

# Resettlement in New Zealand:

## A Step Closer to Home for the Homeless

"As soon as a refugee steps off the plane and onto New Zealand soil they are a New Zealand citizen, just like us."

Cathy Downey-Parish, Refugee Volunteer

**Over the crackly static of an old telephone speaker**, the American accent of a woman could be discerned. It was the voice of Mackenzie<sup>(1)</sup>, an immigrant herself, but unlike refugees escaping the most dangerous and poor places in the world, Mackenzie comes from the richest country across the globe, North America. Years ago, she came to New Zealand and found herself working at Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre in Auckland. Over the breaking sound of the house phone, she described how a large percentage of refugees crave the familiarity of their home, despite the tumultuous environment which has enveloped their country and forced them to flee. She described, "Most people, in fact like 95% of people, don't opt for resettlement, because the vast majority of people would prefer to go home. They want to go back from where they came from, because that's their culture, their homes, their families, their community, everything. They are hoping that the war will finish, or the conflict will end and that they will be able to go home." New Zealand serves as a new home for 1,500 quota refugees every year and Mangere refugee resettlement center and its staff such as McKenzie, does everything in its power to make Aotearoa feel like a home away from home to its newest citizens.

**The first world problem of waiting in 5:30 Auckland traffic is annoying** when all you want is to be home and eating dinner, but can this qualify as an issue in comparison with what refugee's face? Being chased from your community for the fear of death, escaping on a path of uncertainty. Sixty-eight point five million refugees, fourteen times the general population of New Zealand, have been displaced from their home and community and do not have the privilege of waiting in traffic to make it home for dinner. This astounding number of refugees are unable to return to their home in fear of persecution due to their identity; religion, race, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. New Zealand has resettled over 35,000 quota refugees since 1945, and in the interview with Mackenzie, she mentions how this small country in the South Pacific prioritizes the smooth integration of refugees into its country and seeks to give the minorities a home. "New Zealand is one of the countries that has signed on to resettle people, we have our own criteria. New Zealand prioritizes vulnerable women, we prioritize people who have disabilities. We accept people who are members of LGBT community".

**New Zealand is a small piece in a big puzzle slowly being put together**, the big global picture is rehoming refugees. Australia and New Zealand, among many other countries are a part of the UNHCR<sup>(2)</sup>. A term frequently used by the UNHCR and other resettling programs is 'Quota refugee', it refers to the number of legal refugees New Zealand accepts every year with

support from the UNHCR. All of Aotearoa's quota refugees' pass through the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre upon entering the country.

**The brothers in the pacific, alike in so many ways but are completely different in others.**

Both New Zealand and Australia abide to the same Refugee Policy<sup>(3)</sup>, despite the similarities between Australia and New Zealand's treatment for refugees, there is a massive difference when it comes to the level of care towards Asylum Seekers. Mackenzie elaborated on the actions taken towards asylum seekers that arrive in New Zealand in the interview "An asylum seeker is someone who arrives at Auckland airport and claims asylum, we get about 400 asylum seekers coming into New Zealand every year, and almost all of them arrive on the standard visa, it might be a student visa, work visa, tourist visa etc. They come in on a legal visa and they are allowed to be in the community while their asylum claim is being processed. A very small number, maybe 10 or 20 a year, arrive and they have either no documents or a fake visa, and when that happens, it's not very nice. The standard would be to go to Mt Eden prison, especially if they are a man, if they are a woman or in certain circumstances, they will be released to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. Quota refugees stay here for six weeks and then they are sent to a new home, I knew one guy who was an asylum seeker who was here up to three years before he was actually deported. It's a very different process". However, In Australia, it is the government policy that no person arriving by boat seeking asylum are ever resettled in Australia, instead, they are sent to Nauru, or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, for "offshore processing". No genuine resettlement ever takes place. People who have legally claimed asylum and have no apparent crimes are warehoused in appalling conditions. In fact, the detention center was designed to inflict punishment to deter other asylum seekers from trying to enter Australia by boat. Many of the asylum seekers are not unlike refugees, they have experienced the same tragic displacement from their homes and have witnessed scarring things, yet they are treated like rodents rather than ever given a chance to resettle. In John Howard's re-election campaign, he made this policy the centerpiece. "We will decide who comes to this country and the manner in which they come". The former prime minister of Australia stated.

**Nestled within the industrial suburb of Mangere, hidden amongst shipping containers and factories,** is the small village whom people from many walks of life, make their home for 6 weeks. Creating a sense of community and belonging for these refugees, is the number one priority for Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. The staff have 6 weeks to prepare the refugees for life in New Zealand before welcoming another intake of new citizens. Mackenzie described this process in the interview. "So, we have six intakes a year, at each intake we get about 170 to 180 people, roughly 50% of them will be children, They all arrive at the same time, they all stay for six weeks, and then they go to their new home. There is a two week break and then and then we have another intake." Mackenzie emphasized how a large percentage of refugees are children, children perhaps, without their grandparents or siblings in New Zealand. Many people that make it to Mangere have not been able to come with their entire family. They have been divided in the process of resettlement due to illness or inability to travel. Mackenzie

described the effects of this in the interview, "Being part of a divided family is one of the biggest things that people say stops them from immediately feeling at home here, you can imagine that if you were here with your parents and one of your siblings was left behind, you wouldn't feel entirely whole. You wouldn't feel ready to embrace your new life because you would be worried about your loved one."

**Creating a sense of community and home in a place which is ever-changing and so many different cultures and divided families live, must present a challenge?**

Mackenzie described how shared meals and communal space, among other things, plays a big role in bridging the gap. "One of the key things to develop a sense of community at Mangere refugee center is meals are all shared. Every family who is on site has breakfast lunch and dinner in the same space. Most things are done communal here". A special time within Mangere Resettlement center is when everyone gathers together to share a potluck dinner, Mackenzie described the excitement this brings to the refugees at Mangere "Once every intake they have a shared meal where representatives from each of the different ethnic groups are invited to prepare a dish, then everybody tries each other's food, it's always a massive highlight". A rare but very special occasion is when family reunification takes place. It gives the opportunity for refugees to request members of their families to be accepted into Mangere refugee center, Mackenzie illustrated this in the interview "There is something called family reunification, where every year, a very small number of people- not many, are invited to apply for their immediate family members to come and join them here. That's a huge deal when that can happen for a family." These actions all take place to enforce a feeling of belonging for refugees.

**Nobody would ever say that they were heading for a holiday in Mangere,** it does not have beaches or rolling green mountains like the more attractive places in New Zealand. Hence, why it was surprising to hear that the refugees first impression of New Zealand from within the shipping container town of Mangere, was that New Zealand was clean and crisp. Mackenzie stated her amazement that people had positive feedback to give the area, having not found the suburbs particularly beautiful herself, "The center is in Mangere East in kind of an industrial area, so I don't think of it as a very attractive environment, but a lot of people have said to me that the first thing that struck them when they left the airport was how clean the air was and how cold it was, that kind of environmental stuff." It appears, the things born and bred New Zealanders don't give thought to, are what can gather a common reaction of awe among refugees, "The fact that you can drink water straight from the tap, for some people is very exciting" says Mackenzie. At the beginning of each intake a powhiri takes place to welcome the refugees. This is a very well received event as Mackenzie describes "A Lot of people really responded to and appreciated the Maori influence. There is a powhiri at the start of every intake, where the local iwi come and welcome people official. It is quite a powerful experience for a lot of people and something that resonates because many refugees see quite accurately, Maori as the original people of this land so they are very interested in learning about Maori culture and Te Reo. They remember that." Refugees are New Zealand citizens as soon as they step on New Zealand soil, and they can find pride in discovering their new culture.

**What happens to the refugees after their six weeks is up?** Often with only the English they learnt at Mangere and knowing very little about the ways of this country, they begin their own life in a new part of New Zealand. Mackenzie elaborated on this a little more in the interview “The governments allocates them a house. Families don’t get to decide where they go. It’s not like they are sent somewhere and forced to stay there forever, if they want that kind of wrap-around support, then they need to go where the house is provided.” The government is careful where they place refugees. In Christchurch there is a large Muslim community, but since the 2019 mosque shooting where 51 people died, many of whom were refugees, the government has not allocated anyone to Christchurch. The government does not think it appropriate that people who have suffered and think they have found refuge in New Zealand, are sent to a city, where people like themselves, were murdered for the same reason they are being massacred in their own countries. It is of great importance to the government where refugees are placed, Mackenzie expanded on this subject in the interview “What they try to do is keep people from the same ethnic group in the same town, for example in Palmerston North there is a large Afghanistan community. They don’t want to be the one family from Afghanistan in the whole town, especially if you are still building your English skills because you would have no one to talk to.” Within Mangere Centre everything is provided from food to clothes. Once refugees are given a house, they have a lot more freedom to be an independent family, but the government still provides support as Mackenzie mentioned, “When a family is settled in their new house, they will be matched up with volunteers from the red cross. Those volunteers visit them regularly for six months and help them figure out where the school is, where the supermarket is, how to take the bus, yea that kind of stuff. The red cross is contracted to provide furniture, bedding household goods and all that stuff, and then there is the volunteers. But then after six months it’s kind of left to the families to fend for themselves, and for a lot of people that is absolutely fine and for other people it takes a little bit longer.”

**This marks the end of the resettlement process**, when the refugees have become fully integrated into New Zealand society. The UNHCR and Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre has done everything it can to make New Zealand feel like home. Throughout this whole process, maybe the hardest milestone to pass is that beginning step, when refugees must make the decision to resettle or not, to say goodbye to the culture and people they knew, and to forge a path into a foreign country. New Zealand does the utmost to welcome our newest citizens with open arms, and has the desire to make their transition a smooth and supported one. There is value in remembering refugees are citizens like us, and desire community like us, their story between birth and New Zealand citizenship was just a longer trimester than ours.

Written by Ruby Legg

(1) Mackenzie Koppel is the fundraising and communication manager at Mangere Refugee centre in Auckland

(2) “The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is a United Nations program with the mandate to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people, and assists in their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country. “

(3) As read on the [immigration.govt.nz](http://immigration.govt.nz) website, “New Zealand is a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugee and its 1967 Protocol, the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”.