

Armidale Sanctuary Humanitarian Settlement, Inc

Yearly President's Report – May 2023 to May 2024

It has been another busy and productive year for Armidale Sanctuary (reflected in this long report).

Volunteering

The majority of our volunteers have continued to support the Ezidi community in Armidale through the Home Reading Program and the Homework Centre at Drummond School. (Thanks go to Fay Paris for her organisation). Many who have become more friends than volunteers with Ezidi families have also been helping with applications for citizenship and passing the notorious Citizenship test. And there have been a large number of successes!

Other volunteers have responded for requests for help from the organisations responsible for the welfare of the Ezidis in Armidale: SSI (Settlement Services International), Mosaic Multicultural Connections, STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors) and several health agencies. These requests cover a wide range from English support to driving instruction to providing companionship. Our hard-working Volunteer Coordinators, Kerry Dunne and Astrid Knirsch, received these requests and assigned volunteers to help where possible. (But we still have many requests that we are unable to fulfill because of lack of available volunteers.)

Following requests from Mosaic, volunteers were also lined up to help Ezidis with bookkeeping and filling out citizenship applications. Frustratingly, in many cases Mosaic did not follow through by arranging this with the volunteers.

Astrid and Kerry have also coordinated two new successful initiatives over the past year. The first is volunteers going to TAFE to help students in learning English. The second is volunteers working with Ezidi students who have enrolled at UNE. This has been partly in conjunction with HEPPP (the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program) at UNE.

Many thanks to the Sanctuary members who have been doing all this volunteering.

Highlights of the year:

Awards and appointments:

At the New England and Northern Inland Volunteer Awards Ceremony on 7 September, Sanctuary Volunteer Coordinators, Kerry and Astrid, received the 2023 award for Volunteer Team of the Year.

Both Committee member Liz Ellis and I have been appointed to the Regional Community Network (RCN) for New England and Northwest. This is one of 10 RCNs established to provide advice and guidance to Multicultural NSW (a NSW government agency).

In November, Armidale Sanctuary topped the Greater Bank's Community Funding program's poll and received \$3000 to support our continuing work with Armidale's growing refugee population. (Thanks go to our treasurer, Maurice Anker, for this initiative.)

2023 Human Rights Lecture:

The Annual Sanctuary Human Rights Lecture was held on 14 September, given by the President of the Human Rights Commission, Emeritus Professor Rosalind Croucher. The title was "Making rights a reality: The need for a Human Rights Act in Australia".

Citizenship Test:

A campaign by Sanctuary helped to make the Citizenship Test available in Armidale. Previously, Ezidis applying for citizenship had to travel to Tamworth to take the test. Vice President, Lucinda Wright, and I made written and face-to-face representations to the Centrelink Multicultural Services Officer,

members of the local council, our federal MP, officials from the Department of Home Affairs and the Minister of Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs. Ezidis started taking the test in Armidale in November.

Community Sponsorship of Refugees:

A Sanctuary Community Supporter Group (CSG) was formed in July to take part in the federal government's CRISP (Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot) program. We were assigned the Issa family (parents and 5 children, aged 5–14) from Syria. They were displaced by the war there and had been refugees in Lebanon since 2012. All support for refugee families in the CRISP program is provided by the community, not the government. So we raised funds from the wider Armidale community and received generous donations of furniture, white goods and other household items. We also arranged housing, medical care, schooling, banking and signing up with Centrelink.

The Issa family arrived in Armidale on 23 November. Unfortunately they decided to move to Shepparton to be with close family friends who had just arrived there as refugees. We helped set them up with agencies there and paid their train fares, and they left 2 weeks after arrival. This was very disappointing for members of the Armidale Sanctuary CSG who had worked so hard for the family. But we were happy that we had enabled them to come to Australia, even if they didn't settle here.

And we signed up to support another (smaller) family. This will be a mother and daughter (who is a young adult) from the Democratic Republic of Congo. They have been refugees since 2010, living in Nairobi (Kenya). We have been in contact with the family and are waiting to find out when they will arrive. But we have been informed that because of delays in getting refugees out of Africa, it may take months.

The convenor of the Armidale Sanctuary CSG is now Michael Walsh and the deputy Gaynor McGrath. We are still looking for other members of the group, so please contact me if you are interested.

Other activities

Refugee Week:

Sanctuary helped organise an event for last year's Refugee week on **18 June** at the Armidale Jockey Club. There was music, music, dancing and free food from Armidale's multicultural community, plus activities for kids and youth.

Events in coordination with Rotary:

"An evening with Gemma Sisia" was held on 16 June at the Bowlo (Armidale Bowling Club). Gemma, who is from Guyra, started the School of St Jude for needy children in Tanzania over 20 years ago. There are now 3 schools and over 300 students supported in tertiary education. Gemma was joined by Maddie Kelly (author) and Enoch Ephraim (alumnus and current employee of the school) to talk about her new book *The School that Hope Built*.

A dinner was held at the Bowlo on 23 April for Robin Jones, one of the founding members of Armidale Sanctuary. She also spent time working as a volunteer in refugee camps in both South Sudan and on the Thai-Burmese border. The presence of the large Ezidi community in Armidale is largely due to her success in lobbying for Armidale to become a designed refugee settlement location. Robin moved to Queensland a few years ago and wrote a book about her amazing life: *From Cabbages to Naan: Memoirs of a Humanitarian*. This was launched at the dinner.

Film fundraiser:

A film evening fundraiser, showing *Captains of Za'atari*, was held on 31 October at the Armidale Playhouse to launch the fundraising appeal for the Issa family.

Training and outreach

Information sessions/Volunteer Chats:

Three gatherings were held over the year to give Sanctuary volunteers the opportunity to meet each other, learn about the code of conduct, find out about the main service providers for the Ezidi community and ask questions. These were held on 29 June, 26 October and 8 April. Another Volunteer Chat is being planned for August this year.

Helping people pass the Citizenship Test:

On 13 July Lyla Stephen ran a workshop for people involved in helping Ezidis pass the Citizenship Test. She shared her techniques and teaching materials that have helped people actually pass the test. Lyla has kindly made her materials available to Sanctuary members. (Contact me if you want copies.)

Lifesaver Day:

Sanctuary participated in "Lifesaver Day" at UNE on 22 February. This is part of O Week (orientation week for new students), where community groups and clubs provide information about their activities and services.

Recognition of the Ezidi language:

Efforts continued to get the language actually spoken by 99% of the Ezidis in Australia recognised by government agencies. Salam Qaro and I applied to the ISO 639-3 Registration Authority (associated with the International Organization for Standardization) for this language to be listed and given its own internationally recognised 3 letter code. The application has progressed but there has been a delay caused by revisions of the code structures the second half of 2023. It is currently being considered by Review Panel.

Meetings

Throughout the year, Vice President Lucinda Wright and/or I attended New England Multicultural Interagency meetings and meetings of HSPN (the Humanitarian Settlement Program Network) and MCDT (the local Multicultural Community Development Team). Along with Volunteers Coordinators Kerry and Astrid, we also had regular meetings with STARTTS and occasional meetings with SSI and Mosaic.

On 19 June, I had a long meeting with two Community Liaison Officers from the Dept of Home Affairs, who were visiting Armidale: Olivier Dreyfus and Sarjoh Bah. On 30 April I had another meeting with Olivier and another officer, James Lea. We discussed issues such as the Citizenship Test (both its accessibility and the nature of the test itself) and the recognition of the Ezidi language in Australia.

On 11 November, I was interviewed in Armidale by Christine Castley, one of the three people appointed by the Federal Government to conduct a review of multiculturalism in Australia and support a cohesive multicultural society.

Sanctuary Committee

As usual, the Committee met the second Wednesday of each month (except January). And members of the Committee have dealt efficiently with all of Sanctuary's planning and activities, in addition to their volunteering with Ezidi families and individuals.

First, I would like to give a big thank you to our official and unofficial office holders. Vice President, Lucinda Wright, has continued to be a mainstay of the organisation. Our Treasurer Maurice Anker (who also looks after our database) has once again worked hard over the year, as have our Membership Secretary, Luise Ashley, and our Correspondence Secretary, Priscilla Connor (especially in organising

speakers for the Humanitarian Lectures). Patricia Marson took on the time-consuming position of Minutes Secretary this year and has done a fine job.

Valerie Dalton has continued doing great work as Publicity Officer, and Fay Paris has remained a stalwart as coordinator of the Home Reading Program and Homework Centre.

But the biggest thanks go to our Volunteers Coordinators, Kerry Dunne and Astrid Knirsch, who are sadly stepping down from this cumbersome job (presumably to get their lives back!).

Finally, huge thanks to the dedicated general members of the Committee: Phillip Bookallil, Maria Craven, Liz Ellis, Carol Mackerras, Helen Ware and Pam Watson, and to Ishan Jarallah and Qasim Qasin, who have represented the Ezidi community.

And of course, we can't forget all the supporters and volunteers who make Armidale Sanctuary what it is!

Jeff Siegel
President