

Belonging, Hope and Survival

By Nicola Conville

Yassmen Yahya fled Iraq with her young family to make a new life in Australia. She has since overcome many challenges and was recently elected as president of her local Mandaean community.

Can you tell us a bit about your background and the journey that led you to live here in Australia?

I fled Iraq in 2001, when it was still under Saddam's regime. My husband had been taken from our home in the middle of the night six months previously. It was so scary. The soldiers came at 3am - through the front door, the back door, from everywhere. My husband was still in his pajamas. It was winter and they wouldn't even let him put on a coat.

Over the next six months we searched everywhere for him. We didn't know if he was alive or dead. Finally I received a phone call from a man who asked me to meet with him. He gave me a small piece of paper with just two lines on it - it was from my husband, telling me to take our two young daughters and leave Iraq.

We fled to Jordan and eventually my husband joined us two years later. We had to pay money to the regime for his release. My youngest daughter was only one when my husband was taken and she was almost four when we got him back again.

In 2007 I came to Australia with the girls and my husband joined us two years later in 2009. It was very hard having our family torn apart during that time.

You were recently elected as president of The Sabian Mandaean Association. How did this come about?

When I first came to Australia I went to the Association to do some paperwork. At the time it was a community service run by older people and the computer knowledge there was lacking. I said, "Look, I know what I want, so if you let me use your systems I can get it myself."

I ended up helping them out in a volunteer capacity. I was going to English classes at the time, so after class I would go for two hours each day to help out.

Then I would pick up my daughters from school. Then I joined the board - I was actually the first female board member. After that, I became secretary. Then I was elected as president in December 2014.

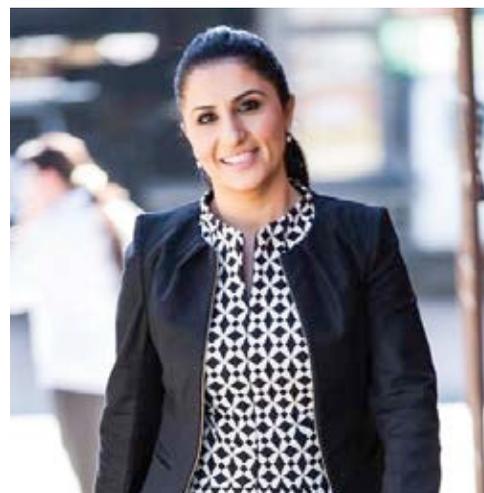
I am the first woman to be elected as president of The Sabian Mandaean Association, and as far as I know I am the only female president in a similar role in the world.

Can you explain the importance of the Association?

Mandaeans are a minority group and we have suffered a lot of persecution. There are around 10,000 Mandaeans currently living in Australia, and 5000-6000 of these are living in the Liverpool and Fairfield area, where the association is based.

Our association focuses a lot on immigration and just telling people who we are and what we do. We have a community centre which we opened three years ago in Liverpool. It consists of a church for prayer and services and a community hall for events and activities.

We have also purchased land in Wallacia in order to build a place of worship and hold our baptisms there. It



has taken a long time for us to get planning permission and it's a major project which we have undertaken with the help of the Mandaean Synod.

What kinds of services does the Association provide? And what are your responsibilities as president?

The centre is very busy and my role carries huge responsibility. A big part of my job is just ensuring everything is in place and runs smoothly.

The resource centre and church are open from 9.30am to 3pm, then the centre closes briefly and is open again from around 4pm until 10pm. We do a lot of casework and community work. We provide services for women, hold meetings and run classes and we hold playgroups for kids.

We also have picnics and run four or five large community events every year. We have a soccer team and run activities with that every weekend. We have a big Mandaean soccer team cup every December. And we also hold information sessions about Centrelink and access to legal advice.

I work at STARTTS full time, and after work I usually go to the community centre. Sometimes I don't get home until 11pm. I'm also dealing with emails and phone calls constantly.

Because the centre is solely run by volunteers, I need to make myself available to them when they need help or they're feeling frustrated, or they just need someone to talk to. We do, sometimes, cover volunteers' transport or food costs, but it's very nominal. My weekends are also spent at the community centre.

How do you fit the role in around your family life?

It is very demanding, but my family is very supportive. My husband is great and while the girls are older now - Sally is 16 and in year 10, and Sarah is 19 and in her

second year at UTS - to some extent they actually need me more than ever. It is really hard trying to manage everything.

Most of the time Sally is with me. She comes to the centre for a few hours in the evening after school. On Sundays we have family time after I finish at the centre. We always enjoy a late dinner together and just spend time talking and catching up. It is very challenging trying to balance everything.

Did you have to break new ground in terms of being accepted as a female in a senior position in your community?

When I first joined the board I was the only female. Another woman joined the board a while ago, but she didn't stay for long, unfortunately.

It was very difficult initially, because I was responsible for finances and sometimes people don't like to ask a female about such things. But people saw that I worked hard and began to believe in me. And I also had the support of our community leaders. I've been working in the community since 2008 and will hold my position as president for two years.

I am doing a social work degree part-time but I have put off my studies for now because I am so busy. When I finish my presidency, my plan is to finish my degree, focus on my career, and maybe just relax for a little while!

What are your plans for the future?

I want to build systems within the association so that if someone leaves, the service they provide doesn't disappear, which is what has been happening up until now.

I'm getting a lot of support from STARTTS to put systems in place and implement policies and procedures so that whoever comes after me won't have to start from the beginning.

It would be great to get some funding for the centre too so we are not just relying on volunteers all the time. That would help to take the pressure off.

Why is it important for you to be so active within your community?

It means that there's hope, and reassurance of the survival of the community for a long time. The "Mandi" community, as Mandaeans call it, is a home away from home.

It is the home to Mandaeans who are making a life here. The importance for me to be so active is because it's where I belong, something that I have been trying to attain since I left Iraq - and I'm not the only one. A sense of belonging, hope and survival is what is driving the community to give back and assist in any way we can. ☺