

# NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY FRESHWATER CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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## Welcome to the NBRs Summer 2016 Newsletter

It has been a busy last six months. We helped 365 people to come to Australia of which 230 came from Syria. This brings the total helped to 4829. We are delighted that the Syrian visas are starting to be issued. The last report we had was that about 4,000 had already arrived. They are so grateful to have been granted visas and are excited to be here.

Many of the families we have helped have sponsored a number of families. We have helped Karlos bring six families totaling 31 people. He is still waiting for others to be granted their visa. He wouldn't have been able to raise the \$35,000 needed for fares. Each time he has called he is so excited that the next family has got the visa. He is very happy we could help but I think he finds it hard to understand why we help without any charges or interest.

Clearly Syria is a disaster. It is so painful to watch the TV footage of the destruction. I don't ask people their stories but many talk about the sadness of their homeland; the bewilderment at what has happened and is continuing to happen. One of the people we helped said that there are more than 12 countries fighting over their bones. There seems little concern for the people caught up in it all. Once again we are witnessing a terrible war destroying lives and killing thousands. We don't learn much from history.

I recently met with a group of families that we helped. They were also from Syria. We assisted three families; six adults and 10 children. The children ranged from 2 to about 8 years old. The first family arrived about one year ago and they have sponsored another family. What a delightful family group. On a warm Summers day I went to Bankstown to meet them all. The sponsor has been in Australia for nearly 20 years and acted as interpreter. The newly arrived have started English lessons and were making progress. One of the families live in a 3 bedroom flat which they love. The children were so happy. They are learning English and sang twinkle twinkle little star to me as well as bar bar black sheep; such gorgeous children and so polite.

After a couple of hours I was about to leave when they insisted that we have some food together. The women had made dinner which was delicious. It was such an enjoyable time. The families were all so keen to develop skills for work. They loved how safe and quiet Sydney was. Everyone had been so friendly to them. The family that arrived first had bought a car. They had never had a car before. I asked the children how they were enjoying school and they were all laughing and said how much they were enjoying life. The sponsor said that in Deraa, the town the families had come from, some school children wrote on the blackboard "Down with Al-Asaad". The Government arrested 15 children who were tortured. When the parents and others protested the army opened fire on them killing 4 of the children. The army then open fired on the funeral killing another person. That was the start of the civil war. The families fled, some to Lebanon and others to Jordan. The family who went to

Jordan had two children while they were there. When the Australian visa was granted the Jordanian Government charged them \$2,000 each to grant the boys an exit permit as they are considered Jordanian! I doubt that they would qualify for the benefits that Jordanians enjoy.

Sadly two of the people we had helped have died in the last six months. Tina who we helped in 2006 was a teacher and was studying for her PHD in education when she died after a short illness. Andrew, who we helped bring his wife, was unwell for a while and sadly didn't recover. His wife is being assisted by the Sierra Leonean community.

We have helped a number of children travel unaccompanied by an adult. How brave they must be. They wouldn't have flown before and language is difficult. One case was a 5 year old coming from Afghanistan. The mother had to leave her as an infant and has been trying to get approval from the child's father to bring her to Australia. It was finally given. She then needed to apply for a visa which was successful. She couldn't travel to Afghanistan as it wasn't safe for her. The International Organization for Migration arranged the travel with assistance for each transit stop. Sadly the boy got sick with a fever in Dubai and the medical advice was to keep him in Dubai until he was fit to fly. He flew on the next day to a happy reunion with his mother. It was very scary for all involved until he was cleared to fly the last leg to Brisbane.

We received the following email from a family we helped.

Hi David,

We would like to thank your organisation again for helping us in our time of need. Our family is here safe with us now and we owe that in part to your help.

My father drives kids with disabilities to and from school every weekday as a part time job. My brother works with the NBN and is helping in rolling out National Broadband to the Australian public.

My sister is still in high school and will soon be a productive part of Australian society. I have gone on to make a career with Harvey Norman corporate for the last couple of years and I am currently helping in Coordinating their fleet of hundreds of vehicles. We are lucky to have managed to finish our migration process before the tougher laws were introduced, and would like to think that we are contributing to Australian society as it is our home now.

The migration stance of the Australian Government and the international climate right now is very displeasing and we hope it tilts back to a more tolerant and loving side sooner rather than later, and prevents the destruction of more lives and families than it already has. My community (The Hazaras) has been affected in particular along with all the other communities in need, and I know people who are living here in fear for their families lives overseas. If anyone needs the sort of help your organisation provides I will definitely point them in your direction so they can get in contact.

Once again, we cannot thank you enough for all the good work your organisation is doing and best of luck for the future.

I wish you all a Happy Christmas.

David Addington