



Straddling two cultures

Carlos and Yolanda Encina

Carlos and Yolanda Encina's Story

Juan Carlos, Yolanda and their young son John came to Australia as political refugees in 1975. They were forced to leave their family home in Chile in the wake of a violent political uprising. Yolanda and Juan Carlos applied for political asylum in Lima, Peru, before being granted the opportunity for re-settlement in Australia.

Since arriving in Sydney over 30 years ago both Yolanda and Juan Carlos continue to be enthusiastically involved in the Chilean and Latin American communities in Australia. Juan Carlos initiated the formation of the Chilean Association. Both are also involved in assisting the community through the NSW Spanish and Latin American Association for Social Assistance.

In 1975, Yolanda and Juan Carlos were forced to leave their home, their family and their country, and all that was familiar to them. As political refugees they found safety in Australia, as well as a host of challenges. Here they share their story of how, through personal effort, and family and community support, they were able to adapt. They offer tips on how others can do it too.

After our first wave of curiosity about our new country, Australia, the reality hit us. Losing our ability to communicate to those around us was very difficult in the beginning.” Yolanda and Juan Carlos both studied English in Chile, however they had never heard an Australian accent before.

Yolanda recalls their first confronting experience with the new language. “We decided to go to Parramatta by bus three months after we arrived. On our trip there we had no problems. We asked the driver how much the ticket cost and paid the fare. On our way back the driver asked us a question that we did not understand. He kept asking the same question over and over in the

same tone but we still did not understand. We were so embarrassed and the people on the bus started to complain. Eventually the driver let us on but we never understood what he was asking...

“Six months later we went back to Parramatta on a similar trip. The same thing happened. No questions were asked on the way there. On the way back the driver asked us in a heavy Australian accent, ‘Where ya goin?’ We responded ‘Villawood’.

‘Where ‘n’ Villawood,’ he asked. We asked him why it mattered. He said because the fare was calculated based on the distance travelled. He did not want to charge us the full fare if we were getting out before the last stop...

“If only someone had told us before going on the bus trip how the system worked -- we would have understood the question that the first driver asked and avoided the embarrassment.”

Yolanda and Juan Carlos desperately sought a sense of belonging in their new country. But as well as ‘losing’ his native language, Juan Carlos also struggled with a new identity.

“Luckily I found work as a factory worker quite easily and I was glad to have found a means to provide for my family. However, I also wanted to study but it was difficult to fit in classes around my work schedule and I was often forced to miss class. When Yolanda finished her six-month English course we decided that she would work for three months so that I could do the accelerated English course full-time...

“The decision to leave my job to study full time meant that I had to make the shift from an ‘average Chilean fellow’ who only did men’s work, to a ‘sensitive new age guy’. I started to help around the flat and took care of our son when Yolanda was at work.

“I remember taking my son for meals at the common dining room in the hostel where we lived. I also used to mop the floor of the flat and leave the mop to dry on the veranda. A lot of the other refugees and migrants at the hostel noticed this and made jokes. They thought it was wrong for me to stay at home and do the ‘women’s work’ while Yolanda was out earning the money. Yolanda and I overcame this criticism as we knew it was important that I also had the opportunity to study English so that when I graduated I would look for a better job that I enjoyed.”

As well as having to adjust to a major shift in the typical gender divide, like all refugees Yolanda and Juan Carlos had to learn to cope without the support networks of family and friends. Fortunately Yolanda and Juan Carlos soon built new networks with other Chilean refugees. Together they overcame feelings of lost hope and bitterness and over time were able to strike a balance between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ cultures.

Yolanda explains, “to succeed in the new country we needed to embrace change and learn new ways of facing the

challenges that life brought. We realised that older refugees may prefer to maintain old customs but that younger people [like us] will be inclined to absorb new values from the new culture. We needed to listen to both groups and adapt our values so that we were happy with the balance between the old culture and the new culture.”

Based on their experiences they identified ‘tips’ for easier settlement and exchanged these ideas with other refugee and migrant communities.

“We needed to embrace change and learn new ways.”

LEARN HOW THINGS WORK IN AUSTRALIA

Yolanda and Juan Carlos’ number 1 tip’ for easier resettlement is to arm yourself with information about Australian business, legal and social systems as soon as you arrive in Australia. Yolanda and Juan Carlos highlighted the “real need to educate newly arrived refugees about



Yolanda Encina

Sharing our stories conference

these Australian systems, how things work and how to communicate effectively within this society. This must happen very early on in the settlement process to ensure that refugees and migrants do not lose their passion, and so that they are empowered to change their situation both as an individual and as a community."

Community organisations have a large role to play in this information exchange – just as they have a role in supporting newly arrived migrants and refugees on an 'emotional' level. Yolanda and Juan Carlos support mentoring programs for newly arrived refugees as an invaluable way for 'older' refugees to impart knowledge on re-settlement.

"It is crucial to start the settlement journey with a support infrastructure that provides people with the basic security, knowledge and confidence to succeed. Many people who started the journey isolated from support systems were susceptible to lonely and challenging situations and consequently their settlement experience was tainted by these initial negative experiences.



Juan Carlos Encina

"We are extremely grateful for the support we received from the migrant hostel where we initially stayed, our English teachers and others that assisted us during the first frightening months".

ACCEPT CHANGE

Yolanda and Juan Carlos' second tip for easier re-settlement is to embrace change. For many refugees and newly arrived

"Embracing change will make it easier to make positive decisions."

migrants facing a different way of doing things, different foods, different language, different social norms – change is an inevitable experience. But as Yolanda and Juan Carlos suggest, refugees and migrants do not have to change everything in their lives to move forward. It is true that newly arrived migrants need to re-evaluate their circumstances and adjust to their changing situation, but "there are things that you will feel that you cannot compromise. We didn't change the way we lived entirely, but we did introduce a few changes at a time, as we felt comfortable".

Yolanda and Juan Carlos addressed challenges by setting both long-term and short-term goals and accepting that "change is not easy. You can hate it and resist it, or you can embrace it and grow... Find someone to help you see things from a different perspective. Embracing change will make it easier to make positive decisions in the future".

COMMUNITY STRENGTH

One of the most important aspects of Yolanda and Juan Carlos's resettlement process was their involvement with the Spanish-speaking and Latino communities – as well as with the 'mainstream' Australian community. Engaging with the

community was and still is a source of strength. Yolanda and Juan Carlos' third piece of advice for newly arrived migrants and refugees was to "engage like-minded people to create social structures that will help you grow and link in with the Australian way of doing things".

"We believe that the best help and solutions come from within the community itself. Expecting assistance from

the government alone will not solve our community's challenges. Australia has a mix of all different cultures and we have very different migrant communities. This creates unique problems – but also unique solutions. By being involved in the Australian and the Spanish-speaking/Latino communities we were not isolated and were able to be part of the solution addressing the needs of fellow migrants and refugees."

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

The key theme to emerge from Yolanda and Juan Carlos' story is the value of information exchange and knowledge sharing -- sharing stories, resources and tips between Australian and migrant communities and within migrant communities.

Yolanda and Juan Carlos believe that they have successfully settled in Australia and they are proud of the home they have built for their family. Both recognise the reason for their happiness, sense of community and strong identity is their constant search for answers. Yolanda and Juan Carlos say never stop trying and always seek information. In return for information that was shared with them they share this information with others. ■



Holocaust child survivors: Support group flourishes

Elizabeth Ban

Elizabeth Ban's Story

Elizabeth Ban is member of Jews for Social Action, and believes passionately in social justice. Born in Hungary, she is a Holocaust child survivor and a child refugee from the 1956 Hungarian revolution. After being stateless for 17 years and living in four countries on three continents, she is happy to call Sydney home.

Elizabeth describes how, against all the odds, a child holocaust survivors group flourished. How despite her initial denial of her Holocaust survivor status, this group became a catalyst for her own healing journey, which she shares below.

I have to tell you up front that I am not an EXPERT in community action, psychology or anything else. I am a journalist. And I have just broken the golden rule of good journalistic writing, which says: don't ever start a story with a negative.

I do this for a reason. To stress that I am here simply to tell you about a group of people who helped me sort out the darkness in my otherwise perfectly ordinary life.