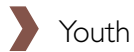




Journeys from Africa: Destination Hunter

Northern Settlement Services Ltd (formerly Migrant Resource Centre of Newcastle and Hunter Region), Newcastle, NSW

This project also relates to:



Youth



Education

The original aim of this community education project was to reduce the possibility of racism towards refugees from Southern Sudan, an emerging community in Newcastle. When the project started to generate a lot of interest and refugees from other backgrounds heard about it, the project was expanded to include refugees from the whole of Africa.

Nineteen refugees living in the Newcastle area agreed to participate in the project. They were taught presentation skills in order to be able to better relate their refugee experiences to schools and community groups in the Newcastle area.

Using the refugee community as a resource, the project aimed to develop the skills of refugees to build up their self-esteem and confidence in their journey towards integration. At the same time, local youth and the broader community would be educated about the refugees.

The presentations promoted positive images of African refugees as people of value within the community and connected local youth to the refugee experience. During the presentations, resource material was distributed such as maps of Africa, information about refugees and the role of Northern Settlement Services Ltd for continued use in building cross-cultural understanding and good community relations.

The project was a partnership between Northern Settlement Services and Newcastle City Council, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, the Southern Sudanese Community, the Catholic Education Office and the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The project received funding under the *Living in Harmony* program administered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to employ a project worker for three days per week at Northern Settlement Services from October 2004 to September 2005.

Identifying a need

Within the past few years, a large number of African refugees have settled in the Newcastle and Hunter area. The general community was uncertain about the status of the new arrivals. Director of Northern Settlement Services Ltd, Violetta Walsh, said:

We had in our region a new group of people who were clearly very different from our previous arrivals. There was a lot of curiosity about their background. People didn't know if they were students, if they were temporary or permanent residents or if they were asylum seekers.

Most people are unfamiliar with the experiences of refugees and the challenges they often face in settling in Australia. As well as cultural and language barriers that can impede integration, recently arrived refugees face further obstacles, such as prevailing attitudes, and stereotyping. The potential for community disharmony was evident and a need was apparent to provide the community with positive exposure to the refugees.

Engaging the refugees and the broader community

In order to encourage local schools to sign up for the presentations, a multi-media competition on the theme of *walk in my shoes* was held for students from Year 4 to senior school. The theme encouraged the children to think about what it meant to be a refugee by basing their entries on their responses to the talks by the refugee ambassadors.

The refugee presenters launched the competition at a Harmony Day lunch in March 2005. Entries were presented in a wide variety of formats including CDs, PowerPoint presentations, posters, stories, poems and worksheets for students. Winners were announced during Refugee Week in October 2005.

The engagement of youth was seen as a beneficial extension of the principal aim of the *Journeys from Africa: Destination Hunter* project.

Further awareness raising followed with the production of a CD of some of the winning entries interspersed with highlights of the project such as photos of those attending a Harmony Day celebration at Newcastle Town Hall. The CD was distributed to all local schools and libraries and placed on the Northern Settlement Services Ltd's website.

Promoting the project

After a press release was issued about the closing date for the schools competition the media took an interest in the project. Articles were published about the project in *The Newcastle Herald* and *The Star* and this resulted in requests from community organisations for guest speakers. Northern Settlement Services Ltd's quarterly newsletter *Multicultural Matters* highlighted the project's activities as did the organisation's website at www.nssservices.com.au.

The project

A reference group was established in the planning phase to identify appropriate partners, convene a reference group committee, and organise regular meetings to monitor the implementation and impact of the project and gather feedback.

Recruiting and training refugee ambassadors

Northern Settlement Services employed a part-time project coordinator to identify and recruit ambassadors from the African refugee community who represented a good mix of age, gender and ethnic background. The project coordinator approached community members and African students at TAFE and attending other local English classes.

Overall, 19 refugee men and women were chosen as ambassadors and trained as presenters. One-third of the presenters were women. Each presenter received three intensive training sessions on presentation and public speaking skills before recounting their experiences to school communities and other groups.

Each refugee speaker had the backing of a volunteer support person or mentor, who attended each presentation to provide logistical support and encouragement. A refugee presenter, Marial, proudly recalled:

When I was presenting for the first time, I spoke to over 200 people. That certainly exceeded my expectations.

Northern Settlement Services held a graduation ceremony for the refugee presenters during Refugee Week where they were presented with formal certificates of achievement.

Creating links and promoting positive images

Hunter Valley school students from early primary years to senior school and their parents were the target audience for the presentations. While schools were the main focus, opportunities were also created for the presenters to recount their experiences to other groups, such as charitable community organisations and service providers.

Forty-five public schools and 10 private schools received the presentations and the total school audience reached was 2617 people. Twenty-four additional sessions were held with community organisations with an audience of around 500 people.

Achievements

The project resulted in a large and successful community education program and built up the skills and confidence of the refugee presenters. As a result of the project:

- 19 refugee presenters were chosen and trained at three training sessions
- presentations were made at 55 schools to 2617 people
- community organisations hosted another 24 presentations for more than 500 people
- mainstream media publicity about the project ensured that many people from the Newcastle community were touched by personal journeys and stories
- a stronger sense of harmony between diverse cultures was engendered and understanding, empathy and solidarity increased across the community
- the goodwill of the community was demonstrated and cultural barriers were broken down through education and empowerment.

Community feedback

Feedback from community members who attended the presentations revealed the impact of the presentations was profound. One community member observed:

photo > Yar and Amer, two of the refugee ambassadors with their certificates of participation



YOU CAN LIVE

Certificate of Participation

Name: *Makia Kivik*

Address: *1000 University Street, Suite 1000, New York, NY 10003*

Organization: *World Council of Churches*

World Council of Churches

The very emotional effort that the Sudanese people have endured is hard to comprehend. The strength, just unimaginable ... If there was one thing that we all need to learn more, is that everyone deserves respect and dignity. I'm happy to see that the refugees have found some in Newcastle.

Newcastle community member, Michael Sims, said that hearing about the refugees' experiences had resulted in him not only understanding much more about their cultures and the difficulties they have undergone, it even resulted in him examining his own identity and what he represented. He said:

Learning more about a person's background means that in the long-run attitudes change. People are no longer lost. They are able to visualise a place very far away and very different from Australia.

Feedback from the refugee presenters

Refugee participants were encouraged to write comments in their languages about the project, which Northern Settlement Services staff translated. The comments were very positive.

The presenters felt this project had brought much joy, awareness and understanding to both themselves and the wider community. They agreed that the building of mutual respect through this positive exposure was lasting, and was something people would not forget.

Challenges

The presenters said language barriers had been a considerable obstacle for them, but that clarifying language issues had resulted in interesting lessons. For example, words like 'home' and 'community' hold different meanings in Australian society than in their cultures.

Some presenters' shyness, and some female presenters' lack of confidence in public because of traditional gender roles, provided challenges in achieving the goals of the project. However, two female presenters stressed that the fact that women refugees were speaking about their experiences as well as the men was a very positive outcome.

Some informal feedback was gathered, but a more formal evaluation process would have been beneficial in guiding any future ventures. A possible improvement to the project would have been to provide a final collective debriefing for the ambassadors to allow them to share their unique insights into the project.

Continued support for the project is needed to revisit and reinforce the new skills of the presenters.

The project needed more supporter roles and supporters recruited from local youth would have been a very valuable addition to the project.

Key factors in the project's success

Goodwill towards refugees in the local community was apparent, as Newcastle City Council had recently declared Newcastle to be a 'Welcome town to Refugees'.

Encouraging real involvement in the project by the school students through the multimedia competition was vital in improving their understanding and in enabling them to empathise with the refugees.

Transporting refugees to and from engagements was essential as few had access to transport.

The mentors' encouragement of the refugees, particularly the women, in telling their stories was crucial to the success of the project.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Funding is vital in order to adequately set up such a project. As well as funding a project officer, the funding should cover the basic educational resources needed, such as large maps of Africa that can be used to explain where the presenters are from, and where they have lived in refugee camps. A refugee presenter, Amer, said:

People don't know where Africa is, where Sudan is, where Sierra Leone is. The people didn't know what African culture is. After the talk they wanted to see Africa.

The mentor's role was crucial in encouraging and supporting each presenter at each presentation, and ideally more mentoring should be provided with local young people recruited to fill this important role.

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