

Seven years to find his family

By Jim Gainsford

FREEDOM from Fear – the theme of Refugee Week 2010 – could also be the title of Rwandan refugee Damascene Byimira's life story since coming to Australia.

Mr Byimira fled the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and was separated from his wife Jeanne and sons Derrick, now 14, and Polain, 11, for more than seven years.

"I was a refugee since I was born," Mr Byimira said. "The genocide in Rwanda started in 1959, the year before I was born.

"My grandmother fled the country, taking me with her when I was three. "We went to the Congo and she died in Zaire when I was six. After that I looked after myself."

Mr Byimira was reunited with his parents and 11 brothers and sisters in his early 20s when the second genocide started in 1994.

He married Jeanne in 1995 but they were separated by the war.

He said his mother had a dream the genocide would happen and he would be the only member of the family to survive.

"She said I would survive because God loved me in some way," he said. "She told me not to avenge.

"I was hiding in the bush when they killed my brother."

Mr Byimira escaped and made his way through Kenya to Indonesia and then to East Timor.

While in Timor he was taken in by the local priest, Bishop Belo, and looked after by the church. Moving on to Europe to try to find

Survey out

A Red Cross survey of 1000 Australians, released to coincide with Refugee Week, has found that most people are sympathetic to refugees.

It found that eight out of 10 people would help a refugee resettle in their community and 67 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that refugees had made a positive contribution to society.

It also found that 94 per cent of respondents would use all their money to flee conflict or threat to travel to a safe country.

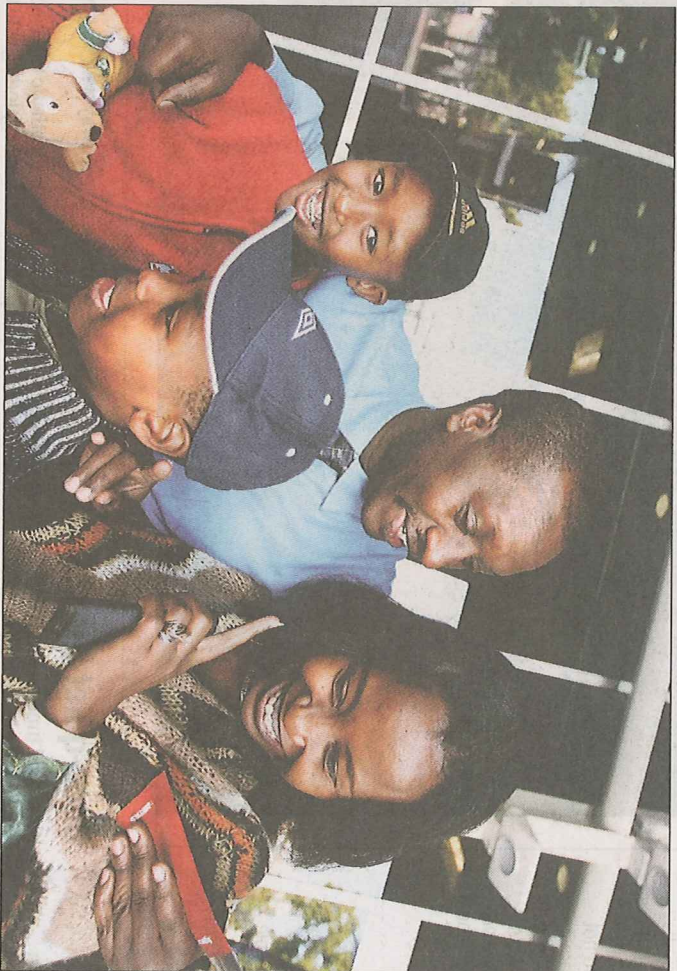
REFUGEE WEEK

his wife, he was detained while in transit in Darwin and sent to Villawood Detention Centre.

He was tracked down to Villawood by one of the nuns he had met in East Timor who helped him apply for residency.

Released on January 10, 2002, he was helped by the church.

He went on to study English and was educated at the Australian Cath-



New home: Damascene Byimira when he was reunited with his wife Jeanne and sons Derrick and Polain at Sydney Airport in 2006. Picture: Ben Rushton

olic University at Strathfield where he works as an administration officer.

The Red Cross found his wife and sons in Belgium and the family were reunited in 2006 and have settled in Arncliffe.

Their third son, Daniel, was born three years ago.

Mr Byimira said he feels safe living in Australia.

He has started a Rwandan cultural and community group with the assistance of St George Migrant Resource Centre and Kogarah Coun-

cil to bring his scattered community together.

"We have a very small number of Rwandan people here: five or six families," he said.

"We can't ignore history but we can give our children a future without anger. We also want to share our culture with Australian kids."

To mark Refugee Week, Kogarah, Rockdale and Hurstville councils will host a cruise on the Georges River for 55 refugees and their families this Saturday, June 26.