

# Bright Ideas



Refugee Council  
of Australia

**Local strategies to support  
refugees and asylum seekers**

## 13. FIRST HOME PROJECT



*The First Home Project community (Photo courtesy of Aaron Brunch)*

**What?** First Home Project (FHP) is a community housing initiative in Midland (Perth, WA) established on 24 December 2012. It was started by Jarrod McKenna, a pastor and activist. FHP seeks to be a “living example of a compassionate alternative to detention while providing a practical ‘hand up’ rather than a ‘hand out’.” FHP provides medium-term affordable accommodation to recently arrived families from refugee backgrounds while they get settled and thus enable the families to get a rent history.

**Who?** Anyone from Refugee and Humanitarian backgrounds, particularly recently arrived families. Currently there are 20 of people living at FHP (the McKenna family of 3 and 17 recently arrived members of refugee families).

**Why?**

- In Perth there is only a 2% opening in the rental market. This makes it very difficult for many to get their own place.
- Many newly arrived families are forced to couch-surf, sleep on floors and live in separate homes. This is referred to as ‘secondary homelessness’, where people are unable to secure their own home and as a result it becomes very difficult to hold down a job. First Home Project directly addresses this very real need.
- First Home Project provides recently arrived people from refugee backgrounds with cheap accommodation while they settle and adjust to new challenges.
- For a year, First Home Project provides a supportive environment to make friends, find your feet in this new context while developing a rental history, thus making

breaking into the rental market a possibility.

- FHP state that they “want to be able to name the injustice of detention and embody the real alternative to it and show that another way is possible.”

#### How?

- Jarrod McKenna and his wife Teresa decided that in buying their first home they would find a place big enough to house three separate apartments to offer to newly arrived families.
- They found an old church in the suburb of Midland that had been used as a community centre, apartments and even a meth lab and made an offer.
- After getting knocked back by the banks for a mortgage, they took to social media and in just two weeks crowd sourced their mortgage of \$600,000.
- They state that they don't take any money from the government, because they “won't be silent about the fact that mandatory detention is not only unnecessary and economically insane, but it is immoral and just wrong.”

#### Successes

- Before coming to First Home Project, the first newly arrived family to join the project were living in three separate houses in the community. The mother slept on a roll out mattress at one friend's house, the father slept on a couch at another friend's house, and their kids staying with extended family.
- Since moving into FHP, the family were able to live together and subsequently their kids - who were in a bit of trouble at school - are now doing well.
- The year living at First Home project provided the stability for both the mother and father to get full time jobs, which are going very well.
- In January FHP celebrated this family graduating from the project and taking the rental history they developed and securing their own rental property.
- In the latest development, the family now have a stable basis to find and succeed in full time work, have qualified for “Home Start” and will be building their own home.
- This family have gone from secondary homelessness to owning their own home. All that was needed was a warm welcome and a fair go.

#### Challenges

- As Jarrod advises, “coming alongside people who are dealing with complex post-traumatic stress disorder after persecution and war zones, then refugee camps and detention centres takes a willingness to enter into the pain of others.”
- Training in counselling, pastoral care, community development and social work have been as important as the creativity of building a living alternative. “While many want a one-size-fits-all model, the challenge is to provide a safe space for people to rediscover their own agency in addressing the difficulty of their situation with support of friends. This is much more empowering.”

#### Advice for others

For nearly a decade the McKennas have volunteered in a variety of ways with people seeking asylum. Jarrod states that “until we realise the incredible dignity of these people, we can't be present to everything they have to teach us. Our experience is that our new friends don't need 'help', they need a fair go – just like all of us. Our transformation is bound up in their transformation. And that's work we can only do together.”

#### More info

See [www.facebook.com/thefirsthomeproject](http://www.facebook.com/thefirsthomeproject) for more information.

#### Bright Ideas

*Bright Ideas* highlights innovative programs, initiatives and projects developed to support refugees and asylum seekers. It provides a way to share ideas, success stories and good practice to improve service provision and assist organisations and communities in addressing key issues and challenges.

If you have an initiative you think could be profiled in *Bright Ideas*, please contact the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) on [admin@refugeecouncil.org.au](mailto:admin@refugeecouncil.org.au) or call (02) 9211 9333. To download other *Bright Ideas*, go to: [www.refugeecouncil.org.au/brightideas.php](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/brightideas.php)