

# From Little Things Big Things Grow

*Many refugees are resettling in regional areas. SUSAN CUNNINGHAM, facilitator of Families in Cultural Transition writes about refugees in the Riverina.*

**L**eeton is a rural town in the Riverina area of southern NSW, home to a population of 11,000, including around 60 Afghan men, the majority of whom are Hazara.

In Refugee Week 2014, Leeton was declared a Refugee Welcome Zone by the Shire Council, and the story behind the proclamation involves many Leeton residents, including a courageous mayor and a Hazara refugee who has made Leeton his home.

Afghan men have been coming to Leeton since the early 2000s and most have found regular employment in the town's meatworks. They are a small but visible minority in a town steeped in its agricultural roots. Locals had started to engage informally with some of the men, but it was a STARTTS program that helped the men find a new level of trust and friendship in the town.

PHOTO: SMALL RED GIRL





Welcome to Leeton Day, April 2014 PHOTO: Courtesy of Leeton Shire Council

Families in Cultural Transition (FICT), a foundation program of STARTTS, helps refugees with their settlement during the period of cultural transition. It allows participants the space and time in a group setting to discuss the practical and emotional issues they are facing, facilitated in their community language. People from refugee backgrounds who speak English and their community language, and who have knowledge of their community, are recruited to be trained as bi-cultural facilitators to run this program.

Abdullah Nazari, one of only a couple of Afghan men in Leeton who speaks English, was recruited to join the FICT training that STARTTS ran in Wagga Wagga in February 2014. He moved to Leeton in 2013 where he heard work was available, and soon ended up working in the local meatworks and as an interpreter for his fellow Afghans. His English skills were honed working as an interpreter for the US army in Afghanistan, where his bravery was recognised by a top ranking Colonel in a New York Times article.

Abdullah, the only Afghan among the group in Wagga Wagga trained to run FICT, was keen to return home to Leeton and start a FICT group. He had an enthusiastic response from the men with whom he spoke and a group of 14 men joined the program held at the Leeton library every Saturday for nine weeks.

To ensure that the men had a variety of perspectives, Abdullah invited guest speakers to some of the sessions. Abdullah had been introduced to the Leeton Mayor, Paul Maytom, by STARTTS counsellor Jeanette Ninnis and local TAFE teacher Susie Rowe, and he invited Councillor Maytom to the group to explain Australia's political

system and the democratic process.

Having met the men and heard about some of their needs, Councillor Maytom returned to visit the group most Saturdays, often joining them for lunch after the session. His approach is a practical one. Having had a long life of work and public service, he wanted to offer assistance to the men to make them feel valued by the community.

All but two of the men in the FICT group have families in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Most have permanent residency and are waiting to get their citizenship. This will allow them to apply for a passport, visit their families back home, and begin the process of applying for them to come to Australia.

Meanwhile they endeavour to provide emotional and financial support to their wives and children from afar. Those with families in Pakistan can use the internet to talk face-to-face while those with families in Afghanistan rely on phone calls. For each man it is a painful waiting time with little certainty about eventual reunion with his family.

The FICT discussions aimed to address some of these concerns by acknowledging the trauma that the men have suffered in their home country and on their journey to Australia, but also to provide hope for the future.

STARTTS Counsellor Jeanette Ninnis had been providing outreach counselling services to some of the Afghan men and was aware of the difficulties that they were facing, being apart from their families. She ran a session for the men to help them deal with grief and loss and to acknowledge their strength in their roles as fathers.

Other guest speakers discussed the expectations of parenting and child-raising in Australia, the Australian

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schooling system, and the opportunities for young people to study and work. The men had many questions about the educational opportunities that existed here for their children and how they might prepare them for joining them here.

The FICT group also showed the men that there were people in Leeton genuinely interested in helping them to learn English, understand more about Australian culture and way of life, and to navigate the immigration system.

Around the same time TAFE teacher Susie Rowe established a tutor program, in which interested locals were trained as tutors to teach English and matched up with Afghan men and other refugees keen to learn. As well as their regular tutoring meetings, held in a coffee shop or the local park, some tutors invited the men to join them at family and sporting events.

The bonds of friendship developed in this program are increasing the English skills and local knowledge of the Afghan men, and enriching the tutors' understanding of the backgrounds and cultures of these men in their community.

Councillor Maytom emphasises the importance of the relationships he has developed with the men as being for the “long term” and he acknowledges the FICT program as a catalyst that provided him with a deeper understanding of the practical and emotional needs of the Afghan men.

Councillor Maytom continues to make himself available to the men, has helped them with visa and citizenship issues, and has facilitated invitations for the men to speak to the local Rotary club and schools. He describes his support, and that of a growing group of

people, as “working below the headlines” – as day-to-day relationship building that increases the social capital of the town.

The Leeton Multicultural Group (LMG) was established in 2014 by Councillor Maytom and Susie Rowe and was set up to ensure the sustainability of the commitment to help these men, here without their families, settle in Leeton.

Establishing the LMG helped to build community support for refugees in the town and Leeton's celebration of Refugee Week, Harmony Day, Australia Day and a host of local events has provided the opportunity for the Afghan men to feel part of the life of the town.

As the first of these, Refugee Week 2014 was a celebratory occasion in Leeton. The men from the FICT group were presented with a certificate to acknowledge their participation. Abdullah, the FICT facilitator, was presented with a STARTTS Humanitarian Award, having been nominated by STARTTS staff in acknowledgement of his outstanding work in connecting his fellow Afghans with the Leeton community. Locals joined the Afghan men and other refugees for lunch and the day finished with a football game and many photos being taken.

The proclamation of the Refugee Welcome Zone by Leeton Shire Council means Leeton joins hundreds of other local government areas to welcome refugees to their regions. It is an acknowledgement that the Afghan men have a contribution to make to the social and economic life of this town. The Mayor is hopeful that these men will continue to make Leeton their home and, in time, be able to bring their families to join them. R