When offering a helping hand comes full circle

“Ordinary Australians rarely have the chance to make such a tangible difference to another family's life. CRISP gives them that chance.” - Huy Tran.

When Huy Tran arrived in Australia as a toddler after his family fled the war in Vietnam, strangers helped his parents begin again. Decades later, Huy and a group of people volunteering their time, are doing the same for a Syrian refugee family.

Huy Tran was not yet two years of age when his family arrived in Australia after a dangerous seven-day journey by boat from war-torn Vietnam that involved hunger, thirst and encounters with pirates.

Today, Huy is a project engineer, living with his family in Perth. His wife, Grace, is a doctor, and together they are raising three children. They are also part of a community supporter group helping a Syrian refugee family settle into Australian life through the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Program (CRISP).

For Huy, who is the group's coordinator, the connection is deeply personal.

"I am truly very grateful. Australia has given me so much. I have a full and safe life. And I also feel that I can bring something good to others."

His own family spent time in the Pulau Bidong refugee camp in Malaysia before being accepted for resettlement in Australia.

In Perth, they started again from scratch. They lived for about a year in government-arranged accommodation before moving into their own home. His parents struggled with English, but government support helped his father find work in computers, while a church group provided clothing, furniture and other necessities. That history has stayed with him.

Ahmad and Amani fled the Syrian war and spent about 10 years living as refugees in Jordan with their four children before being accepted for Australia.

When they arrived, Huy and the community supporter group met them at the airport, supplied food and essentials and began helping them navigate a bewildering new life in a foreign country. The group helped with school enrolments, public transport, healthcare and Centrelink. Once the family was housed, another challenge emerged – one of trust.

The role of the community supporter group was not initially clear to Ahmad and Amani and the relationship was, at times, tense.

Grace says she watched her husband navigate the emotional complexity of becoming the person providing help after growing up in a family that had once depended on it. "He's received much. And now he's the benefactor," she said.

Gradually, the relationship between the families changed. Ahmad began calling Huy and the other men in the group, "my brother". For Huy, it was a sign that the family had begun to feel safe.

Huy and Grace have also been impressed with the way the family has adapted, particularly the children. "They all arrived without English. Within a year, the children were speaking confidently, particularly the teenage children," Grace said. "They continue to work on their English and are each making plans for further study."

For Huy, this is what successful settlement looks like: moving from simply surviving to being able to imagine and plan for a future. For Grace, the Syrian family has provided lessons of its own. "I think that they teach me perspective, resilience and hope."

The community supporter group and the family are now friends. They share meals and barbecues together.

"Ordinary Australians rarely have the chance to make such a tangible difference to another family's life. CRISP gives them that chance," Huy said. "And seeing a family arrive here to start over, then gradually settle and thrive, is a very meaningful experience."