

CAPSA

CATHOLIC ALLIANCE FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

Najeeba's story

Najeeba Wazefadost was 12 when her family was smuggled out of Afghanistan and flown into Indonesia on fake passports. Her younger brother was born in Indonesia and was just days old when they set sail for Australia. The boat was intercepted by the Australian Navy in 2000.

Najeeba now lives in Western Sydney. She heads up the Hazara Women's Association, and is an ambassador for Amnesty International and Welcome to Australia. In 2010 she was a finalist of the Young Human Rights Medal Award. She has a Bachelor of Medical Science and is now studying a second degree.

I had to leave my country Afghanistan in 2000 because of the war and persecution that happens there. I am from an ethnic minority called Hazara. Hazaras have been persecuted ever since around 1891, and there is no single cause or reason as to Hazaras not only being persecuted by the Taliban but by other ethnic minorities. Hazaras still face massacres by officials and warlords in Afghanistan. That is the reason that I and my family escaped. There was no other choice for us than escaping the country and going to somewhere safe - we would not have survived there.

We left Afghanistan without knowing that we were coming to Australia. When we left Afghanistan we didn't have any means of transport. Sometimes we had to walk barefoot, sometimes we had to get into a truck and hide within a truck, sometimes we were walking in the night. But then we did make our way, it was very difficult to get out of Afghanistan, but



Najeeba Wazefadost was a finalist of the 2010 Young Human Rights Medal Award. Image credit: ABC News.

we finally got to Pakistan. From Pakistan we went to Indonesia and then to Australia by boat.

It was a horrifying journey to come to Australia by boat, or I should actually call it a piece of wood. We had to sit in the boat for more than a week, just hoping to survive. We risked being drowned in the Pacific Ocean.

I am a refugee, but that no longer defines who I am. And I thank the education that I've had for that.

We arrived in Darwin and immediately we were brought to the Curtin detention centre. We had no clue that we would arrive in Australia and be imprisoned in a place that. We came to find a home where we could be safe, secure, where we could stop being an asylum seeker and be valued as a human being. But unfortunately those dreams were not realised right away and we found ourselves in Curtin, where all the wire fences were around us.

It was in the middle of the desert, with nothing in there. The first thing we saw was security guards with guns coming towards us, and as we were going in all the gates were getting locked behind us - exactly like a prisoner. But we were being imprisoned for having done no crime except fleeing our country.

We were coming from a war-torn country where we were really traumatised. I was a child, and being detained in a jail-like environment only added to that trauma. We had no voice. That trauma was a big challenge and I still feel it.

We were lucky in that we only stayed there for less two months. We stayed in Curtin for nearly a month and a half and then we were relieved into the community on temporary protection visas, in John Howard's time. Which was itself a challenge because our lives were put in limbo for another four years, we had no idea what would happen to us. From Tasmania, we decided to come to Sydney.

The other hard thing was that when we were released, everything was new. I didn't have any friends. I didn't know how to be part of society.

In Afghanistan I never would have had the opportunity to have access to education or employment. I'm able to further that education, and that's amazing. I am a refugee, but that no longer defines who I am. And I thank the education that I've had for that.

I feel safe. I feel secure. It's given me the freedom to get an education to help myself and my family, but also contribute to Australia and to have value and worth as a citizen.

There is no simple answer to racism. It's all about creating relationships and having conversations. If we do not interact with each other, if we do not hear each other's voice, if we do not hear each other's pain or problems, we will always have questions being unanswered and that will create problems.

There is no simple answer to racism. It's all about creating relationships and having conversations. Every person has to have that conversation with one another, and the problems will be reduced and there will be more harmony. If we do not interact with each other, if we do not hear each other's voice, if we do not hear each other's pain or problems, we will always have questions being unanswered and that will create problems.

I've come across a lot of amazing Australians who have helped me and my family settle in Australia and open a fresh life, a new life. Today, where I am, I thank those Australians.

I personally myself have not faced any racism or any discrimination or anything that has hurt me. I've been welcomed, I've been loved, and that's because they were hearing me. They gave me the chance to share my story. I've come across some Australians who initially have had a negative image about boat people coming to Australia - saying they're queue jumpers or they're taking the jobs away from other people, things like that. I think it was through a civil conversation that I was able to clear that assumption they were having and we were able to build a good rapport with each other.

I have been able to make many friends because we both respected each other regardless of race, religion, culture. And we gave each other a chance to be heard. They heard my story, and I heard their negative comments. Sometimes we need to hear what negative things people are thinking, or assuming, in order to show the other side and get rid of any negatives that are there.

In the first few years when I came to Australia, I always used to say it's me, me, me. I came to Australia by boat, I wasn't welcomed into Australia, my dreams were shattered, what I went through in the detention centre was seriously unfair. But then I thought hold on for a minute, let's put you in an Australian person's shoes. If I was Australian, with a life where I wasn't exposed to war and I didn't know what a refugee was, how would I react? Then I realised, it's not about me, it's about us. I should give people the chance to share their views without becoming angry. And then they will give me the chance to share my story and the problems will be slowly resolved. The problem is when people don't get a chance to be heard. I was able to express to them how many asylum seekers carry a lot of sorrow and stress and they depend on human sympathy. And then they became more sympathetic to asylum seekers and refugees.

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