

Media Release: Work & Welcome program opens doors for refugees

With 'World Day of Migrants and Refugees' coming up on 25 September it gives an opportunity to celebrate programs that help build the future of the migrants and refugees in our community.

The employment experience program called 'Work & Welcome', established by Multicultural Australia, provides refugees and migrants with paid work experience.

Toowoomba Catholic Schools (TCS) encourage their staff to donate to this program as it provides employment opportunities for refugees and migrants in schools and its office.

The regular donations made to this program have enabled refugees to be welcomed into Toowoomba Catholic school communities for ten weeks' of work experience in administration, assisting student learning, cleaner, catering, groundwork – just to name a few.

Shaza Alshawi was recently employed by St Joseph's College, Toowoomba and was working as a School Officer assisting student learning and also assisting in the College library.

Ms Alshawi comes from Syria where she was a Primary School Teacher for 25 years, a presenter of educational programs and a supervisor at the United Nations (UN) France.

She describes what it was like living in Syria, "before the war Syria was a wonderful country; but after the war we lost everything, our houses, our jobs, and our cars."

"I was also kidnapped for seven days in the countryside which has left a mark on my heart - knowing you can't feel safe in your own country," said Ms Alshawi.

"The gangs in Syria took me and 30 other female teachers and we were put in a big shed where they made us cover our hair and didn't provide any food or water."

"They threatened us with burning and other tortures and all of us received cigarette burns."

"Our families didn't know where we were and we didn't know if we would survive," said Ms Alshawi.

"The government ended up making a trade for our freedom so we did survive and I am learning how to move on from this horrible experience."

Ms Alshawi fled from Syria to Iraq and spent three long years there where she was desperately trying to come to Australia as a refugee.

Her story is not an easy one as she suffered much hardship in Iraq as a single mother with two small children, where she had no rights and experienced some of the worst years of her life.

As a refugee in Iraq she worked very long hours, house rent was very expensive and as a single mother she was treated very unfairly as if she was 'available' to everyone.

Ms Alshawi finally arrived in Australia in December 2021 and was so happy to be able to provide her two young children a safer and better life.

She chose to live in Toowoomba as she didn't want to live in a big city.

"I love living here as people are so friendly and supportive."

"It is a wonderful place for a new beginning with my children and I feel very safe here," said Ms Alshawi.

Ms Alshawi has been warmly welcomed into the College community by the team at St Joseph's.

"All of the staff at St Joseph's College are so welcoming and supportive."

"They know that English is my second language and they have helped me with the right words to use and we have become friends."

"I get great work experience and I now know how the education system works," said Ms Alshawi.

"I know what my children are learning at school, I am involved in the community and I have Australian friends which is perfect for me."

"At St Joseph's I get the opportunity to work in both the library and the classroom so I am so lucky to get two opportunities to learn, which is wonderful."

"I am studying to be a teacher's aide and looking forward to finishing my studies and getting a fulltime job so I have some financial security."

"Work & Welcome is a fantastic program as you can't imagine what it is like to arrive in a new country. I now feel part of this community and I don't feel like a stranger anymore."

"This program has supported me by providing me with some experience to put on my resume and also great references going forward," said Ms Alshawi.

Kirstie Andrews, Teacher Librarian and Literacy Learning Leader at St Joseph's College who works with Shaza could not be more delighted with her contribution to the College.

"Shaza has been a wonderful presence at the College and her warmth, friendliness and smile has brought such joy to the library," said Mrs Andrews.

"It is amazing how much Shaza has been through and we are very grateful to have her working for us as she does a great job."

Kellie-Marie Ford, Assistant Principal of Religious Education at St Joseph's, said that when they were approached by Toowoomba Catholic Schools with the opportunity to offer a position as part of the Work & Welcome program, they were really excited.

"It allows staff to see the real impact of their donations to the program, while also offering refugees and migrants the opportunity to experience life in our schools, to become part of our community and gain valuable work experience for future employment," said Ms Ford.

"Most importantly, our St Joseph's College community has gained a valuable understanding of Shaza's life experiences and gifts."

"This is an amazing example of resilience for staff and students."

"We are proud to host Shaza and learn from her," Ms Ford said.

Work & Welcome relies on the generosity of Australian schools, businesses, community groups and individuals to create job opportunities.

Carla Zafiriadis, Manager Employment at Multicultural Australia said that, "Multicultural Australia's Work & Welcome Program in schools supports people from refugee and asylum seeker background on their first paid work in Australia."

"The program provides an opportunity for participants to gain local experience in a supportive environment and be able to have current references to add on their resumes."

"Participants are able to develop the skills and confidence needed to find employment, as well as build their hope for the future and sense of belonging in a new country," said Ms Zafiriadis.

"Multicultural Australia provides ongoing support to both participants and host organisations for the duration of the placement and supports participants find employment past program. "

"In recent figures, close to 80% of participants were able to find employment since completing the program. The success of the program is only possible due to our amazing group of partner schools and we thank them for the continuous support," said Ms Zafiriadis.

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