

# **NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY**

A Project of the MANLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

6 Raglan St, Manly, NSW, 2095

Website: [www.northernbeachesrefugees.org](http://www.northernbeachesrefugees.org)

Email address: [nbrs@optusnet.com.au](mailto:nbrs@optusnet.com.au)

Patrons: Bishop David Walker

Tom Keneally

Des Hasler

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## ***Welcome to the NBRs Christmas 2007 Newsletter***

We have reached a milestone. When we started we wanted to build a fund that would become self-sustaining. We hoped that we would be able to raise enough money so that we would be able assist all those who needed help and that the repayments would then help the next families. Due to the wonderful support we have received from our donors, we have now reached that point. We don't need any more donations. It isn't an exact science and we might need more money in the future but at the moment we think we have enough. We have raised almost \$570,000 and the repayments are over \$30,000 per month. We have lent nearly \$1.5 million.

The money we have raised can only be used as loans for refugees to come to Australia.

It is impossible to thank you enough for your generosity. I can assure you that those we have helped are deeply grateful for your support. Someone told me that he was forced to borrow from a company to help his family as he didn't know about NBRs. He borrowed \$5,000 and repaid \$9,750 over 3 years, an interest rate of about 50%. The interest free loans we offer make life much easier for the new arrivals.

## **Sierra Leone Journalists.**

The three families that we were successful in sponsoring have been granted visas. There were a few small issues that needed to be resolved. Once that was done the letters arrived granting them visas. There are 16 people in total. They have been waiting for a long time to find a safe place. They all left Sierra Leone in 1999 and fled to Guinea. Journalists trying to let the world know about the abuses of the war and implication of Government officials in crimes against humanity is a very dangerous thing to do. You often pay with your life and sadly many journalists in Sierra Leone have made this ultimate sacrifice.

We are looking forward to welcoming the new arrivals in the New Year. We have been assisted by the International Federation of Journalists and we thank them for their support.

We are looking at filing again for the others who were rejected. The visa allocation for Africa has been fully used this year so we will review this next year. They have already been rejected once so it won't be easy to be successful a second time. We will try and gather more evidence for the applications.

## **Sierra Leone Athletes**

Some of their families are going for interviews in December. Most of them are spouses and children. We expect that the interviews and medicals will cause no problems. We could expect the families in the New Year. It will be a very exciting time for everyone. The athletes arrived 18 months ago. It is a long time to be apart from

your wife and children. There will be some very happy people when the families are reunited.

Sadly, all but one of the athletes have left the Manly area. The rents are just too high here. They have settled well and are all working. They have adapted very well.

Musa is competing in weightlifting. He is currently ranked second in Australia and hopes to win the National championships this December.

Lamin, Albert, Daddy Alie, Isha, Bangalie and Sandy are still running. It is not so easy to train as there are lots of distractions. They also have to work and it is hard to get to training.

All the athletes support family in Africa.

I thought you would be interested in the process of applying for a visa.

One of the athletes, Gibrilla, stayed with our family when he first arrived in Sydney. He has a wife and two children. He has also adopted two older boys whose families were killed in the war. He was very keen to sponsor them to join him. This process is reasonably easy as they apply under the split family provision. The burden of proof is easier. We filled in the forms which had lots of questions that we needed to check the answers to. eg. Where did your wife go to school and what years or the date of birth of all her siblings. It takes a number of phone calls.

We then lodged the forms and wait for a file number. The day this arrived was very exciting. They had passed the first hurdle. The next step was for Gibrilla to be interviewed by phone. The Immigration Dept has to verify that it is a real marriage. Gibrilla was having driving instructions with my brother Mark, when the phone call came. Gibrilla pulled over to take the call. He asked them to call back in 15 minutes and went straight home. He was too excited to drive. (A blessing for Mark!). The interview went well and the application went to the Immigration Dept in South Africa where these cases are handled. Gibrilla works as a builder and was at work when he received a call to say that his family was scheduled for an interview in early December. He was so excited that he ran to tell his boss who saw him running so quickly he thought that there must have been an accident on the site!! We now wait for the family to be interviewed and then have medicals.

When Gibrilla heard that the family was to be interviewed in December he told me that it was like a weight being lifted off his shoulders. It is a very common expression. The waiting and not knowing is very difficult on everyone. To be apart for nearly 2 years is not easy. The children change so much. We are nearly at the end of a long journey and Gibrilla won't be the only one at the airport with tears in his eyes!

p.s. Gibrilla has a car and is a wonderful driver. He has a full license and has given lessons to some of the others athletes. He is a great bloke who has much to offer Australia.

## **Assisting refugees.**

We have helped a number of refugees in Australia who have problems with visas or bringing family members. These cases sometimes have costs involved. We may from time to time seek donations for special cases. Currently we are helping a young man bring his brother as a carer. He has been badly disabled as a result of an accident. The carer visa is quite expensive to apply for and the carer and family don't qualify for Centrelink for two years. To qualify for a carer visa you have to provide an assurance of support (AOS). We have a pro bono lawyer filing the application and St. Brigid's Social Justice Committee in Coogee have raised the money for the application as well as the bond. They also have managed to provide an AOS. The AOS is a guarantee to reimburse Centrelink if the carer or family claim Centrelink benefits in the first two years they are here.

We hope the application progresses smoothly and that his family will be able to come and help him.

## **Family stories**

We have been working with a man who is trying to bring his sons to Australia. They have been granted a visa and we have agreed to pay the airfare. It should be very easy. Sadly the boys are now old enough for military service and with war looming; their Government doesn't want them to escape. The father arranged for them to be taken to the neighboring country, so we could arrange for a flight. He asked the UN to assist him. Sadly before the UN could intervene the local police caught the boys and deported them. The father tried a second time but they were turned back at the border. Each attempt costs money as there are "fees" to be paid. This process has taken a year and is still unresolved. The clouds of war are darkening so dad is very worried. The boys were under 14 when the process started. At 13 our children shouldn't be facing the prospect of conscription and fighting in a war.

We recently helped a woman and her daughter come to Australia. They were met at the airport by her son and daughter. The son was 10 and the daughter 16. They had been apart for 8 years. The mother was assumed killed in the war and her sister adopted the two children. They found the mother and father alive in a refugee camp. Sadly before the father could be granted a visa he died. The two "Aussie" children have been here for 8 years and are doing very well at school. The young boy is the Australian champion for 800 meters in his age group. They had never met their sister. The airport was particularly poignant as the 10 year old met his mother. A number of families all came out together and of course he didn't recognize her. He hadn't seen her since he was 2. His adopted mother pointed her out and tears were flowing all around. The sponsor (who adopted the children) is a wonderful man; a tireless worker for his community as well as raising his 6 children. He has sponsored over 60 people. We helped his mother come two years ago. She was 62 when she arrived and looked 80. She had the mannerisms of a very old person. She was also at the airport and the difference was incredible. You couldn't believe it was the same person. She had put on weight and looked 30 years younger. She is very tall and regal and was bouncing around the arrival hall. It is amazing the difference good food and safety can have in a very short time.

## **How well do Refugees Settle?**

Many people ask me how the refugees settle in Australia. The last minister of Immigration Kevin Andrews said that Sudanese refugees don't settle well and so the allocation for Africa has been reduced.

It was an outrageous statement. Factually wrong and based on no evidence. In fact the Victorian Police Commissioner said Sudanese were underrepresented in crime statistics. He was challenged by many people to justify this insult with evidence which he was unable to do. He never withdrew the statement or apologized for it.

The harm that he caused to many African Australians was huge. They were clearly deeply insulted. I have been asked many times by new arrivals "why don't Australians like Sudanese people?"

We have assisted over 500 Sudanese in their journey to Australia. The number of people who really struggle is small. My experience would be that the incidence of adjustment problems was much lower than the wider community. I am told that there are 200 Sudanese students at University in NSW. Given that the educational system doesn't work well in a war zone, and in refugee camps it is very difficult, I would say 200 is a remarkably high number. Many of those who arrive need to learn to speak English before they can get work or go to school. The Sudanese people I have met are like any community, diverse, but overall wonderful settlers in this country. They should be proud of their achievements.

I was at the airport recently to meet two Sudanese families. One was a young woman and her 2 ½ year old son, her husband was the sponsor. He had never met the son as his visa was granted when she was pregnant. There was great joy when she arrived. There was another family arriving with her and while we were all taking photos I asked the sponsor if he could email the best photo to me. I gave him a card with the email address and he gave me his. He has started a small cleaning business. I was hugely amused that he has "proudly Australian" on the card.

## **Books for Sierra Leone**

We are working with Sierra Unite and members of the Sierra Leone community who are collecting school text books and children's books in good condition. We are also collecting computers in working order. (They can be old but need to work.) We will send them to Sierra Leone. A 40 foot container has already been sent. Barbie Davis from NBRIS is assisting them with this project. If you would like to help you can contact me. My phone number is 02 99385082 or 0434029384.

One of the Sierra Leonean elders told me that at his primary school there was only one text book in the entire school. He worked hard and managed to go to University. He got a scholarship to Australia and completed a PHD in Education. It is amazing that one book had such an enormous impact on his life.

He has since helped build a library in his village and is one of the group working so hard at filling the next container.

From all the committee at NBRIS we wish you all a happy and peaceful Christmas and all the best for 2008.

David Addington

Chairman.

05/12/07

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.