



It's not *just* Soccer

A soccer tournament in rural New South Wales was more about forging friendships than winning trophies. LO-SHU WEN travelled with nine teams from migrant communities in Sydney and Newcastle to find in Gunnedah strong local competition and country hospitality. By Lo-Shu Wen

Australia is a lot more than just tall buildings, large cityscapes and sprawling suburbia. There are boundless plains and snaking valleys that represent the natural beauty and resources that characterise rural Australia. For many that arrive to Australia as refugees and settle in the built-up areas of Australia, they are occupied with settling into the way of life in the “big smoke” and have little resources or time to uncover the true treasures of the “outback”. Similarly, city life has changed a great deal. The cities have grown

to become a bastion of multiculturalism with both migrants and refugees sharing their culture to create what is an ever-changing face of Australia.

The Gunnedah International Cup, a soccer tournament, was envisioned to bridge this divide and promote cross-cultural exchange not only between the changing face of the city and the country but also between the growing diverse communities that exist within the city. After a failed initial attempt, Jorge Aroche, Executive

Director of the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) was approached by the Centre for Social Leadership at the Benevolent Society to assist with the event. This new partnership and the existing one with Auburn Migrant Resource Centre and Gunnedah Shire Council ensured the fruition of this event. It would seem that this theme of partnership, working together and unity would be carried through the whole weekend as event after event displayed the

friendship and goodwill that was being generated.

The trip kicked off on Friday 11 June when over a hundred young people from eight different ethnic backgrounds left Sydney together for Gunnedah. They included Afghan Hazara, Bosnian, Iraqi Assyrian and Chaldean, Somali, Sierra Leone, Spanish Speaking, Sri Lankan Tamil, and Vietnamese. In the build up to the event, the Bosnian team received great support from the community, such that their uniforms were sponsored. The Sudanese team joined us at our stop at Hexham. This team consisted of Sudanese who had settled in Newcastle. The event was a great opportunity for them to spend time together as a community which they rarely do because of their dispersed locality.

After several hours of travel, we finally arrived at the Creative Arts Centre in Gunnedah where we were warmly greeted by a welcoming party which included the Mayor, Clr Gae Swain. In the Creative Arts Centre, Gae presented to each team, as welcoming gift, a sculpted ornament made from wood from the region with an inset of a gum leaf. We then retired to our accommodation at the Lake Keepit Sport and Recreation Facility.

Saturday was the big day of the soccer tournament. By this time, the Iraqi Assyrian and Chaldean and Spanish speaking women's teams had decided to amalgamate into the one team: 'Four Nations' to strengthen their chances to win. This proved to be a successful move until their lead striker was injured. As the striker writhed in pain, the teams playing on the adjacent field stopped play to come and check on her. As she was helped off the field, both players and spectators gave her a round of applause in appreciation of her effort and

courage. This event proved to be a catalyst for bringing 'Four Nations' and the Bosnian team, the opponents, closer together.

Friendships were being formed on the men's teams, too. The Sri Lankan Tamils' had adopted a pair of twins from Gunnedah to play on their team. With this injection of energy, it propelled the Sri Lankan Tamil team, normally a cricket playing nation and not known for their soccer expertise, into the finals past the more heavily favoured teams. Elsewhere, there were shin pads and soccer boots being shared between teams in support of one another. The Vietnamese team weren't strong in soccer but were strong in spirit as they showed their support for every team in the competition by cheering wildly and applauding loudly.

The women's final was between the Bosnian and Gunnedah 2 team and the men's final was between the Sri Lankan Tamil and Gunnedah 3. The eventual respective victors were the Bosnian women's and the Gunnedah men's teams. But it could be said that everyone was a winner because of the spirit they shared, the friends they made and the fun they had irrespective of whether they won, loss, or drew.

The fun was not yet over by a long shot. Sunday was filled with activities. Amongst the activities was a visit to the local museum to learn about indigenous culture. There was also a visit to a farm to see sheep shearing and a sheep dog demonstration. At the farm, one Gunnedah local generously decided to give the young people a ride on his quad bike, whilst another decided to give them a go at shearing a sheep. After this, it was time for a trip to Waterways, a wildlife park, where the group were able to get close to a koala and feel how soft their fur is and how

sharp their claws are. The Afghan Hazara team were also able to get reacquainted with a bird that is native to Afghanistan.

The day climaxed with the entertainment night at the local servicemen's and bowling club. It was a night to share each other's culture. The Gunnedah community showed us how to crack whips, how to tap dance, how to juggle, the meaning of indigenous dances, and how to have fun. In return, the Sierra Leone, Somali, Sri Lankan Tamil, Bosnian, Vietnamese, Sudanese, and Afghan Hazara teams all shared an aspect of their culture with the people of Gunnedah, be it a dance, a song, a glimpse into their humour, or a gift. The night did not want to end and the participants did not want to leave, as they danced into the night in unison.

On Monday, it was time to leave Gunnedah for home. But, before leaving we planted a tree together with Gae in what was to be the beginnings of a Peace Garden- a lasting symbol of our time, what we shared and the possibilities. With a wave and a tinge of sadness we bid Gunnedah goodbye but not farewell, as the friendships formed will be lasting. Gae's sentiment captures it best, she said, "We send all of you our love. We will never forget. God Bless."

On the trip back to Sydney, we said goodbye to our Sudanese friends from Newcastle. We hugged. We shook hands. We shared a laugh. Back in Sydney there were similar scenes. It was time for us to go back to the everyday with the memory of the great weekend we shared. There was much shaking of hands and embracing, exchanging of numbers, emails and whatnots, and a pledge that we will meet each other again ... as friends. ■