

Starting Over

FOR MANY MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES, ARRIVING IN AUSTRALIA IS JUST ONE STEP ON THE LONG ROAD TO A NEW AND BETTER LIFE.

■ STORY: ANDREW DAWSON

Ten years ago Sidique Bah was given an opportunity. After fleeing a long-running civil war in Sierra Leone and finding his way to a refugee camp in neighbouring Guinea, he was chosen for resettlement in Australia.

A decade on, Sidique is now helping other refugees and migrants make the transition to a new life in South Australia.

“When you come here as a refugee, one of the main things is the loneliness,” Sidique recalls.

“Most people don’t consider that, but you really feel alone, when you don’t know people around you.”

And when your native language is French, difficulty communicating adds another hurdle, particularly when it comes to finding work.

“Even if you speak the language, you speak with an accent, so you can find it a bit hard to get through, or to convince people that you are capable of doing some of the jobs that are out there,” Sidique says.

Max Fofu Folly, a former refugee from Togo, agrees. He found it took a while to adjust to the Australian way of doing things.

“I had a settling in period to learn the way people think in Australia, compared to how people think in Africa,” Max says.

To help make the journey a bit easier for those who have followed, Sidique and Max have both become involved with resettlement programs run by the Multicultural Communities Council of South Australia. They recently discussed their experiences with federal parliament’s Migration

Committee, which is conducting an inquiry into multiculturalism.

In its submission to the inquiry, the council highlights the value of sports and arts based programs as an effective way to help youth and families develop the contacts, confidence and resilience to successfully settle in Australia.

“You really feel alone, when you don’t know people around you.”

The council says sports programs encourage people to participate in a healthy activity and help families make friends and develop networks so they feel part of the wider community. Arts based projects, particularly performance theatre, encourage interaction between different groups.

“Coming from Africa, for most of them music and dance is part of their culture. When they come to Australia and that part of them is missing, it is harder for them to deal with their actual life,” Max Folly says.

“We underestimate the value of their art and how it is used in their communities.

“Think about how you can give more young people the opportunity to express themselves through their art.”

Sidique Bah believes arts based programs can help people, particularly young people, overcome the trauma of the life they were leaving behind.

“Some of them were living in camps before they came to Australia and they learnt to fend for



HOPES AND DREAMS:
*For many children of refugees,
they get their first experience
of education in Australia
(Photos: Andrew Dawson)*

FOR A BETTER LIFE:

Often humanitarian entrants who come to Australia have lived in refugee camps for a long time

themselves at an early age. Some have trauma that goes with it,” he says.

“When they find themselves here some of them end up having issues that will be very hard to deal with because of what they have been through. On a general basis I think it would be good to encourage them into some form of creativity and activity. I think that will help them.”

According to the South Australian government, people who come to Australia under humanitarian programs arrive with great hope for a bright future but are not necessarily prepared for the difficulties that arise in relation to employment, language, culture and family.

“The literature shows that young people are particularly vulnerable, with additional challenges arising from the expectations of dual cultures, consumerism, the legal system, education, family relationships and peer acceptance,” the SA government’s submission says.

Consultations the state government has undertaken with refugee communities and their service providers point to the importance of keeping family relationships intact and improving proficiency in English.

Roger Lean, acting director of Multicultural South Australia, says youth are the group that needs the greatest attention among humanitarian entrants.

“It is a very significant shift for them,” he says. “Often they have been in refugee camps for a long period of time. They have been involved in very traumatic experiences in the past. The shift to settling in our society is an enormous shift for them which is compounded by the issues associated with education and the challenge of getting employment beyond that.”

According to Mr Lean, many young people who come to Australia as humanitarian entrants have virtually no previous education experience.

“They have no literacy in any language and no notion of learning in the formal sense that we have here in Australia. As a consequence, for them to reach a level at which they can get qualifications of any sort is a massive challenge.”

Four hundred kilometres from Adelaide, in the regional city of Mount Gambier, a local primary school is getting first-hand experience of the educational challenges facing young people who arrive in Australia as refugees.

Over the past four years, many hundred Karen and Karenni refugees from Burma and a dozen or so Congolese



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families from Africa have resettled in Mount Gambier. Their children, often born in refugee camps, are only now getting their first experience of formal education.

Mount Gambier North Primary School principal Jane Turner says the younger students learn quickly, but those who start their education as teenagers can find it a real struggle.

“The younger children will do brilliantly. They are gifted in languages, music and sport.

“They pay attention and they want to learn. They come to the homework club twice a week. I actually have to kick



GETTY



SETTLING IN: *Former refugees Max Fofo Folly and Sidique Bah are now helping others with resettlement*



them out to send them home. They come to read and have a bit of social time.

“The older teenagers who have had no English and no education as we would see it cannot just pick it up and sit the year 11 curriculum. They just cannot. It is taking them longer to pick up English.”

According to Ms Turner, research shows that if you are a humanitarian refugee, do not speak English and have had no education it will take about seven years to learn the language.

“The challenge there is to keep the children’s hopes and dreams alive, but not to have such artificial dreams that they are not achievable immediately. There are some things they would like to do but it will take them longer to learn the language.”

In some cases that wait can seem too long and they look for alternative ways to gain the skills they need.

“We have just helped organise a job for one of the 18-year-olds because he does not want to be at school for another seven years before he can achieve anything,” Ms Turner says.

“He is working at our local supermarket. In the workplace he will learn English and he can study later on.

“They do not want to go straight into year 11 because it is a bit daunting for them so they are going into the workplace. They take a job, which may not be the job they want forever, while they learn English.”

Another of the young refugees was able to get a job at a local supermarket after getting to know the manager through a local sporting club.

Involving the community is an important part of the school’s approach to ensure the community understands what the school is trying to achieve through its new arrivals program.

“Initially some of the parents were a bit unsure about having new people in our school and asking, ‘What is this all about?’ It was not aggressively so, but you would get the quiet questions,” Ms Turner says.

“Four years down the track, my governing council are now saying things like, ‘How come we are not learning Karen as a language? How come we haven’t got welcome signs in all the languages around the school?’ We have tried not to push it too hard so that people do not say, ‘Back off’, but we have been letting our community know.”

Creating that sense of belonging is vital for all involved when it comes to starting over. •

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Migration Committee’s inquiry into multiculturalism in Australia, visit www.aph.gov.au/mig or email jscm@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4560.