

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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Welcome to the NBRIS Winter 2010 Newsletter

This is our 14th newsletter. Our first family arrived on 27/06/2003. We have now paid 2338 airfares since we started including 237 in the last six months. They have settled in Queensland, NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and ACT. We have helped people from 26 different nationalities. The year 2009/2010 has been our busiest. We were able to assist everyone who applied for a loan this year. It was a struggle but we received very generous support from our donors. Thank you very much to everyone who helped.

The repayments are going well with over 120 being fully repaid this financial year. There are about 360 still outstanding. We receive repayments of about \$50,000 per month. This year we will have to write off some loans. It will be about \$12,000 which is very disappointing. We have tried to recover the loans but there is no real prospect of any of this money being repaid. The two larger amounts are because of illness and we don't want to add to their difficulties. We don't harass people nor would we take any legal action. Sometimes a loan fails and we need to recognise that it won't be repaid.

There are always new challenges. The Iranian Government won't allow the International Organization for Migration (IOM) help refugees leave Iran. Most refugees we assist travel with IOM. They are cheaper and also have a loan scheme which covers 65% of the travel costs. We then assist with the remaining 35%. In the future those travelling from Iran will have to make their own bookings and we may have to cover all the costs.

Department of Immigration.

We don't usually help with filing applications for refugees; you need to be a migration agent or lawyer. There are groups that will assist with information. We will write letters of support and also advocate for a case if there are problems.

To be granted a visa you need to be in good health and have a reasonable prospect of settlement. There are 13,750 visas granted to refugees each year so there is plenty of demand for few places. Some applications get to the medical stage and find one of the applicants has a medical problem. They may be rejected based on the cost of treatment. If one of the applicants fails they all fail; clearly you couldn't ask a family to leave one behind. There is an opportunity to request a medical waiver. There are a number of reasons this waiver might be granted. We are often asked to assist with a letter of support for a medical waiver. We have had very good success with these applications. Medical problems in Africa are often fatal but in Australia can often be resolved easily. It is very rewarding to see families granted visas and then have the sick person receive medical treatment.

IBRAHIM'S FAMILY

Rosemary reports; three months ago I met Ibrahim at the airport. He was very excited by the imminent arrival of his wife whom he had not seen for five years and his young daughter Fatmata whom he had never seen. He had prepared them a home in Wagga where he works in the abattoir. He had traveled up from Wagga that day and was at the airport very early to meet his family. His sister, friends and I joked about how he would bow down on his knees, or call out in joy, or sweep them up in his arms when they arrived.

We were not disappointed - the welcome was very warm. Husband and wife were obviously very happy to be reunited. There were tears and smiles and hugs all round.

So naturally I was a little surprised later when I was leaving the airport that I saw his wife and sister still in the airport car park talking to Angela from the NBR. Ibrahim had driven off and the women had been left behind in all the excitement. Both cars full of happy Sierra Leoneans had left the car park each thinking the women were in the other car!

So far to come to get "forgotten" so quickly?

Angela continues; Yes it was a memorable night!

Ibrahim's sister was chatting with her newly-arrived sister-in-law at the car park entrance when they realised all the others had disappeared! And as luck would have it, she had left her mobile phone at home.

That's where I came in....I was walking back to my car after saying goodbye to the two other families who had arrived, when I saw Ibrahim's sister and his wife standing in the car park!

So after a telephone wild goose chase with my mobile and much hilarity, the two ladies made their way off to the main gate to meet up with Ibrahim (for the second time that night!). What was great to me was that neither of them seemed particularly worried about the fact they'd been left at the airport! Perhaps we can take a leaf from them with regards to our own 'she'll be right' attitude in our rush-rush, stress induced society today.

Abdul's family

There were some problems with the application so it had taken three years for the application to be completed. There is always the fear that the visa might be rejected at the last minute. Lots of letters and emails had been sent to Immigration in support of the application. It was a very happy day for the family when the visa was granted. There are 13 in the family. The family had been very stressed by the situation they were in, in Africa. However all that was forgotten as they arrived in Sydney. The family were very vocal in welcoming the newcomers. Abdul's parents were also at the airport welcoming their children and grandchildren. They were almost incapable of talking. Grandmother had tears running down her face the whole time we were at the airport and could only keep saying thank you, thank you.

The newly arrived always look shattered. It is a very long journey.

They have settled very well. The young children are already at school and the adults are completing their English lessons. They will soon be looking for work.

Working or studying.

It can be difficult to find work when you first arrive. You don't have any Australian experience or qualifications. One area that many refugees work in is aged care. It is not well paid and is very hard work. You can get a certificate in three months and there is normally plenty of work. Many refugees come from cultures that value old people and treat them with great respect. My father in law has just moved temporarily into a nursing home. There are two refugees working there who we have assisted. He tells me that they treat him with great dignity and compassion.

Many of the refugees want to study. They have lost everything and are delighted to have the opportunity to gain qualifications. There are a remarkable number of young refugees at university and TAFE getting a good education.

Some of the families we have assisted have all their children going to university.

It is a difficult decision to study as you forgo the income and the financial benefits that go with work. They also have the pressure to support the family left behind.

Sandy's Family

We helped Sandy get a visa when he came to Australia in 2006. He had left his wife and daughter in Africa. He applied for her shortly after he arrived but the first application was rejected as he made some errors. The application was finally successful and we welcomed his wife and daughter earlier this year. Sandy has been working 70 hours a week since he first arrived. He is looking forward to working less and spending time with the family. His daughter is going to school already and is making friends. It is amazing how quickly the children settle down.

Those who are young enough to go to school find it the easiest to adjust. They quickly make friends and speak English with an Australian accent. It makes it much easier to find work.

Family Groups.

We have broadened our criteria to assist family visas. This would normally be spouses or children. We assist a number of orphans who are adopted by family members here in Australia. The applicant would need to be a recently arrived refugee. They are referred by Migrant Resource Centres, Members of Parliament, community groups and friends we have helped. They really struggle as they have to pay for the visa application. It is currently \$1,705. They may also have to undergo DNA tests to prove family connection. This is also expensive. We have lent the money for DNA tests as well. It is a small part of the loan scheme. They will also have to pay the airfares and when the family arrives they don't qualify for Centrelink payments for two years. It makes it very difficult for families. We have a family of eight orphans coming this week. They will get some support from child benefits but it will be very hard for the family to support them. The extended family will all be involved. I can understand why you wouldn't allow newly arrived immigrants to receive welfare but feel there should be an exemption for orphans. The sponsors are incredibly generous in raising the children. This week will be a wonderful airport arrival. The winter cold will be off set by the warmth of the family love.

ALIE and Katimu

Alie came to Australia in 2006 to compete in the Commonwealth Games. He applied for a protection visa which was granted. He competed as a boxer in the 51 kg division. He made the weight as he was malnourished.

He has since put on 30 kgs which looks very good on him.

Last month he welcomed his wife Katimu at Sydney airport. It was a very emotional meeting. Katimu was very surprised at how big he was! Alie had been working six days a week and 12 hours a day. He has cut back to only 5 days now. He has completed a certificate 2 course and is now working towards the certificate 3. Katimu is studying English and will then start the Assistant in Nursing course so she can work in a nursing home. They are so happy and grateful for the opportunities that have been given to them.

Kanga Schools Project

The Kanga School Project is really going well. They have supplied 37 schools with books and computers. It is helping almost 40,000 school children with access to books. It has built 13 school libraries as well. Books have also been sent to the public libraries. They have sent sewing machines, set up a school science laboratory, as well as supplying generators to 28 schools to power the computers. It has had a huge impact on Sierra Leone. It is an inspirational group that is trying to make life easier for the children of Sierra Leone. It is amazing what can be achieved by a small number of very dedicated and generous people.

The Northern Beaches Refugee Sanctuary has only been a modest contributor this year as we have really struggled to help everyone who has asked us for help with travel costs. We hope in the next year we will be able to assist more actively.

Membership Dues.

Membership fees are now due. It is \$50 per year for Associate Membership. Your support is greatly appreciated and needed. Donations are tax deductible.

The next year looks like it will continue with lots of requests. We normally see a lot of visas granted in June and July so we are looking forward to welcoming many new families in the next couple of months.

We have lent over \$3.2 million since we started and have had more than \$2.4 million repaid. We have \$16,000 in defaulted loans which is remarkably few. We will continue to work with the families to keep the failure rate so low. The only other cost we have is the Centrelink payment fees. We pay a fee for each repayment we receive from Centrelink.

Thank you to all those who have supported us with donations this year.

David Addington

Chairman.

07/06/10