

Helping refugees to speak out

By Jane Austin

A major hurdle for many newly arrived refugees in Australia is acquiring fluency in English. Without the ability to speak the language they have greater difficulties with settlement, are more likely to be socially isolated and have limited employment opportunities.

For these reasons, most refugees are eager to attend English classes and gain a skill that is vital for their survival in the new society. But some people are unable to attend English classes due to a physical disability or illness. Women in particular find it difficult to attend classes if they have young children or, for cultural reasons, they are not permitted to travel alone and attend mixed classes of men or women.

The only option for these people is to find a tutor who can come to their home on a regular basis – an expensive prospect for most. Mission Australia recognised this problem and, with funding from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, via the Adult Migrant English Service, established a free Home Tutor Service in July 1998.

The home tutors who provide the service are trained volunteers who are supported by professionals. The volunteers are matched to a client in their local area and visit them regularly to teach basic English and community access information.

One of the volunteers is Samira Badreddine, who arrived in Australia from war-torn Lebanon 15 years ago and had been unable to speak English at the time. Badreddine had been a recipient of a similar home tutor service: "The lady [tutor] who came made me feel sure. The way she introduced herself I felt like I trusted her. It was good and helpful and the visit made me feel relaxed and it helped me to settle here.

"The ways she talked about her family, you felt warm and I didn't feel alone anymore. I felt someone cared and I felt more secure," she says.

Today, Badreddine is fluent in English and has decided to help others who are in the same position as she was 15 years ago. Through the Mission Australia's Home Tutor Service she has

been allocated a client: "When I go to her place we sit and talk. We talk in English about things that interest her and do some work on English she needs.

"It's very interesting for me. I have learnt now I can prepare a tutoring session for her. I can prepare newspaper articles and things for us to work on. I enjoy it".

The Home Tutor Service has proved to be extremely popular and the demand for it is double what was anticipated. "During this financial year we've had over 500 clients coming through our service and we've many more, particularly in the west and south west of Sydney, waiting for a tutor," says service manager, Liz Griffiths.

Many volunteer tutors are currently studying welfare, social sciences, languages or arts. Joining the program lends an extra dimension to their CV's and gives an added edge to students wishing to enter the work force or apply for postgraduate courses in a related field.

In addition to the Home Tutor Service, Mission Australia also runs an Enhancement Program designed to support the ongoing work already being done in the community to help refugees and migrants improve their English. The Enhancement Program already works with 50 groups and organisations in Sydney and Wollongong providing them with free training of tutors, access to resources and curriculum support so that they can hold their own English classes. Some of the organisations involved are STARTTS, various Migrant Resource Centres, religious groups, libraries and ethnic minority communities.

Both the Home Tutor Service and Enhancement Program are run by dedicated staff and volunteers who have a strong commitment to the communities they work with.

Provide an invaluable service to a refugee or migrant and help them learn English! For more information on how to become a home tutor call 9635 1543.

Check out the new STARTTS web site at

www.startts.org

STARTTS web site provides detailed information about the service including research, training programs, volunteering and jobs.

You can also download brochures in 12 languages and access some Transitions articles online.

