



# REFUGEES,

# OUR NEIGHBOURS

The case for a fair and just  
Community Sponsorship Program

Amnesty International is proud to be a part of the Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI), which is a joint project of the Refugee Council of Australia, Save the Children Australia, Amnesty International Australia, Welcoming Australia and Rural Australians for Refugees.

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# FOREWORD

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We all dream of the best future for our families. We all work to build communities that are strong and supportive. Refugees have the same hopes and dreams as anyone else. They are an integral and invaluable part of our community - cooking meals for us in our inner-city cafes, looking after the sick and the elderly at hospitals in our regional towns, and everything in between. We are neighbours. Our children are friends at school. Like everyone, refugees want to make a positive difference in the life of communities.

Australians want to make more space for refugees - like the heroes featured in this report - to make a difference in our communities. Many have shown genuine eagerness to welcome more refugees to their neighbourhoods and to volunteer their time and skills to support them.

A fair and just Community Sponsorship Program is critical to harnessing this goodwill among Australians. Since early 2018, our campaign, My New Neighbour, has mobilised the public, local governments and community associations to call for a better government program for enabling individuals, groups and businesses to support refugees. Put simply, the current Community Support Program can and must be substantially improved. Presently the cost of the sponsorship program is highly prohibitive for many Australians who wish to be part of it. Worse still, for every refugee that comes to Australia through this program, the Government deducts a place from the annual humanitarian intake quota.

We are urging the Government to redesign the program in a way that encourages, not hinders, more families, groups and businesses to participate. Equally importantly, an improved program will allow Australia to welcome more refugees every year. It will also save lives and prevent refugees from making perilous sea journeys as well as avoid the costly and punitive deterrence measures.

Thousands of individual Australians and dozens of local governments have joined the call for a fairer and most accessible community sponsorship program. We need the Government to listen and to act.

**Samantha Klintworth**  
National Director  
Amnesty International Australia

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# MY NEW NEIGHBOUR

**In just three years Amnesty International's refugee campaign, 'My New Neighbour', has gone to every Australian state and territory, revealing the willingness of local communities to get behind their new neighbours, some of whom are refugees.**

The My New Neighbour campaign is a neighbourhood-led solution to help refugees – people who are seeking to rebuild their lives somewhere safe. It's all about giving communities the opportunity to lead the change from within.

The journey started in March of 2018, in Wagga Wagga, and made its way around to just over 50 communities across the country. In each state and territory we have seen local groups building public support for a: **fair and just model of refugee community sponsorship in Australia.**

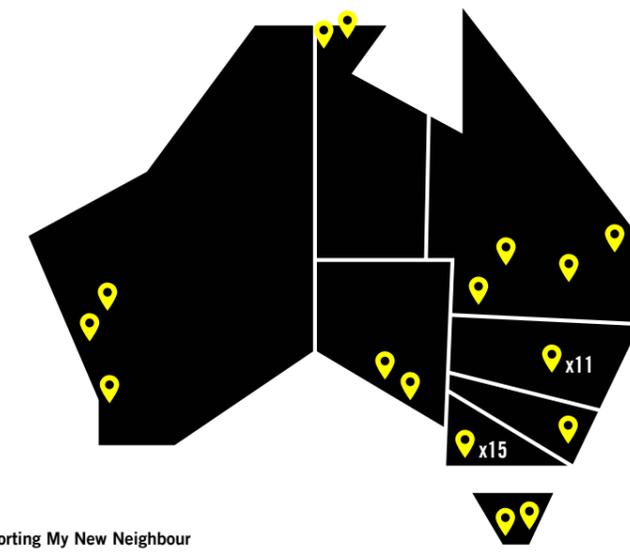
With almost 40,000 Australians signing a petition calling on the Australian Government to expand and improve community sponsorship for refugees so that more families can rebuild their lives in safety, we are confident that this issue is a significant one and for so many.

## Here's what we've achieved so far.

1. Tireless efforts from communities working for a fair model of refugee sponsorship has meant to date that 40 Mayors and/or local governments have stood with refugees in sending letters to the Minister responsible for refugee sponsorship; or passing motions in support of improvements to community sponsorship and often unanimously.
2. We have seen refugee diaspora communities and leaders standing up for improvements to the program. Maribyrnong City Council **unanimously supported a motion calling for improvements to refugee sponsorship** led by Mayor Cuc Lam, a former refugee who fled to Australia from Vietnam. Mayor Lam called on the Federal Government to step up and ensure that the intake of refugees under community sponsorship is above and beyond any existing humanitarian quota. The Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, to ethnic community peak bodies such as the Federation of Ethnic Community Councils of Australia (FECCA), and thereafter regional bodies such as the ECCV, ECCQ and several others.
3. In a fantastic show of support from regional local governments starting in 2018: Albury, Wodonga, Wagga Wagga and Griffith – simultaneously passing motions, to the City of Toowoomba, Logan and Darwin more recently in October 2020. Australians want better solutions and councils like these are leading the way.

## Councils supporting My New Neighbour

\* List at the time of the report's publication  
\* Full list of the councils on the back cover



The opportunity of the Government review in 2020, into Australia's model of community sponsorship, inspired submissions from dozens of the communities the campaign has worked with. These submissions were made available to both the Review as well as the Federal Parliamentarians for each locality/region.

We have enjoyed the support of a multitude of organisations from church groups and Rotary Clubs, to AFL teams with the Western Bulldogs adding their support and voice to the campaign by calling for more community-led programs like community sponsorship.

We must harness the strength and compassion of all the communities that have engaged with this conversation, represented by the 40 local governments who have written to the Commonwealth Government to date. These Local Government Areas provide homes to refugees with incredible stories of sacrifice, courage and contributions to the communities they live in.

Our work across all these communities has revealed that there is a goodness that lives in our families, communities and neighbourhoods – to reach it we just need to walk beyond our fears. If we can go and build our homes there, raise our children there, look out for each other there, we will all live fortunate lives.

You and I, and our new neighbours.

**Shankar Kasynathan**  
**National Campaign Manager – My New Neighbour**

*\*My New Neighbour, coordinated by Amnesty International Australia, is supported by a coalition of organisations including the Refugee Council of Australia, Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, Save the Children Australia, Welcoming Australia and the Rural Australians for Refugees.*



# A NEW MODEL FOR THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR REFUGEES

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## Our concerns with the current model

The Government's Community Support Program is a small private sponsorship scheme that began in 2016. It allows individuals, organisations and businesses to sponsor a refugee or their family to start a new life in Australia. There are currently only 1,000 refugee placements through the community sponsorship program.

While it is welcome that Australia has recognised the potential of community sponsorship, the current model has significant flaws.

Firstly, the cost of sponsorship is exorbitant, including an approximately \$20,000 visa application fee, additional fees for family, a bond of \$20,000 plus airfares, medical expenses and settlement costs.

Secondly, the program privileges those who have 'adequate English', are between the age of 18-50 and are willing to work in regional Australia, rather than those in urgent need of resettlement.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the community sponsorship program does not serve to increase Australia's refugee intake. Because it sits within the Refugee and Humanitarian Program, for every refugee who comes to Australia under the community sponsorship, the Government deducts a place from the annual fixed quota for refugee resettlement.

## A better plan

Amnesty International is calling on the Government to expand and improve its current model.

By working with like-minded civil society organisations, we have developed an alternative model for the community sponsorship program for refugees similar to Canada's model which has been successful for many years.

### AN APPROPRIATE PROGRAM WOULD:

#### Not take places from others in need

For Australia to do its fair share in meeting the global need for people seeking asylum, the community sponsorship program must be above and beyond any existing humanitarian or visa quotas. Ensuring community sponsorship places are additional to Australia's existing humanitarian intake will mean that the Government is not merely passing the buck by shifting their responsibility onto the community. We have also heard from businesses and community groups that additionality is needed to give them confidence that their contributions to the community sponsorship program are delivering real humanitarian outcomes.

Based on our wealth, population and current support for community sponsorship, Amnesty recommends that the Australian community could support the sponsorship of around 10,000 refugees per annum through the community sponsorship program.

#### Provide adequate support and services

To assist people seeking asylum to integrate successfully into our communities, the Government must provide adequate settlement and support services. The pilot program allows access to Medicare and Australian Migrant English Program, but more clarity around services and entitlements is needed. It is also necessary to put in place measures to protect refugees from exploitation or harm in the event of their sponsor seeking to make a profit from their arrival or if the sponsorship arrangement breaks down.

### Limit costs

An improved program must ensure it is not too costly for refugees or their sponsors. Currently, the high cost of the application and visas is approximately \$80,000 for a family of five – three times the amount of the Canadian program.

### Allow community, family and businesses to act as sponsors

Amnesty recommends that there be three main categories of potential sponsors:

1. Family sponsors bringing refugee family members residing overseas who require international protection
2. Independent sponsors such as faith-based groups, universities and community associations who may sponsor those most in need, as identified by UNHCR, who do not have family links and who are not yet job-ready
3. Business/employer sponsors who want to employ job-ready refugees to meet dual commercial and corporate social responsibility objectives.



## MOHAMMAD AZAD

Eleven years ago Mohammad Azad made the heartbreaking decision to leave his family in Afghanistan and seek the safety of Australian shores by boat. Since moving to Rockhampton in Central Queensland, he has flourished, helping to settle hundreds of his fellow refugees and migrants into the Central Queensland area. He is also on a mission to reunite with more of his own family in Australia.

I used to work with the American, French, Canadian forces in Afghanistan for nearly eight years. But due to my job, I couldn't relocate my family back to Afghanistan because it was dangerous for them, so my family was living as refugees in Pakistan, and I was working in Afghanistan. When I was trying to visit my family in Pakistan, I was often under attack, so that's why I decided to leave Afghanistan and to try to come to Australia by boat. On 5th June 2009, I left my family in Pakistan and headed towards Australia and on 13th October (2009) I landed in Brisbane.

I'm lucky that Australia was accepting refugees who arrived by boat back then; otherwise, I don't know what would have happened to me. I stayed for a few months in Brisbane and then I moved to Rockhampton and thought I would be here for three months. It's been nearly ten years now, and I'm still in Rocky.

When I was new in Australia, there were a lot of challenges for me, even though I spoke English. Coming to Australia with a totally different language, different people, it was a challenge. You know, you come here, and you need housing, and you know that for housing you have to have a rental history. Employment as well, we have people who come here with a lot of knowledge but finding work can be hard because you need accreditation, but you also have to support your family.

My wife and kids are here for the last few years now. They've resettled well, my kids are in school, but I still have my sister and brother back in Pakistan at the moment. I've been trying to apply for them to come to Australia through the community sponsorship program for the last three years, but there have been so many challenges. For two people, I will have to spend about \$40,000. That is big money.

In some circumstances, I know people are happy to pay, but still, there is a lot of other stuff that stops them from sponsoring their family members. Providing documents has proved to be a really difficult part of the community sponsorship process. I belong to a Hazara

community, which is facing a lot of hardships in Afghanistan, so a lot of our people are refugee people in other countries, so we do not have documents.

For the last eight years, I have been working with Multicultural Australia, assisting with resettling refugees in Rockhampton and Central Queensland. I try my best to support between maybe 600 and 700 people because I'm the only person working with refugees and migrants in Central Queensland. It is a challenge, but I love to do it.

A big number of my clients have part-time jobs as well, so they are doing hard work, like taxi or housework, or these kinds of jobs as second jobs. Because of Coronavirus, there are a lot of people who have lost their jobs and a lot of them are getting fewer hours and they need support. They are saying: 'What are we meant to do? We have to support our families as well'. So I have been working around the clock to help these people to apply for government programs where possible or getting them the support they need.

We have a lot of clients who come to us, and they know they have the issue, but they don't understand the issue itself. So we try to help them to understand. Doing this makes them independent in the future because we can't help the same client with the same problem ten times!

For me, at the end of the day, seeing a smile on my client's face is a big gift, and that is the thing that helps me to restart the next day again. Seeing people who have started from zero and with our support, now they have got a house and a family and their kids are at school, and there are very many positive stories around how we can help them be helpful too.

When I came I was the first Afghani Hazara person in Rockhampton; we didn't have Hazara here before! When we started settling here, we were on the first page of the newspaper; people were talking about us. I remember when we applied for our housing here, the first thing that happened was we were given a real estate agent. The agent asked where we were from, and we explained we were from Afghanistan and all they had to say was something about Osama bin Laden! Today, the same real estate company is sending me emails saying we have a house with an opportunity for another one of your clients. They give

us the first opportunity to apply for them. Because now they know that these are people that they can trust. We also have clients who are working in construction, who are working in the nursery, working in farming. We send local employers some clients for job interviews, and two months later the companies call us asking if we can send them more workers!

It's a good feeling for me that I know that the work that we do is positive, we know that it has an outcome, it has a benefit, not just for refugee communities, also for all of the local communities as well. The community knows now, that when the refugees come here, they don't bring problems, they bring a lot of benefits, they can support accommodation in Rockhampton, plus they also support local businesses.

I do a part-time taxi job. I pick up passengers, and when I explain that I'm from Afghanistan, the majority of customers that I deal with, they shake hands, and they say welcome to Australia. That is giving me hope that we are getting somewhere.



## ALI AL BATAAT

**Ali Al Battaat from Shepparton in Victoria was a baby when he arrived from Iraq via Christmas Island. Today he is helping refugees and others recently arrived in Australia in understanding the complexities of life under COVID-19: what they need to do, what they can't do and who's around to help them while the country remains in lockdown.**

My family arrived in Australia in 2000. Dad got here first, and we came about a year later. I have one brother and three sisters.

We're from Iraq originally. Dad had nine brothers and two sisters, but he lost five of his brothers and his father under Saddam Hussein. Dad was an academic and in the 1990s he had to leave Iraq for Iran where he worked in religious studies because he didn't have the option of continuing his education career in Iran. From Iran, he went to Indonesia by plane and then from there to the Australian Nauru detention centre by boat going across the deepest points in the sea.

He arrived in Nauru mid-1999 a month after I was born. Later that year we also crossed the sea by boat and arrived at Christmas Island. After being in detention for three months, we went to Shepparton to meet my dad.

Like everything, there were good and bad experiences. At my kindergarten, for example, they had a separate area for the mums who had recently arrived and didn't speak English. It was great because it meant my mum could be near me all day while learning English. There was so much support for education like this.

But for my dad, it was tough. He was having a rough time having to look after my family financially and also supporting his family that was still in Iraq. He couldn't continue his career in education as a teacher of Arabic, but he still worked very hard. He told me, over and over again, education is essential, and I must work hard. He taught me to work hard.

Education was very important in my family. It's very important in many Iraqi families - they hope we will all end up being doctors and engineers! My sisters all went into childcare related things, and my brother became a barber, so it was on me to become a doctor! I didn't do too well with my VCE exams - the stress got to me - but I went to La Trobe University to study Health Science to get into medicine. After a couple of years, I realised it wasn't for me. I spoke to a social work coordinator, friends and my misses, and they

suggested studying social work in accordance with my skills, values and ethics. So I transferred, and it's been great. I love it.

I've always volunteered, since about 2014, through various organisations, helping kids at local primary schools, kids from ethnic backgrounds and indigenous backgrounds with their homework. I loved helping these young kids. For the ones who didn't speak English well, I could talk to them in Arabic and help them with their work. I've also volunteered at multicultural events. There was one at Federation Square where I gave a speech. It was after the massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, so I talked about that and Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister, who inspires me. Her way of leadership, how she treats people. After the speech, someone came up to me from the council and asked if I'd be interested in getting involved. So I've been working there part-time on social cohesion through education projects.

When COVID-19 hit, my initial reaction was to worry! Would uni stop? Would work stop? Would all my social and sports activities have to stop? I knew it was something that could change everything for the worse. Or I could use it to grow and learn from this experience. I was meant to be going to schools as part of my work, but that stopped, and everything turned to social media.

I was connecting with a lot of youth via social media anyway, and suddenly lots of issues started coming up - kids dropping out of uni, people losing jobs, relationships breaking up, family issues, people wanting to leave home, depression. It escalated week by week, day by day, all the problems coming up on social media. I was showing these to my manager and our team.

That's when our team started talking through everything - the reports that family violence had tripled and the impact on our elders in the community. I took over social media for the council, and we set out our priorities. It was clear that the community was struggling. People were being bombarded with information from the councils and local government groups, but it was all so complicated, and for many people, the language was a real barrier. SBS shared some of the best language resources through videos and social media posts. That was a great language

resource, but the governments and councils were not filling the void.

For us, we decided a priority was family violence. We've not seen any resources given to family violence in languages other than English. Hence, we put together some videos in different languages and posted them on Facebook and other social media channels. We stuck to that topic for the whole month, and the response has been amazing. We put out 34 posts in April, and almost ten thousand people looked at them in that time. And it was so easy and cost little. People just wanted to help. They didn't want to be paid although we are giving them gift cards now.

In May, we are focusing on support for youth and education. This virus could change everything for a whole generation. We are searching for resources and creating new ones that will help kids get through high school.

This whole experience of helping my community through this difficult time has made me realise the importance of being inclusive. Sometimes there can be a backlash, particularly for me with an Iraqi background. People make comments, but it has also started to bring people together who wouldn't normally connect, which is great. And I firmly believe that no one should ever be left behind. No one should be left out, always, but particularly when you are going through a crisis like this.

## ARASH BORDBAR

Arash Bordbar came to Australia as a young man having fled Iran and faced five long years of persecution in Malaysia as a refugee. He has consistently worked away at trying to help others throughout his life. Now settled in Parramatta in Western Sydney, he has devoted his time to helping people in his community navigate life and find their passion, especially for young people. Throughout COVID, his workload has nearly tripled, but he has found a way to continue to push through and help these young people navigate an immensely difficult period while working with Community Migrant Resource Centre.

I came to Australia about five years after fleeing from Iran. I got resettled to Australia through the humanitarian process of UNHCR but I'd been in Malaysia for about five years previously, living there until we got resettled to Australia. That's a snapshot of how we got here, but there have been lots of struggles on the way. In Malaysia, because they did not sign the refugee convention of 1951, they consider you an illegal immigrant. So you have no rights, you have no access to anything, no education, no employment or limited health. So that was quite difficult. I had to finish my high school online because I couldn't go to school in Malaysia.

But along the way, I kept myself busy and positive by doing a lot of work volunteering for the humanitarian sectors with refugees and with other migrants in Malaysia. It started with a health organisation called Health Equity Initiative. It was like case work and interpretation, consultation and support generally and I was also working with UNHCR Malaysia whilst also doing some case work, taking them to the courts and working with local organisations, gathering young people and sharing information. Finding some vocational training and employment opportunities in a cafe or elsewhere for them. So trying to lead and support them with their lives basically.

Then when I came to Australia, I continued the same way but also I had the privilege to start my study again. Once we got here, I think the first or second week that I started studying English at TAFE to get a certificate because that was something that I needed to be able to get into university here or other further qualifications. Whilst I was studying I started to volunteer with some of the settlement organisations and got involved in running youth symposiums and events and also sharing my experiences and skills with other young people who were newly arrived here.

Then for the last three years, I've been working as a settlement support worker at CMRC

in Sydney. I've been helping some young people around employment and education, so I support their integration. Helping them to find a passion and pathway and to find out where they want to get and how to get there. But during COVID it has been tough. Especially when you are working with young people, especially people from CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) backgrounds, they like to get together and meet people in person. But we haven't been able to do that. So it has been a big shock for a lot of people, but especially for those I work with because we had some support and programs we had to cancel which were face to face. So we had to do training to adjust to a virtual environment.

However, for me, the COVID experience has been interesting. Working in the humanitarian space in the community, it is possible rather than thinking about what you are doing and thinking of yourself and your problems; you are constantly reminded that you have to find ways to help others. So you know for the past five or six months, that's been the case, we have been thinking how do you reach and share information.

I have been running workshops, and international campaigns in terms of personal contributions and refugees, in general, called the #foryou campaign, engaging with refugee doctors to share information in the mother tongue, like in Arabic, Kurdish or Assyrian or the different languages we have. I'm also leading a campaign called Australian Universities Leading Inclusivity, which is with UNHCR and a few other organisations in our region. So that has kept me busy and has kept my mind off the challenges we are going through.



## BU GAY PAH THEI

The anxiety of stepping into unfamiliar territory and needing a helping hand to work through the unknown is an experience well-lived by former Karen refugee, Bu Gay Pah Thei, who first arrived in Australia at the age of 12.

We lived in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border for many years before being privately sponsored to come to Australia. We went to Bendigo in Victoria and lived with an Australian family for several weeks after our arrival, familiarising ourselves with life here in Australia, including becoming accustomed to enjoying our own tap! In the camp, there was one tap, and a big community used it, and it wasn't hot water either.

Making the move to Australia even more challenging was the fact that our family was the first people from the Karen ethnic minority in Myanmar to settle in Bendigo. When we first arrived back in 2007, not many people knew about the Karen community and our background. We did make friends after a few months, but we had to try very hard to fit in and belong.

After leaving school, I studied to become a nurse. My dad wanted me to be a nurse because people do not get good medical care in our home country. Dad wanted me to be a nurse so that I could one day go home and help our people.

I was then offered a part-time job in multicultural services. This is very important to me. I want people to feel free to celebrate their own culture when they settle in a new country. There is so much to be done. Social interaction and culture integration are very important. They have the right to maintain their culture and the right to request a service with an interpreter. I want to make sure they know what they can access. I want them to understand why kids have to go to school and that you have to make an appointment to see a doctor. There are so many gaps that need to be filled in terms of improving understanding of the Australian system.

I also wanted to make people feel welcome, not alone, and make sure they have access to information not just in English, but also their language. Social support is so important, and without social interactions, it is very hard for the newly arrived refugee community.

With COVID, people need to understand the process and government rules. Not everyone has access to the internet. Not many people from refugee backgrounds can read which is also a big issue.

The impact of this sort of thing has been immense. Some in the Karen community, for example, have been told that drinking beer would assist in warding off the coronavirus. More seriously, some people were taking the stay at home directions literally, and not leaving home even for critical needs such as food or exercise.

Many in our refugee community work as casual workers as they are not highly skilled. They have lost income. It's very stressful to go back to Centrelink, particularly when their English is not very good.

I've made videos for our Karen community explaining the government's new rules. If you can't read, having access to video or audio is essential.



## BWE THAY

**Bwe Thay, from Melbourne, takes on a variety of roles as he fights to ensure that refugee communities across Victoria are kept safe and well informed during COVID-19 and beyond. His own experience of living in a refugee camp for five years on the Thai–Burma border has given him a unique perspective on life in lockdown and a deep commitment to make sure no one is left behind in this trying time.**

For people who have not gone through being locked up before, social isolation is quite a daunting experience. In some ways, I feel like I was actually blessed that I spent time in refugee camps in lockdown because I can now utilise that experience at this time through the work that I am doing.

I've been involved as an advisory board member with the Refugee Community Association of Australia and as the Vice President on the Communities Council on Ethnic Issues. Through COVID-19, we have been able to meet with and consult our communities. We were approached to see if we could deliver or run an emergency food relief program because many of the asylum seekers and some of the community members could not access Jobkeeper because of technicalities.

Through the goodwill of the wider community, we started delivering food hampers which would last for two weeks to the Rohingya community. Then we expanded the program the following week to reach out to the Assyrian/Kaldian communities, the Burmese communities, the Iranian communities, the International student network, the Bhutanese/ Nepalese community and also other smaller groups who approach us.

I also see that we need to advocate for these diverse communities so that materials about COVID-19 are translated into their languages. Having materials in their own languages empowers the community through information so that they are doing the right thing and complying with the rules and regulations of the Victorian state government. I have also set up a Facebook group with many of the community leaders that I have close relations with, and we share information so that we can pass it back to our communities as quickly as possible. Our communities have to be empowered not with second-hand information but with accurate information.

The reason we did this was to ensure that no one is left behind. We are all in this together,

and, coming from a refugee background myself, we know what it means when you are left out or when you run out of options. Advocating for our diverse communities closely aligns with my values. If the community benefits from it and I can contribute in a small way, that is something I am passionate about. I don't do things based on the expectation of what I get back. So it doesn't matter what ethnicity or religion, to me I don't see that, I see us as communities, as a human race and what matters is how we can empower and inspire one another.

We saw that in the spirit of the Australians in the bushfires crisis. It is free-spirited, generous, friendly, kind and fair, and I think during the bushfire disaster we saw that not only from the government but from the community level and through COVID -19 I'm able to see it again. The passion and compassion from the communities to help one another and help their fellow Australians is beautiful, so having the opportunity to experience that spirit makes me very proud to be an Australian.

*Bwe Thay Commissioner is with the Victorian Multicultural Commission and a passionate advocate for a multicultural Australia. He has held many leadership roles within Victoria's multicultural sector with a focus on education and employment for new and emerging communities. He has received a range of community and academic awards for his contributions, including the Victorian Multicultural Commission's 2018 Emerging Leadership in Multiculturalism Award. His voluntary work spans grassroots, community development and empowerment right through to advising all levels of government.*

*Focusing on bringing people together, building capacity and raising aspirations, Bwe has worked tirelessly to empower new Australians of all backgrounds to take advantage of the power of education to improve their lives and the lives of their families and communities.*

*As part of his engagement with these organisations, Bwe builds awareness of multicultural, migrant and refugee issues among government and policymakers, and in effect provides a voice for those yet to find a voice in Australia.*



## CELIA TRAN

**Working to have the voices of Victoria's diverse communities heard by those in government during the day, Celia Tran spends the remainder of her time volunteering to support her own community as well as other refugees and migrants in Victoria. Born in Australia to parents from Vietnamese refugee backgrounds, Celia Tran is one of the youngest executive members of the Vietnamese Community of Australia – Victorian Chapter.**

My parents fled Vietnam during the war. My grandfather had been a high ranking official in the South Vietnamese Army, and while my grandfather passed away before the end of the war, other members of my family who were also in the army were facing internment in re-education camps under inhumane conditions following South Vietnam's loss.

My parents felt they didn't have a future there and that there was no way they were going to survive under the regime at the time, so they made the decision to leave and seek asylum.

My dad was a fisherman with a small fishing boat and he gathered my mum, my two sisters, along with some family members and other members of our community, and set sail, only vaguely knowing where Indonesia was and just hoping to eventually hit it.

I think it applies to anybody, that to jump on a boat, that is their last straw, their only hope. And that was my parent's decision.

After leaving they were lost at sea for four or five days, but they were lucky to come across an Indonesian fisherman who waved them down and basically said 'Galang', which is the name of the refugee camp. That was the only word he said, 'Galang Galang'.

My parents didn't speak Indonesian, but they knew the name of the refugee camp, and so they just nodded and followed the fisherman who guided them to the refugee camp. They were there for six months before they were sponsored to come to Australia.

My great uncle who had left Vietnam a few years earlier, had managed to make it to Melbourne. Through my great uncle's support and the local church and community there that he was connected to and who had actually supported him when he arrived, my family was sponsored to come to Australia. I know that, like our family, many Vietnamese refugees were benefactors of similar initiatives. It was almost like common sense at the time, that people who wanted to welcome Vietnamese refugees had a way to. It wasn't considered taboo or strange, it was what Australians wanted then to welcome refugees.

Today I wear lots of hats within the community, and I think that comes from my upbringing in a refugee family. I was born and raised in the multicultural hub of Melbourne's West, an area which a lot of refugees and migrants now call home. I grew up surrounded by all sorts of people and all sorts of backgrounds – it was a very colourful childhood. I thought this was just the norm, being surrounded by everybody who's just amazing from all parts of the world. But when I started university, studying policy, I was one of the few diverse faces in my course.

During my work in the not-for-profit space, I found that there were a lot of barriers with community organisations and communities being able to reach government, and influence decision making. I have been working for the state government for the last three years, working in the multicultural and social policy space. Learning a lot about the ins and the outs and the ropes, and really being able to fulfil my vision of connecting the community to government and to be that bridge. I am very passionate about the work I do.

My volunteer work started in high school, from volunteering at the local community, putting my hand up to sit on various youth advisory groups, I was involved with running leadership programs and programs for young people from migrant and refugee communities, as well as tutoring and mentoring for newly arrived migrant and refugee communities. I was grateful to be awarded the Premier's Victoria volunteer of the year in 2016 for the work I do.

Since I was a child, I have been involved with the Vietnamese community, but only in the last four years, I have moved into an executive role. This year marks 45 years of settlement in Australia for my community. We have lots of Vietnamese families across Victoria and Australia, from different generations, so it's an interesting position to be in. It's challenging yet rewarding.

During the COVID pandemic in Victoria, the greatest challenges for our community have been people being let go from employment, and mental health concerns. The Victorian chapter has been doing lots of emergency relief, we have a hotline people can call through and they get case managed, and we provide food relief, material aid, referral to social services, elderly services, family violence, and sometimes immigration issues as well.

We have a few people in our community who are asylum seekers, but also temporary visa holders who are here and struggling financially, and international students as well. We have got quite a diverse range of people needing our support, from people who have been for 45 years, to recent arrivals as well. We act as a conduit to other services, but also do the service delivery ourselves. We are a very small team, mainly all volunteers.

It's on my to-do list to reconnect with the family and the local church that sponsored my family. We have some photos around, but there are not much other details about who they are.

What I do remember is growing up, we would have families come and visit us here and there, and we were told they were from the community and charity organisations and they just wanted to see how we were going. They would come and give us Christmas gifts and things like that. It was really nice, but I didn't know who they were because I was just a kid, to me they were simply really tall, big and friendly Aussies. Now reflecting back, I'm certain they were from the church community who had sponsored us and the charity organisations that supported my family to settle into Australia.

It's quite heart-warming to think that I have kind of done the full loop without realising it, that I have worked in the not for profit sector, sometimes as part of programs where I was the one who organised Christmas gifts for newly arrived refugees and migrants and helping families settle in. While working in this space, I realised that these kinds of programs were actually a big part of my life growing up.

I think the generosity is there for community sponsorship and we are just not capitalising on it. If we are discussing the economic argument, there are benefits for migration, especially since we are talking about not just temporary migration, but about refugees who will call Australia home for generations to come. From a humanitarian perspective, there are Australians who want to welcome more refugees, and this is an easy way for a community to help individuals or a family resettle in Australia. People in this country are very generous, and they want to help, but they just haven't been given the options nor the clear incentives to do so.

*Celia has been named one of the top 50 Public Sector Women for 2020 in Victoria.*



## DOMINIC GOLDING

Dominic Golding came to Australia as a tiny baby in a cardboard box, after being evacuated from Saigon in April 1975. Today, Dominic is celebrated as one of Australia's leading advocates for people living with disabilities, from culturally and linguistically diverse and non-English speaking backgrounds. Dominic is currently working as "Research and Project Officer" at the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA.) His work at NEDA has taken on added importance, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dominic is committed to ensuring that those with disabilities from migrant and refugee backgrounds are not left behind in these uncertain times.

I work as the Research and Policy Officer at the National Ethnic Disability Alliance, also known as NEDA. NEDA is a national Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) that advocates federally for the human rights of people with disability, and their families, from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB).

Most of our board and staff members identify as having a disability and/or being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

A lot of our work involves consultation with the federal government and other disability advocacy organisations around what we can do to change things to assist people with disabilities to get the support and rights that they are entitled to.

Most of my work is aimed at making public policy inclusive for all people with disabilities.

Intersectionality understands people have multiple identities that overlap and combine, resulting in them experiencing unique and compounding forms of social disadvantage and discrimination.

Taking my example, I have multiple identities, and yet, I am the same person; I am a person with a disability, and I am also from a migrant background. Often what happens in social services is that each identity is split and treated as a separate entity.

Recently, there was a national government roundtable discussion around responses to COVID-19. The government officials discussed the possibility of producing fact sheets about the virus. We endorsed the idea and thought it was a fantastic initiative.

However, at the discussion, we advocated for the fact that any other resources on COVID-19 need to be easily accessible and understood by all people with disabilities. They need to be intersectional.

People with disabilities are very diverse – people with Asperger's, people with autism, people with intellectual disabilities or people

with learning difficulties should all be able to access and understand the content of the resources.

There are also many initiatives from our own communities to not just rely on the government but to be proactive and send the right message to our members. At the end of the day, we are best placed to do so.

The idea of what information is valid, and what information can be trusted is also important. The US President's idea of drinking bleach and taking malaria medication is laughable, but it also raises questions about the sources and authenticity of the information available to the public.

Should I believe my aunt in Vietnam, who seems to have found the cure for COVID-19, or should I believe the Chief Medical Officer in Canberra who gives daily briefings to Australians? These are just some examples to show how people deal with social upheaval and dramatic lifestyle changes.

For people with disability from refugee or migrant backgrounds, there is an added layer of apprehension that is more pronounced than for mainstream Australians. Language gaps, cultural barriers and many other factors make it more difficult for our community to assimilate public information.

Technology is another challenge that people have had to deal with in the wake of COVID-19. Everything has gone online, so the contact that normally would have happened around forums and conferences has shifted to the online space. There are a lot of restrictions and some liberations for people with disabilities online. Some platforms such as Zoom have closed captioning (CC) and are very accessible for some people with disabilities.

But the limitations are for people like me, who have hearing impairments. I rely a lot on video. Some teleconferences with people blacking out their screens deny me the ability to communicate. I need to see people's faces, their lips and body language to communicate properly with them.

When it comes to forums and engaging with public servants, bureaucrats and politicians, it is important for people like me to have them in the room. It allows

us to have a better understanding and communicate our needs better.

What I hope for in the near, post-pandemic, environment is for the multicultural and disability community to come together and bring those who are a minority into the conversation.

We have had to be innovative in all our lives to survive as refugees, migrants and/or people with disability, so I hope we can be part of the recovery for small businesses and also support inclusion of people across our society. To become part of the big conversation, we need to sell the idea that we can do things. We are not just a side story.

*For further information regarding NEDA's work for people with disability during COVID-19, visit any of the links below:*

<http://www.neda.org.au/statement-concern-covid-19-human-rights-disability-and-ethical-decision-making>

<http://www.neda.org.au/publications/joint-statement-about-exclusion-dsp-recent-coronavirus-supplement-income-support>

<https://dpoa.org.au/an-open-letter-to-the-national-cabinet-immediate-actions-required-for-australians-with-disability-in-response-to-coronavirus-covid19/>



## JALEL GURMESSA

**Jalel Gurmessa arrived in Australia in 2016 through the Community Sponsorship Program after fleeing Ethiopia in 2011 and spending five years in a refugee camp in Sudan. Today he and his wife, Chaltu, are working hard on the COVID-19 frontline in a Melbourne hospital, while still studying and homeschooling his own two kids.**

In Ethiopia, there are a lot of problems. We are a big tribe nation. I am from the Oromo tribe, and for the past seven years, there have been problems with the government. If you do not agree with the government, you do not have any human rights. There is no party that is separate from the government. If you do not support the ruling party, you are in danger. I was suspected of being a supporter of the Oromo Liberation Front and went to prison for about five months without any conviction or court appearances. Then I was released, then again they tried to catch me, and I escaped.

I went to Khartoum in Sudan. I was there as a refugee from 2011 to 2016. That is where I met my wife, Chaltu. Eventually, I was sponsored under the Community Sponsorship Program to come here by my uncle, so thanks to God today, I am here. But I am still trying to be a voice for the people left over there. I really want to amplify the voice of those people.

When they killed (singer and Oromo activist) Hachalu Hundesa recently, they were arresting Oromo people - more than 30,000 people are in prison. Nothing has changed since I left. They say there has been change in the government, but this shows it's still the same thing. If you support the government, you have no problem, if you speak out and ask questions like Hachalu... All he did was ask questions on TV. This is why he was killed; these are the issues we are facing in Ethiopia.

The refugee experience was very hard; it had so many challenges. Starting from when you cross the border, you go illegally because you can't take any passports or legal documents from the government when you flee from your country. There are many problems, especially with bureaucracy and registration. You struggle with that, and sometimes the police from that country will find you and arrest you. I was arrested two or three times.

And when you go to the UN, they say they are going to follow up, but there is no response. Even they do not accept your asylum application. When the police catch you on the

road, there are many challenges. On top of that, you cannot work. By chance I was working, I secured some illegal work, but I was the lucky one per cent. It was still financially challenging; there is so much time spent lining up, applying to the UN, applying to other organisations for aid. Even if you stop your work and you apply to them, you do not have any income, and there is such limited support from them. The challenge was so much, but thanks to God, I got over that challenge.

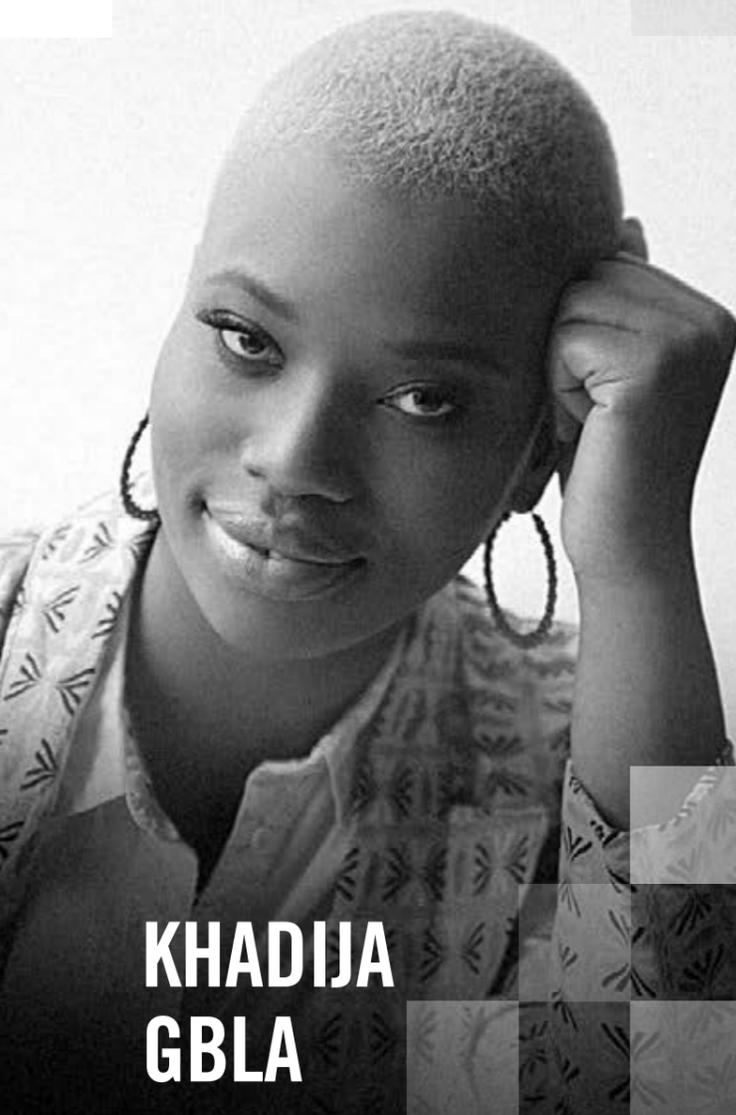
I am so lucky, from the challenges I was facing over there to where I am now. I am in a first world country and a peace-loving country. Before my uncle's family sponsored me through the Community Sponsorship Program, they tried to sponsor me through another government application two or three times on the family visa. When that didn't work, I applied for community sponsorship. It only took about ten months or 11 months, I think it was good, but the payment was so high, and that really made it hard, it put so much financial pressure on my family. But when I got here, the government set me up with a Newstart allowance and my uncle was so supportive, showing me everything.

Directly after about eight or nine months, I was starting to work as a patient service assistant. I did a certificate of patient assistance then I was directly able to start work. I have also started studying for my degree in nursing. I am working in the hospital two days a week when Chaltu has her days off. Some days are difficult as I am sometimes in the COVID ward and I can, like everyone, feel a bit anxious about it all. I clean patients' rooms, transport the patients from ward to ward or from room to room, supporting nurses on the positioning of patients, that sort of thing.

My main challenge though is the workload. I do my school online as well as look after kids, helping my son with his online education because, with COVID, everything now is remote learning.

I am also a member of the Melbourne Oromo Community Leaders Committee, where we communicate with members of our community through a Viber group and Zoom. We are volunteering by educating, creating a supportive environment and interpreting government updates on status.

This has been a challenging time for everyone. When you join the health services, you know the theoretical stuff for how this is meant to work, but now we understand it on a practical, real-life level too. So the challenge is definitely there. But I feel happy to be able to help the community by being a member of the health service.



## KHADIJA GBLA

**Khadija Gbla is a former refugee born in Sierra Leone. She and her family resettled in Australia when she was a teenager. Today she is an award-winning human rights activist who runs her own cultural consultancy providing advocacy training, as well as speaking on domestic and family violence, child protection, racism, human rights, refugees, and cultural diversity. Today she talks about her own experiences through the COVID-19 lockdown period in Adelaide.**

My heart has been breaking for our refugees and migrant communities for whom I think that this has been a very triggering situation. Most of these communities have come from struggling situations like war. We are talking about insecurity with food, safety, violence, really we have had to go through a lot, and now we are seeing this situation happening.

What is quite worrying for me is that the grandmas, grandpas, aunts and uncles that I have been speaking to are struggling. This is bringing up a lot of post-traumatic stress disorder for them; the anxiety is real; people are saying they are having nightmares. I am having nightmares, and I look after my mental health.

I worry about the impact that this will have on women who are vulnerable to domestic and family violence where English is not their first language. We know that COVID has amplified what was already a national epidemic in regards to domestic and family violence. But all the adverts and campaigns won't reach them because they are not accessible and culturally inclusive.

Within our communities, there is a lack of awareness of what constitutes domestic and family violence. We use the word "violence", but most people assume that it is physical violence. We don't then go on to talk about emotional violence, sexual violence, spiritual violence, cultural violence, financial abuse, and all the things used to control you as a woman.

When we use this terminology, they don't translate across cultures, because what I grew up with was being told a man beating his wife was discipline. So if you put a group of my aunts together and talk about domestic or family violence, they don't know what you are talking about. They do not know what the conversation is about: "I am okay, I am surviving this; this is just what relationships are".

What I am trying to do mainly is work out how we get information back to the community in a way where we can not only empower women but also empower communities and their families. It's not just about one individual, one member

of our family who isn't safe or healthy. Our approach has to be family-focused in a way that allows us to heal families, and we work with everyone within those family settings so that we can keep women and children safe.

One of the things I have done is to go back to my past clients to say, "Look, I can't do face to face work, given the restrictions we have. But what if we do online trainings and workshops, what if we do resources in simple English, what if we go online, take all of what I've done traditionally face to face and just move it online so we can keep getting those key messages out there around safety, wellbeing and healthy families and healthy communities."

For some community members, looking after their mental health may not have been a priority. They may not have even dealt with what they have gone through in the past, but here we are finally thinking that we are safe and we are okay, and suddenly there is food insecurity, they can't see their grandkids. These people come from communal cultures - they need people. Everyone is constantly at everyone's houses, eating and laughing. It is how our cultures keep going - grandparents pass on stories about our lives and where we have come from. There has been such an interruption to the quality of our life and culture and what makes us feel safe and connected.

I feel like in terms of mental health I know lots of organisations have been given money, but do they have interpreters available? Is that information passed down to the community level to say who to talk to that they can call? Would members of that community even want to call these organisations? In my experience, I don't see my 60-year-old African uncle wanting to call Beyond Blue to have a chat about how he is feeling.

First, he has to recognise that he is struggling, and then because he thinks struggling is normal, this is just what life is. I've gone through struggles before, and he is thinking "Oh I'm lucky that I am in Australia, it is not that bad", even though he is having nightmares, angry, not eating properly and he is yelling at everyone he can because that is the only way he can respond. Mummy is also yelling at the kids because that is the only way she thinks she needs to respond. Are these people going to call Beyond Blue?

How do we get these organisations to that level, how do we ensure that we are able to provide support within the community system? I have had teenagers call me because at the end of the day, as far as they are concerned, who will understand what they are going through? Who understands that it's child abuse in a cultural context? That would be me.

That is where I can support. I can make sure they know how they can take breaks, go to the bathroom and call me "What's our safe word", safe words to ensure that Khadija knows. Things like: "Oh, Khadija I liked that top that you wore at that speech". Okay, I now know what you are talking about, you are not listening to my speech, let me call you, let's hop on Messenger and have a chat quickly. What is going on? Can you say you need to go to the shop quickly, can you say you want to buy ice cream, can you say to mum you are happy to do the groceries so that you can take a break from the family?

In Africa, it takes a village to raise a child. I may not be an aunt who can physically be everywhere right now, but I do not get off my phone because right now this is what saves lives, me being on this Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. I am just across it because the texts come through and a ping comes which I read, and I go "What does that mean? What are you trying to say?" That is how I am trying to reach everyone because with a simple text message I know who I need to immediately get on the phone to ask what is going on? What is happening in that house? "Pass the phone to Mum or Dad. Pass the phone, let me talk to them right now, so I can de-escalate the situation. Or do you just need me to distract you right now? Let's talk stupid things; I can distract you, do you need a meme, do you want me to send you memes for the rest of the day?"

I am a believer that I can make everything happen. But what I want to say is we all have to take ownership and make sure that we create contact and systems that allow this to happen because we cannot depend on elected leaders, we cannot depend on the state government, we can't depend on service providers, I haven't seen these.

*Khadija will be holding a three-part series of Zoom events in association with the Morella Centre in Adelaide, talking about how we can help marginalised communities throughout this difficult time of social distancing.*

## MEDINA LAMUNU

**Medina Lamunu from Warragul in Victoria has faced hardship after hardship in an inspiring story of resilience. After escaping the brutal conflict in South Sudan and facing a life-threatening situation in Uganda, she has now settled in Gippsland. She now works at an aged care home during COVID-19, putting herself on the front line to protect the vulnerable in the community. However, with all of her family still stuck in a refugee camp in Uganda, she is continually driven to try and bring them to Australia as a 'My New Neighbour' Ambassador with Amnesty International Australia.**

We escaped from the South Sudanese conflict in 1994 to Uganda, but we did not find safety there. It honestly felt like we were escaping two wars because a group of rebels kept harassing and attacking our camp. I'll never forget one occasion when they came. They asked us to gather food for them and stand with it near a mango tree. But when they had gathered us together, then the rebels started murdering the men, women and children, slaughtering them with their machete and guns. My family desperately fled, but the rebels continued to attack our camp for many months afterwards.

The rebels kept coming, and my mum told us it was time to relocate, but I was doing my final year of education for primary school, so I had to make the really hard decision to leave my family and stay where I was. However, a few months later, my life got turned upside down again.

I was sleeping in a neighbour's house, and at six o'clock in the morning, we heard a big gunshot. Guns and bullets were flying everywhere as the rebels destroyed our town. My neighbour had two small children, so I had to cuddle one of them on my back, and one of them was like a koala clinging onto me as we started running. We kept on running until we couldn't hear the guns anymore. I then reunited with my mum in a new refugee camp after travelling by myself from Northern to Western Uganda.

My mum was struggling because she was very sick from all that she had been through with us, but she kept going because of the kids. Eventually, she managed to build a house for us, and we stayed there. We had no money even to buy food, so I had to take the responsibility to grow the food for our entire family from when I was about 16. From there, I started schooling and finished my final year of primary school and was able to get a scholarship to attend secondary school. I met my partner in my final year of secondary school, and he then migrated to Australia and a year later, I followed him over here on a partner visa.

After bouncing around a bit, we eventually settled in Warragul in Gippsland. I love Gippsland. It is now my home since 2011. It is a community with lots of young families, and although it is far away from the city, we have every service here, and we are really happy here. At the moment I'm working in Kooweerap regional hospital as a nurse. The biggest challenge in being a nurse right now is taking extra caution because I want to protect my family, my friends and the people I look after when I go to work.

Before, I enjoyed nursing. It is not just when you are treating people, or like giving them medication, it is when you get to know them personally. The best day of my work when I go working as a nurse is when I spend time with the patients or when I work in aged care, is when I spend time with the residents. Getting to know them, living alone, all the health issues you get to know them personally, which is good, especially the older people, they are amazing.

During COVID, the work was difficult. Because like, where I was working, there is a medical ward and a residential ward, the nursing home. So in the morning, you have to check everyone's temperature and then be vigilant of any sign and symptoms of the COVID-19, like a sore throat or high temperature or even a loss of taste or smell. You have to ask the residents every day. But the way you can spend time with them is not like before, like for example if they have a cough and high temperature you have to immediately isolate them whilst the swab is being taken for COVID 19.

Yeah definitely, it is different because you cannot just go there and spend time with them and have a chat. You go there with a mission, not only to care for them and ask them how can I help them and if they have any visitors, they have to look through the window. It is hard; it is just a different world.

But there is a sad side to our life in Australia. My mum is still in a refugee camp in Uganda with my siblings. But I still support them in Uganda in terms of medical and financial needs. I am the only one here, and I am the breadwinner for my family, even up to now I have to support them. I wish my family were able to be here to be with me in Australia. But it is just so hard to do that with the current system.

However, people in Warragul have also really wanted to help us too. We have met a community in the church, ever since we have been great friends with them. We have met a couple here in Warragul who are in their 80s who have been helpful in trying to raise some money to start the process of private sponsorship. We call them mum and dad because they requested us to call them that way and our children call them grandma and grandpa. Except for one day, my older boy, who is only like three years old, said: "Oh mum, why do our grandpa and grandma have a different skin colour?" I told them this is because we live in Australia and these are your Australian grandparents but you have your African grandma and grandpa in Africa. It reminds me of the great community goodwill that exists here in Australia.



## MICHAEL AYAYI

Emergency department nurse Michael Ayayi is one of many refugees who's been working on the frontline helping people with COVID-19. He's always wanted to help people and give back to the Australian community that took him and his family in. It's been a long road to get to his current situation, but now he's living happily in Surrey Hills, Melbourne with his girlfriend and dog.

Mum came here as a refugee because there was a civil war going on in Liberia. She was here for five or six years before we managed to get here, but we had not seen her for nine years because we were separated during the civil war.

My dad, sister, brother and myself were in Ivory Coast at the time and came here in 2011. Mum came to escape the civil war and Dad wanted us to be a family again and to have a better education and future.

Today, I am a registered emergency department nurse. I've always been motivated to help people, and I wanted to give back to the Australian community and Australia in general.

There are many stereotypes surrounding Africans in Australia; people often think we are trouble makers or violent, but that is not the case for all of us. Often in my community, I feel like once we come to Australia, the mentality is to go directly to full-time work without any higher education qualifications. This means that often the jobs are not high paying or there is little to no long term career progression.

There is also an unspoken fear that we do not want to pursue our dreams because we are scared of failure. While Australia is a multicultural country, we still feel like if we go and study and then go for a job interview - they will not choose someone like us.

The Ghanaian Youth Association of Victoria is a small community-driven group that puts on soccer events, celebrations and so on. I am only a quarter Ghanaian, but it is one of the only African communities I have joined since I came to Australia. The leaders of the organisation encourage the younger ones to pursue their dreams.

Of course, my parents, siblings and girlfriend also give me hope and always encourage me to keep working hard. I was lucky enough that my parents wanted me to study before working full time, and I am grateful for the opportunities they have given me. By doing nursing, I feel I

can give back to the community for giving my family and me an opportunity for a better life here.

When COVID-19 started, we were really busy. But it's begun settling down now. At first, I was pretty excited. This is what I had trained for. This is what all the studying was for - I could utilise all my knowledge from the university.

I was also a bit nervous, though. We didn't really know what we would be facing, what we would be getting into. For nurses and doctors, it's all about treating people who are sick and injured and sending them home well. But with this, we knew from what was happening overseas that the nurses and doctors were getting sick too, so I was slightly scared. But the other side of it was that I knew this was a great opportunity to use my skills and learn even more.

My life was basically going to work and back to home because of the lockdown. I didn't see anyone outside of my work and family. But I live in a great community, and everyone was so kind. When I got home from work, there would be boxes of chocolates on my doorstep! Everyone was so supportive! I would also get lovely text messages from my soccer club and friends.

Everyone has been so wonderful through what's obviously been a difficult time.



## MICHAEL LAM

**Michael Lam was just a child when he and his family were forced to flee Vietnam in the 1970s. Pirates took their belongings before they made it to a refugee camp in Malaysia and after a few months to Canada courtesy of the Canadian Community Sponsorship Program. Today, Michael lives with his young family in Sydney, after moving to Australia 20 years ago.**

My parents were business owners in Saigon in South Vietnam. But in the late 1970s, they feared the communist regime coming down from the North. They feared for their lives, and they feared for our lives. The danger was such that they were forced to leave behind everything they had worked for, even though they were business owners who were well to do in Saigon. They had to give up their home and their business and everything they owned.

I don't have too many recollections because I was pretty young, but I remember we got onto a boat of some sort with a bunch of other people and away we went. When we left, I have one recollection which was being boarded by other people from another boat, and at that time I didn't know who they were. They were pirates, my parents and siblings told me later. They took our belongings and anything valuable that they could find. We ended up in a refugee camp in Malaysia and stayed there for a few months.

We were then sponsored by a family in Canada and the next thing you know we boarded a flight and off we went. The family that sponsored us was in a town called Thunder Bay which was on the North Shore of Lake Superior. When we landed, I remember some kind people just handing us lots of winter clothes like boots and thick jackets because they were preparing us for what was to come with the Canadian winter which we were not ready for!

My memories of our time in Thunder Bay and Canadian Private Sponsorship model are very happy ones. They're mainly of the family who sponsored us - meeting them, spending time with them, spending time with their kids and going to school — just being a normal kid.

My parents were still in contact with the family that sponsored us last time I checked. They communicated mostly through letters, and we were even writing to each other, sending pictures and stuff like that. It was really lovely to see them and see their kids grow up and share where we were with them as they were

very interested in how we were doing and what we were up to. My parents are very happy that we ended up in Canada. They didn't have any regrets even though they still had family in Vietnam; in the end, they were happy with that difficult decision that they made and the sacrifices that they made too.

Certainly looking back, what life was like in Vietnam at the time when they left, I look at that, and I am really appreciative of what they did because it is not easy to leave everything that you've worked to try to give your family a better opportunity for the future. They left because they were escaping or trying to get out of danger. They certainly weren't escaping because there were better jobs, they were doing pretty well in Vietnam already, and it was more for our lives that were in danger, and we needed to go for no other reason.

I've been in Australia now for 21 years or so. One of my aunties came out here when we moved to Canada, so I always had a fascination with Australia. When I came here, I connected with a couple who ran the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group and Rural Australians for Refugees. I felt strongly about refugees and taking refugees in because I am one myself. I just volunteered, you know, my time and resources and said if there is anything I can do to help let me know. So they got me involved in the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group by helping them with their website and online marketing which is what we do at Cornerstones, which is my own marketing business I've started since arriving here. And so just contributing our time and helping them work more effectively and use their online presence to create more awareness and raise money for the cause.

I now live in the Upper North Shores of Sydney with my wife and kids. It is beautiful. It is very leafy, lots of big trees, lots of bush and national parks. I love the community feel. I've got two young kids - ten and seven. We moved up here for the schools and the community of kids going to the local school and meeting other families, young families like us up here and yeah, the community is fantastic, whenever some family has got an issue, everybody pulls together and helps that family out. Whether it is someone being ill, people bringing food to that ill family or the simplest of "hey I'm running late, I can't pick up my kid and take

them to the band on time", and people jump in and help out. I love that about Australia and the area we live in. The community is really close-knit.



## PRUDENCE MELOM

**Prudence Melom was only a little girl when she arrived from Chad in Toowoomba via Brisbane. Her experiences of community kindness have stuck with her throughout her upbringing. Today, she wants to continue to foster and spread that community kindness, not just in Toowoomba, but across Australia.**

I first arrived in Toowoomba in 2007. I came here with my family; we arrived as refugees here. When we first came, it was an unknown country. We didn't know anyone in Australia before we arrived. So from arriving at the airport in Brisbane, we had a team of people who worked for resettlement services. They were at the airport and were waiting for us with big smiles on their faces. Even at that moment, when you've just landed, you are welcomed with big smiles, and you are only made to feel very safe and welcomed.

Before coming to Toowoomba itself, I didn't know much about the town, it was chosen for us, and it was just a place that the government decided to send us to settle. But I think the best way I can describe my relationship with Toowoomba is it is like being set up on that blind date that actually works out! It is a really good place to raise a family, it's not as busy as big cities. It is a regional area, but it's not too small either. It's like a small city on its own. There are schools, universities, that good community spirit; we have a lovely mayor as well.

There are just lovely people around, and that's definitely another big reason why we've stayed loyal to Toowoomba since then. For example, I had my ESL teacher. She was the first one to have me taste sausage rolls and vegemite, so I had my first experiences that I've had in this country because of people's random acts of kindness and generosity. Just people trying to get me to experience the lifestyle here in Australia, so those were really good memories.

Even though we met a lot of great people that helped us a lot coming here, there was that number of people that were not so keen on seeing our faces. You know, walking down the street and being told to go back to where you come from, where you know deep inside you don't have anywhere else to go, no one leaves home if the home is a safe place to be. So, after having my personal experience of racism on different levels, I decided that I wanted to do something about it, and I wanted

to speak up. So, I decided that since there was a void of programs to educate young school kids about the arrivals of refugees and migrants, I created E-raced.

E-raced works with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and gives them a platform to share their stories and experience. They can use their personal stories to educate, to empower, to create mutual understanding and respect and start to combat racism. We can try to hide away from the fact that there is racism in Australia, but I don't know how long we are going to keep hiding away from it because people are experiencing it daily. So we use our platform and our voices to speak up and to stand against it as a team.

COVID-19 was just a disaster because at the beginning of the year we had a lot of plans, a lot of events to attend to, a lot of schools to visit and we were looking forward to what the year had to offer. But when COVID-19 hit, many of those events got canceled. But we had a moment where we told ourselves that if we can't have those face to face interactions, maybe we can try using our online platform to keep the message still going, keep the stories out there and use our stories to bring people together during this hard time.

We created E-raced live which is on every Sunday from 6 pm on our page. We bring in a guest from a refugee or migrant background. We interview them, and we ask them to share their stories with us to talk about their experiences of racism. They have a page to use their stories to motivate other people around Australia and encourage them to keep going. Initially, E-raced live was for us to keep our work going until the end of COVID-19 and restrictions were eased, but we had people messaging us, saying don't stop it, keep it going. I think people are learning and taking positive messages from it, especially in this time now, where there is such a big conversation on racism. People are realising that because it is happening in America, it doesn't mean it is not happening in Australia. So it's raising a lot of conversations as well.

We are getting a lot of attention to our work. We've also started working together with Sportsgirl. It was with gladness that we decided to work together with Sportsgirl to use their big platform to spread the message on racism. We use that platform to speak

up about racism in Australia, how it is affecting the indigenous community, we talk about institutional racism; we bring that conversation about racism to light. It's such an important conversation that we might not have been able to deliver at such a fast pace if we didn't have them behind us - encouraging and pushing us and giving us that platform to do so. We've been very busy, and sometimes I feel frustrated and overwhelmed.

But the reason why I keep coming back to work even when I'm frustrated and tired is that I feel so passionate about it. I want to live in a world where the next generation will not feel the need to always explain themselves and justify why their skin is black or why they are who they are. Things that we can't control. I feel that we have the opportunity and the platform to speak on it so that it will not be an ongoing issue for my kids in the future, I want them to live in a world where it is a bit safer for them. That's definitely what empowers me to keep going and to keep pushing.



## SHAHAB AHMED ALSMOQI

Shahab Ahmed Alsmoqi from Wagga Wagga in New South Wales only arrived in Australia 12 months ago from war-torn Iraq where he was a physicist. Finding work in his specialist area has not been easy; however, he is already stepping up in a variety of ways to help his new community here in Australia. His role took on added importance as he helped his community navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When Saddam Hussein was president of Iraq, before 2003, the life of the Yazidi people was very hard because the government took our rights away and saw us as weaker people. We did not get an education because we had to work on a farm which was about two hours from our village.

In 2003, I was in year 6 when America attacked Iraq and circumstances for Yazidi people changed for the better. My father then got a teaching job, and the pay was good. Many more people in the village got paying jobs. Children like me then were able to continue our education.

My dream was to become a maths teacher like my father. I completed secondary school and moved to the north of Iraq, where there was a university (in Kurdistan). This university did not have a place for me in maths, so I chose to study physics. I was the best student (number 1) in the first, second and third year.

In 2014, I finished my third year in July and returned to my village for the holidays. On the 3rd of August, ISIS attacked our village. Most people weren't sure what to expect. Some including my family fled to the mountains and some stayed. The soldiers of Kurdistan had promised to protect our village. But when ISIS arrived, the soldiers had disappeared in the night without a trace. ISIS came and kidnapped many people, killed the men and forced the women to marry ISIS fighters - many were raped. Children were trained to become suicide bombers.

Life in the mountains was very hard. We were surrounded by ISIS and had no food or water, and it was summer, so very hot. After seven days, a route opened up for us to escape to Kurdistan. The people of Kurdistan fed us and gave us clothes. They were very good to us. My family and I went to a camp for refugees in Kurdistan, which had been used for Syrian refugees. My family of eight got one tent which was two meters by three, so it was very small. We were lucky though - all my family survived.

At that time, I was 22. I missed my friends from university, especially my roommate. I decided to be strong and to complete my university studies. In October, the colleges started, and I went to the department of that college to complete the last year of uni. I graduated and had great results, even though studying was tough because of the times and the things that had happened to friends. It wasn't a very happy time, but I was number 2 in the class. I became a university teacher.

My sister, who was married at the time, went to a camp in Turkey. She was there for a year and was then allowed to come to Australia. She then applied for her family, my parents, brothers and I, to come to Australia. We arrived in 2019.

I was surprised when I looked out of the plane at how many trees there were here. Everybody was so friendly and always smiling and welcoming; we didn't feel alone. We felt like we were beginning a new life.

After a month, my younger brother and sister went to high school, and they love it. This has made us happier because, in Iraq, there would not have been an education for them. After that my mother and father went to TAFE to learn English and my brother Amer and I went to TAFE to prepare for university. This course gives a chance to continue our education.

Now I'm a support worker to help refugee and immigrant students get aligned with mainstream students. I am a support teacher in language. I studied an online course about trauma in refugee and immigrant students, and the course was beneficial.

Sometimes we have some students crying or getting angry. When I ask them what happened, they speak about how they remember a painful memory of their friend in Iraq who was killed, and it can make them feel lonely. I try to encourage them to be positive. Sometimes the teacher will be talking about one topic that reminds them of when they were in Iraq before the genocide, so they get sad again, and it can be hard to deal with. So I try to support and encourage them.

When COVID-19 hit, we couldn't be with the people in our community. So we recorded a video about our community to tell them how to wash hands and to

stay at home, isolate and maintain social distance in our language.

I am also working as a translator for people in our community. If someone is having problems communicating in English, they would call me. For example, a friend had a problem with his internet, so he called the provider and got me to talk with them.

The thing is, my job in Iraq wasn't interpreting languages or doing social services; it was science. I was a physics scientist - electrons, atoms, nuclear - now I am doing things far from that. I told myself, for now, my community needs my help so I will help them and maybe in two or three years they will get better and there will be more people to help them. I will then get to do things for myself and continue my studies.

I am lucky to do these things for my community. We will stay in Wagga forever. We love it; it has given us a new beautiful life.

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