

Christina Shmail (left)
and Rose Chong

Given the chance

As Tim Richards discovers, a mentoring program for newly arrived refugees is enabling not only skill sharing, but two-way cultural exchange and the forging of long-term friendships.

Wartime US President Franklin Roosevelt lived before my time, but I'd been thinking of his famous quote since 2001. There seemed to be fear everywhere that year, especially in connection with refugees.

Dismayed, I wanted to do something to show my support for a more humane approach. But what could one person do? Then I happened across the *Given the Chance* program, run in Melbourne by the Ecumenical Migration Centre of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Given the Chance operates on a simple premise, that what newly arrived refugees most need is work. The biggest stumbling block? Their lack of local experience and references.

The program short-circuits this problem by matching newly arrived refugees with local mentors. It's a win-win situation: the refugee gets the benefit of the mentor's networks and local work experience, and the mentor gets to make a positive contribution to another person's life, providing a hand up just when it's most needed.

In my case, I was matched with Anas Elwakil, a Sudanese man who'd had to flee his country with his wife Inas in 2002, when the military government there cracked down on a pro-democracy group he was part of.

"It was difficult," recalls Anas. "We had started to build a future in Sudan, but after I fled the country to Cairo there was nothing for us, there was no future, no certainty."

After the Elwakils were accepted by Australia as refugees in 2004, they

both signed up with *Given the Chance*. Although my experience as a freelance writer didn't precisely match Anas' desired career in social work, there were a lot of practical areas we could tackle together, like computer skills and the way the job-seeking process works in Australia.

"It's been really useful," says Anas. "Particularly the practical support. I remember when I came here I didn't know anything about resumés, for example. I didn't know the concept of selling yourself, that was quite foreign to me. So I needed support to do that, to teach me essential things related to getting a job here and taking on further study."

Anas also points to more general benefits of the program. "I think it works very well as a window to Australian culture. Otherwise it's hard to get to know somebody local, just to have a chat and to learn about Australian history, culture and society. Even simple things like cafés!"

Three years on, the Elwakils are an example of how successful the combination of mentoring and motivation can be. Anas is now working regularly at a migrant resource centre in Melbourne's northern suburbs, and Inas has undertaken the study and practical assessments needed for her to qualify as a doctor in Australia. Somehow they've also managed to squeeze in the time to have two children, Badr and Maya.

Another mentor is Rose Chong, who runs a costume design, manufacture and hire business in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy. She was paired with Christina Shmail, an Iraqi who left her country after the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. They were originally matched because of Christina's interest in fashion design, but she has since gained work as an instrument technician at a major hospital.

Despite Christina's changed career trajectory, she speaks highly of the relationship. "I was lucky to meet Rose. She's like an angel to me. She's more than a friend. I haven't seen my mother since she died when I was two, but I can see her in Rose."

Rose agrees with the life-changing potential of the *Given the Chance* program, having come across it six years ago. "I was overworked at the time, doing too much, not really examining the rest of the universe. Then I read something in the paper about Jill Carr, who used to run the program. She was an absolute inspiration, selfless and determined. She put me together with two people who have both gone on to get jobs."

**"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."
– Franklin Roosevelt.**

With Christina, however, the connection runs deeper than the formal mentoring role. "We talk about life, and men and children and those sorts of things. And Christina's got a very beautiful son with whom I've been able to enjoy a slightly grandmotherly relationship."

So who's suitable to become a mentor? Though *Given the Chance* has mentors of all ages on its books, older workers or retirees are a particularly good fit, because of their work experience and networks.

"They're crucial to the refugees," says program coordinator Kay Davis. "A lot of our refugees are looking for professional work; we have people who've worked in finance and accounting, chemists, IT workers and people with social or community skills. Their degrees are rarely recognised here and they have to do some sort of educational catch-up."

Kay also points out that it's not as time-consuming as you might expect. "It's driven by the refugee's needs, but we generally suggest an hour a fortnight, and we give mentors an induction, with training. And we're always available for support."

There's also an immense personal satisfaction in being involved.

"Absolutely," agrees Rose Chong. "I mean, it beats patchwork! It's very rewarding – I can't tell you how good it is!"

I'd second her enthusiasm. There's something enormously inspiring in seeing how refugees respond to the challenge of adapting to their new home, once they're given the boost they need to get started. Further, as I got to know Anas, I learned at least as much about his culture and life as he did about mine. And though he's now found success at work, we've stayed friends, keeping in touch and visiting each other's homes.

It may sound 'high concept', but if there's any way to break down fear and mistrust between cultures, it has to start with individuals. In its practical way, the *Given the Chance* program changes lives for the better, and everyone involved gets to share the benefits. **YL**



→ MORE

To be involved with the *Given the Chance* program in Victoria, contact the Ecumenical Migration Centre at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Ph (03) 9416 0044
Web www.bsl.org.au (under Services/Refugees & Migrants)
Email emc@bsl.org.au

In New South Wales, a similar program entitled *Professional Links* is run by the May Murray Neighbourhood Centre in the inner Sydney suburb of Marrickville. Ph (02) 9282 9333
Web www.prolinks.com.au
Email info@maymurray.com

Another Sydney scheme inspired by *Given the Chance*, the *Refugee Mentoring Program*, is operated by Adult Multicultural Education Services. Ph (02) 9646 3366
Web www.ames.net.au/community
Email upasen@ames.net.au