

New Journey for Refugees in Uganda



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By Amy Fallon

AS urban refugees in the capital of Uganda – the number one host country for those who have fled their homes in Africa – many Burundians and Congolese in Kampala face unique challenges.

Now, a chicken farm project created through a Rotary Foundation district grant to the Rotary Club of Devonport South East is aiming to help these refugees survive in the city.

The program will fund the purchase and housing of approximately 1,000 birds (egg layers and meat birds), which will be sold to generate income for the refugees.

The money will allow people to buy replacement birds, with a space to house approximately 400 chickens in Makindye, Kampala. A community garden will also be developed.

In 2015, many Burundians were forced to flee their country after then President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to run for a disputed third term. Approximately 312,615 Burundians escaped to nearby countries, with the majority settling in Uganda, as well as Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Rwanda.

The chicken farm project came about after Devonport South East member and early childhood teacher Donna

Mlejnek met Kampala's Burundian community in 2019. They identified that education, pre- and post-natal care, income and food security were vital for people's wellbeing. The initiative was designed with these necessities in mind. Input from Anciet Ndabirinda and the committee of the Refugee Life Support Network (RLSN), the non-profit group Anciet runs, ensured the community's views, opinions and plans were heard. The network is registered in Uganda but is not a recognised Australian charity.

The Rotary Foundation generously donated \$2,000 to the Rotary Club of



Devonport South East for the project.

"It's so hard to go home, even now," says Anciet, who fled to Uganda from Burundi six years ago. "But life is hard starting from scratch in Uganda."

"Things are expensive here. Education is expensive. Food is a challenge, and shelter is a challenge."

Anciet says that besides providing an income for young refugees, the chickens initiative is also about providing skills, particularly for mothers. It is hoped that with the income they receive, they might be able to start other small businesses.

Donna, who was previously based in Albury Wodonga, has had a career encompassing TAFE teaching, university tutoring and teaching, and family support roles in the difficult, complex areas of drug, alcohol, violence, poverty and mental health. She has completed studies in developmental trauma/brain development and attachment, and English as an additional language. When her three children

left home many years ago, Donna decided she wanted to help those in need.

Previously a member of the Rotary Club of Albury North, NSW, which serves the Albury area including North Albury, Lavington, Wodonga and Thurgoona, Donna worked with Congolese refugees in Wodonga.

In 2018, she visited Ghana, in west Africa, where she became involved in a farm project.

"The fire in my belly began when I met people who had lived lives that were so incredibly tough but they were still so positive," she says.



In 2019, after she first travelled to Uganda, Donna began working with refugees there, and visited families in the Nakivale refugee camp, in the country's southwest. It is home to more than 100,000 refugees from Burundi and other neighbouring countries. The settlement is the oldest in Africa for refugees, according to UN Habitat.

Donna moved to Tasmania in 2021, where she met District International Service Chair Roslyn Teirney.

"Roslyn was instrumental in the grant application process for the chicken project and very, very helpful," says Donna. "And The Rotary Foundation was incredibly supportive of the links between us and Kampala, providing their time and knowledge in order to apply for a district grant in 2022."

Roslyn stresses that this is the role of Rotary's District Resource Network – to support club leaders to develop their international projects.

"Our committee congratulates Donna and her club on their district grant from The Rotary Foundation," Roslyn says. ■

LEFT: Past District Governor Kevin Shadlock, right, was an invaluable mentor to Rotary Club of Devonport South East member Donna Mlejnek, left, in helping get her Ugandan chicken farm project off the ground.

LEFT: Refugee Life Network volunteers Anciet Ndabirinda, poultry farmer Christine Ntawumana, Desire Nduwimana and Nelly Wanyarimana in front of the newly installed chicken coops.