

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 2007 Newsletter

We have had a very good last six months. It has been a busy but rewarding time. We have had a constant arrival of people.

We have been able to assist 450 people this year which is about 20% of Special Humanitarian Visa holders coming to NSW.

Our first family arrived on 27/06/03 almost four years ago. We have now assisted 1,112 people with airfares. They have come from 14 countries and live in each State and Territory. The largest numbers of people we assist, are from Sierra Leone and Sudan although we have seen more requests from Liberians. We will help anyone with a refugee visa if we have the funds. We don't ask people their religion, tribe, political alliance or why they don't have the funds. If the Government has granted them a visa, they need a loan for the airfare and we have the funds then we help them.

Conakry, Guinea

Most of the Sierra Leoneans and Liberians we help come from refugee camps in Conakry. The situation in Conakry is very dangerous. The president is clinging to power. There is plenty of opposition to his rule. There were strikes there earlier in the year and over 100 people were shot in the streets. In hot climates, when you don't have fridges, you need to shop almost every day. You also need to collect water every day. When there are armed people in the street shooting people at random you can't leave home so you slowly starve. You then take the risk that you can get to the markets safely. Sadly the brother of one of our new arrivals was shot and killed while looking for water. Refugees are treated badly as they are seen as "illegals". They have no protectors. They can't return home as they fear they will be killed. The camps are dangerous, especially for women. Sadly, all too often we are told that a family member has died and they are usually under the age of 40.

Special Humanitarian Visas (SHV)

Most of the people we help have SHV's. They wouldn't have been granted this visa unless they proved they have been subject to "gross human rights abuses." They come bewildered and tired after a long trip; for most of them it's their first time on a plane. They are met by their family at the airport and the new life starts. We try and meet each flight where we are surrounded by the joy of reunion. Most meetings are full of laughter and happiness, some are very subdued. It is often our first point of contact with the sponsor and obviously the refugees. Sometimes the meetings are a little strained as the last 30 minutes of waiting seem to take forever. Then a family

arrives and joy breaks out. Tears are shed and family who have been separated for years are reunited.

We try to welcome everyone as we want them to know that not only their family wants them here but Australia also wants them here. Most of the refugees have never been welcomed anywhere. They are incredibly grateful to Australia for rescuing them.

The refugee camps are terrible places, dangerous, violent, no medical care, overcrowded, not enough food and in many places harassed by the locals who don't want refugees in their town.

Australia is like heaven; plenty of food and work, education for the children and safety. Medical treatment when you are sick and the chance to save money to support those you have left behind. Most of the newly arrived settle well. Education and work are the first priorities. It takes a while to adjust to the concept that three meals a day is expected and a reality for almost all Australians.

Recent arrivals

One of the arrivals last year was a woman in her late 50's. She looked 80. She had suffered terribly in both the civil war and also the refugee camp. Her visa application was delayed a number of times. She had been badly traumatized and by the time she arrived at the airport in Sydney she was mentally ill.

She required hospital treatment. Her family was very concerned about her. Her daughter had hoped that she would be able to look after the grandchildren so that she could return to work. Time, the love of her family as well as good medical care and the sense of feeling safe have healed her. We visited the family last week to be greeted with a big hug and smiles. She is about to start English lessons and will be able to look after the grandchildren. She will be safe and happy, something that was not possible in her homeland.

She is so grateful to those who made her trip to Australia possible.

Gwyneth Hughes

Gwyneth is a member of the NBRIS committee. She has spent many a Friday morning at the airport meeting families. She gives each of the children a teddy bear and each of the boys a soccer ball. She also gives each person a "Wrap with Love". She has plenty of laughs with the families. Gwyneth is one of those people who tells you she will do something and you don't need to check as you know it will be done well.

Sadly Gwyneth is very sick in hospital. We wish her a speedy recovery. Could you remember her in your prayers.

Family reunion.

We were recently at Sydney airport with a husband/father waiting to be reunited with his family. He hadn't seen them for nearly ten years. He had come to Australia on his way to a conference. There was a major problem at home and he applied for refugee status in Sydney. He was in detention for nearly 4 years before being granted a temporary protection visa. He had to wait until he was granted a permanent visa before he could apply for his wife and children. He contacted us about three years ago asking for assistance with the airfares if he was successful with the application. While we can't commit to a loan until the visa is granted we did tell him that we almost

certainly would be able to help. He kept in regular contact as one problem after another was resolved. There were health issues and the family had to move to a safer place as they were continually harassed. He worked hard to provide for them. It didn't leave him much money for himself.

The visa was finally issued and we paid the airfare. Five days later we were at the airport welcoming his wife and the children. The youngest was 12. He hadn't seen her since she was a baby. There was joy but also a great sense of what they had missed out on.

The younger ones are now in school and the older ones at TAFE. Hopefully some will qualify for University next year. It will be a difficult time for them all. Everyone has changed over the 10 years. However they are safe and away from a brutal civil war. They have the time and chance to rebuild their lives. They are very grateful for the opportunity.

Margaret's Girls.

Margaret wanted to bring her three girls since she first arrived in Australia. If you don't know how to apply then you rely on the advice of your friends. She got poor advice and so it took much longer than needed. She is a member of a church group who assisted her with the application. They have also repaid the loan for her.

There was great excitement as she counted down the days. They arrived one Wednesday morning at 8am. Margaret was supported by her church group; a wonderful group of people who have become her family. They offered emotional support while she waited through the difficult times. They were at the airport along with two other family groups to meet their families.

The girls arrived and were taken home for a feast. There were photos and then over to the church to meet with some of those who had been such a help in getting them here. A rich chocolate cake and gifts to welcome them were also waiting.

The younger two are at school and the older one is at TAFE and looking for a part time job to help with the living costs. Their English is rapidly improving and they are already shedding the haunted look that so many refugees have. It is amazing the effects of safety, good food and the love and support of friends and family have on a person.

Junisa's wife

We assisted with the airfare for Junisa when he came to Australia. Junisa had to leave his wife, son, brother and sister behind. His son was only six months old. It was very difficult to leave but it was the only hope they had of a safe life. His sponsor had a large extended family and all of them were looking to be sponsored. He could only afford to pay for 3 fares so he sponsored three family heads with the expectation that they would then sponsor their own families. Junisa arrived and was working very quickly. He sent money back to support his wife and son as well as his brother and sister. He sponsored them and almost exactly two years after he last saw them he was reunited with them at Sydney airport. Junisa swept his wife up in his arms to large cheers from his friends. He didn't want to put her down. There were tears and laughter as well as some ribbing by his friends. Junisa is rebuilding his life.

Applying for a Refugee Visa.

There are many more applications for visas than there are visas available. We were disappointed that the allocation for next year is staying the same at 13,000. This allocation is 6,000 for the Government sponsored Refugees (Visa category 200) and 7,000 for refugees sponsored by Australian residents (Visa category 202). Most of the 7,000 are used to reunite families. Australia will accept about 150,000 migrants next year.

It is very difficult to get a 202 visa, with less than 10% of applications being successful. One of the obligations you feel as a refugee, who has been granted a visa, is to see if you can help other family members left behind in the camps. Sadly very few are successful. We have lots of people asking us if we can help but there is not much that can be done. Hopefully there will be an increase in the allocation.

Sierra Leone Athletes

It is a year since the 14 athletes came to Sydney from the Commonwealth Games looking for help. They were all granted permanent protection visas. They are all getting on with their lives. One is at University, one at school. The others are working. Most of them lived in Manly for a year so we have become good friends. Some have now moved to other areas looking for cheaper rent or being closer to friends. Some have wives and children they are trying to sponsor and we have assisted them with that. We hope that they are successful and we will get to welcome them soon. It takes about a year for the sponsorship process. We will also assist them with the airfares.

Year End

We have lent over \$1.25 million and had over 0.75 million repaid since we started four years ago. We have had over 120 loans repaid, 75 in the last year. We have \$475,000 outstanding in loans. The only expenses we have are transaction charges on Centrepay repayments. This year it will be about \$2,500.

Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Manly covers our postage and photocopying costs for which we are very grateful.

To all those who have made donations in the last year or have renewed their membership a deep felt thank you. We wouldn't be able to assist so many people without your help.

The annual fee for associate membership is \$50. If you would like to renew your membership please make the cheque payable to Centacare a/c NBRS so that we can get you a tax receipt.

David Addington

Chairman.

01/06/07

P.S. If you received this by mail and have an email address please send it to me, at the above address as it is easier and cheaper to send the newsletter electronically.