

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 2011 Newsletter

We have now paid 2605 airfares since we started including 127 in the last six months. We have helped people from 34 different countries. There are less refugees coming from Africa and more from the Middle East. We have made contact with a number of different community groups and Migrant Resource Centres. We are also working with Salvation Army Legal which has an amazing legal service for those in need including refugees.

It is amazing how people hear of our group. They are all so relieved to know that they can borrow the money for the airfares. We often get people asking if funds will be available in the future as they don't want to sponsor their family until they know they will be able to fund the travel. It is very rewarding to be able to offer support.

Most of the families we help are reuniting with family here. We have extended our help to spousal visas if the sponsor is a newly arrived refugee. They have often been apart for a long time and are so excited when the visa is issued. Comments like I won't be able to sleep until they arrive are common. It is wonderful to share in the joy of families being reunited.

We were able to assist everyone who applied for a loan this year. We received very generous support from our donors. Thank you very much to everyone who helped.

Melisa

The first family we helped was a family of 5 from Sierra Leone. They arrived in June 2003. The youngest member of the family was a beautiful 8 year old girl, Melisa. She didn't speak English but had an incredible smile. She was shy to start with and always cold. We bought her a pink, warm fleecy jacket and for the winter. She seldom took it off. She was often huddled over the heater. She started school and quickly learnt English. She was a good student. She was a delightful and happy girl. I never saw her without a smile. Everyone loved her.

We took her to the beach swimming for the first time. She loved the beach and was fearless. One of my lasting memories of her will be jumping through the waves at Freshwater beach with the biggest smile.

Her family had suffered terrible tragedy in Sierra Leone but Australia offered peace security and happiness. She loved her music and dancing.

Melisa had lupus which was well managed. She didn't appear to be sick. Sadly she went to bed on April 19 this year, and she didn't wake in the morning. Everyone was devastated. The funeral was huge and overflowing with grief. It was just so sad. She was only 16. May she rest in peace.

Beatrice's family

One of the requirements for a visa is that the refugees pass a medical. We have assisted Beatrice before with other family members including her mother. She has been sponsoring her sister and her family. One of the children, Edward, failed the medical as he had a heart valve problem. It is normally a routine operation to fix. If a medical is failed the whole family is failed. You have an opportunity to request a medical waiver.

We did so in this case and the waiver was progressing. Sadly Edward died while we were waiting for the waiver to be approved. We then needed to prove that he had died before the visa could progress. The visa has now been approved and we are hoping that they will be arriving soon. Sadly it is one of the tragedies that happen all too often to refugees.

Boat arrivals.

Much has been said about asylum seekers arriving by boat. There is a near hysterical debate about the evils of people smugglers and the terrible danger of coming by boat. It is of course terribly dangerous coming by boat as the recent tragedy proved. This suggests that refugee camps are safe. They are not. They are awful places. There is lack of food, clean water and medicine. They are violent and unsafe. The children don't get much if any education. You can live there for decades. Life expectancy is about half that enjoyed in Australia.

Australia allows refugees to seek asylum here. We were integral in the writing of the 1951 UN convention on refugees. Our proud history has been tarnished in the last few years. It is difficult to understand how a country that accepted millions of refugees since the war is now so terrified by a small number coming each year by boat. We have seen evidence of horrible cruelty to cattle in Indonesia this week. It has led to the call for the ban on live cattle exports. Why don't we see the same outrage at the plight of refugees? Where is the compassion for people who are in real need of help?

I meet lots of refugees. Some have come by boat, some by plane, most with visas and some without visas. They are all human and in need of sanctuary. It is a shame that we only see sound bites and slogans and not the suffering people.

We have nearly the best standard of living in the world. I can't understand why we can't share it with more refugees. Australia has been incredibly enriched by the refugees who have made Australia home.

Suleiman

We have been assisting a man with an application for his family for the last 4 years. It has been a very difficult process for lots of reasons. The Department of Immigration has been very helpful but there are legal requirements that need to be met. Each time we looked like it was resolved we had additional problems. At the last minute it looked

like there was a problem with the flight. However this week his family arrived to tears and joy.

Kanga Schools

In March, three containers of books, computers, furniture and solar lanterns left for Sierra Leone – and these are now being distributed to almost 50 schools. The growth in this program has been amazing.

One of our supporters visited Sierra Leone in May, and while there was able to meet government authorities and also the vice-president. In fact, the visit even rated an interview on Sierra Leone television.

One of the schools, a high school in the north, has written a letter saying that Kanga Schools has “taken my school from nowhere to somewhere, from grass to grace...” This same school says in less than three years, the pupil enrolment has increased from 450 to 1500, and they are now seeking help from Kanga Schools to build a library. This school has also provided focus on helping disabled children and education of girls. Kanga Schools is very proud of this remarkable achievement by just one of the schools.

In March, a volunteer travelled to Sierra Leone and spent 4 weeks assisting a Kanga School member in auditing the resources and impact on the schools. He has returned full of enthusiasm for this program, and has had this to say:

Upon visiting more than half of the Kanga sponsored schools in Sierra Leone during April this year, it was obvious that a significant difference is being achieved. Most importantly, this change was being experienced not just by the schools but families and entire communities, with an undeniable and positive benefit for the long term.

Arriving to the remotely located Rokothrr village, it was immediately clear that distance certainly has not fazed the enthusiasm and appreciation of the village residents for the assistance of the Kanga Schools. Even before the canoe had touched shore, the riverbank was covered with people singing and waving in joyous celebration. Progress is being made in leaps and bounds in Rokothrr. The library, built with funding from Kanga Schools, is now virtually complete and books had been safely stowed in preparation for display on the shelves.

However, it has been the newly refurbished water well which has made the most immediate impression on the village. Prior to the involvement of Kanga Schools, the well produced only small amounts of clean water each day. The rest was tainted with Cholera and otherwise unsafe to drink leading to unrest and conflict. Everybody in the village now knows how big a change the repair of the water well has made. The appreciation towards Kanga Schools for its repair will not be forgotten. With the well producing clean water and the library nearing completion, the outlook for Rokothrr village has been fundamentally transformed well into the long term.

The next shipment for Kanga Schools will leave at the end of September, and included in this will be 500 soccer balls purchased specifically for the schools. We are hoping for donations of soccer boots to include as well.

Thank you to all who have made donations in the last six months. Your support is wonderful.

We would love your continued support of the Kanga School project and all new donations will be used to support it. The project has been very successful and has had a big impact in Sierra Leone. We hope to continue and expand the work.

Hazara Community.

We are seeing an increase in requests for help from the Hazara community. They are a heavily repressed minority in Afghanistan. Most of the Afghan refugees in Australia are Hazara. We recently attended a Hazara function where the runner up in Afghan Idol was performing. He was fantastic. It was a wonderful night and we were made most welcome by the large crowd. A lot of people came up to ask if we could assist them when their family was granted a visa. There will be an increase in the number of refugees coming from Afghanistan and we will be able to help them.

We also attended the launch of the Hazara Woman's Group and a celebration of Mother's Day. It was an impressive night with lots of Members of Parliament both State and Federal. The committee members were very impressive and the whole community will be well served by their group. In Afghanistan women are denied education and a voice, perhaps that is why the country is such a mess. We look forward to working closely with their community and welcoming the new arrivals.

The next six months look to be a busier one. We expect to see more people asking for assistance. There has been a delay in visas been issued while waiting for security clearances. The visas should start to be issued soon.

We will continue to support the Kanga School project with new donations. We are very happy with the impact in Sierra Leone. It is remarkable what can be achieved by hard work and dedication. We paid for two of the containers that were sent this year. We will pay for the next two that are sent.

Thank you for all those who have made donations or renewed their Associate Membership. We will use donations to continue the support of Kanga.

David Addington
Chairman.
03/06/11