

# Celebrating divErsity



Developing leadership, confidence and self-esteem was the guiding principle of a weekend camp at the Victorian seaside town of Anglesea. OLGA YOLDI reports on a weekend of affirmment for 61 young migrant women from 25 countries.

Regaining confidence and self-esteem is one of the most difficult challenges when women are uprooted due to war, migration, loss, trauma, or simply by big changes to their lives. Coming into a new country, the stress is so intense that one can easily become depressed, socially isolated, or ill. With this in mind, AMES Victoria, an organization with a long trajectory working with newly arrived migrants and refugee women, came up with the idea of organising a gathering of young women students. The women, aged 18 to 40, were attending English classes across Melbourne.

Some participants had escaped war from countries such as Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea and others had migrated to Australia through marriage. Katerina Aleksoska, one of the organisers, said that “we wanted them to feel a sense of ownership in the new country and offer a space to express their ideas, feelings and thoughts through artistic activities and in an environment of joy and fun.”

All sorts of artistic and physical activities were organised for the three days. Friday was spent exploring the beaches and the bush near Anglesea. “Some participants from Somalia discovered the

sea for the very first time” Katerina said, “they were stunned looking at the immensity of the ocean and brave enough to venture into it with caution, holding hands in big circles.” At night there was dinner, music and dancing. Dances ranged from African, Eastern European and many other types. “I am so happy here, I made so many new friends, it is absolutely great,” said Mona. One of the aims of the camp was to express their creative potential through specific activities. “Just because many of the participants do not speak English, that does not mean they need to be silent or invisible in Australia, because their ideas can still be expressed through drama, painting, and other forms of artistic expression”, Katerina said. “We wanted to instill women with a sense of pride and achievement. The objective was to value one’s self, one’s story and therefore one’s life.”

Even the themes of racism and ethnicity were explored in a seminar facilitated by Carol Ransley from the Equal Opportunity Commission and Jiselle Hanna from Darebin Legal Service. Both used examples from people’s lives and the media about common forms of discrimination and racism



and informed women about their rights. “We hoped that these discussions would help women to challenge their own stereotypes and prejudices, and thus help to foster attachments and links with women outside their own cultural group,” wrote Katerina in her report. The camp was a success, it was hard to leave and say goodbye. The warmth, the creativity, the dancing and singing and having the space to bond with each other contributed to a unique synergy that broke all cultural and linguistic barriers.

Although cultures are diverse and unique, something does prevail in every culture and that is their basic humanity. The camp confirmed that. “We emphasized that while communities are normally formed on the basis of nationality, language or religion it is also possible to forge communities in their dreams and goals”, the report said.

According to Melba Marginson, who has been working on a leadership and advocacy project for ethnic communities for some time now, the camp was only the beginning. The Leadership project will also include a module that promotes and nurtures leadership in young women. Initially the plan was to target Arabic speaking women, but that proved too difficult and instead AMEP students were invited to participate.

The camp approached the promotion of leadership in an innovative way. The report states that “We believe the women were already driven and knew how to be leaders, but did not have the confidence or the self-esteem to believe they could be. We thought that if women were introduced to new ways of expressing themselves, they would see ways in which they could achieve and maximise their potential.” ■