The Centre for Refugee Research
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The Australian National Committee On Refugee Women

Celebration of Refugee Lives

Stories of Strength and Resilience

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

THE IAN POTTER FOUNDATION

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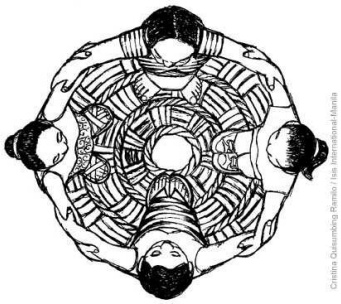
Our warm thanks and gratitude are extended to the participants whose experiences are told here within this book. We thank you for having the strength, courage and trust to share your stories with us. It has been a privilege to share in your triumphs.



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DISCLAIMER
The stories shared within this book are true lived experiences of settlement in Australia. Permission has been obtained for the use of individual stories. In some cases small details have been changed at the request of the individuals involved. Many people have families who are still overseas and they remain at risk.

"Everybody has their own story to tell"

"Welcome to the Celebration of Refugee Lives: Stories of Strength and Resilience book. My name is Abraham and I am a refugee from Sudan. I know from my own experience, settlement in a new country can be hard. It takes time. When I first arrived, I struggled. My brother and I were alone. We had no parents, no friends. We had to learn how to begin our lives again. After time things got better but it was not easy. Coming from the refugee background and being in war for a very long time has a lot of impact for people resettling to countries like Australia.

To cope with that experience you need support and encouragement. When refugees first arrive, it is important to have a welcoming community and a place to feel at home. Refugees have cultures that are different and have faced different issues before we came to Australia. It is very hard to start again. That is what people need to think about before they mention integration. There are so many myths about refugee communities, especially refugees resettling from countries in Africa. They feel like discrimination. People say the Sudanese are very very difficult to integrate into Australian society. But the Sudanese people have lived in war for 21 years. Most of the young people were born and grew up in war. Saying 90% are the problem and 10% are okay is not right. Most people are doing well but they need support when they come here. We can have 100% positive experiences for people in the future if we do the right thing now. Many young people from refugee backgrounds are studying at universities, others are working. All are contributing to their new country.

If I compare myself to others I would say I am better settled. I completed TAFE, am studying at university and have a good job but there are still struggles. I worry about my family back home in Sudan. I need to support myself and finish my studies. It is not easy, but I am on my way. I am contributing.

I hope this book will help to bring people together as Australians and encourage people to share in experiences with others instead of focusing on differences. It is an education for both refugees and the people of Australia. We all need to learn from each other. "

Abraham Nicknora

In this book you will find the inspirational stories of successful refugees living in Australia. These stories challenge and shatter many of the myths circulating about refugee communities. By sharing in the lives and achievements of refugees, we hope to raise awareness about the journey of resettlement and the extraordinary strength and resilience it takes to both survive and succeed in a new country.

WHO ARE REFUGEES?

"We were in danger, we couldn't live there anymore, any chance to leave we had to grab it"

"We were not safe"

"We had to leave our country. We had to keep running away from the guns and the bombs"

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy asylum from persecution (Article 14 1948 Declaration of Human Rights)

A refugee is "a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable to or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country or to return there, for fear of persecution" (1951 Refugee Convention)

WHAT IS PERSECUTION?

"We were not born into freedom"

"We have been through hell"

"It was not our war...we had to keep running"

Persecution is the severe abuse and denial of the human rights of individuals or groups. Serious and ongoing forms of discrimination may also amount to persecution.

Persecution takes many forms but may include: killings; physical violence, rape and sexual violence; torture; kidnappings; no protection under law or justice; no freedom of movement; forced exile from homes; no access to livelihoods or education; imprisonment; the burning of villages and towns; child prostitution; forced pregnancies and the trafficking of women and children.

Refugees should be able to turn to the governments of their homelands for protection. Yet often they are the ones responsible for the worst of this persecution. With nowhere to turn, no safety in their own country, refugees are left with no choice to but to flee to other countries. They are hopeful of finding asylum, of finding protection. But this journey is not easy.

THE JOURNEY TO RESETTLEMENT

When refugees flee their homelands, they hope to be able to find a safe place to seek refuge until conditions improve and they can return home. Instead they often find they have exchanged one life of danger for another. Life in refugee camps and urban areas can be equally harsh. There is insufficient food. Parents frequently starve for days to make the limited rations last to ensure one meal a day for their children. Women often have to walk for hours to find a small amount of water for their families. They are at constant risk of abuse and rape.

Shelter can be a plastic tent in 50 degree heat; a bamboo hut where the walls are so thin the slightest touch can break them; a mud hut too small to stand up in. There is no security and no sense of permanency. Health services are grossly inadequate and sometimes paracetamol is the only medicine available. Where education is available, it is limited. People are desperate for education but resources are often scarce. There may be 100 plus students to a room, with no desks, few if any textbooks and pencils shared amongst groups. Income generation opportunities are minimal and rarely provide people with enough funds to be able to live well.

Violence and fear are part of daily life. Everyone is at risk. Men and women are beaten, tortured, kidnapped and forced to be soldiers. Women are attacked, raped and survive severe exploitation. Refugee children also suffer. Many have seen people die. Some are kidnapped and trafficked across borders into prostitution or to be child soldiers. Young girls are at risk of sexual violence. Some children are born in camps and know no other life.

Over eleven million people live in these horrendous conditions, many for between 15-20 years. Camps and urban settlements are designed to be a temporary refuge. But the average time now spent in them is 17 years. People live with the hope of returning home, but for those who cannot and where life is too dangerous for them to remain where they have sought asylum, resettlement to another country is often the only option.

LIFE IN A NEW COUNTRY

"Resettlement…you go there to learn to live again"

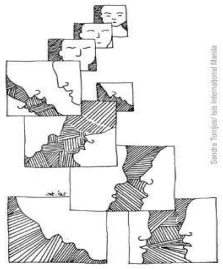
At last estimate there were 11.4 million refugees in the world. Only approximately 1% will ever have the chance to be resettled. The majority continue to live in dangerous and appalling conditions. Each year, approximately 13,500 refugees are resettled to Australia. The support provided by settlement service providers and volunteer groups is critical to assisting newly arrived refugees to settle and to start coping with some of the traumas they have endured.

When refugees first arrive, the Australian government provides access to important services including: an initial orientation to life in Australia where people are welcomed and linked to mainstream support services; torture and trauma counselling and support; an allocated number of language tuition hours; and help in finding initial accommodation and setting up a home. Volunteers and community organizations also provide essential assistance and support.

There are also many challenges. Settling in an unfamiliar country can create an enormous culture shock. Freedom and justice are welcomed. However people need time to adjust after years of being denied these rights. Education and employment systems are different. Isolation is common. When they first arrive some people can go for months without speaking to another person except for their caseworker. Experiences of racism and discrimination are widespread. There are new customs and ways of living to adjust to. Language can be a barrier. After years of persecution, learning to feel safe again and to trust others can also take time.

Despite all that they have endured, refugees bring to Australia amazing strengths, knowledge, skills, wisdom, resilience and lived histories. They are survivors. The inspiring experiences shared here within this book, show that if people are able to access appropriate settlement support alongside a warm, welcoming and understanding community, successful settlement can be made easier. In the words of one resettled refugee woman, "a little kindness goes a long way".

SUCCESSFUL SETTLEMENT



"Success means we have survived"

The act of resettlement does not automatically mean that people will feel 'settled' once they arrive in Australia. It can take people some time to feel that they are secure and at peace. Refugees need support to work through the loss and trauma they have experienced. Some have described it as learning to live again. To be successfully settled means different things to different people. For some it is in the knowledge their families are now safe, their children can have access to education, that they will be able to enjoy the same rights to which all people are entitled. Many have described it as a feeling of belonging, of having a place to build a future. All agree "To settle takes time, it doesn't happen overnight."

Some of the strong and resilient refugees who now call Australia home have shared their thoughts on what it means to finally be settled:

"I belong!!!!"

"I am doing well"

"I am independent"

"I am learning and encouraging others"

" Having a country to belong to. You feel like you have somewhere to call home. Somewhere to look after you"

"Becoming citizens was a dream..we found our hope"

"I have equal rights like everyone else in Australia"

"Success is in my family. We have stayed together"

"I teach my children to be an asset for themselves first and then for Australia"

"Where my children feel safe, where I will be safe, where my children will have a future"

MYTH

Most refugees are economic migrants and only come here to get work and claim welfare benefits.

"Sometimes as a refugee you have to take (welfare) money to survive and support yourself. We feel a shame as though we are beggars or something. But I knew I would pay this back one way or another."

Refugees do not have a choice about when or how they leave their home countries. They flee because they have been persecuted, often on grounds of their political opinion, religion, nationality, ethnicity or because of their membership of a particular social group. People are tortured. They are beaten. Children are kidnapped. Women and girls are raped. Villages are burned. Whole families disappear. Conditions are harsh. It is too dangerous for refugees to remain in their homelands. They cannot seek protection from their own governments who are often the worst abusers. They do not flee seeking better employment conditions, higher education or welfare benefits. Survival is their only goal.

Refugees come to Australia from every region in the world and have differing levels of education and employment experience. When they first arrive, circumstances often mean people are left with few options but to access the same welfare benefits all Australians are entitled to in order to support their families. None want to be dependent on welfare payments. Many refugees associate dependency with shame. Reliance on any form of support can bring up painful memories of being unable to provide for themselves and their families during times of displacement in camps and urban settlements.

Some people have previously held high level positions in their home countries. Many refugees were forced to leave successful businesses behind. Others worked as farmers, teachers and shop keepers. People often struggle to have their qualifications recognized in Australia and are sometimes forced to take on other skills and enter new industries to support themselves. While there are times when people do need support and assistance, they are also keen to be independent, to build their skills and to be strong providers. Refugees arrive in Australia, hopeful for a safe future for themselves and their families and with a strong determination to make a contribution to Australian society.

WAH WAH's STORY

"It was a lonely journey at first….you feel like an outcast when you first arrive and you don't belong."

Terror and abuse by the Burmese Junta forced Wah Wah and her family to flee their village when she was three. They escaped to another area in Burma, hoping things would be safer. However the terror followed them and years later they were again forced to run. Leaving everything behind, Wah Wah and her family crossed rivers and ran through dangerous jungles to seek refuge on the Thailand border. Despite their hopes for a better life, conditions were still hard. With no government recognition of their status as refugees, no rights to work and limited access to law and justice, there was little protection for Wah Wah's family. After thirteen years of struggle, her family risked everything to travel to Bangkok in search of safety. It was another two difficult years before they were at last sponsored by community members to settle in Australia.

The first few months in Australia were not an easy time. Seemingly simple things such as catching public transport were a big challenge. Not being able to speak English left Wah Wah and her family feeling very isolated. Desperate for a place to belong, a new place to call home, Wah Wah remembers feeling lonely and afraid when they first arrived. Initially Wah Wah was scared to go outside, frightened they would be caught by authorities and put in danger once again. After years of suffering at the hands of authorities in Burma and Thailand, Wah Wah was initially terrified by the sight of Australian police. Although she now knows police are different here, the memories are still strong and the fear is not completely gone.

The cultural diversity of the local community where Wah Wah settled helped them to feel more at home. They also found great support from an understanding high school. Although Wah Wah and her sisters were older than the other students, the teaching staff were committed to supporting them while they learnt English and finished their education. Being independent was very important to Wah Wah. She was determined to stand up and support herself as soon as possible. With a strong desire for further education and a career, Wah Wah completed high school and studied nursing at university. Although she enjoyed working as a nurse, Wah Wah was keen to make further contributions and to give back to the community. She now works as a trainee counsellor supporting newly arrived refugees. "**It's still caring for people but in a different way. When you get a lot of help, it makes your transition better.**" Wah Wah remembers how difficult it was at first to settle and wants to be part of the process of helping other refugees to cope with their traumas and start life again here in Australia.

PAUL's STORY

"We have been through hell. It was a difficult time…maybe ten years before we felt like we understood and were settled"

Paul and his family survived years of conflict in Iraq. After each war, they lived in hope that life would improve. Instead, conditions worsened and the country became increasingly unstable. At one stage the danger was so great, that the family separated, hopeful that this might mean a greater chance that at least some of them would survive. Finally, with no food, no access to any livelihoods and no safety, they were left with no choice but to escape through neighbouring countries in search of refuge. Unable to find safety, it took many years before Paul, his wife and their four children finally arrived and were reunited with extended family members in Australia.

Arriving in Australia, the family experienced culture shock. Everything was different. After a lifetime of being denied freedom, it took Paul and his family some time to adjust and accept a new way of life. When they first arrived, they were well supported by extended family and community members who had been resettled earlier. Paul's first priority was ensuring his children were settled and enrolled in school. He then began to address his own settlement needs and started to look for work and educational opportunities. In Iraq, Paul was a successful businessman working for an International Company. Unable to find work in his former industry when he first arrived, he focused on gaining education and skills for a new career in Welfare. He studied hard at TAFE and later pursued further studies in Immigration and Citizenship law to become a not for profit Migration Agent. Access to education is extremely important to Paul, and he has continued to study while encouraging his children to do well and supporting them in their chosen careers.

Paul has welcomed and supported thousands of refugees to their new life in Australia. "**In my soul, the helping of refugees is inside me….people need to be welcomed and have time to settle in."** After working with the Red Cross for a number of years, he is now the coordinator of a community based organization assisting refugees from the Assyrian community. Paul still remembers the early days of settlement when the family felt shame at having to be reliant on welfare payments. Although he knew it was what they needed to survive, Paul remained strongly determined to ensure this was paid back. Today, he and his family, all of whom have been working for years, have given back through their taxes and their contributions to the community more assistance than they ever received in their earlier welfare benefits. Paul is rightly proud of himself and his children. They are strong assets, both to themselves and to Australia.

MYTH

Life in Australia is easy for refugees. They should be grateful for all of the help they get.

"We were trying to survive as well, learning the language, finding a job, just adapting"

Life in Australia offers most refugees the opportunity to rebuild their lives in relative peace and security but it is far from easy. While refugees flee to Australia seeking safety from persecution and a risk free existence, many continue to experience challenges even once resettled. Refugees arrive in Australia, with few possessions and the hope that a better life awaits them. They have suffered and faced many struggles on their journey. People have come from lifestyles and countries which are significantly different from those in Australia. There are new and very different systems to negotiate.

While there are many good settlement services, not all refugees are able to access these. Even with the best of settlement support, it takes time to repair the traumas people have suffered and to begin the process of restoring some sense of safety and belonging to their lives. Other than support with initial settlement, refugees do not receive extra welfare assistance and their needs are not prioritized over those of other residents. They are however able to access the same welfare benefits to which all Australians are entitled.

Refugees also face the same challenges in accessing affordable housing, education and employment as do the wider population. However most encounter additional barriers due to racism, discrimination and stigmatization because of their refugee status. Without a welcoming community, many refugees are isolated and it can be a lonely and frightening period when they first arrive in Australia. Most have survived serious human rights abuses and carry these experiences with them. Others have left family and friends behind and live day to day with guilt that they have survived whilst others have not. The grief of being separated from family members who are often still in danger overseas, impacts significantly on people's capacity to settle well.

Refugees are grateful to be in Australia. They appreciate the support and assistance provided by settlement service providers and the community. But refugees also contribute a lot to Australia. Given time and support, refugees settle in to their new community and rebuild their lives, bringing knowledge, skills, wisdom and diverse lived experiences which greatly enrich Australian culture.

MOHAMMAD's STORY

"Becoming citizens was a dream. We found our hope"

After many years in the army, Mohammad, an educated man, ran a school for his community, a persecuted minority group in Afghanistan. In 2000 the Taliban arrived, closing down schools and targeting educated people. Mohammad fled to Pakistan, but his family remained in terrible danger; he could think of nothing else. It was a month before he was able to rescue them and they joined him in Pakistan. There was no safety even there, with no rights, harsh conditions and continuing danger from the Taliban. Left with no other choice to ensure his family's safety, Mohammad paid a smuggler, and after a long and dangerous journey, they arrived in Australia. They thought they would receive refuge and that they would be safe and happy, but instead were sent straight to a detention centre. **"We came to Australia with a big hope…but there was no one to help us."** After three months of questioning and waiting, they were given temporary protection visas (TPV), which acknowledged their refugee status but gave them few rights, no permanent residency and an uncertain future.

When they were released from detention, Mohammad's family was taken to a capital city. They soon had no money, and as TPV holders they were eligible for few services. It was a very low time for them, but the kindness of a few Australians gave them hope. The family moved to another city, hearing there was a better chance for work and good education for the children. Although Mohammad tried for any type of work, he couldn't get a job due to his insufficient English and lack of experience. Mohammad was desperate for work, needing to save money for fear they would be sent back to Afghanistan. On the advice of other Afghanis, they moved again, to a regional town where, finally, they received a warm welcome. Mohammad and his wife found work on a farm, a safe home for their family and a community who provided much needed support.

After being on a TPV for four years, Mohammad and his family were granted permanent protection, enabling them to rebuild their lives without fear of being returned to danger. With ongoing access to education for his children a great priority for Mohammad, the family moved back to a capital city. This is where they now live. His youngest daughter is attending primary school, one son is at high school and his two older children are studying engineering and biological science at university. Learning English has not been easy but Mohammad's wife is working hard to improve her language skills and Mohammad now speaks English well. His family became Australian citizens as soon as they were able to. This was a very significant and moving moment for Mohammad because, after a lifetime of persecution, finally they were recognized as people with the same equal rights as all other Australians. Mohammad has kept his family safe and together through danger and trauma, and the family looks forward to continuing to contribute in their new life here in Australia.

YOLANDA's STORY

"We came with a lot of hope for the future"

Originally from Chile, Yolanda, her husband Carlos and their small son, fled following a violent political coup. The military junta who had taken power had begun a reign of horror, targeting supporters of the former government. There were mass arrests and kidnappings. People were tortured. Many were killed. A year after they escaped to Peru, Yolanda and her family were resettled to Australia. At that time refugees were settled in Migrant Hostels and had extended access to accommodation, food and services for a year. Having all of the essential settlement services in the one place before needing to find permanent accommodation was important for Yolanda.

Yolanda and her family arrived hopeful of a better future but also filled with grief for the plight of the family and the life they had left behind. It took years before they began to feel at home. Initially, Yolanda felt as though everything was on fast forward. They were under pressure to settle quickly, learn English as soon as possible and find a job. Although Yolanda and her husband were educated and had previously learnt some of the grammatical foundations of English, they still found it frustrating trying to communicate and often could not understand people's accents. Yolanda remembers being on a bus, with an annoyed driver repeating several times the exact same question, and of feeling distressed at not being able to understand what he required. Although Yolanda can look back and laugh now, at the time it was incredibly traumatic not being able to communicate.

Despite having to juggle learning English with employment to support their growing family, Yolanda and Carlos enjoyed attending the classes. After gaining confidence in English, Yolanda returned to her education and enrolled in welfare courses at TAFE and later at University. Although determined to gain an education, she encountered challenges. Some people assumed that because her spoken English was not perfect that Yolanda would not understand the course content or be able to contribute to study groups. Once she began to do well, their attitudes changed. But Yolanda still remembers their first response. **"You are judged all the time by the way you speak the language. It can be difficult if you let that discrimination get to you."** During this time, Yolanda and her husband were also committed to supporting new refugee arrivals. They volunteered to provide interpreting, translating and settlement assistance.

Yolanda has now worked for many years in the community and education sector. She is currently employed as a Community Development Worker for a local council, working with ageing communities and those with disabilities. Yolanda is passionate about her work and continues to volunteer and advocate for the empowerment of communities.

MYTH

Refugees have nothing in common with 'everyday Australians'.

"It takes a huge amount of courage and creativity to set up a whole new way of life. Now I feel Australia is home. Now I belong!"

Australia is a diverse nation whose identity has benefited from the contributions of people from around the world. Refugees bring new cultures, languages, traditions and wisdoms which enhance our community. Despite the horrors they have endured, the long times in refugee camps and the varied backgrounds and lived experiences they bring, people from refugee backgrounds also share many things in common with 'everyday Australians'.

Refugees arrive in Australia hoping for a secure place to live and a stable future for themselves and their families. They share the same hopes, dreams and aspirations as the wider community. Parents want their kids to be educated and to be safe. Children want to enjoy life and to make their parents proud. Young people face similar coming of age choices about education, employment and families. Older refugees have much wisdom to share and find strength in the support of family and community. Families enjoy being together to celebrate occasions and events that are important to them. Communities reach out to support and encourage each other. The strong desire to have peace, happiness and security is shared by all religions, cultures, ethnicities and communities. As one young refugee said, 'People are people'. There is much common ground to be shared.

For many people, Australia represents a place of belonging. Somewhere to finally feel safe and accepted after a life filled with suffering, grief and instability. Countless refugees have become citizens as soon as they are able to. They are happy to have a place to call home, a place where they and their families can have a future. The majority have no other home to return to.

AJANG's STORY

"To settle is a process. It can't happen overnight. My message is give us time"

Ajang was a leader in his community in Sudan and had just begun a family with his wife Aduk when war forced them to flee by foot to Ethiopia. Ten years of uncertainty, danger and deprivation in desert refugee camps followed, in Ethiopia and, after war forced them to flee again, in Kenya. Ajang and his family suffered for many years in Kakuma Refugee Camp. They lived in appalling conditions with no protection, no access to livelihoods or education and insufficient food rations. With the war continuing in Sudan, there was no possibility of returning home. Eventually, Ajang, Aduk and their five children were resettled to Australia.

When the family arrived in Australia 11 years ago, Ajang spoke a little English but Aduk and the children spoke none. They knew little about Australia, but were keen and committed to learning about their new home and community. They built up friendships with their neighbours and through a bible study group, which enabled them to know Australians and their customs, and provided an opportunity for Australians to get to know them.

But they also wanted to rebuild their lives, settle the children into a good education, learn English well, get jobs and find a secure home. With his qualifications not recognized in Australia, Ajang retrained in bookkeeping. After two years of study and job-seeking, he wasn't offered work: "Too senior for this job," potential employers told him. Discouraged by repeated rejections but encouraged by his friends to use his skills with people in a different field, Ajang graduated after two more years with a welfare qualification. He was interviewed for a position in a government department, and received the phone call he didn't expect: the job was his. After years of rejection, he was ecstatic to be able to provide for his family and start a new career in Australia.

Ajang's children had meanwhile settled into school. His kids were keen to learn but language and some bullying from other children made it a difficult transition. In support, the local church set up a homework club, which Ajang feels led his children to their current success. The two oldest children are now at university. The other children, including the youngest born in Australia, are doing well at school, and play in local netball and soccer teams. Aduk now works as a qualified nurse; Ajang gained postgraduate qualifications while continuing to work. The family achieved their goal of a secure home by buying a house, and they have sponsored and supported other families to come to Australia. **"My first goal was to study, to have a house, to have the children at university. When they all get a job, I will have to retire and dance!"** Although they can now support and assist others, Ajang and his family continue their warm friendships with the Australians who welcomed and supported them in their early years here.

NGHIA's STORY

"It is really a success story, not in terms of money, but because we are still alive more than anything else"

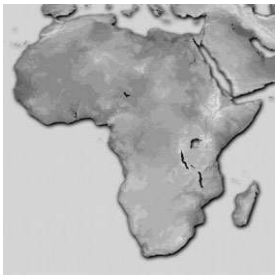
Nghia does not remember much of her life in Vietnam. She was only 14 months old when political oppression left her family with no choice but to leave everything behind, including some of their family members, and escape in search of safety. Fleeing with two other families in a small rickety boat, they arrived in Malaysia hopeful of finding a secure place to settle and start their lives again. But conditions were still harsh in Malaysia and her family continued to be at risk. Eventually Nghia and her family were sponsored by a small regional community to settle in Australia.

Nghia and her family received a warm welcome from the town they were settled in. But aside from one other family, they were the only non-white people in the area. It took some time for them and their sponsor family to adjust to each other's cultures. Many things were different: the food, the climate, the way people interacted and spoke to each other; and of course the language. Nghia remembers how much her parents missed their family members back in Vietnam. Due to the political situation in Vietnam, communication was impossible. For the first ten years after they arrived, her parents were not able to contact their family back home. They could not let anyone know they were safe in Australia and did not know if their family in Vietnam had survived.

Nghia's parents were highly successful business people in Vietnam. It was incredibly difficult for them to leave behind everything they had known and were familiar with. To start life in Australia again with nothing but two small children by their side was not easy. With the support of their sponsor family, her parents started a new restaurant business while Nghia and her siblings attended school. Knowing all that her parents had sacrificed, Nghia was keen to succeed and do well. When it was time for Nghia and her siblings to continue with a higher education, her family moved to a larger city. It once again took time to settle into new surroundings. Nghia did well in her studies, and recently finished her second Master's degree.

Nghia has a passion for humanitarian work. She is keen to give back to other refugee families the same support that she and her family received when they first arrived. Having a warm welcome and a supportive environment made an incredible difference to her family's experience. Nghia's sponsor family has become her second family and they remain very close more than a decade later. **"They keep on saying that we have given them so much….but they have actually given us life - that is so much more important than anything else."** Nghia recently volunteered in Africa in support of local community development projects. She is working hard to make a difference and support other communities in need.

MYTH



Refugees from Africa are not settling well and do not want to be part of Australian society.

"Australia is like a gift but it can be difficult here…people have different strengths, they need different support. There has to be that sensitivity"

Australia has resettled increasing numbers of refugees from Africa over the last decade. Refugees from Africa come from countries that share a common continent but they are very diverse. Individuals and communities are varied in their religion, ethnicities, customs and tribal groupings. Some have grown up in cities and are highly educated. Others are from rural villages and may be pre-literate. Many have spent years in conflict and war and in horrendous protracted refugee situations, often spending between 10-20 years in refugee camps and urban refugee settlements. Some young people have only known a life filled with conflict and loss. Yet all have shown incredible strength and resilience to survive and be resettled to Australia.

With differing backgrounds, strengths and skills, the needs of communities and individuals vary. Settlement takes time. People live with memories of horrific conflict and cruel persecution. The horrors of war and displacement have left many people separated from family and loved ones. Unaccompanied youth who have been orphaned since a young age are often settled alone and need understanding and support while finding their place in a new society.

Many refugees from countries in Africa are highly successful and are making enormous contributions to the community. Some are working in schools, in government departments, in health areas and in community sectors. Others run highly successful businesses. Some have formed charitable organizations. Young people who had suffered years of disrupted schooling are now doing well at university. Women who were preliterate when they arrived are reading, writing and teaching others. Many people volunteer hours of their time to supporting newly arrived refugees and community members. All agree settlement is a long term process. Some people are also taking much needed time to settle, to cope with their traumas, to adjust to a whole new way of life and to learn the 'system'. Successful settlement does not happen overnight but with support, understanding and patience, individuals and communities can do well.

ABRAHAM's STORY

"Just not everything is going bad, we are here, I am doing well. I am contributing now and I will contribute to Australia in the future"

When conflict broke out in Sudan, Abraham's family feared for their lives. His father was killed and Abraham and his siblings were separated from his mother by the war. His aunt cared for them but when she died, Abraham and his younger brother became part of the 'Lost Boys'. The 'Lost Boys' were a group of approximately 20,000 unaccompanied and orphaned young boys who had lost their families to war. Together the 'Lost Boys' formed their own families, caring for each other and providing protection where they could. They lived for many years in fear, fleeing back and forth across the border between Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, desperate to find safety. Finally in Kenya, Abraham and his brother sought refuge in Kakuma Refugee Camp. However with no parents and no support but each other, they struggled to survive in the severe conditions. They lived with the knowledge that going home to Sudan would mean almost certain death, but that staying in Kenya was no guarantee of their safety either. After living in hope of resettlement for many years, Abraham was finally selected, but was told he would have to leave his brother behind. For Abraham, there was no choice. He had to stay. He could not leave the only family he had, his brother, to survive alone.

After many years, Abraham and his brother were finally resettled to a small regional town in Australia. Although grateful to the group that had sponsored them, they found life very difficult in Australia. Despite speaking some English, he and his brother were still very isolated and had little support. Alone and depressed in a small flat, the boys wondered what they were doing in Australia. Abraham remembers shedding tears of pain for the first time when they were resettled. **"We needed someone to talk to but there was no one to talk to us. Someone to be a mother, to tell us what to do."** After a difficult first few months, Abraham went to TAFE to study Welfare while his brother finished school. With a strong desire to help other refugees feel welcome and supported, Abraham began working with a local refugee support organization. He later moved to Sydney to continue his studies at the University of New South Wales.

Settlement has not been easy and Abraham knows it will take time. Despite being here for five years, he believes it will be a few more years before he feels truly 'successfully settled'. Yet Abraham is continuing to work tirelessly to support his brother, his family overseas and other resettled refugees in Australia. Abraham is also close to the other 'Lost Boys' who have been resettled and knows young unaccompanied refugees need special support. Currently he is studying to be a social worker, and is also employed full time at a government agency. Abraham is making strong contributions to Australia through his education, his employment and his dedication to the community.

ANNIE's STORY

"Everything is different here. I came from a war torn country. When you first arrive, you don't know where to start. You don't know where to go"

Annie ran a successful hairdressing business in her home country of Sierra Leone before war broke out. Her husband was killed, and she was forced to flee with her children to neighbouring Guinea. Conditions were dangerous and Annie worked hard to protect her family. In 2001, they were finally resettled to Australia.

Arriving with her 5 children and 3 stepchildren, Annie had little more than the summer clothes they wore. They initially shared an already overcrowded house, but after receiving some settlement support they found an old fibro house to rent, and were so grateful they went to give thanks at the church. Here they met and were welcomed by local community members, who provided much needed material donations and support to the family. **"We got assistance for everything we needed. Anything we asked for… The most important things are shelter, food and making people feel comfortable in their homes".** The local schools also helped the children to settle in and provided uniforms and school books.

Within a month of arriving in Australia, Annie had started a course in small business management; she wanted to run her own business again. She went into partnership in a hairdressing business, but soon wanted to branch out on her own. As a single mother with no business experience in Australia, no bank would provide her with a loan. Undeterred, she decided she would just do the best she could, found a shop with very low rent, set up her salon, and worked very hard.

Annie's business has now grown to two salons, and she has travelled the world to source the best hair products for her clients. Some travel long distances to see her, including some from interstate. Annie's clients are loyal and supportive and many have been with her since she started her business. One of Annie's customers mentioned to Annie that she was selling her house, and Annie was able to buy it to provide a permanent home for the family. Having a home, a place to call their own after so many years of uncertainty was extremely important to Annie.

Some of Annie's children are now grown, and her oldest stepson has married an Australian woman. All of her daughters are involved in the business. One daughter manages Annie's second salon, while a daughter at university and those still at school work part time. Annie is well known and respected in her neighbourhood and has won awards for her business. She loves her work and is happy that she can once again run her own business and support her family.

CHIKURU's STORY

"Even though people have been unsettled, have had disrupted schooling, have been through unfortunate circumstances – there is still an opportunity to acquire the honour and pleasure of assisting someone in their journey. Of assisting them to restore their life"

Chikuru was just finishing secondary school and was hoping to soon begin university in Kinshasha, a city in the Congo, when war broke out and his entire family was forced to flee. They escaped to East Congo and then to Uganda. But the dangers of war followed and with life still unsafe, his family continued to run until they reached Kenya. They were made to stay in Kakuma Refugee Camp until the vicious conflict in Congo stopped and it was safe to return home or they were resettled to another country. When Chikuru and his family first heard about resettlement they thought it was too good to be true. How could there be an opportunity for them to go to a developed country and start their lives again with freedom?

After four years of dreadful conditions and ongoing danger in Kakuma Refugee Camp, resettlement became a reality when they were chosen to come to Australia. Chikuru remembers the moment they stepped off the plane, **"I'll never forget that. It was very moving. We realized how fortunate we are. That's it we have made it…We were walking in the clouds."** Chikuru and his family had only just begun to settle and feel a sense of belonging in their on arrival accommodation, when they were dealt the traumatic news they had to leave and find alternative rental housing. With eleven family members, it was incredibly difficult to find something suitable. The suburb they had originally settled in had just begun to feel like home and they were hesitant to move. With no other option, and after a long search, the family finally found a large home to rent. Unfortunately it was in an unfamiliar area, and Chikuru's family had to start their life in Australia once again.

Chikuru spoke a little English and he and his brother were keen to resume their studies. With no transcripts or Australian work experience, they returned to high school to study the HSC. Here they were fortunate to be met by an understanding and welcoming school community. The Deputy Principal and Intensive English Centre staff provided strong support and encouragement to Chikuru and his brother. But even with a supportive environment, it was still hard to adjust to a new and very different educational system. After high school, Chikuru went to TAFE. He was soon contacted by his former school asking if he would return, this time as a mentor and support staff person for other refugee students. Although he had not previously considered a career in education, now Chikuru can think of no better path.

Chikuru is currently working with the Department of Education and Training on a Refugee Project and is a Teachers Aid in two local schools. After finishing TAFE, he plans to study a double degree at university and pursue a Masters in Teaching. Chikuru marvels at the fact that he is now employed to help assist students through a smoother educational journey than the one he had. He hopes others will take the opportunity to do something good and make a difference in people's lives. It's clear Chikuru certainly has.

MYTH

Refugees without English and education will struggle to fit into life in Australia.

"You can't forget what has happened before but I am here now and I want to learn. I want to encourage myself and other people. It is difficult to learn if there is no one to help you"

For many refugees not being able to be understood or communicate their needs when they arrive in Australia is one of the greatest settlement challenges. While some refugees can speak English when they arrive, many do not. Refugees also arrive with a mixed educational background. Many have been denied access to education in their homelands. Educational opportunities are limited in refugee camps and urban settlements and people have often suffered severe disruptions to their schooling. Some have never seen a classroom or text books. Despite this, all arrive with a desire for education and language opportunities. But support and encouragement are needed to achieve this.

Refugees are often criticized for failing to learn English quickly but learning a new language in a new culture is not easy. Settlement can be a hard process. People have survived immense traumas on their journey to Australia and need time to adjust. Learning English is important but there are often other immediate priorities which take precedence. Settling families, finding housing, accessing employment and learning new systems all take time. Where people are able to access language classes, the allocated hours often barely scratch the surface of their true needs. In spite of these challenges, people want to learn. They are more aware than anyone of the importance of being able to speak English in order to be able to move forward with their lives. Their desire for education is also incredibly strong. Many see it as the essential ingredient for building a better future for themselves and their families.

After years of being denied their right to education people also need time and support to find their way in new systems. With access to supportive and understanding education and language environments, people will do well. Some of the most successful and inspiring refugees are those who arrived in Australia with no English and no educational background. Determined to make a new life for themselves here in Australia, they have started from scratch, worked through the challenges, and are now making significant contributions to the community.

GORANKA's STORY

"I think it's such a beautiful thing that Australia opens its arms and helps people in their time of need….when you have made a friend here you are well and truly on your way into settling into the country"

When the gunfire started, Goranka and her family knew they had no choice but to flee their hometown in Croatia. At first the family sought refuge with relatives in a neighbouring town, however the war followed and after hiding in fear of their lives in a nearby forest they were eventually taken to Montenegro. As a ten year old, Goranka remembers being on a bus leaving Croatia, not realizing it would be many years before she and her family would ever be able to return. Some months after arriving in Montenegro they were resettled to Australia.

Arriving in Australia, Goranka and her family spoke no English. Feeling the grief for a life left behind and with a new language and a new culture to learn, the initial period was incredibly hard for Goranka. There were many nights when she cried herself to sleep. **"You feel isolated and completely helpless. You rely a lot on the kindness from people around you."** The first day of school was terrifying, and Goranka was scared she would not be able to make friends because she did not speak English. Looking out at a sea of strangers, their mouths moving but hearing no words, only sounds, Goranka wondered if she would ever belong. When the teacher asked the class who would be her friend, a few hands slowly went up. Goranka can still remember vividly the relief at that feeling of acceptance, of kindness. Although it took some time for Goranka to settle in and learn English, a welcoming and supportive school made all the difference.

Today, Goranka works hard to support and celebrate the courage of others. She has formed a charitable organization, Triumphant International, and with a number of other friends runs a business called Exquisite Women. The business aims to highlight the achievements, strengths and contributions of women. In 2007, Goranka co-launched a highly successful refugee film festival to celebrate the triumphs of refugees from around the world. Recently, Goranka was awarded the Rotary World Peace Fellowship, an annual scholarship of which only 60 are awarded in the world. Goranka plans to study a Masters in Peace and Conflict studies in the UK with the scholarship. She then hopes to return to Croatia to continue the peace building efforts and to work with local women in strengthening their leadership potential. Still in her twenties, Goranka is herself a strong leader. She has made many contributions to her life in Australia, and is an inspiration to women across communities. Goranka is now keen to continue those contributions internationally.

ELIZABETH's STORY

"We are good here now but it is not easy. Our lives have been broken"

Elizabeth's life was torn apart by the conflict in Sudan. Her husband and many of her family were killed when the war began. Others disappeared and still have not been found. As Elizabeth fled the horrors of life in Sudan with her children, one of her young sons was shot and killed. It was too dangerous for her to stop and grieve for him. After a horrendous journey, Elizabeth arrived with her family at Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. They hoped for a safe refuge but instead found further danger. As a woman alone with her children in a camp of 95,000 people, their lives were constantly at risk. Elizabeth's children were kidnapped and she was forced to hide in a small section of the camp known as the 'Protection Area'. The family was later reunited and finally, after years of living in fear for their lives, Elizabeth and her family were resettled to Australia under the Women at Risk program.

Before Elizabeth and her family arrived, they had been told they were going to Sydney and were surprised when instead they were taken to a smaller regional city. There were very few other people from Africa in the area and Elizabeth remembers thinking, "**There is nobody here like me…what will I do?"** After a few months, and with the support and assistance of her local caseworker and dedicated volunteers, Elizabeth and her family began to settle in. The kindness, warmth and support shown by these local volunteers helped her family enormously during this initial period.

Elizabeth spoke no English and could not read or write when she first arrived in Australia. Determined to learn and build her skills, she went to TAFE and can now speak and write English. Elizabeth is continuing her study and is working hard to support other resettling refugees. She spends her time encouraging others to learn and study. Elizabeth knows it is not easy to start again and believes support and encouragement are keys to helping people succeed.

Elizabeth is a strong woman, a leader who has shown incredible determination to succeed in Australia. She has worked hard over the years to support and protect her family and is making enormous contributions to Australia. In 2005, she was asked to speak at the "Hopes Fulfilled or Dreams Shattered" Refugee Resettlement Conference. There, Elizabeth spoke about the importance of giving people time to settle and the role of a welcoming community. A short film was made about Elizabeth's time in Kakuma and her conference presentation. The film has been shown in refugee camps around the world and Elizabeth is an inspiration to other women who are still fighting for survival. They all say: "**One day I want to be like Elizabeth."**

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

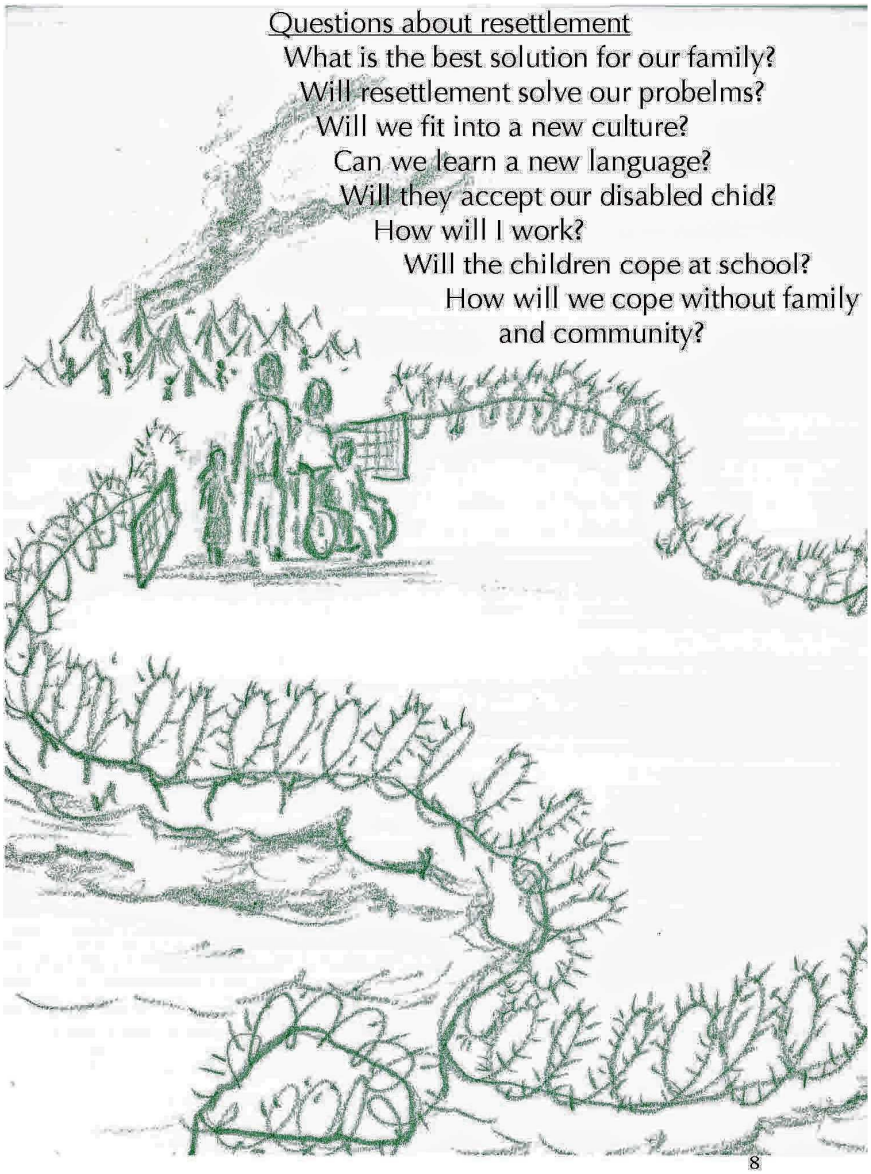
"My name is Goranka and I arrived in Australia as a refugee from Croatia. When thinking about what helped me to succeed in Australia there were so many things that came to me. My family and welfare support ensured I had a roof over my head and necessary nourishment. English as a Second Language classes ensured that I had the basic communication skills required to live in my new environment. This kind of support provided a fundamental foundation on which I could grow and develop as a person. It was an investment in my future and the kindness I was shown inspired me to later in life contribute back to the people who supported me.

However, if it had only been left up to addressing my basic survival needs, then probably all I would have ever done is just survive. What allowed me to flourish is community support that had a broader intention than merely ensuring my survival. This community support allowed me to fulfill my dreams. It built my self confidence and helped me to socialize with others. When I started primary school in Australia, I was so grateful when some students put up their hands to be my friend. To this day, one of the students is still one of my best friends. By encouraging me to socialize with people around me, my teacher made a huge positive difference in my life. I no longer felt alone, I had friends with whom I could share my life journey. The fun we had made the settlement experience less stressful and it didn't appear to be such hard work anymore. The routine my family provided for me gave stability to my life, which allowed me to focus on achieving and reaching new heights.

Even learning English became more fun, especially given that there were others who were going through the same experience and we could relate to each other despite our different cultural and language backgrounds. Reflecting on this years later I realized the lesson was that people could relate to each other based on their experiences, that cultural differences can be celebrated, they can be fun and used as learning opportunities rather than act as a justification for division and antagonism. Being part of a multicultural environment allowed me to develop the skills, curiosity and interest in people from different cultures. I still absolutely love meeting people from different parts of the world and discovering their way of life.

One final point I'd like to acknowledge is that I have always been surrounded by people who have believed that I am capable of achieving great things. They gave me the encouragement needed and pointed me in the direction of further support to fulfill on my goals if they were unable to give me support themselves. As an acknowledgement of their support I've as much as possible looked for ways to use it to give back to others. Rather than worry about how much I am giving, I like to have my attention on giving. I have a strong belief that if each of us has our attention on giving, that somehow life works out in the end. Successful settlement depends to a large extent on community generosity. I am successful because I have spent much of my life in a generous environment in Australia. "

Goranka Slavujevic



WOULD YOU LIKE MORE INFORMATION?

Centre for Refugee Research: www.crr.unsw.edu.au

ANCORW (Australian National Committee on Refugee Women): www.ancorw.org

Refugee Council of Australia: www.refugeecouncil.org.au

UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) : www.unhcr.org

Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org.au

STARTTS (Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors): www.startts.org

FASSTT (Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma): www.fasstt.org.au

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