

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

6 Raglan St, Manly, NSW, 2095

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Patrons: Bishop David Walker

Tom Keneally

Des Hasler

Welcome to the NBRS SUMMER 2009 Newsletter

Since the Winter newsletter we have helped 301 people with loans which has been the busiest six months ever. It has been a challenge to help everyone. The Australian dollar fell against the US dollar making the airfares more expensive but with the recovering dollar the fares have fallen again.

We were able to help everyone who approached us and it has been very rewarding to see so many families reunited.

We have now helped a total of 2101 people with airfares.

We have 365 loans outstanding. Most loans are repaid within two years. There are some that take four or more years. We have had very few loans that haven't been repaid. The families are so responsible at repaying the loans. They understand that the money is used for the next family.

We explain to the family that it is an interest free loan. There are no loan documents or promissory notes signed. We accept their word that they will repay and they do. Most of the people we help come from Africa. We will help anyone who applies if we have the funds but we only see a few from the Middle East and Asia.

Most people approach us through their community contacts or through one of the migrant resource groups. Most come to NSW but we have helped people travel to each State and Territory.

Conakry.

There have been ongoing problems in Conakry Guinea. The political situation is very unstable. Last year there was a military coup and there have been on going protests and riots. The most recent riots killed 200 people and injured 1,200. It is a very dangerous place. The refugees living there can't return to their homelands. It is very stressful for everyone. The Immigration Department has responded to the difficulties by giving priority to the outstanding applications for refugee visas. It is very difficult as the whole city closes down. The airport is closed so it is impossible to leave even if the visa has been granted.

The situation has now calmed down and the visas are been granted. The welcome at the airport is full of both joy but also relief. There is also some sorrow for those who are left behind.

There have been some amazing family reunions in the last few months.

I have asked Michelle, who has recently joined NBRS to tell of her first airport meeting of one such reunion.

Christiana's story.

David invited me to accompany him and his wife Mary-Anne to the airport on Thursday 29 October, to meet a family of Sierra Leonean refugees. It was a day that I will never forget.

The person sponsoring the refugee family was Christiana. We met her at the airport at 6.25am, the time the plane was due, although Christiana had been there for at least an hour before that. (She told us that in her excitement she had gone to the domestic terminal first by mistake, even though she knew where the international terminal was.) Christiana is a very attractive, well-spoken and obviously intelligent young Sierra Leonean woman, who came to Australia as a refugee three years' ago. Over the next hour and a half as we waited for the family to emerge we heard Christiana's story.

Christiana had twin boys and when they were three months' old, her town was attacked by rebels. She wasn't at home during the attack. They were with their father who was killed. Christiana was told that her babies had been killed too. Christiana fled Sierra Leone, ending up in a refugee camp in Guinea. Some six years later she was granted refugee status in Australia and arrived with other members of her family in 2006; NBRIS lent the money for their airfares.

About a year after she left Guinea, a friend in a refugee camp met two little boys, who were living there with their grandmother and her family. The friend put two and two together, and realised that the boys were in fact Christiana's sons, whom she had presumed dead. Their paternal grandmother had managed to rescue them from the slaughter, and had fled with them to Guinea. Christiana was contacted in Australia, and she then spent the next three years going through the procedures to get refugee visas for Australia for her twins, their Grandmother and the Grandmother's family. Christiana was studying tourism at TAFE, but had to stop that to start working to earn the money to pay for such things as DNA tests for her family, as well as support them in the camp. Their Grandmother arrived two months before the boys as they were delayed by a medical problem. The boys travelled with their aunt and a cousin.

It was the happiest and most emotional reunion I have ever witnessed and am probably ever likely to witness. When the boys and Christiana's sister-in-law finally appeared at the end of the corridor, Christiana flew to meet them. There was a wonderful, joyous cry of "Mummy" and the boys ran to her. Then there was just a beautiful, entwined ball of mother and sons, and nephew too. Tears were pouring down Christiana's face when they finally disentangled themselves, and you could see a rather puzzled and anxious expression on the 10 year old nephew's face as he looked into hers: "Why are you crying, aren't you pleased to see us?"

The airlines had managed to lose all the family's luggage in the two day trip from Guinea, via Paris, London and Bangkok, to Sydney, so all they had was one small carry-on bag. However David had brought along a big, black garbage bag containing rugs for each of the refugees from 'Wrap with Love'. There was one more thing in the bag too. As I was leaving to go home to my 10 and 11 year-old daughters and my husband, I heard David ask the boys if they liked soccer. The answer was an enthusiastic "Yes". The last thing I saw were three beaming smiles from three beautiful boys as David opened the bag to show them a brand new soccer ball.

Sanfa's story.

Sanfa came to Australia in 2002 as a political refugee. He left behind his pregnant partner and son. He and his partner also looked after four children who were orphans. When he arrived in Australia he started the process to bring his family. Seven years later we were waiting at the airport for the arrival of the family including his seven year old daughter who he had never met. The flight arrived at 8 am. There was another family we were assisting on the same flight. They came through at 10am and told us that there were no other refugees on the flight. Sadly the flight details were wrong and we had to return the following morning at 8.00.

The next morning we were at the airport as he greeted his partner and the children. It is impossible to understand the joy but also the sadness of the wasted years. He was so joyful. The family were also very happy to be here but exhausted. The children were exhausted but excited to be here.

Not only will they be safe, loved and well fed in Australia, but they also will get an education. It is hard to believe but by coming to Australia their life expectancy doubled. The children are in school now and settling in very well. They are making friends and adapting to the new way of life.

Isha's Family

Isha came to Australia in 2006 as part of the Sierra Leone Commonwealth Games team. She applied for refugee status which was granted.

She applied for a visa for her sister, two brothers, brother in law and niece. The visa was granted and the family arrived in late August. They have settled in the Manly area.

They are a wonderful family, bright and friendly. They are full of excitement about their new life. Adama has already started a job in a nursing home. She will work as a cleaner to start and then as a nursing assistant. She is also undertaking English for Future Studies course at TAFE.

Karlos and Alie look like they will be starting a laboring job in December. They have been helping the Kanga project collecting books. They are very hard working and so should always find it easy to get work. Alice who is 3 is a darling. She has started in day care while Adama is at TAFE. Her English is rapidly improving.

It is interesting to listen to the things that people miss in their new homeland. Karlos tells me that the streets here are very quiet. In Africa there are always people standing around talking. Here we go into our houses at night and the streets are deserted.

Kanga Schools Project

In May this year, the Kanga Schools program was supporting 20 schools. In the months since then, this has grown to add another 10 schools – 2 more tertiary institutes – and the libraries in Freetown, Bo and Kenema. A 40 foot container of books and computers was distributed to these 30 schools within the last 2 weeks, and now funds have been provided for a further 12 generators for these schools.

With the building of the libraries, it was recognised that there is a lack of light in the wet season. The program is now purchasing clear corrugated sheets to use as "skylights" in the roofs to assist in overcoming this problem.

With the next shipment, each of the beneficiary schools is being provided with a plaque to indicate participation in the Kanga Schools project. In December this year, Kanga "medals of excellence" are being awarded to one student from each of the first 20 schools .and a team of five is travelling from Sydney to Sierra Leone to visit a

number of these schools and see first hand the results of this project. They are funding their own travelling costs.

How can you help?

We are always seeking books and computers, quarto exercise books and second hand soccer boots. We need to collect these and take them to Wetherill Park. We are looking for people to collect the books. We are looking for people to source the books as well. Could you work with a community group, school or church to have a drive to collect books for us? Many schools have book sales at year end. There are often many unwanted books due to changing texts as well as unsold books. We would love to have them. If you have a contact at a school please call us to see if we can use them.

We are looking to create a website for the project. If anyone has the skills and would like to volunteer their time please contact us.

The cost of shipping each container is \$10,000, and support with this is always welcome as we are now sending at least two containers a year.

It is amazing what has been achieved due to the hard work of a small team led by Barbie Davis and Diana Wells.

Please contact us on contact@kangaschools.org or 0408 181 022

I would like to thank all those who have sent in donations this year. It is only due to your support that we are able to expand and help so many.

I am always humbled by your generosity especially in the last few months when the economy was looking very sick.

We hope to continue to expand our services. The Kanga School project is a very exciting one. It helps the children of Sierra Leone who are the hope for the future. Currently only 38% of adults are literate. With better resources let's hope this figure rises rapidly.

If you want to make a donation please make the cheque payable to CatholicCare a/c NBRS and post to

NBRS

6 Raglan St

Manly

NSW 2095.

Credit card donations are also gratefully accepted.

I would like to wish you a very Happy Christmas. It is a time for celebrations but it is also a time for peace. Let us hope that next year we will see more peace in our troubled world.

David Addington

Chairman.

20/11/09