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## **2006 Community Idol**

Best Practice Community Examples

Address to the Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 19 June, 2006

### **Compere: Brett de Hoedt**

Mayor, Hootville Communications and Media Trainer and  
Consultant (Specialist in not-for-profit media and  
communications)

## **Sanctuary Refugee Foundation**

Coffs Harbour, NSW

\*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was  
presented to the

**2006 Communities in Control conference  
convened by Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family  
Services**

*The Australian Community Idol competition aims to find Australia's most innovative, vibrant, effective, representative and participative leader.*

*Three short-listed finalists presented their case before delegates at the 2006 Communities in Control conference.*

*The criteria which finalists were judged on were:*

- *Has the group shown leadership and advocacy?*
- *Has it a track record of community action that makes it stand out from the pack?*
- *Has it built a dynamic, forward thinking board or committee of management?*
- *Has it pursued excellence in fund raising?*
- *Has it worked with local businesses to form genuine community business partnerships?*
- *Does it promote accessibility and equal participation in your community?*

## **Sanctuary Refugee Foundation Presenters: Peter and Sue Hallam**

### **Peter Hallam:**

Well we're just ordinary folks, but we seem to have achieved something quite amazing with our community. It all started in 1986 in a poor community in Mexico City, where we met a Father Donald Hessler, a thin American priest living in a sparse room with just a metal bed, a bucket and a few books.

Sue and I were deeply moved by the love and dedication of this little old man living in poverty, supporting Salvadorian and Guatemalan refugees, who had suffered so much loss and trauma in their lives.

We knew as we left that this was going to be our life's work. On our return home to Canada we got involved assisting refugees as volunteers.

A year later we received news that our family's application to immigrate to Australia had been successful. And on November 10<sup>th</sup> 1987 we left Canada for Melbourne with our three young sons and several boxes.

After a bit of travelling in an old combie van we fell in love with Coffs Harbour and rented a house. Six months later we began Sanctuary Refugee Support. We welcomed our first refugee family from Chile in June of 1988. We found them a home and helped them with all of the aspects of settlement. It was a steep learning curve.

Since then we have welcomed more than 2000 refugees from El Salvador, Honduras, Iraq, Vietnam, Burma, Bosnia, Croatia, Southern Sudan, Ethiopia and the Congo.

The majority are women and children, including orphans. Most have lost everything and have experienced horrible tragic events beyond our imagination.

One young orphan, a Sudanese boy, Abraham, wrote to us pleading for help. He'd found our address on a scrap of paper blowing in the wind in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northern Kenya.

His village had been attacked, and while running with his mother she was shot in the back and was killed right beside him. He was six.

He and his brother ran with a cousin and they became part of the 'Lost Boys of Sudan', walking thousands of miles, actually two thousand miles across Sudan and Ethiopia. Many died of starvation and lion attacks before the survivors reached the camp.

To cut a long story short we sponsored him and his brother and three cousins and they arrived in Coffs Harbour two years ago.

Abraham's life is full of miracles. En route to Australia they were offered an earlier flight from the scheduled flight because there seats on board. They landed in Johannesburg to learn that the scheduled flight that they should have caught had crashed and most of them had been killed on board.

Sanctuary receives requests for help from desperate refugees all the time and we sponsor many under the special Humanitarian 202 Visa Program.

Their air fares are unfunded. Just after half the refugees accepted by the Australia government are fully paid for, that's the government sponsored program.

We help refugees from all backgrounds, regardless of race, religion or creed.

**Sue Hallam:**

Our dream was to make Coffs Harbour a centre of peace for refugees. In 1996 we became an incorporated registered charity and we began the Sanctuary Travel Loan. The Sanctuary Travel Loan Fund was set up to provide interest free loans to families who are at risk of losing their hard won visas and often their lives.

Once settled here families gradually repay their loan over two or three years and this money is then recycled to help others in the same situation overseas.

It has an excellent repayment record as people know that this money is needed to help others left behind in the camps. Every donation raised is used over and over again and it's a great scheme.

In 2002 Sanctuary was amazed to receive the Auscare National Humanitarian Award, and this led to wide interest in our work across Australia.

We began to set up other community groups emulating our successful model. There are now Sanctuary groups in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Lismore, Inverell, Armidale, Coffs Harbour, Dorigo, Sydney, Albury, Perth and one starting in Melbourne and Hobart.

All are working from their heart for no reward, but to welcome and assist refugees into a warm and caring community. We receive no government funding and rely completely on the community for support. Such great benefits come as the result of people working

together like this. The kindness of people is wonderful, whether it's just a pot of soup for a new arrival or an offer to help with shopping or English tuition; it just opens hearts and builds community.

We fundraise constantly with our great committee. One of the wonderful things that happened last year, Year 12 students at a local high school raised \$10,000 over the year. Several of the kids in Year 12 were from ex-refugee families that we'd assisted in the past. This provided airfares for two families, which will be gradually repaid and this money will be used to help others.

Every year local doctors host a Sanctuary dinner, which raised \$25,000 in Coffs Harbour last year. And things like this are now happening in many Sanctuary communities. It's really exciting to see this.

We recently started a Sanctuary pen friends scheme, which links people here directly with refugees suffering overseas. This brings greater understanding and they know that somebody out there in the world cares.

We have also just started an education fund to help those kids whose families have been refused a visa, so that at least they can have a future. This is just a brief overview of an 18 year commitment.

Our life has been so enriched beyond measure. It hasn't been easy, and we have almost given up several times, especially when I was diagnosed with cancer in 1989.

But Sanctuary just continues to grow beyond our expectations, because it's community grass roots work and it's people caring for people.