



# Make lost boys feel at home



## Lindsay Tanner

**W**HEN the first Italian kid turned up at Orbost Primary School when I was in grade 2, it seemed as if someone from outer space had just landed.

He looked different and he sounded different. But we got used to that pretty quickly.

Soon, he was just another kid. His Italian origins became irrelevant.

These days, Italian migrants are part of Australia's European majority.

Our newer migrants seem much more different.

Australia is very good at integrating migrants from all around the world, but the task is becoming more challenging.

Akoch Manhiem is a Sudanese refugee who lives in my electorate.

Like many refugees from Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, he escaped from appalling conflict and poverty.

He now runs the Sudanese Lost Boys Association. The lost boys are teenagers and young men who have no family.

Their parents either disappeared or died. The association helps these young people to settle in their new country.

Akoch has a difficult task. Many African migrants face enormous challenges settling in Australia.

They're keen to work and learn, but they often have little

money, little education and little understanding of Australian culture.

Even things we take for granted, such as driving a car, can be a serious challenge.

There are no driver's licences in Sudan and refugees usually can't afford driving lessons in Australia.

Most available jobs are in areas that require car travel.

Inevitably, African migrants stand out. If one does something wrong, the whole community gets blamed.

When a drunk, unlicensed Sudanese driver injures six Dandenong schoolchildren, it's a Sudanese issue.

When a drug-crazed Sudanese man rapes several women, it's a Sudanese issue.

Sadly, people get killed by drunk drivers and raped by violent thugs fairly regularly.

Most of these criminals aren't refugees, Sudanese or otherwise.

But no one talks about an Aussie problem when a young white bloke, called Johnson or Jones, kills or rapes someone.

The key to integrating African refugees into society is jobs, which is what Akoch Manhiem's Lost Boys want.

That's what refugees from wartorn Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea want: a chance to be part of our great society.

There are plenty of success stories. Last year, I visited BDS Pty Ltd, which employs 35 Sudanese at its shelving factory in Brisbane.

HE company began with one or two Sudanese and found them to be very good workers and gradually recruited more through word of mouth.

There are plenty of problems though. Job Network providers tend to flick African

refugees off to English classes rather than find them jobs.

Learning better English is important, but some African refugees have professional qualifications and good English. They find it very hard to get work in their chosen occupations, even when highly qualified.

It is absurd that we've got Somali engineers driving taxis in the middle of a national skills crisis.

The messages we send to refugees' kids are crucial. If they see their parents denied opportunity and discriminated against, why should they study and work hard?

If we don't ensure they have a real chance of integrating into Australian society, why would they try?

Many African refugees are more passionate about their adopted country than some people who were born here.

Akoch Manhiem has been trying to organise a day of community service for the Sudanese Lost Boys to say thank you to Australia.

So far, no organisation has stepped forward to help, but he's keeping at it. He is determined to contribute to our society.

When you see a negative story about African refugees, remember Akoch's passion for Australia.

This is what becoming Australian means to him:

"There are no words to truly express how it feels for a stateless person to receive the privilege of citizenship in a country like Australia", he said. "It is a gift from God of priceless value."

What more can we ask for?

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