

Sharing our Stories, Sharing our Strengths

A Refugee Conference

Refugees assaulted co-worker: Tamworth tension fears

AFP probes terror fundraising by local Somali extremists

REFUGEES TURN TO CRIME FOR KICKS

Racist pamphlet targets Africans

Mental care for migrant detainees

With headlines like these it's easy to see why some people believe refugees are troublesome, needy and even downright dangerous. Stories of resilience and fortitude are rare, and are generally confined to the later pages or features pages of the major newspapers.

Yet spending time with most refugees builds an overwhelming picture of courage, resourcefulness and a capacity to laugh despite enormous tragedy.

As, Karitane worker and Vietnamese conference committee representative Anhlinh Pham says "Vietnamese refugees... have done a lot of things that have contributed to Australia, but they are

not very much recognised

The Sharing our Stories, Sharing our Strengths conference, is taking place from December 6-8 this year and supported by STARTTS, is based on the notion that more than anything, refugees have a remarkable ability to overcome adversity.

By bringing members of many different refugee communities together, the conference aims to enhance the ability of those who came here seeking safety to deal with their settlement issues and recover from the impact of trauma.

It recognises that people who escaped violence and persecution have the capacity to solve their own problems when given the right supportive environ-

ment. The organisations, communities and individuals involved in developing the conference believe that although experts from Australia have much to offer, other refugees can provide different understandings, assistance and ways of building the necessary social capital for succeeding in a new country.

Carlos Encina, Coordinator of the NSW Spanish and Latin American Association for Social Assistance and a conference committee member said that, "it was time for us to have our own conference, to tell others about our experiences, to tell others about our strengths, our struggles."

The idea for this conference came from members of the Vietnamese

No apology for linking Africans to crime

Refugee mum dies – Husband is charged

Visa row on links to terror

community. In consultation with STARTTS they said they wished to learn from other refugee communities about issues such as multigenerational trauma and care of older people. In turn they desired to assist others by sharing their own experiences, mistakes and successes so that other communities might discover new ways to approach old problems.

From there, representatives of varied refugee communities and organisations (see below) helped plan and develop the conference, deciding upon the four major themes: Building communities, making a living in Australia, families, and negotiating Australian laws and systems.

The success of the conference was to involve as many people as possible in organising it and helping out on the day, including both those with experience and those without. From graphic design work, to the selection of speakers to organising publicity, people with refugee backgrounds have been intimately involved with organising Sharing our

Stories, Sharing our Strengths.

One of those involved in the organisation is Noel Zihabamwe, a student and refugee from Rwanda. When asked about how the conference could help he says:

"This conference is very good for us, so we meet up with many people from different backgrounds who can share, and what we share we can use so that our fear that we have can be stopped."

Presenters are representing Australia's wonderful cultural diversity and focus on the breadth of issues which refugees face in their new country. Speakers originating from the Middle East, Africa and across Europe, Asia and South America will address topics which range from learning English to maintaining culture to intergenerational conflict within a new culture.

Sharing our Stories, Sharing our Strengths is being held at the University of Western Sydney, Bankstown, who have kindly donated their venue on 6, 7 and 8 December 2007.

Assisting the conference so far are

members of the following communities Assyrian, Australian, Bosnian, Burundian, Chilean, Karen, Khmer, Kurdish, Mandaean, Rwandan, Serbian, Somali, Southern Sudanese, Tamil and Vietnamese. Some of the organisations represented are Assyrian Workers Network, Australian Assyrian Workers Association, Australian Karen Organisation, Australian Red Cross, Cambodian Welfare Association, HARDA – Horn of Africa Relief and Development Agency, Karitane, Mandaean Australian Community Cultural Club Inc, NSW Spanish and Latin American Association for Social Assistance (SLASA), Parramatta City Council, South West Recruitment, Southern Sudanese and Marginalised Areas, and the University of Western Sydney.

Sharing our Stories, Sharing our Strengths, 6-8 December 2007, University of Western Sydney Bankstown www.startts.org.au "When people come to this conference and they hear your experience, they will know we're not alone." ■

Richard Kerbaj *The Australian* 27 December 2006, **Justin Vallejo** *The Daily Telegraph* 7 July 2006, **Natalie O'Brien** *The Weekend Australian* 22-23 April 2006, **Greg Roberts** *The Australian* 4 April 2006, **Connie Levitt** *The Sydney Morning Herald* 10 August 2007, **Cath Hart** *The Australian* 9 May 2007, **Cameron Stewart** *The Australian* 23 April 2007, **Brad Clifton** *The Daily Telegraph* 31 January 2007