

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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Tom Keneally

Des Hasler

Welcome to the NBRS Christmas 2008 Newsletter

It has been a busy time in the last five months. We have assisted 250 refugees with travel loans. It has been the busiest time we have ever had. The flow of visas has certainly increased! It has been wonderful to see so many happy people reunited with their families. There is real joy but also sadness for those who haven't been granted visas. There are never enough visas to go around, clearly Australia can't help everyone. We celebrate with those who are successful and suffer with those who fail.

Peter Cox AO. 1925-2008

Peter and Olive Cox were foundation members of NBRS. Peter had been a Member of Parliament for 23 years. He held many posts including Minister of Transport.

Peter and Olive moved to Manly after he retired from politics. Peter was involved in many charities in his retirement and we benefited from his wisdom. He had great compassion for refugees. He will be greatly missed. Our thoughts and prayers are with Olive and their children.

Peter's family asked that donations be made to NBRS in his memory.

The money was used to assist a lady and her three adult children come to Australia. On behalf of all the members and supporters we offer Olive and family our condolences.

Angelo's boys

In early October I was at the airport meeting two young Sudanese boys of 8 and 11 who were coming to join their father. Angelo hadn't seen them in nearly 8 years. There was great excitement as they arrived on a wet and cold October night. It is hard to comprehend how you get over missing such a large part of your child's life. The boys spoke no English so we only talked in smiles and digital photos. They were so impressed with the instant pictures. We posted them some photos to keep as a memento of their arrival.

Angelo is a happy man, full of confidence which he will need as he tells me he is going to be a driving instructor!

Nursing studies

A large number of African women work in nursing homes as Assistants in Nursing (AIN). They need to get a certificate 3 at TAFE to work as an AIN. There is plenty of work as it is difficult and requires heavy lifting. You need to have a caring attitude to the elderly patients.

The Sierra Leone Student Union is trying to encourage young Sierra Leonean women to go to university and study for a Bachelor in Nursing. They have 10 women starting next year at the Australian Catholic University. They have been encouraged to undertake this course and will be supported in their studies. .

Clearly it is not easy to start university when you have been away from study for a while and English is not your first language. The members of the Sierra Leonean Student Committee are to be congratulated for their hard work.

I recently met a young woman who we helped come here three years ago. She started a nursing degree two months after she arrived. She will finish it this week with a high distinction average. She will make a wonderful nurse and hopefully will continue her studies.

Gibrilla's family

Gibrilla was one of the athletes who stayed after the Commonwealth Games. He works in construction. He is studying at TAFE so he can become a builder. He sponsored his wife and children as soon as he could. Gibrilla has settled so well. He has a good job and has made a big effort to become Australian. His wife and two sons were granted a visa and arrived in early August. Sadly I was away and couldn't be at the airport. I spoke to him on the phone while he was waiting and he was almost unable to talk he was so excited. The plane was 3 hours late adding to the drama. Finally they arrived and Gibrilla tells me it is like a huge weight is lifted off your shoulders. The boys started school a week after arriving and have already received merit awards which mum and dad are extremely proud of.

There are two boys who are still waiting for a visa. They are his adopted sons. We hope they will be here soon.

Musa

Musa was another of the athletes who was granted asylum after the Commonwealth Games. He has recently won the Australian Championships in the 69 kgs division. It is a credit to him that while working full time, normally 6 days a week, he has also found time to train. We helped him bring his brother and nephew recently and are waiting on a visa for his parents and other siblings. There has been a problem with the application and we are sweating on a final decision. We are optimistic that we will get a positive result.

Charles's family

Charles's father was killed when he was young. He was raised by his uncle. They fled together and lived in a refugee camp. Charles was granted a visa and came to Australia. He is a citizen and is married with a beautiful daughter. Charles sponsored his uncle and aunt with their four children. They passed the interview and went for the medical. Sadly Charles's aunt died shortly after the medical. His uncle failed the medical so the family was rejected. His uncle has now also died. Charles is now the father of the four children. He started filling in the forms getting ready to file for the children but sadly the oldest died. He has filed for the remaining three children and we hope they will be successful. The process is slow as so many people apply for the visas available. Charles is very happy to be in Australia and grateful for his new life. However it is difficult to get on with your life when your children are suffering.

Spouse and Children visas

Many of the families we help are reuniting children with their parents or parents with their children. There are a lot of spouses who we reunite. There are many reasons why one parent may come first. The sponsor may have a large family and will be expected to help as many brothers and sisters as they can. They will often bring four family heads and expect them to help their own families when they arrive.

The visa process for refugee visas is very slow, currently about two years.

Refugee camps are not safe and we often see applications amended because some one has died. You can apply for a spouse or child visa which has an easier criterion

but it costs to apply and the children don't qualify for Centrelink payments for two years. You must also get a financial guarantee that you won't claim welfare payments for those two years.

This visa is much quicker, currently about one year. However it is very difficult to get someone to guarantee the welfare payments. It is also very difficult if the family head gets sick and can't work. We have suggested to the Immigration Dept, that they give an exemption from being excluded from welfare to refugees who wish to bring their children or spouse. The reality is that if you are rich you can bring your spouse and children but if you are poor it is very difficult. I am sure that is not the intention of the law but it is the reality. I hope the new minister will consider removing this impediment to anyone bringing their children to Australia. The longer families are apart the more difficult the settlement process is.

Books and Computers for Sierra Leone

Even before the civil war in Sierra Leone, there were deficiencies in the delivery of education, especially out of city. The 11 year civil war exacerbated this to the extent that many villages have schools where there are no books, no desks, no equipment.

We have been assisting Sierra Unite, a community group of Sierra Leonean refugees in Australia, in approaching schools, libraries, companies, individuals to assist – with the donation of unwanted books, text books, computers, new exercise books, and used soccer boots. One of the supporters has generously provided warehouse storage. It is to this warehouse in the south west of Sydney that the books are taken and stored – in this warehouse many of the Sierra Leone Australians come regularly to assist with packing and sorting the books. The cost of shipping is provided by generous donations from various companies and individuals.

There are now 8 primary schools, 8 secondary schools and one tertiary institution which have applied for assistance, and are receiving these donations. The second container left Sydney in September with over 1600 cartons of books and more than 120 reconditioned computers, 25 printers (including some laser printers), and several cartons of soccer jerseys and boots from local soccer clubs. On arrival in Freetown, the boxes are unloaded and stored in a warehouse before distribution to the designated schools. It is hoped to ship the third container in early February, 2009.

This drive is now gaining recognition in Sierra Leone with much coverage in the local press, and interest being taken by government officials.

With the hike in oil prices this year, the cost of shipping has increased considerably. The latest financial crisis saw the dramatic fall in the A\$, and a further rise in the cost of shipping. We are now seeking assistance in raising funds to support the estimated \$8000 cost for the next consignment.

It is a wonderful project that has allowed us to also help children improve their education in Sierra Leone.

Barbie Davis from NBRS has been incredible. She has been running the project from the NBRS side. She is out there sorting books and supervising the volunteers who sort the books. She has a van which is used to collect the books from schools, churches and community groups etc. I am reliably informed that she is very strong. (A great compliment in Africa) I am told that she is a very good organizer. The sorters work very hard!!!

Andrew's Family

We have been advocating for Andrew for nearly five years. He came to Australia in 2001. While he was here his wife was killed and he was told that if he returned he would also be killed. He was refused a protection visa in Australia. We took up his case with the minister and after a very long battle he was granted a visa. It took nearly five years.

He left his three boys behind in Africa. While he was waiting for his visa his boys disappeared for three months. It was a very difficult time. Luckily he found them. He got them to live with his mother. He applied for a visa which has finally been granted. They will be here in November. It will make for a very happy Christmas. It has been a seven year fight to find sanctuary and then to be reunited with his children. It is impossible to imagine the emotions that they all must feel. Andrew has become a good friend so it will be wonderful to celebrate at the airport when his mother and the boys arrive.

The Next Six Months.

Last year we had a much slower year with fewer visas being granted. We stopped accepting donations as we had enough money. In May of this year it became clear that we would need to raise some more money as the demand was growing. If we hadn't received some very generous donations we wouldn't have been able to help all those who approached us. A very deep felt thank you to all who made donations. We know that there are a lot of visas about to be issued in the next three months. It will prove a challenge to assist them all. We have stopped lending money for anything other than airfares. We don't have enough money in the bank to help all the visas in the pipeline. If you would like to make a donation we would gratefully accept it. If you would like a tax receipt make the donation payable to Centacare –NBRS. Post it to

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We can also accept credit card donations. .

I would like to thank all those who have helped in the last few months. The committee and all those who have collected books and to those who have sorted and packed them.

I would like to thank the donors. Without you we wouldn't be able to help those who are so in need. I get to hear the thank you's and to see the families being reunited. I wish I could express that joy so you could feel their happiness too.

David Addington
Chairman 07/11/08