



Photo: Legacy Photography

Finding a way

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First of all I would like to thank STARTTS, which is a shining light in the darkness as it gives refugees an opportunity to get ahead in their lives. I am one of them.

I started my journey to Australia in the year 2000. I was born in Iran, and I remember the Iranian revolution when I was three years old. I remember the smell of the burning fire and tar that overflowed our house.

When I was four, the Iran and Iraq war erupted, which lasted almost eight years. That meant that by the time it finished I was 12 years old. During my childhood, normally a time of enjoyment and discovery, my family and I were running from city to city for safety. I always felt different, not because of my low vision impairment, I simply felt different at school. Everybody would look at me as if I were a strange creature. I had to always practice religion

and wear a hijab, and I had to do everything that is strange to me and my own culture.

I finished high school through hard times, then I was old enough to start studying at university but couldn't attend because we had to flee again. Iran was no longer my home, but I was sure I could find a place far away from my country that would become my home. We decided to flee as a family, because we were not accepted and it was dangerous to remain there. This meant going to the other side of the ocean. Our journey was very hard, but I had to be strong as I came with my youngest brother. It was a long journey together, it was hard, but we made it. From Indonesia we went to Malaysia, and spent five days in the ocean in a rickety boat in wild seas.

When I arrived I said to myself, I have found a safe haven at last. This is what I had felt every time my family and I ran from city to city. When we would arrive in a new city I would ask my parents: "When will this running away be finished?". My mum would reply: "Be patient, the war will finish one day. When it's finished, we will let you know." That made me feel better: one day we would all be safe.

And then after spending five terrifying days on the ocean, I said: "I no longer need to flee anymore. We have finally arrived." When I disembarked and set foot in Australia, I kissed the shore, I couldn't believe this land was in fact Australia.

Then they took us to the Woomera Detention Centre. I'm sure everybody knows about Woomera. The first day I was there, it was a disaster. I was feeling so tired I couldn't move, I slept in. In the evening I put on my nice clothes, makeup and nice earrings. I was free at last, in Australia. But when I came out to go to dinner, dinner was finished! Then I realised I was in a detention centre. I was in a bad environment. I said to myself: "What are you doing, Biti? Go back, take off your clothes, put them in a drawer. We still have a long time to wait to be free."

And when I saw the long fences, I still remember thinking "one day, I will be free." Once beautiful animals were looking at us from behind the fence. They were looking at us and jumping up and down. I told my friend: "Do you know what they think? They think, 'Poor people, why aren't they free? Why are they behind fences?'" Six months later it was finished. I came out without my brother because they had separated us. I came out by myself without my family – and I found out the visa I got was a Temporary Protection Visa, so for six years I had to wait to be able to study. So I thought: "What? Still not finished?"

Six years have gone by. I am now married. I built my life during these six years. And I heard about the Families in Cultural Transition program held at STARTTS. I learned that when I get my citizenship, I will be able to study, yes, I can study, and I can access services.

In these six years, I didn't just sit and do nothing. I found where the nearest library was and went there to study English for one or two hours each day. I learned English and now I have citizenship. I'm Australian now. I'm working.

It's hard to be Australian. Then when I attended the Families in Cultural Transition program, I thought, "Wow, what an amazing experience, what amazing information I am given and what an amazing program." When I finished it I felt I was so well-informed, I wished I had gained that information at the beginning when I came out of the detention centre. I would like to say to refugees now: "You are so lucky, so lucky to get this service when you arrive in Australia".

When I finished Families in Cultural Transition I met the lovely Yassmen, she was of great support. She put me on the right path and introduced me to other women in the community, including volunteers. I realised I wanted to be part of this women's group that met regularly, but I also wanted them to bring their children, as many are traumatised and a bit lost. I thought they needed to be supported so I asked Yassmen: "Please, I have an idea. I need to build something for these kids in this community, it's a playgroup". She said: "That's a good idea, Biti. Rosemary Signorelli is an amazing person, she can help you with this."

We met with Rosemary. She is a gem. She gave us not only a lot of information, but games and a few training sessions. So we were ready to build our Mini Mandy, an amazing playgroup, and we did. Lovely mums arrived. "Yes, come in," we said to them. "We're coming," they said. But why are mums leaving their children and leaving? "You said two hours," they said. "We're coming back, we have shopping to do." "No, no, mum, you are now to sit next to your children. This is a playgroup. You need to be next to your loved one and, learn to connect with your little ones."

Rosemary, your message is ever in my mind. And we tried to help the mums to understand they need to play together with their kids, to build their relationship, build attachment, not only connection with each other. It was really hard, because the mums are also suffering from trauma and mental issues. We need to help these mums too.

My community is supporting me. My community is opening doors for me. Because of my low vision everyone is very helpful. I need to send a message to the parents of kids with a disability, because having children with disabilities is a disaster in our community, it is shameful, so parents tend to hide them, and leave them behind, and don't want to talk about it.

I would say to them: "Don't be ashamed of them, because that child with your support can build his abilities and a future." R