

Sharing our stories conference

very start to make it work. So, things that created a lot of tension got discussed very carefully, with help from members of the group who in their professional lives were therapists or facilitators of some kind.

As the months passed, a general meeting pattern emerged that is pretty much the same today.

Each meeting starts or ends with a communal meal supplied by everyone.

This is followed by a business meeting and discussion, during which some people tell their stories or someone speaks to a topic of interest to the group.

In the beginning these discussions were prepared exclusively by members. Today, there is a mix of both members and outside speakers, which speaks volumes about how far group members have been

matter either was dropped permanently or until the person changed his/her mind.

Not everyone was happy in the group. Some left outright, while others continually come and go as they wish. There is no membership fee per se, but there is a Tzedakah fund – or charity fund – to which everyone contributes at each meeting. Members in need are helped as much as the group is able, both psychologically and financially.

MY HEALING

At first Elizabeth didn't share her story

I still felt like an interloper, even though I felt very much at home in the group. Then, one year I was co-coordinator with Tamar, an art therapist. It was the year we had the first child survivor confer-

this little chat with a fellow child survivor was the beginning of my healing. Other group members also found themselves changing and dealing better with their own problems and accepting those of others.

Slowly I accepted the fact that, indeed, not only was I a refugee from the Revolution, but also a child survivor of the Holocaust. It made sense and as I accepted it, and continued to be active in the group, I started to move from the outside to the inside - not only within the group, but also in other areas of my life.

Elizabeth wanted to help child survivors of other wars by inviting them into the group, yet other members disagreed, so her wishes, stronger than ever today, were not fulfilled.

THE NEED FOR GROUPS, THE NEED FOR SHARING

Prior to the Sharing our Stories, Elizabeth found some research that suggested her experience was not unusual.

"Studies of Holocaust survivors indicate that the most devastating effects were on those who were infants during this massive trauma (Kestenberg and Brenner, 1996); adolescents who survived did relatively well, faring better than adult survivors. The separations and deprivation of parental care, which all young victims experienced, were most damaging for the youngest children...

No wonder that it took me a lifetime to accept, overcome, come to terms with, or whatever the right expression is, with the darkness that clouded my youth. I wish that I had the tools to do it sooner.

I hope that groups like that do exist among today's refugees, but if not, I'd be really happy to help start one if anyone is interested.

Thank you very much for allowing me this time to tell my story. ■

ence.

After a few workshops, I puzzled over with Tamar why my nightmares stopped and, I wanted to know where the turning into dust terror came from. She said they were one and the same thing. I had never thought that could even be a possibility, but it made sense, so I asked how I could get rid of it, because I was truly fed up with being terrified. She said, 'you face it and embrace it and it will go away'.

Easier said than done. Nevertheless,

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able to come out of their shells and deal with the past.

There was deliberately no formal structure. Each year two people are elected as co-ordinators, who organise, with help from others, whatever needs to get done.

Perhaps most importantly, we agreed to disagree and only do things as a group when we had a consensus. For example, some people wanted to be active with some other groups over local social-justice issues. If only one person objected the



Exceeding a troubled education

Manijah Haidary-Hakim

Manijah Haidary-Hakim's Story

Born in Afghanistan to an archaeologist father and high-school teaching mother, Manii was a member of a 'privileged' family. Forced to leave the land they loved when the United Soviet Socialist Republic invaded, Manii arrived in Australia aged eleven.

Manii shares the difficulties she faced entering Australia's school system, her angst in letting down her father, her love of her parents despite all the challenges that come with being torn between two cultures, her desperate desire to be a 'normal kid' and how she has overcome all of this to embark on a successful career.

I came to Australia in the mid-80s as a pre-teenager, and was immediately enrolled in the local primary school which also had an ESL [English as a Second Language] class.

My days involved morning ESL classes and afternoon general classes. I did not fit in to these general classes and wished that I could stay at ESL all day. I never understood the structure of the classes or what was being said, why the students didn't stand when the teacher entered the room, why the teacher would not hit you when you were naughty and so on. These were never explained and it was assumed that I would just fit right in.

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“I felt that my primary school teacher was somewhat annoyed at my lack of understanding and having to explain things over in slow spoken format. This experience in primary school – my dislike of it – soon paved the pathway for my future education”.

To this day my brother remembers being introduced to his grade 3 class as Pyjamas and being stunned as to why everyone was laughing. The pronunciation of his name was nowhere near pyjamas.

I felt that my primary school teacher was somewhat annoyed at my lack of understanding and having to explain things over in slow spoken format. This experience in primary school – my dislike of it – soon paved the pathway for my future education.

I hated school and hated high school even more. [I was] confused as to why everyone had to get up and move around to a different classroom with a different teacher, but I managed to live through that.

So at the end of my schooling I made the culturally taboo choice of not continuing with my education. I guess the reason was that I could never fit in.

I could never understand what anything being taught at school had to do with life like maths, geometry, trigonometry, fractions... thinking about it now makes my head hurt. It didn't matter how many maths tutors my parents hired for us I hated it.

Yet I excelled in the Arts, English and so on. However, I could not communicate all these feelings to my father. I guess he was struggling with his own demons. Having come to a new country at the age of 36 with 3 little kids, starting a whole new life and career. He was a qualified journalist and archaeologist, he was trying to ensure we had everything we needed.

My childhood dream had always been to be a lawyer or study journalism like my dad but I did not want to have to study for it. I spent some time in this frame of mind, arguing with dad that I did not simply want to go to uni and do something other Afghans do; I did not want to live a life for others.

You will hear me speaking a lot about my dad, I guess because he has been the

most important person in my life, my mentor and guide and I have done everything on dad's advice. Mum was always my best friend and confidant; I guess I needed that because I was the only girl.

My father was old school mentality, and struggled for a long time to change, he still had the “back home mentality” that you finish school, go to university, get a job and then get married. He always insisted that without a degree I would not be able to have a career.

I guess I was caught in a clash of cultures. My weekends consisted of being the daughter of a prominent person in my community and living a life of constant scrutiny and being in the spotlight. When we first came to Australia there were very minimal provisions for refugees.

I remember renting our first property, it was mid-December, and we had been in the country for approximately one month. We went to some charity organisations but there was no help, we had to sleep on our wooden floor boards with our clothing as pillows and blankets. This made my father very angry. He still recalls my youngest brother who was five years old at the time asking him when we would be going to Australia to live a happy life.

These events made my father fight for refugee services. I like to think of him as one of the first refugee activists in Australia and this was why we had to constantly have journalists on the door steps, be in the media, and speak at public conferences.

I totally loathed it, mainly because I didn't want the school kids to find out. Monday to Friday consisted of a life of normality, not being noticed, being able to do what I wanted... somewhat, and I lived in constant fear that my two lives would collide one day, and they nearly did on one occasion.

One time in Year 7 my family was

supposed to be on the Ray Martin midday show. I did not want to go on; I was new to high school and really did not want the school kids to see it, or my teachers. I begged my dad not to make me go on, so I created this little white lie. I told him that I had a maths exam that I could not leave. However, to my utter devastation on the day during PE class I was called into the office and there stood my father.

In my school uniform I went to the Channel 9 studios and into the make up rooms. I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Meeting some famous faces while I was there was the least of my concerns, I just wanted the day to end, something to happen. So... on the show I went. Imagine my surprise when Ray told the nation that he had pulled me out of my Maths Exam to meet me. I had no idea where to run.

Anyhow, after high school after having spent some time trying to think about what I wanted to do with my life, I found a job that was meant to be an interim job at an international promotional company as a receptionist. I was very quickly promoted to production manager which meant I dealt with some of the biggest businessmen in the country.

I really did not know why they were all trying to recruit me. I did not realise it at the time but in looking back I realise that the skills that led to this whirlwind promotion were due to those weekends living in the public eye. Living the public life taught me some invaluable skills in diplomacy, interpersonal skills, and public speaking to name a few... skills that are transferrable to any job.

Looking for work at CES [now Centrelink], Manii was offered a temporary job with that very organisation.

I really enjoyed working at the organisation. I even started a TAFE course in welfare part-time, which then led to

studies towards a B. Psychology.

Manii then moved to a private sector Job Network provider and quickly moved into management.

It was during this period of my life that I discovered my passion for training. I was on a project to write and deliver several training packages for one of the Job Network organisations. I realised [then] that I did not want to study psychology but rather adult education and therefore I changed my degree. But, I wanted more security in a job and missed working in the public service.

So Manii obtained a job at Centrelink, and six years later she has a university degree in adult education,

I have learnt to love study, and develop my own business to be opened very soon.

I have realised that a university degree is important but most important is to have a job that you enjoy.

Having worked within the recruitment industry for most of my career I would say that I know the ins-and-outs of gaining employment in this country. If you really want to be employed you will find a job... because the opportunities are endless.

I am now working at management level and loving every moment of it. My absolute love for adult education had led me to complete my degree and it has helped me with my career.

I guess education is a bonus to have when you are employed, however having those other soft skills are also imperative and these skills are what get you to places you want to go.

I know so many colleagues who don't have university level qualifications but are doing very well in their careers and this is mostly due to the fact that they have those soft skills. I am in no way saying not to study. But I am saying that you need to study what you want and enjoy it. ■