

# Community Connections

Connecting cultures. Building community.

Autumn 2016

## Welcome from the CEO

Welcome to the first edition of *Community Connections*!



**Elfa Moraitakis**

CEO

I am thrilled to share news and outcomes of some of the most amazing projects we are working on for the benefit of Greater Western Sydney in line with our vision, which is 'Connecting Cultures and Building Community'. With SydWest Multicultural Services turning 30 this year, I am proud to be leading an organisation that can offer services throughout the life span of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse residents living in Parramatta, Holroyd, The Hills, Auburn, Blacktown and now Penrith Local Government Areas. Let me introduce you to our services...

Our Aged Care and Disability Services Team is offering culturally appropriate Consumer Directed Care packages to seniors in need of connecting with a qualified Community Care worker that speaks their language and understands their culture. Services funded under the Commonwealth Home Support and the NSW Community Care Support Programs offer our seniors and people with disabilities services such as Domestic Assistance, Personal Care, In-home Respite, Complex Case Management, Information Support Advocacy and Counselling and Social Support. Our Social Support program currently runs 15 CALD social support groups, providing people with opportunities to get together and participate in projects like the Art Therapy program funded by FACS, an unfunded fortnightly Shopping Tour and our Gardening Project in collaboration with Blacktown Council, to name a few.

Our Community Engagement Team keeps busy ensuring that new and emerging communities are settling smoothly in Greater Western Sydney and are linked to the most appropriate services. The priorities of the team are links to education and employment pathways as well as educating

humanitarian entrants on the Australian way of life. In addition, the team runs a number of Youth activities for teenagers between the ages of 12-24; activities include, but are not limited to soccer, basketball, homework support, music classes, school holiday activities and one-on-one support in collaboration with local mainstream schools. Our settlement services are funded by SSI under the NSP consortium. Our Families and Children programs funded by FACS, help parents and families from CALD backgrounds to raise happy and healthy families.

We support and empower parents who are expecting a baby or have children up to eight years of age by running a number of supported Playgroups and Women's Support groups.

**SydWest MS is actively looking for partnerships and collaborations that will empower our CALD communities and give them the opportunity to become independent.**

Our 'Going Home-Staying Home' Program has proven to be a very successful partnership with Mission Australia and addresses homelessness within the diverse communities of Blacktown and Mt Druitt in a very proactive manner.

On the last page of our newsletter I am happy to introduce our new Leadership Team that will be working closely with our amazing staff and myself for the growth of our diverse services in Greater Western Sydney, while governed by a diverse and visionary Board. Do not hesitate to get in touch with us to discuss any ideas you might have. In the meantime find out our latest news and I hope you enjoy your read!

# Expanding our services to Greater Western Sydney

SydWest Multicultural Services has opened an office in the heart of Penrith allowing us to offer our diverse range of services to assist humanitarian entrants and CALD communities in the Greater Western Sydney region.

With the past few years seeing a steady increase in the number of new and emerging communities to the Penrith area, we recognised the need to support the growing number of people settling into the region. Our teams have begun working with other agencies and existing services in Nepean to ensure the successful integration of all CALD communities as well as the provision of assistance in understanding the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

SydWest currently offers a range of services and programs from the new location, including Aged Care & Disability advice and referrals, information sessions on a range of topics, English classes, emerging community social groups and face to face support for new arrivals, along with youth programs to help engage new young arrivals through casework, education support, sports activities and social events.

The new office is located at **Suite 113, Community Connection Building, 114-116 Henry St, Penrith**. Office hours are 9am to 4.30pm weekdays.



The Mayor of Penrith, Hon. Karen McKeown, Federal Member for Lindsay, Fiona Scott, our CEO Elfa Moraitakis, our Chair Dr. Chandrika Subramanyan, members of the Board, representatives from NMA and SSI among the official guests at the Penrith office launch in February.

## Empowering our local Communities

As the leading community organisation helping people of all cultures to become empowered, SydWest Multicultural Services has been assisting the Syrian community to establish their own Community Association in NSW to help those who will settle into Greater Western Sydney.

Our Community Engagement team has been working closely with members of the group's executive, many of them new arrivals, so that they can establish themselves as a successful community organisation. To date the group has met with state MPs and the media, have taken part in training conducted by Fair Trading and have even organised their first

social BBQ at Blacktown Showgrounds, attracting around 150 people.

President of the Syrian Community Association in NSW, Hala Hendawi stressed that the Association is a non-political and non-religious group keen to assist all new Syrian arrivals to feel supported and connected with others in their new country. "We are very grateful to the Australian government, Settlement Services International and to SydWest Multicultural Services for helping us to settle into Australia. We want to assist by making new arrivals feel welcome by providing advocacy and also offering the social connections which are very important to the Syrian people," she said.



Members of the Association, Abir Daher (Women's Affairs) and Hala Hendawi (President)

You can contact the Syrian Community Association via email: [syriancommunityassociation@gmail.com](mailto:syriancommunityassociation@gmail.com)

SydWest will continue to support our local CALD communities to build capacity so they can in turn continue providing assistance within their own circles.

# Connecting through Art



An innovative Art Therapy program for seniors which commenced at SydWest Multicultural Services this year is already producing some remarkable results.

Funded by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, this creative new pilot program has attracted 48 participants from across Greater Western Sydney who are mostly from non-English speaking backgrounds, and many of whom are taking part with the support of interpreters. This also includes some with vision and hearing impairments.

Our first session saw one visually impaired woman create a drawing for the very first time since losing her sight 20 years ago, while another was able to open up about her illness and depression through her drawing. Many admit that they have not picked up a crayon in years and for some this is their first time drawing and painting. However the groups are embracing the chance and the space to create art and are enjoying the discoveries and the stories that come with the creative processes.

Facilitated by Art Therapists and supported by trained volunteers, the 16-week program offers the seniors a safe space to relax, have fun and make new friends through creative expression and social interactions. The participants are exploring themes such as eldership, community, the seasons, joy and life journeys using paints, crayons, collage, clay and more. The nature of the group sessions and the fact that art can and is transcending language barriers is helping to bring together people from 14 different cultures and break the social isolation for many.

## Blacktown's Citizen of the Year

Our very own Vice Chair, Chief Inspector Robert Fitzgerald of the Blacktown Local Area Command was named this year's Blacktown Citizen of the Year at the Australia Day Citizenship Ceremony.

On or off duty, Robert is actively involved in helping the local community - from his work in Aboriginal issues, multicultural engagement and mental health to his involvement in local sports, consultative groups and of course his role with SydWest Multicultural Services. This award recognises Robert's exceptional commitment to the community.



SydWest MS Vice Chair Chief Inspector Robert Fitzgerald presented his award by Blacktown Mayor Stephen Bali at Blacktown Council.

Photo by Gene Ramirez, Fairfax Media

## Our Success is in changing perceptions & building confidence

When 16-year-old Yaser arrived in Australia last year, he spoke little English and hadn't been to school in over three years. His family had fled Iraq over three years ago, living in Jordan as refugees where there was little time for school.

Yaser now attends the Intensive English Centre at Evans High School in Blacktown and admits that while he is very happy to be going to school again, it is difficult in a new country with a new language. In order to get a little extra help with his schooling, Yaser rides his bike to the SydWest office in Blacktown every Thursday afternoon where he joins more than 20 other children at our Homework Support sessions.

Yaser recalls the first time he asked his youth Caseworker for help with his school work. "I remember that day when I came to Mervat telling her that I am a donkey. I was very disappointed because I could not understand any of my school subjects especially Math and I was worried about my Maths exam. Mervat encouraged me

and explained the subject in very simple way. She speaks my language and makes things easier for me. I got good confidence in myself that I will do good in my exams and I did. I got 75%," Yaser said.

"SydWest gives me the confidence in myself and this is the perfect place to improve myself and my English language. Now I have many friends from different cultures from my school and from SydWest. I am very happy to get good marks in Maths and receive a certificate too," he said.

Yaser is one of 60 students who attend SydWest's homework support sessions held once a week across Blacktown, St Mary's and Mt Druitt - supported by our Youth workers and dedicated volunteer tutors.



Yaser pictured with SydWest caseworker, Mervat Altarazi

## And the winners are...

SydWest programs and staff came under the spotlight at the recent **2016 ZEST Community Sector Awards** taking out two major categories.

**The Savannah Pride Basketball Club Program won the Outstanding Youth Led Project in Greater Western Sydney.** Supported by SydWest Multicultural Services and coached at the Blacktown PCYC, Savannah Pride is an innovative program empowering over 100 at risk boys and girls each year through a comprehensive basketball program that builds self-esteem, life skills and resilience through sports.

**Our very own Community Engagement Coordinator, Abulla Agwa was welcomed into the ZEST Hall of Fame following his work with the Refugee and CALD community.** Abulla arrived in Australia in 2004 as a humanitarian entrant from Ethiopia and began working at SydWest in 2008. Since then, he has been assisting hundreds of refugees every year to settle successfully into Australia and helping community groups to connect with the wider community. Abulla says he is passionate about giving back to the community and empowering others. "Australia is a wonderful country – a place where people are respected. There are many opportunities and you can fulfil your dreams in this country, but it requires commitment and hard work," Abulla said. Abulla has undertaken tertiary studies in Australia and now leads the Community Engagement Settlement Team. Last year, he also received the Pride of Australia Fair Go medal for his contribution to Australia.



Abulla Agwa admitted in the ZEST Hall of Fame for his work with new arrivals.



SydWest MS Youth Coordinator, Mustapha Bangura, Vice Chair, Robert Fitzgerald, Savannah Pride Coach Acoouth John and SydWest MS Chair, Dr Chandrika Subramaniyan.



## recent events



### International Women's Day

Women of all ages and cultures were treated to cultural entertainment and stalls along with inspirational speeches from fellow women as part of our International Women's Day events in Blacktown and Mt Druitt.



### Harmony Day

More than 500 people from across the community converged on Bowman Hall on Tuesday 22 March to celebrate Harmony Day and to embrace the region's rich cultural diversity.

## up coming events

SydWest Open Day

19 May 2016

SydWest MS Main Office, Blacktown

Refugee Week

14 to 20 June 2016

Blacktown

Blacktown Community Services Expo

12 October 2016

Bowman Hall, Blacktown Council

# Our Board Members

SydWest Multicultural Services is managed by a Board of Directors comprising representatives from the Blacktown LGA.

## **Dr Chandrika Subramaniyan, Chair**

Dr Chandrika Subramaniyan has been an advocate for migrants and refugees ever since she migrated to Australia in 1997. Boasting a career that spans journalism, IT, education and law, Chandrika has assisted numerous women through Sydwest with their legal needs, has mentored and encouraged women and migrants and has conducted workshops and information sessions to educate new arrivals about Australia's legal system. In 2012, Chandrika was honoured as a Woman of the West by Western Sydney University.

## **Robert Fitzgerald, Vice Chair**

Robert Fitzgerald is the Chief Inspector of the Blacktown Local Area Command and is a proud and active member of western Sydney, having lived in the region for the past 40 years and worked across Sydney's police stations for over 30 years. His current portfolios include mental health, Aboriginal issues and multicultural community engagement. Robert is also the 2016 Blacktown Citizen of the Year for his exceptional contribution to the community.

## **Bridget Sarris, Treasurer**

Bridget Sarris has worked in the NSW public education sector for 40 years and is currently the Relieving Principal at Evans High School, a comprehensive secondary school in Blacktown. Bridget is a passionate supporter of the educational, health and settlement needs of newly-arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and their families and has been involved in a number of joint programs designed to enhance the lives of new arrivals.

## **Raquel Ricafort-Bleza, Secretary**

Raquel Ricafort-Bleza is a dynamic partnership broker, program coordinator and project manager with non-government, not-for-profit and government sector experience. Raquel boasts 25 years' experience in the community sector and is passionate about strengthening community service access, establishing stakeholder support and engagement and developing strategic social plans to help disadvantaged groups including people from CALD backgrounds.

## **Om Dhungel, Director**

Om Dhungel brings a diverse range of Board, management, community development and volunteering experience to SydWest. Om is a consultant and a practitioner of strength-based approach to refugee settlement and community development. A Fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, Om is also a Director on the Board of Settlement Services International. He is a current Westpac Social Change Fellow and a recipient of 2016 Community Service Lifetime Achievement Award and 2012 National Volunteer Award. Om is the founding President and currently a senior Advisor of the Association of Bhutanese in Australia (ABA) Sydney.

## **Noel Hiffernan, Director**

Noel Hiffernan has been involved in the disability rights movement for the last 40 years, during which time he has served on numerous state and federal government boards and committees dealing with access to the built environment, employment, health care and advocacy. A member of the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal for the last 13 years, Noel holds a number of board positions across greater western Sydney and is the founder of Greystanes Foundation Leura.

## **Dr Moninderjit Singh, Director**

Dr Moninder Singh has over 27 years' experience in the public, private and social sectors with expertise in management, teaching and training as well as research and analysis. With a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree from India, he has served as an Associate Professor and has also established the Australian Academy of Management and Science. Dr Singh is the Chair of the Punjabi Council of Australia and is actively involved in various community groups across western Sydney.

## Our Leadership Team



**Elfa Moraitakis**  
Chief Executive Officer



**Angela Van Dyke**  
Community Engagement Manager



**Mereline MurimwaRarami**  
Acting Aged Care and Disability Services Manager



**Nikolayka Bentcheva**  
Corporate Services Manager



**Ted Starc**  
Consulting Chief Finance Officer



**Vikki Hine**  
Business Development Manager

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## Lifetime Award for Community Service

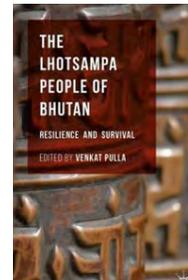
SydWest Board Director, Om Dhungel recently received the prestigious NSW Premier's Lifetime Community Service Award for his outstanding work with the Australian Bhutanese community.

The award recognises an individual's lifetime commitment to community service within a migrant community. For Om, this work began in 1992 when he fled Bhutan for fear of persecution. Living in exile in Nepal, Om spent the next six years volunteering in the Bhutanese refugee camps, advocating for individuals and families and educating refugee children. Om came to Australia in 1998 as a refugee, and 10 years later began helping his community again when the Federal Government started settling Bhutanese refugees under its humanitarian settlement program.

"It is important to empower individuals and communities and to share a pathway, particularly to young people who have a right to know that regardless of their past, they can choose and work towards where they want to be in the future. It's about charting your own course and destiny," Om said.



## New book reveals the Bhutanese refugee story



Om Dhungel is also the co-author of a new book about the Bhutanese refugee crisis. Launched at SydWest Multicultural Services in February, *The Lhotsampa People of Bhutan, Resilience and Survival* is the first book of its kind to shed light on the little known story of these people.

Edited by Venkat Pulla, the book discusses the abuse suffered by the Lhotsampa people and how they have drawn on their spirituality and sense of family and community to make a new life in countries like Australia and the US. Since 2008, 5,500 Bhutanese have settled in Australia, with 1,200 living across NSW and over 430 based in the Blacktown, Penrith and Campbelltown LGAs.

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