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Land of the free

By Will Higginbotham



A group of Australian expats is helping Nauru and Manus refugees start new lives in the US

It's 6pm in the suburb of South Park Hill in Denver, Colorado, and Vali Papi is busy straightening bicycles at the front of a white brick unit. Turning around to see his guest, he lets out a disarmingly Australian "Good to have you here, maaaate" before crossing the lawn to unlatch the gate. His family spills out of the bright green front door. His wife, Judith, carries their one-year-old son, Dariush, and their toddler, Cyrus, is at her legs. Their eldest, Gibson, six, streaks past to go play with the young boy next door.

Vali is full of infectious energy – all big smiles, handshakes and steady eye contact. But when we step onto the patio his gaze hardens, and he points to a window where twisted aluminium blinds dangle at an angle. "I did that. Sometimes I struggle with everything that's happened," he says.

Vali is one of 936 Manus and Nauru detainees who have been resettled in the United States under the deal struck in 2016 between the then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull and president Barack Obama. The family touched down in the US in September 2020. That month, the US notched its 200,000th COVID-19 death. "Could there be a worse time to send us here?" says Vali. "I prayed we wouldn't get sick, but if it was to be, it was to be."

Vali is no stranger to difficult voyages. As the family gathers in the front room over an Iranian spread of rice, chicken joojeh and vegetables, he recalls how he fled Iran without so much as packing a bag. Later, he would board a boat in Indonesia bound for Australia with 94 others. After three days at sea they became lost. Vali counts it as a miracle that the Australian navy found them.

He doesn't like to talk about the three years he spent in detention on Manus. But he mentions the positives: he learnt "Aussie" English, Spanish and Tok Pisin, and he led a soccer team. Four more years were spent on the island out of official detention, during which time he met a Papua New Guinean woman – Judith – and her son, Gibson. A relationship bloomed.

The birth of Cyrus, their first child together, was complicated. Vali and Judith cite negligence at the PNG hospital. (He blames the PNG and Australian governments, saying that Judy was told to halt her labour and cross her legs to “push Cyrus back in”. She followed the orders.) Cyrus quickly showed signs of delayed development and has since been diagnosed with polymicrogyria, a condition where brain development is abnormal before birth, and cerebral palsy, which is affecting the muscles on the left side of his body.

“Cyrus speaks his own language. His preschool teachers are noticing things,” Vali says, ruffling his son’s hair as he eats rice. “We also are watching in case he has seizures.”

Judith was elated to learn they would be sent to the US: “We didn’t feel welcome [in PNG] ... [Vali] wasn’t accepted and we weren’t viewed well for raising Gibson together.” They hoped Cyrus would qualify for a medical evacuation to Australia, but when it became evident that wouldn’t happen, they realised the US was their best option. Eight months into their new life and Judith remains the optimistic one. “It’s America,” she says. “We’re seen as a nice family and Cyrus can be seen.” For now, Cyrus’s needs are covered by state-funded healthcare, and he is receiving regular check-ups.

Still, arriving in America was far from easy. Almost as soon as the family landed they were issued a US\$5000 bill courtesy of the Australian government for their flights. The family are chipping away at it by paying \$150 when they can. Vali, a trained civil engineer, remains unemployed. He is considering truck driving if he can afford the training and pass the licensing test. Judith has a job checking merchandise at Walmart stores. It pays \$15 an hour. Their unit, which seems too small for five, is rented. The International Rescue Committee has been covering it, as the pandemic drags on and employment remains scarce. Vali is concerned about what will happen when that support ends.

A caseworker is assigned to the family. They like her, but they don’t feel like they’re getting as much support as they need. The usual orientation services – such as showing the family around the local neighbourhood and teaching them how to navigate the public transportation system – never happened, largely due to the pandemic. And, six months on, the continual unemployment is wearing them down. “The people are good, but the system is not,” Vali says.

Thinned-out refugee services are also a legacy of the Trump presidency. Funding for resettlement groups in the US is determined by the number of refugees each service assists. According to the Migration Policy Institute, since 2016 the number admitted to the US has dropped by 86 per cent. Without refugees, support organisations around the country wither. Recognising this problem, a network made up of expat Australians sprang into action.

Ads-Up (short for Australian Diaspora Steps Up) was founded in 2018 by Fleur Wood and Ben Winsor. After experiencing a sense of shame at the Australian government, the two expats created the group hoping to make life easier for refugee arrivals (after all, they both knew how challenging creating a life in the US could be, even for the relatively privileged). Today, Ads-Up is made up mostly of Australian allies around the world, and in the US some 80 expats actively “buddy up” with refugees to show them around their new communities and to be sources of emotional support. In 2020, the group’s operations expanded considerably to include raising money for emergency medical support and rent assistance, and to fund education and training. It also introduced welcome packs for all new arrivals, and offers support with navigating US healthcare, social security and other services.

“When the pandemic hit, the gaps in the US system became more apparent,” says Winsor, speaking via phone. “Many refugees in our network were working low-paid service jobs and they were the first to find themselves unemployed but facing rent, and worried about what would happen if they got sick. Meanwhile, more kept arriving as part of the Turnbull–Obama deal, even when cities were deep in lockdown.” About 600 former detainees have arrived in the US since the pandemic hit.

For Vali and his family, Ads-Up has raised more than US\$2000 and has provided them with a computer and other items such as winter clothes. Should Vali pursue truck driving, the group will work to cover the cost of the training and licensing test. Vali says he also wants to talk to them about how he can see a therapist for his trauma and how they may help support Cyrus.

While financial support has been a help, the most lingering contribution has been the organisation’s ability to create human connections. As dinner wraps up, Vali and Judith gush over “Miss Claire”. Claire McMullen is an Australian lawyer and writer, and an Ads-Up volunteer, assisting the family from her base in Washington, DC. During the height of COVID, Vali says McMullen would call the family. “Sometimes she was the only person we talked to.”

When the family arrived in Denver it was McMullen who first contacted them. She and Vali bonded over soccer. He mentioned that he was leader of a competitive Iranian soccer team, and a coach and organiser of soccer competitions on Manus, which got McMullen thinking. The Australian began to reach out to local soccer groups, her search eventually leading her to an Iranian American named Esse Baharmast – a world-class soccer referee, Denver local, and a man aware of the plight of Manus and Nauru detainees. He promised McMullen he'd help.

Vali recently received both his soccer refereeing and amateur coaching licences. For the past three weekends he and his boys have been at a soccer oval in south-east Denver, where Vali has refereed games for the under-14s. It's a step, he says, towards realising a dream of being a professional coach.

On a recent weekend after soccer training, Vali and the boys are surrounded by a sea of SUVs as they wait to catch the bus home. Vali is smiling. "I love it," he says, indicating the green playing field. "It's my therapy – in Iran, on Manus, here. I always feel better. My head's just clear out there."

For more information, visit www.ads-up.org

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