

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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Welcome to the NBRS Winter 2009 Newsletter

We welcomed our first family six years ago. It was a family of five from Sierra Leone. Since then we have helped nearly 1800 people from 21 different countries. The stories are all so different but in some ways tragically the same; families having to flee to avoid war and violence. Most have lost siblings or parents, spouses or children yet all are optimistic of a new start in a safe and secure country.

Most are really keen to get an education and make the most of the new life that is offered to them. There are lots of challenges. It is very difficult getting affordable housing. The rental market is extremely tight and as new arrivals don't have jobs or a rental history, it is not easy. The current economic situation also makes finding work difficult. However most approach it all with courage and good humour. They are an inspiration.

It is hard to comprehend the extraordinary difference between Australia and a third world country. We know that each day we will have food to eat. We also know that Australia is a very safe country. If we get sick we have one of the best medical systems in the world. Refugees always struggle for food to keep them alive and medicine is only available if you have money.

Maternal mortality in Sierra Leone is 2% and child mortality is 26% which are the highest in the world. There have been some improvements over the last few years, but more than one in four children die by the age of five. Almost every family is effected by maternal or child mortality. Childbirth is very dangerous with one woman dying in every fifty births.

Saffa's family.

I told the story of Saffa in the Winter 2008 newsletter. Here is an update.

Saffa came to Australia in 2000 escaping persecution in Afghanistan. He was held in detention, in Australia, for a long time before being granted a temporary protection visa (TPV). This allowed him to stay in Australia but not bring his family. The TPV became a permanent visa in 2005 and he applied for his family, who were in Iran. The process can be very slow and a visa was granted in early 2008. Unfortunately the visa was only valid for a month as the medical clearance was about to expire. Sadly it expired before an exit visa was granted by Iran.

The new visa had to have a new medical and security clearance which took another 8 months. The family finally arrived in February 2009 and it was a very happy reunion as the family had been apart for 9 years. The youngest child was born after Saffa had left for Australia so he had never met him. Saffa has missed most of his children's childhood and is now making up for lost time. They have settled in Western Sydney and the children are all studying. They are bright and happy and will do very well here. The strain of life shows in Saffa's face. He is only 44 but looks 20 years older. Being forced to leave your homeland is never easy and the journey to safety is difficult, dangerous and slow.

I know that they will have a long and happy life here.

Priscilla's family.

Last month we welcomed Priscilla's family; her son, daughter in law and four grandchildren. She was out at the airport with her other four children. It was the first time they had been together as a family. The two youngest hadn't met their brother and the older two were only infants when the family was separated. Her husband was a Government Minister and there was an assassination attempt on his life when he was in the capital city. He had his eldest daughter, Abung, who was 5 with him as she was seeking medical treatment. They fled together and were refugees in Kenya. Priscilla's husband returned home when he thought it was safe leaving Abung with distant relatives to look after her. Sadly he was assassinated. Abung had to go to a refugee camp where life was very difficult. Refugee camps are very dangerous and violent. There is limited access to medical care or education. She was looked after by a family in the camp who treated her as a daughter. When they were granted a visa to come to Australia she traveled as part of their family.

Abung started TAFE and then went on to University. She completed a BA and is now starting her Masters. She sponsored her mother and 3 siblings. Her mother has successfully sponsored her last son and they are a family again. The two oldest children hadn't seen each other for 22 years. It was a wonderful reunion. They are a beautiful family torn apart by disaster but rebuilding their lives.

Mohamed's Present.

We helped to bring Mohamed who is only 6. His father and mother were in Sydney but he was still in Africa. Dad approached us to help with the travel. It takes nearly two days to travel from West Africa to Sydney and he was too young to travel by himself. It was going to cost \$6,000 for an escort, but we had a lady coming to join her husband and she generously offered to bring him.

Dad was beside himself with excitement as he waited for Mohamed to arrive.

Mohamed has a little brother in Sydney who he hadn't met. He wanted to bring a present for his little brother so he brought an apple which he carried all the way to Sydney. He didn't understand Quarantine regulations and the sniffer dog found the apple which was confiscated. Mohamed was very unimpressed and complained to his father that the dogs had turned him in to the police!

Airport Meetings.

We meet most of the families we help come to Sydney. Here is a report from one of the group, Anne who often meets families.

Last week I met Jaye, his daughter and her baby (from Liberia) who were sponsored by his fiancée Mardea. Mardea is a delight. It was a joyful, excited reunion and Jaye was charming & eloquent. We had to wait for Mardea's arrival and when he left his trolley a short distance away from us, I enquired if there were valuables in his bags. He looked puzzled and didn't know the word "valuables" so I explained "money". He laughed and replied "I am from Africa. From where would I obtain money"? His daughter Mercy looked years older than 17 and was very subdued. The baby, Faith, almost a year old, was wide-eyed and beautiful, but quite unresponsive too - I hope they were just exhausted, but God knows what they have endured. Naturally, I am invited to Jaye and Mardea's wedding next month - unfortunately I will be away!

Today, in the pouring rain, I met a young 23 yr old Burmese man, who was met by his wife & nephew. The nephew is 18 and is in Year 10. His English was very good and he was quite a cool dude with an angelic face. He told me he was born in a Thai

refugee camp and lived there for 17 years (almost incomprehensible!) and so had never been to Burma. He and his aunt have been here almost 18 months. She is studying English at Tafe but she is not as advanced. She told me she too had been in the refugee camp as long as she can remember, and that is where she met and married her husband.

I am sure the blanket will have already been put to use warming them on the train trip home - I gave them my umbrella as well!

Michael's Boys.

I told the story of Michael's sons in the Christmas newsletter of 2007.

The boys were granted a visa but couldn't leave their homeland as they were 13. In some places in the world you can't leave your homeland as you may be required to serve in the army. Michael managed to get the boys into the neighboring country but they were picked up by the police and returned home. They were punished and fined. Dad tried to get them to escape a second time but they were caught on the border and were in trouble again. It took two years and 5 attempts, and all of his saving, for them to escape. The visa needed to be reissued and the travel arranged very quickly. The Department of Immigration and the International Organization for Migration were very helpful in getting them to Australia. Michael and the boys can now get on with their lives.

Gibrilla and Roseline.

Gibrilla was one of the Commonwealth Games athletes who were granted a protection visa three years ago. His wife, Rose and their two boys arrived in August last year. The boys have settled into school very well. Gibrilla often brings over merit awards that they have both won. Last week they welcomed a beautiful baby girl. When the war was devastating Sierra Leone they adopted two boys. One is Gibrilla's nephew and the other was an orphan. They didn't qualify for the same visa as Rose and the boys so we are waiting for them to get a visa. They will also be looking forward to meeting their sister.

Reuniting families is a slow and difficult business as there are so many refugees who want to escape and only a small number of visas available.

Latest family

This week we paid for a family of three. The application was progressing but death squads were killing people in the refugee camp. The sponsor, assisted by one of the migrant resource centers, approached the Department of Immigration to see if the visa could be expedited. Immigration granted the visa and once the airfare was paid the family was moved to safety. We work closely with The International Organization for Migration who arranges the travel for most refugees. The family will arrive next week. There is a second family in the same situation and as their visa was granted yesterday, we hope they will be on the same flight. You can imagine the celebrations at the airport when they arrive!

Books for Sierra Leone

This project was started two years ago. In a meeting with Murray Kanneh of Sierra Unite and Serrie Kamara, we discussed gathering books to help the recovery of their village schools after the civil war in Sierra Leone. This was the beginning of the Kanga Schools project. NBRS decided to become a partner so we could do something to help those still in Sierra Leone as we believe education is the hope for the future.

By the end of 2007, this had grown to provide assistance for 10 schools – 5 primary schools and 5 high schools. Each of these schools has a “sponsor” in Sydney or in Freetown. This is highly regarded as it means that there is ongoing contact with the schools being supported, and progress reports on a regular basis.

By late 2008, others wanted their schools assisted and the number of schools had grown to 20 – 9 primary schools and 11 high schools – and two tertiary institutions. There are now 20,000 school children benefiting from this educational project. The number is said quickly – but 20,000 is a large number.

What has happened in the last two years is amazing.

A very generous supporter has been willing to let us use his company’s warehouse at Wetherill Park to store the books and pc’s – to use the space so that we can sort, pack and label, without any rental charge. This has been an essential component to the success of the project to date.

A business associate has volunteered countless hours cleaning down the pc’s which are received, reinstalling the operating systems where required, and then loading them with Open Office and other free software. The pc’s are labelled (Pentium IV, software, etc) and packed ready for shipment. Each of the last two shipments has had more than 150 pc’s alone. So this has been a lot of work in preparation.

Sierra Unite has members in both Australia and Sierra Leone. A key member in Freetown has taken responsibility for clearing the goods at the port and ensuring that they ALL arrive at their school destinations. This is a very time consuming job when the shipments arrive, and it’s a vital part of this project.

The fourth shipment has just arrived in Freetown in April. The last two shipments have each been 40ft containers filled solely with educational materials. Each container holds approximately 60 cubic metres. We have sent over 200,000 books so far. That’s a lot of books!

As the cost of shipment is high (approx \$9,500 for each 40ft container), we only ever pack educational items. The exception is soccer equipment – second hand soccer boots and new soccer balls are used by entire schools and shared.

We need your support to pay the transportation costs. We continue with the loan scheme for refugees travel but we will also be supporting this project.

New donations and membership fees will be used for both travel loans and this project.

Associate membership is by donation of \$50 or more per year and is now due.

If you would like to continue to support us, please make cheques payable to Centacare a/c NBRIS. 6 Raglan St Manly NSW 2095.

David Addington
Chairman 03/06/09