
QLD NEWS

Small town unites to save Queensland-born little girls from being deported

A tiny Queensland community is fighting authorities for an asylum-seeking family who have been sat in immigration detention for the past year to return to the town they call home.

Elissa Lawrence, The Courier-Mail

QWEEKEND

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It's a simple tune rekindling memories of a happier time. Memories of friends, laughter, learning – and of home.

Three-year-old Kopika Nadesalingam remembers singing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* at her church-based playgroup in Biloela – the town where she was born – 120km southwest of Gladstone in Central Queensland. But the childhood rhyme now makes her cry.

Kopika, who turns four in May, has spent the past year in immigration detention at Broadmeadows, in Melbourne's northwest. Now when she hears her friends in Biloela singing to her over a FaceTime phone call, she becomes agitated and confused. She wants to go home.



📷 Queensland-born Kopika and Tharunicaa have spent the past 12 months living in detention in Melbourne with their parents, Nades and Priya who are seeking asylum from persecution in Sri Lanka.

Kopika and her family – father Nadesalingam Murugappan (Nades), mother Kokilapathmapriya Nadesalingham (Priya), both 42, and little sister Tharunicaa, 21 months – are at the centre of a passionate community-led battle to allow them to stay in Australia and to return to their adopted town in regional Queensland.

[QWEEKEND: THE LITTLE BOY WHO ‘DIED AFTER BEING BITTEN BY A TAIPAN](#)


[FORMER ARMY ENGINEER INVENTS WORLD-FIRST MEDICAL DEVICES](#)

Sri Lankan Tamils, the family had been living in Biloela for more than three years before they were removed from their home by Australian Border Force immigration officers and Serco guards in a 5am raid on March 5 last year, one day after Priya’s bridging visa expired.

The couple, who met in Sydney with their marriage arranged through the Tamil community, had endeared themselves to the town.

They legalised their traditional Tamil wedding with a ceremony at the Biloela Court House in 2014 and their two daughters were born in the town. They rented a modest, single-level house on Rainbow St. Nades volunteered in the local St Vincent de Paul opportunity shop before getting a job at Teys meatworks.



 Biloela family Nades, Priya and children Tharunicaa and Kopika on a trip to Sydney.

Priya attended church-based craft and playgroups with her children and became known for her home-cooked curries and kind nature.

But their great Australian dream was not to last.

As Nades was preparing to leave for his early morning shift at the meatworks and Priya was warming a bottle for Tharunicaa, then eight months old, immigration officers arrived to remove the family.

After packing what belongings they could, they were taken in two vehicles (Nades in one, Priya in another with the girls) to Gladstone Airport, where they boarded a plane to Melbourne.

On March 13, the family was flown to Perth, where they boarded another plane to be deported, but a dramatic last-

minute injunction from lawyers resulted in them being removed from the aircraft and returned to Melbourne.

Since then, the family has remained in a small self-contained unit in a residential precinct of the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA), called an APOD (Alternative Place of Detention).



📷 Tamil asylum seekers Nades with wife Priya and their Queensland-born daughters Tharunicaa and Kopika.

It is separated from the main immigration detention centre compound but the family is still under the supervision of Serco guards. They have a small patio, which is fully enclosed with security grilles, and they cannot leave the accommodation without an escort and prior approval.

‘THEY CAME IN SEARCH OF SAFETY’

Priya often says her life began when she arrived in Biloele, a safe haven from what family friend Angela Fredericks describes as a long and distressing history of violence and fear.


“Priya has been through some horrific things ... she watched her fiancé in Sri Lanka murdered by being burnt alive in front of her, she’s been raped,” Fredericks says.

“Her father was physically assaulted and lost sight in one eye, her mum has been physically and sexually assaulted, her home has been bombed. They are asylum seekers, they came to Australia in search of safety. They came here fleeing for their lives.”

Priya came to Australia by boat in 2013, arriving at the Cocos Islands with 93 other people. Nades had arrived at Christmas

Island by boat with 99 others a year earlier, after fleeing persecution for fighting for both sides during Sri Lanka's civil war.



 Biloela girls Kopika, who is now nearly 4, and Tharunica, who is now 21 months old, have been in a Melbourne detention centre since March last year with their parents Priya and Nades.

They did not know each other and met through the Tamil community after they had both been released on bridging visas – Nades in August 2012 and Priya in February 2014 – along with 50,000 people who had arrived by boat between 2008 and 2013.

Classified as “illegal maritime arrivals”, Nades has exhausted all avenues of appeal to stay in Australia, while Priya and - Kopika can make one final appeal to the High Court.

The family's Biloela support group has not wavered in its efforts to bring them “home to Bilo”, attracting national attention to the case with their campaign.

Led by Fredericks, who is a social worker in Biloela, the group has raised about \$84,000 from crowdfunding to pay for legal fees, as well as advertisements about the family's plight on a roadside billboard and in newspapers.

In January, the group organised national rallies drawing hundreds of people in Gladstone, Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Canberra.

A Facebook page has more than 4600 followers, while a change.org petition to return the family to Biloela has received 180,000 signatures.



 The house in Biloela where the family lived. Picture: Mark Cranitch.

Fredericks, who has visited the family at MITA twice – in May and October last year – and speaks to Priya most weeks says the family is under regular supervision from guards, including sporadic checks during the night.

“They are in a family accommodation section within the MITA,” Fredericks says. “The Government tells us they are not in prison but everything you experience is that it is like prison.”

She says the visiting process is complicated and includes numerous forms and online approvals as well as a security check and drug test. Items that visitors have attempted to take as presents for the girls, such as Play-Doh and colouring books, have been confiscated.

“We know this family,” Fredericks says. “They are part of our community ... we have sat and we’ve heard their stories and we’ve seen their fear. It’s genuine fear. When you sit with them and hear that, our protective instincts kick in. You fight and you protect your own people. And these are our people, so we are going to fight for them.”

SHIRE OF OPPORTUNITY

Biloela is the largest town of the resource-rich Banana Shire that stretches over more than 28,500 sq km in Central

Queensland.

Fewer than 16,000 people live in the local government area spread over 12 towns including Moura and Taroom, with almost 6000 people in Biloela.

The shire's fertile farmland supports a wide range of crops – wheat, sorghum, chickpeas, mung beans, herbs, lucerne and cotton – as well as beef, squab, pork and red claw production. Hundreds of jobs are created by the Callide power station (which generates about 20 per cent of the state's electricity), three coal mines, a gold mine, Queensland Nitrates Plant (QNP), and Teys meatworks.

The area is also rich in coal bed methane gas and has three pipelines running through it from the Surat and Bowen basins to Gladstone.

Banana Shire Council declares itself “the shire of opportunity”.



At a local park each week, the cultural mix is on show during a regular game of beach volleyball.
Picture: Mark Cranitch.

Mayor Neville Ferrier, 65, who lives in the 30-resident town of Dululu, simply says: “We are very lucky. We have everything here ... grains, herbs, beef, cattle studs, irrigation, hay production. Agriculture is our base to the shire and has been for 100 years.

“We are in a bad drought at the moment. Cattle prices have slumped just lately and we can't find enough hay or grain to feed cattle, things are pretty crook.


“The resources industry is keeping us up at the moment. And we have big interest in solar farms wanting to come to the shire.”

Queensland's resources boom that created "big-paying jobs everywhere" had another effect too, making lower-paid but necessary jobs harder to fill.

In 2010, Biloela was chosen to host a planned settlement of refugees as part of a federally funded pilot called the Rural Employment Assistance Program. Refugees started arriving in the town in 2011, taking jobs at the meatworks and in other agricultural-based industries where a consistent local workforce had been hard to find.

The program has since been discontinued but there are now many migrant families living in the town, including Brazilians, Chinese, Burmese, Sri Lankans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Afghanis and South Africans.



 Sid Sathees and friends playing volleyball. Picture: Mark Cranitch.

At a local park each week, the cultural mix is on show during a regular game of beach volleyball. Players include Teys workers and are a mix of Burmese, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese and Indian cultures, with an occasional "Aussie".

Sid Sathees, 34, from Sri Lanka, a Teys meatworker who is on a temporary protection visa, initiated the idea, raising money among his friends to fund the court sand and net. Council approved it and helped by installing a drinking fountain.

"There's a good community here who support the migrant people. The council has been a support for us," Sathees says.

"It's good living here, a nice quiet town. Good work opportunities. We have the power station, Teys, the piggery, mining, QNP ... there's a bit of work around.

"The volleyball is a good thing to do ... it keeps everyone on the right track and is good entertainment, otherwise they

might want to drink alcohol or play the pokies. It's a good influence."

Ferrier says there's been "no trouble at all" from the influx of new nationalities to Biloela. "There are something like 17 different nationalities now at the meatworks," he says.

"We've got a few migrants working for the council who also came through the same program eight or nine years ago when we couldn't get people, because they were working everywhere else."

Ferrier says he is not at all surprised by his community's action to fight for Priya and Nades.

"They [the family] were certainly very well behaved here. And we don't know what the poor buggers have been through, do we?" he says.

"Biloela is just a typical country town where you try and look after your neighbour. People have got feelings and if someone is in strife, everybody rallies ... it's just a natural thing to do.

"With children involved, especially since they were born here, it gets your heartstrings going. It just affects you."

A TARGET FROM BOTH SIDES

Sri Lanka's civil war, between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or Tamil Tigers, and the Sri Lankan military, was fought from 1983 to 2009.

Amnesty International's 2017/18 report on world human rights states the Sri Lankan war resulted in "enforced - disappearance, extrajudicial executions, torture and other serious human rights violations and abuses" that were - committed "with impunity" before, during and after the conflict.

But the report also states that "torture and other ill-treatment in detention" continues. It says the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka found widespread incidents of violence against detainees, including torture and other ill-

treatment that were “routine and practised throughout the country, mainly by police”.

Fredericks says Nades’s mother in Sri Lanka has received visits at her home from CID officers (the Criminal Investigation Department of the Sri Lanka police) asking about Nades and Priya and mentioning their daughters by name.



Queensland-born Tharunicaa and Kopika.

His mother has provided a formal statement about the incident to the Tamil Refugee Council, which has condemned the removal and detention of the family.

Fredericks says Nades has a history of fighting with the LTTE as well as with the government army, making him a target “from both sides”.

“During the civil war, the Tamil Tigers wanted to recruit Nades’s father but because of his age they took Nades instead, basically forcing him against his will to join the Tamil Tigers,” Fredericks says.

“He escaped and got back to his family where he was conscripted into the army. Nades is covered in shrapnel wounds. It was discovered he was in the Tamil Tigers so

basically they were after him too. So he is wanted by both sides. He managed to leave Sri Lanka and when he thought things had [calmed] down he went back to his family but then the heat would rise again and he'd have to leave again.

“This has been used against Nades, making it sound like he’s been back to Sri Lanka for a holiday.”



 Internally displaced ethnic Tamils at the Manik Farm refugee camp, in Vavuniya, Sri Lanka in 2009. (AP Photo/Lakruwan Wanniarachchi, Pool)

Nades was found “not to engage Australia’s protection obligations” in late 2012, a decision upheld by the Refugee Review Tribunal in 2013 as well as the Federal Magistrates Court (July 2014), the Full Federal Court (November 2014) and the High Court (June 2015).

Priya was found not to be a refugee in 2016, upheld by the Immigration Assessment Authority in 2017. She has also unsuccessfully appealed to the courts but is entitled to make a final appeal to the High Court.

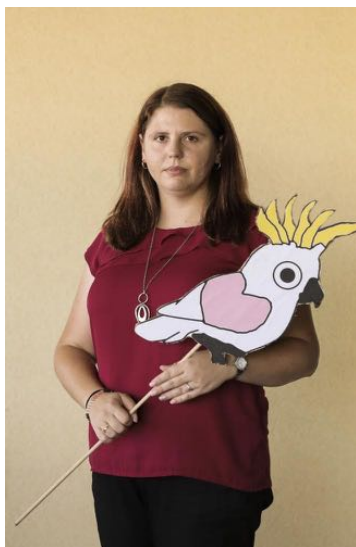
“Priya is very scared,” Fredericks says. “She is filled with worry about returning to Sri Lanka. She believes they are going to their death. None of us is denying that there needs to be rules. But if the result is innocent, hardworking people, who we want and welcome, being sent to danger, then there’s something wrong.”

SET THEM FREE

Established on Gangulu Aboriginal lands, “Biloela” is believed to have derived from the Aboriginal word for white cockatoo.

The symbol of the community fight on behalf of the family has become an illustrated white cockatoo, drawn with a love heart

as part of its wing to “show their heart belongs in Biloela”, that they “shouldn’t be caged” and should be set free.



Supporter Angela Fredericks with a cockatoo with a love heart on its wing, which has become a symbol of the “home to Bilo” campaign. Picture: Mark Cranitch.

Priya can speak English, however her friends have noticed her language skills slip over the past year, a result of not being immersed in the English-speaking community.

Speaking via a translator by phone from their detention accommodation, Priya says Kopika, who remembers Biloela very well, asks every day when she will return home to see her friends.

“She says, ‘Can we go tomorrow?’ That is very difficult,” Priya says. “We had a very happy life in Biloela. My family now is Biloela. I miss the community and my friends, everything. It’s very hard to be here with children. There are no activities for kids here.”

She says she is scared for their safety and their lives should they have to return to Sri Lanka. “It is very dangerous for my life if I go back to Sri Lanka. It is also not safe for Nades,” Priya says. “We are very scared and there is much sexual

abuse [of] women. I am scared for my daughters' safety. They won't be safe. I am so grateful to have people to support us. I hope that we will return to Biloela."

That support network includes Marion Meissner, a former Banana Shire Council councillor and high-school teacher of 32 years. Meissner says she is appalled by the treatment of "good people".

"This is Australia in the 21st century," she says. "The sort of thing that happened here 12 months ago is what you read about in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany. It's not supposed to happen in Australia. I can see no reason for that early morning raid on the type of people we are dealing with. I'm appalled that it happened in Australia, let alone this country town."

Marie Austin, 49, who visited the family in detention in January, met Priya at a Biloela Baptist Church craft group.



Supporters, Bronwyn Dendle, Marie Austin and Angela Fredericks having a face time conversation with Nades and family. Picture: Mark Cranitch.

"I know the family really well," she says. "They are a very warm and friendly family. You would always be greeted with big hugs, big warm smiles. You would see their interaction with other people ... it wasn't just me. They were engaging with the community and very well liked, and every friendship they made was genuine.

"My husband had an accident last year and, from detention, Priya will ring me to check on me. They are always thinking of others.

"They are clearly wanted here and they have proven they are valued community members who are willing to work and

willing to integrate.

“We know what has happened to them is not right, it’s not fair. That’s not justice.”

Bronwyn Dendle, 43, a social worker, says she was teaching Kopika Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star only days before they were taken.

“Surely the Government’s policies are meant to be a guide,” she says. “I feel our policy has thrown the baby out with the bath water. The Government has thrown out the nation’s humanity in the name of protecting ourselves. What are we protecting ourselves from? These are kind, loving, giving people who have done their best to become a part of Australian society.



Supporters, Bronwyn Dendle, Angela Fredericks; Marion Meissner and Marie Austin prepare campaign material. Picture: Mark Cranitch.

“This family supported themselves, they paid taxes, paid private rent, paid for the girls’ birth in hospital. Now they are in detention, there is the cost of the guards, all their food, clothing, everything. Now they are costing the taxpayer. It just doesn’t make sense. We’re asking in this particular case, for this particular family, in this particular town, please intervene and, on humanitarian grounds, let them stay.”

WE WANT THEM HERE

During a doorstep interview in Brisbane in January, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton said the circumstance of the family was “of their own making”.

He had issued a statement the previous month that said Priya and Nades “met and married and had two children in - Australia and did so in the full knowledge that they had no

right to remain in Australia. They have attempted to use their children as leverage and it is sad to see their children used in this way”.



Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and PM Scott Morrison during a division in the House of Representatives Chamber at Parliament House in Canberra. Picture. Kym Smith

At the time, Dutton’s office estimated the use of Australia’s judicial system to prevent their removal had cost the Australian taxpayer more than \$1 million.

Department of Home Affairs Immigration Detention and Community Statistics show as at December 31, 2018, there were 1285 people in immigration detention facilities, including 380 “illegal maritime arrivals”, or people who - arrived by boat seeking asylum.

Most Biloela locals know about Priya and Nades but many say they don’t know enough about the details to pass opinion and assume there may be “something the Government knows about them that we don’t”.

Others are equally supportive of their return and outraged at their treatment. There are many comments of support on the ‘Bring Priya, Nades and Girls Home To Biloela’ Facebook page, perhaps summed up by a common point of view: “The - overwhelming affection, respect and outpouring of support of the community for the family is surely proof the family should be allowed to stay.”

As the “face of the campaign”, Fredericks says she hasn’t received any hate messages on social media or otherwise and she believes that says a lot.



📷 Peter Dutton poses for photos with his family - wife Kirilly with their two sons Harry, 14 (right) and Tom, 13 (left) and daughter Rebecca - during a holiday on the Gold Coast. Picture: Nigel Hallett

“This is a bipartisan issue, this is about human rights, it’s not about political point-scoring. It’s about four human beings who need to be kept safe,” she says.

“In Australia we are meant to be the land of the fair go. This family could be used as an example of what we want from our immigrants – go rural, go into jobs that struggle to attract locals, produce kids.

“Most Australians like to think that if you are willing to put in the hard work ... if you have a go, then you get a go.

“They came here, they contributed, they became part of the community and so they are our people. We want them here and they deserve to be here.”

‘THE MINISTER SHOULD INTERVENE’

In January, Queensland Greens Senator Larissa Waters wrote to the Federal Minister for Immigration, David Coleman, requesting he exercise his powers to allow the family to stay in the community “where they have worked and to which they have contributed for years”.

In response to a request for comment from Coleman’s office, *Qweekend* was referred to Dutton’s December statement as outlined above.

In her own comment to *Qweekend*, Waters says the treatment of the family has been “shocking”.

“The Government keeps saying they want migrants in regional communities who contribute locally, and here we have a

family who was doing exactly that and is desperately wanted and welcomed by the Biloela community,” Waters says.

“The thousands of signatures on the petition to keep them here shows the depth of feeling, not just in Queensland but across Australia, with this case.

“The current Minister Coleman should intervene and use his personal powers under the Migration Act to return this well-loved family to their home in Biloela.” ■

WHAT THE LOCALS SAY:



📷 Marie Turner, 52, teacher.



📷 Dave Kehl, 65, mine worker, Dululu.

MARIE TURNER, 52

PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER, BILOELA


“Migrant and refugee workers are important to towns like Biloele. It’s cruel to take this family away and I think they should come home. They came here, they met here, had two kids here, were working here, were part of the community – they had a home.”

DAVE KEHL, 65

MINE WORKER, DULULU

“Taking them away like that, they have been treated like common criminals. There’s enough room in our community for families who are doing the right thing. To me, they are a good family and are welcome to stay. Bring them back.”



 Annette Munroe, 53,
administrator, Biloele.



Stephen McLellan, mine worker, Baralaba.

ANNETTE MUNROE, 53

REAL ESTATE OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR, BILOELA

“I think it’s unfair. I didn’t meet the family but have seen them around the community and they were always well-mannered and pleasant. I don’t believe they’ve done anything wrong. The people of Biloele are just standing up for what they believe is true.”

STEPHEN MCLELLAN

MINE WORKER, BARALABA

“The more people who live in country towns, the better for the economy. They were working and trying hard, not on the dole or anything. They were contributing. The community has got behind them, so they must have done something right.”



 Natasha Cullearn, 36, stay-at-home mum, Biloela.



 Greg Conway, 40, Biloela.

NATASHA CULLEARN, 36

HOMEMAKER, BILOELA

“They’ve worked here, they’ve contributed to the town. It would be really sad to have the whole family moved away and their kids taken away from the only home they’ve known. I’ve got little kids too; it would be heartbreaking. Their girls were born here and they [all] should be allowed to stay.”

GREG CONWAY, 40

BILOELA

“It’s distressing to hear that people who are so integrated in the community have been snatched away. It’s a complex issue but you have to see the human side of it. We want restrictions, of course, but as a society we want to support these people. It just doesn’t seem the Australian way.”