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Tibetan Friendship Group Australia (Inc.)

Patrons: His Holiness the Dalai Lama
Joan M Wilson OAM

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS TIBETAN COMMUNITY

The World Heritage NSW Blue Mountains lie west of Sydney and comprise a series of



villages and small townships along the Great Western Highway and railway. Built on rugged sandstone, deep vast valleys with a long indigenous history, drop away on either side, and this beautiful area is now home to more than eighty Tibetans.

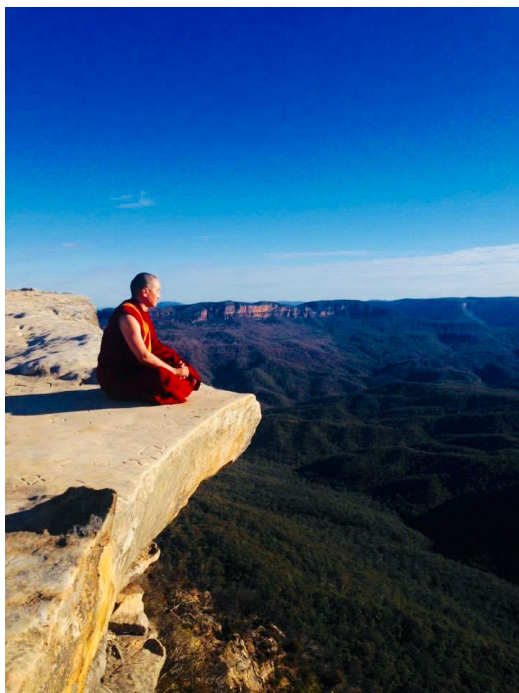
TFG was formed following a request for help for Tibetan refugees in India, forced to leave Tibet for safety in 1959. The Tibetans continued to arrive in subsequent years making the dangerous, difficult journey over the Himalayas, arriving in India with nothing. Over the years settlements and schools developed, and there were opportunities for Tibet's unique culture to be preserved and fostered. TFG has continued to help individuals and projects through sponsorship and donations. This enabled children to have an education, monks and nuns to flourish, healthcare to be provided, and culture maintained in institutions like the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts.

At first the Tibetans thought they'd return to Tibet. The Tibetan Government in Exile was established in Dharamsala under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Tibetan settlements developed across India, but it still wasn't possible to return.

Over the years there were opportunities to settle in other countries and to get citizenship and hold a passport. A few Tibetans came to Australia in the eighties and nineties and eventually the Australian government agreed to Tibetans being part of their humanitarian refugee program. The first group arrived in 1997 settling in Sydney and Melbourne. Gradually the numbers of arrivals increased, and the majority came to live in Dee Why in the

Northern beaches of Sydney, although there are groups of Tibetans in other Australian states, and smaller groups have settled in other parts of NSW.

A few Tibetans have lived in the Blue Mountains for some years, but the numbers never really grew. They'd come and live up here for a few years but would often return to Sydney. And then His Holiness Dalai Lama visited in 2015, giving special teachings at the Fairmont Resort and a wonderful public talk. The Sydney Tibetans came to see him and were introduced to the area, and some of them were inspired to move here. They appreciated the natural beauty, accommodation was less expensive, and it was still an easy journey to visit Sydney. Later they learnt to appreciate how the Blue Mountains community is smaller than Sydney but very welcoming.



The community has gradually grown, until today there are over eighty Tibetans living here; mainly in the upper Blue Mountains, in Katoomba or close by. At first, they moved from Dee Why, but more recently families have moved here direct from India on their humanitarian visas.

It's never easy settling into a new area and home, and particularly difficult for those with little English language. Tibetans already living here have often helped them find accommodation and work, but it all takes time and resilience.

A lot of services have developed in Sydney for new migrants and refugees. In addition to well organised settlement services there is an excellent multicultural health department with a Tibetan health worker, extra help in schools and a good TAFE with a range of relevant courses for Tibetans. Brookvale TAFE also has the excellent Tibetan mentoring program, and the Northern Beaches Council has been most supportive.

This contrasted with the limited services available in the Blue Mountains, and at first several families and individuals returned to Sydney. It was the Tibetans themselves who established themselves as part of the community by organising events and asking their Australian friends to attend. Good connections were also made with the Katoomba dharma centre and the local indigenous community.

The new Tibetans also realised the importance of preserving their language, so a Tibetan language school was started on Saturday mornings for the children. They also invited local Blue Mountains residents to come along as students to learn their Tibetan language.

The large active Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group (BMRS) helped some of the newcomers with furniture and household supplies, and later coordinated one-on-one English language tuition. There are many ex-teachers and ESL teachers who have retired in the mountains, and they value helping and becoming friends with the Tibetans.

We organised a meeting with representatives of the council, multicultural health and



BMRS to ask the new Tibetans what they wanted. They needed continuing help with employment, accommodation, education, access to services and support to present their cultural events. Following this, council have given financial and other support for events and for a 'talking circle' with all the

local service providers; and meetings with real estate agents and local employers – which all developed into a Tibetan Coordination Group. Assistance was given to accredit two Tibetan health interpreters and a local GP started a Tibetan clinic and ran health programs. TAFE is working to provide more accessible English classes, and other training and employment opportunities have opened up through this networking.

The number of Tibetan children has grown, with new babies arriving and toddlers in childcare and older children in Blue Mountains schools. The school principals encourage the children to retain their culture, and one school hall and kitchen has been offered for big celebrations like Losar (Tibetan New Year), and another room has been offered for the Saturday Tibetan language classes.

Employment is still a challenge though many are valued for their work in the aged care,



disability and cleaning industries. Tibetans are also beginning to open their own businesses. Early ones were selling food at local markets, but there are now two cafes and a jewellery shop in Katoomba, and a smaller picture framing business.

The last eighteen months with the Covid virus hasn't been easy, and there is a pause on new arrivals from India. Many Tibetans with visa

approvals are waiting in India to travel here. Events have been cancelled though a Losar picnic was held at Wentworth Falls Lake in February, and a joyous indoor Saka Dawa celebration in May. A small mentoring scheme (Mountain Mentors) has started this year, and is working well, enabling further help and friendship between the Tibetans and Blue Mountains community. *Leona Kieran – TFG committee and resident in the Blue Mountains*