

How refugees saved a town

A couple's quick Google search has led to the most successful settlement scheme since the Snowy Hydro. Why don't more do this?

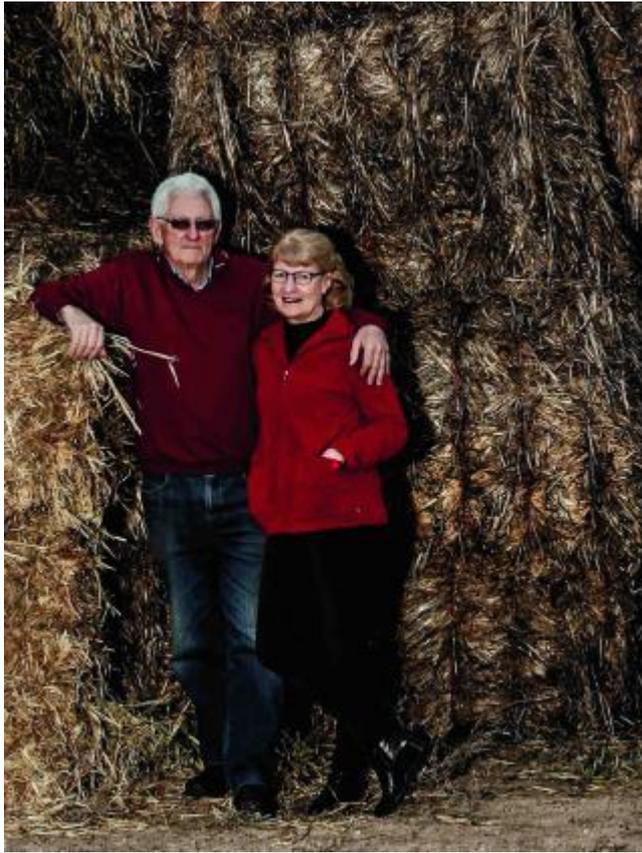
- By [Greg Bearup](#)
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The imposing Commercial Hotel sits on a plum plot in the Victorian town of Nhill, the halfway mark on the eight-hour trek from Melbourne to Adelaide. Its grand wrought iron balcony runs along beside the highway and then wraps around into the town's main drag like a welcome mat. But there'll be no more beers with Duncan at the Commercial for the atmosphere is grim — after flowing for 125 years, the kegs ran dry in 2013 and the pub was abandoned.

The Spot cafe, a few doors away, is no longer the spot and the end of financial year run-outs at Ivan Morrow Holden ran out long ago. It's been a while, too, since Westpac decided Nhill was no longer in need of staff, or a bank, to fulfil its promise to *help our customers, communities and people to prosper and grow*. For the past few decades Nhill's been like a castle on a beach and each full moon the tide laps at its foundations.

The problem for Nhill, population 2184, is not a lack of jobs — its unemployment rate is just 3.6 per cent, well under the national average. Just about anyone who comes to town, be they professionals or labourers, can find work. Its perennial conundrum is getting people to come and keeping them.

This was a major headache for John Millington, 71, the former manager of Luv-a-Duck, one of Australia's largest duck producers and Nhill's largest private employer. The company was expanding and, for a while, he filled vacancies with locals — many of the smaller grain farms in the district were being sold to larger operators and the farmers were moving into town with their kids and looking for work. But then they too started drifting away and the company faced the prospect of having to relocate parts of its operations closer to Melbourne or Adelaide, an option that didn't sit well with the Millingtons. They'd moved to Nhill in 1983 and were staunch defenders of the town — both John and his wife Margaret have been awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for their decades of service to the community.



John and Margaret Millington OAM's.

Picture: Julian Kingma

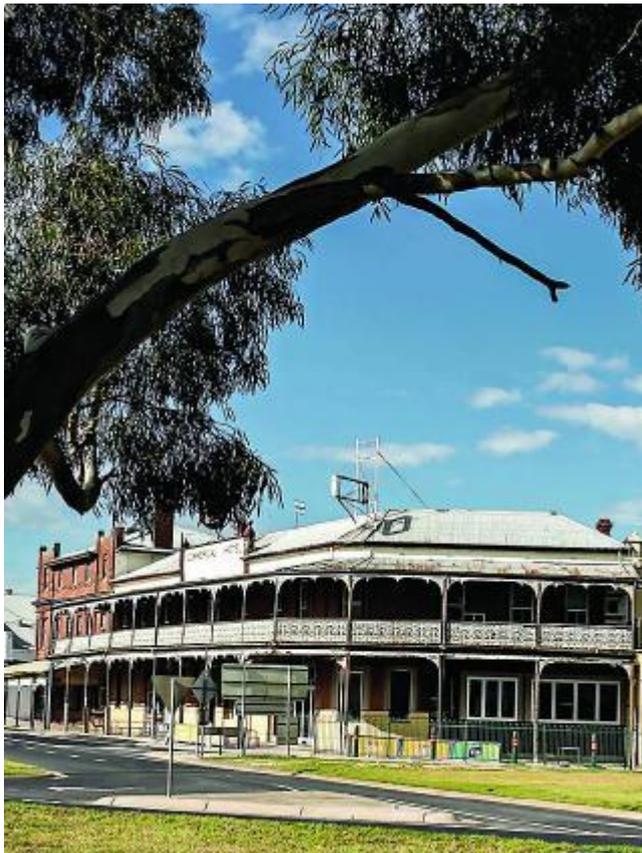
The Millingtons decided to fight. “If we in the town didn’t do something,” says Margaret, 66, “nobody else would. No white knight was going to ride in over the horizon.” John had had some experience bringing in skilled foreign workers — engineers and diesel mechanics from South Africa — on 457 visas. He was asked to speak about his experiences at the annual meeting of Rural Australians for Refugees, which was being held nearby in 2009.

It was at this meeting that he first heard about Karen refugees. The Karen — a collection of tribes from the hills of southern Myanmar — have been brutalised by Myanmar’s military dictatorship for decades. Hundreds of thousands fled to camps over the border in Thailand, where they scratched out a miserable existence, stateless and unable to work. In the early 2000s Australia began accepting Karen refugees and more than 11,000 have come. Many ended up living around Werribee in Melbourne’s south-west, where unemployment rates among the largely uneducated and unskilled refugees was high.

At the conference, the Millingtons heard about a well-meaning but vague plan to bring some Karen refugees to the regional Victorian city of Horsham. John knew from his experience with the South Africans that they needed more than a vague plan. To entice migrants, they needed guaranteed work. But getting them to stay required much more: their families needed to feel welcome; they needed the comfort of having their own kind around them, as well as pathways to help them integrate into the community. “It was a lightbulb moment, an epiphany,” says John. “That night when I left the conference I sat in the car outside the Uniting Church Hall in Horsham thinking, ‘Well, why couldn’t we bring them to Nhill?’”

He knew absolutely nothing about the Karen or Myanmar “apart from Aung San Suu Kyi and *The King and I*.” The next morning, he and Marg Googled Karen. Then they hatched a plan.

Eight years later that plan has become one of the most successful rural refugee resettlement programs since the Snowy Hydro Scheme. There are now more than 180 Karen living in Nhill and working in 18 businesses — on wheat farms, in engineering workshops, in the hospital and schools. Karen kids, born in refugee camps, have gone off to university and returned to Nhill as professionals. At the nearby Australian Wildflowers farm they've provided the necessary workforce to allow the company to move into the export market. The Karen have sunk deep roots and 24 families have bought their own homes. In 2015, a Deloitte Access Economics study found the Karen had contributed \$41.5 million to the local economy in the first five years they'd been in Nhill.



Commercial Hotel, Nhill. Picture: Julian

Kingma

It's now known as the Nhill Model and has become a template for rural revitalisation and -refugee resettlement. Jack Archer, CEO of the Regional Australia Institute, says there's a quiet revolution underway. Dozens of Tamil and Burmese refugees have moved to Biloela, Queensland, to fill vacancies at its meatworks and on farms. Hundreds of Afghan refugees have moved into the SA towns of Naracoorte and Bordertown to work in meatworks and on farms and vineyards, and some have started their own businesses. The Muslim refugees have been embraced, according to the local mayor, Erika Vickery — with almost a quarter of residents born overseas she says, “we've become a United Nations in a generation”. More than 100 Filipinos have moved to Pyramid Hill in Victoria to work in a piggery and other businesses and now comprise 20 per cent of the town.

For many rural areas, just about the only people moving there are migrants. The Regional Australia Institute's recent study, *The Missing Workers*, found that in 113 rural local government areas — which it called “heartland regions” — there had been a hollowing out of Australian-born residents. Old people were retiring to the coast and young adults were

moving away for jobs. This was the scene in Nhill, too, before its residents shored up the foundations of this ageing bush town and injected hope. Success here has not been driven by government ministers or bureaucrats or economic theories. This is a story about love and respect. It's about the people of a small town opening their hearts to an oppressed minority, and enriching the lives of all of them in the process.

John Millington takes me on a tour of Nhill in his old work ute. "See this place up here," he says, pointing to a grand old colonial timber house surrounded by verandas. "We call this the Big House, it used to be the doctors' surgery." Millington is mates with the local doctor, Malcolm Anderson, who'd moved to a new surgery next door to the new hospital. "I rang him up and said, 'What are you doin' with the Big House, do you reckon we could rent it out to the Karen?'" The doctor said they could have it for free but Millington insisted that those who could pay should. So, they struck a deal that anyone who had a job would pay \$50 a week, but everyone else, their wives and kids or those looking for work, could stay for free. At times, during the first few years of the Karen in Nhill, more than a dozen people lived in the rambling old house.

"See this house here," Millington says, pointing to a dwelling opposite the Big House. It belongs to Eril and Paddy Field, who'd moved into town after retiring from their farm. "I went in and saw them and explained what had happened to the Karen, how they'd had a rough trot, how their villages had been burned and how they'd lived in appalling conditions in refugee camps for years. I said they'd be needing a grandma and grandpa, someone who could help them out, tell them when to put the bins out and make them feel welcome." Eril and Paddy became great mates with the new arrivals, who'd come over and help with their gardening.

And so Eril and Paddy introduced them to their neighbour, Peg Orford. Peg, who's in her 90s, ran the local haberdashery until she retired and was a stalwart of the community. The Karen started mowing Peg's lawn too and she became very fond of them. "Anyway," says Millington. "A while ago I got a call from Peg; she wanted me to come over." Peg had never married and had no children but had lots of nieces and nephews and many of them were at her house on this day. Peg was going into a nursing home. "She'd called them all in for a big family pow-wow and everyone had agreed with her decision: she wanted to donate her house and everything in it — washing machine, TV, furniture — to the Karen." Peg Orford's old house, neat as a pin, is now used as a Karen community centre and any new families that move to Nhill get to live there rent-free until they find their feet. "How good is that!" says John Millington with a tear in his eye. "Peg donated the house she'd grown up in to the Karen!"



Hal Loo Pakoo. Picture: Julian Kingma

At the hospital we meet workers Mura Htoo and Miriam Creek, now firm friends. The hospital's director of nursing says that without the influx of Karen nurses and ancillary staff it would struggle to operate. Next, we pop into Halfway Motors and Hal Loo Pakoo, 30, strolls out from under a vehicle he's been tending. "G'day," he says. We move to the warmth of the office, where owner Kim Moyle is shuffling paperwork. Hal's folks were among the first to move to Nhill in 2010 when his father got work at Luv-a-Duck, where he works still. In 2012 Hal fronted up to Kim Moyle and her husband, Dallas, looking for work. "We said we didn't have any work," says Kim. "The next day he turned up again and said he'd work for free." He did a few shifts; they were impressed with his work ethic and attitude, and took him on. "He loves working here," says Kim. "He's got a smile on his face all the time. He comes in here happy and it just lifts the mood of the whole place. It's infectious."

Hal is now a fully qualified mechanic and his wife, Eh Tha Pakoo, 26, has qualified as a nurse and is working at the Nhill hospital, one of seven Karen staff. They recently bought a house and are planning a family, which, for Kim Moyle, cannot come quickly enough. "Kim wants to be grandma," says Hal cheekily. Kim's doe-eyed grin confirms this to be true.

Hal says the Karen like the pace of life in Nhill — they came from isolated villages in Myanmar and city life never really suited them. They all talk about the peace and quiet after generations of turmoil. Most weekends Hal takes his parents out fishing on the Wimmera River — they love the taste of carp, which they dry or cook in curries. "I've got plenty of good mates," says Hal. "Karen mates, Aussie mates. Doesn't matter, all the same."

And they can afford to buy houses, something that would have been unlikely in Melbourne. With a median price of around \$150,000, Nhill has some of the cheapest housing in Victoria; even lowly paid labourers have managed to save enough for a deposit in just a few years.

Hal and his wife regularly go on camping trips with the Moyles. They recently shared a houseboat on the Murray River, where Hal learned to wakeboard behind their speedboat. Kim Moyle and her husband have five kids between them and all have trodden the usual path for Nhill youth and moved to Melbourne. She reckons Hal will stay. “Hal’s become part of our family,” says Kim as her eyes moisten. “He really has. He is such an inspiration to us all — when you know what he and the other Karen have been through ... I can’t put it into words how incredibly special he is to us.” Hal reaches over, pats her on the shoulder and grins.

John and I head down to the main street to get some lunch as he explains how he and Marg travelled to Melbourne late in 2009 for a meeting to encourage the Karen to move to Nhill. They thought they might get a dozen people to the meeting; around 150 turned up. John gave a talk, with slides, about the work at Luv-a-Duck, and Marg gave a PowerPoint presentation about the town’s facilities — its schools, its new hospital, its sportsgrounds and churches; the Karen in Nhill are Buddhists or Christians.

The couple also spent time explaining their strategy to Nhill’s community leaders — the police, council, service clubs, schools and local business people. “Basically, anyone who could potentially give us a hard time,” John explains. “We wanted people to be with us.” They also approached around 30 local people to become mentors — each new family who came to town would have someone to show them around, help them out with banking, filling in forms, signing a lease, booking the kids into school ... “We wanted everyone to have a friendly local they could turn to for help.”

Early in January 2010, a busload of Karen drove out to Nhill to look the town over. A week later five workers and their families turned up and began working at Luv-a-Duck. There are now 50 Karen at the processing plant, more than a quarter of the 180-strong workforce, and the business has never been stronger.



Karen women at the Paw Po shop. Picture: Julian Kingma

Down the main street, John beeps the horn and a woman named Pam Deckert pokes her head in the window for a chat. Pam's late husband, Daryl, a grain farmer, was once the local mayor. "You were one of the mentors, weren't you, Pam?" he asks. "Yeah, for two families," she says. "Loved it." Pam had worked as a speech therapist and turned her skills to helping out with English lessons and also with sewing lessons at the Paw Po shop, where the Karen women turn their traditional woven fabrics into contemporary bags, clothes and homewares for sale. "We've become really close," Pam says of the families she mentored. "I have been over to their house a few times for lunch and I've taken them out on drives and shown them around the farm. The second family that I mentored, I am the grandma to their little boy, Simon."

I ask Pam if she thinks there've been any negative aspects to the Karen coming to Nhill. She pauses for a while, thinking about the question. "No, I can't think of a single negative," she says eventually. "Honestly, I can't speak highly enough of them and I've never heard anyone say nasty things about them." Of course, there have been the odd detractors, John Millington says, who believe they've taken local jobs and overrun the town — but there has been no overt conflict.

Senior Constable Karyleen Hateley from Nhill Police tells me that the integration of the Karen has been remarkably smooth. "The Karen are a very, very law-abiding people," she says. When they first arrived the old sergeant, Nelson Barwise, spent time getting to know them. He organised soccer matches and barbecues. Barwise, who has since retired, knew the Karen had come from a culture where they'd been brutalised by the army and police. He wanted them to know they could trust the police if they ever got into trouble.

Jack Archer, from the Regional Australia Institute, says much more could be done to encourage migrants to move from the city to the bush. "People had assumed that rural decline was an insoluble problem," he says, "that either the jobs weren't there or that people didn't want to move to the bush." However, Nhill and a number of other bush towns have proven that with local champions the rural decline can be arrested. "But the Federal Government hasn't focused enough on supporting this," Archer says. "It hasn't been doing all that well in helping regional areas."

Archer sees parallels with the successful Landcare movement. In the late 1980s, farmers and environmentalists united to tackle serious land and water degradation issues. Landcare began as a community-based movement that the government later supported with resources to make it more successful. "I'd love to see something similar in bringing migrants to regional areas," he says.

Greg Wood, the CEO of Hindmarsh Shire, headquartered in Nhill, says support is badly needed and is scathing of the Federal Government's immigration policy, which does little to encourage migrants to move to the bush. His council is unable to fill numerous key roles. "I can't get an engineer to move here for love nor money ... we need four or five or six - engineers," he says, along with planners and environmental health officers, surveyors ... It's the same with the local hospitals, trying to attract doctors and nurses. Last harvest, there was a dire shortage of truck drivers. He would like to see a special rural visa, where migrants are given permanent residency if they stay in a rural area for four years. "We've got this huge skill shortage right across the country," he says. "But we've had no help from the Federal Government, none whatsoever."

The job of encouraging migrants to head to the bush has been left to enterprising locals, such as farmer David Matthews, who lives an hour east of Nhill outside the tiny town of Rupanyup, population 536. Matthews and his wife, Sam, established the Wimmera Grain Company in 1993 to add value to local pulse crops; they've since sold the grain business to concentrate on their farm, but have always found it very difficult to get staff. Matthews had a friend who was an agronomy lecturer in Melbourne who told him about one of his students, a Colombian vet, who he reckoned was a good prospect.

Guillermo Sierra, 40, and his wife Magda Medina, 37, are both veterinarians. In Colombia they lived in fear of getting caught up in the country's drug violence or being kidnapped by left-wing guerrillas. And their prospects were meagre; even as fully qualified vets they were each only earning around \$600 a month.

In 2012 they moved to Melbourne on skilled migrant visas, leaving their son Phillip, now 11, to live with his grandparents in Colombia until they'd become established. Life in Melbourne was tough. They slept on the floor of a friend's apartment, working several jobs while learning English. Guillermo was also studying agronomy at night. He then got a phone call from David Matthews, asking if he was interested in a job.

In 2014 they moved to Rupanyup. Guillermo is now the farm manager and Magda works night shifts as an aide in a nursing home nearby. She tells me the first year in Rupanyup was tough. Her English was not great, and she'd just had her baby daughter, Valeria Rose, now aged four — they've since had another daughter, Melissa Jane, two. They had no internet and it was too expensive to phone her family in Colombia. "It was hard," she says. "I was very lonely." But slowly they've become integrated into the community and have been embraced, particularly by the local Catholic community.

"People say, 'Wow, you are a vet and you are working in a nursing home,'" she says. "But you have to think, 'Where do you want to go in life?' Back in Colombia I was a vet, but we couldn't afford to make the payments on our house." They now own two houses in Rupanyup. A second Colombian family has moved into their other house and the couple are working with Guillermo. A third couple are also planning on moving to Rupanyup soon. Magda says having other South Americans in town has changed her life.

"Now we have that beachhead established we figure it will be easier to bring more South Americans," says Matthews. "The myth is that there are no jobs in the country and that is one of the first things that we need to address." He was instrumental in establishing Australia's first-ever community bank in Rupanyup 20 years ago. He tells me planning is in its early stages to get the community banks to work with migration services such as AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services) to identify opportunities for migrants to move to the bush. "Eighty of the community banks are in small communities where they are the only bank," he says. "These are the small communities that have suffered most from decline."

Guillermo and Magda say they're now enjoying life in Rupanyup. Their son, Phillip, has joined them from Colombia and is doing well in school. "After pushing, pushing, pushing for so long we are starting to enjoy our lives, it feels like we are getting somewhere. We used to travel to Melbourne all the time on the weekends, but not so much any more." They are too busy. Magda is heavily involved in the parents and citizens' group at the school and Guillermo has joined the local Country Fire Authority as a volunteer. "Life here is good," he says. "I am building a future for my family."



Thay Blay Sher with her brothers Mu Yeh Htoo, left, and Ku Say. Picture: Julian Kingma

Back in Nhill, my epic tour with John Millington continues. “I want to take you to meet some special people,” he says. We arrive at a big house on the edge of town that looks out across a wheat field. Here we meet Tha Blay Sher, 23, who did her final years of schooling in Nhill and is now employed as an interpreter at the school. She grew up in a refugee camp, in a hut with a dirt floor. In 2015, she’d managed to save enough money to put down a deposit on a five-bedroom \$300,000 house in Nhill. “Yeah,” she says proudly, “the garage has a bedroom and a toilet in it as well!”

We gather around the lounge room fire as her mum sits crossed-legged on the floor, weaving a traditional design on a loom. Tha Blay works full-time at the school and is studying for a social science degree at Horsham to become a social worker in Nhill. “We have come a long way,” she says. “Nhill has been wonderful for the Karen, it is a place where we can build our futures in peace.”

Her younger brother, Mu Yeh Htoo, 15, wanders in — I’ve been told he is one of the brightest kids at the high school, Nhill College. Life for him has been a little easier; having come to Australia when he was young, he’s had no problems with English. He wants to become a surgeon. “My teachers are very encouraging,” he says, “and I try very hard. My Dad is a labourer at the duck farm and he says he never had the opportunities I have had. They just want me to achieve as much as I can and I am determined to be a surgeon.”

I notice a military camouflage uniform sitting on a chair and wonder who it belongs to. Mu tells me that his brother, who is in Year 12, is in the Australian Air Force Cadets at Horsham, and wants to join the Australian Army when he leaves school. Ku Say, 18, is summoned from his bedroom. Why do you want to join the army, I ask? “Ever since we came to Australia I

have felt a great sense of debt,” Ku Say tells me. “Living in Thailand we had very few opportunities but since we came to Australia we all have a good life. We have opportunities and so will our children and their children. I feel like it is my duty to give something back. It is very personal, but I feel like joining the army would be giving back.”

We walk out into the freezing night air and John Millington turns to me and says: “How good is that Greg! How good is that!”

Attribution: With thanks to:

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