

## Sanctuary Northern Rivers: Newsletter July 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. An excerpt from 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; there remains a sense of urgency in booking his travel, given current circumstances in Kakuma. The following email sent 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 shuted 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.

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. Membership confers the following benefits:

- ❖ *Regular communication about the settlement of refugees in the Lismore region and in particular, ideas on how I can assist in the settlement process for new families*
- ❖ *Information about how we can make the settlement process easier for refugees generally and support their representation in the local community*
- ❖ *An understanding of how donations are used by Sanctuary to assist in the settlement process*
- ❖ *Ideas on lobbying the various levels of Government and the community for better settlement arrangements (with opportunities to support this lobbying)*
- ❖ *Opportunities to learn about and appreciate the cultural diversity and enrichment that refugees bring to our community*
- ❖ *A greater appreciation of our Government's refugee policy and ideas on how one can assist in influencing this when it appears to discriminate against those most in need*

*For organisations, there is also:*

- ❖ *Understanding how businesses can make it easier for refugees to access the services they need in our community including opportunities for staff to gain some refugee cultural awareness training*
- ❖ *Identification as 'refugee friendly' businesses that have a commitment to assist refugees whenever they use their services*
- ❖ *Understanding about how local businesses can assist refugees to find appropriate employment*
- ❖ *An opportunity to fulfil their 'corporate social responsibility' within the community in association with refugees as a specific target group needing assistance*

We ask that all persons and organisations become members, and renew this on an annual 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; : concessional; Business/organisation:

- ❖ Annual General Meeting will be the first Tuesday in October – your chance to shape the organisation that we are.

### **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 food and song, . . .

There will be a range of ticket prices ('pay what you can afford') so that everyone has the chance to participate. It will be a very special and joyful night!

Tickets available late July from . . .

### **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**

Sarah's story

**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. 