

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY FRESHWATER CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

6 Raglan St, Manly, NSW, 2095

Website: www.nbrs.org.au

Email address: nbrs@optusnet.com.au

Patrons: Bishop David Walker

Tom Keneally

Des Hasler

Welcome to the NBRS Winter 2014 Newsletter

We have seen an increase in the number of refugees asking us for assistance in the last three months. We helped 475 in the last year making a total of 3,643 people we have helped. They have come from 44 countries. We are seeing more people from South East Asia and the Middle East and less from Africa.

We are still self-funding and are not looking for donations. Loan repayments continue successfully but we did have to write off a number of loans this year. Loan defaults are still below 1% of loans made.

The last six months have seen a dramatic toughen up of Australian refugee policy. There have been no boats arriving with asylum seekers. All those who are in detention are still waiting for their applications to be resolved, and there is no assurance of how long this will take. There is great suffering and sadly many are suffering from mental health problems. What is deeply concerning is that there are nearly 1,000 children in locked detention camps. We know that it causes significant mental health problems.

The justification is that we have stopped the boats, which makes it safer for refugees. This of course implies that they were safe in the places they left from. They weren't safe. Given that over 90% of asylum seekers are found to be refugees, it means that they were facing real danger. Clearly the reason they left their homeland was to escape danger so our refusal to assist makes it more dangerous not less.

We have recently deported asylum seekers to Sri Lanka before their claims to refugee status were examined. A decision that is truly appalling. To see our Government hand over asylum seekers to a Government that has a terrible record for human rights abuses is a new low in our Immigration policy.

We are now giving the Sri Lankan Government two patrol boats to help them stop refugees seeking safety.

Refugee issues aren't easy. There are now over 50 million refugees and displaced persons in the world; the highest number since World War 2. At the same time the world is only giving visas to about 70,000 refugees living in refugee camps. It is hardly surprising that so many are seeking asylum. Australia has reduced its allocation for refugees this year. We will accept 13,750 down from 20,000.

We are still receiving a lot of applications for airfare loans. These are people who do not have the funds to pay for the airfare of those they have sponsored, and are very anxious that they should be able to use the visa before it expires. They have no way

of being able to raise the airfare money themselves. When they call, they are so grateful that we can help, and when we agree to help there is a huge relief in the voice. On arrival, those sponsored are then able to make the repayment of their airfares - and 99% of them do this faithfully.

With new arrivals, many of the applications are up to 4 years old, some are even 6 years old. This is because there have been so many on shore arrivals which have taken up the available visas and there has been such a backlog for humanitarian visas to be granted. With some of the cases, the visas are for families and orphan children. When making application for the visas, the sponsors are finding the application fees now so high that it is not possible for them to also raise funds for the airfares, so assistance is required even more to help them.

Many of the sponsored families are now settling in other states - living near their sponsors in Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne, Brisbane and some rural areas, as well as Sydney of course. It is fantastic to see how well accepted and welcomed they are in these communities. We hear of many stories of refugees who have been assisted with airfares who have been studying, and are now qualified in various areas. A large number of them study nursing and other health sciences and work in our hospitals and communities. Many of the new arrivals are working with the aged and disabled where they provide much needed compassionate care. Some have graduated as lawyers, some as doctors... some as engineers. It is exciting to see how these people, who have struggled with so much in their past, have focused on studying for higher qualifications and are now a valuable asset to the Australian community.

A happy ever after story...

In May this year, a family of 9 arrived from the Congo, and they had been waiting over two years for their application to be processed. The sponsor and his wife had a sister in the group, and they had not seen her for 10 years and had never met the sister's husband or children. However, the sponsor himself had a story to tell. He and his wife had two children, now aged in their mid teens, and they had become separated during the conflict in the Congo. They had no hope of finding each other, thinking they had died. And then, some years later, they re-discovered each other on Facebook!! She had ended up in London, he in Australia. So now, they are all living happily in Australia, and have a third child added to their family. They are working hard, and the husband is also studying at university!

David Addington
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