

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE GROUP

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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Welcome to the Christmas 2005 Newsletter.

We have had a very busy time in the last six months. We have paid our 460th airfare and we have a lot of people waiting for visas who will apply for loans.

There are many families who we have already helped now getting visas for their family members. There were interviews in Guinea at the end of October and it looks like a large number of visas will result. There will be at least 150 people looking for help. It will prove a challenge raising the airfares for all the people but we live in hope.

We have a couple of large groups being processed including one family group of 21. They are the children and grandchildren of Finda and Lamin. We assisted Lamin last December and now he and Finda will be joined by the rest of the family.

When we met Lamin at the airport, his wife Finda, who hadn't seen him in three years, was shocked at how he had wasted away. She told us that she would fatten him up. She has been very successful!!!

They are so looking forward to being reunited with the rest of the family. It will cost about \$40,000 for the airfares. They have no way of raising that sort of money but how do you choose which child or grandchild to leave off the application. Families are asked all the time to decide who they will help.

We have a number of orphans we have helped. A group of eight arrived last month. They will be living with different family members. Two will come to Sydney and stay with their uncle and aunt.

Peter Jusu

We were deeply saddened by the death of Peter Jusu, who was part of the second family we helped.

Peter arrived with his wife and three children on 15/10/03. They were blessed with a baby girl on 1/10/04. At the beginning of October Peter was complaining of lack of appetite and weight loss. He had a blood test and then a CAT scan. He had cancer of the liver. He died within three weeks. He faced the illness with the courage that he showed all his life. The day before he died he became an Australian citizen. The Immigration department agreed to visit him at home and this allowed him to die as a citizen. He was very happy as becoming an Australian was very important to him. He died in his sleep on 28/10/05. He had just turned 39.

Peter had sponsored his sister, brother, two nephews and a niece and they were granted a visa just before he died. He was very happy to know that they were able to escape the refugee camp. They arrived in time for the funeral.

Peter was loved in his community and at work. He was very bright and hard working, a committed family man. He will be sorely missed. May he rest in peace.

Out of Africa Gala Night

We had an Out Of Africa Gala night which raised nearly \$50,000 and more importantly helped 40 people with their airfares. The committee worked very hard at putting on a terrific celebration with great food, good company, lots of dancing and African drumming. Kerry O'Brien was the M.C. He did a great job and we thank him for his support. There were over 235 people there. Everyone said how much they enjoyed the night. The auctions were very well supported. A big thank you to all those who came and supported us.

We are really grateful to the committee for all their hard work.

Loan schemes

The IOM loan scheme is now in place and we are often assisting with only part of the loan. It has allowed us to help many more people. To qualify for an IOM loan you have to have a health care card. We have suggested that they ease this restriction as it makes it very hard for many families to qualify.

We are hopeful that it will change which will allow us to help a larger number of people next year.

There were 500 people who missed coming to Australia in the last year. That is down from 1000 in the year before. We hope this year it falls again. There are a number of other groups running loan schemes. It will be wonderful when all those who are offered visas are able to use them. The signs are very positive.

We have had a lot of people asking for help whose visas were about to expire. So far we have been able to help them all or direct them to other groups. No one who has applied to us has missed out on coming here. IOM, who arrange the travel, have done a great job in getting people here quickly.

Family stories

It is hard to explain the joy that the families experience when they welcome the new arrivals. One of the latest arrivals was a family of seven. They were the sponsor's brother and sister in law as well as four nephews and nieces who were orphaned in the war. The sponsor has adopted the children. He hadn't seen his brother in 15 years.

When I spoke to him on the morning of their arrival he told me that he loved me and would love me forever. I told him that it wasn't me but the donors who had made it possible for him.

When the family arrived at 10.30 pm he was overjoyed. He picked up his brother and danced down the exit ramp. They clasped hands and jumped up and down overcome with joy. There were people crying and laughing. There were hugs all around and hand slapping and back slapping. Even the immigration officials had to wipe tears away!

The same night we reunited a husband with his wife. They had been separated for over three years. The husband was overcome with emotion and threw himself on the floor at the airport sobbing with happiness. We were all teary-eyed and laughing with joy. Joy is such a wonderful emotion; there is always plenty to share.

Aldo and Mary

Wrap in love give us a wrap for everyone we help. The refugees are very happy both to receive the wraps and know that someone cares enough to think of them. We normally welcome the new families at the airport with the wraps. We want the families to know that not only their family welcome them but we also are delighted that they are coming to Australia. We weren't able to meet Aldo and Mary and their seven children, two who are adopted, at the airport. We delivered the wraps a week later. Aldo said that we would need to join him in a prayer of thanks. It went something like this. "Dear Lord, You know we were cold and we thank you for inspiring those who made the wraps and sending them to us. We also thank you for the Sanctuary Group. You knew we had no resources in the refugee camp and no likelihood of coming to Australia; we thank you for sending them to help us."

It was very moving.

They were staying in a one bedroom flat while looking for a house. I suggested that it was a little crowded but Aldo said "It is much better than the refugee camp." They are now in a house and very happy to be here in safety. The children are going to school and Mary is going to a play group with the youngest. Aldo left Sudan in 1987 and spent 18 years as a refugee. Now they have a chance to put down roots.

Baby boom.

Many of the families we have helped are having Australian children. We often reunite husbands and wives. We are trying to reverse the falling birth rate! So far we are doing a good job!

It is not only the families that we help that benefit but the children will grow up safe and well fed. Many people have told me that one of the great things about Australia is no soldiers on the street and no gunfire. It seems a reasonable desire to raise your children without fear. The mothers also enjoy having children in Australia as almost no one dies in child birth here. Sadly in Sierra Leone childbirth is still very dangerous. One of the families we are helping with their application lost a young woman in childbirth and another died waiting for the visa to be issued. Escaping these dangers makes Australia seem like paradise.

Tejan and Massoh

We assisted Massoh in September 2004. They had been separated for nearly three years. Tejan's uncle had sponsored him as well as Tejan's brother and cousins. The expectation was that Tejan would sponsor Massoh. It took him almost three years to get her a visa.

When they escaped from Sierra Leone in 1999 they fled with eight children. They were the children of his brothers, who had been killed in the sacking of Freetown. The youngest was only four months. Tejan had one child strapped to his front and one on his back. Massoh carried another two.

When Tejan sponsored Massoh he was supporting the children in the refugee camp. It made saving money very difficult. We were able to help with the airfare and he felt confident enough that he could borrow the airfare to apply for the children. They have

been for the medicals and are now awaiting the visas. It will be a very special day when they arrive.

Conakry

One of the consistent messages we get from those who have just arrived is how difficult life is in Guinea. They complain about harassment at the hands of police and army. They are arrested and fined. They are mistreated by the authorities. There is not enough food or availability of medicine. Sadly many young people die. We often support sponsors with the immigration process. We have had a number of people die who were waiting for a visa to be issued.

Fatmata, who was in the first family we helped, has three adopted nieces in Conakry. She finally got a date for their interviews and called them to let her three orphaned nieces know the date. Happiness turned to sorrow when the family caring for them, told her that they were trying to contact her to let her know that Isatu 17, had died two days ago. She was so sad as Isatu was almost here. We are now waiting for the two younger girls. It is a slow process getting the visas. Last year there were 86,000 people applying for 7,000 positions.

The political situation in West Africa is difficult. Ivory Coast is a divided country. It is almost a failed state. Violence is contagious. Guinea has an aging leader with a power vacuum likely when he dies. Liberia looks like it may find some peace with the first elected woman president in Africa. The peace keepers in Sierra Leone are expecting to pullout at the end of the year. Many people are very worried that the troubles will resurface. Conflict in one country all too quickly flows over borders. Let's hope that peace will find a home in West Africa this Christmas.

I would like to thank all those new people who have helped the group this year and those who have renewed their membership. We have a number of parishes and schools who have had fundraisers. The Diocese of Broken Bay also supported us. We have had people give associate membership as Christmas and birthday presents. To everyone who made a contribution our deepest thanks. There are people who live in safety because of your generosity. I am always asked to pass on the thanks of those we have helped, so please know that there are a great number of people who are very grateful. They all say they remember you in their prayers.

I wish you a merry Christmas. May 2006 bring you peace and joy.

David Addington
Chairman.