

## Sanctuary Northern Rivers: Newsletter August 2008

Warming greetings to all our friends and supporters! There have been many energetic and inspiring moments in our efforts to work with refugees in re-building their lives with us here, and reshaping the way that we view our own lives through their presence with us.

### World Refugee Week

Refugee Week was again celebrated in a very special way this year (June 15 – 20).

- The United Voices Choir gave their inaugural performance at TAFE. The choir is a collection of student who were once refugees, as well as some of their classmates, combining to share three songs, depicting their courage and growing confidence in showing their skills in a very public way. Murray-Jo (Sierra Leone) also moved us with his pensive poetry, displaying the emotion and passion that his new life now brings.
- Skills were also on display in the soccer match – Lismore City Council staff against the 'African All-stars'. The final score was a little lopsided toward the latter, but the game was played vigorously, and in a spirit of goodwill. Word is that morning tea at the council Thursday morning was a comparison of bruises. . .
- World Refugee Day was celebrated on June 20, and again marked by Mayor, Merv King in formally welcoming the Sierra Leoneans to the community. The morning was a very moving event, distinguished by the sharing of stories, Sudanese dancing, and a cleverly crafted Sierra Leonean song. Sarah King, a Sierra Leonean who joined our community just four months earlier again showed the power of words in her narration of several poems from her homelands. Sarah's own passion and writing skills were evident in the feature article in the 'Lismore Echo' of the same week. Sarah's story this is reprinted below. Many thanks to Penny Watson and Mark Rusconi for their organisational efforts for the day.

### Pending arrivals:

- ✧ After two years of effort, we were advised last week that **James Thokluel** (son of Phillip) was granted a visa. When Phillip arrived in the country (August 2005), his first comments were his gratitude to the Australian Government to provide his family with the opportunity for a new life, but also his deep regret that his son, James, was not given the chance to come with them. It has been a long road, but one that will fill Phillip and James with much joy, that they can be re-united and spend their years ahead together.
- ✧ **Eraston Kibururu**, a young Congolese man, approached Sanctuary Northern Rivers about 18 months ago seeking our support to come to Australia. His visa was granted in mid June; and at last we have him on a plane to arrive August 22! To give some insight into camp conditions, I share the following email sent by Eraston on June 30:

*I am hereby informing you that for today my situation of life is really under trouble due to the event which exploded at night on Friday the last week; the unknown persons came to our community at 8.30 p.m with guns looking for money and they shot people and some of our people died immediately. So, I was feared of that and I decided to report to the IOM to see how can I escape from this area"*

- ✧ **Margraet Kiden Poji**, her husband and 5 young boys, originally from Sudan have also successfully gained a visa to join us. We expect them to arrive within the month.

These successes are most welcome. However, there are many, many more who request help. We continue to support these requests, but sadly, the majority are refused a visa. While every rejection causes a great deal of sadness and despair on behalf of the applicant, it has been particularly difficult to observe the pain of those with us here who continue to struggle to have their own family members refused entry. The circumstances of these are particularly dire, and raise serious questions on the integrity of the processing of their applications. I mention several:

- ✧ Nhial and Ngor are 11 year old twins – orphans, have been living in very poor circumstances in Nairobi over the last nine months. They were born in a refugee camp in Kenya, and have never known the land of their Heritage, Sudan. They are brothers to Mary Maluk, who has been in Lismore for three years. Our efforts to have them join Mary have been denied three times now, in spite of their very compelling circumstances. We are still working at it!
- ✧ Angelina, daughter to Mary Ajok, and her young family similarly have had to flee from the Kakuma camp because of threats of violence there. She too has been refused a visa on two occasions.
- ✧ We are advocating for the sisters and brother of an Eritrean family who have been subject to persecution for their faith, and family members have 'disappeared'. Each of their circumstances again currently of gravest concern, yet they have been denied the possibility to join their siblings here.

We continue to work for these, as we must; and we must continue to seek a greater accountability for the decisions made by the Department of Immigration that seemingly does not accept their plight, or appreciate awareness of the pain that their decisions bring to those who are with us.

#### Happenings:

- ✧ Mannie Caulker (arrival February 2008) has commenced an apprenticeship with Trevor Gale (Builders) – well done to Mannie and much appreciation to Terry for his willingness to support the community;
- ✧ Monica Matoc (arrival June 2004) and her family celebrated their four years in the community with a delightful lunch and performance on a Sunday afternoon in late June;



### Admin matters

- ✧ Finally, our **webpage** is again operational, with thanks to Ian Phillips of Lismore. Check it out – it will be the focal point of our communication.
- ✧ **Memberships** due. Sanctuary is very proud to be a community based organisation. It strives to reflect the aspirations of our community, and works for the benefit of refugees on behalf of the community. The work of sanctuary is open to the direction of the community. I urge everyone who has an interest in this work to become a member. Your membership allows us to continue this work, and indeed, guide the direction that we take. We need you – as interested persons, as support workers, and as our voice and conscience. Please consider joining up and playing an active role in the further work of Sanctuary.

Membership needs to be renewed on an annual (July – June) basis. Please fill out the attached form, and apply on-line (through website). Membership fees are required each year. There are three levels of membership fees: Individual/family \$30; concessional \$15; business/organisation: \$100. Payment should be forwarded with membership renewal/application form, or if made online, there is an on-line facility to pay fees. **Thank you for all help with this!**

- ✧ Our Annual General Meeting will be the first Tuesday in October. This is your chance to shape the organisation that we are. There are likely to be several Board positions vacated; if you have an interest in being a part of central group that provides the governance of Sanctuary, please feel free to talk with any member of the current Board to discuss how you could contribute. We also intend (after much delay) in formally establishing several sub-committees. We will be looking for persons to chair and be a part of these committees.

### Gala Dinner

Our Gala Dinner is to be held on Saturday September 6 at the Southern Cross University. The purpose of the dinner is to celebrate our work, and provide all who have been involved and supportive a chance to enjoy the spirit from which we work from. Renowned author and social justice advocate, Sandy McCutcheon will be the keynote speaker, with Mic O'Regan, of Radio National, bringing the warmth of his personality as MC. There will be African themes and song and poetry. It promises to be a very special night. There will be raffles drawn, a 'silent auction', and other fundraising activities on the night.

We are capping attendance at 250 persons (restricted by venue size). There will be a range of ticket prices ('pay what you can afford') so that everyone has the chance to participate. Ticket prices are \$20/\$60/\$100. A flyer for the dinner is enclosed. **Please note that there is pressure on tickets – so it is suggested that if you would like to come (or form a table), please let us know soon!**

### **Refugee support in international settings:**

We are well aware that many refugees who seek help from us sadly do not 'make it' through the immigration process. The vast majority, in spite of the tragedy of their circumstances, are not successful in gaining a visa. For the most part, while they may not understand the rationale behind the decision, it is accepted. But frequently I am asked the question – "what do we do now?" During the year, Sanctuary has provided a little support to some international endeavours – particularly focusing on those areas where refugees appear to be outside of the support of the larger international NGOs. One such endeavour is the Ethnic Minority Families Society in the north west of Thailand, a small organisation established by a Karen refugee for other 'stateless' refugees from neighbouring Burma. They are doing some marvellous work to support the children and young parents to have some basis to negotiate their position in their new community. Sanctuary recently funded the training program for 22 young adult refugees in learning Thai language. The following is an extract from the final report of the project:

*"In teaching basic Thai literature, 22 learners have shown their great interested and pay very high attention to the subject, thus the learners are able to comprehend contexts and able to complete assigned exercises. In addition, based on our project evaluation, learners feel satisfy and feel that the project helps them improve their Thai language in daily life.".....Saw Muang Muang, Mae Hong Son*

We are keen to know of any-one who is aware of specific needs of refugee groups who may similarly benefit from the small support that we can offer. If you are interested in these areas, please let us know!

### **Homework support**

Sue Darnell has championed the efforts in establishing the Homework Support Centre. Sue comments on her interaction with the target children – just how much they desire to have greater opportunities to gain a better handle on their school work. If you can spare a few hours each week working with the high school children, Sue is keen to hear from you. You don't have to be a teacher – but you do need the capacity to explain concepts and mentor the kids in a supportive way. Please call if you may be able to help.

Thanks to all for your inspirational support.

**Michael Douglas**

**President**

If you receive this newsletter by mail and you have access to email, please forward you details to us. It makes our communication more efficient and saves the postage. Thank you!

## A journey to a safe landing

Sarah King

My last thought before I drifted to sleep was that we may take so long in the air that the microphone will blare informing us of the decision of the pilot to turn around and fly back to where we came from. For it all seemed too good to be true. The countdown on every second to reaching our destination still seemed like the dream I began to nurture the last months, when the hope of beginning a new life in Australia gradually injected new blood into my veins.

It has been a long, hard, rugged journey, which sometimes came to an abrupt halt when hopes of reaching Babel were almost shattered by yet another unsuccessful attempt to change our status. 'Only a limited number of refugees will be resettled annually.'

I woke up with a start when the loudspeaker did come on, announcing that we will be landing in Sydney airport in 30 minutes. Still, 30 minutes to landing on Australian soil seemed a long way away, as if waiting for 20 months wasn't enough. The thought of actually meeting all the angels and saints, my loved ones who perished in the war, and possibly the chance to meet the creator Himself and ask him why he relocated hell to my country, filled my mind so much that the 30 minutes passed like 30 seconds and I felt the hard surface underneath as the wheels of the plane hit the runway.

As if to prolong my dream, my first attempt to get up from my seat failed, and I thought the devil was still at work. Taking a deep breath, I lurched forward, daring him to hold me back. Of course he knew better. I was still to make sure I could move my legs. I grabbed my hand luggage, making sure my young son and other family members were with me, I heroically descended the steps of the plane, feeling like Rambo emerging victorious after a long, brutal battle. My dream became a reality. I have finally stepped on Australian soil; the 'Promised Land' Dr Martin Luther King spoke about in his most popular speech.

Sierra Leoneans have always been known to be warm, hospitable and friendly, as was demonstrated to the Liberian people who sought refuge in our country in the heat of their own civil war that spilled into our beloved and once peaceful country. So it was no surprise when on reaching the airport terminal, I saw a psychedelic sea of jubilant faces that couldn't contain their excitement at seeing their 'brothers and sister', as we know one another to be. They had been waiting since the early hours of the morning to heartily welcome family members, relatives and friends who they had not seen for many years, since the war reaped us apart, many to shallow graves unmourned.

Although I saw a few familiar faces, I felt the shade of the cotton tree, which stands in the heart of the city of my country, with her over two hundred year old branches, spread in all directions in protection of the inhabitants, like a hen, with wings spread out over her chicks. The heat of the war scorched her so hard, rendering her helpless as she watched her 'chicks' being maimed, killed, rotting and ravaged at her feet. Again, I was not surprised when I heard that water drops, like tears, seeped through the aged tree, in the heat of the dry season, when there isn't a drop of rain.

From the airport, we were taken to a motel in Sydney, where we spent two nights with much anxiety and anticipation. While I finally drifted to sleep in the early hours of the morning, my son later told

me he didn't wink an eyelid as he switched from one channel to another on the television set. I could have walked all the way to Ballina, so that I can scream my excitement above the sound of the waves, marvel at all the beautiful trees, the colourful flowers, the wildlife, as I walk through the 'garden of Eden' breathing in, with all my might, the soothing fragrance of nature. But before I knew it, we were up in the air again, on a flight to Ballina.

In Ballina, we were welcomed by very special and lovely people and absorbed into the Northern Rivers sanctuary, just where we belong. Our stay at Gunundi Camp in Ballina, while our houses were being prepared in Lismore, was a memorable week, still under the warm wings of 'Mother Hen' and others in the sanctuary, making sure we had enough food to eat, good warm clothes to wear and some recreation, among other things.

I had the opportunity to re-live my youthful days when I went hiking and camping with the Girl Guides movement, only there was no bonfire, but we clapped, danced and sang a merry song. Their kindness and loving care went with us right through to Lismore as we settled, quite comfortably, in our beautiful new homes that they have secured for us to settle into a peaceful life.

With frequent calls, both physical and on the phone, they made sure we are settling okay. By now all the machines have been set in motion; medical checks, Centrelink registration and benefits, banking and so on, to melt, mould and make us so that we glitter, just like Australians. Our new friends in Lismore have been extra special, giving time and resources to making our settling in much easier. To all of these people, including those who spare time to stop, smile and ask: "How are you going?", even the Sudanese and other African migrants who have made us feel welcomed, from them, we're unable to withhold our gratitude.

The climax of this all is the financial support we get from Centrelink. Coming from Africa, we know what it is like to live without a job, when even some with jobs can hardly provide a square meal for themselves and their dependents. It might not be as we want it but it is a great start.

When I meet someone and introduce myself, their comment most times is: 'It must be hard for you, it's a huge move'. I always say, it hasn't been that hard. In spite of a scary week I spent at the Lismore Base Hospital, life is much better here, with more facilities, lots of opportunities, equality, abundance of food and life's basic necessities. It is a place to be. Our children are settling well into school, while the rest already are in other learning institutions. We also look forward to community support to provide employment opportunities for us so that we can be able to support ourselves and contribute to community development.

I thank God for making our migration program successful. Many thanks to the Australian government for granting us a permanent safe haven. Many more thanks to all our sponsors, friends, in the Lismore community and its environs. Keep the smiles, they make our day. We hope to make our stay here worthwhile, upholding the values of this nation and make our own contribution towards the rich multicultural society it now is.

## Sanctuary address at World Refugee Day official function:

That we are enriched as a community becomes more evident with each year. Amongst the many attributes are the greater cultural diversity, the emergence of leaders, the sporting prowess. The riches, however, run in a much deeper vein. The refugee population that have settled here in Lismore are very aware of the obligation of being a good citizen. Their background of trauma and torture, of incarceration and separation, of fear and flight have established a very strong awareness of the importance of citizenship and human rights, of the capacity to have dialogue about significant matters in our society. Democracy is dearly valued, as is the right of the individual and the collective group.

### Refugee responsibility

In your homelands you were pushed aside and discarded, subject to unimaginable violence and trauma. You took refuge on the margins, in camps, or sheltering in the anonymity of a city; always on the margins, without voice. With blessing, you have joined our community, and confronted new values, new cultures, and new ideas, some that conflict with your own. Perhaps you still feel on the margin of society – but that is not where you belong.

You will emerge as leaders of your new and wider community, letting go of any feeling of isolation, of disadvantage, of abandonment, of inadequacy. Let go of any pain, however deep it may be held. We need you to show us, the wider community, what your pain and struggle has achieved. We need you to share your courage and love, and share your dream for the human race. There is no room for you at the margin – you are true citizens of this community, and you are called to show us a way forward. The unforeseen turns that your life has taken, that has brought you here, does not end here. You are called to be leaders of a new community, to be beacons of strength, to promote the dialogue of human rights, and to continue to work for a world that can overcome its dark nights through a conviction for good.

### Community responsibility

We are at a time of history in our country of extraordinary wealth. While we must ensure that this wealth is shared for the benefit of all, we have indeed prosperity and freedom. We are also at a time of history where we are privileged with information that provides insights on all quarters of the world. We cannot feign ignorance of the trials of Africa, or the arrogant disregard for human life in Burma, or of the compromise of human rights in many countries of the Middle East – to name just a few examples. We are a global community, and as members of that community we must take our position as global citizens. And that means to share our prosperity and encourage that our freedoms can be enjoyed by all.

There are challenges for us to face. The current housing crisis of Lismore may prohibit further settlement of refugees. Those employers that have engaged the refugee community sing of their capacity and reliability, yet, with a few notable exceptions, we still struggle to have meaningful engagement by the businesses of Lismore. With a wider purview, there is still much advocacy needed to ensure government policy reflects the humanitarian ethos of our society. While there have been encouraging increments in a more sympathetic approach in recent months, they remain incremental. Yet of more significant concern is the bureaucracy that implements the policy of the day. Our encounters with those that process requests for refugee status defy that ethos, and make folly of the human tragedy has touched the lives of each of the refugees.

We cannot be complacent. We must confront the expectations that we have of ourselves, and ask: Are we doing enough? Can we, and should we, be doing more – both in our own community and within the wider ambit of our society generally.

