



Photos: David Sickerdick

# Many hands

## MAKE LIGHT WORK

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*While Swan Hill boasts amazing landscapes and natural resources, it is the people that give the region its unique colour. When MEAGAN MCGREGOR caught up with Mary Ruane St Clair from Mallee Family Care's settlement program, she discovered just how culturally diverse the Swan Hill community is.*

THE original inhabitants of the Swan Hill region were Aboriginal tribes who have called the area home for at least 13,000 years.

The discovery of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady near the shores of the Willandra Lakes date back even further, to about 40,000 years ago.

The Wemba Wemba, Wati Wati Latji Latji, Paakantji (Barkindji), Ngjampaa, Mutthi Mutthi, Tati Tati and Barapa Barapa tribes were the earliest known caretakers of the land.

Suzanne Connelly is a local Aboriginal woman who is proud of her heritage and says Aboriginal communities were the first environmentalists.

Mallee Family Care settlement program team leader Mary Ruane St Clair believes it is the diversity of the people that makes Swan Hill a colourful cultural melting pot.

The new wave of immigrants embrace the opportunities afforded to them in Australia — for many, it's a second chance at life.

Ms Ruane St Clair is responsible for ensuring a smooth transition for new immigrants to the region.

Those immigrants' journeys to Swan Hill are often as varied as their cultural backgrounds.

"We have a rich history of immigrants in Swan Hill," Ms Ruane St Clair said.



Samia Fox, Abida Elahi, Lucy Connelly, Williams, Sayed Ramazan Musayib, Rebecca Wuor, Mary Ruane St Clair and Charman Faril

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"From early Chinese and Japanese settlers to the more recent refugees who arrive from troubled homelands.

"Each has played a part in the development of our area and has brought something unique to our multicultural lifestyle."

Swan Hill received its name from explorer Thomas Mitchell, who camped beside a hill here on June 21, 1836.

"Among the reeds on the point of ground between the two rivers was a shallow lagoon where swans and other wild fowl so abounded that, although half a mile from our camp, their noise disturbed us through the night. I therefore named this somewhat remarkable and isolated feature Swan Hill," Mitchell wrote.

Europeans moved to the region as early as 1846.

They invigorated the early agricultural industry, capitalising on the abundant water supply provided by the Murray River.

They focused on setting up large sheep stations and later developed grain farms.

Other contributors to the agricultural sector included the Chinese and Japanese who planted commercial rice crops — including the first in Australia — on floodplains in the region as early as 1914.

As the 20th century progressed, the region was again influenced by an insurgence of migrants, this time from Italy.

These residents brought with them a new language, food and culture as well as knowledge of fruit farming. Swan Hill now supplies stonefruit and citrus to the rest of the world and also exports highly respected wines.

## "FOR MANY, THE JOURNEY TO AUSTRALIA HAS BEEN FRAUGHT WITH DANGER AND OBSTACLES, SO ARRIVING HERE IS LITERALLY A SECOND CHANCE AT LIFE AND THEY EMBRACE IT"

In 1990, the region started receiving migrants from other parts of the world including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Sudan.

Many of these migrants were refugees forced to flee war-torn homes, displaying great bravery and resilience in arriving here.

Ms Ruane St Clair says these refugees make a valuable contribution to the community because of their ordeals.

"We often find they place an extremely high emphasis on peace and education," Ms Ruane St Clair said.

"For many, the journey to Australia has been fraught with danger and obstacles, so arriving here is literally a second chance at life and they embrace it."

Ms Ruane St Clair works with a multicultural team of staff who use their own experiences of immigration to assist those arriving here.

Abidah Elahi was born in Pakistan and moved to South Africa shortly after she married local anesthetist Dr Manzoor Elahi.

Together they spent eight years in the politically fractured nation during its worst period of instability. >>



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They met Nelson Mandela after Dr Elahi was attending to the medical needs of bombing victims.

The Elahis gave birth to five of their six children in South Africa but fled after the De Clerk government handed over power to Mandela, causing unrest and violent outbreaks.

They arrived in Australia in 2001 and Dr Elahi began practicing medicine.

Ms Elahi was the first woman to wear the hijab in Swan Hill.

Another refugee, Charman Yari, made his eventful journey to Swan Hill in 2010.

Forced to flee his homeland due to the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan, Yari made an arduous overland journey across several countries before landing in Indonesia where he took a dangerous and expensive journey by boat.

He experienced extreme sickness and hunger during an arduous 21-day trip where he continually feared for his safety before eventually landing in Australian waters.

Yari spent time in detention centres and is still awaiting

approval for his family to join him here.

Although qualified in many fields, he now works with Mallee Family Care in the settlement program and helps others who are making a new life in Swan Hill.

Samia Fox also works with the team and brings her knowledge and skills from a Moroccan background.

She married a local farmer and made the huge transition from her family home to a farming property near Lalbert.

Ms Ruane St Clair is humble in her acceptance of compliments for the work she does.

"I get more from the people in experiencing the unique cultural gifts they bring, than they get from me," she said.

"I believe Swan Hill is a very accepting place that embraces all people.

"For this reason, our town has benefited greatly over history.

"You just have to take a look at Harmony Day events to see how well Swan Hill is doing in embracing multiculturalism." ■



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