



HOUSE OF WELCOME IS FUNDRAISING TO HELP MIGRANTS

Ballarat resident Mary Bukjiok says the support she has received from community groups and kind individuals had helped her live happily in the town, after migrating from South Sudan fifteen years ago. The mother of eight moved to Ballarat in 2006 and lived in Wendouree for five years before moving to Melbourne for her child to attend university.

Ms Bukjiok (pictured right) said she returned to Ballarat last year and found help 'everywhere she went'. Connecting with staff and education programs at the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre helped her secure work in aged care and feel welcomed as a valued member of the community.



Ms Bukjiok also completed a small business course at the centre, before launching her catering business that offers African food. The support of other community groups helped establish the catering business before business was hit by COVID-19.

House of Welcome and the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Centre have provided opportunities for the business. Ms Bukjiok said it would have been difficult to feel a part of the community in Ballarat without that support. "People look after each other. You get help everywhere in Ballarat. I love to be in Ballarat," she said.

Refugee support group House of Welcome hosted a high tea event as part of Refugee Week in an effort to raise funds to continue offering support to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers like Ms Bukjiok. People were encouraged to book for the high tea due to limited numbers in two afternoon sessions held on Wednesday, June 17 or donate to the cause.

House of Welcome director Carmel Kavanagh said the funds raised would help the group purchase food vouchers, small households needs for families and organise social afternoons for socially isolated people and new arrivals to Ballarat.

The group also offers support with Centrelink, the immigration department, the court system, housing stress, clothing, bedding and assistance to pay utilities. "The social outings give people confidence they are going to be accepted in a wider community," Ms Kavanagh said. "We try to engender friendship and through friendship we give assistance, which brings the confidence to the people then to circulate among different people in the community and feel accepted."

Ms Kavanagh said many refugees and migrants were lonely and many, particularly those who had been through war, struggled to know who they could trust. "We treat people as equal, get them engaged with other members of the community and show them there is some assistance so they are not feeling alone," she said.

Ms Kavanagh said House of Welcome's fundraising had been affected by COVID-19, as large fundraising events had to be cancelled. She encouraged those interested in making a donation to call 0401 175 045 or email annekav1234@gmail.com.

Refugee Week (June 14 – 20) has the theme 'celebrating the year of welcome'.

Article courtesy of the Ballarat Courier, text by Rochelle Kirkham and photo by Kate Healy