



Jorge Aroche. Photo: Legacy Photography

# A celebration to remember

## PROFILE

*In September last year more than 1000 people met in Fairfield to celebrate STARTTS' 30th anniversary. It was a unique opportunity to look back at the history of an organisation created in 1988 to help refugees deal with their past experiences and build a new life in Australia. OLGA YOLDI looks back on three decades of achievements.*



Photo: Legacy Photography

**T**hirty years ago CEO Jorge Aroche, then a young psychologist, began working at STARTTS in a small house in Fairfield. Equipped with a single telephone line, the small team of psychologists and counsellors started to work with survivors of torture and trauma who had just arrived in Australia.

From its humble beginnings, STARTTS has emerged as a leading organisation that has grown and evolved with time. Today it employs 200 staff and operates from 10 offices across NSW and in the past three decades has assisted 70,000 survivors of torture and trauma from more than 100 countries.

“It has been an amazing journey,” Jorge says. “We started the service on a shoestring budget, with few resources. We grew and learned as we embarked on large projects such as Operation Safe Haven, established to assist Kosovar refugees and setting up torture and trauma rehabilitation services in East Timor. These were large projects for a fledgling organisation! Since then we have worked with successive waves of refugees fleeing different conflicts around the world.”

When STARTTS opened its doors in November 1988, says Jorge, nobody knew much about healing survivors of torture and violence. “We had to learn, and in doing so, learning became part of STARTTS’ culture, a culture that has endured over time. Learning and

transferring knowledge have been and continue to be a driving force that enables us to improve and innovate as an organisation, and to better assist our clients regain their lives after torture and suffering.”

Indeed, innovation is a hallmark of STARTTS. The organisation is involved in the development of new knowledge-based methods to achieve better results, research projects, always keeping up to date with the latest findings in psychotherapy and , the new developments in neuroscience and inviting globally renowned experts to clinical evenings and workshops.

“In the past 30 years we have accumulated much knowledge that we have refined and applied not only to pilot groups, but also to thousands of clients,” Jorge says. “But with knowledge comes the responsibility to share it so that others can benefit from it ... this is a challenge that has grown exponentially in the past few years.”

STARTTS’ Neurofeedback Institute (ANFI) is a new and exciting project designed to share expertise in cutting-edge areas, such as applying the latest advances in neuroscience to help reverse the effects of trauma on the brain. “It also includes our expanding training department, student internship clinic and the many research and teaching partnerships we have been fostering with tertiary institutions nationally and internationally,” Jorge says.

“Another challenge, also very close to our hearts, is to use the substantial advances made in this field in recent

years to coordinate a NSW state approach for the resettlement of refugees, a project that has been spearheaded by Professor Peter Shergold.” At the same time the Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) program and the School Liaison Program are two initiatives funded to address the impact of the additional intake of 12,000 refugees from Iraq and Syria. “These have truly supercharged our ability to assist families with children and young refugees,” Jorge said.

Witness to War was another project led by STARTTS that supported individuals, families and communities negatively impacted by foreign conflicts. It provided a services gateway for survivors and training for service providers about the best ways to mitigate the negative impacts suffered by survivors of trauma living in NSW.

Community Living Skills Refugees (MH-CSLR) program is an initiative focused on assisting those refugees most impacted by trauma to better manage their lives and access specialised treatment. STARTTS has partnered with New Horizons to deliver it across NSW.

In the past 10 years STARTTS has opened services in regional areas as many refugees began settling away from cities. The percentage of clients STARTTS assists outside Sydney has increased from about 5 to 20 per cent in recent years. “We must make sure all our clients receive the best services, no matter where they settle in NSW,” Jorge says.

STARTTS has a large community footprint, with a long history of assisting young people. Recently it joined the Compact Alliance, a coalition of 60 organisations across all sectors that have joined forces to support youth engagement projects to empower young people and help them become leaders in their communities. It has been extremely successful, reaching more than 22,000 young people in 130 schools. The latest evaluations show behavioural change is already happening among young people who want to connect, participate and give to their communities.

The anniversary also offered an opportunity to spotlight where STARTTS needs to redouble its efforts to meet the current and future challenges across the three key pillars of its work: community development, clinical services, and training and education. We live in uncertain times of disruption from a global pandemic, increasing inequality and many other problems, with too few solutions.

Jorge highlighted the challenges ahead in a world that is changing fast, and not necessarily for the better: “We live in a world that has become increasingly permissive of torture and human rights violations and resistant to dealing with the inevitable movements of refugees this triggers, and a world increasingly deaf to the plight of refugees.

“We need to sharpen our capacity to get our message across in a way that is both compelling and resonates with new generations. Our world is also being adversely affected by climate change. It is likely that in the future huge areas will become unproductive, and indeed unliveable, unless immediate, drastic and coordinated action is taken by people and governments everywhere. This is also a refugee issue. We know very well that competition for resources will force people to move because of famine and lack of water, which will result in conflict and repression. This is precisely the cause of many of the current refugee crises, and unfortunately there will be similar crises in future. So let’s act before it is too late.”

Keynote speaker and Multicultural NSW CEO Joseph La Posta says STARTTS has never been more needed than it is now. “Since 2015, 22,000 refugees and humanitarian entrants call NSW home. Last year alone we welcomed 5800 new Australians to NSW. I’m proud the NSW government has invested significantly to support refugee newcomers.”

Government funding was also crucial to enabling STARTTS’ achievements, as Jorge says: “Successive governments at state and Commonwealth level, no matter what side of politics, have understood the value of investing in the mental health of people who join our society after surviving unspeakable trauma. This investment has paid off in spades, and it is to their credit that – assisted by many capable bureaucrats – our elected politicians have acknowledged this. We have been able to benefit from ongoing bipartisan support for a long time now. We should all be very proud of this, particularly in the current global context.”

It is the courage and contribution of the refugees themselves that deserves our admiration for overcoming all odds. While every refugee story is different, they all share a common pattern of courage and determination to survive, to persevere in difficult environments and rebuild their lives.

Jorge says first and foremost, STARTTS belongs to the clients, who provide inspiration, purpose and meaning to the organization.

“It is an amazing feeling to see so many of you here today to celebrate our 30 years of service to the community. It fills me with joy, pride and gratitude to see you, friends and colleagues both old and new, clients and ex-clients, representatives from community and government organisations, from an incredible array of refugee communities, STARTTS supporters from all walks of life... Thank you for being here with us, thank you for supporting us on this 30-year journey.”



Bitia Jayzan. Photo: Legacy Photography

While much has happened in these three decades, a small core group of staff have been with STARTTS since the early days. Clinical psychologist and coordinator of clinical services and research Mariano Coello was one of the pioneers who launched the organisation. He has had a key role in the growth and evolution of clinical services and the expansion of research projects. Deputy CEO Lachlan Murdoch, community services coordinator Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Hayward, psychologist Marc Chaussivert and counsellor Luz (Lucy) Oscar Marin – a recipient of the Medal of the Order of Australia in recognition of her work

– have all been part of a committed team that played a vital role in the transformation of STARTTS.

“I feel incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to be part of it,” Jorge says. “I know most of my staff feel the same, and I would wager that most of you sharing this moment with us feel the same too, because the STARTTS journey belongs to all of us.

“Thank you for continuing to inspire us, so that we remain as committed to our work and as eager to tackle new challenges as we were 30 years ago – although I must say, a bit better prepared now, and a whole lot wiser.” R