

The making of a local hero

PROFILE

Rosemary Kariuki didn't know anyone when she landed in Australia in 1999. She is the recipient of the 2021 Local Hero of the Year Award for her work helping migrant and refugee women overcome domestic violence. She spoke to Dunja Karagic about the loneliness during her first years in Australia and her efforts to build a sense of community.

DK: You were born in Kenya, what was your life like? And what made you decide to come to Australia?

RK: I have been in Australia for 21 years now and my life in Kenya was a good place to live. But every five years, there were tribal clashes. I come from a very big family. My father had two wives, there were 16 of us and we lived with our cousins and our aunties. It wasn't a nuclear family, it was a large family. I came alone. I left my children back home. A friend I met at the airport from Ethiopia accommodated me in a house in Carlton. Then St Vincent de Paul gave me a place to stay in Randwick. After that I lived in a unit, it was lonely as no one would talk to me and I used to wonder why isn't anybody talking to me? Until one day during the Christmas period I had a few spare Christmas cards so I decided to send them to my neighbours. In December 24th, before midnight I placed a card under each door that said: "Dear Unit Number 1, my name is Rosemary Kariuki and my

phone number is this, I wish you a Merry Christmas and could you please talk to me?" and for sure afterwards everybody used to stop to talk to me and they started inviting me to their homes.

After that, what did you do to overcome loneliness and build a sense of community?

I overcame it in a different way. I always believe it is better to do something, instead of just sitting around thinking and doing nothing ... I had to do something so my neighbours would talk to me. How I overcame the loneliness? I started volunteering at a nursing home called Little Sisters of the Poor in Randwick. I saw this advertisement where they wanted people to come and visit lonely residents at the nursing home, and I thought what a good idea to visit another lonely person, so I started volunteering and I did that for three years and these people became my new family. Unfortunately one by one they started to pass away and it started to affect



Photo courtesy of Rosemary Kariuki

me, so I stopped doing that and volunteered instead at the African Communities Council.

You co-founded the African Women Dinner Dance, an annual event that helps women overcome isolation, by sharing knowledge and experiences through storytelling, dance and traditional food.

When I started volunteering at the African Communities Council, I was elected the women's representative, that's how I ended up working with the New South Wales Police. At that time South Sudanese, Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees were coming to Australia in big numbers. So when I started working with the NSW Police as a multicultural community liaison officer, I realised refugee women were socially isolated and were not accessing services. So I thought about how I could provide information to them and link them to services. That's when the idea of the African Women's Dinner Dance came about. I said to the council, women like

dancing, eating, they like dressing up... It's normally the women who are struggling with their big families all by themselves, with no language, living in small houses. That's how I ended up working with women. When you give information to a woman, it will reach the whole community. If they believe in a message, they will keep on telling it to each other until everyone in that community knows about it. When you work with women you work with the whole family and the family will benefit from it.

You mentioned that you started working with the police, helping them communicate with non-English speaking migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. How did you choose this line of work?

Where I come from we fear the blue uniform. There's no way I could have ended up working for the police, but my friend, who was working at the council at the time, saw the job ad. She knew I was looking for a job

and she said, "Rosemary, this is a job for you, in fact you are already doing it but not being paid. At least with this job you'll be paid." As the women's representative with the African Communities Council I was connecting African refugees to services in a volunteer capacity. So I got the job and continued assisting women. Then I organised the first African Women's Dinner Dance. I said, this is not only a dinner dance, but a call for women to come, learn about the system and link them to services. I just kept on talking to women until they understood what I was saying and believed me. And at that first dinner dance in the Auburn RSL, 350 women attended. That is when an Australian speaker talked about her experiences of domestic violence, how she had managed to come out of it and how she survived it and the following Monday, 15 women came to report domestic violence. I started supporting women. Then through the dinner dance, a project called Cultural Exchange Program came about. It was aimed at connecting migrant and refugee women with local women by visiting regional areas to exchange culture and experiences of domestic abuse. This program has changed the lives of many women.

I take vulnerable women to the countryside for a long weekend. They talk with each other, meet local women and make new friends. Often domestic violence comes up during the conversation and they support one another. They say: "Go and tell Rosemary," so that's how they end up coming to me for support. I love supporting women. When a woman leaves an abusive relationship, if you don't help her, she will go back to the perpetrator. She'll say: "It's better going back than being on my own." When many women leave abusive relationships they lose their friends, they are never invited for Christenings, birthdays, housewarming parties, they lose their community. They become very isolated and even the kids are left alone because they're not invited to community events. So I connect women to social activities. If they have young children, I connect them to playgroups. I also help them look for a job. I connect them with other members of the community. I continue supporting them. I walk with them until they stand on their own two feet.

Most don't go back to the abusive relationship because they have made new friends, are working and feel empowered. But you can't just remove them from their home, their community and provide them with new accommodation, but have nobody to talk to them. If they don't work, they will be very lonely. They'll say: "I was better off in the abusive relationship." Normally when they come seeking help they are broken but after a while they feel empowered and are dancing on the streets. That's what makes me keep going.

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What do you think are the biggest barriers facing migrant women when it comes to finding help and reporting domestic violence? Did you ever find that language was ever a barrier in finding help?

What's hard is that women don't see the abuse. They think abuse is only being hit. In many cases there is psychological abuse, you can see they are being controlled. They're not allowed to talk to their neighbours, cannot call their parents. They don't even have any money. Because most of them are living with their parents-in-law, I ask them: "Why can't your mother-in-law help?" They say: "My father-in-law hits my mother-in-law when I'm there, so how can she help me if she thinks it's normal?" So that's what's the hardest for me. Most of the time I wouldn't tell women in those situations to leave, but you just empower them, show them violence is not okay, in this country there is help available and nobody needs to suffer. You educate them and they leave by themselves.

I don't think language is a barrier because if somebody doesn't speak English, they have people in their community that do speak English. I know people from

that community who can interpret. If women want to write statements they have to do so through certified translators. But if it's just a matter of them wanting to learn more about the system, that is when I use my connections, my links to the services.

What are some of the responses you've received from the women that you've helped?

A lot, when I was given the Australian of the Year Award, someone said: "You deserve it. Rosemary I can't express my gratitude and appreciation. I was homeless. You gave me shelter; you fed me, gave me hope and inspired me. When I was completely down, you put a smile back in me, challenged me and gave me a reason to carry on. Thank you." I am so blessed because I have wonderful people surrounding me. Building a network of connections and relationships has been very important. If STARTTS and the Community Migrant Resource Centre were not supporting me, I wouldn't be able to do what I do. The African Women's Group is supported by Friends of STARTTS. The Migrant Resource Centre also provides supports through a worker.

A documentary has been made about you titled *Rosemary's Way*...

Rosemary's Way started as a documentary, now it's a film shown in big cinemas around the world. A few years ago, I did a documentary called the *Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe* about a play and we performed it in the Belvoir Riverside Theatre. It went all the way to the Opera House and to London. It was about the stories of four women. It was very taxing for me. At that particular time I was very busy working, running a shop called African Village Market and my husband was sick. So I had too many things to do. The play was made into a documentary after a few years when [film-maker] Ros Horin came to me and said: "I want to see what you do that makes you so busy."

So I invited her to attend the Cultural Exchange Program and she organised a camera crew and they came along. We were going to the Blue Mountains and they stayed with us for three days, and Ros was immediately hooked, so she started documenting my work. All along I had wanted Cultural Exchange Program's stories to be written down, which didn't happen, so I'm still working out who can write the book because I don't want the stories to get lost. These are powerful stories from women and their hosts. Ros followed me with a camera for nearly two and a half years, so I sent her the things I was doing and she would send someone to follow me with a camera. That became *Rosemary's Way*, stories about women.

Is there one story during that time that really stuck out for you from the women?

The four ladies' stories in *Rosemary's Way* stuck out for me. The case of a woman called Pasca, nobody would give her a job because she has a disability due to polio. It didn't stop her brain, her heart. She's got four beautiful boys, but finally now she's working with UNHCR so that is a story I just couldn't even believe.

Sufia experienced very bad abuse and nobody could help her, she told me: "Rosemary, I wish I could have met you when I was going through my divorce, I lost everything, we had two houses, I came out with nothing." Everything was taken by the husband.

Then there is Anu, a beautiful, intelligent young lady. Who could abuse such a lovely girl? She's now recovered and strong. She's nearly finished her university course to make it easier for her qualifications to be recognised to work in her profession. She wants to teach Law at university.

I remember when I started in the Cultural Exchange Programme. There was this Pakistani girl, very young, very small, and she was not talking to anyone because she had no confidence. She was supported by the love flowing among the women present. She gradually came out of her shell. I met her on the street one day, she came running to me, she said: "Rosemary do you remember me?," I said, "Of course I do," she said, "I am working Rosemary, I've got children, I'm married with a wonderful husband." So those are the stories why I can never stop doing what I do.

You mentioned the African Village Market earlier. What inspired you to start that?

I started it because many women weren't working but they were knitting, sewing and had many talents. Because of language problems they couldn't get a job. I thought if we could create a market where they could sell their crafts and start their own businesses, perhaps at a community centre, that would be great, at the same time they could be linked to services and overcome their social isolation. So that's what I did. People used to come to the market, not only Africans but also other people to chat. They wanted to know about Africa. I always had a dream that one day we could have our community centre where women can come and just sit and tell their stories and even share their culture with children and other communities. In 2006 after the first African Women's Dinner Dance, women said they wanted to continue organising events to preserve our African culture, our dancing and music. So we founded the African Women's Group. We tend to express ourselves through music and dancing and we needed to do so. That is how the African Women's Group started.



Photo courtesy of Rosemary Kariuki

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**And tell me more about yourself and your family?
What do you do in your free time?**

My husband passed away in 2015. I have two children and two grandchildren and I live with one of them. What do I love doing? My house is an open house. There are always people around, people just come, not only Africans: Indians, Aborigines, etc. People just like coming and when they come they don’t want to leave. I always say, “I’m the caretaker, my home is your home, just come and feel at home. So many women come and have a rest. In my alfresco I put a daybed. Even when I’m not there, if a woman wants to just come and rest they are welcome. I put a fridge, I put some drinks there, some magazines and some fruit so that if somebody comes they can lie there, read and have fruit.

How has COVID-19 impacted women and your work?

Many people say to me, how am I surviving without having people around. It is true I can’t live without people, now that we can’t have anyone it is hard. It is hard for women, but we’re just catching up on WhatsApp, I’m just encouraging them. We have different groups, I ask them if they are okay, if anyone wants anything, and then another time I’ll ask them, “Oh, let’s talk, what did you do today, what made you happy?”, just to encourage them to communicate.

And just to go back to your family, did you meet your husband in Kenya?

The father of my children is there, he was a very abusive guy. We divorced a long time ago. When I came here I got remarried, then my husband got early onset dementia, and he was in a nursing home for three years and then he passed away. It was very sad but he was a very nice man to me ... he was the best thing you could want in a man, but God had other plans, yeah. My children came to Australia after I came here. I also have a few nephews and a niece. They came as international students because it’s so hard to come to Australia otherwise.

And what was your family’s response when you received the 2021 Local Hero of the Year Award?

Oh they say, “Oh we knew! We knew you were up to something!” because I’m always very busy. When the Rosemary’s Way documentary came out, that’s when they all realised what I did. They said: “You always say you’re busy, but we never understood why, but now we can see what you do.” So many people told me that. When I saw Rosemary’s Way I was shocked to see all the things I do.

And last, what are your plans for the future? What next?

I want to write a book about my life. So if I could get someone to write that book that would be good. I haven’t started, but I’m in conversation with a few people. It’s about my story, my memoir. The Cultural Exchange Program, that’s a different book, I’m still looking for somebody to write that. I haven’t mentioned about my faith. I’m a Christian, I’m a Catholic and my faith has a lot to do with what I do. My faith has helped me to achieve everything I have achieved. My faith in God makes things happen. So it is very important to me. R