

31 August 2019

## The Green Patch legacy



For nearly eight years, the community garden on the river flats at John and Mila Little's property in Eynesbury has served as a green haven for dozens of refugee families from Myanmar. At Green Patch, the families grow vegetables for the table and to share among others in their community, just as they – and generations before them - had done back home.

Green Patch was established through a partnership between the Little's and CatholicCare, and made possible with support from a multitude of others. However, funding constraints in recent years had put pressure on CatholicCare's ability to maintain support. When John and Mila announced they would be downsizing and selling their farm, the future of Green Patch became uncertain.

Fortunately, the new owners have since expressed interest in supporting Green Patch, so the Burmese growers look set to stay; for the time being, at least.

The upcoming change in land ownership became a catalyst to make further changes to the project, whereby CatholicCare would step back to allow the refugee families to take responsibility for Green Patch. A leadership committee has now been established and each family will make a contribution to help fund equipment maintenance and repairs.

Today, at a celebration held in the barn on the property, Green Patch was 'officially' handed over to the refugee families to manage as a collective.

Over 30 Burmese refugees joined John and Mila to reflect on the last eight years and to acknowledge the wonderful partnership. They were joined by a number of local community members who have been involved in the project over the years.

Nick Collins, CatholicCare's Director of Operations likened the transition of Green Patch to a self-managed project as 'taking off the training wheels'; a wonderful legacy of the effort and goodwill provided by those who have shared in the mission to support refugees in Australia.

Reflecting on the history of Green Patch, John Little acknowledged the many people who had been involved in the project, including those in the local community who had rolled up their sleeves to help plough the land or build the chicken shed. John also recalled some of the more colourful stories such as when one refugee attracted a visit from the CFA after burning off on a Total Fire Ban day; and the time a car owned by one of the participants nearly went into the river.

'It's been wonderful,' said John. 'This whole project, as a way of welcoming new people to our country - and to give the sense of being welcomed - and to let them do what they know.'

Su Su, a young Burmese woman whose parents have been growing vegetables at Green Patch for six years spoke of what it has meant for the families:

'This farm is more than a farm to us - because we are from the same country, but we live in different place: Werribee, Wyndham, Melton. This place gives us a place to socialise together. We come here, we talk about life, we talk about family back home, and we help each other. We grow enough organic vegies for all the families.'

The families expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to farm at Green Patch, presenting John and Mila with traditional Burmese garments that were hand-woven by the community in Werribee. With the formalities over, there was nothing left but to share the food that the families had brought: delicious fish soup with vegetables from the farm, pork curry, rice and noodles.

The new owners will take possession of the property in the coming months. Already there has been talk of new possibilities: some paid

farm work, maybe even a small piggery. The seeds of hope sown more than eight years ago look set to flourish into the future.

(From Centacare Newsletter)