

A New Zealand philanthropist has set up a scholarship program that is opening doors to university for young refugee women. ANTHEA STYLLANAKIS reports.

Broadening Horizons

PHOTO: NARUE DOM

In support of refugees resettling in Australia, Western Sydney University (WSU) has announced a half-million dollar scholarship fund to assist refugees through university. This fund holds the potential to transform the lives of many refugees by enabling them better access to higher education.

However, it is not the first university to do so. In fact, there is a scholarship program that has already given a diverse range of promising students the opportunity to pursue university education.

The Sir Robert Jones Refugee Daughter's Scholarships, a New Zealand-based scholarship, covers the cost of a recipient's tuition fees, regardless of the degree they choose or the university in New Zealand they wish to study at.

The scheme was set up by New Zealand philanthropist Sir Robert Jones with the input of Gary Poole. Poole is the former chief executive of Refugees as Survivors New Zealand (RASNZ), an organization that cares for the wellbeing of refugees and assists in their resettlement.

It aims to enable young women of refugee backgrounds to undertake tertiary studies and gain university qualifications. Sir Robert Jones explains that the refugees who resettle in New Zealand 'come from war-torn nations and mostly rural village societies. To arrive in an advanced urban society with an alien culture and language, poses great difficulties. The children however, quickly adapt and it's important to assist them'.

He explains that the scholarship is provided specifically to young women as many come from societies where women may not have as many opportunities as their male counterparts.

At this point in time, the scholarship covers the tuition fees of thirteen students for the duration of their degree. On top of this, it provides funds for hostel accommodation for two years if the women are studying far from their homes. The recipients also receive a voucher for a new outfit when they first receive the scholarship.

By 2018, the scheme is set to reach an annual budget of over \$400,000, with around 50 women in total studying at universities and other tertiary institutions across New Zealand. In order to further extend the reach of this endeavour, universities have been offered the opportunity to cover the cost of half the scholarship and thus far, Victoria University in Wellington has agreed to do so.

The current recipients are from all over the globe, from countries such as Kenya, Myanmar, Rwanda and Sri Lanka. Their chosen degrees are as diverse as their backgrounds, spanning across the humanities, sciences and the built environment. It allows them to continue their higher education without financial concerns, enabling them to focus on their studies and perform to the best of their abilities.

For example, one scholarship recipient, Jenny, whose parents migrated from Burma says, 'The financial assistance that the Sir Robert Jones Scholarship provides will definitely allow me to focus more on my studies...It is comforting knowing that I will not have massive student loans to pay off when I finish my studies'.

Karthika, originally from Sri Lanka, has not been in New Zealand for the minimum two-year period necessary to obtain a student loan so for students like

her the scholarship is a means by which they can still attain higher education without having to worry about getting themselves through university on top of having to find ways to support their families.

The scholarship means a lot more than just a source of financial aid. Marie-Ange, originally from Rwanda and studying her Masters in Law described the scholarship as 'the silver lining to the negative impacts that come with being a refugee'.

She explains that the scholarship has boosted her confidence and 'has encouraged me to take my studies even more seriously now that I have more people supporting me and wanting me to succeed'.

Pyo, who is studying an undergraduate degree in neuroscience, says this scholarship has flow-on effects for other young women who come from a refugee background.

"[It] has given motivations and inspiration to other young daughters of refugees to work hard by knowing that their dreams would come true one day... [this scholarship] has changed our life and the way we see things in life."

Dr Ann Hood, current Chief Executive of RASNZ, points out that this scholarship means 'they are in a stronger position to become involved in the community and focus on their career', and it will therefore 'be a much quicker process [for these women] to integrate into society'.

This puts them in a good position, not only to contribute to New Zealand society but to become leaders. As such, these women will have the opportunity to serve as exemplars who may have experienced hardships but have succeeded in their chosen fields.

The scholarship may also assist in changing community perceptions of refugees. They are put in a position to 'show New Zealand that refugees are just as capable, just as smart', says Dr Hood.

These women are more than capable of making meaningful contributions in spite of the difficulties they have faced in the past. Indeed, the knowledge they have gained from their experiences will add value to any paths they choose.

Pyo closed her interview by stating that the scholarship has made the impossible become possible. "Sir Robert Jones's generosity has inspired me to help others and give back to the community. I hope one day I will be able to help students to achieve their goals in life just like he has helped me." As the scholarship grows, it can hopefully provide opportunities to a larger number of passionate students. R