



Bhutan, bonds, boots

Street soccer program is building bridges

Steven Deare

"BUILD it, and they will come". When your target audience is homeless people though, how do you know if they will?

That was the uncertainty that faced organisers of a new street soccer program for homeless and disadvantaged people at Robin Thomas Reserve, Parramatta, recently.

The Big Issue Street Soccer program tried to start at Granville youth centre last year, but failed through lack of numbers.

This attempt posed the same questions. Would they come from the streets? The hostels? Ordinary homes?

How about Bhutan?

Of the 20-odd people who attended the initial meeting, a dozen

or so were young men from a Bhutanese community near Blacktown.

The men are recent arrivals to Australia after spending years as refugees in neighbouring Nepal.

One of them, 26-year-old Damber Dhungyel, said they heard about the program through a migrant centre.

"We were interested in community soccer and interaction with new friends," he said.

"Since football is basic for development, I'm sure (our) youth can become good persons mentally and physically. Since we've just come here we want to build a strong bond with the community."

Street soccer organiser Jason

Oldridge said the program aimed to build confidence in people so they could integrate into society and find a job, which is just what these men need.

One in the group, 33-year-old Bhaktiram Khatiwada, has enrolled in a TAFE course in community services.

He is eager for work after having no prospects in Nepal.

"Life as a refugee is very tough in Nepal without any opportunities," Bhaktiram said.

"When you're a refugee, you belong to no nation."

The street soccer program will continue each Thursday at 3.30pm.



The Big Issue Street Soccer Program has attracted strong interest from the Bhutan community