Northern Rivers Sanctuary Group. The reports are that they are settling well. We will try and sponsor some more of the Sierra Leonean journalists in exile.

On the same flight were two Liberian sisters, Mercy and Ophelia with their six boys. They have been refugees for more than 15 years. The boys were all dressed in their best clothes. They were on route to Melbourne. The flight was delayed and so they missed their connecting flight. Rosemary and David, members of NBRs, offered to have them to stay the night. The children were delightful. The parents spoke some English but the children didn't so we conversed in music. They could really dance! I don't think anyone got much sleep that night! Early the next morning we took them back to the airport for the flight to Melbourne to be reunited with the extended family. The boys were wide eyed on the way to the airport at all the traffic especially the large trucks. They were welcomed with a large party in Melbourne.

Books and Computers for Sierra Leone

The first container of goods has arrived in Sierra Leone and has been distributed. It was collected by Sierra Unite, a community based group in Sydney. The goods went to schools, universities and orphanages. We are assisting them with the next container. So far we have collected more than 90 computers and pallets of books. We have had wonderful support. The collections continue. If you would like to get your school, church or club involved let me know. It is a great way for students to help those who are poor. We are asking for pre-loved goods so it won't even cost the parents! (David Addington 0434029384) We can have someone talk to the group and then arrange for the goods to be collected in Sydney. We are looking for computers, school and children's books, exercise books, boxes of pencils and pens, clean soccer shirts and boots. The container is half full. When it is full we will start on the next one! The schools in Sierra Leone struggle to get supplies. Parents find it hard to feed their children so it is impossible for them to help. Most families in Australia have children's books that are no longer needed. We are delighted that we can work with Sierra Unite on this very worthwhile cause.

(See attached brochure)

Year End.

We have now lent over \$1.65 million and had over 1.20 million repaid since we started five years ago. We have had over 230 loans repaid, 120 in the last year. We have \$455,000 outstanding in loans. The only expenses we have are transaction charges on Centrepay repayments. This year it will be about \$2,500.

Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Manly covers our postage and photocopying costs for which we are very grateful.

To all those who have made donations in the last year or have renewed their membership a deep felt thank you. We wouldn't be able to assist so many people without your help.

The annual fee for associate membership is \$50. We are now accepting donations again. If you would like to renew your membership or make a donation, please make the cheque payable to Centacare a/c NBRs so that we can get you a tax receipt.

David Addington

Chairman 01/06/08