



7 UNTOLD STORIES

How they became
community leaders
in Australia

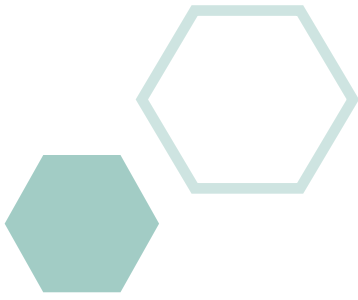
FORUM 2023

Communities in Cultural Transition (CiCT) Program



NSW Service for the Treatment
and Rehabilitation of Torture
and Trauma Survivors





STARTTS would like to specially thank Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer, for her time, dedication and passion in interviewing and writing the original articles. We thank the seven community leaders for sharing their stories and helping us in the editing process. We also acknowledge the thorough and professional edits made by Jessica Baker.

STARTTS would like to acknowledge all partners who helped us in developing and delivering the previous CiCT training: Dr Wayne Fallon, Freny Tayebjee and the Diplomacy Training Program.

These seven stories are a few of the many untold stories of the silent but invaluable work of community leaders. By sharing these stories, we want to highlight the significant values that community leaders have brought to their communities and Australian society.

The stories are launched at the Refugee Communities in Cultural Transition Forum 2023 and will be available online for access after that.



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I first met **Anh Linh** at a STARTTS leadership course in June 2021. Following the course, she agreed to share her story with me. Her story is one of resilience, strength, and transformation. Mother, daughter, fighter, survivor, and President of the Vietnamese Women's Association* (VWA) NSW; Anh Linh is a strong community pioneer for women who have experienced domestic violence and trauma and have made the choice to resettle in Australia. Anh Linh was a third year Law student when Communism took hold of the whole of Vietnam on 30th April 1975, and it wasn't until she escaped her country in 1986 that she was able to graduate in Social Work from the University of Sydney in the late nineties. Anh Linh's friend and ex-colleague describes her as: "totally dedicated, always creating harmony and somehow managing to get things done". I hope you appreciate the time she took to share her story as much as I did.

A House with No Roof

Anh Linh's story started in Hanoi, Vietnam, where she was born in 1952 as the youngest of three children whose parents both worked within the Government. In 1954, Anh Linh was taken by her family to flee the Communists to settle in Saigon, South Vietnam. She recalls her childhood as taking a dramatic U-turn when at age 16 her family's security was shattered by bombs and bullets, and they were left with three hours to evacuate their suburb. This was due to the initiation of the TET offensive in 1968 in Saigon by North Vietnamese Communists. Within three weeks of evacuating their home and fleeing with minimal possessions to their grandmother's home nearby, Anh Linh's family returned to rubble and ruin, and an ex-home with no roof or walls on the front part of the house. Anh Linh expressed her gratitude that her brother "got out" soon after and went to study in France before 1975, thus escaping the impending conflict. Despite efforts from the South Vietnamese Government to rebuild their home, their community and lives remained crushed by Communist forces, with bullets and curfews becoming banality.

The 1975 takeover of Southern Vietnam enforced regimes in which Law students such as Anh Linh were forced to succumb to a new University curriculum that solely focused on Education and Marxism, with additional "compulsory labour" which included cleaning streets and gutters. Anh Linh was allocated a job as a high school teacher following graduation, which enabled her to receive minimal, below subsistence rations. She was also required to teach a rewritten version of history that did not align with Anh Linh's values for education, morals, or instilled beliefs. For this Anh Linh still felt gratitude compared to the plight of many of her friends and family who were sent to "Re-education camps". This included her father who remained in prison-like settings for eight long years, and her sister Tuyet Le's husband who was also detained for three years in the same camp. Her father and brother-in-law recalled stories to Anh Linh of being regularly chained and beaten, forced to work for long hours in the sun, and receiving pitiful rations which left them with no choice but to "eat cockroaches and plants to survive".

Following this harrowing period, Anh Linh's sister and brother-in law were determined to escape from Vietnam. On their second attempt they squeezed onto a small boat along with 150 passengers which had a maximum capacity for 90 people. An already difficult journey was exacerbated by two attacks by sea criminals, but fortunately their boat was rescued by a British petroleum freighter and passengers were taken to a detention centre in Darwin, where they successfully applied for asylum in Australia.

For Anh Linh, a different route was needed due to safety concerns for her young daughter after two "unsuccessful and very frightening" attempts were made by their family to escape by boat. It seemed an easier option for Anh Linh's husband to flee independently, apply for asylum and sponsor Anh Linh and their daughter to join him. Despite her husband gaining refugee status in a refugee camp in Malaysia and being granted permission to live in the United States, he soon moved on and cut off contact with Anh Linh and their daughter. To make matters worse, her father was a "broken man". Experiencing PTSD after his eight years at the re-education Camp, he sadly passed away just a few years after his return.

Hope returned to Anh Linh's family when her sister, Tuyet Le, was able to sponsor their mother to come to Australia in 1985, and as the last remaining

member of the family, Anh Linh joined them via plane a year later with her daughter. Anh Linh clearly remembers what she felt when she landed in Sydney airport and gives thanks to her faith which has given her the courage to start a new life in Australia and keep moving forward today at the age of sixty-nine. She summarises her departure and entry beautifully, explaining:

"I was like a bird who had been in a cage for many, many years and then the door was opened wide, and even the air in Australia smelt of freedom... The Lord has protected me and sheltered me in the palm of his hand".

Anh Linh's dedication to supporting others shines through her bright and positive demeanour, which is steadfast despite further losses in her life such as her daughter who sadly passed away from cancer at age 40. Her dedication to supporting others despite the trauma she has faced is particularly prevalent because of her work supporting women and children. Just six months after arriving in Sydney, Anh Linh had the opportunity to complete a TAFE course which paid unemployed women over the age of 34 to attend, which just happened to be shortly after her 34th birthday. Her steadfast ambition to support others inspired her to secure employment to re-house domestic abuse survivors, and gain qualifications in social and advocacy



Photos from VWA*. Mother's Day 2023



Photos from VWA*. women's community swim group



Photos from VWA*. Mother's Day 2023

work as the current president of the Vietnamese Women's Association, her passion has helped to scope the future of women's advocacy work in NSW, as she explains below:

"I feel indebted for everything I have received and have to give back to the community... The Re-education camps in Vietnam played a big part in marriage breakdowns and domestic violence experienced by Vietnamese women, meaning many women are isolated and traumatised with few skills including being unable to communicate in English... My mission now is to help vulnerable people and support the voiceless."

Anh Linh's empathy and warmth has helped to guide her when protecting others, considerably extending the VWA* service as President by providing shelter to those with unstable homes. Anh Linh has made contributions to the successful integration and advocacy of the Vietnamese community by providing bi-lingual services and supporting youth groups with music projects in the Vietnamese language outside of this work. Her 30 years of contribution in Sydney and NSW have not gone unnoticed, and Anh Linh has strived to

ensure no communities are left behind when she has fundraised on a personal level when funding has no longer been available elsewhere.

Anh Linh has further initiated an art program for Vietnamese children on the Autism Spectrum and is especially proud of this achievement. She is a shining example of community leadership that has been made possible through lived experience, active listening, compassion, and a commitment to her culture and faith, which is celebrated as well as integrated into her life in Australia. Anh Linh therefore not only helps provide houses with a roof through her work, she embodies a feeling of home for all who have also journeyed to Australia in search of safety.

July 2021

After sharing her story, I asked Anh Linh some follow up questions to find out more about her transition into community leadership:

Freny: How did you become a community leader?

Anh Linh: *I have been involved with the Vietnamese Women's Association for many years since 1990, as an outsider first, then a member, then a management member. I was elected president in 2018 for a 2-year term and re-elected in 2020 for another 2 years.*

Freny: How would you describe yourself as a leader?

Anh Linh: *I find myself committed and able to maintain the Association working even in tough times where no financial support was in place, no funding, no worker. I gain trust from the Management Committee members. Therefore, we form a good and cooperative team to bring the association to fruition.*

Freny: What do you think makes a good leader?

Anh Linh: *Commitment and skills to overview the operation of the organisation.*

Freny: How did the Leadership course influence you?

Anh Linh: *I feel myself more equipped with necessary skills. More open to team members, capacity to share tasks.*

Freny: Do you have any feedback on the leadership course you attended?

Anh Linh: *To clarify, in any group, let it be an organisation, a community, a family, if the foundation is not strong, with no rules, no principles, just working as it pleases, then the group will not last long. It will have many people in the group with different ideas that clash with each other, everybody claims to be right, correct, then the group cannot work and will head to dissolution. The leadership skills need to be strong, with committed leaders ready to fight for the survival of the group.*

Written by Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer.

Edited by Jessica Baker, CiCT Consultant.

*The Vietnamese Women's Association (VWA) provides health and wellbeing services including cultural activities, health counselling, early intervention, playgroups, child protection, social activities for aged communities, training programs, and crisis accommodation for over 1,000 women facing domestic violence and in need of community rehabilitation, reintegration, and support. Additionally, innovative art programs for Vietnamese children who are on the Autism Spectrum are available on Saturdays; the first culturally specific disability program available through the VWA. More information can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/VietnameseWomenAssociation>

For **Tun Tun Khine**, the driving force of his life is to advance the cause of the Arakanese (also called Rakhine) people on the West Coast of Myanmar. His eye-opening experience of seeing his community and the communities of others disperse to nearby states as a result of conflict, has propelled him into a role where he is an integral part of Sydney's small but growing Rakhine community. However, despite internal conflicts within Myanmar, Tun emphasises that his passion is to bring his people together in Sydney to jointly promote their culture and not the politics that have divided them and continue to fuel unrest today. Tun achieves this through his work and contributions to the Australian Arakanese Association of NSW*.



Decades of Neglect

Tun was born in Rakhine state in 1975, the middle child of five siblings. His father was the Assistant Superintendent at a Government theatre whilst his mother stayed at home to manage the household. Tun recalls that as a family, they faced constant financial hardship which resulted in his father hiring out a small motor boat to generate additional income. Tun recalls his sadness that a region so rich in mineral resources and with such a strong strategic position was, and still remains, "woefully underdeveloped". He explains how despite China seeking to extend its sphere of influence for its Belt & Road initiative and India for its "Act East" policy, the Rakhine state remains the second most economically disadvantaged of the seven states and seven divisions of Myanmar. The decades of neglect the Rakhine state has been subjected to has resulted in disease, poverty, illiteracy and high child mortality which have led to widespread civil unrest. In February 2021, a military coup was formed which heightened ongoing violent clashes between the Burmese military and rebel Arakanese army, which had devastating consequences on the Rakhine people.

When the conflict started, there were few career prospects and younger Rakhines tended to find work in Thailand or work on cruise ships. Tun's two brothers went to Thailand and his sisters left school early and started working to support the family. Tun's father recognised his potential and borrowed money from relatives, enabling Tun to attend University in Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon). Tun became the first in his family to graduate despite ongoing conflict tearing the communities apart. It was shortly after this that Tun was able to seek sanctuary in Australia in 2001. His former partner, also a Rakhine, had come to Australia on a Humanitarian visa after living for 11 years in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. On a brief visit to Myanmar, they got married and Tun was able to migrate to Australia on a spousal visa.

At Tun's time of arrival to Sydney there were less than 50 Rakhine community members. There were however larger numbers of people from other Burmese communities such as Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rohingya and Shan communities who each have their own distinct

language, customs and associations. Tun reflects that the majority of people who identify as Burmese arrived in Australia as refugees or asylum seekers as a result of conflict in recent years, however a sizeable number came to Australia as skilled migrants in the nineties.

Tun quickly transitioned into a role helping newly arrived migrants by organising activities and events to make the Sydney Rakhine community feel welcome. He has also held a number of positions in the Australian Arakanese Association in NSW* such as Secretary and Treasurer. Tun's role also includes supporting his community to find accommodation, complete paperwork and apply for employment. He demonstrates empathy and recalls how he has personally housed newly arrived migrants due to his understanding of the potential isolation migration can cause. Tun's friend, Danny Bwin, describes him as:

“Diligent and energetic, working tirelessly for Rakhines, not just those who are in Sydney but also those who are IDPs (Internally Displaced People) in Myanmar”.

Tun's primary objective is to support the Rakhine community still living in Myanmar and being subjected to daily conflict and uncertainty. His fundraising focuses on supporting IDPs in Myanmar living in desperate circumstances with no state support. Tun outlines that there are approximately 200,000 IDPs in the Rakhine state alone who mostly follow Buddhism. However, included in this number are the Muslim community of Rohingya peoples who are not recognised by the Government of Myanmar whatsoever and therefore further lack subsequent protection, rendering them more vulnerable to persecution and violence. Tun is passionate about supporting all members of his community and their culture, regardless of their religious or political affiliation.



Karen New Year celebration in February 2023 held by the Karen community.



Community meeting at the STARTTS office in Carramar, 2019



Unemployment skills and training information session, organised by the Community Migrant Resource Centre Auburn, in 2019



Youth's mental health first aid training, organised by STARTTS, Carramar in 2018

Alongside these significant voluntary contributions, Tun works full time as a warehouse inventory controller. Astonishingly, he still finds time to actively assist the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA). This is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation dedicated to furthering criminal justice efforts through investigations in

a number of countries, including Myanmar. It is Tun's contribution to the CIJA and his passion to overcome decades of neglect his country has suffered that guides his life's purpose today.

November 2021



Humanitarian refugee awareness event organised by the Karen community, in Sydney, in 2018.



In UNHCR regional office in Canberra in 2018, with UNHCR representatives from the Canberra office and other community leaders from the Australia Karen Association.



Picnic camping trip to Chipping Northern lake, Sydney in 2019, with Arakanese community members

Following our conversation, I asked Tun some follow up questions to find out more about his journey into community leadership specifically:

Freny: How did you become a leader for your community?

Tun: An overwhelming majority elected me as Assistant Secretary in 2006, I've served with that position until 2009. After that I was elected as a Secretary, I've served with a Secretary position until 2014. After that, I have been given the Public Officer position and Treasurer positions from 2017 until now.

Freny: How would you describe yourself as a leader?

Tun: A leader comes with full responsibility. I love helping people, especially disadvantaged people who come to Australia with refugee backgrounds. They are a bit struggling to adjust to the new environment when they first arrived in Australia. As you know they need so much support. And then I want my community to grow and connect with all the networks from here in Australia.

Freny: What according to you makes a good leader?

Tun: I always listen to the people with my heart. I always want to see the improvement of their life. As a good leader giving good advice and encouragement for the members is so important.

Freny: How did the Leadership course influence you?

Tun: The Leadership course was great. As you know that all the communities in Australia have their problems and issues. After I attended the course, I started to (have) more understanding (of) how to respond to those challenges with intelligence, strategy and expertise.

Written by Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer.

Edited by Jessica Baker, CiCT Consultant.

* The Australian Arakanese Association of NSW is a small community network that helps newly arrived and existing members of the Arakanese (Rakhine) community to access housing and employment, and engage in programs that celebrate their unique culture. More information can be found here:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/aaasyd11/?ref=share_group_link



As far as community pioneers go, **Henry Leke** does not fail to impress. A living example of how lived experience can transform communities, it was a pleasure to meet Henry in the 2021 STARTTS leadership program. Henry has transformed his experience of fleeing conflict and surviving the majority of his life in a refugee camp into liaising with Government officials and making positive community changes. Henry is the chair of the NSW South Sudanese Kajo-Keiji Organisation* and has been elected three times since 2014 because of his focus on prioritising and maintaining Sudanese heritage and community interests. Henry regularly commutes ten hours from Brewarrina in regional NSW, where he works as a registered nurse, to attend community events in Sydney and represent his Kajo-Keiji community. His friend Clement Duku reflects that Henry “has taken the community from where it was to where it is today” due to group work that is “cohesive and focused on common aims and events that bring people together”. However, behind Henry’s passion is a story of a young man who silently observed catastrophe but nevertheless was able to transform his life for the better.

Helter Skelter

Henry was born in Sudan in 1984, the youngest of eight children. Henry was just two years old when his father passed away but his innocence and youth rendered him oblivious to what was to come. An intensifying civil war meant that Henry’s mother and siblings were forced to flee Sudan and seek protection in the Mungala Refugee Camp in Northern Uganda, unaware that they would spend 16 painful years living in purgatory here. At the age of 18, Henry was sitting in a camp classroom when Ugandan rebels, supported by the Sudanese Government, launched a particularly brutal attack. He describes it as filled with:

“horrendous shouting and screaming with everyone running helter skelter”.

In the ensuing chaos Henry found himself separated from the rest of his family. After two years of isolation and limbo, he discovered that three of his sisters



*Kajo-keji Cultural Night,
St Marys Memorial Hall, Feb 2017*

were living in different refugee camps, one of his brothers was in the opposite end of South Sudan, one or possibly two of his siblings had passed away and one had made it to Australia. For Henry, it seemed the shadow of his former years would never leave him. Conflict raged on all around him and continued to tear the communities he had grown up around apart. Henry's description of life at this time paints a bleak picture, many who have transitioned to safety can relate to:

"If there is one word to characterise my life in the refugee camp, it is 'uncertainty'. You don't know what comes tomorrow, you don't know if you will see someone again, you never think about the future, as you don't know what is coming next".

Fast forward to 2003, Henry visited his brothers grave and tried to reconnect with his extended fragmented family. That was when his uncle Michael Kenyi returned into his life. Michael had lost touch with most of his relatives during the civil war in Sudan in the 1980s where he fled from his workplace in Khartoum to Egypt and went on to spend several years in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Fortunately, Michael was able to gain a Humanitarian Visa during his time in Kenya and arrived in Australia in 1997. It was because of this transition that Michael encouraged his nephew Henry to also settle in Australia, which was made possible when Henry also received a Humanitarian visa in 2004. The pride in Michael Kenyi's voice is evident when he speaks about Henry. He states: "he is my son" and then adds "that is in the African concept, in the Western world he would be regarded as my nephew." He goes on to describe Henry as a quiet achiever who has used collaborative approaches to problem solving, helping him to find his true passion in Australia without overlooking significant community issues.

On his initial arrival to Australia, Henry describes suddenly feeling free and secure, which was so different to the violence he had been exposed to at refugee camps. He jests at his initial disbelief

that instead of walking everywhere people drove or took buses for journeys as short as two or three kilometres, and also praised the fact that no one watched him in a shop and that his bargaining skills were no longer needed. The refreshingness and politeness of the community allowed Henry to interact with public officials such as the police and educational systems, which he was also shocked to find did not require upfront tuition fees.



Henry Leke with, Bob Fitzgerald: Chief Inspector, Local area command, Blacktown NSW in Jan 2019

With great determination, Henry studied English at the Macquarie Community College, and then received a TAFE diploma in Pathology Testing. This was followed by a Degree in Nursing from Western Sydney University, where he graduated in 2015. Henry now lives in Brewarrina, NSW where he works as a registered nurse at the Public Hospital. Alongside this, Henry's work with the NSW South Sudanese Kajo-Keiji organisation* has been described as visionary. When reflecting on his life in Australia Henry recounts never dreaming of studying at University, owning a car or being able to help others because the entirety of his life was



Thump-Down to Suicide, presenter David. Black-Dog institute, Venue: Rooty Hills Community Hall, May 2017

spent in hostile camp-like settings with his freedom to reach potential hindered by decades of conflict. Henry's life today, is a far cry from the chaotic "helter skelter" like environment that shaped his younger years. Community member Rukia Mody describes Henry as:

"a genuine person and a kind hearted leader, someone who has a real vision for furthering the Kajo-Keiji community"

Rukia recounts that Henry has initiated programs that particularly focus on youth and women which include accidental counselling, youth suicide prevention, education programs on alcoholism and domestic violence, and arranging for members to attend youth conferences and women's events. Rukia adds that Henry remained in touch with Kajo-Keiji throughout the Covid-19 lockdown and kept community spirits high with monthly Zoom sessions that promoted cultural education and reduced feelings of isolation. Henry's associates also add that he has transformed their community social gatherings to an association registered with Fair Trading and has displayed impressive skills in financial acquittals, applying for community grants and maintaining organisational finances. As well as this, Henry has developed intra community connections by holding large events which celebrate

the cultural diversity of Sydney and wider NSW by inviting other refugee communities and Blacktown City Council members to Kajo-Keiji events.

Henry's friend Clement describes Henry's success as a result of his "willingness to listen and take on feedback", something that would not have been possible sheltering from constant conflict and a lack of protection in the refugee camps of his youth.

January 2022

I asked Henry for some feedback on the STARTTS Leadership courses and he stated the following:

"The leadership course was so inspirational, as it brought and connected all those different associations with their leaders to share what matters to them and the difficulties their associations faced and what should be done to it. I personally learned that a leader/s should be a person who is concerned with the entire community members: emotions, values, ethics, standards and a vision for long-term goals. As such, continuing searching for the process of change in both individuals and organisations, making both the leader and members involved in decision making process."

Written by Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer.

Edited by Jessica Baker, CiCT Consultant.

* The NSW South Sudanese Kajo-Keji Organisation is a community group that holds events such as youth conferences and cultural events across NSW. They are currently working on a website, and information about upcoming events and their progress can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/Kajokejicommunity/>



Delilah attended the STARTTS leadership program in June 2021 and I was privileged to re-connect a few months later to talk about her journey to Australia and transition into a leadership role in New South Wales. Despite her warmth, poise and professionalism, Delilah's journey encountered endless uncertainty and trauma, something her problem-solving skills, determination and foresight could not always help to overcome. Besides supporting Assyrian women during the Covid-19 lockdown, Delilah is the very active President of the Assyrian Women's Organisation and the founder of the Assyrian Cultural and Social Youth Association* (ACSYA). By immersing herself in community volunteer projects, Delilah gives women the hope she once needed to navigate her place as a woman in Australia. Her story emphasises that things are not always as we hope them to be, particularly when it comes to love.



Honeymoon

Delilah is Assyrian and was born in Iraq at a time of communal harmony. She reflects on her "idyllic" youth where she lived in a neighbourhood where everyone felt like family, with children from cross-cultural backgrounds sharing both public and private spaces and moving freely between one another's homes. For example, Delilah spoke Assyrian Aramaic at home with her family and studied Arabic, and also enjoyed celebrating her neighbour's Armenian, Jewish, Islamic and Assyrian cultures.

From a young age, Delilah was a strong woman who supported her family in more ways than one. With her father working away from home at sea for long periods and her mother needing regular medical care, Delilah was largely responsible for her younger sister, and taking care of the family finances. Alongside her family commitments, Delilah graduated with a Business Management degree and started working for a petroleum company where her ability and ambition took her to a senior position very quickly. When Delilah met Emmanuel,

she believed life couldn't get any sweeter. Delilah recalls being blissfully unaware that soon life would never be the same again.

Delilah tells me that when Saddam Hussein rose to presidency in Iraq in 1979, those working in petroleum industries were coerced to join the Ba'athist Party, spy on colleagues, and disregard previous traditions such as speaking Aramaic and attending church. With foresight, Delilah realised this was just the start, and acknowledging that life in Iraq would deteriorate rapidly, she planned to leave her friends and family behind with the intention that they could follow her soon after. Restrictions on travel were increasing, but Delilah and Emmanuel used their love story as a way to allow them to travel to Denmark on the pretext of going on their "honeymoon". Albeit far from a traditional honeymoon, they accepted their fate and journeyed across Europe to safety, where they immediately sought asylum.



Delilah taking photo with the Assyrian Chaldean Syrian Youth Alliance in Fairfield, with a group of teachers & principle



Delilah attending Assyrian Aid Society Symposium in Sydney with International Opera Singer



Delilah visiting Assyrian Nissiben Saturday Language School



CiCT leadership training in 2021 with other participants. Delilah is the second person from the left.

Meanwhile, back home, the Iran Iraq Gulf war had begun and the country was in a state of emergency. Delilah's father faced severe interrogation when she did not return from her "honeymoon". At this stage, Delilah had made it to a refugee camp in Greece, where her executive skills, and fluency in Arabic, English and Aramaic enabled her to get a job in refugee resettlement with the World Council of Churches. Realising that any communication with home would now endanger her family, Delilah could only write to friends for the first two years to receive family updates. Thankfully, Delilah's letters to friends started taking on a more positive narrative when she met an Australian ambassador who encouraged her to apply for migration from Greece to Australia. Delilah successfully applied and she and Emmanuel landed in Sydney in 1981 when they were 26 and 28 years old respectively.

Delilah and Emmanuel did not anticipate the culture shock they experienced in Sydney. They longed for the streets and bazaars of their home, alive with conversations with friends and neighbours late into the night. Instead they were confronted by the silence that descended on Sydney when shops closed at 5:30pm and all activity ceased. There were no cross-cultural amenities or food, and no community to turn to. Delilah recalls her first casual job of wrapping Christmas gifts standing on her feet all day and crying every night sorely missing her family and life in Iraq, realising that she had to "start from zero" in this new country.

With time and patience, Emmanuel secured a factory job and Delilah became a typesetter for an Arabic Lebanese newspaper. Delilah then worked in the Botany Migrant Resource Centre assisting

new refugees and migrants, and enhancing her managerial skills. Her roles since have included being a Team Leader at Settlement Services International (SSI) and Navitas, a manager at the Auburn Migrant Resource Centres, and a Multicultural Community Liaison Officer with the NSW Police. She now works as a Community Liaison Officer with the Department of Communities and Justice and is the President of the Assyrian Women's Organisation. The latter was made possible by her previous experience as an active member of the Assyrian Aid Society and playing a lead role in the Assyrian Democratic Movement to support Assyrians in Iraq, all complemented by her lived experiences of seeking asylum and migrating to Australia.

Delilah has a legendary reputation for volunteering and setting up organisations to assist the Assyrian community. She ensured Assyrian communities in Sydney were supported throughout and before Covid-19 and also established a thriving Assyrian Cultural and Social Youth Association* to reduce the likelihood of social isolation she was once subjected to when arriving in Australia. Delilah introduced an Assyrian Saturday school which opened its doors to 50-120 students per year for ten years, teaching the Aramaic language to communities in Sydney and preserving Assyrian culture despite global conflict. Unfortunately the school is no longer running and was forced to close due to Delilah's health and wellbeing. Despite supporting communities through empathy and compassion, Delilah's story is therefore reflective of the toll trauma and journeying to safety can have on physical and mental health.

Delilah has faced post-maternal problems, trauma-related panic attacks, physical health conditions and has overcome breast cancer. These have been exacerbated by the guilt Delilah tells of when she describes leaving her family behind to live under a brutal regime. A regime that left her home in Basra bombed, her sister abducted and experiencing severe depression, and the family being forced to move to Baghdad. Her strength and courage to keep supporting communities when

struggling internally reflects her determination to keep representing the Assyrian community in Sydney through practical and emotional support; now part of her legacy.

Fortunately, Delilah's mother, father and sister later escaped to Jordan after four years of further uncertainty in Baghdad. They were soon permitted to join Delilah and Emmanuel in Sydney in 1996, a staggering 17 years after Delilah first left her home town of Iraq on her "honeymoon". Delilah describes fainting at the airport when her family arrived, but emphasises:

"securing their safety was my biggest achievement to date".

Family is everything to Delilah, and her daughter Natalie describes how proud she feels when receiving community feedback about her mum. She believes Delilah's major strength to face major challenges is her husband Emmanuel, who she describes as her mum's "number one cheerleader". Despite her steadfast support of communities and her family, as well as overcoming significant health challenges, Delilah, like many others, never did get her "honeymoon" after all.

August 2021.



Delilah attending Assyrian event at the Nineveh Club – St Johns Park

I asked Delilah some follow up questions to find out more about her journey into community leadership specifically:

Freny: How did you become a leader for your community?

Delilah: I became a leader through volunteering my time & work effort to assist my Assyrian community in Eastern Suburbs, West & South West areas, where most of them were newly arrived Refugees & Humanitarian entrants.

Freny: How would you describe yourself as a leader?

Delilah: I am very passionate about helping people in need, especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged community members. Having a caring & nurturing nature has helped me to contribute more and to continue helping my community. At the end of the day when I put a smile on someone's face who is in need of any service, that will be my best reward.

Freny: What according to you makes a good leader?

Delilah: Someone who will advocate on behalf of their community members. A leader who consults with her/his own community members and be active listener. A leader who will connect her/his own community members to different services and refer them to service providers, to build their capacity. A good leader is to be a servant and not a Master.

Freny: How did the Leadership course influence you?

Delilah: It helped with skills for strategic planning, upskilling my knowledge on the main element to be a good/ professional leader, and building my connection with different multicultural community organisations/ groups for future partnership program. Having well educated Dr Wayne on board & skilled STARTTS staff who were from CALD backgrounds which make me feel safe to express my opinion and sharing experience, it provided that safe atmosphere & equality. It also helped me with sharing experiences and information among the participants which was a learning curve for me as well.

Written by Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer.

Edited by Jessica Baker, CiCT Consultant.

ACSYA Inc (Assyrian Cultural and Social Youth Association) is an independent not-for-profit organisation that campaigns for the conservation and protection of Assyrian cultural heritage through evidence-based research. The organisation encourages volunteerism and youth engagement and works with community and national partners to develop knowledge sharing platforms. More information about ACSYA can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/acsyaorg/>

Assyrian Women's Organisation is a not-for-profit organisation aiming at empowering Assyrian women and advocate for their rights. The Assyrian Women's Organisation also helps newly arrived refugee women settle & integrate in Australia. More information about the Assyrian Women's Organisation can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/people/Assyrian-Womens-Organisation-Australia/100068632410343/>



Viji is a community leader who can only be described as a force to be reckoned with. A mental health ambassador, she is presently on the advisory board of the Jesuit Refugee Service and the Advisory Committee of Mental Health Australia. Viji is also a committee member of Pink Sari Inc., an organisation that promotes the importance of breast and cervical screening for women and bowel screening for both men and women, raising awareness about available healthcare resources

whilst helping to nurture the bodies of South Asian communities. Viji is passionate about breaking down cultural stigmas that permeate the Tamil community. She ran end of life programs to tackle cultural stigma about discussing death and making end-of-life preparations before one loses their mental capacity. When SSI and Relationships Australia ran a “Men’s Behaviour Change” program for male perpetrators of violence against women, Viji supported the women and children within the families. Viji advocated for change in this space by conducting information forums to educate the community on gender-based violence, helping her peers to develop an understanding of legally punishable offences in Australia.

Viji overcomes cultural silence by pouring her heart and soul into her work, and supporting the mental health of others. As one of the founders of Tamil Women’s Development Group and Tamil Resettlement and Community Konnect* (TRACK), she strives to ensure Tamil voices are heard and are not disempowered by their past.

Mind, Body and Soul

Viji was born in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) in 1949 and lived there until 1974. Growing up, she witnessed the innumerable injustices suffered by Tamils leading up to the civil war that ravaged the country between 1983 and 2009. The properties owned by Tamils were appropriated by the Government without compensation, Tamil enrolments in universities were severely restricted and Tamils were consistently overlooked when applying for jobs and promotions. These injustices outraged Viji. She was also concerned at the way mental health and disability was approached in her community, with her sister Sarojini, who had an intellectual

disability, being labelled as “backwards”. Special education schools or provisions were non-existent and Sarojini was forced to drop out of school aged ten.

When Viji was 24 she married her husband Dhaya and shortly after they moved to the UK where Dhaya completed his Accountancy studies. This was followed by living in Papua New Guinea for three years. They avoided returning to their war-ravaged country by successfully applying for skilled migration visas and arriving in Australia in 1983. Fortunately, Viji was able to sponsor her mother and

sister to join them, her only remaining immediate family in Sri Lanka. Shortly after arriving in Australia, Viji's mother and sister were both diagnosed with bi-polar affective disorders and Viji became their primary carer. Viji recalls it was a heavy burden both physically and financially but states:

“I could not have done it without the generous support from my husband and the understanding shown by my two children”.

Whilst in respite care, Sarojini was critically hospitalised for receiving her Diabetes medication on an empty stomach. This caused Hypoglycaemia resulting in brain injury and she then required specialised care for the rest of her life. A distraught Viji later complained to the Ombudsman, resulting in an official recommendation that all staff in respite care should be trained in Diabetic Care. During this difficult time, Viji sought support from the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association (MDAA) and later started a part time job with them. Her experience in caring for her mother and sister and her work at the MDAA gave her a deep understanding of the problems faced by people with disabilities and their families. According to her colleague, Nerida, Viji's invaluable skills gained from her life, the community and the public sector make her:

“a formidable champion for social justice, especially for the Tamil community.”

Viji took care of all the medical and social needs of both her sister and mother, visiting them in their care home almost every day, until her mother sadly passed away seven years later. Although Viji practices Hinduism, when Sarojini found solace in Christianity she helped Sarojini to get baptised and took Sarojini to a Tamil church every Sunday. When Sarojini passed away four years after her mother, Viji arranged a Christian funeral where her favourite hymns were sung in her memory.



Viji was a panel member in a session at the inaugural Refugee Alternative Conference in 2017 in Sydney.

With the help of six other Tamil community members she became one of the founders of the Tamil Women's Development Group (TWDG), which supported Tamil people who came to Australia seeking asylum by boat through a buddy-up system. TWDG also assisted these people to secure accommodation, hosted workshops on Australian culture and celebrated significant religious festivals such as Hindu Thai Pongal, New Year, Diwali and Christmas.

Aged 64, Viji retired from her position at MDAA and pursued her passion for supporting the Tamil community, regardless of how complex the problems or barriers they were facing. Viji's friend of 30 years, Kanchana recalls:

“A newly arrived Tamil woman who spoke very little English had been complaining in vain to her real estate agent that she had a sewage problem in her rented unit. The man took no action, even though he knew that the woman had been going to her neighbour's unit to use the toilet and shower. As soon as Viji found out, she took the matter to the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NCAT). She not only got the agent to fix the problem but also to provide compensation to the complainant for the inconvenience she had suffered!”

...

“If Viji finds out about an issue, she cannot sit by. She just rolls up her sleeves and does what she can.”

Viji's strong sense of community advocacy was demonstrated by her support for Tamils with their applications to remain in Australia. She recruited volunteers, liaised with the Refugee and Casework Services (RACS) to provide interpreters for the application process, and arranged for Auburn Council to allow the use of the Home Work Room at Auburn library free of charge to meet with RACS's Tamil clients to complete part of the SHEV and TPV application.

Viji also collaborated with the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2015 by organising information sessions for the Tamil community regarding the transition from collecting information by hand to online. When SBS Tamil Radio interviewed Viji about this, she gave her mobile number and invited people to call her if they had any questions, forgetting that it was a national broadcast. Viji's profile subsequently grew and she was inundated with calls from the Tamil community Australia-wide. All of this work was done by Viji as a member of TWDG.

Viji explains how her many achievements have been made possible because of "teamwork with other like minded people". For example, despite the

mounting pressures during the Covid-19 pandemic, Viji as a member of Home Among the Gum Trees (HAGT), supported 56 refugee and asylum seeking families with grocery purchasing, packing, and delivery along with 40 community volunteers who she recruited. HAGT, wrote an article thanking Viji which stated:

"Our heartfelt thanks go to Viji for the proposal to undertake the program in the first place...Viji doesn't just take on a worthwhile project, she inspires and coaxes others to come on board!"



Information forum to explain about the new SHEV /TPV visa application. SSI office Parramatta with a lawyer. 2014



Staff and Volunteers of Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS) at the Australian Human Rights Community Awards Ceremony (2017) where RACS received an award for assisting people seeking asylum to complete the application for SHEV and TPV visas.



Grocery boxes ready for delivery during Covid-19 (HAGT).



Workshop to explain the different cultures of Sri Lanka and Australia followed by a social for the women. In 2013 at Toongabie community centre.



Pink Sari Inc spreading the message about the need to do regular mammograms at the Pink Test in 2019. With Glen McGrath and the Premier Gladys Berejiklian.



Of course, many of Viji's projects have faced barriers due to the precarity of funding and commitments of volunteers during Covid-19, for example those who could not make volunteer commitments or participants dropping out of sessions, but Viji is nevertheless thankful for the learning experience, ruminating:

*"It has just made me stronger
and more resilient"*

Viji is one of the founding members of Tamil Resettlement and Community Konnect (TRACK). This organisation was formed to help people experiencing the need for increasing mental health support in the community of Tamil people seeking asylum. This aimed to reduce the risk of suicide following increasing numbers of suicide related deaths in the Tamil community. Motivated by her

childhood in Sri Lanka and years of dedicated caring for her mother and sister, Viji is a formidable advocate for communities at risk of vulnerability today. Now in her seventies, Viji shows no sign of slowing down. By putting her mind, body and soul into her work, she has been instrumental in bringing about positive social changes in the community and inspiring others.

March 2021

When Freny, STARTTS CiCT volunteer met Viji at a meeting with refugee community representatives in August 2019, she transmitted energy and enthusiasm. Viji was asked for some feedback on the STARTTS Leadership courses she attended in 2019 and 2020 . Her responses are below:

Freny: How did you become a leader for your community?

Viji: I do not consider myself a leader, just a community volunteer. I have been interested in world politics and social justice since my school days. I also had a sister born with intellectual disability who also developed mental illness in her late twenties. Hence I had first hand experience of a CALD family trying to navigate the health system and the government organisations to get the services needed for her. When I retired, I had the time, passion and the skills needed to help in the areas I was passionate about. I am also lucky to have a very supportive husband and children.

Freny: How would you describe yourself as a leader?

Viji: I am very committed to my work. I do my best to help people with their issues, if it is something that I can assist them with. If not I will try to refer them to the right people who would be able to assist them.

Freny: What according to you makes a good leader?

Viji: A leader needs to be passionate about wanting better outcomes for the people. They need to have skills to achieve this vision; a good communicator, a good listener, be empathetic, have a good understanding of his /her skills, strengths and weaknesses/limitations and need to be able to recruit skilled people who would be able to fill these gaps in his/her skills. They should be honest, have an open mind and be able to adapt, when things change or evolve, be able to handle unpleasant situations, understand the group dynamics, be able to resolve conflicts and be able to delegate.

Freny: How did the Leadership course influence you?

Viji: It helped me to consolidate my prior knowledge and I also learned many new skills. How to resolve conflicts in the group or how to address a situation needing discipline, in a sensitive manner was the biggest lesson for me.

Written by Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer.

Edited by Jessica Baker, CiCT Consultant.

***Tamil Resettlement and Community Konnect (TRACK) are a community organization in NSW helping Tamil migrants settle and receive support in relation to the trauma they have experienced fleeing conflict in Sri Lanka. This includes a nationally recognized “Community Companion” program where elderly volunteers support survivors of trauma and help them to integrate into Australian society.**



CiCT training programs:

1. Leadership training in May 2021
2. Leadership training May 2022
3. Leadership training in July 2022
4. Human Rights and Advocacy Training in Feb 2023



Khatol exemplifies how kindness and confidence are key to empowerment. She has a calming drive that tells me she is someone who is in control of not only the destiny of herself but the destiny of others. Khatol recounts the role she took on when navigating Karachi airport with a couple of other Afghan refugees in 1999, where she used her translation skills gained at a refugee camp to guide and assist her community peers in what she calls a “momentous and confusing” journey to Australia, which included navigating the Kuala Lumpur airport. 25 years later many from this group continue to consult her and seek her advice. Currently, Khatol is a Justice of the Peace, was an active member of Afghan Community Support Association* (ACSA) and currently works for Sydwest Multicultural Services to support newly arrived migrants to transition into life in Sydney. Awarded the “Inspirational Person of the Year” by Blacktown City Council in 2022 and the Best Service Award by SydWest, Khatol’s determination and contributions are the reason many still see her as a community pioneer and natural born leader today.



The Accidental Leader

Khatol was born in Kabul, Afghanistan as the eldest of three children. Her father worked in the police force and her mother was a teacher. Khatol recalls her childhood as a happy and peaceful time. Communities were open and inclusive and she was able to form strong bonds in her neighbourhood which celebrated the diversity of her friendships. Whether Hazara, Pashtoon, Tajik or Uzbek, children played together and went to each other’s homes without fear. This soon changed when the Mujahadeen gained power in 1993. Khatol’s father lost his job as he was considered an employee of the previous regime, and faced confrontational behaviour in the community he called home. On one occasion he was pushed out of a moving bus and narrowly escaped severe injury and possibly death. To make matters worse, Khatol’s mother was no longer allowed to work and lost the female identity she had known, stripping her of her independence and income. The family initially fled to Pakistan but due to a lack of funds, passports or documents,

were forced to return to Kabul.

Khatol recalls the chaos in the country when they returned from Pakistan. The streets of her childhood were replaced with factions that had been formed on “tribal lines”, meaning people were prevented from entering or killed if they attempted to do so. Widespread unrest day and night and the bodies of lost souls became normality. During a particularly difficult period, Khatol’s family took shelter in a neighbour’s cellar alongside 30 other people. They spent an entire week in one corner of that cellar. Many members of her extended family were killed or shot during this horrific time, including aunts, uncles and step cousins. With many members of her family now destitute, and the Taliban coming to power in 1995, it was clear that the conditions in Afghanistan were significantly worsening. Following Khatol narrowly missing a bullet by two centimetres, her family were forced to leave their hometown for the second time.

Khatol's uncle, Ali Kakar, was already in Australia during this period and was able to help the family financially. They made it to a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan, and were later sponsored by Ali to migrate to Australia. Despite their new found safety and finding a place to live in Auburn with Ali's help, the trauma, loss and diminished sense of confidence the family now faced remained. This was exacerbated by a lack of time to plan or rationalise their journey, meaning they were faced with a dramatic change in seasons and weather; wearing summer clothing during winter months. The prospect of finding a job and integrating immediately into society was overwhelming and Khatol did not know where to start, but she was determined to lead and support her family in order to settle in Australia and find a place to call home.

Khatol found a job opening in a local paper for a volunteer position at Mercy Refugee Service which required no prior experience. She was accepted and despite being initially unaware it was an unpaid role, this was a great experience. Khatol's supervisor supported her to successfully apply for a job at Australia Post where she worked for almost three years. Soon after, Khatol returned to her true passion of helping other new migrants and refugees and completed a course in Community Development at Granville TAFE. She gained a Diploma in Translation of Dari and Pashtu into English, and furthered her experience in paid and unpaid roles at Mercy Refugee Service, Mission Australia and SydWest Multicultural Services Blacktown (previously called the Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre). Khatol has now been working at SydWest for fifteen years. Her colleague, Abdul Wazim, describes her as:

"a problem solver who takes every matter seriously and helps clients achieve their goals, not just by directing, but by always following up and supporting them during the process"



Khatol received the inspirational person of the year award 2022 By Blacktown Council.



Khatol at her office in Afghani dress to celebrate Persian New Year.

Assal Khurassani, also an Afghan refugee and a friend of Khatol's, reaffirms her presence as a role model in the Afghan female community. It is clear from talking to her peers that Khatol's life is characterised and driven by service. She cares for her family, actively supports Afghan refugee evacuees and helps Afghan refugees and asylum seekers to settle in Sydney. Khatol plays a vital role at SydWest by assisting community members with practical integration methods. These include helping the community study at language classes on Saturdays, prepare for online driving tests, navigate their community and also support bereaved family members to hold funerals. Khatol used to work as a volunteer at ACSA* which ensures community members feel welcomed. With over 1000 members, ACSA* has built the Blacktown Mosque for Friday prayers, and offers a range of services and activities such as a women's support group, youth and sports groups, Eid Mass Prayers, Charity services, bi-annual picnics for elders and mentoring programs for newly arrived Afghans. In addition to this meaningful work, the sacrifices she has made to ensure her family feel loved and supported include moving closer to her parents and sister to regularly provide them with meals and healthcare support, despite this meaning she has to increase her commute and the time taken to drive her daughter to school in a new area.

In recognition of her services, Khatol received an award for "Best Community Worker" in 2017 for initiating the first Afghan women's social group in the Blacktown LGA. This has accelerated opportunities for other Afghan women's leadership groups, allowing them to develop across other parts of Sydney. Khatol has also received the "Best Service Award" from her current employer, SydWest for her efforts and passion to support others.

Khatol has many aspirations for Afghans living in Australia. These include providing Justice of the Peace services, educating the community about their citizenship responsibilities, and promoting inter-generational communication. Khatol has also organised information sessions on domestic violence and mental health and provided services to elders who feel isolated. Although Khatol's initial leadership was accidental, her ability to fulfil her purpose creating unity between communities makes her a true leader. Khatol has achieved this by working to overcome previous conflict induced rivalries and focusing on what bonds her community today rather than focusing on what divided it in the past.

November 2022



Women's camp with newly arrived refugees at Narrabeen beach recreational centre.

I asked Khatol for some feedback on the STARTTS Leadership courses and she stated the following:

Freny: How would you describe yourself as a leader?

Khatol: I do not describe myself as a leader – just someone who helps and supports community members.

Freny: What according to you makes a good leader?

Khatol: Someone who serves the community and is the first point of contact for community members. A leader should not just be just a talker who shows off!

Freny: How did the Leadership course influence you?

Khatol: I gained a lot of practical tips from the course. I found the session of the “lone nut” particularly helpful, where you do what you consider to be right and slowly others will follow. I strongly encourage potential leaders to attend these leadership training courses.

Written by Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer.

Edited by Jessica Baker, CiCT Consultant.

*The Afghan Community Support Association (ACSA) is a not for profit organisation that provides cultural, religious and social services for Afghan communities in NSW to achieve an improved quality of life for its members through local and national partnerships and affiliations. ACSA provides the community with youth and sports programs, educational programs including language schools, and Islamic development programs. They work on a variety of projects that support the wider community of NSW and hold a number of fundraising events throughout the year.



Like many who share his culture, **Movses'** career path had to take a back seat when his life was disrupted by bombings and political unrest. Movses describes how a "tragic history" has resulted in Armenians fleeing for sanctuary primarily to neighbouring countries like Lebanon, Egypt and Syria but also to Europe and America. In 1915, Movses' great grandparents were among the victims of the Armenian Genocide, who fled Armenia and took refuge in Syria. Over a century

later, there are 3 million Armenians living in Armenia, but over 7 million living in more than 100 countries globally, of which approximately 55,000 reside in Australia, mainly in Sydney and Melbourne. Despite the existence of resettlement programs, Movses tells me of the barriers he has faced when seeking safety, and his lack of choice when putting his pharmaceutical passions on hold because of displacement. However, meeting on a Zoom call during the height of Covid-19, Movses describes how he now runs three successful pharmacies in Sydney. He also acts as a "great mentor for young Armenians" by "analysing their issues and taking them step by step through what they should do" within his connections within the Armenian community in Australia. Fast forward to today and Movses is on a mission of activism to ensure there is an equal distribution of humanitarian aid across Turkey and Syria following the February 2023 earthquake. Movses has set up the Australian Syrian Humanitarian initiative because of this. This is his story.

The Humanitarian Pharmacist on a Mission

Movses was born in Aleppo in 1989, the middle child with two older sisters and two younger twin brothers. Although Syria was relatively stable during his early years, by the time Movses was in his last year of undergraduate studies the war in Syria had commenced. Full scale battles on the streets, snipers on roofs, and terrorist attacks became daily occurrences in Aleppo, and wreaked devastation through the homes of families like Movses'. Civilians were caught between opposing groups and there were gruesome casualties, including six of Movses' close friends who were victims of the conflict and

sadly passed away in their twenties; a personal loss that also devastated his community. Despite having to adjust to conflict as the daily routine, Movses continued his studies and maintained a proactive approach to supporting his family. However, his Masters of Pharmacy at the University of Aleppo was cut short when the University closed, and Movses' father's toy shop was subjected to a bombing. Undeterred, Movses father renovated the shop and resumed business, but when it was bombed for the second time and faced irreparable damage, the family knew it was time to leave and

headed for Lebanon to begin their journey to safety. Movses moved to Australia in 2015 where his family joined him on Humanitarian visas one year later. The constant flow of electricity and water uninterrupted by conflict related shortages helped Movses to feel safe and happy. Despite some initial communication barriers and having to familiarise himself with the Australian accent, he was able to maintain his Armenian culture in an English-speaking environment and secure a job as an assistant pharmacist within only two months.

Movses has now been in Australia for eight years and within this time has gained recognition as one of the Armenian intellectuals in Sydney and as a Board Member of the Armenian Missionary Association of Australia. Movses is also a member of the Armenian theatre group where he has performed, engaged in script writing and coached other actors to participate in bi-annual performances. Talin Ekmekjian, a fellow thespian, came to know Movses through the theatre group, and describes him as:

“An enabler. He enables things to happen and mentors young Armenians... he put a new life into the group...he is a kind, gentle person who is always ready to assist and support other members of the community”.



Movses with his Hamazkaine Noubar Khachadourian Theatre group at Zeneth Theatre, Chatswood, NSW on 16 March 2019

Movses also helped the theatre group to start an Armenian YouTube channel and he MCs at various Armenian events where his presence and energy is well known. He reflects that his biggest achievement was as an MC for a telethon in November 2020. During this event, \$1.3 million was raised in one day for Armenians who had been subjected to the 44-day war in Artsakh, Armenia at the time.

Movses' embodiment of his culture and passion to maintain the Armenian culture is evident. He believes this can be achieved via bilingual Armenian schools, increased theatre performances, various community events and a greater focus on youth programs. He states:

“All over the Middle East people socialise every evening, but in Australia people tend to meet only on weekends when many also have sports commitments...We must preserve the Armenian language and culture and maintain our identity”

When asked about any intentions to return to Armenia in the future, Movses is insistent that Australia is now his home. His gratitude for the opportunities he and his family have been able to access, such as professional development and permanent job roles for his siblings and father, help to drive him forward to celebrate the potential of the Armenian community in Sydney. For example,



Movses (L) Hrant (R), The Australian Federal Parliament, Canberra, ACT on 25 February 2020 at Joint Justice Initiative



The inaugural meeting of Australian Syrian Humanitarian Initiative at St Andrew's Uniting Church, Longueville, NSW on 05 March 2023

Movses' father completed a TAFE course in horticulture and now works in a casual position for NDIS. Movses' friends are clear that this is just the beginning of his journey, with forementioned friend, Hrant Bujikian, stating:

"Movses is an intellectual with charisma, and a visionary who is passionate about the Armenian community. He is able to inspire us to meet and do things together".

As a pharmacist, Movses is impressed with the "orderliness" of life in Australia with its well thought out procedures and regulations starkly contrasting with the chaotic life he experienced in Syria. He points out that Australian pharmacists are required to update their registration annually, which helps him to stay informed about new products and research. Movses pharmaceutical progress is sure to thrive now that he is separated from the conflict that initially delayed his progress. Equally important is his embodiment of the true Armenian spirit, that will continue to inspire others to cure and heal outside of the medical profession, and inside of communities searching for a place to call home.

Following the Syria-Turkey earthquake, where the deaths have now surpassed 50,000, Movses has unearthed the humanitarian injustices that are still

happening to his people today. He shares with us the following:

"On the 2nd of February this year I took my mum to the airport because she wanted to go to Syria to see her sister. Her sister recently had a cerebral stroke and doesn't have any carer or pension, but on the 6th of Feb a big earthquake happened in Syria and mum got stuck in a city that has already collapsed after the 12 year old war and now on top of this there was an earthquake happening. This was Aleppo, Syria."

"So unfortunately a second wave of the earthquake happened on the 21st of February and mum took her sister and went to the emergency point near to her building and literally my auntie, she is half paralysed, she has a catheter attached to her bladder, and is sitting on a plastic chair, not even a wheelchair. So this picture when I saw my mother standing next to her sister, it triggered me to start an initiative called Australian Syrian Humanitarian initiative."*

“This initiative has two targets. The first is helping the Syrian people inside Syria by reviewing the Australian Government’s allocation of \$18,000,000 to the Turkish and Syrian victims of the earthquake, which significantly favour Turkey. This is a pure humanitarian initiative and does not have any political direction. I wanted to raise my voice because the NGOs in Aleppo do not have a political affiliation with Assad and just want to help the Syrian people.”

Movses states how the majority of the money allocated through humanitarian aid has been allocated to Turkey and to one city, Idlib, in Syria that is currently under Turkish occupation. Movses has two friends who work in the medical section of Caritas and are based in Aleppo. Caritas is an international humanitarian aid NGO, and when Movses reached out about his concerns over unfair aid distribution, they invited him to a roundtable event to hear his thoughts. Incredibly, Caritas are now negotiating to increase the amount of aid sent from Australia to Syria, and have taken over the investigation of fair money review allocation, after discovering that \$6.5 million was allocated by UNICEF and UNHCR, has not reached the Syrian people because of a lack of acknowledgement that Syrian human lives exist outside of the Assad regime.

Following the success of the first part of the initiative, Movses describes the second target of the initiative as to push the Australian Government and specifically the Department of Home Affairs to increase the annual refugee intake of Syrian refugees, which totalled 450 out of 18,750 in 2020/2021 despite conflict tearing the country and its people apart. Movses continues to use his connections with Catholic and Armenian churches within Australia, as well as his humanitarian connections on the ground and overseas, but tells himself:

“I’m a pharmacist not an immigration lawyer so I can’t provide legal recommendations but I have people who can help with this now. Australia should bring more Syrian refugees to have more successful people in the Australian economy and it will boost, we have an 86% literacy rate after all”

June 2021 | March 2023



Movses lecturing at Yerevan State Medical University, Armenia on 19 January 2022



L to R, Rhonda White AO, Dylan Parker Mayor of Randwick, Terry White AO, Matt Thistlethwaite MP, Movses, Sina Clayton, John Culty EBOS CEO, Reggie the Rabbit on 19 March 2022 at the Grand Opening of TerryWhite Matraville Pharmacy

It is clear that since engaging with STARTTS in June 2021, and reconnecting in 2023, Movses has utilised his passion to become a leader in the community. Back in 2021, he told us about his journey of becoming a leader and reflects on the impact the Communities in Cultural Transition had on him, which has helped him to get to where he is now:

"I became a leader by being an active member and growing up in the Armenian community's various organisations throughout the last two decades. My first leadership experience was being a leader of Year 7 Armenian teenagers within the Armenian Youth Federation, just when I was about to start my University degree. Being a leader, I would rather get the answer from my community members. However, I might summarise leadership with three words: attentive, considerate, and full-of-fun. A good leader is knowledgeable, artistic, strategic, and empathetic. Once you are aware of your community's needs, you can implement your knowledge in an artistic way, that shows your strategy without touching on anybody's toes! A good leader mentors and prepares his future leaders.

The CiCT courses definitely took my leadership skills to a few levels up. Dr Wayne was very helpful to academically & practically show us to look & think "outside the box". Given that Australia is a multi-national country, the courses were an eye opener for me to see and interact with a dozen of community leaders among hundreds of ethnic community groups that exist in Australia."

Through knowledge and passion for equality, Movses continues to balance the pharmaceutical with the humanitarian, and is able to see people for who they are because of his ability to see life through multiple perspectives.

Written by Freny Tayebjee, CiCT Volunteer, June 2021.

Second interview and edited by Jessica Baker, CiCT Consultant, March 2023.



Dr Wayne Fallon and Movses Injeikian at the Advanced Leadership Course on 15th March 2020, Mulgoa, NSW

The Australian Syrian Humanitarian Initiative does not currently have a website due to the recency of the initiative. For more information on volunteering with Movses and the initiative please find the [link online](#).



1. (from left to right) Freny Tayebjee - CiCT volunteer/consultant, Dr Wayne Fallon - facilitator, and David Ajak Ajang - Former Senior CiCT Project Officer. They initiated the CiCT leadership courses.



2. Dr Wayne Fallon with the participants at the leadership course in 2019

3. Loan Bui, Senior CiCT Project Officer (in the middle) with Diplomacy Training Program team at the Human Rights and Advocacy Training in February 2023



4. Participants of the Human Rights and Advocacy Training in February 2023 at the morning coffee time



Communities in Cultural Transition (CiCT) Program assists non-funded associations and groups from newly arrived, small and emerging communities from refugee backgrounds to help develop their leadership and governance skills. The program aims to reduce the dependence of these small groups on large community service organisations by empowering them to manage their own affairs.

The program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs through the SETS Program.

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NSW Service for the Treatment
and Rehabilitation of Torture
and Trauma Survivors

