

Refugee's rooftop garden helps feed Kings Cross homeless

Michael Koziol

Published: December 30, 2014 - 10:05PM

Lionel – not his real name – is a little shy, by his own admission. He has good reason; he fled his central African homeland of Burundi, one of the world's poorest countries, to seek asylum here. Now he waits in limbo, with limited English, in a country that doesn't believe he is a refugee.

But when Lionel, a professional agronomist, tends to the rooftop vegetable garden at St Canice's in Kings Cross, he blossoms.

"I am very happy, the garden is very good" he says. "I like gardens and I want to know more about gardens in Australia."

The 43-year-old arrived here by plane in April last year to claim asylum. In Burundi, he worked for the government, supervising a team of agronomists. He was the head of crop production in one of the country's 17 provinces.

"We showed the population how to cultivate, how to grow," he says.

Lionel worked chiefly in rural areas, providing seeds, fertiliser, chemicals to control pests and teaching agricultural methods. But his skills also made him a successful recruiter for an opposition party, attracting the ire of the Burundi government. After death threats and three stints in prison, he fled.

Rob Caslick, who runs the Inside Out Organic Soup Kitchen at St Canice's, discovered Lionel's talents almost by accident. Wanting to grow fresh produce for the charity's malnourished clients, Caslick sought to work alongside the Jesuit Refugee Service, which is based above the church and runs a shelter next door. Lionel was one of the service's new clients.

"Lionel was very keen, but his English wasn't that great so he was fairly quiet," Caslick recalls.

"I asked if he would like to come meet the designers. At the end of the meeting I said, 'Lionel, is there anything that you'd like to plant?' And he produced this beautiful hand-written two-pager of all these vegetables and herbs and fruits."

In a mix of English and French, he had scrawled more than 100 possible plants across the back of a prepaid mobile phone bill - including notes on what would grow well together and what would not. "Lionel's List" became something of a roadmap for the garden, although some of his initial ambitions had to be slightly curtailed.

"We didn't have the garden space to do [all] that but we definitely incorporated a lot of his ideas," Caslick recalls.

"For me, the essence of what we were creating was in that list. We were blown away."

Almost a year in the making, the first seeds were planted in October and the garden began to sprout vegetables in November. Beetroot, tomato, chilli, capsicum, zucchini, mint and eggplant are now harvested each Wednesday to prepare the organic meals that feed the area's homeless and disadvantaged later that night.

Lionel also helped build the garden, hauling pallets back and forth and assembling the underlying mix of newspaper, soil, compost, mulch and manure. He says creating the garden was difficult at times, but working with Caslick is "fun" and "much appreciated".

"We sometimes meet complicated situations and we try to think together in order to find solutions," he says.

Among the wisdom Lionel imparted was an irrigation shortcut he taught villagers back in Burundi.

"We took a plastic bottle and put holes in it with a very thin knife," he explains. The water inside the bottle slowly seeps out, providing sustained irrigation.

Lionel's initial application for asylum was rejected, and he now sweats on a decision from the Refugee Review Tribunal. But without a lawyer he is in a precarious position. He wants to find permanent work here but is unsure whether his skills are wanted.

"My job was to teach," he says. "I don't know if there are jobs to teach like this. I don't know if [Australians] need to learn about gardening."

Maeve Brown, shelter project co-ordinator at the Jesuit Refugee Service, says Lionel's situation is all too common among asylum applicants. Their lives are characterised by uncertainty about whether they will be able to keep living in Australia, and often abject poverty, she says. Among her clients, who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and destitution, she often sees signs of depression and physical sickness.

"The waiting and uncertainty takes its toll on people's health and mental health," she says. "After a year of waiting, people have lost a lot of hope."

That limbo period can last upwards of two years, Brown says, and there is "very, very little in terms of free legal help". Those who arrive by plane are typically given work rights and healthcare access, but these can be swiftly revoked if, for example, the person is shown to have travelled on a fake passport.

And finding work is difficult, even for professionals like Lionel. Foreign qualifications are often not recognised in Australia, asylum seekers frequently lack sufficient English skills and employers are often unwilling to hire an applicant who could be deported months later. Only about 40 per cent of applicants who come by plane receive government financial assistance, Brown says.

Caslick hopes the garden will continue to benefit from Lionel's expertise. He is working on a horticultural therapy program to be run at St Canice's in conjunction with St Vincent's Hospital, which he hopes will elicit the same positive effect as it had on Lionel.

"He's a quiet fellow but he's opened up a little bit," Caslick says. "He walks around with a bit more authority in the garden. I'm assuming he feels a bit of ownership."

Lionel has his own plans, if he is allowed to stay in Australia. He wants to study agriculture, particularly the differences between cultivation here and in Burundi. And he wants his friends here and in Burundi to know about his little green oasis, tucked away on a Kings Cross rooftop.

"One day I am going to take a picture here and show my friends," he says. "I am going to tell them, 'this is my job'."