



FINDING ASYLUM

The local library can make a huge difference in the lives of refugees and other new immigrants, as MEG SMITH reports.

Our community in the City of Greater Dandenong is proudly diverse. The variety of accents, foods, faiths and festivals is unparalleled in Victoria. But here in the library we see a common need. Many of our patrons are refugees and asylum seekers, people who, although now physically safe, find themselves in a country where the struggles are more subtle and undefined. Many feel comfortable in their own communities, but beyond that sphere they can often feel adrift, without help to navigate their way through Australian bureaucracy. Our library identified this need and created a service to meet it.

The program, titled Learning Help for Adults, is a regular drop-in session that offers a little bit of everything – learning opportunities, jobseeking, help with dealing with government, and a sprinkling of social support. It was clear that a program of such diverse objectives required someone with a unique blend of talents. Library management soon discovered that one of their own librarians – Nanette Davis – already fitted the bill.

With a strong background in volunteer work and extensive experience in teaching English language and literacy, Nanette was an obvious candidate for the role, which from the outset blurred the boundaries between librarianship and social work.

'There are just a million little things that make the job so enjoyable,' Nanette said. 'The kinds of problems that I help with are all the little things that average people need to know to get through life.'

Nanette has met hundreds of people across the life of the program, but one gentleman stands out – an Afghan man she helped to navigate through an unfair and confusing insurance situation. With only an intermediate level of English, he had come to Nanette

Nanette Davis

after a car accident in which the other driver initially admitted fault but then later denied culpability after a claim was made. Left with a large repair bill and no avenue for recompense, the Afghan man turned to Nanette, who stepped in and facilitated contact with the insurance company, Victoria Legal Aid and the Financial Ombudsman to resolve the situation.

'Two days after we contacted the ombudsman, the insurance company offered to fix the car,' Nanette said. 'The library service saved him over \$3,000 – money he didn't have as he was still looking for work. He was so grateful to us and our service, and he now calls me "sister".'

Nanette still regularly sees this patron and has helped him through several other issues as he and his family settle into life in Australia. He is one of many patrons whose lives have been touched by Nanette and the service she provides through the drop-in sessions.

A program like this might not be relevant to all communities around Australia, but it is relevant to ours. All libraries strive to be loved, and a large part of this endeavour involves experimenting beyond tradition by trying new programs and services that complement local community needs. In offering these personalised services, we hope not only to help our patrons develop the skills to live successfully in their new community, but also to connect them to the library on a much deeper level by creating a lasting memory that is appreciated and shared. Most of all, we want the new members of our community to feel welcome and to know that our library service will always be a place of refuge and asylum. 🌟

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