



playing but then I like showing everyone that I can do it. It makes me feel good inside when I can do it."

Thinking about what these kids have been through before reaching this program is truly upsetting. Born in war, they've grown up in refugee camps. They've witnessed violence of the worst kind. Parents have gone missing, been killed or raped, often in front of their eyes. They've lost their homeland, their culture and their friends.

Exposure to such extreme trauma is almost bound to cause emotional, social and developmental difficulties for refugee kids. Teenage years are fraught with challenges at the best of times, but for refugees the trauma they have experienced is compounded by the problems they face with communicating in an unfamiliar language and learning a new set of rules about how to behave.

Young people however are incredibly resilient and have great capacity to recover if they can access appropriate support and opportunities to learn and grow.

Describing why STARTTS chose Capoeira Angola, Coordinator of Community Services, Jasmina Bajraktarevic Hayward, said that it was particularly relevant to the needs, strengths and diversity of young people.

"It's about empowerment and overcoming adversity, developing individual strengths while being a member of the group," Jasmina says.

"It's fun, it uses lots of energy and it helps the young ones to express their frustration and aggression in a constructive way."

As 17-year-old Raymond\* from Burundi explains, "I love all the time we are in the classroom playing Capoeira. I feel good, like not angry ever."

Everyone agrees that relationships are the central element that makes Capoeira Angola such an effective program.

"It's modelled really good relationships and interaction with the kids and with each other. That is very powerful, for the kids to see a different way of doing things," explains Elisabeth Pickering, Cabramatta IEC Counsellor.

Maestre Roxiho says, "The core principle of Capoeira Angola is respect."

"I started Project Bantu with at-risk kids in Brazilian slums, with kids who did not respect other people, teachers or parents. I started in a playful way. What they learned in the class, little by little was brought out in their everyday life. They started to respect the rest of society as well," he says.

"Keeping Capoeira Angola in its original traditional form is essential for its success."

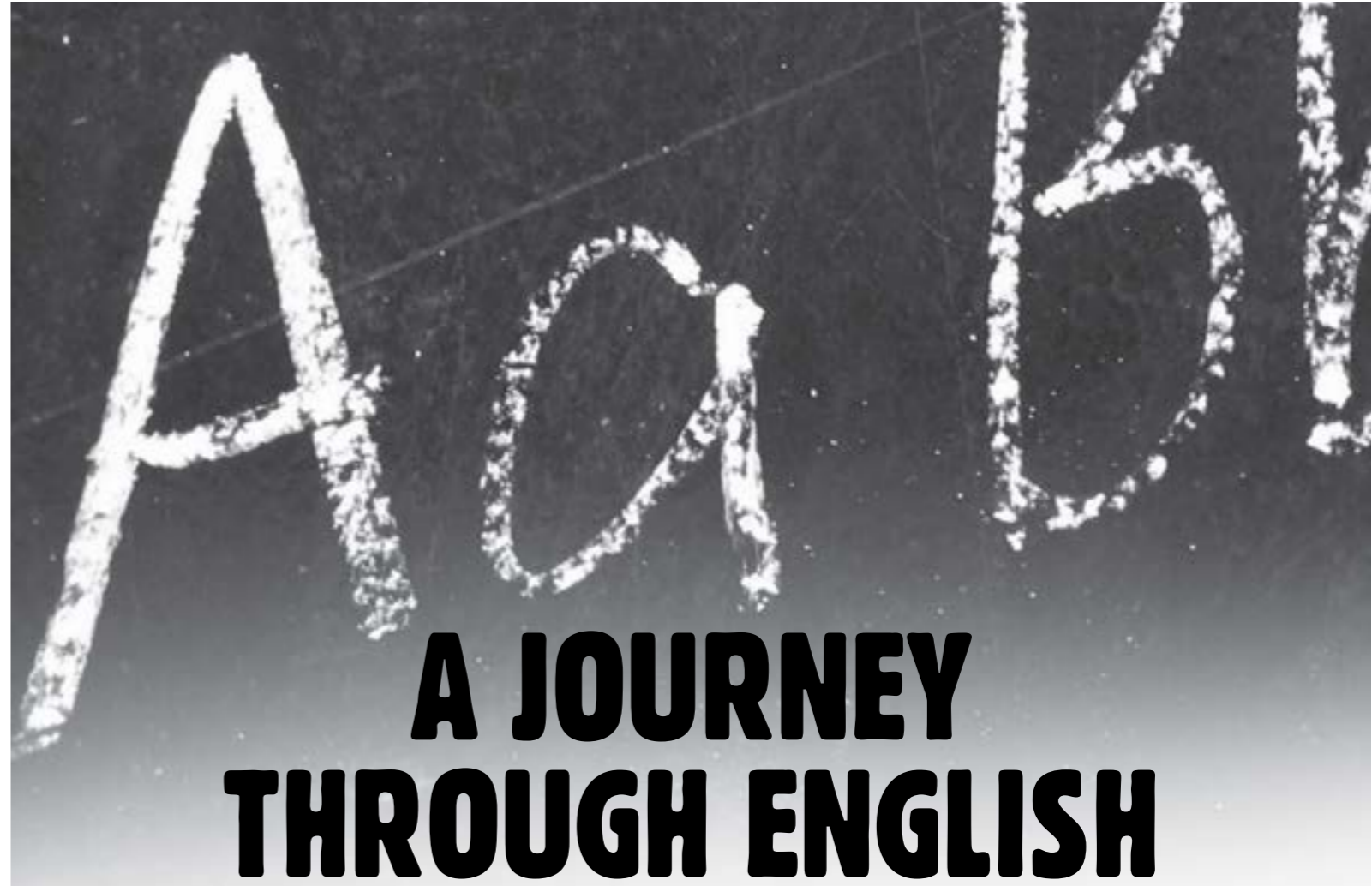
Mohammed\* puts it like this: "Other teachers are always shouting at me and are so bossy. In Capoeira the teachers are talking nice to me. I hate it when the teachers shout at me. It makes me feel angry and bad. But when the Capoeira teachers are always so nice to me it makes me feel good."

Amy\* has learnt basic relationship skills. "It taught me about helping people. Everyone has to help each other," she says.

Summing up the feeling of the Capoeira Angola students 16-year-old Maria says, "It makes me feel happy. When I come here it is like a different world to me. I don't care what happens outside. Like if I have bad days, when I come here I'm happy, It is like a big family here." ■

\*Names have been changed to protect the identities of the young people.

For more information about Capoeira Angola at STARTTS call 02 9794 1900 or visit [www.startts.org.au](http://www.startts.org.au)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tccQxDDyC0M>  
[www.capoeiraangola-projectbantu.com.au](http://www.capoeiraangola-projectbantu.com.au)



# A JOURNEY THROUGH ENGLISH

Since 2000, volunteer English teachers have provided classes at STARTTS for men and women from refugee backgrounds who have not been able to gain access to the classes through other formal channels ELIZABETH SCHAFFER speaks with some of the teachers and students.

The English classes began as part of STARTTS' response to an urgent need that arose when legislation was introduced to bar people with Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) from free English tuition.

"They were in culture shock", says Sister Maureen O'Connor, who has been a volunteer at STARTTS for many years. "People were very traumatised. In a way they had experienced trauma all their lives. Many of the students were pre-literate. They were on TPVs, they had no English, and had been in detention. At STARTTS they were greeted and welcomed and treated with dignity."

It was clear to the teachers that a flexible, student-centered approach was needed in the classes. "All the teachers used to bring morning tea to share with their classes and they gave the students time. It was hard for

people to learn, their memories were affected. They had post-trauma symptoms. They were so broken when they first started coming to the classes. It's terrible to think of the TPV ever being introduced again. It caused so much suffering".

The English classes that were started for the men on TPVs were not, Maureen says, conventional English classes. "That's not what people needed. I remember a teacher who came into class intending to volunteer. She wanted an 'outcomes program' but we couldn't teach in that way, topic to topic, it just didn't work. I rang a prominent refugee advocate who told me 'These are adults; they have a life experience to tap into'. And that's how we taught; we touched their life situations. We were on a journey together, we celebrated as someone became a citizen and when there



A previous student with teacher Maureen O'Connor.

From L to R: Elizabeth Giles, Mary Foley, Sr Maureen O'Connor, Margaret Warburton and Helen Wren

was sadness, we shared in that too".

The teachers encouraged class members to access STARTTS' services when needed and let them know about other community resources that were available such as help to find furniture and other household basics. They used a combination of ingenuity and community networks to gradually build the resources available to the students. "Even dictionaries were difficult to get at the beginning," says Maureen. "It was hard to find Dari/English dictionaries. We got a donation to pay for some dictionaries and a local supermarket arranged to import some for us."

"In 2000 we started with four weekly classes - two beginners' classes and two at a slightly higher level. We taught language in context - survival English. We soon discovered that we all laughed at the same things. We had to experiment and we had to be flexible. Students were sometimes there in class and sometimes not. We made each class an entity in itself. We taught people the tools they needed to greet someone, taught them to really listen to what was being said. We allowed them to take time to hear things. If you are working in a factory you're going to hear different English from the English you hear on language tapes - we taught them to understand ordinary English, like 'how ya goin mate?'. Another teacher tells of a student who asked for an explanation of the greeting he received every

morning at work "Ya gettin any?"

Liz Giles, who taught in the program from 2000 to 2008, agrees with Sister Maureen about the importance of the classes in people's lives. "Students got some understanding of Australian culture and support from each other. The social things have been really important. They gained greater understanding of each other's cultures and had to make some adjustments. I've seen people making lasting friendships across cultures - people with no common language other than English developing good friendships. It was not just the English classes themselves but being part of the whole environment at STARTTS that helped people. People felt accepted wherever they were in their lives. It was a non-judgemental environment. That was an eye-opener for many of the English students - that people not from the same religion, culture or nationality were prepared to help them. It changed how they saw things. One of our students, Salim Jafari, said "You have taught us a new way to live".

Some of the volunteer English teachers came to STARTTS with long teaching careers behind them while for others, teaching was a new direction. Liz, who came from a professional background in speech therapy, found a new career direction as a result of her teaching at STARTTS. Like all the volunteer teachers she believes that the volunteers and the students learned from each other. "It

was an amazing experience" she says. "I felt embarrassed when people said thank you, I got so much. It broadened my outlook, gave me contact with other cultures different to my own. It taught me to be more tolerant of different cultures, different voices. It gave me friendships and networks of people I wouldn't otherwise have known. I got experience teaching and I went on and made it my career. I discovered that I loved teaching. It was absolutely a two-way thing". Most importantly, says Liz: "I was struck by how much people can endure and survive. I had a student for example who had lost 150 members of his family but he was still going on and he was not bitter".

Like the other English teachers, Margaret Warburton began volunteering at STARTTS because she was motivated by a wish to help people. "It feels good to make a contribution". She has taught in STARTTS English classes throughout their many different stages. "Now the class is all women. Many of them have had no schooling in the past. We have four teachers, two on each class so that people at different levels can get the attention that they need. Most of them have finished their 510 hours of free English tuition but they haven't been able to use that time very well because they didn't know how to learn and didn't yet understand that learning is a two-way process. They weren't ready - there was so much for

them to learn in a new culture. The young can learn quickly but it's especially hard for the older students."

Zahida left her previous English course after becoming pregnant. STARTTS classes were flexible enough for her to join. "Now I can write my name and address, I know I can explain some things in English, it makes me feel better. When I am in the English class I forget about other things, problems in the past, I talk to everyone. I don't feel lonely anymore, I am more happy."

Most of the women in the current classes are from Afghanistan as well as from other countries. Many in the group came to join their husbands who were originally on TPVs, while many others have lost husbands and family members. "Just getting to know the teachers is important for the women," says Margaret. "Being in the class increases their confidence and self-esteem. They are really impressed when they find out that we are volunteers. We can run the class to suit how the women need to learn. Last week we made a salad in class together. What's so and so doing? She's peeling a carrot. It made everyone so happy. We had a lot of fun. Then we sat and ate the salad together. It was lovely."

Thanks to all of STARTTS' volunteer English teachers over the years. ■