



# Welcome to

# America

Entrepreneur  
Fleur Wood tells  
*The Weekly* how expat  
Aussies in the US are  
helping the refugees  
we've forgotten.

## IT ALL STARTED ON AUSTRALIA DAY.

A group of expats, sharing pies and pavlova in a New York flat, decided we wanted to do something for the refugees that our government had just wiped its hands of and sent to America. They were coming as part of a deal hatched between Malcolm Turnbull and Barack Obama – an agreement that Donald Trump fumed about, but agreed reluctantly to honour.

These were refugees who had arrived by boat, so would never be settled in Australia. Many had been incarcerated on Manus Island and Nauru for years. We had heard that they were arriving in the States with nothing but a debt – no job, no support system, just an expectation that they would repay the government

the cost of their transport from detention. We decided to try to offer the sort of help and assistance that our own government had refused to give.

That night in New York, you only had to look out of the window to be reminded of some of the conditions facing the refugees. It was snowing, with forecasts of a major blizzard on the way. How were the new arrivals coping with the freezing weather after being detained for years in such sweltering heat? Where were they living? And who was looking after them? The search for answers led to the formation of the charity Ads-UP, which stands for Aussie Diaspora Steps Up. There are some 100,000 Australians living in America, and it was time to mobilise them.

I started plugging into the Australian network, and making contact with refugees. Sure enough, it turned out some had arrived in north-east cities like Philadelphia in the middle of January

with no winter coats. Some parents and their kids were living in cockroach-infested apartments. One family of six was about to be evicted after falling behind with their rent.

The refugees had financial needs for sure, but most wanted something that money can't buy: a friendly face to welcome them, someone to explain the public transport system, to help with applying for a job or to share a meal with. Loneliness and isolation seemed their biggest obstacles.

In the space of just a few months, more than 500 Aussies have signed up as volunteers to help more than 300 refugees. From Seattle to Salt Lake City, from Texas to New Jersey, it has become a nationwide effort.

In one case, a young Iranian woman was struggling with depression and we managed to put her in contact with an Aussie psychologist for phone support. In Texas, there was a Sri Lankan guy living on the floor, so we sent him a mattress, sheets and pillow. An Aussie lady living in Utah is helping a Rohingya refugee who had been imprisoned for almost a decade. They now describe each other as "family".

Recently we've been helping the Congee family, who became refugees after fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka. They were detained for four years on Nauru and arrived in New Jersey in February. The father Diloson, his wife Rinsiya, their 12-year-old son Sanoson and their eighteen-month-old daughter Serafina have confronted all sorts of challenges. Not long after arriving, the apartment they were living in burned down, forcing them to relocate. Diloson and Rinsiya have managed to get jobs, in a factory and Dunkin Donuts, but they are still struggling to make ends meet. So Ads-UP is compiling an Amazon wish list, so our volunteers can buy things that help them out.

I'm so proud of the Australians who have already stepped up but there's much more work to do – 950 refugees are on their way. Their stories are heartbreaking but their desire to build new lives is inspiring and their resilience is breathtaking.

*For more information, visit [ads-up.org](http://ads-up.org)*