

The Story of Nanette and Brian D’Arcy and the Boat People

by Madeleine Hoang

This past year has been one of the most difficult in living memory for many Australians. While recovering from crippling drought, many communities have suffered record bushfires, only now to find themselves confronted with an unprecedented pandemic. In the midst of the of chaos, this year our community lost two of its most beloved and cherished members.

In 1958, Nanette and Brian D’Arcy happened upon the community of Castle Hill. They arrived with two girls and would continue to have six more children to form a family of ten. Brian built their home and in the years that followed, their family would become permanent fixtures in the community of St Bernadette’s Parish, where their children attended school.



Our story with the D’Arcy family begins in 1979. Fleeing in leaky, rotting fishing boats, over one million Vietnamese refugees were forced by a war to leave their homeland, with no fixed destination but for the hope of future freedom. Swept along in this tide was my family of six. My parents were barely thirty and my cousin, brothers and I were twelve, three, five, and six years old.

Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser had recently opened Australia’s doors to the “boat people” and in response, Archbishop Clancy appealed for Catholics to open their hearts and lend their hands to resettle these Vietnamese refugees. Answering his call, Nanette and Brian D’Arcy found their way to Westbridge Hostel in Villawood to meet the Hoang family – my family. I know not what was said between Uncle Brian, Aunt Nanette and my parents on that day, only that within the month, we were being driven in Uncle Brian’s van to our new home in West Pennant Hills. Not long after that, my cousin started at Oakhill College and my brothers and I enrolled in St Bernadette’s Primary School. We were the first family resettled by Brian and Nanette D’Arcy via the St Bernadette’s Refugee Resettlement Committee and over 200 families would follow.

Strangers in a strange land, completely isolated from our customs, our language, our family and our friends, it was Nanette and Brian D’Arcy who extended their friendship, opened their hearts, and shared their home in welcoming us to this foreign land.

From 1979, up until the early nineties, the caravan in the backyard, the flat downstairs beneath the D’Arcy home, and even the rooms of the D’Arcy children contained a constant flow of Vietnamese refugees. They were families, single mothers, young couples, old couples, lovers, brothers and sisters, and even orphans who had managed the treacherous boat trip on their own. Some stayed a few weeks as they sought assistance or a temporary abode whilst finding their feet. Others stayed for months and even years, choosing to raise their children within the safety, security and warmth of the D’Arcy home.

Uncle Brian would come home from a long, hard day of building, and Aunt Nanette would immediately send him, with van and trailer, to pick up an old bed, refrigerator or furniture for the new refugee family. It was not uncommon for the D’Arcy boys to find themselves exiled to sleep in the family room, making way for the latest refugee family. Their youngest child, Naomi, often spent holidays playing and teaching English to her new friends, myself included.

When sleeping over at the D’Arcys, my favourite meal quickly became Aunt Nanette’s beef mince. Then, each Sunday on the drive home after mass, Uncle Brian routinely dropped by the petrol station to fill up the van. I relished in the sheer delight of being allowed to choose a treat as he paid for his tank. In the early days my parents could not afford to spoil us with such treats! Playing hide and seek, I grew to know every nook and cranny of the D’Arcy home, including the hidden laundry chute in the ensuite, which enabled a quick escape to the ground floor. It did not occur to me that I was different from any of Naomi’s friends. In the D’Arcy home it was easy to forget that one had been a refugee.

Aunty Nanette would constantly be up at the local school office, challenging principals into enrolling the resettled refugee children, despite being repeatedly told that the schools were at capacity. She would stand in at parent teacher evenings for those unable to speak English. At the tennis club she would collect old uniforms and hand-me-downs to clothe these new arrivals. She'd arrange cleaning jobs for many of the women and factory jobs for the men, easing the way for those eager to make a start in their new life. Uncle Brian's van was continually in service of refugee families moving from the hostel to their new homes. Being in the building trade allowed him to provide many of these men jobs, though more than a few found it difficult to keep up with his blistering pace. Some families were very quick to integrate into the Australian way of life and find their community. For others, resettlement and integration was a challenge, but Nanette and Brian were always patient and would hold their hands for as long as it took. They would accompany visits to doctors, dentists, hospitals, schools, universities, banks, Medicare, Centrelink, airports and many more besides.

Born from these countless resettlements, are now farmers, artists, musicians, designers, nurses, doctors, engineers, bankers, accountants, writers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, academics and small business owners. Spanning the country from Perth to Adelaide and Tasmania to Darwin, all of these families are now actively contributing to a culturally diverse Australia. Brian and Nanette's generosity, compassion and empathy have allowed three generations of Vietnamese refugees to successfully adopt the Australian way of life. In uncountable acts of kindness, they shared their home with perfect strangers and in doing so, have enabled those displaced to call this lucky country their home. On behalf of the hundreds of us, whose lives have been enriched because you both have lived, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your boundless generosity and constant compassion.

This pandemic has robbed many of us the chance to properly bid you both farewell. But instead of letting death silently steal you away, we have chosen to celebrate your legacy by sharing stories of how you've touched our lives and influenced us all so profoundly.

Ai Minh

Brian and Nanette were among the first Australians who made us feel warmly welcomed and respected, despite our being refugees. They both had their individual personalities that added something special to our lives.

It was Nanette who taught me how to hand-wash a second hand dress, without knowing that it was going to be my wedding dress a week later. It was Nanette who comforted me when I had difficulties handling my teenage daughters because of cultural differences. It was Nanette who taught me to stand firm amidst challenges. In many ways, Nanette shaped the person I am today.

Whilst Nanette was a leader, a natural "instructor", Brian was a wonderful supporter. He did not talk much and he rarely told us what to do, instead he did it together with us.

It was Brian who drove my husband Tien from Castle Hill to Kensington to sit entrance exams to resume Medical studies. It was Brian who drove me to the Conservatorium for my entrance exam and sat patiently in his big working van waiting for me. Hours later, I came out to be greeted by a big smile, winking eyes and two thumbs up. Brian was a passionate classical music lover. He was my best friend, my supporter and my surrogate father.

To our children they are Pop and Nan, because they are family. We have thoroughly cherished their friendship throughout the years, and will forever remember the many memories that we shared with them.

Hao

One of the pivotal moments of my life was when I discovered I was pregnant with my fourth child. I was barely recovered from five years of constant trauma in post war Vietnam. My husband had been taken to re-education camp; I was isolated, my mother, brother and sisters all scattered across the globe; I had three children and a nephew under my care with no means of survival after our property was confiscated. Finally, after the months in a refugee camp, we were re-settled and it was time to build a new life. Nanette had helped me find my first job as a kitchen hand at the Mowll Village (Aged Care facility). This would temporarily support our family as my husband completed his Engineering studies. My children were in a loving school environment and we were on the way to a new life. The news of pregnancy filled me with concern and anxiety. How would our family live if I could not earn money to supplement my husband's part time work? Would my husband need to stop his studies? How could we provide for our children and

support my in-laws still in Vietnam? I came to Brian and Nanette not knowing what to do, full of uncertainty and trepidation. Brian held my hands and said “God creates and God will provide. Nanette and I will be there to support you”. I could see tears well in his eyes, full of empathy and understanding. In that moment I knew that everything would be okay.

Brian was one of the most gentle souls I have ever known. He was a true gentleman, always ready with a handkerchief, whether in his work overalls or his Sunday best. And even in death he was a gentleman... he waited for his dear wife Nanette to go first and gently followed her thereafter.

Dom

On a cold cold day in the June of 1979 Mr D’Arcy picked us up in his van from Westbridge hostel and took us to the flat beneath his home. We were a family of five, my wife, my son, niece and nephew. In the weeks after our arrival, another refugee couple would come and live in the caravan outback. To this day I do not know how the D’Arcys could have been so trusting. To embrace strangers like us, from a foreign land, into their home and share their lives, without reservation. For a man, like me, who had just escaped the cruelty of war and the darkness of humanity, their trust in us gave hope, that this might be a country for us to call home.

When we first arrived, my wife and I spoke very little English. Often Mr D’Arcy would come down to our flat in the evenings and watch television with us. He would try to speak with us. I later realised this was his way of teaching and encouraging us to speak English. On one of these evenings we watched a documentary about refugees together. There were scenes of an overcrowded fishing boat being flooded with water, on the verge of sinking as those on board panicked in horror. Mr D’Arcy shook his head in sadness and could not stop the flow of tears. I realised that here was a man with a gentle heart and kindness like no other.

We came to Nanette and Brian with our complex stories, oftentimes complicated but also unfamiliar and humorous to a white Australian, and they welcomed us. From them was never judgement, only the warmth of their generosity, the wisdom of their counsel and the support to guide us through whatever challenges we faced.

Nanette and Brian were happily married for over 60 years. No one who felt their touch could avoid the inspiration of their shared faith and unity. They will always remind us that despite society’s continuing and sometimes disruptive changes, faith, love, and compassion remain our foundation.

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

Emily Dickinson