

## SEEDS OF PEACE

### **PETER AND SUE HALLAM AND THE SANCTUARY REFUGEE FOUNDATION**



The example of one, however humble, seed of peace, can be profoundly effective on the lives of others, and the ripples of peace caused by one person can continue many thousands of miles and many years afterwards. Such is the story behind one of Australia's impressive refugee support groups, the **Sanctuary Refugee Foundation**. For *Sanctuary Refugee Support Group* (now *Sanctuary Refugee Foundation*) was founded in 1988 by **Sue and Peter Hallam**, after what they describe as 'a life-changing experience' in Mexico, where they spent time with a priest who was sheltering destitute Salvadoran refugees.

*'He was so humble'* Sue recalls. *'His dedication and kindness were an inspiration to us, and we knew then that this was going to be our life's work!'*



After their experience in Mexico, Peter and Sue Hallam (pictured left with Jana Wendt at Parliament House, when they received the 2002 National Auscare Humanitarian Award) subsequently worked with refugees in Canada, and then migrated with their three sons to Australia in November 1987, settling in Coffs Harbour on the north coast of NSW. Shortly afterwards, in 1988, Peter and they established the *Sanctuary Refugee Support Group* to assist refugees from war-torn countries with setting up their new lives in Australia, and began working as volunteers for the Government's Community Refugee Settlement Scheme.

The Sanctuary Refugee Foundation is certainly a vital contribution to the addressing the consequences of violence and the pressing crisis of refugee and displaced persons in the contemporary world. Within 12 months of starting their work, Sue and Peter had welcomed four refugee families from Central America to Coffs Harbour and realised the scale of the challenge. As they recall:

*'It was a huge undertaking, as most arrived traumatised, with nothing but the clothes they were standing up in! We helped them in every way possible, including accommodation, furniture, food, clothes, schools, bank, Medicare, and so on, and tried to make them feel safe and welcome.'*

Since then, Sue and Peter have helped hundreds of refugees from many war-torn nations, including Chile, El Salvador, Vietnam, Iraq, Burma, Bosnia and Southern Sudan. On arrival, these refugees are assisted with accommodation, furniture, food, clothing and are generally welcomed into the community. In 1997, the group became a Registered Charity and began to send money directly to refugees suffering overseas, as well as clothing, shoes and medicines. Thus, for example, in response to the famine in Southern Sudan, over \$17,000 was raised and sent to help feed those in need. Such work is no mean achievement. For, with no government funding, the *Sanctuary* relies completely on the generosity and help of the local community, operating on a non-profit, non-denominational basis to resettle recognised refugees, regardless of race, religion or creed.

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### *Sanctuary Travel Loan Fund*

In response to an urgent need for refugee airfares, a 'revolving' travel loan fund was set up in 1997. Again, this reflected a desperate need, as most refugees who are accepted by Australia under the Special Humanitarian Visa Program are granted visas under strict conditions, acceptance is subject to strict medical checks, and the availability of a sponsor or relative, already in Australia, who is prepared to assist and support them. This support includes not only assistance after resettlement, but money for medicals (\$250 per person) and airfares (sometimes in excess of \$10,000 per family). After waiting for years, going through interviews, medicals, etc, many refugees who finally receive Visa approval can therefore lose their only chance for a hopeful future because neither they nor their sponsor can fund their travel to Australia. As one Sanctuary worker put it, *'It's like winning the lotto and not having the bus fare to collect it.'* Through the *Sanctuary Travel Loan Fund* however refugees can be financially assisted, arrangements made through the International Organisation for Migration office, and liaison made with DIMIA overseas on their behalf. Once settled in Australia, such refugees then gradually repay (over two or three years) and the money is recycled to help others.

### *Creating new ripples of peace - Sobhana's story*

The ripples of peace which have carried Peter and Sue Hallam forward, continue to touch others. Dr Sobhana Arianayagam, Pathologist in Charge of the SNP laboratory at Coffs Harbour is but one of these. In her case, a chance visit to an art exhibition changed her understanding of 'entertaining', and also helped change the lives of three families from war-torn Sudan.

For Sobhana heard a Sudanese refugee speak of his life prior to coming to Australia: how at the age of 5, he had seen his mother being tied down to the ground, rubbish and petrol poured over her and then incinerated, and how he had lost most of his family and friends in the violence that has been sweeping the country for decades.

He said there were families in refugee camps with accredited visas, waiting for years to come to Australia, but who could not come because all they had were the clothes they wore; they had no means of raising the air fare. In one family's case, their visas were about to expire and with that their hopes of ever finding a future in Australia. They needed at least \$12,000 to come to Australia.

To raise money to help, the idea of a Sanctuary Dinner was born to support Sue and Peter's work. Some of those who could not attend the dinner sent in donations, and over \$12,000 was raised. The family of seven arrived within a few weeks and are now happily settled in Coffs Harbour. Such initiatives continue to bring some respite to many suffering from violence across the world.



A refugee child ,Peter, from a family that Sanctuary Refugee Foundation has sponsored in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Kigoma, Tanzania.

### **Sources and more information:**

[www.sanctuaryrefugeefoundation.org](http://www.sanctuaryrefugeefoundation.org)