



The 2024 Humanitarian Awards winners with Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC and Barrister Mr Dennis Wilson, Roger Gurr STARTTS' Chair, Paul Power CEO of Refugee Council, Jorge Aroche CEO of STARTTS, Jasmina Bajratic-Hayward STARTTS' coordinator

HUMAN RIGHTS

Humanitarian Awards 2024

The NSW Humanitarian Awards 2024 celebrated an extraordinary group of people, whose advocacy and empowering actions have not only transformed lives, but also continue to assist those in need and inspire others – reigniting the call for compassion and collective action in these tough times.

DANIELA AROCHE reports.

The awards brought together a remarkable selection of individuals, organisations and advocates whose tireless work has had a profound impact on human rights, social justice and equality via various avenues, projects and inspiring actions – a powerful reminder of the good that still remains in this world, despite the challenging moments being faced.

Presented on July 1 at Government House Sydney, by Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales, it was a moment for these influential, yet humble winners and guests at the beautiful event in an iconic venue to enjoy the positive atmosphere, express their genuine appreciation, acknowledge important contributions and reflect on how they could do more themselves.

This is something that Ko Ko Aung, Special Counsel of Albert Arthur Lawyers, and the winner of the Humanitarian Awards 2024 in the Government and Legal category noted after accepting his award. “This award will also motivate to do more influencing policies that protect the rights of refugees and migrants, ensuring everyone receives fair treatment and opportunities. Every action, no matter how small, can create ripples of change. All we have to do is to keep pushing.”

Events such as this not only honour the changemaking achievements of those who have helped others and illuminated the path forward for human dignity and social change, but they also serve to renew the call for justice, equality, and compassion, in Australia and around the globe.

Aung, who has been recognised for his unwavering commitment to refugee advocacy, using his legal expertise to support and empower displaced communities – particularly those from Myanmar and Afghanistan – can speak of this firsthand.

Working tirelessly since the 2021 Myanmar coup in providing vital legal assistance, he also has shaped policies that create lasting change for refugees seeking safety and stability. He has championed refugee rights and aided resettlement through Talent Beyond Boundaries, a project that matches refugees with companies in need of their skills. He has supported Afghan women in his role as company secretary for the Afghan Women on the Move, which helps women to build independent lives in Australia – work that has been honoured in the John Gibson Young Migration Lawyer of the Year Award and Lawyers Weekly 30 Under 30.

Arriving in Australia in 2012 initially to pursue his tertiary education and study engineering, his path shifted when he witnessed that his home country, Myanmar, was experiencing a wave of optimism and transformation.

“The beauty about living in Australia is having practically infinite opportunities. In extreme contrast, being a refugee usually means having almost no opportunities at all.”

— Amro Zoabe

He explains that after decades of military rule, there was a glimmer of hope as the country began to embrace democratic reforms. “For the first time, I witnessed the workings of democracy and its impact on society. Australian scholars, legal practitioners, and policymakers frequently visited Myanmar, conducting workshops on constitutional law and legal reform. Seeing their efforts sparked something in me – a desire to contribute to shaping the future of my country through laws and policies.”

His journey from a hopeful engineering student to a legal practitioner committed to justice has been shaped by both personal and collective experiences. As he says: “Each step has deepened my understanding of the law’s power to bring about change and reinforced my commitment to using it as a force for good.”

His story is a testament to the power of advocacy, and how dedication, compassion and expertise can transform lives – for individuals and entire communities striving for a future defined by justice and hope.

He is not alone. Other Humanitarian Award winners in 2024 share in his passion to help others and have found ways to do so via individual skills and in professional areas. Among them is Michele Greenwood, a Clinical



Siobhan Martin and Mary Tran (Media category award winners)



Ahmad Zarar Mujahid (Sport category winner) (with guests)

Nurse Consultant for Refugee and Multicultural Health at the North Coast Population and Public Health Unit, part of the Mid North Coast Local Health District.

Awarded in the 'Refugee Supporter category, Greenwood has been at the forefront of developing and delivering essential healthcare services tailored to the unique needs of refugees since the first arrivals of humanitarian entrants in Coffs Harbour in 2000. Her personal journey began as a Chest Clinic Nurse, where she first noticed the healthcare challenges faced by refugees who could not find suitable community health services.

"Humanitarian refugees began arriving in the Coffs Harbour area as part of a sponsorship program with the Sanctuary Australia Foundation. I was the Chest Clinic Nurse at the time and was asked to check the newly-arrived families arriving under a health undertaking and those sponsored by Sanctuary for Tuberculosis (TB)," she explains.

"I came to realise the countless difficulties people faced during settlement, not to mention all the other stressors involved in moving to a new country as refugees. From a health perspective, this included issues such as

navigating the health system, discrimination and the failure of health professionals to use interpreters.

"After the success of the Sanctuary program, the first families arrived in the area as part of the Government Sponsored Program in 2004. I was concerned that the refugees would not get adequate health care and believed that a public health clinic would be the appropriate place to conduct initial health assessments, vaccinations and referrals to specialists. So, in collaboration with six local general practitioners, the Coffs Harbour Refugee Health Clinic commenced in February 2006."

Since then, Greenwood has been assisting newly arrived humanitarian refugees to navigate the complex health system, keep them healthy and prevent hospital stays. There are challenges, but the rewards heavily outweigh the hurdles faced, and being recognised for this, which was quite a surprise, was a bonus.

"I had no idea I was even nominated, so it was a complete surprise and to win the award for supporting refugees, a job I love to do and am passionate about, is incredibly humbling," she says. "The refugees inspire me every day with their resilience, despite having endured the most unimaginable losses in their life."

She adds that the incredible company she was among during the awards also made the event extra special and inspiring.

“I was surrounded by some wonderful recipients who are doing such amazing work, caring for people who are so disadvantaged ... And I was especially thrilled that Aye Win who is one of our health interpreters from Coffs Harbour was also the recipient of an award,” she says.

Aye Win, highly commended for her contribution to rural and regional areas, has been a key figure in the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour since her arrival as a refugee in 2007, helping them to navigate life in Australia, and assisting them to handle processes linked to employment, visas, and housing.

Win had lived in India as a refugee and worked in exile for five years as a photo-journalist for Mizzima, a Burmese media outlet. In 1995, she joined the Women’s Rights and Welfare Association of Burma and continues working for them now.

Notably, since then, she has contributed as a self-funded co-curator of the Free Myanmar Arts & Cultural exhibition, which raised funds to support civilian minority groups targeted by the military dictatorship in Myanmar; while also organising other cultural and fundraising efforts, including the Homelands Tour (Stories of Welcome). Her tireless advocacy also extends internationally, through key roles in projects such as the Safe Birthing Kit for displaced women, and she continues to be a powerful advocate for Myanmar’s refugees, bridging the gap between her community and Australian society.

Her nomination also came as a surprise, and she says the joy of being recognised via the Humanitarian Awards extended back thousands of kilometres to her family in Myanmar. “The award was meaningful for me because it brought happiness to my family back in Myanmar, as well as my community here in Coffs Harbour. I [even] arranged for my father to come to the mountain near his village, the only place where there is phone reception,” she reveals.

“It took a week to arrange, and then I was able to speak with him. I told him: ‘You are going to be proud of me, I am going to get 2024 Humanitarian Award.’ I didn’t think he understood totally about the humanitarian part, but he knew I was getting an award, and he said: ‘I am so proud of you.’”

Amro Zoabe, awarded in the Youth category for his work as a projects coordinator at Illawarra Multicultural Services (IMS), wasn’t able to attend the awards in person. The fact that he was recognised in this way has made an impact, which he’s very happy about.

“Every action, no matter how small, can create ripples of change.”

— Ko Ko Aung

“I felt seen and recognised. Even though no one does humanitarian work seeking fame or recognition, it still feels heartwarming being celebrated,” he explains.

Since arriving in Australia in 2016 as a Syrian refugee with limited English but boundless determination, Zoabe quickly became an integral part of the local community support network in Wollongong, making significant impacts on the lives of refugee youth.

Volunteering at the local migrant resource centre laid the groundwork for his deep commitment assisting other refugees understand and access essential services like Service NSW and myGov. In 2020, he stepped into a leadership role at IMS, launching impactful programs such as youth sports, cooking and parenting workshops, and the volunteer-run Electronics Repair Shop, which empowers refugees with local tech experience. His efforts in organising large community events for Harmony Week, Refugee Week, and CultureMix have served to foster unity and mutual respect among diverse cultural groups.

A respected advocate for inclusivity, Zoabe challenges stereotypes and uses his personal refugee experience to drive positive change – but he admits that his biggest personal challenge was finding his cause, his calling. “The

beauty about living in Australia is having practically infinite opportunities. In extreme contrast, being a refugee usually means having almost no opportunities at all. Hence, the shock from having no hope to having endless possibilities either freezes up people or overcharges them,” he explains. “[So], while I was overcharged to do a lot, I needed to find out what I actually should focus on.

“What worked for me was do what I am good at, until I can find what I am passionate about. I was good at academia, hence I continued my studies until I graduated from university. I was good at community service, until I realised it is more than a job, it is a passion.”

Combining their passion for media, for storytelling and advocacy, and their impressive journalistic skills, Siobhan Marin and Mary Tran, producers at ABC’s Compass, created the powerful episode Walk in My Shoes, which focuses on the Refugee Camp in My Neighbourhood (RCIMN) project in Western Sydney.

The episode aimed to educate Australians about refugee experiences through an immersive simulation and personal narratives by refugees and asylum seekers. A powerful educational tool, fostering empathy and raising awareness on the challenges faced by displaced individuals, it earned them recognition in the Media category.

It wasn’t an easy task to create such an impactful media production, Marin concedes. Ultimately her determination and desire to “make documentaries that are compelling enough to cut through” and in a nutshell, her “goal to spark curiosity and make people care” are what keeps her going. In this way, she gives back to the community.

Walk in My Shoes, quite an observational documentary, was still confronting in many ways, she reveals. “It was really important for us to capture the genuine reactions that visitors – in the case of our program, school students – have while going on the Refugee Camp in My Neighbourhood tour. There were moments of shock, fear, anger and sadness as they experienced first-hand a taste of what it’s like to be a refugee,” she says.

“My first time going on the Refugee Camp in My

Neighbourhood tour was with the primary school students, and I did it once more with the high schoolers. I purposely tried not to know too much about what would take place, because I wanted to respond naturally as it happened on camera. The year 5 and 6 students reacted so genuinely to the elements of the tour.

“Scary’ and ‘confronting’ were two of the words many of them used, particularly to describe the section where we ‘crossed the border’. Even though I was an adult, I also felt really shocked and on edge in those parts, especially when the guide, whose face was obscured with a headscarf, demanded I hand over my wedding ring. We felt a fraction of the fear that refugees and asylum seekers face, but it was still incredibly impactful.”

Overall though, she says that for herself and Tran – who has made short films around the world, including in Cox’s Bazaar refugee camp – it was an honour for their Compass program to be recognised in this way, and they’ve come a long way since first meeting the tour guides and organisers without a camera. They’re a great team and she feels proud of what they have achieved – and its impact.

“Mary and I have come to documentary-making from different backgrounds, so our skills complemented each other ... It was a privilege to make Walk in My Shoes, as it features such special individuals and explores issues that feel more timely than ever,” Siobhan says.

Admittedly, it is a difficult time for many, and among the numerous challenges and adverse events unfolding around the globe, documentaries such as this become even more crucial. They provide a much-needed lens to assist viewers to understand complex issues, to amplify marginalised voices, and to inspire empathy, providing a sense of connection and hope in times of uncertainty.

In this way also, the work of Marin and Tran, along with the efforts of other Humanitarian Award 2024 winners and the Highly Commended, can help to inspire optimism and spark change and advocacy in communities, despite adverse and difficult circumstances that continue to affect the world.

Such dedication and constructive actions serve as a powerful reminder that even in tough times, positive

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transformation is possible through collective action and unwavering commitment to human rights.

Jorge Aroche, CEO of STARTTS, emphasises the importance of recognising the diverse efforts in refugee support.

“We are constantly inspired by the dedication of individuals from all walks of life, including those with lived experience, who contribute significantly to the healing journey of refugees,” he says.

“These awards, presented within the iconic walls of Government House, serve as a powerful tribute to the individuals who make refugee resettlement program a success.”

Governor Beazley expressed her honour in hosting the ceremony and officially presenting the awards at Government House: “The wonderful individuals and organisations recognised by these Awards exemplify the best of who we are as a community: compassionate, inclusive, and giving unwavering support for refugees who settle in NSW.”

Other winners at the Humanitarian Awards 2024 and those Highly Commended were: Ashley Young,

Service Manager of Multicultural and Refugee Health at the Armidale Refugee Health Team, awarded ‘Best Project’; Gabrielle Humphreys, General Manager of the Dandelion Support Network, Highly Commended for ‘Best Project’; Shaun Christie-David, CEO of Plate It Forward, awarded in the category of ‘Business’; Ahmad Zarar Mujahid, a committee member and U13s coach at Melrose Park Football Club, winner in the ‘Sport’ category; Aung Kyaw Htut Saw, awarded for her outstanding work as a ‘Refugee Community Worker’; Zainab Jalloh, Highly Commended for her contributions as a ‘Refugee Community Worker’; and Dr Bipin Ravindran, Acting Clinical Director at the Hunter Valley Mental Health Service, Senior Staff Specialist at the Newcastle Mental Health Service, and Clinical Lead for the Cultural Consultation Program, HNE LHD – winner of the ‘Rural and Regional’ award. R

To learn more about the winners and those Highly Commended at the Humanitarian Awards 2024, please go to: <https://www.startts.org.au/news-events/humanitarian-awards/2024-nsw-humanitarian-awards/>