

Reflections on The Human Library – Centacare FNQ’s Celebration of Multicultural Month

This August, Centacare FNQ turned the page on Multicultural Month by inviting people across Cairns and the Cassowary Coast into The Human Library. Instead of paper and ink, our shelves held living stories—more than 17 Human Books who generously shared their most moving and profound experiences.

As part of Multicultural Queensland Month, Centacare FNQ hosted The Human Library, a living, breathing library where “books” are people, and “reading” means sitting down in conversation to hear the real, unfiltered stories of their lives.

The format was simple, but the impact profound. Across Smithfield, Manunda, Earlville, and Tully, community members and Centacare staff sat side-by-side, speaking openly about journeys shaped by migration, resilience, faith, loss, and renewal. There were no scripts or stages—just people sharing their truth, and the kind of listening that changes how you see the world.

This year, more than 17 Human Books took part. Some were familiar faces from within Centacare FNQ itself—people we greet in corridors, collaborate with on projects, and share a laugh with over morning tea. Yet until they became “books,” few knew the depth of their personal journeys.

At Smithfield Library, Eric spoke of fleeing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo at just 13. Sixteen years in a Rwandan refugee camp taught him endurance, but also the value of hope. Now a homeowner in Cairns, fluent in five languages, and working as a Bi-Cultural Worker, he uses his lived experience to guide others through the same challenges he once faced—proof that even the longest journeys can lead to a place called home.

At Manunda Library, Ambika shared her journey from Nepal to building belonging in Australia. She spoke of life in a refugee camp where she lived in a tent for 20 years after being forced to flee in the middle of the night. Both of her children were born there. In that same camp she met her husband, and together they began a story of survival and hope that now continues in Cairns, where she supports others finding their way.

Also at Manunda, Santa’s story traced a parallel journey. Growing up in the Bhutanese refugee camps, she dreamed of working in law. She is now a Police Liaison Officer with Queensland Police, bridging trust between her community and local services, and raising two daughters who remind her daily of the strength it took to begin again.

For those listening, one of the most moving moments came with the realisation that Santa and Ambika had once lived in the very same refugee camp—walking the same dusty paths, facing the same hardships—before life took them on different journeys. Each eventually met their husbands and migrated to Australia, only to be reunited by chance years later here in Cairns. Their reconnection added a powerful layer of meaning to their stories, reminding us how intertwined lives can be, even across time and continents.

At Earlville Library, Gimuy Walubarra Yidinji Elder Henry Fourmile shared the history of his family’s forced removal to Yarrabah Mission, the cultural disruption it caused, and his lifelong

dedication to keeping Yidinji culture alive. His gentle, generous teaching style gave listeners a rare chance to see the land and its history through Indigenous eyes.

At that same session, Hong Ma reflected on his path from China to Cairns. A dive instructor turned Police Liaison Officer, musician, cook, radio presenter, and community advocate, Hong Ma's story was as multifaceted as it was moving. He recalled how, as a teenager, his mother urged him never to forget the events of Tiananmen Square, shaping his determination to seek freedom and a new life in Australia. For him, community work is not a job but a calling: "I keep a pure heart to serve the community."

For those who came to listen, the Human Library was deeply moving. These were not performances or polished speeches, but real conversations—moments of honesty that replaced stereotypes with empathy. For the Human Books themselves, it took great vulnerability to share such emotional parts of their lives. Together we laughed, cried, and walked away changed.

One participant reflected:

"These stories put life into perspective. We complain about the small things, but hearing what others have lived through makes you step back and rethink. I didn't expect to feel so connected to someone whose life had been so different from mine, but I left with both perspective—and a new connection."

This is why Centacare FNQ continues to host the Human Library. It is our way of celebrating Multicultural Month—not with speeches or numbers, but through the living stories of our community. Each Human Book reminds us that courage often hides in plain sight, and that by listening, we uncover truths that change us.

Some of these stories leave us humbled by the strength it takes to begin again in a foreign land. Others make us pause and reflect on the privileges we take for granted in daily life. Together they challenge us, move us, and open our hearts in ways no statistic or report ever could.

Behind every face is a story waiting to be heard—one that can shift how we see the world, and how we see ourselves within it. That is the profound gift of the Human Library, and the reason these conversations will stay with us long after the books are closed.

Pull-Quote Style Sidebar – Meet the Human Books

"I left home at 13 to escape war. Sixteen years later, I arrived in Australia speaking five languages—and ready to help others rebuild."

– Eric, Democratic Republic of Congo to Australia

"From raising children in a refugee camp to building a new life in Cairns, my story is one of survival, motherhood, and the strength of belonging."

– Ambika, Nepal to Cairns

"I always dreamed of working in law, even from inside a refugee camp. Today I wear the Queensland Police uniform and help bridge trust between my community and police."

– Santa, Bhutan/Nepal to Queensland

“My mother told me never to forget Tiananmen Square. That memory drove me to seek freedom, and now I serve my community with a pure heart.”

– Hong Ma, China to Cairns

“Our family was forced from our land to Yarrabah Mission. I carry that history, and my role is to keep Yidinji culture alive for the next generation.”

– Henry, Gimuy Walubarra Yidinji Elder

“Nine years in refugee limbo taught me patience and hope. Now I use my voice to guide others starting again.”

– Khyber, Afghanistan to Australia