

Finding our place

Compelling accounts
Refugee and migrant resettlement in Australia

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Foreword



Take a walk through any of Swinburne University of Technology's Melbourne campuses – Croydon, Hawthorn and Wantirna – and it is hard not to be struck by the incredible diversity of the student population. A diversity that adds so much to who we are as a university and shapes the way we work.

Since its inception in 1908, Swinburne has always been known for who we include rather than who we exclude. Our embracing of the great value that diversity brings to our community and our understanding of its importance to driving innovation and creating impact on a social and global scale has defined us.

This diversity is enhanced through the delivery of English language and general education programs tailored to meet the needs of new migrant and refugee communities. Each student comes to us with a rich history and powerful story to tell. In this publication our students and recent graduates share insights into their experiences of arriving in Australia and studying at Swinburne.

The determination and resilience required when moving to a new and largely unknown country cannot be underestimated. Negotiating seemingly simple activities of shopping, driving, seeking medical support and the like requires a huge amount of determination. Doing this without a good grasp of the English language can be even more intimidating. Add to this mix, in some cases, years in refugee camps, the fear for the lives of loved ones, and brave acts of survival.

As a team of educators, academics and professional staff, we are inspired by the stories of all our students. Our privilege in contributing to their educational development and, for our refugee and migrant students, supporting their introduction to Australia is an honour.

I have loved reading these accounts in *Finding Our Place* and thank each of the students for sharing them. To the staff who have managed the publishing project, particularly Serena Seah – thank you also. Your work is greatly appreciated.

The volunteer tutors who provide much-needed one-to-one support to our teaching program delivery – thanks to you too, especially Susan Powell who interviewed the students and wrote up the stories.

At Swinburne, we continue to be proud of the achievements of our students, and the contribution they make to the development of our communities and industries.

I hope that the insights these stories provide serve to inspire you as much as they have me.

David Coltman

Deputy Vice Chancellor Pathways and Vocational Education
Swinburne University of Technology

View of Swinburne University of Technology Hawthorn campus (bottom-right) looking towards the city.
Google Earth image © 2016 TerraMetrics

Introduction

It is a happy co-incidence that *Finding Our Place* makes its appearance in 2018, the year that marks the seventieth anniversary of Australia's modern immigration program.

This program, much extended in inclusiveness since its inception, has enabled millions of migrants and refugees from a multitude of countries to settle here permanently.

The benefits are abundantly two-way. An under-populated post-war Australia has increased its number of residents far beyond the natural birth-rate, and in the process has become a vibrant, multicultural society. Families and individuals fleeing danger and displacement on other continents have found a haven, while a chance to improve their standard of living has proved an attractive drawcard to those prepared to leave their home overseas in order to start again.

For whatever reason it is undertaken, migrating across the world is a huge step and challenge. Most newcomers find that much that was previously taken for granted in everyday life in the homeland is in the past. The usual supports of relatives, friends and locality are absent; issues of accommodation, of employment or retraining, or of studying in a different environment need immediate addressing. For many, there is a new language to be learnt, or competency improved. The physical and psychological health of two, or even three, generations of accompanying family is of equal consideration.

All these scenarios unfold against a backdrop of unfamiliar Australian cultural practices and customs, attitudes and assumptions.

The multi-faceted nature of resettlement calls for flexibility and a considerable capacity to adapt. The services and resources provided to new arrivals by government and a range of migrant support organisations are as vital in helping them draw on these qualities as is access to language classes.

All these scenarios unfold against a backdrop of unfamiliar Australian cultural practices and customs, attitudes and assumptions.

There are no roadmaps or timelines to eventually feeling at home here, no longer a stranger and a foreigner. It's a complicated journey, and each person's is different. Over the decades of the migration program, though, some common threads to successful resettling are discernible. Key among them would appear to be the recognition of opportunity when it presents itself, and taking advantage of it.

Such points are well illustrated by the personal accounts of the ten migrants and refugees who generously share their own stories in *Finding Our Place*.

They tell of their backgrounds, why they left, how they felt on arriving here, what they did then, how they are now. Feelings, insights, practicalities and experiences are revealed in the hope that others may find them of interest or assistance.

In navigating their new country, the contributors have had to meld what has gone before, what has been left behind, with their present life. In doing, so they have not only learnt about how to live in Australia but also a great deal about themselves.

As speaking and writing English are fundamental to resettlement, *Finding Our Place* also celebrates the invaluable

role that the Migrant English and General Education departments of Swinburne University of Technology have played in the lives of these current and recent students. Over the years, many thousands of other students have been similarly assisted at Swinburne's three campuses across Melbourne.

The basic program these migrant students access is known as the AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program). The AMEP provides for 510 hours of free English classes. For the majority of the ten interviewees, this learning was further supported by the SEE (Skills for Education and Employment) Program through Centrelink or job agencies, either in Migrant English or General Education. Some students who complete the AMEP go on to undertake further English language and vocational courses at Swinburne, as well as at other institutions.

All the interviewees in this publication attested to how greatly they have benefitted from the commitment of Swinburne's AMEP and General Education teaching staff, whom they characterise as caring, supportive, and well informed. They expressed appreciation that the teachers are able and prepared to give advice, referral and encouragement in relation to courses, further study, careers, various aspects of Australian life, and other issues as required.

Interviewees were also aware of benefitting from the staff's broad knowledge of what assists in the settlement process. The teachers urge all English students to seek voluntary work in parallel with their studies, as this provides work experience, practice in the language, and helps build confidence and networks. For the same reasons, they also recommend that students accept virtually any paid, part-time job they are offered, whether they are planning to enter the same or a different field later on.

What Swinburne teachers contribute to the lives of the students clearly goes far beyond the curriculum.

And whether the students fully recognise their role or not, the presence of volunteer tutors in the classroom adds to the breadth of academic support received as well as helps in forming connections with people from the wider community.

Grateful thanks are due to our interviewees, some of whom have been in Australia for many years, while others have arrived fairly recently. They are: Ta Hay from Myanmar (Karen State), Nazi from Iran, Aida from the Philippines, Bounyouat from Laos, Rebecca from Southern Sudan, Chelsea from Myanmar (Chin State), Ghada from Syria, Maja from Serbia, Wanting from China, and Luis from Chile. Their diversity of backgrounds is a barometer of global situations and circumstances.

What Swinburne teachers contribute to the lives of the students clearly goes far beyond the curriculum.

It is due to the commitment of Serena Seah, at that time Volunteer Tutor Coordinator and ESL teacher at Swinburne's Wantirna campus, that their stories have been published in this form. A volunteer tutor at Swinburne myself, in 2016 I suggested to Serena that I interview some inspiring refugee and migrant students drawn from all the campuses, and make narratives of their journeys.

Serena's encouragement and subsequent actions have led to this suggestion becoming reality. She engaged the interest of colleagues in the concept, organised funding from within and outside the institution, liaised with teachers and students in relation to the project, and worked with the designer, photographer and other professionals to turn the idea into *Finding Our Place*. All this took countless hours, and upskilling in new areas, which Serena carried out in addition to her busy schedule of teaching and other duties.

Susan Powell
Volunteer Tutor

(Note: references to interviewees' class levels for Migrant English are according to the curriculum in use at Swinburne at that time. A new curriculum for Migrant English was adopted by Swinburne in July 2018.)

Swinburne Volunteer Tutor Program

A well-established Volunteer Tutor Program supports the work of the Migrant English and General Education departments of Melbourne's Swinburne University of Technology. There are around 90 active tutors in 2018, based at Swinburne's three campuses.

Trained tutors may elect either to be placed in a class to assist the classroom teacher, to be assigned to an individual student with whom they will meet on a weekly basis, or to facilitate a conversation group of students. Some tutors choose to have more than one placement and may be on campus two or even three days a week.

Over its 25-year history the Volunteer Tutor Program has evolved in response to changes in student demographics, funding bodies, departmental structures and curricula. Consistent throughout this time, however, have been its fundamental aims, the quality of the volunteer cohort and the level of satisfaction with the program reported by staff, students and the tutors themselves.

Thanks are due to two of the long-term coordinators of the program who have provided the information for this snapshot: Serena Seah and former coordinator Barbara Macfarlan.

Aims of the Volunteer Tutor Program

Serena summarises the aim of the program as the provision of support to the learning process in the areas of literacy, numeracy and computer.

Key to the achievement of this aim is the training of the volunteers, which identifies positive ways to interact with the students and stresses the need for patience and active listening. 'A good volunteer', says Serena, 'should respond to the student and encourage the student to talk'.

Tutor training courses are conducted twice per year, each course delivered one morning per week over a three-week period. Included in the training are basic information about the courses in which students are enrolled, and the requirements of the funding bodies which sponsor the students, chiefly the AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program) and SEE (Skills for Education and Employment). On completion of training, tutors are given a campus-specific orientation at their chosen campus prior to taking up a placement.

Barbara emphasises the importance of the training in building a sense of community and belonging for the tutors. These connections are maintained through regular communication, invitations to campus events and Professional Development activities, and an end-of-year function.

A profile of our volunteers

Strongly represented in the Volunteer Tutor Program are people drawn from the local area who have transitioned out of paid employment and are seeking a meaningful way to contribute their time and skills to a worthwhile cause. Increasingly, tutors may be of migrant background themselves, and thus well placed to share their 'adjustment journey' with our migrant students. Some of these are skilled migrants with overseas teaching qualifications who value the opportunity to gain experience of working in an Australian classroom. Our own high-level students are also encouraged to become volunteer tutors.

Evaluation of the Volunteer Tutor Program

Feedback about the Swinburne Volunteer Tutor Program is received from teachers, students and the tutors themselves. As reported by Serena, for teachers, the help of the tutors is 'immeasurable': once used to having a tutor in class it can be difficult for teachers to adapt should a tutor be absent. For students at lower levels of English, the distinction between a

tutor and a teacher is not readily understood, with students viewing tutors as 'part of the team' which provides learning opportunities. In higher-level English classes, where tutors participate with students in role-plays, students come to appreciate the specific contribution tutors make in providing interaction practice to build confidence in engaging with the wider Australian community.

Many positive comments emerge from the tutors' own appraisals of the program. One tutor described her contact in class as a 'moving experience' and said she was 'grateful to be included'; another remarked 'it is always rewarding to see the smiles and appreciation from the students'. Others highlight what they have learnt through their association with our students: 'I have a greater perspective after listening and speaking with students from different countries and backgrounds'. Tutors come to realise that the welfare of the students is at the forefront of the teachers' work. Relationships between tutors and teachers based on mutual regard and respect grow over time and are much valued.

It is significant that it was a Swinburne tutor of long standing who conceived the original idea for this collection of stories. I congratulate Susan Powell not only for her skills as an interviewer and writer but also for her determination in bringing these personal accounts of courage and resilience to a wider audience.

The Swinburne Volunteer Tutor Program offers flexibility, with participants free to make a commitment according to their availability. Expressions of interest are welcome.

Susan Bradley

Swinburne Volunteer Tutor Program Coordinator and ESL teacher



Volunteer tutors help in classrooms across the three campuses.



TA HAY HTOO

Ask thirty-two-year-old Ta Hay – who in 2014-16 studied Migrant English at Swinburne – where he comes from or where he grew up and his reply gives a glimpse into a world and a way of life that is unimaginable to most Australians.

Ta Hay's family are Karen people, belonging to the persecuted Christian ethnic minority whose home is Karen State in the south-east of Myanmar (known as Burma until independence from Britain in 1948). Since independence, the Karens, along with many of the dozens of other ethnic groups within Myanmar, have been threatened with the loss of their identity and autonomy for protesting against the ruling political regime. The protests of these groups are met with armed conflict, discrimination and violation of human rights (torture, rape and forced labour).

Ethnic minority

Where they can, after government attacks on their villages, the Karens, who are largely subsistence farmers, attempt to rebuild their homes and re-establish their traditional life. While doing so, they are defended by the Karen National Liberation Army with its ageing arsenal of weapons. The resulting large number of unexploded landmines in Karen State remain a huge hazard to all.

As a child, Ta Hay, his parents and his two younger brothers frequently had to flee the fighting and hide out in the nearby jungle – the Htoo family was particularly vulnerable due to the proximity of their land to the Karen National Liberation Army's headquarters. In the dense vegetation, villagers are typically on the run for months at a time, moving from one area to another as quietly as possible. Along the way, food is scarce as crops have to be abandoned, and noisy animals are killed for the risk they present.

Even in periods of relative greater stability, meeting basic needs is a struggle for the rural Karen people. Some of the needs go totally unmet: health care is virtually non-existent and education is only for those who can pay for it. Ta Hay wanted to go to school but his parents could not afford to send him.



'There has been help all around me.'

Escape to Thailand

When he was eleven, Ta Hay and his family made the highly dangerous crossing of the Salween River, which runs along the Burmese border with Thailand, to take refuge in Mae Ra Moe camp on the Thai side. Mae Ra Moe is one of nine such camps in the region set up for displaced Karen people. Some of these settlements are very large (up to 50,000 residents) and long established; started in 1995 and now with 18,000 residents, Mae Ra Moe is one of the smaller and more recent ones. The camps, which exist with the reluctant agreement of the Thai Government, are guarded by a form of para military forces.

The displaced Karens are not permitted to go outside the perimeter of their particular camp, to earn a living or to learn Thai. In order to re-inforce the feeling of impermanence, they are allowed to build only bamboo houses with roofs of thatched leaves.

Due to its remoteness, there is no electricity at Mae Ra Moe, which means, among other things, a lack of direct means of communication with the outside world. Young residents receive an education to Year 10 level, after which there is no provision for them. Adult residents spend most of their time growing food and tending animals. Basic supplies such as oil and rice and some other goods are provided by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) through the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium, which administers Mae Ra Moe and the other camps.

Although restricted and deprived in many ways, life in these circumstances is at least relatively safe and stable. After their arrival, Ta Hay and his brothers were finally able to go to school, although to Ta Hay's great disappointment he had to leave at the end of Grade 6 due to his deteriorating vision. His eyesight problem was the result of earlier contracting measles; like the other children in Karen State, he had not been vaccinated, nor was there appropriate medical treatment available when it was later realised in the camp that his eyes had been affected by the disease. His vision has continued to worsen over the years. Today, Ta Hay is deemed to be legally

blind; in due course, medical experts say, he will become totally blind.

No longer at school, Ta Hay spent his time helping with farming and raising piglets which he sold to help support the family, especially his brothers so that they could continue to attend school. For Ta Hay, as for the other young men, while he remained in the camp there was no point in having any personal goals or ambitions. On the upside, however, in 2007 he married Eh Paw, who had also spent many years in Mae Ra Moe; they went on to have a daughter, Shee Eh, now aged eleven.

The displaced Karens are not permitted to go outside the perimeter of their particular camp, to earn a living or to learn Thai.

In 2012 the extended family (Ta Hay's parents, his wife and child and his brothers) made the momentous decision to start again elsewhere, in the West. Through the UNHCR one brother was accepted into the United States, while the rest of the group were told they were going to Australia. Although camp officials were supposed to be preparing them to some degree for their new life, in actuality the emigrants were told very little (they weren't even shown a map), and some of that information was irrelevant – Ta Hay recalls mention of barbecues and beer! The Htoos could not possibly have conceived how different every aspect of their new home would be from anything they had previously known.

Another universe

The new experiences began the moment the family boarded the plane in Bangkok in late 2012 for the flight to Melbourne. 'From the beginning,' says Ta Hay, 'it was as though I had been re-born... It was another universe. There was so much to learn.'

Re-settlement presented great challenges for them all (as Ta Hay puts it, 'For quite a while it seemed like we had climbed the wrong tree'), and especially so for someone in his situation (it was only when he came here that he received a proper diagnosis and prognosis concerning his vision). Several years on, though, it is clear that everyone in the household, which now includes Ta Hay and Eh Paw's second daughter, four-year-old Sophia, and Eh Paw's brother and his wife, is making a successful transition. Learning English – which none of the newcomers knew before – has been fundamental to this.

'Before I came to Australia I thought my life here would be the same as it was in the camp,' says Ta Hay. Given his experiences there, he assumed that he would not have the opportunity to resume his education...nor could he have dreamt of a future in which he might be employed, and in the area of his skills and interests. His expectations have been turned on their head. To his surprise and gratification, 'There has been help all around me'.

He was accepted into Migrant English classes at beginner level at Swinburne, where supportive teachers perceived his potential and helped him, often going out of their way to do so. From the start he was provided with classroom integration aides who worked closely with him and continued to do so until he had completed Level 3. Workers from organisations which assist new migrants, especially refugees, and a range of other mentors have all played their part.

On arrival, Ta Hay's parents and wife also attended English classes at Swinburne; his mother still does and his wife plans to return after a break. Although, like most of the other students, they have found learning the language very difficult, they now have sufficient knowledge of it for day-to-day life.

Available assistance

At the commencement of his studies, when confronted with a computer he did not know how to use, Ta Hay devised his own creative code for typing. For reading he used a magnifying glass, which gave him bad headaches and made him dizzy. But such

was his determination that he persevered with these means of learning until Swinburne purchased JAWS (a software which turns type into speech) for his use on a class computer, and for which he received training from Vision Australia. His progress accelerated when grants from a community service organisation and a Swinburne Achievement Award enabled him to purchase JAWS for home use. He now uses the software to read and to surf the internet, among other activities.

Thanks to a further grant from a different community service club, which was approached on his behalf by a Swinburne teacher, Ta Hay was able to purchase an iPhone and to receive training in usage from Vision Australia. The device has apps that enable him to navigate and negotiate much in everyday life.

The degree of human and high tech assistance he has received would go nowhere without Ta Hay's own motivation, hard work and ambition. His initial goal was to learn to communicate effectively in written and spoken forms of English and this he has achieved. He subsequently undertook a course with Vision Australia in the area of his greatest talent, woodwork, hoping to go on to make a career as a carpenter or cabinet-maker. Unfortunately, this is now looking unlikely due to his diminishing vision.

Another of Ta Hay's interests is gardening, and currently he is working on trial at a nursery that provides experience to people with disabilities. He hopes a permanent part-time job will come out of this. A dream is to become an interpreter and to this end he keeps up his English via the internet and has plans to return to Swinburne for further English studies.

Visiting the camp

Ta Hay has recently fulfilled another dream: earlier this year he, his wife, their two daughters and his mother returned to Thailand for six weeks to visit the camp they had lived in prior to coming to Australia. He discovered that his family was one of quite a number of people now returning for short periods

to visit. Many of them are former residents who have settled in the United States.

'It was a difficult journey emotionally', says Ta Hay, 'but I am so happy that I made it. I was able to spend time with my grandmother and to re-meet old friends. I also enjoyed seeing the coconut and mango trees that I'd planted years ago fully grown.'

'I had to re-introduce myself to people as they didn't recognise me at first. I'm now older and also no longer very, very thin! When I saw the children in the camp it reminded me of how I used to be and my earlier life there...'

While camp residents were happy to learn about Ta Hay's lifestyle in Australia, their own living conditions and future outlooks have not improved. 'I felt very sorry for them,' he says. 'They're still very poor and the same restrictions are there. The way of life in the camp is still difficult – shortage of food and other basics, and very limited opportunities to improve the situation. Many people hope to emigrate to the West but they face a wait of many years, and may not be accepted after all. For some others, their aspiration is to return to Myanmar, a move that is being encouraged by various support agencies.'

Although they enjoyed the people contact in the camps they visited, Ta Hay's young daughters did not find the environment appealing. Says their father, 'They were confronted by the lack of appliances they are now used to...no fridge, no rice cooker, the lack of TV, and by things like people having to make a fire in order to cook, and then eating the food sitting on the floor.'

The family saw something of Bangkok on their way back to Australia, the first occasion they have been tourists anywhere (and a place far more to the girls' liking). In a country where refugee Karen people are barely tolerated as residents, and punished if they go beyond the confines of the camps, Ta Hay appreciated the freedom, safety and novelty of this time spent in Thailand as an Australian citizen.



NAZANIN RIAHI

Until Nazanin, or Nazi as she calls herself, arrived in Australia from Iran in August 2013, she had not realised what a challenge she was facing. Highly educated and sociable, she was starting again in this country knowing no-one apart from her husband and without speaking a word of English. Nor was she probably going to be able to do the kind of work she was used to.

Nazi was born in Tehran in 1978, the oldest of three girls in a comfortable, middle-class family which highly values education and professional qualifications. Nazi's degree, from a university in the capital, is in graphic design, the field in which she went on to build a career.

Leaving home

At twenty-six Nazi married Ali, and over the following decade she and her husband, who lectured in materials engineering, lived and worked in Tehran. Her younger twin sisters and her mother still live in their home city and 'When we weren't working we used to spend most of our free time with our families,' she says. Despite this closeness, the couple decided to migrate to Australia 'because we knew we'd have a better future there'. The only time they'd left Iran previously had been to go on holiday to India.

Prior to their arrival in 2013 on a working visa, Ali had obtained a research position on the post-doctoral staff at Swinburne's Department of Civil Engineering. Soon after, he and Nazi found an attractive apartment close to the campus, where they still live. Despite these externals falling satisfactorily into place, Nazi's own journey to feeling settled and happy has been an individual one, with some unexpected elements. One of the first hurdles she faced was that, although her husband spoke excellent English, she spoke no English, only Persian. Once Ali started work, she was on her own. As she puts it, 'I felt like a child. It was very hard.'

Feeling lost

Four years on, Nazi summarises her first months in Australia as 'both challenging and interesting. It was only when we actually arrived that it really impacted on me that we knew nobody...we had no friends, family or home here. Shopping and so much else were mysteries! I started to feel very lonely. I like to have a lot of friends but it takes time to make them. I wanted to communicate with people but I couldn't.'

Nazi is grateful to her mother in Iran for keeping her spirits up in that initial period. 'My mother has raised her daughters alone



'I have freedom because I can speak English.'

since I was twenty and she has always pushed and supported us. I would share with her how upset and isolated I felt and she'd tell me, "Don't worry, you can do it! You'll be fine. Say to yourself every day that you can do it." She helped by encouraging me to believe that the longer I was here, the easier and better it would get. She was right.'

'As time went on, although I was still very unsettled, I started to enjoy life in Melbourne, especially going out with my husband and seeing new places. It didn't matter on those occasions about my lack of English.' From the beginning, Nazi had wanted to attend classes 'but as we were not yet permanent residents only private English courses were open to me and they were very expensive'.

So she took matters into her own hands: 'I decided to start teaching myself by watching children's programs on TV. They were easier to follow than other programs, and gradually I could understand what was said. I became very familiar with *Bananas in Pyjamas*, *Sesame Street* and *Postman Pat*! I also read many children's books and stories.'

After two years the couple were granted permanent residency, which meant that Nazi was eligible for 510 hours of free English classes. 'I attended Swinburne because it was so close to home and because my husband worked there. In 2016 I was placed in Level 1. This was a good experience: my teachers were very supportive and I am very grateful to them.'

'I enjoyed studying alongside students from many countries – China, Africa, South America – and I started making friends. I found I liked learning English formally although it was not easy for me, even at this first stage.'

'I worked hard in class and out of it, including going to the cinema quite a lot in order to hear more of the spoken language.' Nazi was soon promoted to Level 2. Despite the progress she had made, she found the higher level 'too challenging. I became uncomfortable and confused...I think I was put up too soon.' But rather than losing spirit, she worked harder, which paid off because in 2017 Nazi moved up to Level 3. 'As my English

improved I really started to enjoy what I could do with it, including writing stories drawn from imagination.'

Some fortuitous voluntary work also assisted her integration. 'Three years ago I went to a hairdressing salon as a customer and while I was there I chatted to the manager, who was a very long-time migrant from Laos.'

'We got on well and she invited me to come to her salon every day and talk to the customers to practise my English while she taught me some basic hairdressing skills (although I didn't intend to become a hairdresser). I accepted her offer and went there daily.'

'As the manager and I had no common language, we were forced to speak English to each other. It was a funny situation because she was very talkative – talk, talk, talk – and as I couldn't always understand her, I didn't say much in return. She told me she thought that I was very quiet but I told her that in my country I was considered talkative! All this practice was very good for me and I was lucky to have the opportunity.'

Work, study, leisure

By the third semester of 2017 Nazi was ready to apply for the job she subsequently obtained in a busy kebab shop in Hawthorn. She worked there for some months, recalling with pride that she became proficient enough to manage the shop alone. Although the work was totally different from anything she had done before, Nazi was surprised to find that the business was very much to her taste.

'I cooked and served different food from what I was used to in Iran and I liked that. I made all sorts of things on the menu and I also made coffee, which was foreign to me as in Iran we drink tea.' (Early this year Nazi did a barista course to enhance her skills in this area.) 'We had a wide range of customers, Australian and from overseas, and often they had very strong accents. Dealing with this led to my growing confidence in English and in relating to different kinds of people.'

Nazi's main study focus this year is again at Swinburne, working

towards a further qualification in English. She has left the kebab shop, and is doing a course in hospitality while working on placement in a coffee shop. 'At some stage in the future I hope to do an interior design course and then to find work as a designer. In the meantime, I'm fine with what I'm doing now.'

Nazi's creative side finds some outlet through designing and crafting a range of items – like brightly coloured decorated boxes, framed pictures, tealight and candle holders – from pistachio shells, egg shells and cement. These she sells on e-bay.

There is no doubt that she misses her mother and siblings. 'There are many differences between the life we knew in our country and our life here now, and not seeing my family is one of the main ones.' Late last year, however, there was a reunion. Ali, now a senior lecturer and researcher in civil engineering at Swinburne, had an overseas conference to attend so Nazi went to Turkey, where she met up with her mother and sisters and Ali's parents. Ali later joined them there.

'There are lots of kebab shops in Turkey,' says Nazi, 'and they are very professional. I learnt a lot by visiting quite a number and sampling their food and looking at the way they did things. When I was by myself on these travels I was very pleased that I was able to handle exchanging money, checking out of hotels and catching taxis. I also learnt about different cultures.'

'Australia,' reflects Nazi, 'is a very nice country. I am very happy here now. There is freedom, and I also have freedom because I can speak English and do anything alone, like going shopping or to the doctor. These days I have lots of friends from Iran, which makes it even better.'

'Changing countries is a huge decision. Some things about life in Australia still seem strange but they are not a problem. I can manage.'



AIDA CASSAR

In the nearly thirty years that Aida has spent in this country after leaving her own, she has benefitted greatly from the study and employment opportunities she has found in Australia. Now approaching her mid-fifties, she is about to embark on yet another change of direction, nursing, towards which she gained a diploma at Swinburne in 2017.

A Swinburne course in Migrant English helped Aida to obtain good results after a previous failed attempt at the same diploma. Now studying for her bachelor's degree in nursing, she is excited about her future.

Aida was born in 1964 in the Philippines, on the long, narrow, densely populated island of Cebu. Her home town is Ronda, which she describes as 'tiny' at the time she grew up there. In financial terms, her family was very poor, her mother working as a housemaid to provide necessities for her six children. It was through the help of her siblings that Aida managed to further her education. Although an older sister tried to persuade her to become a nurse, she chose instead to study for her Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering degree, graduating in 1985 from the University of the Visayas in Cebu.

Resettling in Melbourne

'I feel very fortunate that we children were all able to avoid the fate of many Filipinos who could only survive by working very hard for low wages in largely unskilled overseas jobs, usually leaving their families behind,' says Aida. 'Apart from two of my siblings who are still in the Philippines, the rest of us have left though our own choice for greener pastures abroad and we are all doing well.'

Despite her qualification in civil engineering Aida was never to work in that profession. She found it more lucrative, and it suited her better, to go into hospitality instead, at a five-star hotel in Manila. 'I was trained on the job for what I was doing and I became good at it, winning awards when I achieved set targets.' In 1988 she met an Australian man who was a guest at the hotel; in due course he became her husband...and he is the reason that she went on to make an unexpected new life in Australia. Says Aida, 'My husband brought all his family over from Melbourne to Manila for the wedding, and we've got on very well ever since'.

In respect to employment opportunities, the Australia to which Aida emigrated in 1989 at the age of twenty-four was enviably different from today. 'It was so easy to find work then. There were lots of jobs, including in factories or in corner shops that have now disappeared. You could pick and choose. My first position



was with Australia Post, at the South-East Mail Centre; it was waiting for me as my husband already worked there. Over time I progressed from night sorter to leading hand. As part of the job I was also a statistical officer.' An advantage of her steady employment was that Aida was able to send money home to help her family.

While her way was smoothed by being able to speak English on arrival, it was American English, a reflection of the dominant influence of the United States on the Philippines since the Second World War. 'Although it might appear,' she says, 'that what I spoke was much the same as Australian English, it wasn't. I managed OK for many years here but my English really wasn't good enough for some of the jobs I was going into and for what I wanted to do in future.' Her proficiency in Australian English became 'a challenge', and that is why she enrolled at Swinburne a few years ago.

A diversity of directions

After Aida had been working at Australia Post for ten years, she and her husband decided to buy a Post Office licence, and together they subsequently ran, for some six-and-a-half years, a post office in the outer suburb of Endeavour Hills. 'We had several people working for us there; it was always very busy,' says Aida. Thanks to her business acumen, over a period of three years she doubled the sales revenue. By 2006, however, the couple was ready for something different, and sold the business. They could also see significant technological changes on the horizon for post offices and wished to avoid these developments.

The change of direction meant that Aida was now able to fulfil her dream – owning her own café. In fact, she went on to own and run two, in between working in the kitchen at Dandenong Hospital, preparing and serving meals to patients. Her first café, located in an office complex in Notting Hill, was a 'run-away success' and sold at a healthy profit, but the second, in

'I gradually started to believe in my own capacity.'

Dandenong South, was, she says, 'the hardest of all my jobs'. She stuck it out for over six years, almost losing the business before pulling it out of disaster and then managing to sell. During this stressful period, Aida's husband 'fell ill and almost died'. It was definitely time to move on.

With her husband recovered, Aida was ready for another challenge: 'I wanted to test myself to see how far I could go. I didn't want to rely on my husband as I had in the past; every time there was a problem my husband would fix it for me. In many respects I hadn't been independent...I could work very hard and well but I had no confidence, and that had been the case all my life. People think I am full of confidence, but I'm not! In addition, I had become aware that, although I had shown I could do many things, I actually had no paperwork. Because of that I'd had to accept lower jobs and poor pay. I wanted to change this situation.'

She may lack confidence but Aida is, by her own admission, a planner: 'I always plan and find things out so I know what I'm doing. I want to make informed choices. There's always a Plan B.'

So she read, watched the news, talked to others and generally tried to assess what career opportunities were open to her and worth pursuing. 'I realised that the health area was the way to go and decided to become a nurse, as my sister had suggested long ago. The path ahead wasn't clear to me at that point but the idea was there in my head now. Gradually I started to believe in my own capacity.'

As a cautious next step, Aida went to work in the aged care area. The training, which she did at another institution in 2015, was 'short and very basic. However it enabled me to see that I could cope with the levels of study necessary for nursing. I knew I was facing a big step but I told myself, "I'm on the tail-end of possibility so if I don't take this challenge now I never will. I'll just get older, and doing what I want will get harder and harder; in fact, it will be impossible. So I need to focus on getting a nursing qualification." Along the way, from 2014 to the present, she has kept the income flowing by also working in hospitality in Mulgrave.

Twists and turns

Although Aida enjoys her current aged care job she finds it frustratingly restrictive. 'I'm only permitted to do certain things and not others that I want to...some things are out of my scope. I want to help but am not qualified to do so.'

This situation has made the prospect of nursing all the more attractive. But when Aida inquired as to the first step she discovered that her academic qualifications in the Philippines were too out of date for her to be accepted for a Bachelor of Nursing degree. 'So I did the nursing diploma at Swinburne, which qualifies me as an Endorsed Enrolled Nurse. I wanted to study somewhere reputable and I'd heard that this was a good course which would see me well-accepted.'

There is a back story: Aida's initial attempt at the diploma was unsuccessful. 'I felt so stupid! I'd been in Australia for so long and had worked in a number of different areas and had spoken English all that time. But I wasn't quick enough in providing answers during my studies as the terminology was sometimes different from what I'd grown up with. Until then I hadn't realised that I was lagging behind, due to this issue with words and their contexts.'

It was her at husband's suggestion that she enrolled for the Swinburne course in Certificate III in General Education for adults, concentrating on English and numeracy for migrants, which also included computer skills. When she re-sat the Diploma of Nursing she received excellent results, gaining several distinctions and high distinctions.

Based on this success, Aida received a first-round offer from a university and is currently enrolled there to do a Bachelor of Nursing while still working in aged care. She hopes in the long term to work in a hospital.

Although her initial failure in the diploma was upsetting, she says that 'It didn't put me off. I reflected on where I'd gone wrong, then tried again. There will always be blockages and difficulties: I was determined to get past what happened.'

'I also realise from what had happened that I need to talk more, to practise my Australian English. Now I'm really doing so on the job, speaking whenever I can and asking questions.'

Regarding language, Aida's advice for new settlers runs on similar lines: 'Get as much practice as possible in speaking English at every opportunity. I found YouTube clips a very useful way to gain an idea of what happens in interviews and other situations, and I practised based on these scenarios.' Even now, she says, when under pressure her own English can still slip, and she still lacks confidence in a number of other areas.

Seasoned advice

Aida knows well from her own experiences that 'It isn't easy for anybody to make a new life. With all my advantages I've still found it hard...knowing where to go, how to do things, making connections and friends, finding social support. It all took time, and I had my husband to help. It was very lonely for me at first but once you are working and you accept your new situation you're on your way.'

'One thing I realised early that helped me is that, in my own culture as well as those in other parts of Asia, you are raised to be submissive, to know your place. It's to do with power. You wait for someone to tell you that you are good, or good enough.'

'You're not encouraged to sell yourself, as you are in Australia and other Western countries, to recognise your own good points. It was a big lesson for me that when going for a job here you need to show keenness and enthusiasm. Over time I have changed my approach a lot and I'm getting the results.'

In relation to work, she advises: 'Take whatever comes your way, even if you don't want to do it. Who knows, you might like it or it might lead to something else.' Aida did dishwashing when nothing else was on offer.

'My time here has shown me that Australia is really good if you know how to pick yourself up. You may be cast down but keep trying, keep pushing. There's generally another pathway.'



BOUNYOUAT PHOUMALA

When Bounyouat, one of five children, was born in 1954 in Laos in South-East Asia, the country had long been part of the extensive French empire in that region. That same year, after many struggles, the colony gained full independence from France, and a constitutional monarchy.

In his late twenties Bounyouat was to escape from Laos, fleeing a highly repressive regime: the local Communist Party, the Pathet Lao, which had taken power a few years previously.

At the time Bounyouat grew up there, Laos was almost entirely an agricultural society. It remains the same today: most of the population of several million still live in, and cultivate, the valleys of the Mekong River and its tributaries. Like everyone else in their village, Bouyouat's family were rice farmers.

A turbulent history

Sadly, Bounyouat's mother died when he was about four. 'I don't remember her,' he says. 'I've really only got two memories of her, and in them I can't recall her face.' Following his mother's death, he and his siblings were raised by their grandmother. Their father remarried and moved away, and had a new family.

Laos' independence from France in the mid-1950s was followed by much bloodshed and fighting. These conflicts originated from within Laos and outside it, and one of them ended the monarchy.

The country's highly strategic geographic position – it is bordered by China, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam – has always been a major factor in its turbulent history, and this was again particularly the case in the 1960s and 1970s. In those decades, both Laos and neighbouring Cambodia were drawn closely into the war between the United States and North Vietnam, with devastating effects on their people and economies.

During the Vietnam War, parts of Laos were invaded by North Vietnam in order to set up a complex system of supply lines (the Ho Chi Minh Trail) through to South Vietnam. In attempts to disrupt this passage of men and materials, the United States bombarded Laos from the air with exceptional ferocity: it is estimated that more bombs were dropped on the country during this period than elsewhere during the whole of World War II. (Some 80 million of them failed to explode and today lie in the ground, rendering vast areas of land impossible to cultivate. They also kill or maim dozens of Laotians every year.)

In 1975, backed by North Vietnam, the local Communist Party,



the Pathet Lao, seized power. The Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed and 'socialist transformation' of the economy launched, with dire results for agricultural output.

Today, Laos is one of the world's few remaining socialist states that openly espouses communism. Its one-party socialist republic is governed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

A mixed education

Bounyouat's life in the countryside came to an end with the completion of primary school. 'For my secondary education I was sent to the capital city, Vientiane, so that I could attend a military high school there. I lived with my cousin and his family and they supported me. As the military high school at that time belonged to the French Government we were taught in French, which I'd learnt at primary school. Everything at that time was in French. We were taught English at the military high school but were held back through lack of opportunity to speak the language.'

'In my last year of high school the change of political regime occurred and the communists took over. I was forced to spend the next five years with the military in the north of Laos. During this time the Army tried to brainwash us: we were only young men so we were easier to control and influence than the older people. We were also easier to control because they isolated us.'

Bounyouat had his own views of the new regime. 'I didn't like it. But I had to keep quiet or I would have been jailed or killed as I'd seen happen to others. If the authorities objected to you, there was no reasoning, no arguing, they would get rid of you. I knew they wanted to do this to me and that they were trying to provoke me.'

'I hoped there would be some possibilities for starting again.'

Escape

In 1981 came his chance to leave the country. This occurred when he was sent to work in a town close to the Mekong River, which for much of its length forms the Laotian border with Thailand. Here he asked himself, 'Why should I stay, where there's no freedom?'

He could only think of reasons why he should leave. So he waited until dark one night, about 7pm, and went to the river bank where he took off his clothes, put them in a plastic bag along with an English textbook, and clutching the bag, swam across the Mekong. There was no time for second thoughts or turning back: 'I had to keep going or I would be caught. Nearby patrols on both sides were armed and they were ready to shoot.'

After 'twenty or thirty minutes' in the water he reached the Thai side, got out and started walking, not knowing where he was going or what he was going to do. 'I came to a big farm where I spent the night. I was found by the farmer, who spoke Lao as that part of Thailand used to belong to Laos; we had the same culture. He directed me to the local police station, where I stayed a few days. In the short time I was there, more escapees from Laos arrived, singly or with their families.'

In fact, from 1979, some hundreds of thousands of Laotians fled their country for Thailand, due to dislike of their government's ideology and because of prevailing severe shortages of food.

'I had to keep going or I would be caught.'

In making his own crossing, Bounyouat had no long-term plan. 'I just wanted to get away from Laos and my life there. I didn't really think ahead although I hoped there would be some possibilities for starting again somewhere else. I would have gone wherever I was accepted. I never expected that I would end up in Australia, or that I would go overseas at all.'

His home for the following year and nine months was a Thai refugee camp. From there he applied through the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to emigrate to the United States, but as he had an aunt and uncle in Sydney he was told that Australia was where he would be resettled. 'I had learnt something about Australia in high school but I'd forgotten everything apart from some very basic information. I did know that it had a good reputation.'

Bounyouat arrived in Sydney in September 1983. 'I came here by myself and without telling my family in Laos. At that period it was very hard to contact them, but later I was able to do so.' He had little time to adjust to life in a major Western city before starting work; this process, however, was not as difficult as it might have otherwise been, due to the influence of the French in his home country.

Marriage and a move

In Sydney, Bounyouat soon found a job in a factory, where he was employed for the following three years. During that time he met his future wife, who is from Laos: 'She also hadn't liked the regime and had escaped. We'd actually been in the same camp in Thailand but we didn't meet there. She had moved to Melbourne with her family so that's where we were married.'

Melbourne has been his home ever since. 'I immediately found work here, again in a factory. I stayed with that particular business until the factory closed down a couple of years ago. I did the same job for thirty years, moving to different sections.'

Less than ten years after he arrived in Australia with nothing, Bounyouat was able to buy a house. It is still home to him and his wife and their two teenage sons, both of whom are working. 'I never expected to be able to have my own home, I couldn't see how I could do it, especially on one low wage at the time. But we lived simply and saved as much as possible. We were also able to buy because a relative lent us some money.'

Bounyouat is keen to be a good example educationally to his children and young relatives: 'I want them to know that

education is very important'. Now in his sixties he has enrolled at Swinburne, where he is currently studying English and also attending night classes in order to acquire a Certificate IV in a skill new to him, welding.

'The English I learnt long ago at military school in Laos was very poor because we couldn't practise speaking. I picked up a bit more over the years in the factory. But now that I have the opportunity I want to learn it properly, and to be able to communicate well. At Swinburne I'm also learning how to use a computer and other skills. In the future I hope to take my study of English further and get a diploma. I'd like to do more public speaking (I spoke once at a Toastmasters event) and to write a book about my life.'

Keen to remain in the workforce, Bounyouat has in recent months commenced a new factory job, in welding. 'I don't like depending on government assistance,' he says. 'I'm used to people working when older, and also looking after others in the family while they can. That's why I'm doing the course at Swinburne. I started it with the aim of getting a job, or if that didn't happen, doing some voluntary work involving welding.'

On reflection

Bounyouat hasn't been back to Laos since he arrived in Australia. 'I know it's better there than it was; economically things have improved, there are opportunities these days for people that I never had. When I was growing up under the French only the rich succeeded and nobody cared about the poor. Generally, for people like me, after school finished there was nowhere to go, no further education. There was nothing to do except stay home and help our parents in the village.'

He says, however, that 'if the communists hadn't taken over I would have stayed on and made the best of it. I might have had some choice and been trained.'

'Now it's thirty-five years later and I've lived in Australia longer than I did in Laos. I've made a happy and successful life in this country and that's enough.'



REBECCA MAYOL

By any measure, the Australian childhoods of Rebecca's three sons and two daughters could hardly be further removed from their mother's own early life in South Sudan. 'They are lucky to have me,' says Rebecca. 'I can give them what I didn't have. They are happy. My story was tragic but what I can provide for my children gives me joy and makes me feel happy too.'



Rebecca is raising her family, all of whom were born in this country, on her own. Earlier in 2018 she did a course in General Education at Swinburne with the future intention of under-taking a course in childcare there; for now, she works in the aged care area. One might think that her home life provides Rebecca with more than enough interaction with young children. 'I love working with them,' she says. 'It is my gift', and she wants to make it her career.

Early life

The lives and fates of Rebecca and her family of origin are a reflection of the long and complex history of Sudan.

A large, land-locked country in Africa, crossed by both the White Nile and the Blue Nile, Sudan was, for many centuries, under foreign occupation. In the period from 1898 to 1956 it was governed jointly by the Egyptians and the British; in the latter year the Sudanese achieved independence. The following decades saw the outbreak of civil wars of great savagery, fuelled by religious, cultural, geographical and other factors. For families living in both the north and south of the country, these conflicts had shattering effects.

One such civil war commenced when Rebecca, born in 1980, was only three years old and it wasn't until 2005 that a peace agreement was made. Six years later, in 2011, what is now the Republic of South Sudan (Christian and Animist in religion) came into existence, bringing independence from the north, now known as the Republic of the Sudan (and Muslim in religion). In 2013 violent conflicts within and between the republics broke out again, and continue to the present. These have left, in some areas, millions of people in need of humanitarian aid and hundreds of thousands experiencing displacement from their homes.

'I did have a terrible life but it's OK now.'

Growing up

Rebecca was born in Juba in South Sudan, one of the many children of her late father, who had been in the military since the 1970s. He was married three times: his first wife had four children; his second, Rebecca's mother, had six; and his third wife had one. Rebecca lost her mother at the age of three and was subsequently sent to her grandmother to be raised in her village. Like her younger sister, Rebecca doesn't remember her mother, an enduring sadness. 'I try, but I can't remember her,' she says. 'I know nothing about her. I know about her favourite food, I know about her clothes, but I didn't know her. I was so young there is nothing there to recall.'

Like her father, Rebecca's oldest brother was in the military. 'He was a child soldier,' she says. 'He went to war aged fourteen. The civil war that broke out in 1983 divided our family; some members were in North Sudan and some in South Sudan. At that time I didn't know some of my older brothers and sisters and, in any case, we didn't know where they were or what had happened to them.'

Rebecca and her family belong to the Christian Dinka community, the largest ethnic tribe in South Sudan. Members cultivate traditional crops for food and to sell, and also raise cattle, which are important for cultural reasons. Over the years, many thousands of both Dinkas and non-Dinkas in the South have been massacred by North Sudanese forces for their beliefs and way of life.

Like her father, Rebecca's oldest brother was in the military. 'He was a child soldier,' she says. 'He went to war aged fourteen.'

Recalls Rebecca, 'War came again in 1991, against the Dinkas in the south. The other side killed my grandmother and my father.'

Now orphaned, Rebecca was cared for from the age of ten by her aunt and uncle. At that stage she was still unaware of what had happened to some of her siblings and other family members. 'Three of my brothers were soldiers in the south and we had no contact with them. For years we didn't know if they were dead or alive.'

Of that turbulent period Rebecca particularly remembers 1992. 'It was a time of great hardship...I lost my father, and we were short of food. We lost our cattle and everything else. We couldn't believe a couple of years later that we had survived. Things got a bit better then in various ways and connections were made with my siblings. We were able to sort out who had died and who was alive, and where they were. One brother was in Germany.'

Refuge in Kenya

Concerned for their future survival, in 1996 Rebecca and her two younger brothers left Sudan for neighbouring Kenya, in order to take refuge in a large camp in the town of Kakuma. The camp had been established four years previously by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) for Sudanese people displaced by war or persecution. (In 2018 it contains over 185,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from many countries in Africa.)

The semi-arid desert setting of Kakuma is unpleasant and unhealthy, characterised by dust storms, high temperatures, poisonous spiders, snakes, and outbreaks of malaria and cholera. Housed in thatched-roof huts, tents and shelters made of mud, residents were not permitted to move outside the camp for work or education, nor was there at that time a living to be made inside the camp. The only hope for individual change for the better was to be accepted for resettlement by a country in the West.

Rebecca lived in Kakuma for about ten years, she thinks – from her mid-teens to her mid-twenties. As a child in South Sudan, she had gone to school and learnt to read and write Dinka. 'In the camp, I went back to school in order to learn English, and we were also taught something about Australia.'

'One of my achievements over this period was to help bring up my younger siblings and some of our cousins. One of the cousins is now in Canada and doing very well. I'm proud of the role I played in his life and others.'

'In 1998, when I had been at Kakuma about two years, I told my brother that one day I would go to the West. He said no, but I kept it in my mind.' Some years later, she approached UNHCR representatives about moving to Australia. 'I had a lot of interviews with them and medical and other checks. If something was wrong they would not accept me. But they did, and I finally came here in 2005, with my partner, whom I had met in the camp.'

Rebecca had missed not having a mother at Kakuma. 'That was very hard,' she says. In her culture, being a woman without a mother presents particular difficulties. 'If your husband's family treats you badly, or you have another problem, your mother can support you with advice and in practical ways. If you don't have your mother you have no one to help you. I felt that very much in different situations.'

The move to Australia

Rebecca and her then-partner arrived in Melbourne to begin new and very different lives. They subsequently had five children here, the four oldest of whom are now at primary school. On a personal front, however, recent years have not been peaceful ones for Rebecca. Family violence and other issues related to her partner have caused major practical problems and much emotional distress: she lists threats to her safety, irresponsible behaviour leading, at one point, to an accommodation crisis, and lack of assistance in caring for the children and the household. These circumstances led to her taking out an intervention order against her partner; eventually, there was a permanent break. 'He still sees the children,' she says, 'but he doesn't do anything with them or to help me'.

Sadness followed her here when in 2013 her oldest brother died in the fighting in Sudan, leaving behind a family of

several children. Rebecca named her own youngest child after him. She has tried without success to bring her brother's family to Australia.

The reality

Given all that she had been through and the cultural differences to be negotiated, Rebecca says that 'I overall adapted fairly easily after I arrived in this country and now I am really settled. I do recall that I was scared early on by some things...different sounds like barking dogs and when I went to see movies, which I wasn't used to doing.'

On occasion, Rebecca feels greatly burdened by the past. 'At times I can't stop thinking back. I'm over a lot of it and thinking back only makes me stressed, so I try not to. There were some happy times when I was young but when I lost my father and my grandmother...'

'Although I did have a terrible life, it's OK now. I'm in Australia, I've got support everywhere and I have my children. I am the main influence in their lives and I'm pleased about that. And they have healthcare, education and freedom, which we don't in Sudan.'

'My children are also lucky that they were born here; they see themselves as Aussies. The generation who were not born here will be all right if they can get away from the past. But it's very hard for teenagers especially, as they are fighting to find a place in two cultures. There are things they can't know unless someone tells them, such as that it's OK in Australia to look an older person in the eye. It's the opposite in our culture. Someone has to tell them about this sort of thing and much else.'

There are no Sudanese families living close by but Rebecca manages contact with those she knows around Melbourne, including her oldest sister and her aunt who are now living here. She attends an 'Aussie church' in Dandenong where she has made friends, although she says, 'I don't have much time for friendship. My life is keeping my family going. Life is running.'

She sometimes talks by phone with relatives in South Sudan. There are often long gaps between contact; this is due to both what is going on there and to fractured family relationships.

Rebecca originally studied Migrant English at Swinburne some years ago and then did a childcare course with a private company. 'I was OK in class,' she says, 'but I didn't pass the work experience component because I had trouble with the language. So I went back to English classes at Swinburne in 2016 and 2017. I'm good at speaking and reading but writing is difficult.'

'I'm in Australia, I've got support everywhere and I have my children. I am the main influence in their lives and I'm pleased about that. And they have healthcare, education and freedom, which we don't in Sudan.'

Swinburne has been important to her as not only a source of academic achievement but also personal support. 'The teachers are very helpful. I believe what they tell me because they know what I need to improve, but they don't push me beyond what I can cope with.' She was given a laptop by the university, which she is very pleased about.

'Education is the best thing, I tell my children. They see me working on my studies, and they study too. We are a team.'



CHELSEA TIAL

Chelsea was born in a small town in Chin State, Myanmar (formerly Burma), homeland of the Chin people, one of Myanmar's major ethnic groups. Scenically beautiful, sparsely populated Chin State is one of the least developed in the country, and lacks infrastructure and transportation links.

'Between a fire and a flood.'



Its population is made up of many different sub-groups, each with its own history, traditions and language. Chelsea and her family are Hakka Chins. Like virtually all Chins, they are Christian, and thus a persecuted minority with little opportunity to improve their lot. They have also long fought for political autonomy.

Escape to Malaysia

'As a result of these factors, we lived in fear and danger,' says Chelsea. 'This came from clashes between the government troops and our local armed force.' (Such circumstances also apply to ethnic peoples in some other states in Myanmar.)

When Chelsea was three years old, her mother, a primary teacher in a government school, was transferred from their town to a village some kilometres away. Chelsea moved with her while her father remained in the town for work purposes.

For the next few years, Chelsea lived in the village with her mother and the three younger brothers who were subsequently born. Similar to the others around them, their lives were a struggle due to the family's low income and the restrictions imposed on them.

Life for the Tials was further disrupted when Chelsea was in Grade 2 or 3. 'My father decided to escape from Myanmar and go to Malaysia as an illegal immigrant. He did this both for safety (he had recently been in the countryside where he had seen dead bodies by the roadside) and to help our family financially. We have a saying that someone is 'between a fire and a flood', and that's what his situation felt like.'

Escaping to Malaysia, generally to the Kuala Lumpur area, is a well-trod but risky path for Chin people. Arriving as individuals or as families, their new lives usually turn out little better than the ones they have left. The refuge and protection they seek does not exist. As they lack legal status, they are open to abuse of rights, oppressive treatment by employers and authorities, and poor levels of housing, education and medical care.

Many Chin and other minority escapees remain in these highly unsatisfactory circumstances for years, living and working under the radar. Their hope is for eventual recognition as refugees by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), which makes them eligible for resettlement in a third country. This is what happened to Chelsea's father, who came to Australia, alone, in 2008.

Reunion with his family finally took place in 2013, in Melbourne.

Life in Chin State

Even with the intermittent financial assistance of her husband in Malaysia when he was able to provide it, Chelsea's mother found it very hard to provide for her children. 'On top of that,' says Chelsea, 'it was quite difficult to communicate with Dad once he had left. There were only a few public phones in the town and we would have to walk to them from our village. The phones were busy most of the time, and in any case it was not cheap to ring.'

'To make matters worse, during his time in Malaysia my father was robbed and lost everything. For some years he went into hiding in the forest, which cut him off from being able to work or connect with others of the same background or to maintain contact with his family.'

Determined that her daughter would nonetheless receive a good education, Chelsea's mother sent her to board with her paternal aunt and her family who lived in the town. Here she could be provided with better life experiences, a supportive environment for learning, and medical care.

Chelsea found the transition difficult. 'This was not my own home so it was really hard to fit in. My aunt was very strict about the household rules and I had to do a lot of work around the house, even though children in our culture, especially girls, already contribute a lot domestically. I was unable to meet all my aunt's requirements and unsure how to carry out some tasks, with the result that I felt worried and depressed for most of the time.'

Despite her new school being better than the one in the village, 'learning in the classroom was not enough, so my mum had to

find the money for extra tuition fees outside class. Luckily, I was a good student. I loved to study: it was my first priority and interest, whatever else was going on, and so I did it well.'

'Sometimes I really missed my mum and wanted to visit home but I was allowed to do so only at Christmas-time. I told myself that living with my aunt was a better option in other ways as I was ambitious. My aunt's objections to my making the trip were that, in her view, people in the village didn't value education as much as we did and so they might negatively influence me. She was particularly concerned that girls married very young there and she didn't want to risk that happening to me.'

Change of plan

It didn't. Chelsea remained within her aunt's household until she had completed Matriculation (Year 12), when she left in order to undertake a Bachelor of Science at a university located just over the border from Chin State. Her aim was to become a teacher. 'I graduated but a further qualification was required for teaching so I then attended a college to do a Diploma in Teacher Education Competency.'

It was in 2012, while she was at the college, that Chelsea and her family received a major but welcome shock: an email arrived from her father in Melbourne, telling them that he had been living there with his cousin independently for some years. Further, now that he'd been able to make contact, he would start the process of applying for his wife and children to join him in Australia.

Chelsea recalls that, 'I got my Diploma of Teacher Education Competency and had just commenced work as a government primary school teacher when the papers arrived for our migration from Myanmar. Along with my mother and my brothers I arrived here in September 2013.'

Reunion at last

In Melbourne the family had an 'amazing reunion'. It was also tinged with sadness – their father was chronically unwell.

All the new arrivals had to learn English for their new life. Chelsea's

brothers, who are now working, found it hard to return to study and did not do so for long. Her mother, however, is enthusiastic about studying the English language, which she had taught at primary level in Myanmar, and continues to do so at home via the AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program) online. 'She has now become much more confident,' Chelsea reports, 'and these days she can manage many things, like appointments and trips into the city, on her own'.

Of her family, Chelsea is the most advanced English speaker; she had learnt the language at school but lacked the opportunity there to hone her skills. 'I had wanted to learn more English back then but there were reasons I couldn't.' However, she found ways to polish her English herself: 'I realised how important it was to speak it well. Anywhere I went, it would be a requirement in my future life.'

Although she didn't know where that future life might be, she says that 'I had wanted for a long time to go to Australia to study and work. When I was a little girl I used to literally pray that somehow this would happen. The fact that it has is like a dream, and it's all due to the unexpected call from my father. I thank God for how it has worked out.'

A new career

Shortly after arrival Chelsea enrolled in the Migrant English course at Swinburne, where she was initially placed in Level 2 but very soon moved to Level 3. As she recalls it, 'Swinburne is a soft landing place and a welcome home for people like us, newly arrived migrants who are nervous all the time'. She found the teachers 'talented mentors, very honest and caring. They are amazing.'

The helpfulness of a Swinburne counsellor whom Chelsea consulted over her considerable concerns in relation to future study and employment pathways was also greatly appreciated. She had been told by some people in her community that the educational system and her own education background in Myanmar would work against her here. The counsellor was able to reassure Chelsea that she had been misinformed, and encouraged her in her future directions.

Chelsea progressed to higher English studies at the university, with the goal in mind of becoming an Emergency Department nurse. To this end she did a short course at Swinburne in order to become a Patient Services Assistant, which gave her the basic skills to commence employment in her chosen field. She then undertook a Diploma of Nursing, graduating in 2017, while working as an employee at an Eastern Health hospital. Later this year, she intends to commence a Bachelor of Nursing.

'I have had to study really hard as most of the others on my courses have gained nursing qualifications in their own countries and worked in that capacity,' says Chelsea.

'Over all this time, English has remained my favourite subject. I love it. I'm constantly consulting the dictionary and trying to educate myself.' Expressing herself in a precise and accurate fashion is particularly important, given her job.

'The hospital I currently work in is excellent, and provides very good experiences as I move around the different areas. Although most of the people I work with are very understanding, communication and language are often an issue for me because of our different backgrounds. Melbourne is the most multicultural city in Australia so as professional health care workers we need to develop competency in cultural diversity.'

'I'm always trying to maintain effective communication given that we are in sensitive situations. I still have some catching-up to do and I need to keep working at it all. I'm not as nervous as I was, and it's getting easier because I'm now more confident.'

Work, study and activities related to her church, community and family keep Chelsea very busy. Summarising her feelings about life since arrival in Australia, she uses words like 'grateful' and 'fortunate', and says that she has found that 'the support and the opportunities here are unbelievable'.

'Australia is my favourite country. I feel now like it's my home, my actual home.'



GHADA AL MASSRI

It was in January 2017 that Ghada and her family finally arrived in Australia in order to begin yet again. In doing so, they left behind happy earlier times and, in recent years, difficult existences in two global trouble-spots, Syria and Iraq. Today, Ghada, her husband Tameem and their two children are re-established in Melbourne and well launched on the next phases of their lives.

Soon after she came here, prior to joining the workforce, psychologist and social worker Ghada was for some months a student of Migrant English at Swinburne. Tameem, a Syrian agricultural engineer, is currently studying the same English course. The couple's young son and daughter settled in quickly to a new home and a new school, and within a short time were making friends and speaking fluent English.

Groundwork for the future

Born in 1971 in Lebanon and the youngest of six siblings, Ghada studied and worked in her home country until she was into her twenties. Life with her family of origin, who remain in Lebanon, was 'happy, normal, well-off'. All five sisters and their brother are highly educated, as is the norm for their circumstances. 'Education there is regarded as very important; it is your future,' says Ghada. 'A good education means a substantial income and social status.'

Both Ghada and Tameem's academic and employment backgrounds are impressive. But despite their substantial achievements and previous comfortable lifestyles in the Middle East, in their new country they are taking necessary steps back – acquiring better English, seeking employment experiences – in order to go forward. Although Ghada feels very fortunate to be living in Australia, when tempted to think too much about the past and all that it held, she turns to the phrase 'Don't look back'. 'If I look behind', she says, 'I might feel weak'.

Professional lives

Her first professional qualification was a Bachelor of Science: Clinical Psychology (1989-93) from the Lebanese University of Beirut, which she immediately followed with a Master of Science in the same discipline. Three years later Ghada added an additional degree to her qualifications and subsequently worked



'If I look behind, I might feel weak.'

at two hospitals in Beirut, at one as head of the admission department and at the other as a counsellor in training.

Her next positions were mainly in the fields of psychology and social work in a number of settings in Syria and Lebanon, with a focus on children and youth. Later on, in Iraq, in response to local circumstances, she became a psycho-sociologist.

Ghada and Tameem married in 2001. 'I met my husband,' she says, 'through my mother, who is from Syria. He and I had been aware of each other from when we were children because we are cousins but it wasn't until we were adults that we became close. I was very much ready at that time to settle down, to be a wife and to have children.'

'After we were married I moved to Damascus, the capital of Syria. Tameem owned and ran family farms and other properties in the countryside, and he went each day from home to manage them.' The couple were in such a strong financial position in Syria that Ghada was able to volunteer her professional services there for some ten or twelve years after her move.

Enforced change

Seven years ago the family's life changed. Adverse weather conditions in Syria led to a prolonged and serious lack of water which resulted in difficulties for Tameem's businesses and affected his plans. Then the war in the region gradually brought other negative consequences. In 2012 the couple decided that Ghada and the children should, for a short time, move for safety to her mother's house in the Mt Lebanon region of Lebanon. Ghada took nothing of importance with her as she thought they would soon be returning. Over this uncertain period, Tameem remained in Syria and waited for his family.

'That was the point of change', says Ghada. 'I didn't go back to Syria as planned because life there was becoming impossible. My husband ended up staying on for eighteen months in all. In the end, he couldn't get to his workplaces outside the city, and other things were rapidly going from bad to worse. You couldn't buy anything; everything had stopped. We decided then that our only

option was to move elsewhere for the foreseeable future and to look forward from there.'

'I deleted in my mind our house and other properties and the possessions and other things that had made up our life in Syria,' Ghada says. 'It was the only way to deal with what was happening.'

'In 2013 the children and I relocated to the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq, near the border with Turkey. I rented a house for us in Erbil, the capital. It was a difficult time – I'd not only had to leave everything behind but life in Lebanon had proved very expensive and it was the same in Iraq. School expenses alone were enormous. We soon exhausted the savings I had taken with us.'

'I needed to work, so I contacted the local hospital there and was offered a position as a researcher and social worker. When Tameem joined us, he set up a small business, trading in clothes in a shopping complex. We stayed in Erbil for three years.' During this time Ghada added a further academic qualification to her resumé.

In 2015-16 she worked with clients who had been displaced to refugee camps in Erbil. 'I choose to do this because when you see these people, who've been through terrible experiences, you say, "Thank God I can manage. Some can't. I can try to help them."'

'In the job, I witnessed so much suffering, and when you are exposed to so much, you are at risk of it all getting to you. I didn't imagine...you can't imagine...what happened in Iraq, at Mosul. You may read or hear about it but the reality is far worse. Various organisations try to help, the UN in the Middle East tries to help, but...'

Over time, Ghada became so emotionally affected by what her clients were grappling with that she could not continue operating as she had been. 'So I moved into the area of psycho-sociology. This involved a different approach, that of looking for strengths and the positive effects on people of experiences and situations.'

Change of plan

'Tameem and I had planned for the family to return to Syria as soon as life there got back to some sort of normality, but it didn't. It felt like we were endlessly waiting...By 2014, we had faced the fact that there was no future for us in that part of the world. Even though, by then, the war had stopped, Syria was an unsafe and undesirable place to live in. From Iraq, we would have to find another country, particularly for the children's sake and for their future.'

'My husband originally wanted to go to Canada as he had contacts there but our papers were frozen for some months. It was all taking so long that I told Tameem that I preferred to go to Australia, which I knew quite a lot about. I liked many aspects about the country that would make it easier for us there, including that it is a multicultural society and has good values. It's not as extreme or materialistic as America and some other places.'

'So we put in our applications as migrants, sponsored by an old neighbour from Lebanon who now lives in Melbourne. It was a two-year wait before we were accepted. The process was lengthy because we hadn't been in a refugee camp and also because Christians who wanted to migrate were accepted first by the authorities.'

'By 2014, we had faced the fact that there was no future for us in that part of the world.'

Ghada and Tameem and their respective families of origin are Druze, a 1000-year-old, small, persecuted religious minority who live mostly in mountainous areas in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. 'We are not Muslim, we are not Jews, we are not Christian,' explains Ghada. 'We have our own beliefs and holy books, and believe in God and in prophets, including Jesus.'

'Druze are peaceful people who co-exist with others, and keep a low profile.'

Life today

Having finally reached Australia, the family did not take long to settle into study and work again. Ghada enrolled at Swinburne to improve her English; as she had learnt the language at school and university, she was placed in Level 2. (Arabic is the language of Lebanon, but French and English are also widely spoken there.) She then undertook higher English studies at Swinburne. Tameem hopes to move into a job in agriculture when his English is further advanced.

In Ghada's experience, her teachers at Swinburne were 'amazing'. She appreciates that they told her she could do things, as she herself was not always confident: 'They make you believe that they believe in you and so you want to improve for them. Whatever you want to do, they are happy for you and help you.'

In parallel with her studies, from August to November 2017 Ghada did voluntary work at the Migrant Information Centre in Box Hill. She helped with the organisation's programs and activities, including assisting with playgroups for refugee and migrant children and supporting mothers and children in their new environment and with their interactions. This input, for which she drew on her professional skills, was both useful to others and assisted her own process as a new settler.

Having finally reached Australia, the family did not take long to settle into study and work again.

In November 2017 Ghada moved on to paid part-time employment – fixed contract as a client support worker at AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services) in an outer suburb. She is now full-time there, gaining relevant experience as acting case manager in a job that suits her very well.

Apart from the previous neighbour from Lebanon, the Al Massri family knew no-one in Melbourne when they landed. This was hard, as they were used to close and supportive networks. Tameem's brother in Syria, who is in difficult circumstances economically, would like to join them here, and they would like that to happen and hope it will.

Although she greatly misses extended family ties, in Ghada's view this aspect 'is not as important to newcomers compared to stability, to freedom and opportunity. In spite of all the differences we have had to deal with and the changes in our lives, we are lucky to be here,' she says. 'So many can't get out of their current circumstances in some countries, and their future is horrible.'

She believes that in Australia the building blocks of a good life are in place. 'You come and, step by step, things get resolved. The structures are there, there are many benefits, and you can improve yourself if you want. Although the road is not always easy, for everything there is a solution.'

Her experience as a newcomer has shown her that 'You have to be strong and resilient and look for the positive aspects. That my children are happy is very important to me, and they are. I hope they will make something of themselves and contribute. In material terms, we had a very good life in Syria but now I thank God we are here.'



MAJA SAVIC

Whatever Maja might have anticipated of her new life in Australia, she could not possibly have foreseen the reality. Since her arrival three years ago, there have been personal challenges, new academic directions, confronting employment situations and difficult family issues...as well as some remarkable achievements for which she has received official recognition.

Maja was born in 1983 in Serbia. Until 1990, this landlocked nation lying at the crossroads of Central and Southern Europe was one of the several countries that made up the former Yugoslavia. Today Serbia is an independent republic, population seven million, with Belgrade as its capital.

Early directions

Maja and her brother grew up in Sabac, a city of 54,000 in western Serbia. The siblings' parents worked for the government and the family of four enjoyed, says Maja, 'a comfortable, normal life'.

The Serbian school system meant that when Maja was fourteen, 'I had to decide about my future career because we have specialised high schools for almost every industry'. After primary school she attended a Law high school, following which she studied at Novi Sad University, an hour away, where she graduated in 2009 with a Bachelor of Law.

In 2013 in Serbia Maja married an Australian and two years later the couple moved to Melbourne. 'Migrating was one of the hardest decisions in my life,' she says. 'I found it very difficult to say goodbye, and I became highly stressed and nervous in the lead-up. Just the packing was hard for me, putting all my life into two suitcases.'

Starting again

Her early weeks in Melbourne felt to Maja like she was on holiday as she explored and found everything very interesting. 'Sleeping,' she recalls, 'seemed like a waste of time'.

This mood prevailed until a seemingly straightforward request brought a change of attitude. 'My then husband asked me to go to Knox City Council offices, which were very close to our home, to submit a work tender for him. But somehow I was scared, I didn't feel comfortable doing that because I felt shy speaking in English. Despite the fact that I had learnt English at school and



'Australia is the country of second chances.'

had spoken it on holiday in Europe, I was reserved in relating to the locals. I completely lacked confidence in speaking to them, so I wanted to avoid doing so. I was surprised at my reluctance because I always had the courage to do things. In the end, I did submit the tender and I realised it was a small, simple thing.'

'Because of the way I had reacted I knew that something was not right...this was not me. I came to the conclusion that I had two options – to stay at home or to engage with the Australian community. Despite the latter being the harder option, I enrolled in Migrant English classes at Swinburne.'

Maja's first day there was memorable: 'It was very strange for me; I hadn't known what to expect. When I found my Level 3 classroom, it turned out that I was the only European student. All the other students were from Asia, and I hadn't encountered Asians before. However, the teacher was so good that in the first five minutes she made me feel that I belonged there.'

By her own admission Maja worked hard, and 'little by little I learnt more. I appreciated that as part of the English course we were taught about Australian history, culture and customs, which was very important in preparing us for life here'. Fairly soon, she became the president of a student club and helped coordinate and promote events and festivals for students. She also wrote and directed two theatrical productions.

'I came to the conclusion that I had two options – to stay at home or to engage with the Australian community.'

'I really enjoyed my studies at Swinburne; I was inspired and motivated to do more and more.'

Well-deserved success

Keen to participate in everyday life here as well as practise her English ('I couldn't just wait until it got better; I needed to get over

my inhibitions'), with her teacher's help, Maja started to do voluntary work.

Her various initial efforts to connect with a local agency for linking volunteers with opportunities had come to nothing. But 'I pushed myself to get in touch with other people and organisations, and eventually I became an English tutor at AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services)'. By now in the highest class at Swinburne, Maja was ideally matched in her first AMES placement – a woman from Bosnia whose English was then at a low level.

Maja subsequently found other voluntary work too, as a salesperson at an 'op shop'. 'Being on the register gave me the opportunity to talk all day to a wide range of people. Not that long before I'd had been too shy to speak English at all and now I was speaking it constantly. I was so happy!'

When her English studies came to an end Maja went into the SEE (Skills for Education and Employment) program at Swinburne: 'This prepared us for real life, whether that was work or further study'. As part of the course students had to find themselves a work placement, which for Maja was at Knox City Council. She greatly enjoyed her time there, and subsequently became a member of the Knox Multicultural Advisory Committee.

In 2016, Maja enrolled in a Certificate IV in Business at Swinburne. In the later months of that year she received official recognition from the university: named Swinburne's Volunteer of the Year, and receiving both the Outstanding Volunteer Award and the Vice-Chancellor's Leadership Certificate. She also won the Best Product and Promotion Award at the Business and Finance Marketing Expo at Swinburne.

Home and work

Following her satisfying experiences with Knox City Council, Maja's next paid employment, from late 2015, proved to be very different. She gained a position as a waitress at a coffee shop at Knox Shopping Centre but was highly dismayed to be treated by staff

there in what she considered an unpleasant and discriminatory manner. This was the first time in her life that she had encountered such behaviour.

'I was so upset that my inclination after three days was to leave. My boss asked me to stay, and as a migrant without local experience I decided to do so because I had a goal – to learn more about the working culture here. So I gave my best to fit into the new environment, showing friendliness and demonstrating that I wanted to be part of the team.' The improved circumstances that ultimately resulted led to Maja working at the coffee shop for over a year.

At the end of 2016 and the start of 2017 difficult issues of a personal nature arose: Maja separated from her husband and consequently went through a short period of deep depression. 'I stopped everything...working, volunteering...I didn't eat or sleep. I lost motivation, I just stayed home.' Though it was tempting to give it all up and return to Serbia, Maja persevered.

'When I was depressed I pushed myself to apply for jobs. I couldn't find any, which made me more depressed. Then, one day, my first AMES student rang and offered me a job at Toyota. Although it wasn't a very good job I accepted it because I needed to get back into things.'

'My boss turned out to be from the same background as myself; I thought that this was lucky and that we would get along well.' The reality turned out to be the opposite as Maja felt that his authoritative management style was inappropriate. This unsatisfactory environment came to a natural end as the automotive industry was closing down at the time.

'In the situation, the government provided us with career counsellors and mine found me an admin job at another firm. Unfortunately, that proved to be no better than the last one', as Maja found herself once again treated poorly.

After this series of negative experiences, she was fortunate enough to meet an inspiring person and as a result her life turned

around. 'This woman provided me with insights and different perspectives of life and people in Australia. I came to understand that in every culture and place, nice and kind people do exist.'

With this new found support, Maja regained confidence which led her to reconnect with past acquaintances in Melbourne. She contacted her former boss from Knox City Council who now works for Darebin City Council, and as a result she was offered a casual job in the Creative Culture and Events Department there. 'It was a similar position to the one I worked in at Knox, and suited my capabilities. I accepted it and started immediately.'

As a further outcome of her happier mindset, Maja connected with other law practitioners and started attending court sessions, where she gained valuable exposure to the local judicial and regulatory systems. The law contacts were generous in sharing their experiences and struggles as migrants. More importantly, they demonstrated that challenges in Australia can be overcome.'

Early in 2018 Maja obtained a new position, one to which she is well suited and feels very positive about. She now works for the Forensic Department of the Victoria Police, where she is enjoying the challenges this entails, and also what she is learning. She is part of a 'great team', which means a lot to her.

The need for knowledge

From her own experiences and those of other migrants she has encountered, Maja is aware that some employers are taking advantage of their workers' ignorance and desperation to keep their jobs. 'Often, under-paid weekly wages are a fact of life for people like us; in other instances, the employment issues are penalty rates, or breaks, or superannuation not being paid. It's difficult for people from overseas to complain, especially on-line or where there is a lot of paperwork involved.'

'I believe that students and other new arrivals need empowering to approach places like the Fair Work Commission and the Australian Tax Office. I know now what my rights are but I didn't before. In those earlier times I didn't care, because I just wanted to gain local experience. Everyone needs to know

what the Australian regulations are and how to get help if they are being cheated, or suspect they are.'

'In those earlier times I didn't care, because I just wanted to gain local experience.'

Appreciative of her opportunities, Maja tells other newcomers, 'I know that it's not easy to start again but Australia is the country of second chances...and you have the chance to take advantage of that. It's very important to make your own connections and build your own networks. You never know where they can lead you to.'

'My own journey has made me realise that having a different cultural background and being different does not mean I have a disadvantage, nor that I should I accept sub-standard treatment. I now have self-acceptance. Finally, I feel comfortable expressing myself, who I am and what I have to offer.'



WANTING LIN

Born in China in 1986, Wanting arrived in Australia in 2009 to join her parents and her two younger siblings. The four family members had relocated to Melbourne the previous year from Shantou, a city on the east coast of Guangdong Province. They were then still in the early stages of adapting to a very different environment.

Wanting, however, who had delayed her departure until she had finished her four-year Bachelor of Science degree, recalls that for her, 'Immediately I landed here, I felt that it was my home that I was coming to'.

Over the following years all five Lins have negotiated individual pathways to settlement. Although the transition hasn't been as difficult for them as for some others, migration is never easy. This was particularly the case for Wanting's parents, who came to Australia knowing only two people, a friend and a cousin, and possessing little or no English. As business migrants, they were under pressure from the Australian Government to do demonstrably well in what would be a new area of employment. Shortly after arrival they found themselves dealing with a range of completely foreign situations.

Pressures and challenges

Despite the family having chosen to come here from a peaceful and relatively comfortable background, and the members having one another for support, those first years in Melbourne were highly stressful. 'But now,' says Wanting, 'things are much better for all of us. I definitely believe that in moving here, my parents made the right decision.'

Maintaining the language

Over this period of intense change, the Lin family has preserved, and will continue to preserve, a highly valued aspect of their heritage: their language, one of the oldest Chinese dialects, called Teochew.

In existence only as a spoken form, Teochew is today used by as few as ten million people in China, in addition to a possible five million more outside the Chinese mainland. It is thus vital for the survival of the dialect, with its unique pronunciations and vocabulary, that the oral aspect be maintained: over the centuries, other languages and dialects that used to be widespread in the country have died out.



'In moving here, my parents made the right decision.'

Like most Chinese people, Wanting also speaks Mandarin, which she learnt at school. She knows Cantonese too, having learnt it by watching television programs from Hong Kong, less than 300 kilometres from Shantou.

The old world

Prior to emigrating, Wanting's father had his own business in Shanghai, about two hours by plane from Shantou. 'My parents' reason for relocating to Australia was to give us better educational and job opportunities, and a better environment generally,' says Wanting. 'The visa they entered on would lead to permanent residency if they succeeded in a business here. Through their hard work, that is what happened.'

Despite struggling with English, for several years after arrival her parents worked together in a charcoal chicken shop they bought and successfully ran in the bayside suburb of Mornington. They later sold the business and retired, and now live in their own home with their younger children, one a graduate in her first job and the other still at university.

A cushioned arrival

Wanting, who had arrived here immediately after her graduation, had majored in biology. 'I had loved biology since school days and wanted to teach it. In addition to my degree, I also gained a teaching certificate in China, but I can only use that there, where I've never actually worked.'

'Since I've been in Australia I've studied English and worked, for the past few years at two jobs. I intend to do further studies down the track so that I can use my biology qualification in a teaching position here.'

Wanting's brother and sister were at primary and secondary school when she rejoined the family. Within a month, she also became a student, enrolling in Migrant English at Swinburne. She had learnt English in primary school in China but 'speaking and listening were problems due to lack of opportunity to practise. I knew I had to become a lot better.' She was placed at Swinburne into Level 3, where she remained for a year.

The Australian classroom was a welcome change from the formal and crowded ones Wanting was accustomed to in her home country. The way they teach here is totally different and I enjoy it. It's more relaxed, it can be fun. You can talk with the teachers like equals so there's less stress. I like that you can sit in different configurations, in circles or around tables: in China we always sit in rows. The classes are very large there, sometimes with more than sixty-five students. In one teaching placement, I taught a class where there were so many students that I had use a microphone, and even then I lost my voice!

Wanting's parents enrolled in Migrant English here as well; they hadn't previously formally learnt the language. 'Because of this and also their age, they found it very difficult,' says their daughter. 'Over time, my father has become better than my mother because he had more interaction with people, and he did the shopping.'

Early experiences

Wanting acknowledges that 'The fact that my family was already settled here when I arrived meant that my first months and years were cushioned'. While her entry into Australian life was not nearly as confronting as for some newcomers, there were definitely challenging aspects. 'Language was the big issue. It's not so much now but it's still an issue; especially in the workplace I have to be very aware of what I'm saying. Also, I've had to get used to things like communicating via email. That's not done a lot in China; we were more likely there to ring someone.'

'In the early days, I found it scary making phone calls in English, even ringing Swinburne to ask about courses. I'd rehearse but, even so, I lacked confidence and it was hard to make myself pick up the phone.'

When her brother broke his arm in a school-ground accident around this time, Wanting went with him to hospital. This unfamiliar setting was daunting in itself, in addition to which she was required to act as interpreter and intermediary. Given her insecure grasp of English, negotiating forms and talking to medical staff was, she says, 'a baptism of fire'.

The world of work

After completing her English course at Swinburne, Wanting did an administration course elsewhere in workplace English. She returned to Swinburne to train as a volunteer tutor, subsequently helping in various classrooms. She also undertook a course at Monash University in order to qualify for work as an integration/teacher aide.

In 2011, she gained on-going part-time employment at Swinburne, in a job that utilises her skills and talents and to which she brings the perspective of a migrant helping other migrants. Among her different tasks, she has continually supported AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program) students, and assists in administrative documentation.

She enjoys the interactions with people of varied nationalities, backgrounds, ages, family and personal situations, work histories, issues and concerns, and proficiencies.

Since 2013 to the present, Wanting's main job, however, has been working at Wantirna Secondary College as a multicultural teaching aide, a job that followed her earlier volunteer work at the school. There she tutors international students, both in and out of the classroom. 'When they first arrive, those from China and other Asian countries are very shy,' she says. 'They're not used to asking questions or giving feedback. The job is related to my education background as I am able to use my science and maths knowledge to assist them.'

Wanting's two workplaces keep her very busy for now but, when the time is right, she intends to do a Master's degree. For the present she is enjoying newly married life with her husband, Johnson. From the same province in China, they met here, where Johnson studied engineering at Melbourne University. Since her arrival in Australia in 2009 Wanting has been back to China for three short visits to see friends and relatives, most recently during her honeymoon.

In her limited spare time, she likes to read. Heeding her own advice of 'Keep learning. Don't give up learning', her reading material includes 'the same set novels as the Wantirna Secondary College students so that I can keep up with them'.



LUIS CORNEJO

Luis arrived in Melbourne from Chile in 2010, together with his wife, Veronica, and their two small children. The family's previous home was in the Chilean capital, Santiago. With a population of over seven million, Santiago is by far the largest city in this very long, narrow country which lies between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean.



In the second half of the last century, Chile experienced some extreme political and economic twists and turns. Today, it is a democratic republic and one of the most stable and prosperous countries in South America. The Cornejos' decision to migrate to a new life here was a very personal one.

Deciding to leave

Luis was born in 1969 and grew up in Santiago with his parents and his younger brother. His father was a tennis coach, among whose clients were some famous Australian players of the past. After high school, Luis studied at a technical college and on graduating began a career in the IT industry.

When he relocated here some eight years ago with Veronica, it was not her first experience of emigration. Luis explains that 'When she was eight years old, Veronica and her parents left Chile for a new life in Australia. Veronica was raised and educated in Melbourne, and graduated with a degree in biology from Monash University.'

As a young adult, Veronica returned to her birthplace for an initial six-month stay, which eventually stretched into eighteen years of living and working in Chile. Her qualifications, experience, and the fact she is bi-lingual meant fulfilling jobs in hospital administration which led to some international travel.

'In the tenth year of Veronica's time back in Chile,' says Luis, 'we met and married. Five years later, by which time our children had arrived, we decided to come to Australia. We worked hard and we had a good life in Chile but the basic costs of everyday life there are the highest in South America. Some other key aspects, such as health care and education, are also extremely expensive. Australia is much cheaper all round, and we felt that if we came here we'd be able to afford a better life. Another factor for us in migrating was that Chilean society is very money, class and status conscious.'

'Although it's hard here, it's better.'

'But as much as anything else,' says Luis, 'we came for the children's sake...to give them greater access to facilities and experiences, to expand their opportunities, to be able to spend more time with them. We wanted to be able to offer them things that would have been impossible or difficult in Chile.'

The long view

When the couple first discussed coming to Australia, they considered setting a time limit of several months to see how they liked it here; they could then decide whether to stay or to return.

However, says Luis, 'I soon realised that if we set a time limit, migrating wouldn't work. It would be hard to settle with that attitude ... we wouldn't buy a house, we wouldn't properly invest ourselves in this country. I didn't want to live here and leave my heart in Chile.'

'So we decided that if we came, it was for good. For me, I arrived with the idea that I would pass away in this country.'

Even with their positive attitudes and keen self-awareness, Luis and Veronica still went through the challenges typical of initial settlement in a foreign country. 'You have to hang in there until the shock is not so great, and that's at least six months,' says Luis. 'Since I came here, there have certainly been some bad moments but there have been many more good ones.' He views the process as 'a bit like going to the dentist. You have to put up with some pain now in order to feel better later on. Big picture: I'd say that although it's hard here, it's better.'

'I didn't want to live here and leave my heart in Chile.'

'When I felt a pull to go back I kept reminding myself, "All that I have in Chile, I can have here. In Chile, there is only my father and my brother left; my mother died some years ago. I have my memories, they can't be taken away. To make a success in

Australia, I need to leave behind all of my happiness, all of my sadness, and go forward."

A positive attitude

When Luis arrived in Melbourne, the only people he knew here were his wife's brother and family, and some other contacts made through his wife's relations. 'We lived with Veronica's relatives for seven months and then we rented a house. Later on, we bought our own home.'

Prior to arrival, Veronica had lined up a job. The plan was that while she took this up, Luis would study English and then find work. 'The original idea,' he says, 'was for the children to go to childcare but then we found out that childcare is very expensive. We didn't know what to do. So I was very happy to discover, when I contacted Swinburne to enrol in Migrant English classes, that childcare was provided on-site and that it was free!'

Like most Chileans, the language the Cornejo family spoke was Spanish, a legacy of the fact that in the sixteenth century Chile, as well as some other countries in South America, was conquered and colonised by Spain. Although Luis had studied English at school in Chile, in his own words, 'I was very terrible at it. Later I picked up quite a bit of English through my job but I realised when I came here I had to do something about my language skills.'

He subsequently studied at Swinburne for eighteen months, where he found the teachers to be 'friendly, patient and informative'. Now, he says, 'I'm better than I was: I have sufficient English for work and life generally.' He is aware that he can further develop his English and may one day formally do so.

At Swinburne, he delighted in mixing with fellow students from many countries. 'When I was younger I used to read a lot about different cultures; I knew quite a bit about various ones. But it was all theoretical because Chile is very homogenous. In Australia, I have met many people of different races, religions and customs and so on, and what I used to read about has become very real...I've been exposed to so much more since I

came here. I realise first-hand the connections between us all, as well as the differences.'

A rich life

Following his English studies, Luis found a job in the IT field and, after several years there, feels well established. 'I am satisfied with the level I have reached, especially as the children, now ten and twelve, are becoming older and need driving around and want my involvement in their activities.' He is very pleased that his son and daughter can speak Spanish reasonably well. 'After they came here they lost their language so now I am making sure it is part of their lives again. We speak Spanish at home, which is good for them, although not so good for me in terms of my English.'

'If asked now, my children would say that they are Chilean but I know that as they grow older, they will say that they are Aussies. I'm happy that they are bridging two cultures. They don't have to choose.'

'In Australia I've got my family and we are happy. I've been able to buy a house. I've made new friends and am doing some things I couldn't before. People back in Chile think we came here to get rich, to have things. That's not so. I'm not rich, but my life is rich.'

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In *Finding Our Place*, ten current and recent students of Swinburne University of Technology's Migrant English and General Education departments share their moving personal stories of leaving their homelands to make new lives in Melbourne.

Their diverse backgrounds and experiences are reflective of Australia's present intake of refugees and migrants.

The insights they provide reveal much about the impact of resettlement, the process of acquiring a new language, and the journey to becoming part of the community.

Finding Our Place

Compelling accounts – Refugee and migrant resettlement in Australia

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Project lead Serena Seah, Volunteer Tutor Coordinator and ESL teacher at Swinburne University of Technology, Wantirna campus 2009-2018.

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