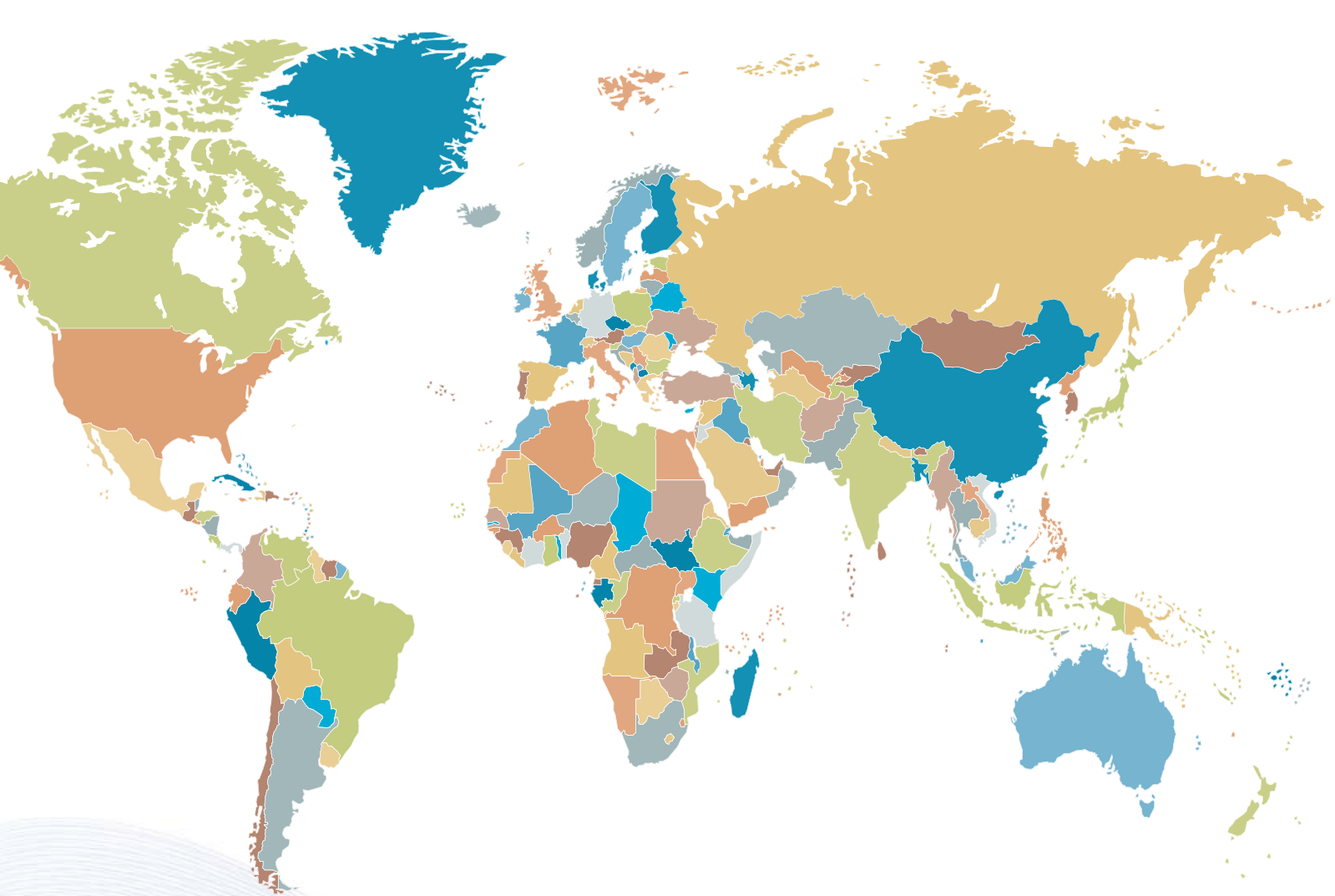


Connecting cultures, Building community

Stories of Making Australia Home

SydWest Multicultural Services



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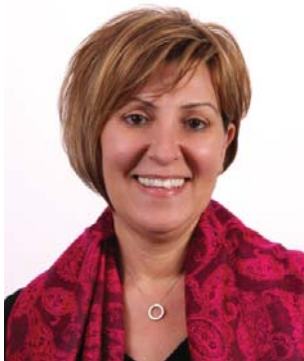
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Foreword

The turmoil that we hear and see around the world makes Australia one of the countries that continue to open its doors to displaced and persecuted individuals and families, desperate to find a new, safe and peaceful home.

For more than 30 years, SydWest Multicultural Services has been assisting refugees, humanitarian entrants and new arrivals to settle successfully in Western Sydney. Years ago, we were helping people from countries such as Ethiopia, South Sudan and the old country of Yugoslavia. Today we are seeing more and more people arrive here from war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and places like Bhutan, Iran and Burma (now Myanmar) where religious and cultural persecution exist.



Elfa Moraitakis
CEO
SydWest Multicultural Services

We are fortunate in Australia to be living in a safe and stable country where things like housing, health, education, the right to work and freedom of religion are seen as a right and not a privilege but often taken for granted. However for many new arrivals, these basic human rights are some of the first things they notice when they land on our shores - and appreciated long after their settlement in this country.

The stories in this booklet provide an insight into the personal journeys of a few of our clients. Some have come here by choice but many have been forced to leave their home country for fear of violence, persecution and even death. The stories reveal what it can be like for women, men and children starting their life all over again, often equipped with nothing but their passion for safety and hope for the future. Starting a new life in Australia is met with mixed emotions - relief and gratitude on the one hand - grief and sadness on the other for the loved ones and the life they left behind.

What we find in our work with these individuals is that they are all overwhelmingly grateful to Australia for giving them a second chance in life. They appreciate the assistance the Australian government and organisations like SydWest provide them and the hope for a better life in Australia. The reality is that the vast majority of them are still dealing with trauma, fear and loss. Starting again can be difficult with main obstacles being the language and the lack of educational and work recognition. Our mission is to help these people become settled and empowered in their new lives so that they can become independent and contributing members of our society.

Through our diverse Settlement, Youth and Family programs and services we assist thousands of new arrivals each year to transition from fear and persecution into safety and freedom as they commence a new life in Australia. Our Aged Care and Disability Services Division works with many seniors, frail aged and people with disabilities and their carers to assist them in living independently in their homes and in the community for as long as possible. We rely on government funding and collaborations with partner organisations to provide these valuable services, and our dedicated and culturally competent staff work closely with vulnerable individuals and families to help them create a better life for themselves.

We are grateful to the individuals in this book for sharing their personal experiences about what it is like to start life again in a new country. We also hope that by placing faces, families and true human stories behind numbers and statistics, we can start to break down the fear and cultural barriers that exist.

This is a great opportunity to disseminate the human stories to the wider community, therefore providing a better understanding about the circumstances of the people we see every day - in the hope that barriers will be brought down and a more harmonious society will emerge. Only then shall we be able to achieve peace, security and a better future for all, in particular our children.

Prejudice and fear alienate our society. Governments, organisations and influential people should act as the catalyst to ensure the doors to Australia remain open for those experiencing similar circumstances.

Raising a family in a foreign country

Imad's Story

In 2015, Imad arrived in Australia with his pregnant wife and six children. The family had spent the past nine years in transit after fleeing Iraq, first taking refuge in neighbouring Syria in 2006 and later in Turkey when the situation in Syria also became untenable. A civil lawyer back in Iraq, Imad says he has great hopes for his children's future now that they have settled in Australia, but admits that his role as father has changed and not necessarily for the better. Speaking with the help of an interpreter, Imad recalls his first day in Australia.

"When we arrived at the airport, we were welcomed by our case manager from SSI (Settlement Services International), who took us to our new home, helped us to set up and explained the basics to us. After just two hours in the house, my wife went into labour. I didn't know what to do, or where the hospital was. I called my brother who had been living in Australia for 27 years and he called an ambulance for us. I had to stay behind to look after my children. In the morning, my brother called me and told me I had a new daughter. That was my first day in Australia."

What has it been like since then?

Settlement is a step by step process. It doesn't happen in one day. Every day we learn something new about Australia. We are very happy with the way the Government has taken care of us and with the services that organisations like SydWest provide. Everything is easy except for the language. When you don't know the language it can be hard.

What has been the biggest challenge for you so far?

Raising children is very hard in Australia when you don't know the language. My children speak to each other in English and I can't understand them. I ask my son, "What are you talking about?" My children do not listen to me as a father and I am concerned that they will forget their Arabic language.

How do you cope with this?

I am studying hard to learn English and catch up to my children just to know what they are saying. I find that when my older children come home from school, the younger ones also speak to them in English. Me and my

wife are on one side and my children are on the other. We are afraid of the big gap between us and the children.

What are you doing to help bridge this gap?

I attend many information sessions at SydWest to learn more about life in Australia, how to deal with children and our lives: children's rights and protection, things like domestic violence, raising children and family harmony. In Iraq, this information was not available and no one tells you how to deal with your family.

SydWest has helped us to solve many of our problems and are helping us to settle and to live in Australia. I also encourage my children to participate in the SydWest activities, like the basketball, football, study centre, excursions and homework support.

How do you feel about life in Australia now?

Australia is a very safe country. We could not go out at night in our country, but in Australia we can. We want our children to have a good chance in Australia and we thank the Australian government for giving us a good chance.

How are you finding the Australian culture?

I accept the Australian culture because this is our new home. I believe that Australia has a good culture and lifestyle. I want to take advantage of the best of my culture and the best of the Australian way of life. For example, I am proud of the things that Iraq has brought to the world like the strong family connections with extended family and the strong community with neighbours. I also like that in Australia there is diversity. I find a rose from every country in Australia. And I notice that it respects many cultures, religions and languages.

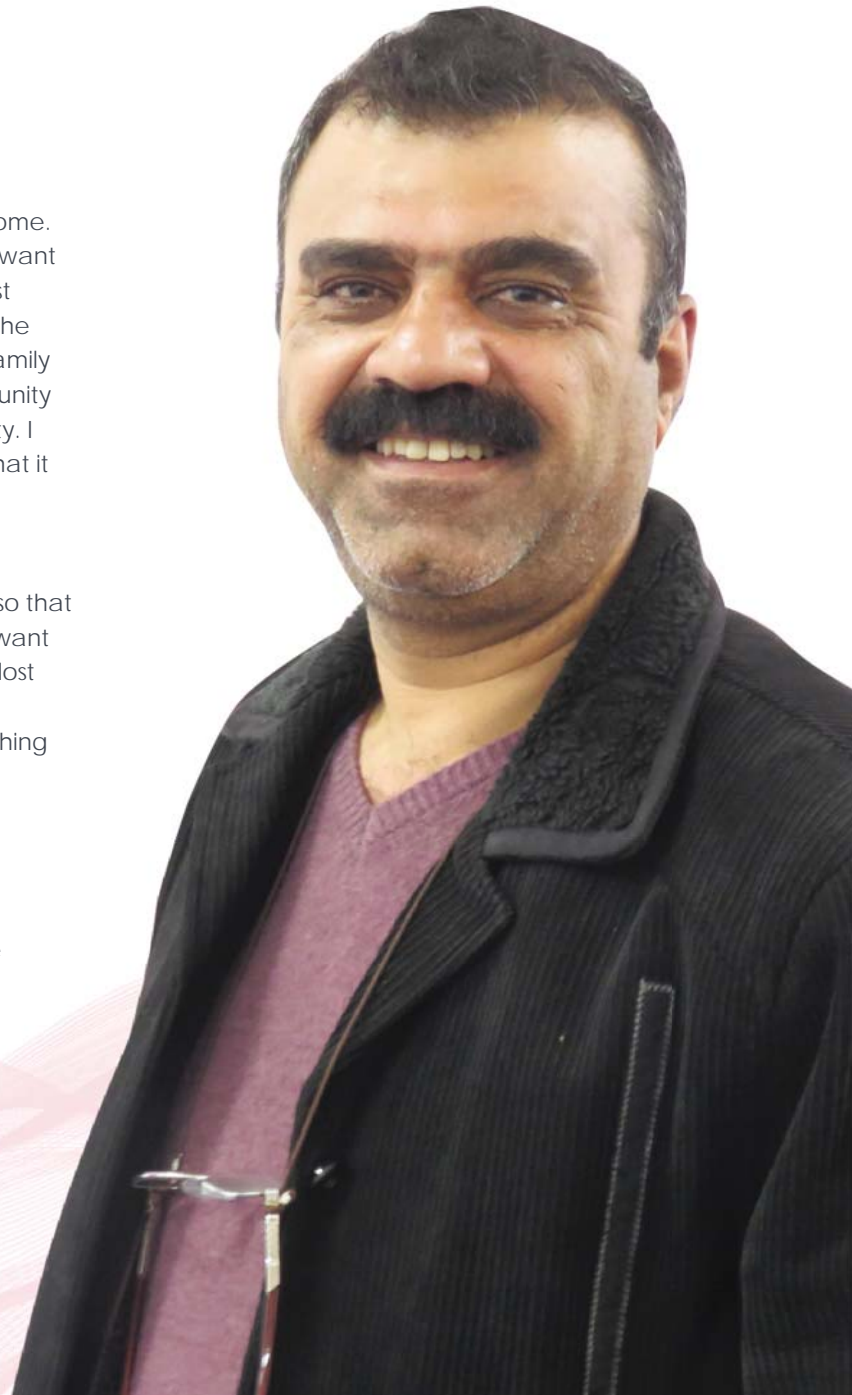
What are your dreams for your future?

I was a Civil lawyer in Iraq. I want to study the language so that I can read and write and maybe even study law here. I want to serve my family and my community and this society. I lost my hand in Iraq so I cannot work with my hands but I am lucky that I can work with my head. I want to give something to society to satisfy myself as a human being.

And for your children?

I want my children to also become valuable and independent members of Australian society and I wish that they do what they want in their lives. As an example one of them to be a doctor, engineer, social worker, builder or teacher ... to build our home in Australia.

SydWest's Community Engagement Division helps new arrivals as they transition to the Australian way of life. Our Information and Community Education sessions help people with their settlement issues and inform and educate them on topics like the Australian legal system, policing, housing, education, health and family harmony to name a few.



Growing up in Australia

Yasir's story

When 16-year-old Yasir arrived in Australia in 2015, he spoke little English and hadn't been to school in over three years. His family had fled Iraq over three years ago, living as refugees in Jordan where there was no opportunity for school let alone many of the normal activities enjoyed by most children in Australia. With mixed emotions, Yasir admits he's relieved to be safe again, but says that the transition has been hard at times and he still misses his native Iraq.

Yasir currently attends the Intensive English Centre at Evans High School in Blacktown which helps new arrival children with their English and transition to the Australian school system. Yasir is also involved in SydWest's youth programs, participating in our homework support and holiday program for young refugees settling in Western Sydney.

What have been some of the most difficult things about starting a new life in Australia?

Australia is very different. In my old country I had friends and neighbours that I knew. I knew my way around. Here it is harder to make friends. It's hard to understand the people here. At the beginning I felt like a stranger. No friends. No language. You don't know the country. It was sad to leave our home where we were raised and born in. We left our loved ones there.

What was it like starting school in Australia?

When I started school I didn't understand anything. My teacher gave me 10 words each day and I went home and translated them in Arabic and understood the words. Of course I really wanted to learn. I pick it up quickly.

How has SydWest helped you to settle?

SydWest helped my family with many services. Miss Mervat (SydWest caseworker) helped me with my homework. I think she is the best teacher because she makes sense to me. Having someone translate in Arabic helps me. I remember that day when I came to Miss Mervat telling her that I am very disappointed because I could not understand any of my school subjects especially Math and I was worried about my Maths

exam. She encouraged me and explained the subject in very simple way. She speaks my language and makes things easier for me. I got good confidence in myself that I will do good in my exams and I did. I got 75%. Maths was hard at first but once you understand English, the Maths it's easy.

What did your parents say when you came home with your results?

My mum was very happy and proud.

How are you finding school now?

I like Maths and English and I love to play soccer every week at school. In Iraq I never used computers but now I'm studying computers and I like that too.

What do you like most about Australia?

Australia is beautiful. Everything is sweet in Australia. In my country there is war. We left because there was a lot of violence happening around us and it wasn't safe. Here it is safe. When I came to Australia, I like to go to the beach. I went for the first time with SydWest. I was so happy to swim in the water and lie on the sand. This was the first time I saw the ocean. I also loved going to Wentworth Falls with other young people from SydWest. It was the first time I saw a waterfall.

What are your goals for yourself?

I want to get my licence and buy a car. SydWest helped me to do my Driver Knowledge Test and get my L's. I also want to go to university and study acting. I feel there are better chances to get jobs in Australia.

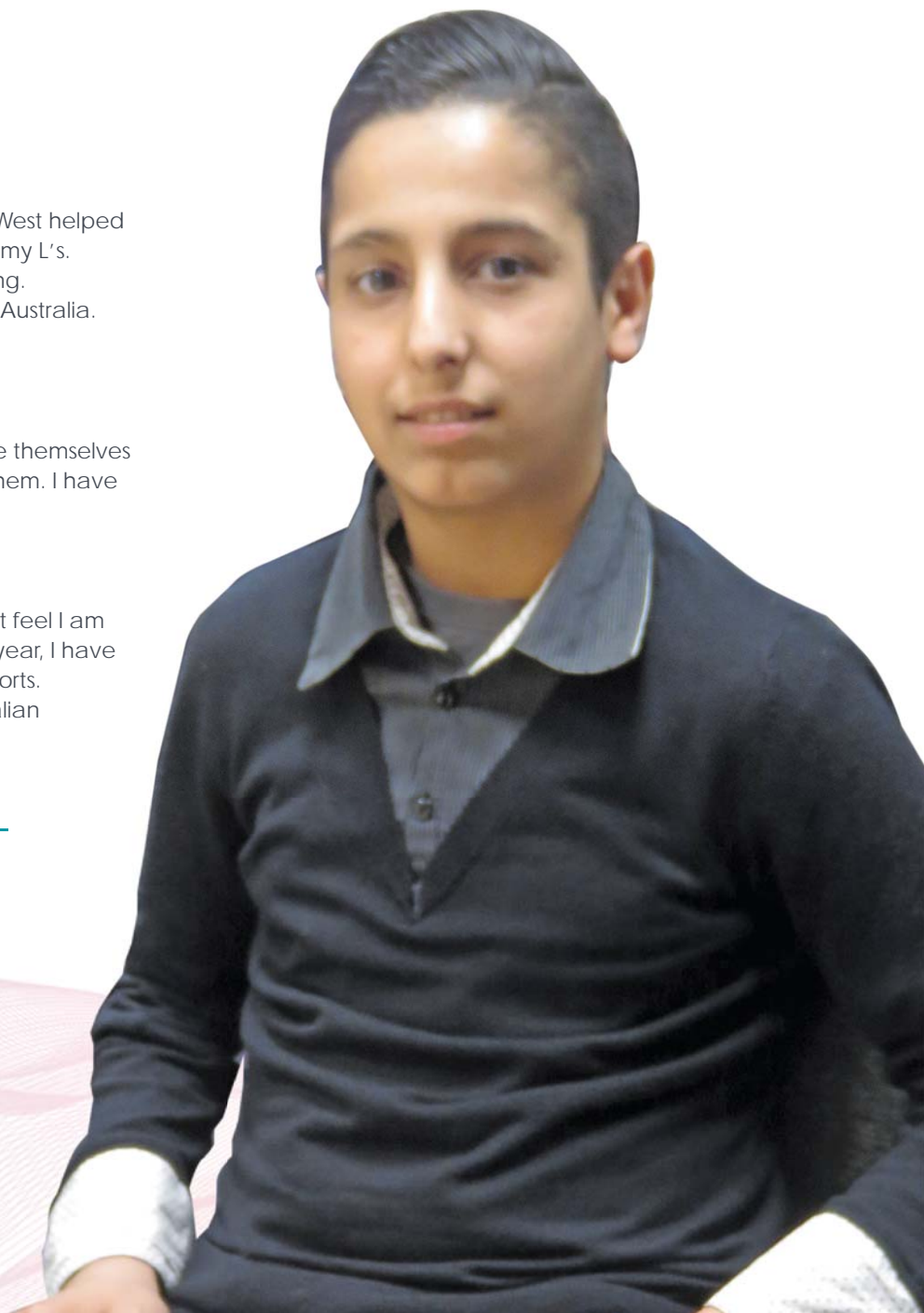
What advice would you give other children coming to Australia?

I would advise them to study and to educate themselves because this country has a good future for them. I have hope for myself here.

Is Australia starting to feel like home?

I know that my future is in Australia but I don't feel I am fully part of Australian society yet. After one year, I have freedom, I am participating in school and sports. I have friends. I try to contribute to the Australian society but I'm not feeling fully Australian. I am still homesick. I know it will take time.

SydWest's Youth Program aims to engage young refugees, humanitarian entrants and migrants who are settling in Western Sydney. We provide casework, homework support and study centres, sports, music and arts programs, social events and activities and we also collaborate with schools, tertiary institutions and others to help keep youth engaged with their education and careers.



The little things that make the difference

Naw Win Win's story

In 2008 when government forces burned down her village in Burma (Myanmar), Naw Win Win and her family fled to a nearby village. Not long after when her new village also came under attack, her family made the decision to flee to Thailand.

"I could not get work in Thailand," Naw Win Win recalls, "so I left my mother and brother and moved to Malaysia." Working first as a housemaid and later as a volunteer translator for the UNHCR, Naw Win Win began learning English for the first time. It was here that she met her husband, also a Burmese refugee, and had two children. Faced with no real hope for their future in Malaysia, the family applied for humanitarian visas to Australia. Naw Win Win says they were overjoyed when their application was accepted in 2013.

What was it like when you first arrived here?

We arrived in Australia in May 2014. We were very happy to leave Malaysia where we were living as refugees in miserable conditions. Now we had hope for our future. When I arrived here I noticed the cold. In Malaysia it was very hot and tropical. I also remember seeing many houses and many trees and not many tall buildings.

What was the most difficult thing for you?

Communication was very difficult in the beginning. Listening to the accent is very hard. I was not confident with contracts. I was worried about my future here. Everyone said that the cost of living and childcare are very expensive.

How did SydWest help you?

I went to the SydWest office in Mt Druitt Office and they gave me advice about their programs and helped me with my lease extension. They told me about my rights. Then I attended their International Women's Day event in 2014 and they told me about their Women's group. I joined the group the next week.

What was your experience with the Women's Support group?

I attended the group for two years and it helped me with many things. My English improved because I was speaking with other women and making friends. I picked up English from them. I started to get confidence. We went to places together as a group and I attended different information sessions. All this gave me confidence to do things on my own.

Do you feel your confidence has improved?

Yes it has now. I was not very confident before. The little things we take for granted but for me were very big and made me worry. Before I attended the Women's Groups I wouldn't go out on my own. I would only go with my husband because I was too scared I would make mistakes. I couldn't even go to McDonalds with the children because I was scared I would make a mistake when I ordered food. SydWest helped me with this and now I am more confident.

How are you doing now?

My life is very different now. I am more confident. I go to places on my own with the children. I have taken a break from the group because now I go to TAFE and am learning English. My English is getting much better. I also got my licence this year.

SydWest also referred me to an early pre literacy and numeracy program for my oldest child. The program has helped me learn about the Australian education system and taught me how to support my child in his learning.

What are your hopes for your future?

I would like to study to be a nurse very soon. I want my children to be educated better than I was and I want them to be happy.

SydWest's Families Program supports young families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through Women's Support groups, Playgroups, referrals, information sessions and home visits. We also work with families from new and emerging communities to help build community capacity and assist individuals to ensure their basic rights and obligations are met.



In the business of 'love and peace'

Sima's story

After experiencing religious persecution all her life, Sima and her elderly mother made the decision to flee Iran when their lives came under threat. Speaking with the aid of an interpreter, Sima explains what it was like living in Iran.

"When I was just one year old, my father was killed by religious radicals because of his religious beliefs, and it was always very difficult living in Iran. My mum lost her job and the government confiscated our bank savings. I was imprisoned a few times because of my Bahai religion. As soon as we received our passports, my mum and I fled to Turkey,"

Sima and her mother arrived in Australia in 2013 as humanitarian entrants. While she is free, she admits that she still lives with the residual fear from her past.

How has this fear affected you in your life?

I lived under threat all my life and I still carry that fear. I am finding the courage to go into groups. When I first arrived, I was also struggling to accept that I would ever be successful in Australia. I have to take care of my mother full time as she suffers from post-traumatic stress and I am studying English to learn the language.

How have you worked through these challenges?

I have lots of support from the people in Australia. Within two weeks of arriving here, I asked my SSI caseworker if I could establish my own business making leather handbags. I couldn't believe how easily she linked me to the right people. My caseworker at SydWest has been very supportive and encouraged me too. She would encourage me to attend SydWest events and take part in groups. She would promote my work at events like Harmony Day. I also attended information sessions at SydWest and learnt about Australian life, the legal system, housing, health. SydWest also helped us to find shared accommodation at first and then to secure housing.

Are you feeling more confident in groups now?

I am getting more confident. I feel connected with more people now that I attend groups and I have more friends. Australia is the first place that accepts me and my religious beliefs.

How is your business going?

I make leather goods, handbags and purses. I have now set up my business which is called 'Love and Peace'. This is what I want for the world.

Are you hopeful for your future now?

Before I was struggling accepting that I would be successful in Australia. I never thought that people would pay this much attention and care. I am a completely different person to when I first arrived. I am much better off.

What are your dreams for your future?

To be independent, to help people and to contribute to Australia. I say to others wanting to come to Australia that they must pay back to Australian society and we must all contribute to our capacity. This is our home now.

SydWest provides **Casework Support** to refugees and humanitarian entrants who have recently arrived to Australia and are dealing with some of the priority issues of settlement. Our experienced caseworkers listen to the needs of individuals providing them with referrals, support and tools to move forward.



The long road to feeling empowered again

Kedar and Tuka's story

Like many others from Bhutan's Lhotsampa region, Kedar and Tuka were forced to leave their homes behind and live for many years as refugees in Nepal. In fact, the couple spent 22 years in a refugee camp where they raised their five children, two of whom were born there. Speaking with the help of an interpreter, Kedar and Tuka describe their situation.

"When the Bhutanese government started enforcing its One Nation, One People policy we had to leave our farm in Bhutan in 1991, as we were not allowed to speak our language or practice our religion or our culture," Kedar explains.

His wife Tuka recalls some of the day-to-day hardships of life in the refugee camp. "We relied on rations supplied by the UNHCR. When my youngest daughter was born, we had a very difficult time. She was sick because of malnutrition and we faced many problems. Kedar would often leave the camp to find work to feed our family. At night when it rained we would wake up our children and move them to the dry area in the tents, which were made of bamboo and plastic. There are no words to describe the suffering there."

How did you feel when you were granted humanitarian entrant visas to come to Australia?

Kedar: At first we did not apply for visas because we were afraid we would not be able to practice our religion or our culture. We thought it might be the same as Bhutan. Religion is very important to me and my family and we could not give this up. But when we spoke to people, we heard that Australia was good and we were happy to come.

When did you arrive in Australia and what were your first impressions of the country?

Tuka: We arrived in February 2013. It was very difficult especially for the first few months. We did not know the language. This made everything very difficult. We did not know how to get around. We found the roads and the public transport very hard. Things like doing our shopping and finding a doctor were very hard too. I told my husband, "let's go back."

After the initial culture shock, how did you start settle in?

Kedar: After six months, we visited SydWest and started attending the English classes to learn the language. SydWest has helped us with many of our needs. We go to the information programs. SydWest teaches us about living in Australia. They helped me to get my licence. We eventually found out how to use the roads and where to go to visit the doctor. They are still helping us with our settlement.

How important has your fellow Bhutanese community been in your resettlement here?

We are very attached to the Bhutanese community and we are following cultures and practices with them. Our connection with the community has helped us a lot.

How are you managing now?

Kedar: One of our children is disabled so I care for him full time. This means that I cannot always attend the English classes. The language is still very hard. Our children learn much quicker than us.

Tuka: I attend English classes and can read and write but cannot speak very well and find it hard to understand when people are talking. I want to improve my English so I can get a job. I am happy to get a job packing or picking...whatever I am qualified for.

Is Australia starting to feel like home?

Tuka: Yes. In the beginning I wanted to go home but now I don't want to go anywhere. We get help from the country. The people are very good and very helpful.

Kedar: We cannot go back to Bhutan so Australia is our home. It's a good life here: the health system and the education system are very good.

What are your goals for your future?

Kedar: I want to get a job so we can buy our own home here in Australia. In Bhutan we owned our own farm and we would like to own our own home again. I will do what I can, manual labour, farming. If our children can get jobs we will be very happy.

SydWest's caseworkers work closely with new arrivals to ensure that they are linked with the appropriate health care and education services which are critical to the settlement process. We also work with individuals to inspire hope and help them find direction in their lives.



The freedom to create a life in Australia

Soheil's story

For 45-year-old Soheil who had to flee Iran because of religious persecution, coming to Australia has provided a fresh start and the freedom to continue his creative passion. Soheil and his family fled to Turkey in 2013 after the Iranian government shut down his professional photography business and denied his children access to education. In March 2015, his family arrived in Western Sydney on humanitarian visas. Despite having to start again, learning the language and the Australian system, Soheil says he was relieved to have the freedom to get on with his life. Speaking with the help of an interpreter, Soheil talks about his transition to his new home country.

What have been some of the best things about your new life in Australia?

There is no discrimination about beliefs here in Australia. Me, my children and my wife have a comfortable life now and because there are no restrictions on our thinking, we can move forward with our lives. I am studying English at TAFE and my children are also studying at school and university.

I am very grateful to SydWest and SSI which have helped my family to settle. I attend many information sessions at SydWest and learn about the law, the education system and about life here. It has provided great assistance and support with our problems and to help us become familiar with our new environment so we can settle here. They have also encouraged and supported me to continue my work.

Will you be continuing your photography here in Australia?

I was a photographer for 24 years in Iran. I cannot imagine life without photography. I hope to own my own studio here in Australia one day, taking photos and also making videos. I have my ABN and a business name – 'Unique Pictures' and I am ready to start. I am also part of a

photography group in Australia. We meet up once a week to network and discuss photography. I have been doing lots of voluntary work in the meantime while I learn English.

You were recently asked to be part of a photographic exhibition by local artists with refugee backgrounds. What was that like?

I am very happy to be part of the exhibition which allows me to display my work and my message for humanity. My photographs are about the human capacity for happiness, sadness and hope. We all have the capacity to be happy and sad and it is our own choice to either focus on one or the other.

What are your dreams for you and your family?

The dreams I have for my family are the same dreams I have for humanity. I believe the world is one country and we are all residents of the same country. My dream for my family and for the world is that we all have happiness and success and that we can live in harmony together.



"I am very happy to be part of the exhibition which allows me to display my work and my message for humanity."

SydWest's bilingual and culturally competent caseworkers work closely with new arrivals to help grow their individual capacity – encouraging them to build their skills and confidence so that they can secure employment and financial independence.



The freedom to create a life in Australia

Soheil's story cont'd



Soheil's photographs were featured in an exhibition at the Casula Powerhouse Art Centre in 2016, called *Beyond Refugee* – a collection of photo-media and video clips created by local artists with refugee backgrounds.



Photo by Soheil

Standing on my own feet:

Mudasirullah's story

In March 2015, Mudasiirullah and his wife arrived in Australia from Afghanistan on humanitarian visas. A graphic designer and English teacher back home, Mudasiirullah's life had come under direct threat when he began working as an interpreter for the Australian forces in the Urozgan province.

"Every time I interpreted for the Australians I received threats from the Taliban, so in 2013, I applied for a visa to come to Australia," he explains. Mudasiirullah says that now he has been given a second chance, he wants to establish himself so that he can give back to Australia.

What was your experience when you first arrived here?

We went to Adelaide first but it was a very quiet city so we came to Sydney. Here in Sydney we have more friends in the Afghan community we can meet up with. We lived for a few days in a friend's garage but this was not acceptable. My biggest problem was finding housing, something nice for my wife. We applied for many homes through real estate agents then we came to SydWest for help. Our SydWest caseworker helped us to find rental accommodation straight away.

What did you do to establish yourself?

Having the language helped me. I started and completed the English classes at Macquarie Community College. I attended the DKT classes at SydWest and my SydWest caseworker helped me to get my licence quickly as I already knew how to drive. These classes helped me to understand the road rules and the system in Australia. I knew that getting my Australian licence was very important to be able to get a job.

Are you working?

I worked with job seekers to find work and never gave up. I found a job on my own working in customer service, parking people's cars in the city. I have been working for

eight months and am definitely enjoying it. I like driving the nice cars and meeting people. I am doing very well because I am polite and on time and they are very happy with me.

How do you feel about Australia now?

It is a nice, beautiful country. I work in the city and love the Harbour Bridge. Everything is good here – the weather, the level of education, the whole society. The people of Australia are so kind. They always come with a smile.

What are your goals for your future?

We have a 10 month old daughter and she is very beautiful. My wife is also studying English and looks after our daughter. I hope that my daughter grows up and becomes independent and gets a job where she is also giving back in some way.

I want to do something good in Australia. I am coming to Australia to not only help myself and my family but to help the Australian people as I promised. I will be honest and continue to stand on my own feet. I plan to have my own business one day. I am thinking about my long term future and about doing an apprenticeship. I know it will be hard for the first few years, but I need to establish myself for the future.

I want to use all of my skills to be a useful person in this country. Hopefully my extended family will be with me one day. I will be very happy and thankful then.

What advice would you give to others settling in Australia?

I would tell those coming to Australia, to not lose your hope. Trust yourself and don't rely on the government. Once you arrive here, try as hard as you can to become independent and eventually give back to society.

SydWest's Homelessness Program provides specialist support to non-English speaking individuals and families to help them secure suitable, affordable and sustainable accommodation.



Reunited in Australia

Eptisam and Naif's story

In 2012, Eptisam left Syria to visit her daughter and son-in-law who were living in Australia and who had just given birth to their first child. The plan was to stay for a while, help her daughter out and get to know her new granddaughter. However during her visit, the tension in Syria had escalated making it too dangerous for her to return home. Eptisam recalls the stress of being separated from the rest of her family who were living in the centre of the unrest.

"I was very worried and kept calling them day and night. I could hear the big helicopter in the background. Rockets were being fired from both sides. It affected my health and I had very big surges in blood sugar levels. I applied for a permanent visa and then applied for my husband and two sons to be accepted under the Humanitarian program." Speaking with the help of an interpreter the couple tell their story.

When did the rest of your family join you?

Eptisam: They arrived in June 2013. I was so happy they arrived safely out of Syria. When I saw them at the airport, I dropped to the ground and kissed the floor and thanked God that I got my family here safely. We were all crying but they were tears of joy not sadness.

What was it like for you starting again in a new country?

Naif: When I arrived I was 67 and it was very hard to learn English. The first place I went to was SydWest. I joined the Arab speaking group and attend every week. I made friends and attended the information sessions. I am learning English every Friday and have been on outings with the group. We visited Parramatta Lake and we went to Parliament House in Canberra.

Eptisam: Before my family arrived, SydWest heard about my situation and they called me and invited me to an event and connected me with the Social Support group. SydWest linked me to the right organisations to apply for visas for my family. I also attended many information sessions at SydWest and learnt how to live in Australia - the traffic, the laws and the style of life in Australia.

They also helped me to find housing for my family. Two weeks before my family arrived, I secured a flat and was able to prepare it for them. We have now moved to a house.

What was it like for your two sons who had to start again?

Our youngest son was in Year 12 when we left Syria. When we came here he went to Evans High School to learn English. He was supposed to study for one year but finished in six months. He then had to go back to Year 11. This was very hard for him because all of his friends in Syria were going to University. He is now graduated from Year 12 and finished first in Maths. He is studying Medical Science at the University of NSW. Our other son had a Masters in Geology from Syria. He was studying his PhD but couldn't complete it because of the war. He is now working with a mining exploration company. Our daughter is a psychologist but she is not working now because she is looking after her two children. We are very proud of all our children and happy to be connected together.

How do you feel about Australia now?

Eptisam: We are safe in Australia. I am treated like a human being here and everyone respects me. This is something that we didn't have during the war in Syria. Before the unrest, Syria was a very beautiful country. I was a sports teacher. My husband was in the Department of Finance and our lives were good. Australia is a very beautiful country. It is clean and you are free to go anywhere. The beaches are free. Back home the beaches were very expensive to visit. I am very happy with the way students are treated in schools. Australian teachers are good and they know how to deal with the children. In Syria, the teachers had to rush the education because of the violence.

What are your hopes for you and your family?

Naif: I hope that our children get good jobs, do well and are happy with their lives. I also hope to improve our housing situation one day soon.

Eptisam: I pray that God protects Australia and keeps Australia safe. I don't want the same thing to happen to Australia. I will do anything to protect Australia.

SydWest's Multicultural Support groups assist new arrivals to learn more about the many facets of Australia in a safe, friendly and supportive environment. Through casework and group interaction, people are encouraged to become active and contributing participants of society.



Staying positive

Hameeda's Story

When the unrest began in Afghanistan, Hameeda and her family found themselves under constant threat from the Taliban forces. So in 2012 they fled their home in Kabul and took refuge in India. With no long term guarantees for their futures in India and with one son already living and working in Australia, the family turned to Australia for hope. Speaking with the aid of an interpreter, Hameeda talks about her move to Australia.

How did it feel when your visa application to Australia was accepted?

We were extremely happy. While India was safer than Afghanistan, we were refugees there and we hoped for our safety for our children and ourselves. Our son was living in Australia for four years and sponsored us under the humanitarian program. When I arrived here I felt safe and relaxed for the first time in a long time. I found the people were friendly and very helpful.

What were some of the biggest issues you had to face at first?

At the beginning the language was the biggest barrier between us being independent. We felt guilty always asking our son to always help us. But now I can understand and speak English because I attend English classes.

Also finding a house as rent is very expensive. It is still a problem and at the moment we are looking for something more affordable.

What have you been doing to help your settlement in Australia?

I started learning English and feel more confident now. I came to SydWest for help and started coming to the Sewing and English classes for women. I really like it because I am making new friends and learning new things every week. I want to learn more in this area so I can work from home one day.

I also attended the DKT classes because I wanted to get my licence. SydWest helped me to understand the road rules. I got my P's a year ago and said 'now I can stand on my own feet'. I want to be independent so I don't put pressure on my children who are working and I want to help my grandchildren and drive them around.

What are your goals now?

When I left Afghanistan I was working for 32 years as a teacher. When I left my friends there we were crying and it was very sad. Now that I am sitting on the student chair, I am keen to finish and establish myself.

Is Australia starting to feel like home?

Due to the multiculturalism in this country, people can choose who they want to be and nobody stops others, and this is the way it should be. I have children here. Two are married and I have one son at TAFE and my youngest is in Year 11. I have five grandchildren in Australia and I see them every day. I am also making friends here. We have opportunities to make a new life and we are very grateful.

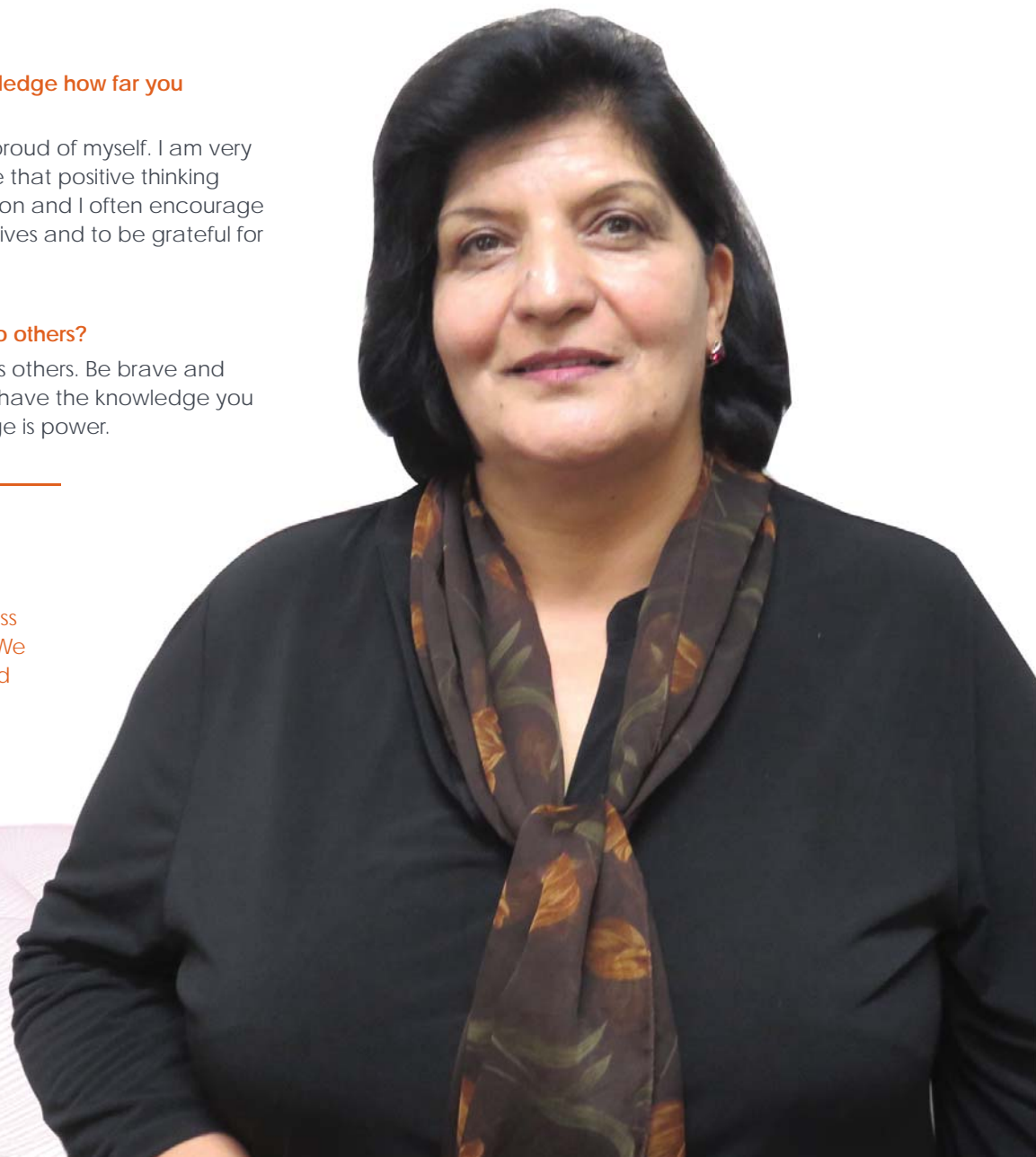
Do you ever stop and acknowledge how far you have come?

Yes I tolerated a lot and I am proud of myself. I am very positive and I definitely believe that positive thinking brings positive outcomes. My son and I often encourage each other to look at the positives and to be grateful for how far we have come.

What advice would you give to others?

Be patient. Be tolerant towards others. Be brave and finish your studies. If you don't have the knowledge you can't go anywhere. Knowledge is power.

SydWest's Learner Driver Program assists people to get their licences so that they can become empowered to access education and employment. We help new arrivals to understand the road rules and provide affordable opportunities for practical on-road driving experience. Programs like our English and Sewing classes are developed in response to client goals and provide opportunities for skills development and confidence with the English language.



More Freedom and Access

Shamsolzoha and Farhad's Story

When Shamsolzoha and her family received word that their visa applications to Australia had been accepted; the news was bitter sweet. They had been living in Turkey for two years after fleeing Iran's religious persecution and were relieved to be coming here. However they were also dealing with the recent loss of Shamsolzoha's husband and faced the journey without him.

In 2012, Shamsolzoha came to Australia with her daughters and her disabled brother Farhad, whom she cared for. Speaking with the assistance of an interpreter, they explain how their lives have improved since coming to Australia.

What did you first notice about Australia when you arrived?

Shamsolzoha: It was hard at first because I was still grieving for my husband, but we were very happy that at last we had freedom to accomplish what we dreamed. We saw that everyone is free to do what they want in Australia: freedom to go to beaches, freedom to go to places, freedom to wear what they want and freedom to go out with men and women together in groups. We could not do these things in Iran. In Iran we couldn't get jobs, our children could not study at University and we were persecuted because of our religion.

What were some of the initial obstacles you faced when you came to Australia?

Shamsolzoha: We had problems with the language at first. I had siblings who were living here and they helped with the translation. Settlement Services International helped us at first by setting up my brother with his special needs, getting a wheelchair and special bed. We were then referred to SydWest and we started going to the Iranian Social Group.

How has the SydWest group helped you?

Farhad: We have been attending the group for a year. The group is an opportunity to go out and see friends. It helps me to get out of the house and get fresh air. I enjoy that.

Shamsolzoha: The groups give us information and knowledge about life in Australia and about healthy living and diets. We also go sightseeing. We visit places we would never be able to see because they provide a bus with wheelchair access and they give us support. We would never be able to do these things without this program.

Is Australia starting to feel like home?

Farhad: Yes because the facilities for me are better than in Iran. Wheelchair access is available to me and this is very important because it allows me to manage. We are able to receive special care and there are always sources of help. In Iran, there are not as many opportunities for people with disabilities. In Australia disability does not limit you.

As well as providing direct in-home services, SydWest's Aged Care Care and Disability Services Division also provides culturally appropriate social engagement opportunities for our seniors and carers. As an NDIS service provider, SydWest is able to cater to the special needs of clients with disabilities, their families and their carers.



Home is where the heart is

Georgette's story

In June 2007, Georgette and her husband left their home in Cairo, Egypt to follow their son who had migrated to Australia for work. Georgette says the decision to move half way across the world as a senior was never an issue, as she would do anything to be with her family.

"Our life is our son. He's our only child and family is everything," Georgette admits. With her son now married and with two grandchildren aged 5 and 6, Georgette says she is blessed to be able to see her family every day, and as far as she is concerned, this is her home now.

Since arriving to Australia, Georgette has been learning English and also started attending SydWest's Seniors Coptic group which meets every Thursday for two hours. Speaking with the help of an interpreter, Georgette explains the many reasons why she loves her new home.

What were your first thoughts of Australia when you arrived here?

It's a very beautiful country and I was very happy to be here. I noticed how quiet it is compared to Cairo which is so noisy day and night. I like the way people respect and treat each other. The government system is so much better here. I appreciate everything even the way the traffic lights work.

What is the biggest thing you appreciate about Australia?

I want to thank Australia from the bottom of my heart for treating everyone like a human being. Everything is very fair here, especially the medical system. I am very lucky because I was able to get a knee operation here. This would never have happened in Egypt.

How do you think people can thank this country?

We need to respect this country as much as it respects us. We need to keep it clean and look after it. We need to obey the laws and treat everyone with respect. This is how we can start to give back.

Has the language barrier been difficult?

Yes. People in Australia speak very quickly and it is very difficult to understand them. I have been learning English and I can understand them as long as they speak slowly.

When did you start attending SydWest's seniors Coptic group?

I joined the Seniors Coptic group two years ago after I met a SydWest worker at my church. Back in Egypt there were no opportunities for groups. I love the group because we sit and we talk. Knowing people and talking to them gives me peace. I love coming here. People speak my language. I make friends here. Every fourth week we go on trips and outings together to rivers and parks and we learn about Australia. I also enjoyed the Art Therapy groups and learning about art.

SydWest's Social Support groups for seniors and carers help to break social isolation and create important bonds within our multicultural seniors community. Seniors and carers meet regularly and take part in outings, information sessions, group activities and group sharing.



Georgette wrote the following poem about Australia while attending SydWest's Seniors Art Therapy program. (Translated from Arabic)

Australia

I loved her from the bottom of my heart.
Yes, I always loved her.
I love her for her kindness and love,
I love her for her law and responsibility,
I love her for her care and respect,
I love her for her safety and cleanliness,
I love her for her calm and quiet,
I love her for her traffic lights,
I love her for her education and her teachers.
All these things inside me,
More than I live inside her.
She is Australia, whose people
I love so much.





SydWest
Multicultural Services