

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 NBRS Winter 2006 Newsletter

Each time I start the newsletter I look back over the last six months and am amazed at how much has happened. We have just paid our 691st airfare. We started the loan scheme in March 2003 and in the first 3 months we helped one family of 5. In the next financial year we assisted 54 people. The next year we assisted 185 people and this year so far we have helped 447 people. There are still many people looking for help.

Hello Goodbye

In the last newsletter I told Tejan and Massoh's story. They have adopted 8 nephews and nieces. Their children have arrived so they are now a family of 10! The children are settling in well and are attending school. Tejan told them the day they arrived that if you look at the stars in the sky that was the heights you could achieve if you got an education. Needless to say homework is faithfully done each day!

Hello Goodbye is a new television program on Channel 9 that screens at 9pm. The show films people arriving and departing from airports. They filmed the arrival of Tejan and Massoh's children. We expect it to be shown on June 8th. It will give you an idea of what it is like to reunite families. It was a very emotional night. They now have many problems to face. Life in Australia is much better than life in Africa but you still miss your friends. Children don't see the benefits as easily as adults, they just miss their mates. The children speak Krio and French so are now on a crash course in English. Their skills have improved quickly. They are playing soccer which is a great way to make new friends.

Andrew and Kadi

Andrew and Kadi married recently. It was a special occasion. Andrew and Kadi met at high school. They were 11 and 12. They quickly became friends. Andrew visited Kadi at home but had to avoid her big brothers beating him up!! He became good friends with her younger brother which helped!

Andrew and Kadi's friendship blossomed until 1995 when they were 16 and 15. Kadi's family was granted visas to live in America. Kadi and Andrew knew that they had to be together. They wrote to each and Kadi called Andrew on the phone. Sometimes she called him at school; luckily Andrew's mother worked in the school office and would send for Andrew so he could talk to Kadi. As the war destroyed the infrastructure in Sierra Leone communications became more difficult. They weren't able to write or speak to each other for a whole year. In January 1999 Andrew was captured by the rebel army. He was convinced he would be killed as many other

prisoners were. For the first week he prayed that God would comfort Kadi when he was killed. The second week he decided that it might be better if he asked God to save him! His prayers were answered and he escaped after 3 terrifying weeks. He managed to call Kadi and said "If you want to see me with two arms and two legs again you have to help me get to Conakry". He was referring to the rebel's barbaric practice of amputating people's arms or legs. Kadi managed to send him some money via Western Union and he escaped to Conakry. Andrew literally went hungry so that he could buy phone cards to call her. He waited for 7 years until his uncle Peter managed to get him a visa for Australia in November 2005. Sadly Andrew arrived a week after his uncle died from cancer.

Kadi came to Australia to visit Andrew in February 2006. They hadn't seen each other for 11 years. They got engaged and Kadi paid for him to go to Gambia to successfully ask her family's permission to marry. When Kadi visited last week Andrew greeted her with the news that they were to marry before she returned home to the USA in a week. It was a wonderful celebration and a privilege to be present.

They will have a long distance relationship until Kadi has finished her medical degree in three years. Andrew will visit her when he gets his passport in 18 months. Kadi said that it is wonderful to be loved by someone so completely. I am sure they will have a long and happy life.

It is very hard to understand the wide reaching effects of war, not just in terms of people killed or wounded but also the terrible disruption in people's lives.

Fundraising efforts

St. Brigid's Social Justice Group in Coogee had a Trivia night in March to raise money for NBRS. They had about 300 people attend and raised over \$15,000. The money was used to assist a family of 14 from Sierra Leone. The family had some of the airfare saved and qualified for a loan from IOM but still needed assistance. It was a terrific night. Unfortunately the table from NBRS performed poorly! The sponsor attended the night and thanked the group for their help. She told us that when she told the family that she had raised the airfare and they were coming to Australia, they said "We can now sleep at night as we are going to heaven". Some of the organizing committee members came to the airport to meet the family they had assisted. We had 33 people arriving on the same flight. It was a busy time! In fact, like many airport visits it was chaos!

The hard work of the Social Justice committee from St Brigid's and the support of all those who came to the trivia night gave 14 people a chance to start a new life here in Australia. To all those who helped a deep heartfelt thank you.

St. Gerard's Primary School Carlingford, heard about NBRS and wanted to help. They had an Easter egg raffle to raise money to help a family. They collected a huge number of eggs. They raised \$2,400 which is a terrific effort. The money was used to help two adults and an infant come from Sierra Leone. Members of the School's Social Justice Group, who organized the raffle, came to the airport to welcome the family. It took a long time for the family to come through but the children were very patient. The family will visit the school to say thank-you. It is very heartening to see the children take the idea "love your neighbour as yourself" so seriously.

Sierra Leone Athletes

We were approached by members of the Sierra Leone community to see if we could assist six members of the Sierra Leone Commonwealth Games team who had left the village in Melbourne and traveled to Sydney to seek asylum. We were asked if we could house them and assist them with the Immigration process. Rosemary and David Ashton opened their home and had the six to stay. The Sierra Leone Government withdrew their accreditation for the games and so their visas were revoked. We contacted the police to let them know that we were going to take the athletes to the Immigration Dept. The police were required to collect them and so we ended up at Manly Police Station. The Immigration Dept. came and collected them taking them to the main office in the city. The press was informed and there was lots of interest. They were given bridging visas to allow them time to file for permanent protection visas. The second six athletes saw the press coverage and made contact asking us to help them with the Immigration process. We met them and escorted them to Immigration and they were also granted bridging visas. The last two saw the coverage on TV in Melbourne and caught the train to Sydney to see if they could go to the "Refugee Camp". They arrived late at night and were walking around Central Station, not the best part of Sydney, when an African man returning from work saw them and offered to help. He made contact with us and we arranged to pick them up. They also reported to Immigration and were granted bridging visas.

They are now going through the process of interviews and medicals. Their visas allowed them to work. We are assisting them with finding work. Eight are living in Manly; seven are working and Isha (17) is at school. Some are in part time work but they are building up their hours.

We are expecting another three to come to Manly next week.

They are lovely young people who are very frightened about the prospect of returning to Sierra Leone. Their cases are very strong so we are optimistic of their chances. It is out of our hands now.

NBRS is helping with settlement issues and finding them accommodation, jobs etc. We are not able to use NBRS funds for anything other than travel costs. We decided to have a dance night to support them. It was largely organized by David Barr's office. We thank them for all the work. It was a great night. The athletes are amazing dancers and entertained us all with their moves. The money raised will be used to support them until they have work and also for a bond on the flats.

Special Humanitarian Visas

Almost all the people we assist travel on Special Humanitarian Visas (SHV). There is huge demand for the 7,000 allocated. This year there will be more than 12 applications for each visa granted. There are lots of people who miss out. We have seen a noticeable increase in the number of people coming from Sierra Leone. I think that a lot of the families have taken the chance to sponsor family in Africa because they see a chance to borrow the money from us. It is wonderful to see the families coming. Some of the visas only have a very short time before expiry. They may have been delayed by the need to get a DNA test or some problem with the medical. IOM in Canberra, who arrange the travel, have been very helpful in getting urgent cases through but sadly not everyone is able to travel before the visa expires.

Sierra Leone Journalists

We were approached by the Association of Sierra Leone Journalists in Exile to help them bring some of their colleagues to Australia. We agreed and are now in the process of sponsoring 11 journalists and their families. It will be about 55 people. Sierra Leone was the most dangerous place in the world for journalists in 1999. They have been waiting for help for the last 7 years. Recently a journalist in Sierra Leone was beaten to death by a group including a Member of Parliament. The coroner found that he had died as a result of that beating. However there were no charges laid. It is not a good idea to upset those in power in much of Africa. If there is no free press then the world doesn't get to hear about the terrible things that Governments do. It is the reporting that brings pressure to bear and helps bring aid or peacekeepers. Those who are brave enough to risk their lives to bring the news sometimes need sanctuary.

It will not be a quick process. We have been offered help by the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance for which we are very grateful.

Bishop David Walker

We welcome Bishop David Walker as a patron of the group. Bishop David is the Catholic Bishop of Broken Bay Diocese. We are very grateful for his patronage

Year End

We are approaching our financial year end. It has been a busy and very successful year. We should have assisted about 500 people this year. We have assets of almost \$400,000 which is fully loaned. We have 5 families waiting for us to pay the travel costs. We have approx 200 loans with only one family stopping the payments. We are working with them to start repaying again.

We have made new loans of \$395,000 and had repayment of \$240,000. We have received \$150,000 in new donations or through fundraising. Our expenses are still just bank transaction costs. We would expect them to be just over \$1,000 for the year.

The next year looks like a challenge as we are struggling to help all those who are currently applying for help. We will not have the funds to assist them all.

I would like to thank those who have given donations or renewed the associate membership. Your efforts have assisted a lot of people who now call Australia home.

If you have an email address please send it to me, at the above address as it is easier and cheaper to send the newsletter electronically.

David Addington

Chairman

1 June 2006