



Following wind

WORDS lee beasley

In 1987, two young boys walked 2000 miles through the desert, braving hunger, thirst and attacks from wild animals to reach a refugee camp on the Ethiopian border.

ABOVE: Sarjoh Bah (centre) came to Australia from Sierra Leone via Egypt. Sarjoh arranged for his brother's family to be the first sponsored by the Northern Beaches Refugee Sanctuary. Pictured is Sanctuary group member David Addington with Sarjoh, Mohamed Apha and his wife and children. From L-R: Jenabu, Habibatu, David, Sarjoh, Fatmata Bintu, Mohamed Alpha and Chernor Saada. Photo: Jane Dyson

They had lost their families as they ran from an insurgency in southern Sudan. The boys, aged five and six, stayed at the camp for four years before conflict forced them to flee again. In the process they lost many of their new friends, one to the fast flowing waters of the river Gilo and others to terrifying acts of violence. When they reached Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya they were both ten years old, and their future looked bleak.

But at Kakuma, a small miracle occurred. 'One of the boys talked about a piece of paper blowing in the wind, he grabbed it into his hand and opened it up and saw our name and address on it. That's how he ended up here. It's like something out of a movie', says Coffs Harbour resident Peter Hallam.

He is not exaggerating. That the name and address on the slip of paper belonged to him and his wife Sue, and

that today the boy, now 19, lives in Coffs Harbour with three of his brothers, is like a movie script.

Yet this is but one scene of many from the life script of Peter and Sue Hallam, who have been welcoming refugees to Australia for the past 17 years. Their photo album attests to this.

Of note are the many photographs taken at airports: the welcoming of a seemingly endless stream of people, often colourful in traditional cultural attire, some shy, some excited, some tired and bewildered.

The Hallams have witnessed the arrival of some 600 refugees to Australia. In 1997 they founded the Sanctuary Refugee Support Group Inc., a registered charity that sponsors, settles and offers no-interest loans to refugees granted a 202 Visa—humanitarian visas that are unfunded—from the Australian Government.