

Voices of Australia audio transcripts

Transcript

Introduction

Narration

In 1975 the Racial Discrimination Act came into force.

It was a landmark for Australia – the first federal law to say that all people have the right to be treated fairly, regardless of their background, culture or colour.

Thirty years on, it continues to be a strong statement about our shared values – that racism and discrimination have no place in our community.

Voices of Australia is our way of marking this important anniversary.

Over the next 50 minutes you'll listen to stories from all corners of Australia and from people from many different backgrounds.

There are stories about what Australia means to people, and what makes it home.

Stories of important friendships, and seeing the world with new eyes.

Stories about breaking down barriers, small and large.

Stories of the experience of racism, and how it was overcome.

And, finally, stories of the transformation from tolerance to respect.

Voices of Australia is an honest look at how we live together in this country.

These stories give us the opportunity to listen to each other – the starting point to understanding, acceptance and respect.

While some of the stories are painful, above all, *Voices of Australia* is about people's strength and their hopefulness – it's about the day-to-day process of getting on with each other and growing together, as individuals and as a nation.

Welcome to *Voices of Australia*.

1. Australia: Our home

Narration

Australia.

It's an ancient land – and home to the world's oldest culture.

But it is also 'young and free' – a vibrant multicultural society.

In Australia, we value freedom, equality, respect for others – in short, the 'fair go'.

And yet the past two centuries have been marked with conflict and discrimination.

Australia today is a work in progress; changing; growing; making room for people of all colours and cultures.

Australia is our home. And each of us has a special connection to it.

Flo Watson is a traditional owner with the Kunganji (Kun-Gan-Ji) people in Yarrabah, south of Cairns. For her, a sense of home comes from a spiritual belonging to the land of her people.

Flo Watson

Well as we say, as Aboriginal people, the Earth is our mother.

As part of our Aboriginal heritage in Yarrabah we have got the rainbow serpent and he lives just around the corner in a place called King Beach.

And that is the story that was handed down to me by my fathers, grandfathers, great grandfather's, aunties and uncles, that we have got the rainbow serpent and he stirs the water once an elder goes up and taps the water three times.

And that water becomes medicine water. It has got healing properties we believe and whenever we're sick or if we have ceremonies or christenings or weddings we go over to that to see the rainbow serpent and that is our spiritual connection.

It is a longing to always go home. It is just beautiful. It is a beautiful spiritual connection. It is a feeling that only Aboriginal people can explain.

Narration

Like Flo Watson, Kathy Mills believes that it's important that Aboriginal people share their stories and teach non-Aboriginal people about the importance of 'country'.

An elder of the Koongurukan ('Koong-uruk-kan') people, south-west of Darwin, Kathy wrote a poem about a sacred women's place called 'Topatinj' (Top-a-tinj).

Kathy Mills

*This sacredness for land we hold
Is sacred to our very soul
It is a source from which we came
And to that source we will return again
The spirits of the land conduct this ancient law
As they instruct their future generation
Keep the places where they place their feet
And that might be a certain tree
Or a rock or a spring but in reality
It is source of life within and the object that holds
As our heart beats, so our life unfolds*

Narration

Of course, no matter what our background, Australia gets under our skin and into our bones – the look and feel of the landscape, the sights and smells, the people.

Steve Pratt, now a member of the ACT Parliament, previously worked with CARE Australia to deliver humanitarian projects in many conflict-torn countries around the world.

His memories of Australia were particularly important to him during many difficult times, especially during 1999 when he was captured and held in detention for five months by authorities in Serbia.

Steve Pratt

The qualities that resonated with me about Australia and it being home was the Australian bush, the Australian natural environment, our seas, our beaches, our forests.

And certainly when I was going through a very difficult period in captivity in Yugoslavia in '99 of course these sorts of images came back to me very, very sharply.

Of course too, and just as important as the natural environment, was the Australian people. I fondly remembered the rather warm, easy-going nature of the Australian people, and also the way that the Australian society in recent years had become quite harmonious in terms of its new multicultural diversity.

And there seemed to me, as I remembered, a much greater tolerance and harmony in Australia than what I was experiencing in many societies that I had to work in, where I was seeing problems all the time – conflict, racism, intolerance.

Narration

Australia has a reputation around the world as a safe and peaceful place, based on respect for people's rights and the rule of law.

It is these qualities that attract many migrants to come to Australia, and adopt it as their home.

People like Marat Sverdlov ('r' pronounced) and his family, who left the Ukraine in 1992 during the upheaval that followed its breakaway from the former Soviet Union.

Marat Sverdlov

We were the first ones to the airport for the flight, although the second to last family to leave because even though it wasn't illegal to leave the country any more the authorities did everything they could to slow everyone down.

We had a few choices but we took the flight to Adelaide. Our other choices were to go to Israel, which probably wouldn't have been a good idea, and the United States.

Well living costs are higher in the United States and we were only allowed to take 100 Australian dollars per person out of the country with us – so I'm rather glad we came to Australia.

The country really does have a good feel about it. Probably the unique thing about Australia is the attitude that people have to each other – there's more mateship and goodwill. I mean you walk down the street, people smile at you and say hello. You don't get that in Russia.

My parents were fairly shocked the first time we went shopping here and one of the assistants actually came and asked if they could help us. It seems pretty simple but you don't get that sort of thing where we come from so my parents were shocked speechless just by someone being randomly nice.

I'm glad I've grown up here surrounded by that attitude and I don't know how I would have made it back where we come from.

Narration

Like Marat, Razia Zahedi (Za-hi-di) is another young person who left her homeland to come to Australia.

With her family, Razia fled Afghanistan with the hope of finding peace and stability in a far-away country.

Unlike Marat, though, her first impressions of Australia were painful and distressing.

Razia Zahedi

When I first arrived in Australia in 2000 I thought Australia would be a really beautiful place. I didn't know much about Australia so I just pictured it in my mind that people were very friendly and they would welcome us and straight away we were going to have freedom.

We came and were taken to the detention centre and I was very disappointed and I thought we were treated like prisoners in detention centre.

Narration

After spending three months in Curtin detention centre, Razia and her family were released from detention on temporary protection visas.

She was left feeling very uncertain about her future here – and just as uncertain about how to begin life in a culture far different from the one she had left.

Razia Zahedi

After we were released we were sent to Brisbane and Brisbane is a place where at that time there were not many Muslim people, with head scarves and stuff. It was totally different. It was poles apart from my country.

First of all, we were not used to the Australian culture. And language was also hard, like was one problem and I had to learn English in a special school, and I think teachers did a lot to help us to learn English and adjust in the society.

And after learning the language I think I understood Australian culture more.

Narration

Five years later, Razia is looking forward in her life – and enthusiastic about the possibilities for study and a career that she now has.

Razia Zahedi

One of my main dreams is that I would finish my education, try my best to get really good marks and make it to uni and study medical hopefully – and that is my dream.

I think in Australia it is more different to what it was in my country. Like I don't have to be a boy to go to university. I can do whatever a boy can do in Australia – and better.

I love Australia. I love the weather. I love the people – and I am still struggling. I am still trying to make it my home. You know. It takes time to make a country your home which is totally different to your country.

Narration

For Razia, like many refugees and migrants, the process of feeling 'at home' in Australia takes time. It can be a confusing and difficult journey.

Thao Nguyen (Taow New-in) arrived from Vietnam with her family when she was a baby – refugees from the war. Growing up in Australia, cut off from friends and family, it was hard to know just who she was or where she belonged.

Strangely, it took a trip back to Vietnam, where Thao found herself caught up in wild sporting celebrations, to help discover her Australian identity.

Thao Nguyen

And in Ho Chi Min City they all pored out and every single Honda motorcycle in the city was out into the streets. And I got onto the back of this Honda with my cousin and literally me my knees were touching these other people that were strangers.

And I would look up in these shanty town balconies and grandfathers with their chopsticks and pans were just banging the things and yelling in Vietnamese, "Long live Vietnam. Long live Vietnam."

I just looked around and all these people look like me, you know, and momentarily I feel like I belong somewhere.

Then I went back to Australia and I remember the first thing I felt was a complete sense of alienation. There was so much space and it was really hard to reconcile where home is.

And shortly after I attended this Australia Day ceremony where I was receiving this award, and they were singing the Seekers song – you know it was so cliché. But I started crying. I started crying and I thought 'My God – I feel Australian. I feel like I really belong here'.

And it was this really weird wonderful mesh – you know, I am not completely Vietnamese but I am not completely like bush ocker Australian. But I have this new cosmopolitan identity.

Narration

Like Thao, Australia in the 21st century is a weird, wonderful mesh.

It has a unique identity – one that’s drawn from the lives, stories and cultures of all the many different people who live here.

And one that’s strong enough to change and grow, as it makes make room for others who will call Australia home in the years to come.

2. Unexpected friendships

Narration

Amareswar (amar – ees – war) Galla arrived in Canberra on a Saturday afternoon in late 1977.

He had come from a rural part of India and was about to begin a research scholarship at the Australian National University.

Much of the city was closed down – a far cry from the bustling life he’d left behind. Plus he didn’t know a soul.

But he was just about to make a very unexpected friendship with one of Australia’s most famous people, where they were both standing in line waiting to pay for their groceries.

Amareswar Galla

There was a very friendly gentleman standing behind me in the queue and he was very friendly, he asked me where do I come from, and I told him I come from India. Then he started asking me about Indira Gandhi and the election results after the emergency that Indira Gandhi imposed in India and how she lost the election.

So I said to him “You seem to know a lot about India – are you a specialist on India?” He said “No, no I just have a personal interest and family interest and family friendships in India.”

And the following weekday I saw him in the Menzies Library behind the card catalogue and I was there experiencing the Menzies Research Library at the Australian National University for the first time. He quickly came round to me with a big smile and very friendly and he said “Are you settling down well? Is there anything I can do for you? Here is my phone number, please call me if you need any help.”

I thought he was extremely generous, I mean this Australian.

Later on when I was borrowing my first books in the Menzies library, Mrs Clarkson and Mr Rose behind the counter, they smiled at me and said “oh you’ve already met the big man.”

I said to them “Yes he’s big isn’t he? He’s bigger than me” and then I said to them, “Tell me, you know, who is he because he’s very friendly, but I really don’t know who he is”.

And they both looked at me, they looked at each other, they were quite non-plussed, they said “You mean you don’t know who he is?”

I said “He just introduced himself as Gough, that’s it.” And they said “Yes, that’s Gough Whitlam, the former Prime Minister of Australia.”

Narration

Of course, not everyone is welcomed to the country by a former Prime Minister.

But many who do arrive in Australia are grateful for the friendships that they form in those early days.

Having left so much behind – often family and loved ones – a friendly face and practical help can make those initial days that much easier.

Denis Asaf came to Australia a year ago – a refugee from Sudan.

He was initially unsure of the welcome he would receive – he was told that Australians were very busy people, too busy to help people like him.

But within a few days of his arrival, he had a friend, Greg, from a local church to show him around and help him settle in.

Denis Asaf

When the person tell me that thing I was a little bit scared because I say I thought everybody was so friendly here and people help each other here. Then it was a surprise when Dr Greg come and started to be with us.

He helped me very much to understand some of the things in Australia like ... ok, the first things he was taking us around to know our suburb, like Fairfield. Walking with us around, driving us around in a big shopping centre, to go to a swimming pool.

And also after that he would be taking us around to understand some of the rules and laws here, and help us to manage our finance. Like how to organise ourselves in rent and also in budgeting

for food and other things, which we don't use to do in Africa.

Without him we could have been messing around and he was the first person who came to us and started doing these things, just voluntary we did not know him before.

He had been helping us a lot. Driving us to church and picking us from church every time. He did all these things for us and it is just voluntary.

He don't need anything. When we ask him should we buy some petrol he tell us no. That is not something that he wants, he just wants to help us and that is all.

Narration

Our friendships give us great support and care. But they also challenge us to see the world through different eyes.

Friendships with people who are different to us can draw us out of ourselves, make us confront our prejudices.

In short, they help us to grow as people.

Dragana (drAgana) Danicic (Dan-is-ich) came to Australia from Serbia 10 years ago. She settled in Perth, a long way from her homeland that had been torn apart by war and old hatreds.

And here in Australia – a sort of neutral territory – she was able to forge a lasting friendship across those deep divides.

Dragana Danicic

I've made many friends here. One of the interesting things was that when I came here the first thing I worried about was being of a Serbian background and at the time there being trouble between Serbs and Croats and Muslims and Bosnians. One of the first things I worried about was how am I going to react when I see these people here because bad things have happened and there is bad blood between us.

I tell you one thing the first friend I made here was Croatian, and we are still friends. And good friends as well. And the funny thing is why we can be friends here, yet in the other place there was a war, where people were best of friends one day and the next day they turn your back on you.

But to put it quite plainly – we come from opposing sides where the other side has done wrong to the other person. So really, once we

came here it should be "I hate you because your side has done this to me."

But the approach we took was that "Your side has done that to me and my side has done that to you, therefore we are even." We would just laugh about it. It was more about what we had in common.

And what we had in common was we were foreigners within this great land. We came here from the same background. Our parents were around a similar age. We were around a similar age. The fact that our religions were different made absolutely no difference whatsoever. We had so much more in common. The little difference we had did not mean anything at all.

Narration

Like Gragana, Luke Gay has gone out of his way to build friendships with people from different backgrounds.

Growing up in a 'dinky di' suburban family in western Sydney, Luke made friends with the children of Muslim families in his neighbourhood and at his school.

He spent time with the families, asked a lot of questions and learnt about their culture.

As a teenager, Luke decided he wanted to join his friends in observing the holy month of Ramadan – a special time of fasting for Muslims.

Luke Gay

I actually have a lot of Muslim friends. A lot of them do fast and I was doing it with them. And so it was better to know what they were going through everyday at school, trying not to eat at school, which was pretty hard especially when you were running around a lot.

At first they'd say "Why are you doing it? You don't have to do it" but it wasn't a "have to" it was a "want", and something good to try.

It was definitely weird waking up, trying to wake up, when they woke up. Just trying to remember to wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning to eat and get back to sleep and not eat the whole day. Or drink water or anything like that so it was quite a different experience. But it was quite enjoyable too.

Seeing what the younger kids were going through, kids younger than me were doing it, and I thought why not give it a try. If they could do it,

maybe I could.

Another thing – we were all close. It was just bringing a bigger friendship and bond in between us too. And I have to say it was quite enjoyable. I definitely liked it. I've done it a few times, haven't done it lately but. My eating habits have changed obviously. But I'd go back and do it again anytime.

Narration

When we take the risk to try something new, and we do it with the support of our friends, we learn new things.

So what did Luke learn from fasting with his friends during Ramadan?

Luke Gay

A lot! How much your stomach grumbles!

Seeing what a lot of people go through everyday, that's not just for Ramadan, it's every day.

And then you have to look at the way you are, and the way you can eat, and things like that and you start to take things for granted a lot. It taught me a fair bit.

Narration

As Luke found, our friends teach us a different way of looking at the world.

They can also teach us something important about ourselves.

Shahnaz Rind (NOT pronounced like the lemon rind) lives in Western Australia. She has an Indigenous grandmother, but her parents are from Baluchistan (Ba-LU-chis-tan, not Ba-lu-CHIS-tan), a province of Pakistan.

She has her Indigenous heritage – and she also has a strong Muslim identity. It's a complex mix of cultures.

But, through an unexpected friendship at university, she learnt how to see beyond the differences that she previously felt with most other people – and, in the process, she learnt what she feels it means to be Australian.

Shahnaz Rind

I met a very nice girl and we started talking. I will be honest I think I drew to her because she was dark skinned. So I said "OK I will be friends with her and maybe she is Muslim and maybe we have things in common."

But when I started to talk to her she was actually a very strict Catholic. And then I realised we had the same morals and the same values and the same family structure and everything.

Then I thought myself "stuff this I am not going to make friends based on culture or based on religion because it's not going my way, it is not working." That is when I learnt something about myself. The only way I'm going to break a barrier and get people to know me is if I get to share things with them.

So I shared my culture with her and she shared her Easter and Christmas and vice versa we did the same sort of things. She still gives me Christmas presents and you know I give her Christmas presents. It doesn't mean I celebrate Christmas but it is about sharing.

I have been friends with her for nearly ten years and we have not had one problem with religion or culture. And I think that is what friendship is getting to know the soul of the person. Because if you really care about someone you don't care what background they are, you don't care what religion they are – you just get along.

And that when I broke down that barrier I think that is really when I became Australian, because I can't put myself into a box forever.

Narration

Our unexpected friendships enrich our lives.

Through them, we learn more about others, and ourselves.

We look for the similarities with others, and appreciate the differences.

In the process, we play a part in creating communities built on friendship, respect and understanding.

For each of the categories below, make a list of those rules and laws that are important for everyday living in a harmonious and respectful society.

3. Racism – not in my backyard

Natalie Lesley

A lot of shop keepers sort of following me around and sort of going a bit overboard with the "can I check your pockets" stuff. And I was like "yea, no worries" and I was happy to show them inside my bag and my pockets and all that sort of stuff.

And they'd sort of still give you a little warning, you know "shoplifting is illegal and you'll get in trouble" and all this sort of stuff. And I was like "I know, I'm not like that, I don't steal".

But it was just because I was a little bit darker.

Narration

Although we might wish it was different, it's clear that racism still happens in Australia.

Sometimes racism can be subtle.

Shahbaz Rind

You walk next to an old lady she automatically clutches her bag tighter. You notice it. They think they are not doing it but you notice it.

I think it's the subtle racism which hurts the most. You know what's happening, but they don't admit to it.

Narration

And sometimes, like with Zahra, a young refugee girl from Afghanistan, racism can be much more aggressive.

Zahra Shafaq

A few months ago I was walking with my neighbour, going shopping in Bankstown, and when we got out of the library we were talking in our own language – Dari, Persian.

And this dude he was walking in front of us like a few steps away and he just turned around and started swearing and saying all the 'F' words and stuff.

"Stop speaking your bloody language you're in Australia". And I'm like "Sir, can I help you?" and then he goes "Stop speaking in your own language, you're bloody in Australia you boat people."

And I'm like "What is wrong?" Like I thought maybe I'm not meant to be here.

Narration

However it happens, racism and discrimination can cut to the heart of how someone feels about themselves. It can leave people feeling hurt and like they don't belong.

Racism and discrimination can happen everywhere – walking down the street, in shops, in the school playground, renting a house.

It can also happen at work.

Ali Gurdag is a police officer with the Victoria Police Department.

However, he takes a positive view on how to deal with any racism that he might encounter because of his Turkish background.

Ali Gurdag

In the workplace today, I have experienced racism from members of the public. Obviously they will look at the name and they've already got their tails up because you are a police officer. Once they see that you're Turkish, they tend to have a few words with you as well.

You just deal with it. You cop it on the chin because at the end of the day they don't know me from a bar of soap. So, yes, I think there is still a little bit of racism. I think what I find is that a lot of people are afraid to express their views as openly as they would have in the past.

But being racist is not a bad thing if you look at it from a positive perspective, because by being racist you're making it clear you don't understand a particular culture, or fear a culture. That, I suppose, opens a door for further learning if you are open to that.

Narration

Lyn, a refugee from Burma, agrees. While clear racism does exist in parts of the community, she says that much of the time it comes from a lack of understanding about people from different backgrounds, cultures and religions.

Lyn Andersch

While there was blatant discrimination in some areas where shop assistants would not serve you, or would ignore you, or when they did serve you would be quite blatantly rude, I think underlying all of that is really a basic ignorance in the community about how to deal with people of difference.

I would be asked 'How come you speak English?', 'Surely you've never lived in a proper house before you came here?', 'Do you have cars?' 'Do you have streets where you come from?'

Narration

For Lyn, sharing her background and her stories is a great way of breaking down the prejudices or misunderstandings she sometimes comes up against.

It's also the approach that Hank Horton, from Deloraine in Tasmania, takes.

Growing up in Tasmania in the 1970s, Hank Horton remembers having his Indigenous identity dismissed by the widely held view that Truganini, who died in 1876, was the last 'real' Indigenous person in Tasmania.

Hank Horton

So many European people they had a real mind set that no there is no Aboriginal people. Truganini was the last one, so you guys are only pretending.

And it was very very hard to shake that, and even when I was at school I can remember standing up in my history class and saying to the history teacher, "No you're wrong – my house is full of blackfellas".

And mutton bird season was happening – just starting or just finishing at the time – so there was something like 14 Aboriginal people at my home right here, and this bloke is trying to tell me there's no Aboriginal people in Tasmania.

And I was going "Hey pal, come out to my place, there's a stack of us out home – you can see how many blackfellas there really is."

We knew where we were as Aboriginal people, within our heart, within our soul, we knew where our spirits lied. But we were unable to act as Aboriginal people within the broader community because they were still denying that there was any Aboriginality out there.

And that just made existing pretty hard.

Narration

Today, Hank's passion is sharing his Aboriginal culture with the Tasmanian community, and especially school students, at the Jahadi centre that he established

He gives the young people a 'hands on' experience of different parts of Aboriginal culture – in the process, putting an end to the fiction that Truganini was 'the last Aboriginal'.

Hank Horton

Feel a spear and throw a spear and wodi. Get to understand why the artwork was done. It wasn't just for pretty pictures. It was a language it was a written way of keeping history.

Have a look at the woven basket, because you could not go down to Mitre 10 and buy a bag.

They get their hands on cooking a damper and tasting the mutton bird.

And each student gets to finish off their own set of clapsticks by doing an ochre ceremony with one of the elders, Uncle Viv. He helps to ochre their set of clapsticks. They dust them off take them home.

So they have got that bit of memorabilia now to trigger off a story. "We made them when we were out at Jahardi." Already there are lots of students who've gone away now with a bigger and larger understanding of the Aboriginal community here in Tasmania.

They accept now that Truganinia is not the last one. "Hey look there are heaps of Aboriginal people still. We spent a day with them – we wove baskets, we ate damper, we tried mutton bird". So they can see that Truganini was not the last one. So it does really break down those myths.

Narration

Education is an important part of tackling the stereotypes that lead to racism. But education by itself is not enough.

That's why the Racial Discrimination Act is so important – it makes racial discrimination and racial vilification against the law.

The Act – now 30 years old – is a strong statement about the right of all people to be treated fairly, regardless of background, culture or colour.

Hannah McGlade, an Indigenous woman from Western Australia, is one person who saw how the law could be used to tackle racism in the community.

Hannah McGlade

When I was a university lecturer I had finished law school, I came across the Race Discrimination Act and I really thought we have got this fantastic piece of legislation. Racism should not be happening anymore. The law is there the law is against it.

Narration

In 1997 Hannah lodged a complaint under the Racial Discrimination Act against Ross Lightfoot, for comments he made about Indigenous people to a national newspaper.

At the time, Mr Lightfoot was a member of Western Australia's Upper House, and was about to become a Senator in the federal Parliament.

In the newspaper article he argued against teaching Indigenous culture in schools and said that "Aboriginal people in their native state are the most primitive race on earth".

Hannah McGlade

I took that case after reading a newspaper account in which he was objecting to the teaching of Aboriginal Studies at school because he was claiming that Aboriginal people were the lowest colour in the civilisation spectrum.

And I had a young child at this time and I wanted my son to go to school and be proud in school and not to feel the sort of shame that my generation felt when we were going through school.

Narration

Hannah's complaint was heard by the Federal Court.

The Court agreed with her that Mr Lightfoot's statements were 'out of line with mainstream Australian attitudes' – and that they were also against the law, because they were likely to 'offend and insult' Indigenous people.

Successfully standing up to racism was an important victory for Hannah and her community, the Noongar (Nung-ar) people.

Hannah McGlade

I wanted to send a message out to non-Aboriginal society that you can't treat us like that anymore and that we are not flora and fauna.

You know, in Western Australia the Native Welfare Act classified Aboriginal people as flora and fauna, not as human as white people.

And I guess that was where I was coming from, to send out that message and also it was really great that a lot of other Noongar people felt good about the decision.

They felt empowered, they felt that there is a law there that we can use.

Narration

Tom Calma is the (former) federal Race Discrimination Commissioner.

His job is to work with communities across Australia to address racism and discrimination.

Tom Calma

Racism is ugly. It can cause enormous hurt to individuals and communities – and there's simply no place for it in Australia today.

That's why it's crucial that the law is there to say 'no – this sort of behaviour is unacceptable.'

At the same time, it's important that we use education as a way of breaking down racist stereotypes and build greater understanding in the community.

We've got to work together to make sure that everyone in Australia feels accepted and respected – regardless of their race, culture or religion.

4. Breaking down barriers

Narration

Shahbaz Rind (NOT pronounced like lemon Rind) is part of a hip hop group called Downsyde.

Based in Western Australia, they spend a lot of time touring country towns and playing to the local communities.

For Shahbaz, music is a great way of reaching out to young people.

After playing a gig, they often spend time teaching kids how to make music for themselves.

Music can be a great way to break down barriers between people – barriers like age, race, and culture.

But as Shahbaz found, sometimes the barriers in a community can remain very strong.

Shahbaz Rind

We played a gig in a small country town in WA, played the gig in the hall and then we were teaching the kids how to rap and mix and all that sort of stuff, play the drums and got up and had a go at everything.

The community had put a feed for us and all the people who were coming through with this thing. It was spun out. They had the barbecue and the cooking. And there was this group of Aboriginal community over there had put on a feed as well.

It was weird they were not mixing. They were just sitting at opposite ends.

The spun out thing was that all the band members took a bit of food from the community that people had organised the barbecue and went sat with the Aboriginal crew and having a chat and eating with them and no one else was coming.

Only when we left that to go somewhere they would come and talk to you. When you come back and sit down they would not approach that area.

Narration

Sometimes the barriers that exist in our communities are the result of deeply held stereotypes.

Often, however, they come about from a lack of knowledge or understanding about different cultures, religions or backgrounds.

Either way, challenging those barriers can be a daunting experience.

Diana Abdul-Rahman lives in Canberra, and works in a large government agency.

A Muslim all her life, Diana decided two years ago to wear the hijab as a personal expression of her faith.

However, with a lot of negative stories in the media about Muslims at the time, Diana was unsure of the response she would receive from others.

Diana Abdul-Rahman

And so off I went to work and quickly rushed in and sat down, before anyone got in.

And then as the people started walking in, it was the most funniest thing to see people watching and thinking and ... you could see them very quietly sort of going you know, "what's going on?"

Until the fellow who was sitting next to me said "Diana, so you you're wearing this for today, for Ramadan?" Cause they all knew Ramadan was starting.

I said "No George, it's on forever". He goes "Ok". And everyone accepted it.

Narration

While Diana was worried that putting on the hijab might create a barrier between her and her colleagues, she found the opposite happened.

People started asking her questions about her culture and her faith, and she was able to challenge some common stereotypes about Muslims.

Diana Abdul-Rahman

But it does break down the barriers because as soon as open my mouth with a broad Aussie accent, people sort of realise she's one of us.

I don't have an accent and people don't need to speak to me slowly ... because I have a sister who wears the hijab and she's been wearing for it a long time. And I remember she used to say that people would talk to her very, very slowly because they thought that wearing a hijab made you dumb.

And I suppose that if they have to deal with a Muslim in the future, that they will think "oh, I've worked with one, I suppose this person might be the same".

Narration

Like Diana, Dean Widders has also had to address prejudice in his workplace – the football field.

Dean is a member of the Parramatta Eels rugby league team, playing in the National Rugby League competition.

Dean Widders

Racism and discrimination on the field should not be tolerated. I know a lot of people say "in the heat of the battle what happens on the field stays on the field" but I don't look at it that way. I think there are just areas that you don't go to and you don't say those sort of things. You don't even contemplate it you know.

Narration

Recently Dean was on the receiving end of a racial sledge during a first grade match.

While some players choose to ignore comments like that, Dean felt it was important to tackle the problem head on.

Dean Widders

The player to his credit was really sorry for what he said and I accept that you know and move on. I think that is the best way to deal with it. You know confront it and ask people "Why are you calling me this? What is your problem?" And work it all out and hopefully it is not much to it and you can get over it and get on with life.

I think for me it is pretty easy just to stay calm and because I am happy within myself and I am proud of who I am. I am really proud of my culture. So nothing anybody says to me is really going to worry me or make me feel any different.

So if that is the way people think that is there problem it is not mine. I am who I am. With that attitude it keeps me so I never ever lose control when it comes to these sorts of things because no matter what people say it is not going to worry me.

Narration

This pride in his Aboriginal background means that Dean is keen to share more of his culture with his fellow rugby league players.

It's also his way of helping address some of the common stereotypes and misunderstandings about Indigenous people.

Dean Widders

I play a lot of rugby league players even now today who do not know much about Indigenous people, which I feel is a bit of a shame.

People grow up in Australia and they don't know much about our culture but hopefully I can help in a way by educating people and letting them know as much as I can about how things work and stuff like that and make a difference.

Narration

Like Dean, the importance of education in breaking down barriers has been the driving force in the life of Vicki Mitsos, who lives in Shepparton, Victoria.

Vicki's father was a farmer and migrated to Australia from Greece, looking for a better life for his family.

A huge barrier for them was language – no one spoke English and, at the time, there was nowhere for them to learn.

The family had to improvise to communicate with their neighbours – like the time the family ran out of food and had no way to get into town.

Vicki Mitsos

I was hungry and I remember my Mum cutting a crust of bread and putting it in her pocket, apron. Mum always used to have to wear her apron of course, and then dragging me across the wheat field to get to the nearest neighbour which would have been you know like half a kilometre away.

So I remember the sweat, you know come pouring down my back, it was so hot and the flies in my eyes and Mum saying come on we're nearly there, we're nearly there and getting to Mrs Grinter's place, who Mum pulled the bread out and showed her and she understood and took us in the house.

And remembering my first piece of bread where she put butter and hundred and thousands on it. Well, to me, even today that's a very special thing.

Narration

When Vicki was 11, her family was involved in a car accident. Her father was seriously injured and, in the ambulance and at the hospital, Vicki became his interpreter.

It was a defining moment for her – where she saw how crucial it was that migrants had the opportunity to learn English, especially those who lived outside the cities.

She became a Greek interpreter – and since 1989 has been running English language services for migrants of all backgrounds across much of regional Victoria.

Vicki Mitsos

Today we are the largest multicultural education centre throughout Australia in regional rural Australia – a staff of 37 and 150 volunteer tutors.

So I believe that I have honestly achieved in helping break down barriers through the English language program because if you know English then I believe that you can open many, many doors.

It's a key to many doors, whether it's careers, whether it's employment, whether it's social – you name it it's got to be the English language.

Narration

Like Vicki, Dorothy Hoddinott understands the importance of education in opening up life opportunities.

Dorothy is the Principal of Holroyd High School, in Sydney's south west.

Close to half of all children in the school are refugees. Many of them have had huge interruptions to their schooling – and many have had no schooling at all.

So one of the first priorities in the classroom is to help them read and write in English.

However, there's a more basic issue that the school has to address in the lives of these kids – poverty.

Dorothy Hoddinott

I remember there was a boy who I asked said I think you as my grandmother I said I am asking a very personal question. This is a Muslim boy how many pairs of underpants do you have? And he said after a moment's thought maybe one.

I guess what we start with here is clothing the children. So shoes, sometimes socks, sometimes underclothing, school pants, a couple of shirts, a sloppy joe. We provide things like school books, exercise books and so on.

We start at that level and that is actually a huge cost but it is really important because the message that being in uniform coming to school and having books and pens is that your life is normal as a child.

It is really a simple thing. But actually you are raising expectations and putting in that glimmer of hope for the future.

Narration

Creating hope for a brighter future can help make the many barriers that refugee children face when they arrive in Australia a little less daunting.

But change takes time, and understanding. Coming from war and conflict, it can take a while for children to learn to be children again.

Dorothy Hoddinott

Many of the children we see have lost their childhood. They have seen things that children should never see. We had a family here where the father was a policeman and refused to be conscripted by the Taliban.

He was taken from the home and he was murdered and he was chopped up into four pieces and his body was left on the front door of the house. The children saw that.

Narration

However, in getting to know the students in her care, and helping them to overcome the barriers they face, the young people have in turn given Dorothy something valuable.

Dorothy Hoddinott

Dealing with children from places like Afghanistan and Iraq, and now from Africa – the courage and the resilience and the stoicism that these people display is humbling.

It is something which I guess has changed my life. It's changed the way I think about people.

5. From tolerance to respect

Narration

"Australia is a tolerant country."

"Australians are tolerant people."

We hear those phrases all the time – it sounds well-meaning and generous.

But it's a different matter if being 'tolerated' makes you feel like you're 'not good enough', or you're just being 'put up' with – not respected for who you are as a person.

As Hannah McGlade, a Noongar (pronounced NUNG-AR) woman from Perth explains.

Hannah McGlade

I feel as an Aboriginal person that you have to work so hard to get respect. I remember when I was just a child, my dad, actually my step-dad said to me, he was a non-Aboriginal man, he said "An Aboriginal person cannot be as good as a white person you have to be twice as good."

But it's a heavy burden for Aboriginal people to carry, to not to be as good and to have to be twice as good and constantly proving. And I find that respect it has been hard to gain and sometimes you have to fight for it.

Narration

For Hannah, part of the problem is that many non-Indigenous people don't have much personal contact with Aboriginal people.

Hannah McGlade

I feel a lot of non-Aboriginal people don't have relationships with Aboriginal people. They don't understand us. They don't know what we're about. They don't care to know a lot of the time sadly. And I guess they just tolerate and they have stereotypes too.

Narration

Overcoming stereotypes of Aboriginal people is something that Dean Widders, a professional rugby league player with the Parramatta Eels, knows all about.

He takes it as a personal challenge to counter those often unspoken perceptions.

Dean Widders

In rugby league a lot of the people look at Indigenous players as being unreliable and not hard trainers and stuff like that. So I really make an effort to be the other way – to be really reliable, to be on time all the time, to turn up to things early, to put up my hand to do extra things, and all the time train harder than anyone else at the club.

I've seen it change the perception of Indigenous players at my club after since I have arrived. So I think I am doing a pretty good job there.

Narration

When he's not playing rugby league, Dean spends a lot of time working in rural and remote Aboriginal communities across Australia.

His focus is on encouraging the young people he meets to set goals for themselves and to go about achieving them – something he believes starts with self-respect.

Dean Widders

One of the main things I really try and impress upon young kids is to be proud. It doesn't matter where you're from or how you have grown up, you just have to be proud of who you are and know that if you set your mind to something and you work hard at it, you can achieve whatever you like.

I think that's been the case with my rugby league career. That was something I really had to work hard for. I wasn't as naturally talented as a lot of people. It has been a long hard slog for me.

So that's the message that I try and give kids. Believe in yourself, don't be silly, but work hard and really reach out for your goals – you can achieve anything. Amongst young Indigenous kids, you know, believing in yourself and being proud of where you come from is a big issue.

Narration

Respect is something that Gragana Danicic (Danis-ich) also found she had to work hard for.

Ten years ago she came to Western Australia – a refugee from her war-torn home in Serbia.

A successful young woman in her homeland, for the first few years in Australia she struggled to learn the language and build a new life.

During those first awkward years, she felt 'invisible'.

Gragana Danicic

When you come here and your clothes do not look too good and you might not speak English the best and all these sorts of things, people might put up with you. I guess from my point of view it was more about being invisible because in the eyes of the others you weren't that good.

Then once you could speak English better and once you got into a university and once all these other things started to happen, you then became respected.

As human beings we should have that straight away.

Narration

Amareswar Galla came from India in the late 1970s.

Like Gragana, it wasn't an easy beginning for him in Australia – and he felt that many people did simply 'tolerate' him, rather than accept him for who he was.

But that sense of 'tolerance' went both ways.

Amareswar Galla

We all need to understand each other because those of us who came as immigrants, we also had to tolerate the bigotry of some people, the ignorance of other people as well.

It's not just their tolerating us, us tolerating them too.

Narration

Today Amareswar sees that Australia is changing at a very fundamental level – and that diversity is becoming the norm, rather than the exception.

He's also very optimistic about how his children's generation will get on in the new, culturally diverse Australia.

Amareswar Galla

But the most important thing that Australia is now facing is you have a whole generation of

Australians, born in Australia, of one or two parents who come from different parts of the world. I myself, I have children whose mother is German, I come from India, and both the mother and the father are Australian citizens and the children are born here. And they don't look German, they don't look Indian, they look something in between, absolutely gorgeous Australians.

People of my age group still go to cross-cultural awareness workshops to learn some very basic things of engagement across cultural divides. But this younger generation that's coming through schools and colleges and now into universities, they've grown up in school environments which have been culturally diverse. They don't need cross-cultural awareness workshops, they know what it is to be in a culturally diverse society.

Narration

Thao Nguyen is in her early 20s. She was a baby when she came to Australia from Vietnam with her family – refugees from the war. Today she is part of the changing face of Australia.

Thao Nguyen

Last year I was selected to be the Australian youth representative to the United Nations General Assembly and one person is selected and the first time in our history it was somebody who is from a refugee background who is non Anglo and it was really quite a remarkable thing because part of the role involved me travelling across the country to rural Indigenous communities, like Western Australia and Tasmania.

For some people 'yeah that's fine'. For other people 'like this Asian person is representing this whole country'. And when I was at the UN I had mixed reactions. Some people said that is really strange, they had the notion that Australian is just white. White is Australia. And other people yeah migrants, refugees, second generations, third generation – that is normal.

Narration

The different reactions that Thao received seem to reflect the broader question that Australia is facing at the start of the 21st Century: 'Just what does it mean to be Australian?'

Thao Nguyen

I think there are parts of Australia that, yes, have really accepted multiculturalism and cultural

diversity. And there are other pockets that are still really quite nostalgic about White Australia.

And I think currently there are lots of different things happening on a political level that are invoking these fears in people. Fears of difference and threats to what we call our way of life.

I think that is really problematic because we have not even defined what our way of life really is. And our way of life is hybridity and our way of life is diversity.

Narration

There is no doubt that Australia is one of the most diverse nations in the world.

But there's also no doubt that such diversity brings its share of challenges and tension – something felt on a very personal level by Diana Abdul-Rahman.

Diana was born and bred in suburban Brisbane, and now lives in Canberra. However, in the last ten years or so, she feels that her Muslim faith has made other people see her as less 'Australian'.

During the first Gulf War in the early 1990's, she was repeatedly told that she should 'go back to where she came from'.

She feels that the same sort of sentiments have resurfaced – but stronger – after September 11, and the bombings in Bali and London.

Diana Abdul-Rahman

Every time something happens overseas that involves say somebody who uses the Islamic faith to do a particular incident, we pay a price here. It is so unfair. I find that is so unfair that every time anything happens overseas, we brace ourselves here. It's like "Ok, we're going to cop it now".

And what people need to realise is we've got nothing to do with that. I hold strongly onto my Australianness. But when I constantly get told "well you're not really an Australian" and "you're a Muslim", and there's undertones that Muslims are strangers and shouldn't be part of this country and you hear things being said in the media, I feel like a stranger in my own country.

I ask for the leadership of this country to be very clear in ensuring that the Muslim community, the Arab community in this country – who are Australians like everyone else – should be treated like everyone else; as equals.

Narration

Australia's leaders – our political leaders, community leaders, religious leaders – do have a crucial role to play in countering the voices of division and blame.

But building communities based on respect and understanding is not just the responsibility of leaders – everyone has a role to play.

Albert Schluter (Schlüter) migrated to Australia from Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War. His country, and the rest of the world, was still trying to come to grips with the enormity of the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

He believes that the simple notion of treating each other as equals, regardless of culture or background, lies at the heart of creating a strong and harmonious Australia.

Albert Schluter

And we have to live together and we have to learn to live together and take the best aspect of each person and try to accommodate them in our land, in our country.

And that's the important thing. You have to live together. I don't think you should be tolerant, you should love thy neighbour. Not just tolerate – love him, if you can.

Narration

For Vicki Mitsos, respect is also about accepting the differences that might exist between different cultures – but working together as Australians.

Vicki Mitsos

I remember what it was like when the Australian women tried to educate us and make us see things their way. Where really, it's about doing things together, not being told how to do things.

I'm proud to be an Australian, I'm proud to be a Greek. And to me, being Australian can be whatever you want to be, as long as you remember one thing: we're all the same.

Narration

One – but many.

Different – but all Australians.

The journey from tolerance to respect isn't always easy.

But it's the foundation for a 21st Century Australia that's worth building.