Voices of Australia

30 years of the Racial Discrimination Act: 1975 - 2005

A collection of real-life stories about Australians living together

- Australia: our home
- Unexpected friendships
- Breaking down barriers
- Racism: not in my backyard
- From tolerance to respect

- The History of the Racial Discrimination Act
- History of change – timeline of Australia's race relations
- Plain English Guide to the Racial Discrimination Act
- Audio CD included inside

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A collection of real-life stories about Australians living together

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Website
Additional information about the *Voices of Australia* project and the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) is available on the HREOC website: http://www.humanrights.gov.au/voices/

Website information includes more stories and other submissions, download of the *Voices of Australia* audio CD, project background, and a complete list of the Race Discrimination Unit projects in the last 30 years at HREOC, and information about additional activities that marked the 30th anniversary of the *Racial Discrimination Act*, including articles and speeches.

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Note: All stories submitted by children under 18 years have been approved for publication by a parent/guardian.

Note: Many of the authors of the stories chose to identify themselves by reference to their cultural background, age and/or place of residence. These identifiers have been retained in this publication.

Warning: the following publication may contain images and/or names of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We apologise for any offense this may cause.

Foreword

This year we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) (Cth), an Act which makes it unlawful to discriminate against people on the basis of their race, colour, descent or ethnic or national origin. This law is an important statement of our belief that everyone has a right to enjoy the same fundamental freedoms and human rights, regardless of their race, colour, or where they come from.

The enactment of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975 also marks an important stage in our development as a nation. The timeline provided in this publication, entitled *History of change – timeline of Australia's race relations*, shows us that the Race Discrimination Act was the first human rights legislation in Australia. It made racial discrimination unlawful and provided legal remedies to those affected by racism. Yet it was introduced just two years after the dismantling of the White Australia Policy: a government policy that applied, in a racially discriminatory manner, an English language test as a condition of migration to Australia.

Thirty years on, the Racial Discrimination Act continues to give significant protection to many people who would otherwise be unable to enjoy the same rights as others because of their racial or ethnic background. In my view this protection would be improved if the Act was more widely known and understood. To this purpose I have provided within this publication a *Plain English Guide to the Racial Discrimination Act*. This has been a challenging task but it is hoped that as a result of this work young people, adults, the elderly, people who do not have English as their first language, people who are new to Australia and people from many different ethnic and diverse backgrounds will have greater access to the protection that the Racial Discrimination Act has to offer.

But laws alone are not enough to eradicate racism in our society. We also need to understand one another and learn from each other's experiences so we can enjoy the great benefits of our cultural diversity. One way of doing this is to share and listen to each other's stories.

Our call for stories about people's experiences of race relations in Australia over the past 30 years brought an overwhelming response with almost 500 stories received. Around 100 of these are published here, and many more have been placed on our website at www.humanrights.gov.au/voices. We have also recorded audio interviews that have been produced on a CD. You can download these on the internet so you can hear and experience the stories directly. In the coming months we will be producing complementary curriculum-linked education resources for primary and secondary schools to support classroom discussion of racial issues.

The stories selected for this publication paint a very descriptive picture of the good and bad faces of race relations in Australia over the past 30 years. They tell of the experiences of high profile identities and sporting heroes, grandparents, parents, aunties and uncles, sisters and brothers, neighbours, acquaintances, friends and even strangers. Stories are told by the original inhabitants - Indigenous Australians and by all who have made Australia their home, be they new or old migrant or refugee Australians.

These stories remind us that Australia is a society of many diverse communities. While it is an ancient land, and home to the world's oldest continuing culture, it is also a young and vibrant multicultural society with nearly a quarter of Australians born overseas, and another quarter having at least one parent who was born in another country. Yet the stories also remind us that within our diversity there are values that many of us share. One of these values is that racism and discrimination have no place in our community.

While some of the stories capture the pain of racism, over all, *Voices of Australia* is about people's strength and hopefulness – it's about the day to day process of getting on with each other and growing together as individuals and as a nation.

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to making the *Voices of Australia* heard. In doing so you have opened your hearts to share your stories, to express your pain, your fears and your hopes. It is in this spirit that I encourage people to read these stories with an open mind and open heart so we can continue to learn from each other for the next thirty years and beyond.

Tom Calma
Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner

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The History of the Racial Discrimination Act

Illustrated by Helana Sawires, 12, NSW 2005

21 December 1965

The *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (ICERD) was adopted and made available for ratification by the General Assembly of the United Nations. It declared that:

> *"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and... everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms... without distinction of any kind, in particular as to race, colour or national origin."*

13 October 1966

Australia signed ICERD, indicating its support for the key principles and agreeing to work towards enacting domestic legislation consistent with a country's obligations under the Convention, so that Australia could ratify (be formally bound by) ICERD.

11 June 1975

The *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) (the RDA) was passed by Parliament. Prior to its enactment, the Racial Discrimination Bill had been rejected by the Senate on several occasions. It was finally accepted after major changes were made, including the removal of the offences relating to incitement and promotion of racial hatred (later introduced, in part, by the *Racial Hatred Act* 1995 (Cth)).

30 September 1975

Australia ratified ICERD, agreeing to be bound by it under international law. However, Australia submitted a reservation which meant that it was not bound to criminalise racial hatred and incitement to racial discrimination (since that part of the RDA had failed to gain the support of the Federal Parliament). The reservation read:

"The Government of Australia ... declares that Australia is not at present in a position specifically to treat as offences all the matters covered by article 4 (a) of the Convention.... It is the intention of the Australian Government, at the first suitable moment, to seek from Parliament legislation specifically implementing the terms of article 4 (a)."

31 October 1975

The RDA came into operation. Al Grassby, former Minister for Immigration in the Whitlam Government, was appointed as the first Commissioner for Community Relations. Under the RDA, the Commissioner could hear and conciliate discrimination complaints, as well as undertake education and research projects. Al Grassby later described the importance of the RDA:

"The battle against racial discrimination could not begin and end with the Act. But the legislation was to powerfully recast the terms of the struggle and give real legal and moral muscle to those who waged it."

December 1981

The Human Rights Commission was established (by *the Human Rights Commission Act 1981* (Cth)). One of its key roles was to take over the education and research functions originally assigned by the RDA to the Commissioner for Community Relations. The Commissioner retained the responsibility to hear and conciliate race discrimination complaints.

May 1982 – Koowarta v Bjelke-Petersen Landmark Case

Under the Australian Constitution, the Commonwealth can only make laws about topics which are listed in the Australian Constitution. This case decided that the Commonwealth did have the Constitutional power to enact the RDA. This was to be found in the power of the Commonwealth to make laws with respect to 'external affairs' under section 51(xxix) of the Australian Constitution. The Court said that because the Government had signed an international treaty saying that they would ban racial discrimination (ICERD), then legislation that was based on this treaty was referrable to the external affairs power.

February 1985 – Gerhardy v Brown Landmark Case

The South Australian Government passed a law granting land rights to the Pitjantjatjara people. The legislation prohibited anyone who was not a member of the Pitjantjatjara people from going onto their land without a permit. Mr Gerhardy claimed that this section of the legislation was racially discriminatory under the RDA. The High Court found that this law was not unlawful discrimination under the RDA because it was a 'special measure' designed to help a group of people (the Pitjantjatjara people) so that they could enjoy their human rights, such as their right to enjoy their culture and their property, to the same extent as everybody else.

December 1986

The *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986* (Cth) commenced. This Act replaced the Commissioner for Community Relations with a Race Discrimination Commissioner, who was responsible for administering the RDA. This Commissioner, together with Commissioners with responsibility for Sex Discrimination, Human Rights and (later) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice and Disability Discrimination, would (along with the President of the Commission) form the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

HREOC was given responsibility for human rights research and education and inquiring into complaints of unlawful discrimination. For more information about HREOC's roles and functions, visit:
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/about_the_commission/index.html

December 1988 – Mabo v Queensland (No. 1) Landmark Case

Before the High Court had considered Eddie Mabo's claim that he had native title over his traditional lands in the Torres Strait, the Queensland Government passed a law extinguishing all native title in Queensland. Eddie Mabo claimed that this law was invalid because it was against the RDA. The High Court agreed with Eddie Mabo's arguments. They decided that, on the assumption that Indigenous people did have title to their traditional land, the Queensland law was discriminatory under the RDA. This was because it took away property rights from Aboriginal people and not from anybody else. The High Court later went on to consider whether, under Australian law Indigenous people did have any title to their traditional land. This was decided in the famous case of Mabo v Queensland (No. 2).

3 June 1992 – Mabo v Queensland (No. 2) Landmark Case

This case found that Australia was not empty (terra nullius) when the first European settlers arrived. Instead, there were already many Indigenous groups living in Australia with their own laws and customs, including laws about land. The High Court decided that, where Aboriginal people were still observing their traditional laws and customs and, through those laws and customs, were still connected to their ancestors' land, then Aboriginal people could claim title to that land. They called this native title. However, even if Aboriginal people could prove that they had native title to particular land, this title could be extinguished if, at any time after the British brought their laws to Australia, the Government had granted that land to someone else.

28 January 1993

Australia recognised the authority of the United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (the CERD Committee) to receive and consider complaints about Australia's implementation of ICERD. This meant that the Committee could consider communications (complaints) made by individuals about the Australian Government's failure to comply with ICERD and protect them from racial discrimination. The Committee could then make recommendations to the country concerned.

February 1995 – Brandy v Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Landmark Case

In 1993, the RDA was amended to give HREOC the power to hear complaints and to make decisions about disputes concerning racial discrimination. These decisions would be filed in the Federal Court, and if a decision was not challenged within 28 days, it would become enforceable as though it was a court order. In the Brandy case, the High Court decided that this was against the Constitution, since it was letting HREOC (which was not a court) make legally binding decisions (which, under the Constitution, only a court is allowed to do). This is why HREOC can now only conciliate complaints (by making suggestions to help the parties come to an agreement), and people have to go to the Federal Court or the Federal Magistrates Court if they want a legally binding decision.

September 1995 – Western Australian v Commonwealth Landmark Case

This case decided that the federal Government had the power to pass the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), because the Constitution gave the government power to make laws 'with respect to the persons of any race' and the *Native Title Act* was about recognising the special property rights of the people of one race, Indigenous people.

It also decided that the Western Australian Government's law taking away native title rights was discriminatory and therefore invalid under the RDA.

13 October 1995

The *Racial Hatred Act 1995* (Cth) amended the RDA to make it against the law to be racially offensive or abusive in public. Although originally intended to criminalise racial vilification and incitement of racial violence, the *Racial Hatred Act* was substantially amended during debate and was left with only civil remedies for racially offensive and abusive behaviour. The Prime Minister at the time, Paul Keating, emphasised the importance of laws relating to racial vilification:

"…racism is wrong, racial vilification and incitement to racial violence is wrong. And because it harms our fellow citizens and the peace, cohesion and harmony of our society, it is also illegal."

September 2002 – Jones v Toben Landmark Case

This case was the first to apply the RDA's racial vilification provisions to the Internet. In this case, the Federal Court decided that a website, which denied that the Holocaust in Nazi Germany had actually happened and suggested Jews were not intelligent, vilified Jewish people on the basis of their race. Toben claimed that the website contained academic articles about Holocaust research. However, the Federal Court decided that, while some genuine academic works would be exempt under the RDA, the website was not exempt because the articles were not reasonable and in good faith, since their intention was to humiliate and insult the Jewish people.

March 2003 – CERD Committee Decision

Mr Hagan petitioned the CERD Committee, complaining that a sporting ground in Queensland was calling one of its stands the 'Nigger' stand, after a famous (white) player whose nickname was 'Nigger Brown', and that this was racially offensive. The Australian Federal and High Courts refused to find that this expression breached the RDA (in Hagan v Trustees of the Toowoomba Sports Ground Trust B17/2001), and so Mr Hagan complained to the CERD Committee that Australia was not fulfilling its obligations under ICERD, because it was not "eliminating racism in all its forms". The Committee decided that the use of the expression 'nigger' could "at the present time be considered offensive and insulting", even if it was not offensive when it was first used. The Committee therefore recommended that the Australian Government take steps to make sure the sign was removed. No action has been taken to implement this recommendation.

March 2005 – CERD Committee considers Australia's periodic report

All countries which have signed ICERD agree to submit regular reports to the CERD Committee on how they are putting ICERD into practice (this is separate to the CERD Committee's ability to hear specific complaints, as referred to above). Australia's most recent report was considered by the Committee in March 2005. The Committee made a number of recommendations of ways in which the RDA could be improved in order to better fulfil the obligations under ICERD, including:

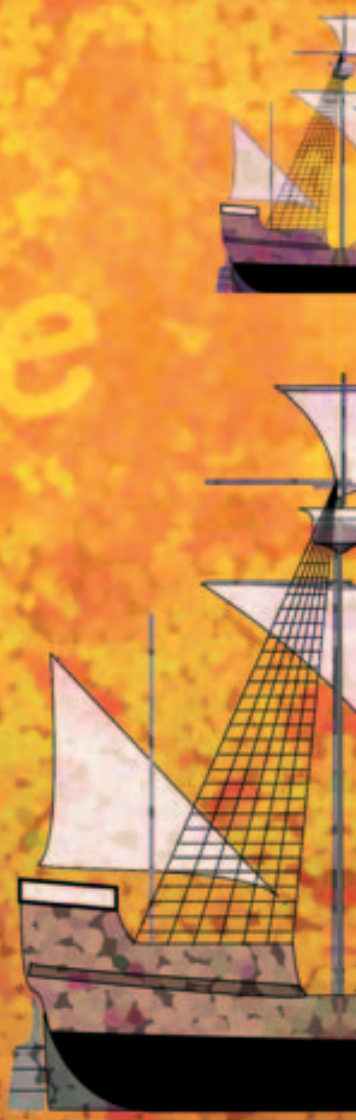
- Making sure that the RDA cannot be overridden by more recent federal laws.
- Putting in place criminal sanctions for racial vilification, so that Australia can remove its reservation to ICERD.
- Altering the 'burden of proof' to make it easier for people to prove discrimination under the RDA.

2005 – 30th anniversary of the RDA

HREOC marks the 30th anniversary of the commencement of the RDA on the 31st of October 2005.

HREOC continues to play an important role in the conciliation of racial discrimination complaints, and the promotion of education and research into aspects of racial discrimination and race relations. More information about HREOC's recent activities is available at **www.humanrights.gov.au.**

Timeline



History of change - timeline of Australia's race relations

120,000-40,000 BC – First people settle in Australia (exact date unknown). Australia's first people interact through a complex system of laws and kinship ties. Each group or clan has its own political, economic and social identity.

1500-1700 AD – Indonesian fishers (Macassans) visit northern Australia and trade with Indigenous peoples.

1606 – First recorded contact between Aboriginal Australians and Europeans (Dutch traders).

1770 – Captain Cook claims the east coast of Australia for Great Britain.

1788 – The First Fleet arrives, marking the start of European colonisation of Australia on the basis that the land belongs to no-one ('terra nullius'). Diseases brought by the early settlers devastate the Aboriginal population.

1797 – Pemulwoy, an early Aboriginal resistance leader, launches attacks on European settlements in the Sydney region.

1804 – Shooters in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) are authorised to shoot Aboriginal people.

1810 – Aboriginal people begin to be moved onto mission stations, to be taught European beliefs and used as cheap labour.

1817 – Different religions start to establish their presence eg Jewish convicts establish the first Jewish organisation in Australia.

1830 – Beginning of the 'Black Wars', which attempt to drive Aborigines from eastern Tasmania.

1832 – Land and Emigration Commission is established to provide government assistance to encourage British migrants to come to Australia.

1835 – John Batman attempts to make a treaty with Aboriginal tribes near Melbourne and 'compensate' them for use of their land – but this is not accepted by the Governor.

1855 – Anti-Chinese laws in Victoria tax Chinese arrivals and require them to live in designated 'Chinese Protectorates'. Other states soon follow with similar laws.

1860 – First Afghan camel drivers arrive and help with the development of communications and railway lines throughout Central Australia. South Sea Islanders (many kidnapped) are brought to work as indentured labourers in Queensland cane fields.

1868 – Last convicts arrive – making a total of 160,000 transported since 1788.

1888 – The first mosque is established in Adelaide.

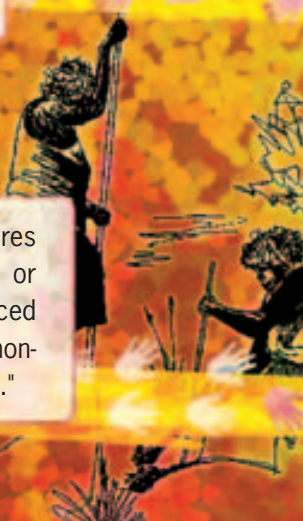
1886 – The Board for the Protection of Aborigines is given the power to apprentice Aboriginal children when they reach 13. Children require permission to visit their families.

1896 – Inter-colonial Conference decides to extend restrictions on Chinese immigration to all non-European people.

1897 – The Aborginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act in Queensland confines Aborigines to reserves unless employed and gives 'protectors' control over their assets (wages), their right to marry and work, and guardianship of children.

1906 – Systematic deportation of South Sea Islanders begins.

1914 – World War I begins. People of German and Austrian origin in Australia are locked up in camps.



1918 –The Northern Territory Aboriginal Ordinance Act "ensures that Aborigines could not drink or possess or supply alcohol or methylated spirits, could not come within 2 chains of licenced premises, [could not] have firearms, [and could not] marry a non-Aborigine without permission or have sex across the colour line."

1838 – 28 Aborigines are killed at the Myall Creek massacre – seven Europeans are later hanged, the first time such a punishment is made by a court.

1839 – First full-time ethnic schools are established by German settlers. Chinese, Italian and Greek MIgration begins.

1847 – Pacific Islanders are brought to Australia to work as shepherds.

1848 – First refugees arrive – mainly Germans and Hungarians – fleeing political upheaval in Europe.

1851 – The first gold rush brings large-scale immigration from Europe and Asia, especially China. Between 1848-1900, 100,000 Chinese migrants came to Australia as labourers and miners.

1869 – Aboriginal Protection Board is established in Victoria, with the power to remove children from their families. Similar laws are later passed in other states. Government policies of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families continued until the 1960's.

1880 – The first Inter-colonial Conference recommends uniform legislation to restrict Chinese immigration. NSW Premier advocates restrictions on Irish immigrants to preserve the colony's 'British character'.

1881 – In NSW, separate schools are established for Aboriginal children. They can attend local public schools only if they are "habitually clean, decently clad and conduct themselves with propriety" and only if non-Aboriginal parents don't object.

1901 – Federation of Australia. Under the new Australian Constitution, the Commonwealth Government is given the power to make laws for all Australians except Indigenous peoples, who are left in the control of the states and are not counted in the Commonwealth census. The White Australia Policy is introduced to restrict non-European migration. A 'dictation test' in any European language is introduced for potential migrants, allowing immigration officials to exclude people on the basis of race (or other grounds) by choosing to conduct the test in a language the applicant is unlikely to know.

1903 – Asians and other non-Europeans are denied the right to apply for naturalisation (the granting of Australian nationality to someone who was born in another country).

1930 – The Depression leads to increased hostility towards non-European migration. Non-British European migrants are not admitted unless they are wealthy or have family in Australia.

1937 – Commonwealth Government holds a national conference which agrees that Aboriginal people 'not of full blood' should be absorbed or 'assimilated' into the wider population.

1947 – Australia signs an agreement with the International Refugee Organisation to accept refugees from Europe. This marks the start of Australia's official humanitarian program.

1949 – Commonwealth Nationality and Citizenship Act passed. Previously Australians were 'British Subjects'. Under the Act they became 'Australian Citizens'.

1951 – Post-war migration program is set up under the policy of 'populate or perish'. Over the next decade, assisted passage schemes are introduced for people from many European countries.

Citizen

1966 – Australia signs the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discriminatioon* (which it then ratifies in 1975).

1966 – Conciliation and Arbitration Commission decides that Aboriginal workers are entitled to be paid award wages. The cattle industry reacts by phasing out Aboriginal labour.

1967 – National Referendum results in the removal of discriminatory references to Aborigines in the Constitution and allows Aboriginal people to be counted in the Commonwealth census. 92% of Australians vote 'Yes'.

1973 – The final parts of the White Australia Policy are dismantled. The Whitlam government announces that immigration policy will not distinguish between immigrants on the basis of race, colour or nationality.

1975 – *Racial Discrimination Act* passed, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin. The Hon Al Grassby is appointed as Commissioner to administer the Act.

1976 - Significant numbers of asylum seekers arrive by boat from Vietnam following the war.

1939 – World War II begins. Although Aboriginal people are denied citizenship rights, two Aboriginal military units are formed and serve on the front line. Nationals of enemy countries (such as Germany and Italy) are interned in camps. A year later Jewish refugees arriving in Sydney are also interned as 'enemy aliens'.

1941 – First Italian prisoners of war begin arriving in Australia.

1943 – 1969 – NSW legislation (with similar legislation in other states) allows part-Aboriginal people to apply for an Exception Certificate (also known as a 'dog license'). Those holding a certificate are allowed to vote, drink alcohol and move freely, but are prevented from communicating with friends and family who are not 'exempt'.

1953 – Atomic tests conducted in Maralinga, South Australia. Aboriginal people are removed from their traditional lands and many suffer radiation sickness.

1957 – Non-Europeans allowed to apply for citizenship after 15 years residence (reduced to five years in 1966).

1962 – All Indigenous Australians given the right to vote in Federal elections, although voting is not compulsory.

1965 – Freedom Ride sees Aboriginal People and students visiting NSW country towns to protest against segregation in public places, such as swimming pools and cinemas.

1967 – 'Integration' gradually replaces 'assimilation' as the basis for Indigenous policy.

1971 – Neville Bonner becomes the first Aboriginal member of the Federal parliament.

1972 – 'Tent Embassy' established on the lawn of Parliament House in Canberra by Indigenous Australians calling for land rights.

1973 - Aboriginal Land Rights Commission established by the Whitlam government to inquire into land rights for Aboriginal people.

1978 - The first national multicultural policies implemented by the Fraser Government.

1980 – SBS begins broadcasting multicultural television.

1982 – High Court upholds the constitutional validity of the *Racial Discrimination Act* (Koowarta v Bjelke-Petersen). Jeremy Long was appointed Commissioner for Community Relations from 1982 - 1986.

1984 – First significant group of African refugees, mostly from Ethiopia, arrives in Australia.

1988 – Australia marks 200 years of British settlement – 10,000 Aboriginal people gather around Sydney Harbour to celebrate their survival.

1988 – HREOC releases the 'Toomelah Report' – the report of the Inquiry into the Social and Material Needs of Residents of the NSW-Queensland Border Towns of Toomelah, Boggabilla and Goondiwindi following a 'race riot' in Goondiwindi, Qld. The Inquiry identified the inequality in living standards between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous inhabitants as the underlying cause of the racial tensions, and made specific recommendations to combat Indigenous disadvantage.

1992 – Mandatory detention introduced for all unauthorised arrivals, with a 273 day time limit. This limit was removed in 1994.

1992 – Mabo decision; the High Court finds that Aboriginal people's right to their traditional land was not extinguished by the British acquiring sovereignty.

1994 - In response to HREOC's 'Call for Recognition' report, the Commonwealth Government officially recognised the Australian South Sea Islander community as "a distinct ethnic group in Australia with its own history and culture". Professor Mick Dondson appointed as Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner from June - October 1994. Zita Antonios appointed Race Discrimination Commissioner October 1994 - 1999.

1995 – *Racial Hatred Act* passed. This amends the *Racial Discrimination Act* to make racial vilification unlawful.

1996 – Federal Parliament endorses the Parliamentary Statement on Racial Tolerance.

1986 – Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) established.

1986 – 1994 – Irene Moss appointed as the first Race Discrimination Commissioner.

1987 – The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established in order to discover why so many Aboriginal people were dying in prison. The report of the Royal Commission was released four years later. 339 recommendations were made in the report.

1990 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) established as an elected representative body to administer Aboriginal affairs.

1991 - HREOC releases 'Racist Violence' - the report of its National Inquiry into 'Racist Violence' in Australia. The report made sixty-seven recommendations in areas such as police practices, the administration of justice, education, employment, housing and community relations, and recommended the introduction of legislation relating to racial hatred.

1991 – The first detention centre to hold unauthorised boat arrivals opened at Port Hedland.

1992 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner position at HREOC was created in response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the National Inquiry into Racist Violence. It was created to ensure an ongoing, national monitoring agency for the human rights of Indigenous Australians. Professor Mick Dodson was appointed as the first Commissioner.

1993 – The *Native Title Act* passed.

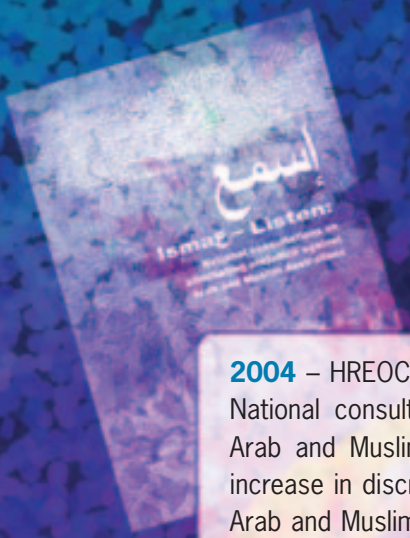
1997 – HREOC releases 'Bringing Them Home' - the report of the 'Stolen Generations' inquiry.

1998 – HREOC releases 'Article 18: Freedom of religion and belief' - the report of the National Inquiry into Freedom of Religion and Belief.

1999 – 2004 – Dr William Jonas appointed as Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner.

2000 – Corroboree 2000 - hundreds of thousands of Australians across the country show their support for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

2001 – The 'Tampa' rescues a boat load of asylum seekers travelling to Australia. The Australian Government refuses to allow the ship to land in Australia and the asylum seekers are eventually sent to Nauru.



2004 – HREOC releases 'A Last Resort?' – a report of the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention.

2004 – HREOC releases 'Isma - Listen', a report of the National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians. The report highlights an increase in discrimination and violence directed towards Arab and Muslim Australians since the attacks in the US on September 11, 2001 and the Bali bombings in 2002. Tom Calma appointed Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner.

2005 – ATSIC is abolished.

2005 – 30th anniversary of the *Racial Discrimination Act.*

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Australia: our home

by Jackie Huggins

Jackie Huggins AM

Jackie Huggins is an Indigenous Australian of the Bidjara (Central Queensland) and Birri-Gubba Juru (North Queensland) peoples. Among many of her leadership positions, Jackie is currently Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia and Director of the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the Australian National University. In 2001 she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (AM) for her work with Indigenous people, particularly through reconciliation, literacy, women's issues and social justice.

'My home, my heart'

'Descendance' at the Red Centre Dreaming, Alice Springs.

My sense of what it means to be Aboriginal was very strong all through my childhood. It was instilled in me by my family and particularly by my mother that being Aboriginal was something to be very proud of. That pride has always stayed with me.

It's got a lot to do with why I have been involved in reconciliation for such a long time. I want to share that pride with all Australians – a sense of what it means to live in a country with such a long and rich history.

There was a particular moment I remember as a child when my identity as an Aboriginal Australian was reinforced. I've heard there is this kind of moment for a lot of people. For me, it was in Grade 3 and the teacher said to the class "stand up all those students who are Australian". We all stood, of course, and then he pointed to me and said "Jackie is the only real Australian here" and he explained why he felt that way.

It was an incredible thing for me to have this young, blonde, non-Indigenous man expressing something so strong and public about who I was and about my place in this country.

The experience gave me some strong clues for later life about recognition and respect being the main ingredients of reconciliation, and how these qualities improve relationships. Australians are essentially very good at relationships and that's what reconciliation is all about.

It hardly needs to be said that there is one overriding reason why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians get and stay involved in reconciliation.

Base walk Uluru, NT.

It's the heartache for our communities, and the great fear and hope for our kids, and the opportunities they will have to fulfill their potential and make a contribution to Australia.

The plight of our people does not weigh us down in this task. It drives us to find a way forward, no matter how long it takes.

Some of us have been involved in reconciliation for a long time.

It can be dispiriting but it can also be uplifting, and once you have felt reconciliation, you know it to be something achievable, and so right and good that you can't help but keep coming back for more.

Because things are changing - too slowly for many of my brothers and sisters - but they **are** changing and there are now numbers of Australians who can tell us about that change so that we might grow it into something.

It is wonderful to be identified as an Australian who cares for their community.

I had the great advantage of coming from a well-known and respected family which was always part of the community. Once your community sees you doing things for it, people feel and show pride and support which is the greatest of gifts and reinforcements. It far outweighs the difficulties of leadership.

And when you are noticed for the good job you are doing in the community, there's a chain reaction where you are identified to take on bigger and broader responsibilities. This is why there is such a hunger for emerging young Indigenous leaders at the national level and why it's vital for older leaders to mentor, communicate and allow younger people to take the lead also.

It's a very Aboriginal thing to do, to give younger people greater responsibilities within the community as they become able to take those responsibilities on. It is a culturally appropriate transfer of roles that involves respect in both directions – from the younger to the older and the older to the younger.

Every day I speak to my Mother who passed on nine years ago. Every day I ask her to guide me in my journeys. When I have to speak at a big event, when I am restless and nervous, I meditate for a few moments and I feel her tap on my shoulder to tell me she is there with me.

She then calls in the ancestors and I am surrounded by them. They tell me to "go for it". Which is what I have done - and tell my young sisters to do so also.

Australia is home to me and home to people from all over the world. But it is more than the land in which I live. It is my 'mother', 'my identity', my 'heart'. It dictates how I relate to other people.

Aboriginal people are happy to share our land and our history with people from many cultures. Together we can create an even stronger, more harmonious and richer Australia which values all of our different legends and stories.

It is this sharing of cultures that makes reconciliation real.

Australia: our home

Aunty Kathy, 69, Aboriginal elder, Darwin NT

I am an Aboriginal elder from the Kungarakan People, south west of Darwin. That's from my fathers side and my mothers side is Gurinji. I was born in Katherine. My mother was taken away from her family as a child and sent to the Kahlin Compound in Darwin. I married a Larrakeyah man. Kungarakan People have only been granted partial recognition of our land. This is also the same for the Larrakeyah People.

Aboriginal people are generous in sharing their land. They take pride and pleasure in teaching people. It's up to people to accept and be part of the generosity that Aboriginal people are happy to give. Maybe you might not be able to understand the wonderful stories because you don't live the cultural life, but once the stories are told on the land it becomes much clearer. Unless we come together and share that, we may always wonder about the concept of Aboriginal people and their attachment to land.

It is sad though, that we can not completely share the whole story because the whole land has not been returned.

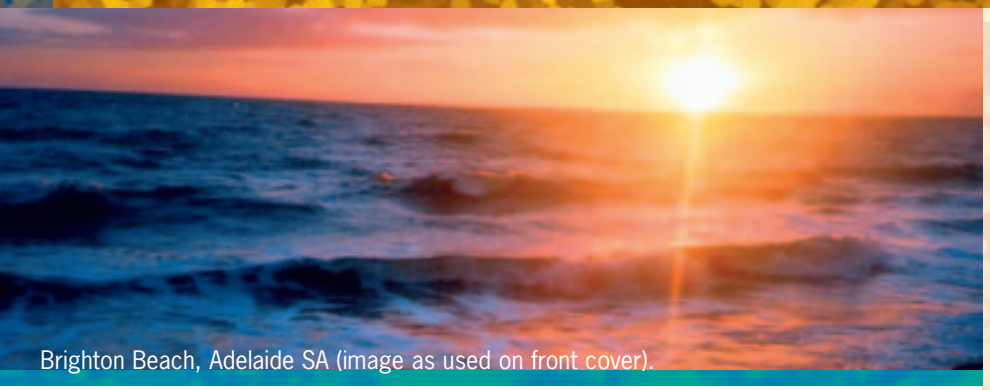
'Jess', British

I came here from England with two capped front teeth, one gold and one silver, and a thick cockney accent. I wasn't exactly the toast of the cool circles at Katoomba Primary School. For weeks I walked to school with my dad and brother – him, tall, skinny, warm and curly-haired, and little three-year-old Joe on his shoulders, laughing and brave in his Batman cape. I would cry when I got to the school gate, because it was time to leave my people and walk through to the other people. But slowly I made friends.

Katoomba is so much a part of me that I cannot say what is special about it in one key phrase. My family lives here, gentle, soft-spoken, generous people. My first sweetheart lived here; tall, bronzed, ocker, passionate man. My childhood spaces exist here; warm, smooth rocks, and spindly trees. My memories reside here, and I will continue to return here all my life.

Australia has become a thing under my skin, and a force exploding through my laughter, anger and love. Australia flickers in my memory and future – a trip around Australia in a ute, expanses of untouched beach, and the deep silent undergrowth of the bush.

Australia is land and people, memory and now. It is special to me because I identify with it in a purely subjective way, and it sublimes my ego in turn.



Brighton Beach, Adelaide SA (image as used on front cover).

Linda, 31, Spanish, Homebush NSW

It was a day, not long ago, that I realised just how lucky I am to be an Australian.

I am Australian-born; my parents are Spanish, having come here over 40 years ago with the promise of work and a better life.

I decided to commemorate my parents' courageous move by having their names inscribed into 'The Welcome Wall' outside the Australian National Maritime Museum; specially dedicated to honour those who migrated to this great southern land.

This is the least I could do to thank them for making that brave choice to come to a foreign land, not knowing the language, working hard and being a part of important projects like the Snowy River Scheme. They are humble, but have done so well in my eyes.

It was on that rainy day in November 2000, at the opening of the 'Welcome Wall', that my father turned to me and said, *"You are so lucky to be an Australian, I love this country and this is my home"*. This, from a man, who rarely shows his emotions and has great affection for his homeland. I could very well have not been born an Australian; and the love I have for my country starts with my parents who have adopted it into their hearts and proudly call it home.

Doron, 78, Clarinda VIC

1959

'From foreigner to AM'

In February 1959 I got off a tram at the intersection of Swanston and Collins Streets Melbourne. I was about to step off the pedestrian island when a truck whizzed past and the driver shouted: "Bloody new Australian! Y'wanna be killed?"

I smiled after him and asked myself how he had known that it was just the previous day that my wife and I had stepped off a plane onto this huge island-continent.

I remembered this story at Government House Ballroom on the day the Governor attached the Order of Australia to my coat for 'Service to Australia, particularly in the field of multicultural affairs'.

It had been a long road but I had made it.

Where else? Only in this sunburnt country.

Amelia, 21, Coburg VIC

'When I think of Australia'

(First published in 'Voiceworks' #59)

I think of my childhood
that distant land
on the other side of puberty.
My family moved house
the same year I got my first bra'.
When I think of Australia
I think of star shaped cakes
dusty with icing sugar
of homegrown tomatoes
and loud Greek voices.
Our neighbours, three generations
in one house. A bungalow
like ours, maybe smaller.
They always brought us food.
I think of the deli on the corner
racing my sister on our bikes
to buy icy poles
and eating them, half melted
in the backyard
wearing bathers
running under the sprinklers
sopping and sticky.
Summer seemed hotter in those days.
Just like winter seems colder
and colder.
Australia is getting colder.
I switch on the TV and see wire
with children behind it.
If this isn't their country
it isn't mine.
I came here on a boat
smuggled piece by piece
like a jigsaw, in many boats
over more than a century.
I came as a refugee, persecuted
I came for work, a better life
I came from Prussia
from Germany, Scotland
and Ireland.
I was born in Australia. But
my bones were already millions
of years old
and bones remember everything.

Geoffrey, 43, Aboriginal, Wongatha Tribe, Kalgoorlie WA

'Ancient gatekeepers'

The beginning of winter is an important time for this land and for my people. I have been going about my business, my father's business, doing the things that are required of me as part of my responsibility to this great country. I have been travelling through the land checking rock holes, teaching my children their history, culture and responsibilities. This is the season the emus are laying and we are collecting eggs. Collecting the eggs is important, not only for food and culture, but also to keep emu numbers in check.

I have been hunting to provide meat for my family - meat to nourish our bodies and protect us from diabetes, heart disease and kidney failure. I know this because the knowledge has been passed down to me through many generations. I hunt not only for my children but also for my extended family, especially my brothers and sisters who have no roof and who are sick, cold and hungry on the fringes of our town.

I travel through the country between Laverton and Coolgardie, following the paths, roads and tracks my father showed me, the routes my family has used for many generations. I travel over the land where I first learned to walk. As I travel I sing to myself the song of this land - the low droning song of my people and the country and western, gospel and rock songs of my childhood and youth. The songs that combine within me, with the music of this land bringing life, love and joy to my land.

Sounds like a perfect life, doesn't it? Important, responsible, generous and right. The life that would be expected of an Aboriginal man. But twice in the last week I have been stopped by men in trucks, wearing clothes with a logo of some company owned by people far away, overseas. These men stop me and tell me this is "private land" and I must leave. When did this become "private land"? These companies may have a lease, permission to mine, granted by some government department somewhere, but it is not "private land".

The fact that white settlers wrote a law to suit themselves does not change the fact that we have never sold our land or agreed to give it away to anyone - it was stolen, like our children. Even according to the white man's law this is not "private land". The native title case for this land is still before the courts. Anyway, the mining companies have a lease, not freehold title, so they have the use of the land for mining but not ownership.

I am not interested in their mine. I was not on land where they were mining. I was not interfering with their activities. So what right have they to tell me to get off?

This is an issue not just for Aboriginal people but for all of us - prospectors, tourists and anyone who loves the bush, our animals and our land of Australia. Mining companies take from us but they also have a responsibility to us, our land and our children. They must not prevent Aboriginal people caring for it and carrying out our traditional activities and responsibilities or our land will suffer even more. Drought, flood, salinity - these things happen when our land is not properly cared for. Those of us who are doing this important job should be encouraged and not told to "get off".

Toni, 58, Bathurst NSW

'United we stand'

The children lined up at the classroom door quietly, even more quietly than usual. They looked up at the police officers who accompanied me from the staff room following morning tea. In those days, we still called it 'play lunch', although 'morning tea' and 'recess' were becoming popular variations.

I had warned the children, average age ten, to expect some interesting visitors, but told them no more than that. The mystery would have disappeared pretty quickly though when the uniformed officers arrived in the playground before school.

I hoped that the officers had some training before being sent to schools. There was no guarantee that they had any idea how to control a room full of ten year olds, let alone how to create a meaningful educational experience for them. Their focus would be on road safety, but they would be asked all sorts of questions by my inquisitive lot.

There was also the cultural factor. Seeing the students, I noted with pride the variety of faces greeting the police officers, one male and one female, both aged in their mid-twenties. The children included Janine, a Koori who had one eye that seemed always focussed slightly to the right. There was Karen, blushing slightly, with Scandinavian cheeks that often took on high colour. George frowned a little; his Greek background seemed to make him a serious student. Jose smiled with impossibly large and white teeth. His family had fled some form of oppression in Latin America and he looked to be absolutely delighted to be here, although it was always difficult to know whether he understood what was being said. His smile made it seem that he did – but then he always smiled.

I asked the officers if they wanted me to stay, but they insisted I leave. My senior colleagues might have insisted on staying, but I appreciated the fact that like all young educators, these officers relished the opportunity to prove themselves.

Later when I returned, the officers looked a little flustered. One said "Boy - you've got the League of Nations in there". Privately, I hoped not, as that organisation had failed and disappeared. But I would settle gladly for the United Nations.

Sonny, 49, Daisy Hill QLD

'What Australia means to me'

The first week after I came home to Australia, I voted. For many, that right is something they take for granted. Indeed, some see it as an inconvenience. For me, lining up at that polling booth, the sense of freedom I experienced was so profound that I literally wanted to grab people and cry, 'Do you have any idea how lucky you are?' Where I lived for twenty years, I did not have that right. Even had I become a citizen, I would not have been allowed to vote. Being born there entitled my daughter to citizenship —but even she couldn't vote.

The second week after I came home to Australia, I bought a house and land. I didn't just lease it. I owned it. The sense of belonging was so tangible that I cried. Where I had lived for twenty years, I could not own land — not just because I wasn't born there, or wasn't a citizen. My daughter couldn't own land, either.

The third week after I came home, I got work. Where I lived for twenty years, I could not work in most jobs because of the colour of my skin. Obtaining a business license in many professions required me to revoke my Australian citizenship. If I'd done so, I would have become a 'second class citizen'. I couldn't vote, couldn't own land, and if I'd offended any of the notoriously hypersensitive politicians, I could have been deported within hours. It had happened to others. They became stateless citizens. No country, no passport, no rights, no recourse.

I know what it's like to be a minority group in a nation whose laws actively prejudice against you because of your skin colour. I'm back in Australia now. Both my daughter and I can vote, own land, criticise the government and work. But you know the best part? Many of my friends are not Australian citizens, and they don't have the same skin colour as me. But they can still own land, criticise the government, receive free medical care, get a job, run businesses, run free on a beach. And if someone discriminates against them, they have rights.

That's what Australia means to me.

Diana, 45, Australian / Lebanese, Narrabundah ACT

I grew up in the 60's and 70's in Brisbane. I'm a Led Zeppelin fan. If I hear a Led Zeppelin song, I'll put it up loud in the radio and I'll be singing away to the songs that I grew up with or anything that reminds me of my youth. I had a lot of fun growing up in that city and in that era. We used to go to the beach all the time. In summer our parents would usually take us to Surfer's Paradise or the Gold Coast and this is part of the make-up of who I am today. That environment, that society that I grew up with, the schools that I went to, the friends that I had; they all made me what I am today.

However, at the same time, I was brought up with some very clear principles of our cultural background which comes from the Middle East. This I'm very proud of. It does not mean that I can't have both and should not enjoy having the best of both cultures. There are parts of the Arab culture and Middle Eastern societies that are brilliant. If only people knew what and how much these parts of the culture can contribute to a society if we were to take on some of those societal values about family and respect. Respect for the elders for example and the way we deal with each other - they are wonderful things and things which I was brought up with also.

As a result, it's the life experiences and a rich cultural makeup that makes me who I am as an Australian today. It's the building blocks of all sorts of things that happened in my life.

Johnny, Chinese, Marleston SA

(supported by Adelaide High School)

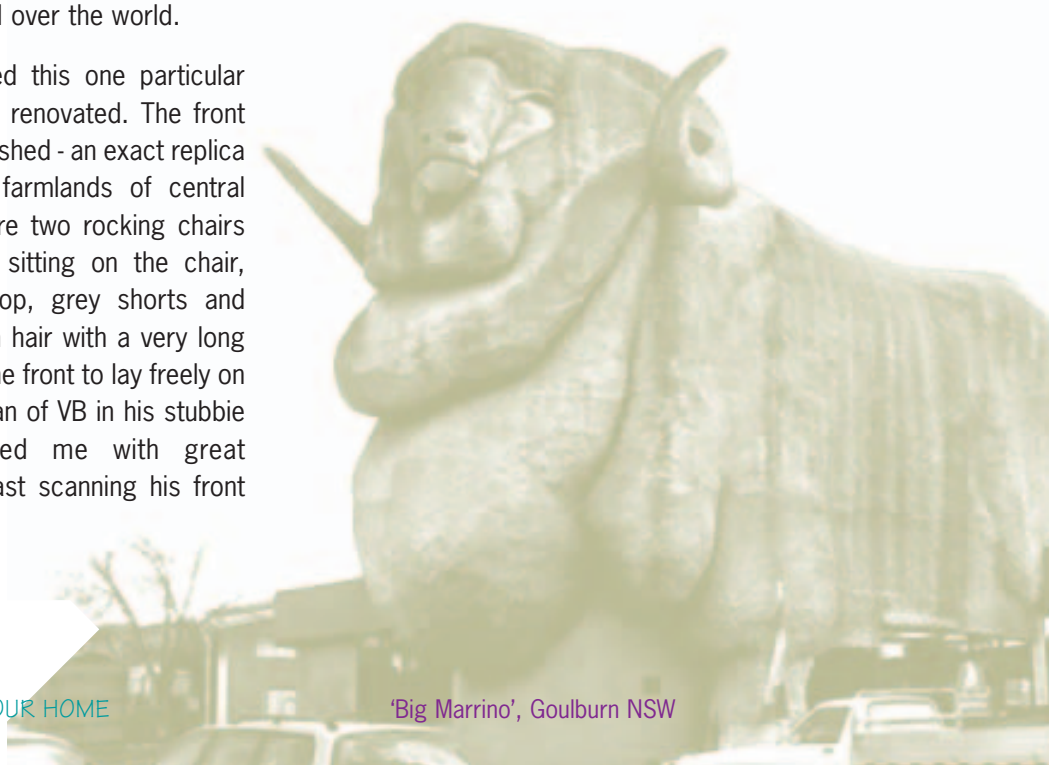
"G'day mate!"

I clearly remember the mid-summer Monday afternoon. It was Australia Day and I had just finished packing for school the next day. I decided to go for a walk to the park to stretch my legs. The area where I lived my entire life was being transformed from an old 'traditional' suburb to one that was much more modern. New houses and units have been built for international students that come from all over the world.

As I was walking, I noticed this one particular house which had not been renovated. The front verandah was very distinguished - an exact replica of verandahs out in the farmlands of central Australia. In the shade were two rocking chairs and a table. A man was sitting on the chair, wearing a white singlet top, grey shorts and thongs. He had light brown hair with a very long mullet, which he pulled to the front to lay freely on his shoulders. He had a can of VB in his stubbie holder. The man greeted me with great enthusiasm as I walked past scanning his front yard "G'day mate! How'r ya?" I was astonished at the way he acknowledged me. "Good, thank you!"

This was the first time I have ever seen a man who lived just like the 'Australian' stereotype - a laid back character, not caring about what other people think who knows how to have a good time.

As I continued past his house, I thought about the way I lived in Australia and compared it to the way my neighbour lives in Australia. Despite our very different backgrounds, cultures and customs, we follow the same ethics and morals and laws.



'Big Marrino', Goulburn NSW

Gai, Vietnamese, Corrimal, NSW

'Discovering a new life'

In 1979 my husband, three year old daughter and I escaped Viet Nam by boat to Australia after the Communist North took over the South of Viet Nam. We stayed in Pulau Bidong, an island of Malaysia, for three months while our refugee and health status were checked. Finally, the Australian government accepted us to go to Australia.

My husband tried to have his pharmacy qualification recognised, but was refused until he was fluent in English. He decided to help me to set up a business. I learnt to be a machinist as I thought I could work at home and look after the children. I opened my own factory as a clothing manufacturer and employed people to work in the factory.

In 1991 we'd saved enough money to take time to go back to Viet Nam to see my mother, who lived in the country. She had to tell the police who we were and how long we were staying for. Then the police wanted a meeting with my husband. They told him what he could and could not do while he was there, and they also asked for a 'donation' as they said they were very poor.

The meeting with the police terrified my husband. Earlier in his life, he had been held in a concentration camp for three years. The next day we drove back to Saigon to fly home to Australia. My poor mother! I saw her only one day after being apart for 12 years. Ten years later, in 2001, I went back to see my mother. Not because I miss Viet Nam but because I miss my mother.

In my heart Viet Nam is a communist country which I can not trust. Australia is my home now – a place where we feel safe. We have freedom and everyone is treated equally. We are happy to work and contribute to our new home. And the song 'I Still Call Australia Home' always brings tears to my eyes.

Jenni, 48, Anglo-Australian, Tatura VIC

I grew up in the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne in the 1960's. My Dad was the manager of a bread and crumpet factory in Abbotsford - home to the 'new Australians'. He would come home at night with stories about how hard the Greek and Italian women worked. They would call him Mr Ricky and giggle, and sometimes they would bring food for him to try. They regularly worked 18 hour days and always asked for more work - but never asked for a pay rise once.

Mum and Dad tried to learn Greek so they could converse with the ladies at the factory. The girls would laugh and laugh at my Dad's stilted attempts at saying "hello, how are you today?"

I remember some of the kids at school would call the Greek or Italian kids "greasy dagos". I was never allowed to say those words. My Dad taught me as a child to see the commonalities in people rather than the differences. I grew up believing that the 'new Australians' were the same as us, but that they just had to start from scratch in a new country, whereas we had a head start by being born here.

I'm now in my 40's and I work with migrants and refugees in Shepparton. I love it. Every day I learn something new about the people I work with, about Australia, the world, and about myself. I have a deep respect for people who come to Australia to make a better life for themselves and their children.

I'm learning that Australia should belong to everyone, not just people who were lucky enough to be born here. It is a land of opportunities. I want it to be the same for everyone who comes here to live, no matter where they come from.

Shahbaz, 28, Baluchi / Aboriginal, Kallaroo, WA

My great-grandfather came here about 120 years ago with the camel trains. He was 15 years old and there was a ship at the port in Pakistan which was bringing camels to Australia. There was one camel who was acting disobediently and the white master couldn't control it. Growing up on the farm in a rural environment, my great-grandfather knew how to handle a camel, so he came along and got it on to the boat. The man was so impressed he offered him a job. My great grandfather didn't know what he was doing. He just ran home and grabbed a backpack and whatever he had, jumped on the ship and ended up in Australia.

In the late 1800's, he slowly built his fortune through camels. He had a camel train and once helped to save Mt. Magnet, the town where he was based, when it was flooding. He met and married an Aboriginal Muslim girl from up North who was the child of an Indonesian trader who had settled in Australia. They got married, even though the State did not accept marriages which were not performed in church. He had four kids, who were my grandfather, two great uncles and one great aunt.

My great grandfather got his brother to come and take the kids back with him to Baluchistan, which is the province of Pakistan where he originally came from. This was because the State was taking any kids with Aboriginal descent away from their family and placing them in foster care and he didn't want his kids to grow up in foster care. They went over there and grew up in Baluchistan and came back when they were old enough. Ever since then our family have been going back and forth. I was born there myself.

It was my grandfather who helped build the Perth mosque. I think he founded it and helped lay the first stone. I am proud of it even though I don't tell people about it unless they ask but I should tell a lot more people about this story. Being in Australia with this background it does help to strengthen my sense of my foundations. At the same time, people spin out because my looks are Indian, even though by blood I am considered an Aboriginal here. I tell people about my history and they still do not consider me to be an Australian. You have to be white to be an Australian – at least that's the image given on TV and everywhere else.

'Me and the next generation' - 2005

Sonia, 17, Sierra Leonean, Granville NSW

'A strength within'

Images of the war in Sierra Leone are still vivid in my mind - the jet fighters, helicopters, guns and mercenary military planes. I can still hear the sounds of the guns, the bombardment, the cries, and the fear on the faces of my mother, sister and brother.

The happy family I used to know was scattered by the terror. My mother and younger sister are still in Sierra Leone, unable to escape the horror. My youngest brother has found refuge in London, and my other brother is in Guinea. I am living in Australia with my father. It makes me sad to think we are unable to live together as a family.

Sometimes I think about the horrors in Sierra Leone. As child I have seen my house burn down. I have seen people killed. I have seen people take their last breath. I remember looking for protection, clinging to my Mum's arms, traumatised by the horror.

This trauma will never go away. Everyday is a struggle, learning to deal with what I have seen.

The day Australia granted my father and me asylum was the happiest day that I'd experienced in a very long time. It was an opportunity to escape the daily gun fire and make my life meaningful. But I also felt guilty – other people were in the same situation as me but they didn't have this opportunity.

Kiri, 68, Maori (NZ), Meadow Heights VIC (nominated by Hume City Council)

'My Place in Australia - Sharing Our Maori Way'

The death of my youngest brother in Melbourne in 1972 brought me to Australia from New Zealand. Initially I came to Australia just for short visits, to pay respect at the feet of my brother's grave. Eventually the need to be closer to my brothers resting place made me move to Australia.

My first impression of Australia was that it was very different to my homeland. The pace was a lot faster and the cities a lot larger. What made my move to Australia easier was the willingness of the Australian people to share their different cultures. I saw the potential in this country, for the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the people who have come from many lands, and who have different cultures, to live side by side. I saw this despite my experiences of racism.

I remember clearly the day I was waiting at the checkout queue at the shops with a lot of groceries in my trolley. The lady at the register asked if she could serve the two people behind me first and I thought that was fair enough, they only had a few items to buy. So I let them through and stood by the side but then two turned into seventeen more shoppers who got served before I did. I was hurt that I was treated with such disrespect because of the colour of my skin.

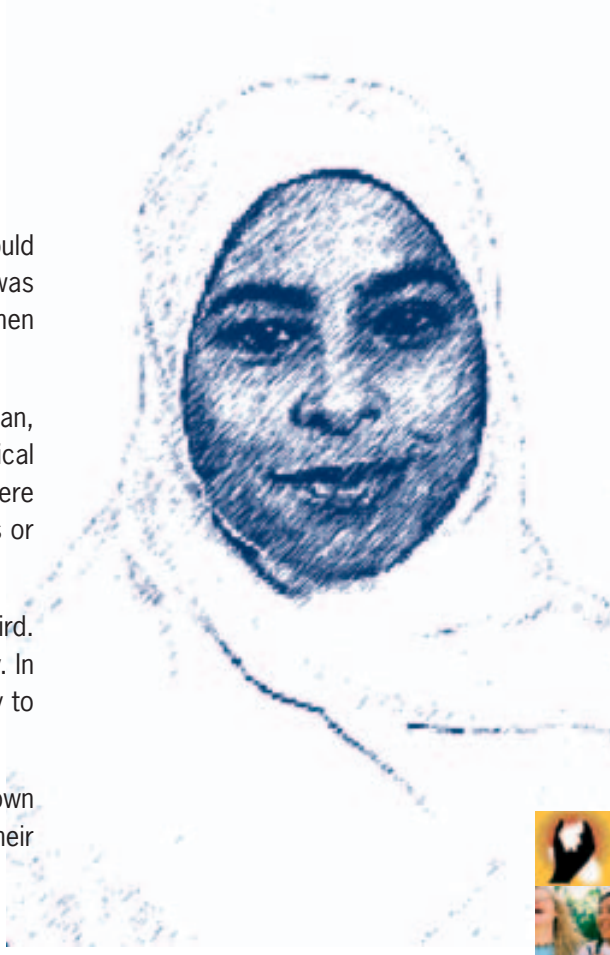
Even though I sometimes still experience this kind of racism, I also still see the potential for harmony in this country, as I did when I first came here. And even though I still long for my homeland, I have found my place in Australia.

My place in Australia, as an elder of my Maori tribe, is to ensure that my children and grandchildren don't turn away from their roots, their culture, but still honour where they live. To me, and to my family, sharing the land means sharing our Maori way, and in turn being willing to learn and respect the ways of those who share the land with us. Diversity is what makes Australia a special place and the reason why I have no regrets.

Fatima, 14, Pakistani, St. Albans VIC

(supported by Werribee Islamic College)

'Australia my home'



When I first came to Australia in 2000 I was just nine years old. I could barely understand anything, but just by the first look of it I knew this was what I dreamt of. For me it was like exiting hell and entering heaven. When I first looked at the clear sky, I pictured all my dreams coming true.

When I was driving to my new home I saw the roads so neat and clean, everything seemed to be so relaxing. There was something very magical about Australia, everything was so peaceful. Looking at the people here made me forget all my worries. Whether they were under great stress or full of tension, they all believed laughter is the best medicine.

Ever since I entered Australia I had so much freedom that I felt like a bird. The fear of going out alone or staying by myself has been wiped away. In such little time Australia meant so much to me - a new life, a new way to live.

The special thing about Australia is that it gives every individual their own identity. It gives every individual the right to speak up and express their thoughts.

Australia is not just a country where I live – it is my home.

Tracey, 16, Chinese, Renown Park SA

(supported by Adelaide High School)

Generations back, my ancestors called China "home". To me, China is like an ancestor. This is where my customs came from and where my family, relatives and culture originated.

A few years back, I visited China. It was a whole new world. It was a place I never imagined it to be, so different to my thoughts. The atmosphere was different, the lifestyle was different and, most of all, the people were different.

The majority of people in China seemed so rude. Wherever I walked, people would yell at me for getting in their way. This is something I never expected from Chinese people. My parents taught me to respect my elders and always be polite. In Australia, I've never experienced someone being so rude to me.

The lifestyle was different to Australia. Every family was only allowed one child. The higher class families were allowed to have more than one, at an extra cost. The houses were not exactly houses, they were more like apartments. The pollution clogged up my lungs, the streets were crowded, the triads were just roaming around, and there so much poverty and homelessness.

To me, my home is a place I feel comfortable in, a place I can do what I wish within the laws of the land. On my plane trip back to Australia, I was recalling all that I'd seen. Although my parents called China home, I could not think of any reason why I had to do the same. In the end I came to the conclusion that Australia was, and always will be, my home. It is a place where I feel comfortable, a place I can express myself and the place I have known all my life.

Natalie, 25, Torres Strait Islander (and many more), Winnellie NT

I was born and raised in Darwin. My mother is from Torres Strait, but she is also Malaysian, Filipino, Japanese, Portuguese and Macassan. My dad is white Australian. He also has Irish and Spanish in him as well. That's something that my parents kept reminding me about every day of my life so I wouldn't forget. I think it's fantastic having so many different nationalities in one little person. My children's father was Aboriginal and Chinese and I think that's also fantastic.

A lot of my family are from Thursday Island, which is part of the Torres Strait. Music is a big part of our family and they sing and write their own songs about living up there. I can't believe how people don't remember that Thursday Island is part of Australia. If you're inside Australian waters it is still Australia, regardless of whether you're on an island or not.

A guy said to me once that he couldn't believe I considered myself Indigenous Australian when Torres Strait Islanders live on islands and it's not joined to Australia. I said to him that the mob from Elko Island and Tiwi Islands are Aboriginal and they live on islands and they're not joined to Australia but they're still Australian. Tasmania is part of Australia, so why not the Torres Strait?

Nahid, 18, Afghan, Auburn NSW

I left my country a very long time ago. That was all because of escaping from the Taliban, to be alive and be safe. Coming to Australia was a very big surprising thing for me. Before we got out of Afghanistan we had no idea what is Australia and where Australia is.

Coming to Australia by boat was very very hard for me and my mum and my brothers, as we did not have anyone to help us. For the hope of coming to Australia, I was really happy and I didn't care about what was happening to us in the boat even though I was very sick. Everyone there was very sick. After we got out of the boat in Christmas Island they took me to the hospital because I was in a bad condition.

'Me, Bonne and Zahra at the National Gallery'

After being in Christmas Island we came to the Australian detention centre in Port Hedland. We stayed there for eight months. It was the most horrible situation in there. We were safe from the Taliban but being in the detention centre we had no future at all. It was very hard for us seeing people committing suicide, staying there for a long time, fighting and being kept in a place in which you are not allowed to get out except for the limited time of two hours a day. It was like still being in the house we lived in Pakistan. My father was outside of the detention centre living in Sydney, but he wasn't allowed to come and see us in Port Hedland.

In the detention centre I was thinking that all the people in Australia must be really tough and weren't thinking about what is happening about the people in detention centres, but coming out and seeing people around me, especially in school, I realised that everything is not the same. At school I had very good friends and a very supportive principal. I realised I have the right to do whatever I want, especially to get educated. I have the right to say what I want and what I want to do with my life and what I want to become, but in my country I did not have any of these.

I want to become a doctor. That was my dream from the time I was six years old in Afghanistan and I was going to go school and made to stop by the Taliban. It just destroyed my hopes. But coming here and all the support that my friends and people gave me I think I can achieve it. It doesn't matter how long it takes, but I will try to be my best to become a doctor, so I am hoping for it.

Unexpected friendships

by Professor Gary Bouma

Professor Gary Bouma

Gary Bouma was born in the United States and migrated to Australia in 1979. He is Professor of Sociology and Head of the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University, as well as UNESCO Chair in Inter-religious and Intercultural Relations for the Asia Pacific Region and Vice-Chair of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (Australia).

'The gift of unexpected friendship'

Many of the stories in this collection tell of unexpected friendships forming between people who on the surface seem very different and unlikely to get to know each other let alone become friends. When I look back over my life, most of my friendships of longest duration are not with people who are most like me, or who grew up near me. There is a sense that part of the appeal of another person is not so much that they reflect what we are as offer in themselves features that round out who we are such that together we are more rich and full than apart. In this sense the unexpectedness of many of our friendships should be less surprising.

Life is a long series of encounters with other people. Some of these encounters last a long time and survive a great deal of change both in ourselves and our friends. Others are more fleeting but may leave lasting impressions. That girl who was briefly in second grade, what did happen to her? That boy who had leukaemia, I wonder still. And then the post-war refugee family that our church helped and who lived in an unfinished house on the edge of town. Our encounters with others provide opportunities to learn, gain new perspectives, to offer ourselves, and to become involved in the lives of others.

Each person is a store of stories, experiences and skills. Each person no matter how utterly like us, or amazingly different, has something to teach us if we are able to be open to them. When I would go to the homes of friends I was exposed to different worlds of language, eating habits and customs. I relied on friends to tell me what was expected and what pitfalls to avoid. The same was true at school, camp and every other new situation I faced. Unexpected friendships would form and I would learn the ropes.

Listening to those who are different, our unexpected friends, exposes us to different views of the world. When I was a child my family often travelled from Michigan into Canada, 'The Kings Country' my father would say in a slightly warning way. Yes it was very different in architecture, road signs with crowns on them, and then the food. To me fish and chips were exotic. But it was a kid the same age on the swings next to me in the town of Gananoque who disputed with me about when World War II commenced. I said December 1941, he said August 1939. I found this shocking, eye opening and an early disconfirmation of my yankocentric perspective.

Unexpected friends take us into their lives and weave a bond of connection that can help and sustain us in trying times. I was stressed out trying to figure our how to enrol in my first year at seminary. I was in a different part of the country, in a new religious group and a long way from anybody I knew. Standing in

line with me were two people who also were new. But they knew more than I did and they took me under their wings. They, like me, had recently married. They had met standing in a queue outside a professor's door waiting to discuss an essay. I became part of their lives and they mine and now 42 years later and half a world away we still keep in touch and the conversation which started then continues without taking a breath.

How boring and limited life would be if all our friends had the same experiences, the same views and the same skills. Experiences of migration certainly enhance the chance of making unexpected friends. If no one moved and everyone had large families we might find our friends in our families. However, most people move, even if it is from one suburb to another or from one school to another, and today very few have large families. Migrants depend on unexpected friends to assist their entry into a society and culture. Having left so many behind, migrants are open to forming new friendships because they have lost their network.

Many of the stories that form part of *'Voices of Australia'* tell of someone making themselves open to another, taking the risk, being vulnerable, ready to learn. Open respect for the other is utterly critical to forming friendships, especially unexpected friendships. If we judge someone to be too different, or 'not like us', or 'too uncool' we cut ourselves off from the riches of another. If we make these judgments on the basis of race, or colour, or class or creed we make our own world small and pinched. We cheat ourselves as well as hurting others. These stories demonstrate the good that comes from being respectful, open and willing to venture. The reward is a rich network of friends, life's best support system.

Hobart TAS.

Unexpected Friendships

Monica, 42, Prospect SA
'Sure, Mum'

In 1992 an unaccompanied minor from Viet Nam entered my classroom. I already taught his elder sister, had met the relatives they lived with and so he was the final piece in the puzzle. He was tiny but full of bravado. He announced that he no longer wanted to be called Thanh – now he was Michael.

I loved these kids unreasonably. There was a desperate sadness about them, even when they were laughing and joking. A little piece of my heart broke whenever I thought of these tiny scraps making the refugee journey alone, without their family.

When I left the school I thought I wouldn't see them any more. But from time to time Michael would call and tell me what was going on with him. His sister would visit me at my new workplace and in 1997 I danced at her wedding – and, was even convinced by Michael to sing karaoke with him.

He'd moved to Sydney by then but he'd still call and we would spend hours on the phone talking about absolutely everything. He would only call me Miss Leahy and I accepted that he was never going to call me Monica. But our friendship was unbreakable.

He was on holiday in Viet Nam in 2003 and I emailed him to say that he needed to be careful about strangers in Thailand because unsuspecting 'mules' were being used to carry drugs and there had been many big seizures by Customs. He emailed back, "Sure Mum". The 'Mum' stuck with me and a few weeks later he rang to say that he was coming to Adelaide and would like to take me out for Mother's Day lunch.

It was that day, as we sat in a café and ate Italian cake, that I noticed everyone looking at us. Me - middle aged, very white, very round and with waist length blonde hair. And him – stylish young Asian guy. I would have looked too. After all, what could we have in common? We must be an odd couple to look at.

But we are what we are, and that is the closest of friends – and family.

Emma, 23, Anglo-Australian, Melville WA

I have a friend named Moza. He is 30 years old and lives in Perth. Moza isn't your average Australian, however; he is an Iranian man who was forced to flee his home country four years ago. After challenging the politics of his country, Moza was thrown into a jail for political prisoners. His human dignity was taken from him as he endured several forms of torture.

When he was released, one year later, he and his family were pursued by the police. Moza was forced to leave everything he loved and knew and become a refugee. He travelled to Australia and became shipwrecked on Ashmore Reef for several months, before the Navy found them and locked them up in a detention centre. Moza was lucky and was released six months later.

This story is not to complain about the negatives of Australian society, such as mandatory detention, but to tell you of a wonderful friend I have in Moza, and how he makes me realise not to take my freedom in Australia for granted.

Moza constantly tells me that "he is in love with the freedom Australia gives him". He is free to love who he wants to love, work and study where he chooses and to decree his own religion. Moza loves his freedom so much that he has written a book about his experiences, and a local Perth publisher has published it.

What a lucky country! We offer experiences to people that other countries do not. It is here in Australia that I can meet Moza and have an extraordinary friendship with him – he teaches me about the way of life in Iran, his family and the cultural differences I would have never known about. It is the essence of Australia's beautiful freedom.

Shahzad, 11, Boxhill South VIC

I came to Australia three years ago when I was just seven years old. I had lived in Mumbai, India, and then in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. I was learning different languages, absorbing different cultures, enjoying a wide variety of foods. Then we migrated to Melbourne and boy was it different!

Children think changing schools is big. Adults think changing states is huge. We changed continents! That was enormous!

I reached these shores on Australia Day, 26 January, and joined my new school just three days later to start Grade 3. With an unusual name, a long surname and a different accent, I knew it was going to be an uphill road. My class teacher, Mrs K, was my lucky break. Even today I thank my stars for being in her class. She took the time to know me and understand that with migration you leave behind family, friends, all things familiar and dear to your heart. Every time I thought of 'home' I shed tears.

'Warandyte Forest Picnic' – me in the middle, with (from right to left), Mrs Kendall (mrs K), Mrs Kendall's mum Marge, my mum Dilnaz, my sister Friyana and Ms Hawking

She took not only me, but my whole family, under her wing. She invited us out for picnics to scenic locations, she came over to our home to have a chinwag, called on the phone, and invited my family to come to the school and talk of our interesting life to my class mates. We relished lamingtons and she savoured tandoori chicken. Her positive attitude encouraged my entire class to extend their hand in friendship. Building my confidence in a multicultural atmosphere helped me enrich my skills and I have never looked back.

When we became proud Australian citizens in May 2004, myself, Mrs K, and our families celebrated together, toasting our friendship. Until today we all share a laugh ... what more can you ask for?

Amareswar, 50, Telugu, South Indian / Australian, Manuka ACT

I arrived in Canberra on a Saturday afternoon in late 1977. I had come from a rural part of India, via New Delhi and was about to begin a research scholarship at the Australian National University. Coming from India, Canberra seemed like a bombed, post-war abandoned place.

I was staying at the University House and I went to the shop to do some basic shopping and there was a very friendly gentleman standing behind me in the queue. 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 he quickly came round to me with a big smile, 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."

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 I am" 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."

Flo, 52, Aboriginal, Grovely QLD

'Forever Friends'

'At St Gabriel's Boarding School in Charters Towers' - Me second from left front row and Amy second from right front row - 1968

We were destined to meet. At the age of 11, Amy and I were forcibly removed from our families and sent to St Gabriel's Boarding School in Charters Towers.

Amy was from Babinda in North Queensland. I was from Yarrabah, an Aboriginal community in North Queensland. We had never met before even though we had family ties at Yarrabah.

We were both under the notorious Aboriginal and Islander Protection Act and we were given no say in things. The government of the day said we had to go and we had no choice. We were both devastated at being separated from our mums and our families. Although we never questioned why, who, how or what?

We were like sisters. We looked alike, we were the same age, we were from the same place and we liked the same sports. We once came back to the school after a break and showed each other the brand new dress we had bought – our two dresses were exactly the same. She bought hers in Townsville and I bought mine in Melbourne.

'At the Link - up Aboriginal Corporation Conference' – Amy and my daughter Lisa on the left, and me and Amy's daughter Meggan on the right - 2004

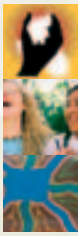
When we left boarding school, we thought we would never see each other again so we cried a million tears. I was sent on to Brisbane not knowing anyone and still feeling devastated. I sat in the waiting room in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in George Street, still crying. When I looked in the corner of the room I saw an old battered brown suitcase with a belt around it with my friends name on it. Amy was there too.

Our friendship has continued over the years. We worked in the same organisations, our eldest daughters are the same age and our husbands are non-Indigenous and were in the defence forces.

For me, I was reunited with my mum even though I had lost all those years of knowing the nurturing of a mother. Amy was reunited with her mum, only briefly and in the last year before her mum passed away.

We had to survive in an era when racism was rife. We intend to write a book about our boarding school days and our lasting friendship.

Amy is my Aboriginal sister and my forever friend.



John, 48, Anglo-Australian, Mosman NSW

(supported by AMP)

'Mandy and my Dream'

When my father died five years ago, I was miserable for weeks and didn't seem to be able to break the cycle. My work colleague, Mandy, a Sikh Indian, observed my misery first hand. One night, I dreamt that I was in the dining room of the convalescent home where my father lived, waiting for him to be brought in for me to feed. He arrived at the door, supported on each arm by a nurse, frail and wizened, in an oversized dressing gown. In the dream, Dad pushed off the nurses and strode across to me, strong and confident in his jeans and sailing sweater. I awoke suddenly, sat bolt upright in bed and cried as I did the night he died. The next day at work, Mandy could see my pain. I told her about the dream. The following day, I hit rock bottom and just couldn't face the office. I rang Mandy to tell her I was not coming in and she asked if there was anything she could do.

At 5.30 that afternoon, a courier arrived at my home with a magnificent bunch of Australian native flowers from Mandy. In the note attached, Mandy explained how Sikhs interpret dreams and in my dream, my father was telling me that he was no longer frail, to cease my sadness and to move on. The next day, when I returned to work, purged of my depression, I called Mandy into my room, hugged her and thanked her for her kindness. She asked if I, an Irish Catholic, accepted her interpretation of the dream. I replied "Who am I to question your view? You comforted me so much and I will be fine now!" I never looked back.

Jessica, 14, Palmerston NT

(supported by Kormilda College)

He was sitting there watching our team play, Diet Coke in one hand and a big smile on his face. He was the last person I would have thought would make such a good friend. He looked just like an Indigenous version of Buddha, solid and round.

After the game our coach Jason introduced him to our basketball team.

"Girls, this is Max, he is your new coach". He gave us a huge grin, "Pleased to meet you all".

Everybody immediately liked him. Max turned out to be a really good coach and a great friend. Never angry, always smiling, encouraging and leading our team to many a victory. In his team you didn't have to be the best, you just had to try hard and give it all you could. He never dwelt on mistakes or blamed people.

The start of 2005 brought the change that our team needed; a clean slate, some new players and the chance to be on top of the ladder. Our team was young. Most of the players were under 21. We were an odd sight with six Indigenous players and three white players, however, colour united. We had a strong start to the season - two wins against last years two top teams.

Then something devastating happened. Mum woke me up at 6:30 am, "Max died last night of a heart attack".

Those words reverberated around in my head the entire day. It was so unfair. He was such a nice person. The day he died turned out to be his birthday and his death day, (17/02/61 - 17/02/05). He was just 44 years old.

This was a message telling me to wake up and make the most of my life. Max taught me that the best person I can be is me. Most importantly do your best, no matter what other people think and say. This message is not just relevant for basketball games, but for my life.

It seems that some people are like angels sent to earth to guide others on the right path. Max was my angel sending me in the right direction. I know that he will always be looking down on me from his box seat in heaven with his can of Diet Coke.

This team went on to win the Grand-final for League which is the top level of basketball in Darwin. Jess has been so inspired that she has since made the U16 NT Basketball Team, U17 NT School Girls Netball Team and the U19 NT Basketball Team to attend the Pacific School Games in Melbourne this year. She is the youngest player in each team that she has been selected to play with.

Mersina, 16, Greek, Adelaide SA

My unexpected friendship began at Adelaide High School. I was sitting alone on a bench waiting for a familiar face when a familiar, yet unknown, face appeared.

"Hi Mersina." It was one of the guys from the year above me. I had seen him around school but I had never spoken to him before so I was surprised he knew my name. I said hello back to him and continued waiting for my friends to appear.

The next day I was going to class and I saw him, he said hello to me again. I felt bad because he knew my name and I didn't know his, so I asked one of the girls in my class. She told me his name was Mohamed.

I admit at first I felt uncomfortable because I had never spoken to anyone from Iraq before. But as time went by, I realised I didn't need to fear him. He was really friendly and, bit by bit, Mohamed and I developed a close friendship.

I come from a Greek background and I am Greek Orthodox so my beliefs were totally different to Mohamed as he is Muslim. But we would talk to each other about the differences in our beliefs and our way of life.

I always listen to what Mohamed tells me about his beliefs even if I don't agree with what he says – after all, it's his choice and we respect each other.

Mohamed and I have a special friendship because even though we come from totally different places and believe totally different things we still manage to get along and have a good friendship.

Dorothy, 60, Hornsby NSW

'Nan'

I met Nan when she and her extended family moved into our street. She was in her seventies and had been living with her daughter, son-in-law and her two grandchildren since her husband died. Nan looked after the children which allowed her daughter to work. Her grandson soon became friends with my son and other children in the street.

Nan would sit on the front veranda and watch the children play at her place or in the street. Her affection for the children was obvious, and they all loved her. She was a good cook and produced sponge cakes for each child's birthday and would send home jars of pickles and jam to their parents.

Nan loved to crochet and each year the boys would be given scarves and beanies in their favourite football team's colours. The girls received beautiful warm ponchos with fringing all round, and dolls in crochet clothing. Nan had the most loving and generous nature of anyone I have ever known.

It was obvious that Nan was Aboriginal, but not so obvious with her daughter and grandchildren. This wasn't something that was talked about much. After I had known them for many years Nan's daughter told me that they did not identify as Aboriginal because they worked hard and were not going to be labelled as 'bludgers'.

Then one day Nan answered a knock at the door – someone from 'Link Up' had come to see her because her son was wanting to find her. Knowing how much Nan loved children, it was heart-breaking to find out that she'd had a young child taken away from her.

I met Nan's long lost son at her grandson's wedding. He had Nan's soft nature and a beautiful kind wife. They both adored her. Nan had several years of knowing her son before she died, which she counted as one of her blessings.

Her grandson told me that Nan had told him just before she died that all of those stories she had told him about her wonderful childhood were not true. She'd had a very unhappy time – but she didn't want to feel sorry for herself or burden others with her suffering.

My friendship with Nan has influenced me greatly. It's motivated me to learn more about the true history of Australia, leading me to join reconciliation groups. I want to see Aboriginal people proud of their cultural heritage and proud that they have survived extremely difficult conditions.

I know Nan knew she was a much loved friend of our family.

Peter (Yayang), 14, Chinese, Brunswick VIC

(supported by Princes Hill Secondary College)

I went to the local school after my family arrived in Australia in 2001. At that school, I had a lot of friends but I realised that something was missing. One day a guy called Santi from Argentina came into our class. Everyone played soccer at lunchtime and suddenly Santi ran towards me and got the ball from me, very easily. I cannot describe my feeling at that moment. But instead of yelling, I walked away very gently, like nothing had happened.

After lunchtime, Santi came over to me and wanted to shake hands with me. After that, we played together and got to know each other. Sometimes he taught me Spanish, and I would also teach him Chinese. He also taught me how to play soccer and told me what all the positions should do. There were many funny things we shared. Our English was so poor then that we couldn't even finish a sentence and so we had to use our "body language" to describe things.

However, things never happened the way that I wanted them to. We had to leave Australia because our visas were ending. That was really a pity because I didn't say goodbye to my best friend – he was sick on my last day of school so I didn't give him any present. I felt so depressed about it. But I think that even though we only knew each other for three months, our friendship will last forever.

When I came back again to Australia in 2004 I wanted to find him. I went to my old school, but the teacher said she had no idea where he'd gone. Maybe he is still in Australia, but maybe he went back to Argentina. I just want to find him.

Pat, 71, Shepparton VIC

"Thankyou very much my dear!"

I am currently teaching English to a gorgeous lady from Kuwait whose husband was a superintendent of police back in Kuwait and in Australia has no job and 6 gorgeous children. She likes to entertain with all sorts of Australian food that she is starting to make, so we are making a ginger frost sponge together soon. I apparently say to her quite often, "Thankyou very much my dear". Recently, I took her shopping and I'm on one side of the store and she is on the other side and I heard this voice saying to someone who had helped her with something "Thankyou very much my dear". I thought 'that sounds like me', and I looked over and it was her. It was an unforgettable moment in my life and one of the most exciting things that has happened in my teaching.

The children are very special too. When things go wrong, they will ring me to tell me. The little boy rang me once to say "Pat! Pat! A terrible thing has happened. My budgies are dead". I don't know much about budgies but I told him I would come and see him. He said "You bring me budgies?" I said "Yes. What colour?" And he said "Yellow". I don't know anything about budgies, but he was so upset, that I went to this store around the corner and I said "Do you sell birds"? There were cages everywhere. They didn't have yellow budgies so I thought I would go and get the little boy and bring him back with me. I got up to the house and the dad wouldn't let him come with me because I think he was embarrassed that I was going to buy the birds. So I said to the dad "Well that's alright, but you can buy him the birds when you get your money this week?" Which he did and I thought that was sweet.

I remember about three months after we met, the dad did something to indicate that even though we are from different religions, he believes we all come from the same God. I said "Same God?" and he said "Yep, same God. We love everybody Pat".

Ivana, 34, Serbian, Osborne Park WA

'Wherever you go you'll find people'

'Jospaine and family' – 2005

I am still amazed by my first contact with Jospaine. Thousands of kilometres separate our countries of origin, there were cultural differences and without full command of language. But in spite of all this our meeting was coloured with laughter and joy.

Jospaine is a young woman from Sudan. She's a mother of four children who are a great comfort to her. Walter (12) is the eldest - a bright, serious boy. Helen (10) is witty and artistic. Brown (5) is very active and likes to do funny and scary things, especially to be noticed by adults. Arron is a five month old baby who is discovering the world in a continuous gaze.

During our first meeting an unwritten contract to endeavour and succeed as friends was sealed with Jospaine's smile. However, the hardest task was to overcome the sadness from the past and a fear of the unknown. Children drew their memories on paper, or played them out through games.

We tried to evoke faces and names of their relatives in Sudan and Uganda. Sometimes the children were startled without visible reason, or they would be very quiet. Somehow, over time, our talks and games began to diminish some of the shadows of the past.

We introduced novelty into the things we did together. We became familiar with the city streets, public transport, food - all activities were accepted by the whole family with joy.

Thinking back to our first meeting, Jospaine is now much more self-confident. She is attending English classes; she laughs a lot and is making plans for the future.

In the notebook that we named "My family" there is a drawing of hands joined together. My hand is there as well. It is a symbol of our friendship and the support we share with each other.

Xin, Chinese, Chiltern NSW (supported by TAFE NSW Riverina Institute, Albury Campus – ESL Class)

'The Tattoos'

Before we moved into our new house we spent some time there painting inside. Sometimes I saw a man who looked about sixty years old, with tattoos on his arms. He used to take his two dogs for a walk along the street. He is a young-at-heart old man. He is our neighbour, and my friend. He is John.

The first time I saw him I thought "he looks like he is a person who would be hard to be close to." But one day he came to our place with his wife to say "hello" and told us they were our next door neighbours. He told us who had built the house and who had lived here before. They asked whether we needed help and some questions about me.

When we moved into the house he gave a party for us and invited all our neighbours to go to their place. He made a barbecue because he wanted us to get to know everyone. Sometimes he would bring beer to our house to talk with me. Sometimes I cooked Chinese food for them and gave him some different Chinese white wines that I wanted him to try. They like Chinese food very much and he loves the wine.

Last Chinese New Year we invited them to our house and we had dinner together. Two weeks before, he learnt to say 'happy new year' in Chinese from a Chinese person who came from Guangdong in south China; so when he said 'happy new year' in Chinese to me I couldn't understand him because he wasn't speaking Mandarin. He was angry because I didn't understand him. Then I taught him how to say 'happy new year' in Mandarin. It was a great evening.

John is a genuine and good person. He is very easy to be close to, and our children like him very much. Every time we go to his place they come home with sweets.

Valda, 65, Aboriginal and South Sea Islander, Milton QLD

'This is what I call a friend'

Back in the 60's it was hard for Aboriginal people to get a house or a flat or anything like that, so when I was younger and looking for a house, I saw this place in the paper and it was at Milton, just behind the brewery. I called up for it and the lady said "Come over, I'll be waiting for you".

When I got there, there was this white woman sitting on the front steps with four kids around her. She said "Come up here, I'm Vilma, how are ya? And this is the place, and so I'll take you upstairs now and show you this top floor". The place was really good. It was big, three bedrooms, two verandas and a lounge and kitchen and I thought "Why isn't she living up here?" She said "I can't afford it, but" she said "you might be able to afford it" since of course my husband was working.

So we moved in and from there we formed a wonderful friendship. Our children were friends and they went to the same school. They looked after my children because her children were much older than mine and we're still friends today.

Of all the white friends I have she is the only real true white friend that I can say I have. Why are we friends? Well, she came down to my level and she sort of spoke to me and she said to me "I've lived in Darwin and I've mixed with the Aboriginal people up there", and I felt a connection straight away because of that. Her children are real special to me. Now they call me Auntie and they can come into my house and just walk in and make a cup of tea – they even ask me what I want in my own house. That's how close our friendship is and I could do likewise with them. I can go into their house and I could even lie down on the bed and have a sleep. I can't do that with many people.

Courtney, WA (supported by Leeming Senior High School)

'What Matters?'

My best friend from primary school wasn't Australian and neither were my two other closest friends. Their nationality is unknown to me to this day, but when I look back now it never occurred to me to ask.

Even after going to Callie's house, meeting her family, growing up with her, I never asked where her family was from, what her background is. I didn't even figure it out. Callie never asked me about my background either. All that mattered when I was at her house was that her pool was so cool on that hot day and that she was a really good air hockey player. I couldn't beat her.

I know the most important things about her. Her birthday is on January 18, she has two brothers, one older and one younger. Her favourite animal is a cow. She is good at maths but not so good at spelling. She is really pretty, allergic to peanuts and was my best friend in the whole world.

Chris, 53, recent European migrant, Northcote VIC

I am the child of post-war Ukrainian immigrants. Once, while visiting a group of Aboriginal women elders in the far Western Desert of Australia, I told them the story of my family history. Through telling them my story and seeing my family's experience through their eyes I came to realise that there was much we shared.

The Ukrainians of my father's generation were cruelly invaded in their ancestral homeland by a foreign force (Stalin's Russian Communists) who took their land (for communes), starved them into submission with a deliberate famine, hunted down and deported dissenters to prisons in distant lands (Siberia), forbade them their native language (Ukrainian) and stopped them from gathering in their sacred places (closed churches).

I went on to tell them how my father, when young, had been taken from his family by another group of invaders (Nazis) and forced to work in their country. He was too frightened to ever go home. Eventually he ran away to Australia to escape the cruel foreigners and never saw his family again.

I grew up hearing him and his fellow Ukrainians trying to maintain their culture in a foreign land. I learned the dances and songs for the home country and taught myself about its ancient symbols and ceremonies. I listened to the old people, living in exile, crying for their family and their stolen country.

The old Indigenous women told me how sorry they were for my pain. I told them how sorry I was for their pain. I showed them some of my ancestral European symbols and songs and dances and they invited me to dance in some of their ceremonies with them.

Terry, Australian of Irish Descent, Ashmore QLD

'A Bond through Rugby League'

I attended the small primary school at Bilambil outside Tweed Heads. When I was in third grade, my father, a keen rugby league man, took me to a slightly larger school at Terranora where there were some after-school league trials being held for all schools in the area.

I had never played in an organised game before and was a bit overawed by the whole situation. When I did take the field, my first encounter brought my heart to my mouth.

A very tall and strong looking boy made a run towards a makeshift 'try line'. The field itself, I can remember, was very basic - sloping and with the try lines somewhere between the outbuildings. Out of instinct, or some other reflex, I chased and managed to tackle the opposition player right in the middle of the gravel path leading to the girls' toilets. I think my father and others were quite impressed. I was shocked and fearful.

The boy in question, who was inches short of the 'try line' and who I later found out was Cedric from Cudgen, looked back at this little bloke with bleeding knees hanging on to one of his ankles. I think I saw two reactions in his eyes, one saying "Where did you come from?", and also a look of respect for the tackle.

A year later my family moved to Kingscliff for a year and I found myself enrolled at the nearby Cudgen Public School. The first day in a large school for a kid coming from Bilambil – and a school population of about 22 – was terrifying. At morning break there was of course 'Free Milk' - a strange custom for a boy from a dairy farming valley. While waiting in line I started to be hassled by a group of boys. Out of nowhere appeared a tall, athletic lad and his mate who promptly saw the offenders off. It was Cedric, and his friend Russel. And that was the beginning of a long association and friendship.

Cedric later worked with my father to establish a banana farm near Kilkivan and then started his own business on the Tweed. He played rugby league for Cudgen and later was President of the Tweed All Blacks Club. He became a respected leader of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the Northern Rivers.

Unfortunately, Cedric succumbed to a serious illness at quite a young age. But I will always remember the friendship that began with a rugby league tackle on that stony Terranora football field.

Racism: not in my backyard

by Dr Eva Sallis

Dr Eva Sallis

Eva Sallis was born in Bendigo, Victoria. She is an award winning writer of fiction and non-fiction, and is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide. She is also co-founder and President of Australians Against Racism.

'From My Inbox'

I read through most of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* recently. It is a surprisingly compelling document, for all its unlovely architecture and its arid prose. The hopes and dreams it embodies are deeply moving; as is the gulf between what it proposes as right and just, and what happens in the day-to-day rub of peoples' lives. It isn't legislation that protects a way of life or regulates power and money. It is legislation that makes a bid for a better future in the relationships between people. What moves me too is what a huge difference this codified idealism makes to a country, and how different life can be in countries that have not had the time or luxury or the will to so codify for their own future peace.

Yet in Australia we have a long way to go. In fact we are fast approaching a crisis as fear and vilification of yet another group begin to dominate public discourse.

I received an email a few days ago in which the writer questioned me on the meaning of racism in Australia. He didn't believe that it is real racism that we see in Australia. Wouldn't racism be more accurately described as tribalism, he suggested politely, and wouldn't this just dissolve away as people got to know each other, much the same way as it had for 'wogs', 'balts' etc, in fact for all the outsiders who gradually assimilated and became insiders in our large Australian tribe? He didn't mention Indigenous Australians.

This argument is nothing new. People sometimes buttonhole me to say that we have seen it all before: when the displaced persons arrived after World War 2; with the post-war European migrants; when the Vietnamese refugees arrived. Nothing bad came of it: no lasting damage done. They imply that it is somehow all OK this time around too, and that any who suffer too obviously at the hands of the broader Australian community are whingers, are failing to cope with the unique rite of passage we inflict on newcomers. They too don't mention Indigenous Australians.

The idea that it is not real racism that we experience between our ethnic groups is an attempt to let us off the criticism that sticks with a harsh word like racism. But racism is very real and painful on the receiving end. A Vietnamese Australian worker emailed me on the same day to ask what to do about his experiences at work. He wrote of the extreme racism of his work environment brought about by the prejudices of his boss. He wrote of his feelings of sadness, of his bewilderment about the source of this man's hatred, and of the hard times he and his fellow workers are enduring.

Attempts to ignore or deny Australian racism, or to suggest that it is minor, natural or transient, obscure a great deal. The inequality often involved: the vulnerability of an employee and the power base of an employer, for example. Such attempts erase any focus on the actions that express racism. Most of all denial removes all suggestion that our actions damage people.

As the stories in this collection show powerfully, it is untrue that no damage is done, and untrue that older inter-community racisms have disappeared. Tribalism, or the many variants of this argument, is never used to encourage us to do more, or improve as a community. I am never buttonholed to hear that because intense vilification of a newly arrived group happened in the past and is happening again, and conceivably could again in the future, we have a serious problem, something unreconciled and unresolved in our national psyche. Importantly, I am never buttonholed to hear that all is OK for living Indigenous Australians: that they are accepted and have now an equal enjoyment of their basic human rights along with the rest of us, that they have been delivered somehow undamaged

from generations of prejudice to a new dawn in Australia. If I am buttonholed at all on the subject of Indigenous Australians, it is to receive a white person's solution to problems he or she has never encountered or even humbly explored.

I do know from my inbox that we in Australia are terribly touchy and thin-skinned on the subject of racism.

The Aboriginal Australians I know live in a different Australia from the one I live in. The glimpses I get of their Australia scare me. It is not that occasionally they experience discrimination, or occasionally they expect it. They expect it all the time, based on long, hard experience. I have discovered that almost every transaction I might have with officialdom or private individuals is likely to be a different transaction for my friends, whether it be with health professionals, police, social workers, educators, retailers, government or law. Sometimes these transactions are positive. But even when a transaction involves positive discrimination, even an excessive helpfulness, it is still discrimination if you encounter it because you are Aboriginal. It is still alien to me and to the way I am met in the Australia I know. More often discrimination is an ever-present negative. I have sat with Aboriginal friends when they are having a garage sale so that the presence of a white face will encourage cars to stop and browse.

The most awful thing I have found is that many of the Aboriginal Australians I know live without a sense of day to day personal safety, without a sense that they have rights that will be protected if they need them to be, and without a sense that they will always be able to protect their children, in fact with the constant anxiety that they will be unable to protect their children. The burden of history is such that they live in an exile from peace that is unimaginable to most Australians.

I believe that any new dawn in Australia, which I would recognise from a real change in the recurrent racist reactions we have to outsiders, will only come with reconciliation. I don't know what reconciliation will entail, but I do know that we have something big to face that as a community we are not facing, and that if we do, some of us pushing, some of us reluctant, we might begin to become the community the *Racial Discrimination Act* suggests we could be and should want to be.

I don't know the solution but some small truths are clear. Getting to know each other transforms damaging rejection into acceptance; potentially transforms fear into love. Hearing rather than silencing voices is essential. The stories and poems in this magazine are redolent with the real friction of Australia's peoples, and with the tiny and huge experiences that shape our selves and our relationships. Reading these stories, I am struck with the individual courage and personal growth it takes to overcome racism, indeed the journey to self-respect and self-knowledge when the broader community rejects you is one of the great endeavours of the human spirit. And I am struck by the sense of Australia having grown, and of what an important change multiculturalism has been for this country. *Voices of Australia* is an unusually inspiring celebration of diversity, a clear-eyed look at the realities of Australians' relationships with each other, and a celebration of survival, transformation and growth, both in the lives of individuals and as a nation. These stories, too, are a way of beginning to get to know one another and learning again to face experiences that have too long been ignored. Some of the stories here will help us to feel what it is like to be someone else, and feel what it is like to experience racism in Australia. We need to know and acknowledge both feelings in order to become what we could be as a nation of diverse peoples.

In this collection of stories you will find painful memories, it is true, but you will also find an uplifting and unusual bringing together of strong voices that individually ring out and together soar. Here you will find stories of the experience of racism and how it was overcome. In reading collections such as this, I think – *Yes! This is us! This is Australia in all its beauty, strength, pain and weakness.* But the strength dominates; such is the impact of voices being heard and stories being told.

These stories and this collection help to make us hopeful, and that is perhaps the most important feeling we can have towards ourselves and each other. Such projects and such hopefulness can help us, as can the legislation that has been with us for thirty years, to acknowledge and face our past and present actions as a nation. The beautiful individual voices of this collection could not be more different from the dry prose of the *Racial Discrimination Act*, but the two texts have a lot in common.

The *Racial Discrimination Act* is a work in progress that invokes our better selves and tries to counter with our better selves the strange mixture of knowledge, blindness and excuses that makes up many Australians' reactions to racism. The *Racial Discrimination Act* reminds again and again, as it must, that discriminatory or vilifying conduct does not reflect who we want to be, not who we are aiming to be as a community. To me, the *Racial Discrimination Act* is a precious instrument to help in charting a course towards maturity as a community. These voices do the same thing by inspiring us.

Racism: not in my backyard

Julie, 34, Tregear NSW

'For Tracy'

I was the smallest kid in class and constantly picked on because of it. I was an outside kid. I wasn't one of the cool ones. The thing about being an outside kid is that all the other outside kids hang together.

One of my friends at school was Tracy. We meet because we played softball and hockey together. We became great mates. Our Mums hung together while we played and we all hung together while Tracy and I waited to play.

The first time that I saw overt racism in action it was aimed at Tracy. At school we were hanging together and another kid came up to us and said to me: "Why'd ya wanna hang with her for, she's black?" I looked at Tracy then I looked back at the kid and told him to "P**s off. Tracy is my friend." Tracy looked at me and asked: "Why did you do that?" I told her: "Cause what the kid said was bad." She put her arm round my neck and told me none of her mates had stood up for her before. I just shrugged and said; "That's what friends do isn't it?" She smiled and said: "Yeah I guess it is." We walked off laughing.

Tracy taught me that 'terra nullius' was a lie, that for 40,000 years Aboriginal people have lived on this land. I was ten back then, now I'm 34. When I was in class back then my little white hand used to shoot up whenever the teacher said that when Cook landed this land was empty. I'd say: "No it wasn't - Aboriginal people have lived here for 40,000 years." "Get out", was the teachers usual reply. Didn't stop me though. I did it every time they said it. Tracy told me I was a stirrer. I told her; "Yep, but they're lying." She nodded.

Claire, 14, Leonyer, NT

(supported by Kormilda College)

'Helpless in the playground'

A few years ago a new boy came to my primary school. He was Asian and didn't speak much English. At lunch times he stayed by himself eating food that no one had ever seen before. Some boys started picking on him – calling him names, throwing rocks at him and pulling their faces so their eyes were squinting.

I knew that it was wrong, the boy was helpless, no one was there to help him and I'm not sure he even understood what the boys were saying. I didn't think there was anything I could do, or maybe I didn't want to do anything at the risk of being bullied myself. I watched as the boy was tormented and just like him felt helpless. I didn't know what I could do.

I don't think this sort of bullying is what Australia is suppose to be about. Racism in the schoolyard should be stopped because it's just as cruel and hurtful as racism on a bigger scale.

Marat, 16, Jewish Russian, Clarence Gardens SA

'Racism Draws Lines on a Map'

When I was in Year 10, there was a boy who wasn't overly fond of me. I didn't get into any fist fights: luckily I grew out of that after Year 8, but we did fight a lot verbally and he was very fond of the 'dirty Jew' remark. This boy was Italian, so I suppose I had plenty of openings for racial slurs but I'm proud I didn't take them, because personally nothing angers me as much as racism does.

Racism draws lines on a map. There are no real barriers between countries no matter how far apart they are. It's the same planet. You won't find a country border etched in the ground – it's just lines on a map. Nationalities are lines drawn on paper. It doesn't really separate people. It only separates people if they allow it to. Racism is really based on a joke dividing land into different countries and different nationalities based on how much power governments want. It's a joke, and not a very intelligent one at that.

Katherine, 41, Anglo-Australian, Morpeth NSW

I vividly recall my first conscious act of racism. A child of British migrants, I attended a public primary school in the 1970's at which there were few non-Anglo faces. One day a new student arrived. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Delicate of features and bone structure, she had lustrous dark hair and eyes. Shy and quiet was Karen from Sri Lanka.

I so wanted to befriend this peaceful person. I observed her, came close to her, engaged her in conversation. I noted differences in her clothes, her appearance, her lunch, her retiring manner. These did not concern me overly. However, I was intrigued by what appeared to be her "smell". I had no language to ask, no one to speak to about this "strange" thing which I observed but had no way of analyzing. From my adult perspective I can rationalise what I did next but it still weights on me. I used this observation about Karen in a negative way in order to "fit in" with my schoolyard group. I can still see myself proffering the view: "Karen smells".

The hurt in her eyes still haunts me. I did not mean to hurt her, but I did. I did something very wrong which undermined her humanity at a fundamental level. At the age of 9 or 10, I had no space, no words, no language, no conceptual understanding to deal with Karen's perceived difference from my perceived norm. Neither school nor home, as supportive as they were, prepared me for meeting Karen on equal terms. I did not know that race mattered, that I needed to learn how to work with my own reactions to difference and seek beyond them to our common humanity. Wherever she is now, I can only hope that Karen's heart is big enough to forgive people like me.

Adela, 41, El Salvadorian, Camp Hill QLD

I was born in El Salvador and came to Australia in 1988. I could not speak English. I could not understand what people said. I did not know Brisbane. We were escaping a civil war that seemed to have no end and I was missing the relatives I'd left behind.

Three months after arriving in Brisbane, I started English classes at a TAFE institute. I was very anxious and afraid. I had to catch a train to get there and learn about the public transport system. That proved to be a very stressful experience. The man selling tickets was very intimidating. Every time I told him where I was going he said he could not understand what I was saying. I would stand there for a long time trying to tell him that I was going to Dutton Park. He would look at me angry and shake his head. He almost yelled at me. The same scene happened over and over again. Each time I would be close to tears.

I wanted to go back home and never come back. I would worry at night and think about what I was going to say the next day. One day I just didn't want to face him and decided not to buy the ticket. Ticket collectors caught me without one and gave me a warning. I had to buy the ticket the next day. This time he gave me the ticket and said "Why don't they go back to their country". I was excited I had understood this (I was learning English) but I felt so humiliated, and not accepted in my new country. Eventually, he left and someone else came to work at the station. He was polite. It was a relief.

I am an Australian citizen now. But I still think about that experience and it makes me feel sad.

Kris, 16, Chinese/Malaysian/Australian, Bulleen VIC

I was sitting in a coffee shop in the CBD on a Sunday afternoon. The day could not have been more beautiful, and my sister and I had just spent the morning walking along the Yarra. With the sun out and the weather blue and smog free, I felt very lucky. Lucky that my parents had decided to migrate to Australia and not remain in Singapore or return to Malaysia. Lucky that I got to grow up in a society where my group of friends was a rich mix of Sri Lankan, Irish, French, Chinese, New Zealand and Australian cultures.

As we were sitting there, a homeless man approached us asking for money. When I said no he became frustrated and angry. And as he went to the next table he shouted over his shoulder, "Stupid f***ing nips, go back to your own country." We sat in shocked silence. It was so unexpected. My sister piped up, "What's a nip?" My reply was that I had no idea. Then we burst out laughing.

'I am the one on the left'

Because that's the thing - in my life I've only received one racist taunt, and even that was nothing more than a weak-willed comment thrown at me during a primary school fight. The word 'nip', I found out later, is a derogatory term for people of Asian descent.

This incident certainly didn't change my life. It didn't even change my day. Racism would be the world's biggest joke if it weren't so dangerous, or hurtful. Degrading people according to their racial background seems so pointless to me. My life has been so enriched by the cultures of my friends and of the many cultures of Melbourne – they're all a part of me too.

Bernard, 40, Anglo-Indian from South India, North Strathfield NSW

'On assumption and reality'

It was an ordinary day in November 2000 and I was leaving a multi-story building that housed a private English college where reality had just struck me hard on the head.

Two months earlier, I was enjoying the fresh breath of morning dew in my garden in South India. I come from a minority Christian community with an Anglo background, a western attitude to life and mother tongue, English. But, unlike many others of the community, I took after my Indian ancestors in physical appearance – dark hair, eyes and complexion.

Having held an English lecturing job in South India for 16 years, I had applied for this job with much enthusiasm. I sent in my CV and later rang to confirm its receipt. A brief telephone conversation a week later lifted my spirits – I had landed an interview, my first in Australia. On the day of the interview I took the elevator to the sixth floor and soon found myself in a small, but comfortable lounge. After talking to the lady at the front desk and waiting for a few minutes, I saw a man poke his head through a door, look at me, shake his head, say something to the lady and disappear.

The lady then beckoned me and clarified, "Is it Mr. X you have an appointment with?" She then went in through the door to reappear with the same man who queried, "Are you Mr. L? Are you the person who talked with me on the phone last week?" At once I realised that I had dashed his expectations. The look on his face was like that of a customer who unwrapped his package to find that what he saw was not what he wanted.

Anyway, we had the interview as scheduled and … you know the result.

It's been almost five years now and I've put that and many other similar incidents behind me. I teach English to multicultural adult migrants in a good academic institution, with a very appreciative management and extremely friendly staff. I've also realised that there is a very fine line between racism and personal choice, and that racism is a universal malady not restricted to any one particular race or creed.

Anthony, 23, Aboriginal, Riverwood NSW

As a proud Aboriginal man living in Sydney, I have come across discrimination just about every day of my life. I am 23 now and have learnt that the fists will not get me anywhere. Truthfully, at times I feel so much hate inside of me for white folla'z for what they have done to this country, but I don't see us as Aboriginals getting anywhere just hating. I think it is time to get up and stand together, so you don't feel that you are going through discrimination alone.

Selina, 15, Bangladeshi, Leumeah NSW

(supported by East Hills Girls High School)

'Cut from a Different Cloth'

I have the same conversation with my mother every time I go out.

"Why can't you just wear the clothes you have?"

"Because I don't want to look different to the others. Wherever I go, people are always staring at me, talking about my clothes, my scarf. I always look different. In Malaysia - fine. Things were different there."

"It's all in your head."

"Look around you, Mum. People from all over the world come here to live and they forget their culture. They just wear whatever the Australians wear and try to blend in - tops and pants. They dress like Americans and Europeans. I want to do the same. What is so special about holding up my own culture so rigidly? All that happens is that I get laughed at and stereotyped as a terrorist. How do you think I feel?"

"Australia is a multicultural society. You can see people from different races, languages and religions who make up Australia. You represent a culture yourself. You should be proud of it."

"Proud? How on earth can I be proud Mum? You might think that way but I have to face obstacles everyday, wherever I go and whatever I do. Shopkeepers follow me around when I enter their shops. Whenever I get on the train people look at me, suspicious. Proud? Am I supposed to be proud of this? Proud of a culture and religion that is seen as a threat all over the world?"

It's so hard being a different teenager in a Western society. I try so hard to make my parents understand, but I fail every time. At times I burst into tears of hurt and frustration, but that's no good either. We are all unique but we're not seen that way in today's world. I just wish, wish that a day will come when everyone will be seen as equal in each others' eyes and be loved for who they really are.

Steve, 48, Aboriginal Australian, Wyee NSW

'Just an example'

I enrolled at university as an Aboriginal mature aged student to study an Indigenous Law Degree. In my class was a woman, also a mature aged student, who upon hearing that I was Aboriginal kept throwing comments about how I didn't pay fees, didn't pay HECS and got given all this money to go to uni.

She openly harassed me for months, until some younger 'white' students told her to leave me alone.

She didn't speak to me for about six months and then, out of the blue, came up to me and said she had been looking into 'us Abo's' and realised that we had things hard and that she now knows it's 'them Asians that are at fault'.

I tell people this for a laugh, but I still feel sad for the person.

'David', NSW

In 1970 my white Scottish family immigrated to Australia from the UK with me. I was a transracially adopted nine year child of Kashmiri and Scottish parentage. We arrived in Sydney and were housed in a hostel for British immigrants on the North Shore.

The kids at primary school picked on me straight away. They called me a 'Black' and 'Abo' and other strange names. They told me to go back to my own country. School quickly became a nightmare for me. I tried to skip school but when I was found out my adoptive father was very angry at me. He told me "Sticks and stones will break your bones but names will never hurt you". Ironically the kids at school then started hitting me in the playground.

Eventually we moved to the Sutherland Shire – another very white area of Sydney. In high school the racism grew uglier. I was called everything - "F***ing Wog", "Black Bastard", "Black Jew", "Paki Bastard". I was often intimidated physically and ended up in many fights.

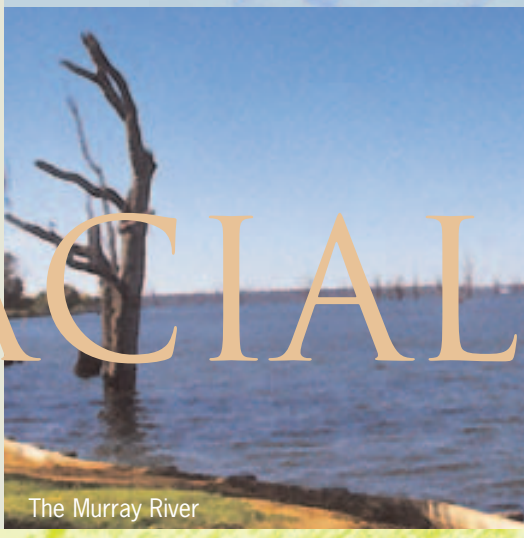
I have been asked if I am an Arab, Italian, Greek, Lebanese, Aboriginal, Jewish, Indian, Pakistani, Mexican, Indonesian. I would feel shame every time someone asked "Where do you come from?" and I would reply "Scotland". The look of disbelief on their face would make me want to disappear. I didn't want to be different - I wanted fair hair, fair skin. I didn't want to be hated because I was dark skinned. I wanted to be white. I wanted to be a racist. I wanted someone to hate.

As I grew older I'd like to say that racism disappeared, but there were other painful incidents. When I was on the railways in the early 80's, I worked as a relief Station Master on a north shore Sydney station. There was a girl selling tickets and I asked her if she wanted a break. She sat down and my first customer, a well dressed and well spoken woman, asked me for a return to Chatswood. When I couldn't immediately find the ticket on the unfamiliar ticket rack she looked past me to the girl behind me and said "The worse thing is that my husband fought against people like him in the war and now they're taking our jobs".

These days, with an enlightened multicultural society, I feel a lot better. I have also joined a group of transracial adoptees, and realise that I'm not the only person in the world to have had this experience. Very soon I'll be meeting my birth father for the first time. I intend to embrace all things Kashmiri.

Susan, NSW

I'm Black inside but look white
I don't fit in anywhere
Except at night
My dreams fill with longing
For another world
Which accepts me
No longer a rejected pearl
Society is ignorant
They don't understand
The ties that connect me to this land
They were taken away
long before I was born
My culture and heritage
Severed and torn
White man rejects me
Calls me half-caste
All that's left is the bloody past



The Murray River

Khalid, 18, Lebanese descent, Granville NSW

As a member of the Lebanese community, I am often placed in an awkward position during some conversations with my friends, particularly when they try to make a connection between the Lebanese community and acts of violence or crime. Normally, I ignore such comments – even though I feel shocked that such ignorance still exists.

One time, however, I decided to take part in the conversation. I began with a simple statement pointing out that not all of the members of the Lebanese community could be classified as violent and criminal. My friends disagreed completely. They told me that it was a majority of the Lebanese community that "caused all this trouble", bringing up things such as rape and theft. At this point I stopped them and dared them to deny that the fraction of the Lebanese community that did commit such acts was minimal, evident by the small percentage of Lebanese people in prison.

I went further and asked them what crime had anything to do with race anyway. I put forward the idea that in every community there will always be a tiny number that set a bad name for everyone else, and this did not necessarily mean that the whole community was like that. Wasn't that the same for the Anglo-Australian and Turkish communities of my friends?

I can't say that I had a huge effect on my friends that day, however since then I have seen a slight change in their attitudes and I haven't had to listen to those stereotypes again.

Benjamin, 27, English Father, Australian Mother, Mardi NSW

I grew up in a housing commission estate in Cabramatta in the 1980's & early '90's, and suffered racism to quite a bad extent. I recall in primary school that everyone hung out together; Asians, Yugoslavs, Africans, Lebanese and the few Aussies there. But when we got to high school everyone started only hanging out with their own race, which left me alienated as there weren't many Aussies. It was weird though – they were all born here but some of them told me that their parents told them never to mix with Australians.

I recall groups of Asians at my school bashing "Aussie skips" as they called us, but never understood why. I was often terrified it would happen to me, as many of them regularly brought knives to school. But then, too the Asian kids would fight the Middle-Eastern kids, often ending up with police being called to our school. I remember too, at the local plaza, the Lebanese kids would always hang out the front, staring at people, asking if you're an Aussie, and if you said yes they'd spit at you.

I remember feeling embarrassed to be an Australian, because we were looked down upon. I was also confused as we'd learn in class that Australians are racist, yet in the playground it was the Aussies who were always picked on.

I had a few friends from other countries who were good to me, but they weren't allowed out on weekends, and their families wouldn't let me come over. One of my Asian friends, who I knew for years, his parents never once looked at me to say hello when I would knock on the door. They never invited me in, even when it was raining. But my mum was always good to my friends.

It was a very confusing time growing up in that climate. I moved to a new school, out of the area, when I was in Year 9 and everything was different. There were still not many Aussies - mostly Italians. And I no longer felt embarrassed about being an Aussie.

Lilly, 40, Aboriginal, Rivett ACT

I was introduced to the injustice Aboriginal people face in Australia at a very young age. I was 11 in 1976 and I remember the lengths that the Manager and his Secretary went to stop my mother from speaking out about the injustices that were happening on our remote Aboriginal reserve. They began a propaganda campaign, circulating a newspaper that included a story with a character called "Empress Fang". My mother had some of her top front teeth missing, except for the incisors. The story said that she was a person that shouldn't be listened to.

When these attempts to belittle and demean my mother didn't work, they turned on our family. My family was refused housing and my parents were refused employment. My mother earned money by cleaning the teachers' houses and baking bread for them. During this time, we lived in two army tents joined together. We later upgraded to a corrugated iron shack with a cement floor, but without plumbing or electricity. Our father's ingenuity afforded us a shower built around a cold water tap, an outhouse and electricity courtesy of a nearby pole.

The most traumatic time for us was when our father was tagged an "illegal immigrant" and forced off the island. Desperate to stay close to his family, he got work on a fishing trawler that would sometimes moor nearby. Two of my uncles wrote a letter to the Manager asking him to leave but he just tore it up and laughed in their faces. Thankfully, though, he did eventually leave. I don't know what happened, but I felt safer knowing he was gone.

In 1978, much to the disappointment of the people, our reserve was turned into a Local Shire Council and with it came a wet canteen. To this day my mother still works in our home community and she still fights an evil: not a man, but a far more silent and deadly killer of my people; their dignity and their culture. Alcohol.

Valma, Mackay QLD

'Walking the Dog'

One Sunday afternoon I was taking my dog for a walk along the Tullabudgera Creek on the Gold Coast, like many other families. When I started to walk toward the beach I heard someone shout, "Let's paint her white." I saw other family groups look in the direction of the shouting and when I turned around to see what the commotion was about I saw a group of people heading towards me.

Panic struck me as I realised that the shouting was targeted at me. I feared for my life. The group had glass bottles in their hands and they were coming towards me. I quickly went to my car and drove off. I was afraid that they might follow me so I headed for the Coolangatta Police Station.

I arrived at the police station to report the incident. I described the vehicle and gave the licence plate number but was told that no action could be taken unless I was physically harmed.

Racism is a disease of the mind of the offender. I counteract it by believing in myself and knowing that personal freedom comes from within.

Kerima, 31, Ethiopean, Ashburton VIC

'Unexpectedly Embarrassed'

I was walking down to the Chadstone shopping centre, where I always go shopping. On the way an Australian guy came up to me and abused me. He put his hand up close to my buttock and slapped me. When I turned around I thought it was somebody who knew me. I realised it wasn't and then he asked me, "Are you married, single or a terrorist?" He was very aggressive and just itching for a fight.

When I came to Australia, people occasionally told me about racist incidents they had encountered. They warned me too about things that can happen on the train and in the streets. But I didn't really take them seriously. I didn't imagine it was like this.

When that incident happened, I felt myself burning up, inside and out. I thought of hitting the guy. Despite my anger, I tried to put aside the rage I felt and instead I tried to feel sorry for him, and people like him, for his prejudices and ignorance. Our differences are skin-deep and even our deep cultural differences don't make us incompatible.

I try to think positively about the whole issue. I try to put things into perspective. I don't want to let a few isolated events colour my thinking. And usually I succeed.

Vivien, 29, Chinese/Malaysian,The Patch VIC

'Changes Within, Changes Without'

'Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, kiss your wees'. The sing-song chant still echoes in my memory, despite the 22 years that have elapsed since I last heard that rhyme directed towards me. The rhyming taunt, repeated relentlessly by my Year 1 primary school classmates, followed me throughout the entire school year. I was not Chinese, nor was I Japanese – I was Australian. Or so I had believed. I did not remember a single thing about my birthplace, Malaysia, which I had left six days before my fourth birthday. I spoke perfect English, having spent countless mornings watching 'Sesame Street', 'Playschool' and 'The Waltons' on my grandparents' television while my parents were at work. Sure, I looked Chinese, I had never believed in Santa Claus as my family did not celebrate Christmas (but, boy, did we make up for it during Chinese New Year!) or exchange Christmas presents and I ate rice at home (every night!). Nevertheless, I was an Australian citizen, I was Australian…or was I?

Through experiencing racist jeers and peer exclusion during the formative years of my life, I began to adamantly reject my Chinese-Malaysian heritage. I refused to speak Chinese, was horrified when my parents spoke Mandarin in public and envied all of my 'white Australian' school mates. I felt like an outsider, having rejected my cultural roots and having being rejected by my adopted country. Oh, how I wanted to be Australian, to be 'white', to eat 'meat and four veg' every night, to open presents on Christmas morning…to be normal, like everyone else.

Finally, I did become an Australian. My family temporarily relocated to Indonesia when I was 11 years old and I completed the last three years of primary school at the Jakarta International School. What a relief! I was just one among hundreds of children from a host of racial, linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. There were no negative stereotypes and preconceptions based on race, there were no racially discriminative insults or nasty chants. Here was my Utopia, a place where my skin colour no longer mattered, where my Mongoloid eyes were no longer the subject of ridicule, where I no longer felt like an outsider. Nationality was important to some extent. However, I was always accepted and identified by my peers as 'Australian'. Here, in this Utopia, one's racial features did not become a reason for derision or exclusion. I finally had an identity.

While I continue to encounter the occasional racist remarks today, I have gradually internalized the acceptance by others that I experienced at the International School and I now know that I am truly an Australian. Without a doubt, self-acceptance and acceptance by others are interdependent. However, by being able to fully believe that I am an Australian (with a Chinese heritage of which I am now proud), the perceptions of others no longer encroach upon my sense of identity. There has been dramatic change over the past 20 years in the respect and acceptance of 'otherness' in Australia; but there has also been a dramatic change in my respect and acceptance of myself.

Tanmayii (Tarna), 34, Anglo-Australian, Hilton WA

'Racism Hurts Everyone'

My first experiences of racism came from within my home, from my parents and my extended family. I am from a white Anglo background and grew up in a small community in Launceston, Tasmania. My parents were working class people with a history of poverty, big families, and lots of struggle. I had cousins who were of Aboriginal descent, and my parents also had many close Indigenous friends.

I remember times when my mother would complain about all the other 'blacks' who were supposed to be different from her friends and family members. She used to say horrible stuff about them – they're lazy or no good, thieves, drunks and so on. I used to argue with her, and would wonder how she could say those things, when her best friend was Aboriginal or her closest cousin, and when I could see she loved them really deeply.

She would argue that they were the exception, they weren't like the rest. On and on we would argue, me trying to understand how she could think like this about a group of people and her telling me I have no idea, I'm just a kid. Here was probably the first place I ever questioned my mother's values, my mothers thinking and realised she was wrong. I could see her hurt, I could see that something had happened to make her hate a group of people so much. But yet individually she was prepared to 'give em a go', to let them close. I knew then that I didn't see the world as my mother did. I knew then that I would spend much of my life trying to unravel the collective confusion that people carry around about colour. And I knew that I needed to discover that from a place of openness and with some knowledge of the facts. I'm still looking.

Hank, 45, Aboriginal, Deloraine TAS

"Get a life cobber!"

My brother and I were in a store and we were looking at a lap top computer. Now me and my brother happen to be dark ones. And there in the store there are school kids walking around the store with bags over their shoulders and everything. I happened to have my brief case with me and this manager of the store said over the PA system: "You two blackfellas looking at the lap top, please move back to the front store where we can remove your bag."

I just left the store mate and never been back. I went down the road where we bought our lap tap computer from someone else. I am not going back into that store for anybody. What a shame! I don't blame the whole store. It was just one person. I realise that. But me and my brother felt like, "How can you do that man? Get a life cobber."

Amie, 33, Filipino, NSW 'The path we take'

I am a Filipino, and have been living here for nearly nine years. In my early years here, until I learnt to ignore it; I went through hell. One of my many unpleasant experiences was while I was at the mall, waiting for my husband. A man approached me and asked how much I charged per hour. I was shocked, distressed and infuriated to think that someone could confront me this way and think nothing of it.

One day as I was walking back home, a middle aged man driving along the road stopped behind me, honked his horn, then shouted "PIG". I glanced back, looked around and then realised there was nobody there except me. I was stunned and fled very quickly. When I reached our home I was in tears.

Do we have to tolerate this behaviour? Should we be treated this way because of our Asian background? I still wonder what I need to do to be accepted into this society and prove that I am an Australian and part of this country.

Ramiza, 15, Macedonian Australian, Burnside VIC (supported by Werribee Islamic College)

When sitting on the bus on the way to school, I would stare outside the window and see many different faces. As I looked out, those faces glared at me. Looking at their eyes, I knew they were judging me. Staring at me as though I had committed a crime. It made me feel as though I was their enemy. But those people staring, pointing and whispering did not know who I was. Did not wonder as to who I was inside, beneath the scarf.

I am a 15 year old teenage girl who enjoys hanging out with her friends and having a good laugh. I have a family of four – I am the youngest. I work hard at school and I try to achieve my best in every subject. I enjoy playing sports, in particular basketball. I approach each day as it comes. I have everything I could possibly want, or so it seems.

This is what I'm all about. I have not committed any crimes. I am not a criminal.

Frank, late fifties, Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal from Raukkan, Munno Para SA

'In the thick of it'

My name is Frank and I'm a Ngarrindjeri Man from beautiful old Raukkan on the shores of Lake Alexandrina at the mouth of the mighty Murray River; a place I'll always call home.

I recall an occasion, when my best friend invited my wife and me to his place for an evening meal. On the night things seemed to be panning out beautifully and my wife and I were enjoying everyone's company. However by about the middle of the evening one of my friend's guests raised the subject of land rights.

Now I guess like a lot of my mob; I've always told myself not to get involved with these sorts of discussions, on these sorts of occasions, because they don't always pan out the way people want them to. But others go on and you're challenged to comment and before long you're in the thick of it and having to defend your mob every which way!

I initially announced that, in my view, it wasn't a good idea to continue the discussions unless we were able to identify someone within the group who was familiar with the legislation and more importantly experienced in the area. As courteously as I could I tried to convince people at the function to get back to the reason why we were here - to have some fun together.

Most agreed, except for a few people who insisted they should at least be able to vent their feelings about the subject and say how they felt about the possibility of Aboriginal people being given the right to take over their land and their homes. Well before long there were all sorts of outrageous claims being made - all negative, some derogatory and a few quite racist.

That night left me with the sense that, more than others, Aboriginal people have to be the ones to always carry the burden of responsibility about legislation relevant to our mob, and of having to always justify our mob's very existence.

Please stop continually asking us to justify our existence in our own country, and do more about stimulating opportunities to bring us together on a level playing field. I'm extremely confident we can quite successfully get on with our lives by simply being fair to one another!

A journey together into the future is a must and I'm confident it is possible – so let's do more about making it happen.

Marianne, 44, born in Hong Kong, Cranbowne VIC

'Banana Bound: Yellow on the outside, White on the inside'

My New Zealand family had adopted me at the age of two from Hong Kong. A few years later we packed up our belongings and came to live in Australia, settling in Melbourne where my father chose to start his medical practice.

I still remember how hot it was that first summer we arrived. My mother had taken me to the pool with a new friend I had made at school and she watched over us while we dipped our feet into the cool waters of the Carnegie pool. I remember a girl yelling at me from across the water: "Where is your Mum? What does she look like?" I tried to ignore her and just shrugged my shoulders as she persisted with her questioning. Then my mother who was sitting on a park bench behind me yelled out, "Her mother is sitting here!" I burned with embarrassment.

From the day I started school, all I ever wanted was a Mum who looked like me. I hated being different and standing out like the literal black sheep. I made friends easily in that first year of school in Melbourne but it came at a price. I was constantly reminded of my Chinese origins: "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at me". I got invited to lots of birthday parties but always made sure my older sister who had blonde hair knocked on the door to pick me up because it would look as if a friend was picking me up rather than my Mother who everyone assumed would look Chinese like me. I wouldn't have to face the barrage of questions and stares.

I still live in Melbourne and now have a teenage son. When he was eight he came home one day from school and casually asked me, "Mum, am I Chinese?" I told him that he had a Chinese mother, an Australian father and Australian citizenship. He seemed quite content about it. I figured someone at school had sized him up but not in the manner that I had experienced. I guess we've come a long way in that regard.

I'm extremely confident we can quite successfully get on with our lives by simply being fair to one another!

A journey together into the future is a must and I'm confident it is possible – so let's do more about making it happen.

Breaking Down Barriers

by Jason Yat-sen Li

Jason Yat – sen Li

Jason Yat-sen Li was born in Australia after his parents migrated to Australia from Hong Kong in 1959. Jason is an international lawyer, specialising in corporate social responsibility. He is currently Deputy Chairman of the Australian Republican Movement, a board member of the Sydney Institute and Governor of The Smith Family. Jason continues to be involved in a number of social and political campaigns advancing multiculturalism, anti-racism and cultural diversity.

"You don't look very Australian!"

Many years ago, when I was living in Holland, a Dutch guy in a pub asked me where I was from. I told him I was Australian. He looked at me again and, after some thought, said: "You know, you don't look very Australian. Are you sure you're not Japanese?"

I admire my parents and other immigrants a great deal. It takes some serious guts to pack up everything you have and move to a new foreign land, where you have no friends, no language, no contacts, no foundations. Most of us can't even leave jobs that we don't like, let alone uproot to another part of the world.

When my parents first migrated to Australia from Hong Kong, they faced different types of barriers. Australia was a less sophisticated society, far less connected globally, far less diverse and multicultural. My father came on a boat – four weeks in 4th class, crammed into a small cabin with 50 others from Hong Kong and a few coffins for good measure for those who did not make it. It was 1959. He was 18. Robert Menzies was Prime Minister and Australia was very British. People ate roast beef, gravy and Yorkshire pudding for dinner; fish always on Fridays. The White Australia Policy was in full swing. It wasn't that there were restaurants that had signs that said "No dogs and Asians allowed". This was Sydney after all – not the American Deep South. But still, he would wait at restaurants whilst groups arriving after him were shown tables ahead of him. But still, he would not get jobs for which he was more qualified than the successful candidate. But still, he was pushed over on George St and told to speak English.

Dad became an Australian citizen in 1972 and was given a Citizenship Card. Even though the card was controversial and abandoned soon after it was launched, he told me: "I carried it around in my wallet for years in case I was challenged so I would have something to show."

There were nights where Dad was woken by shouting and banging on the door of the room which he rented from a landlady who lived alone in Punchbowl. Her boyfriends would have been on the piss that night and were convinced that Dad was a Japanese spy and wanted to bash him. Unlike Bruce Lee, my Dad was no kung fu expert.

Dulwich Hill Public School, Multicultural Day Celebrations.

Some 16 years after Dad arrived in Australia, the *Racial Discrimination Act* ('the RDA') was passed and racial discrimination became unlawful. That was a very powerful public symbolic gesture. It reflected a society's changing aspirations and values. It was a great achievement in its day.

Today, Australia is a very different place from 30 years ago. We have become one of the world's success stories in terms of creating a harmonious, diverse population. But deep prejudices and tall barriers remain.

For the Australians who experience racism or prejudice, the RDA could do little, as most cases of prejudice are very personal, difficult to put your finger on, difficult to substantiate, deeply hurtful and most often suffered in silence. At the end of High School, I came first in NSW for 2 and 3 unit English. But that did not stop the man dining at the restaurant where I waited tables from stopping me as I asked if I "could take his plate", putting a hand on my arm and explaining condescendingly: "It's *may* I take your plate." Or the company executive who, at the law firm where I was working as a paralegal during university, from pulling my supervising partner aside and asking "Are you sure his English is ok?" Or the car full of young guys who yelled at me at a service station on the North Coast: "Go home. Get on your boat!". Or the talk-back callers who, after a televised Republic Referendum debate in which I was arguing for a move to a Republic, said on air: "You shouldn't listen to that Jason Yat-sen Li - he's not a real Australian".

A law can not change people's hearts, just as a law can not itself create a society of harmony, shared identity and shared purpose.

The barriers therefore are not so much about discrimination. The barriers are about belonging. About how difficult it is for people who are different to feel like they can belong. These are the barriers of not having the connections of shared history. The barriers of not having shared identity, shared schooling, shared relationships, shared culture. The barriers in our own minds. The lack of confidence. The absence of trust.

These are deeply personal barriers, but at the same time are barriers for our entire community. It is so important for a community to create a sense of belonging and identity for all of its citizens because if you don't feel like you belong to something, you are not likely to want to participate in it or be a part of its life and growth.

Breaking down barriers means continuing to build a truly inclusive definition of what it means to be Australian. One in which anyone can feel like they have a place. The RDA is a starting point, a necessary precondition. But we have so much more work to do.

Like building on our great Anzac stories and including other stories that speak of the contributions that Australians of all backgrounds have made to the creation of our nation. Stories such as the Eureka Stockade and the Snowy Mountains engineering project.

Like putting more Asian, Aboriginal and Muslim faces in our media, so that we might all see a better reflection of our true community and so that these faces are no longer just associated with takeaway food shops, petty crime and suicide bombers.

This is all part of the dynamic process of forming a modern Australian identity and culture. These are conversations in which there should be no barriers to all Australians lending their voices.

We live in a great nation – the best in the world. We need to work together always to keep it that way. And we, the second generation migrants, have a role in breaking down the barriers that still remain.

To show that you can be Australian and yet still have deep cultural roots in other places. To show that Australian identity is not a closed door, but an ongoing conversation. Rather than being "new Australians", I believe this is the new Australia and the true Australia, a nation where we are in fact united by the fact that we are all different and where this difference gives us strength, vibrancy, resilience and cultural depth.

To break down barriers, we can't just rely on laws. We need to rely on ourselves, our votes, our actions, our values and the very way we lead our own lives.

Dulwich Hill Public School, Multicultural Day Celebrations.

Breaking down barriers

Sylvia, Anglo Indian, Cronulla NSW

(supported by Fairfield High School (FHS). Submitted as part of a *Voices of Australia* writing workshop at the Intensive English Centre FHS)

'No Standing'

We had only arrived in Australia from India a few days and my father was in the city looking for a job. He'd been walking around for a while and felt like a cigarette. Stopping at the next corner, he was about to light a cigarette when he noticed the sign: 'No Standing'. He kept walking, looking for a place to stop, but was confronted by these signs every few metres. Pointing to the nearest sign, he asked a passer by, "Excuse me - is there somewhere I can stop for a smoke?" The man replied, "The signs are for the cars mate."

Deborah, Aboriginal, Smithfield QLD

It was the early 1960's when my parents married – my father a white police officer and my mother Aboriginal. It was at that time that my mother made a choice to disassociate herself from her mother, family and community. It would be many years later before I would learn why she did this. I could never understand why my mother was always secretive, why I could not meet my grandmother and extended family, and why I wasn't allowed to go play with the Aboriginal family down the road.

At 20 I learnt I was Aboriginal. At the moment I was told I remember feeling overwhelmed, but also very calm. I was also so excited that Aunty Ida (who Dad used to say "is only your babysitter, not your Aunty" before he eventually stopped us from seeing her) was my real Aunty, and had always loved me. I asked my mother to help me find my 'other family', but she threatened to take legal action if I asked anyone any questions. I asked Aunty Ida for help, and she gave me photos, told me about my grandmother and shared her stories with me.

It took me eight years to learn my grandmother's story and many more years to understand why my mother made the choices she did, in order to overcome the barriers she faced. I am proud of who I am, I went on to learn more about my culture and history and I became a teacher and counsellor. It took a long time to be accepted by the community to which my grandmother belonged. I turned up 'out of the blue' 20 years ago and still remember being physically removed from community meetings by my own relatives and being told I had no place to be there. I persisted, and with my Aunty arguing on my behalf, was eventually to become part of the community.

I am wiser now and can understand why I was excluded. However it makes me sad to think that due to no fault whatsoever of mine, I was denied my grandmother's love for so many years, and she was denied mine. Things have changed immensely since the 1960's. And I'm also sad for my mother, for whom it will always be the 60's.

Sylvia, Narrabeen, NSW

'From Impotence to Action'

Some time ago I heard Ian Chapell borrow the quote "Evil triumphs when good men do nothing". One of Australia's sporting icons was explaining what catapulted him from talk into action and to lend his support to help asylum seekers and refugees. That saying became a challenge that broke down a barrier for him. What an encouraging moment! It's times like this that keep me positive.

2001 was one of the lowest moments in Australia's refugee history. A ship in distress was turned away from our shores and had to be rescued by a Norwegian vessel. It was a time when political leaders claimed those who 'throw children overboard' would not be welcome in Australia. But it was also a time when many Australians who knew little about refugees and asylum seekers came to understand the plight of those who risked their life to seek protection in this country.

In the months following, there was a sharp increase in the numbers and the variety of volunteers who offered to assist at the Asylum Seekers Centre in Sydney. They were men and women of all ages, often professionals. They would take extended lunch hours to help out, they worked on weekends, they offered accounting skills, legal assistance, they cooked meals and showed hospitality, they provided accommodation, holidays in the country. In short, they found a way to demonstrate welcome and kindness to those who reached our shores. They were people no longer prepared to be "good men who do nothing".

Was it those tragic events in 2001 that broke down the barriers? Was it this new breed of volunteers who broke the barriers? A difficult one to measure. What I do know is that the groundswell of goodness and generosity, of what we label 'social capital' provided enormous support and encouragement to those of us who worked at the Asylum Seekers Centre.

Annabel, 47, Latino American, Langwarrin VIC

'Who am I?'

I am a woman, 47 years old, born in Uruguay, South America. I arrived in Australia in 1978, at the age of 20 with my parents and my brother. I have experienced many barriers since that time.

The language barriers - not being able to express ideas and feelings as well as I wanted or having others misunderstanding what I say; being spoken to louder when my problem was with understanding the word, not the volume. And the assumption that I was not educated because I didn't speak English "properly".

The cultural barriers - being perceived as "cheeky", "hussy", "hot blooded" because I have always shown my feelings and enjoyed my sense of humour; being thought of as "very serious" because I hardly drink and because I like to be informed about local and world news.

I overcame these barriers by remaining proud of my origins. By educating people about my culture and a world outside Australia. By explaining that migrants are here because Australia has needed them and not "as a favour" or "to take over our jobs". By making people aware that everybody has an accent; we simply don't "hear" our own.

Things have changed. People that know me now, have respect and admiration for my knowledge, for who I am and for my courage – they've come to understand the sacrifice that comes with leaving your country. People laugh with me now. However, I am still perceived as "different".

"Me in the middle with friends in Port Augusta"

Rev Sue, 55, Anglo-Australian, West Lakes Shore SA

As part of the Reconciliation movement in the early 90's, I agreed to be part of an "About Face - Port Augusta" weekend. This involved being hosted by an Indigenous family at Port Augusta for a weekend and taking part in cultural activities to help bridge gaps of understanding.

I was pretty nervous about what I had let myself in for, but I fronted up anyway. I believed the weekend would help me grow and I knew that it was time non-Indigenous people starting making moves towards indigenous people.

I was billeted with an Indigenous woman, Mary*, near my own age. When she told us her story, I knew we were together for a reason.

She had grown up and gone to school at Point Pearce Mission on Yorke Peninsula. I had grown up and gone to school at Maitland on Yorke Peninsula. We grew up only 20 miles apart, yet our lives were as different as chalk and cheese. My life was based on a farm and we would only ever go to the mission when we played football against their team – even then we were warned to never go into the mission housing area.

When I was in Year 6, the school at Point Pearce Mission was closed down, as part of the assimilation policies of the day. I had been part of a welcoming group of students when those children arrived at our school. Mary had left Point Pearce by that time, but some of the names I could remember were familiar to her. Those children had to make major adjustments to their new larger school, and they were shy and overwhelmed. Plus there was only one cultural exchange - the Aboriginal children were there to learn white culture!

Mary and I spent some time reflecting on all the differences in our lives growing up. Housing, food, family life, freedom and culture were worlds apart. I didn't even know that the people at Point Pearce were Narranga people. Yet here we were - nearly 35 years later - with roles reversed. I was unsure, shy and out of my cultural depth and Mary was the host - and a gracious and giving host at that!

This experience gave me a fresh perspective on the assimilation policies of the 1950's and 60's. It also deepened my commitment to reconciliation. Mary was willing to be vulnerable, by opening her home and her life to complete strangers for the sake of reconciliation. If it wasn't for the Mary's of this world, reconciliation would be even further away.

(*Mary - not her real name.)

Jen, 47, American, Hazelbrook NSW

I immigrated to Australia in 1987 and, after a variety of careers, now work in adult education teaching creative writing. My classes usually involve beginners, many of whom are nervous or unsure of their abilities.

To put the class at ease I normally begin by telling the students a little bit about myself. I try to be self-deprecating and joke about myself. I know that some of the students will have sturdily-defined ideas of what Americans are like, and taking the micky out of one's self helps.

By lesson three or four we are on to characterisation in writing. This is where the good stuff comes in - I get to talk to them about stereotypes. I tell them stereotypes are gross generalisations. When attributed to 'characters' in fiction they become cardboard cut-outs rather than 'people'. They lack depth, are two-dimensional and make for a boring read. I tell them that using stereotypes in their work is just being lazy. Then I get them to name all the stereotypes they can think of: dumb blondes, recalcitrant youth, dole bludgers. I also ask for experiences in their lives when they may have been stereotyped, and how it made them feel. Nearly everyone has an example.

Then I put races, religions and nationalities on the board, starting with mine. "Name all the words you can think of to describe Americans", I ask, and am inundated with answers. 'Arrogant. 'Insular'. 'Stupid'. 'War-monging'. 'Big hair'. 'Lacking irony'. 'Racist'. 'Fat'. I egg them on. "C'mon", I say. "Is that all you've got?" They come up with more. It's easy, because so many of these terms are used in the media, in general conversations, in what they see, read or hear.

But it's also hard because they have me standing in front of them, and they tell me they don't want to offend me. I have worked with these students for over a month. We've developed a mutual respect. We have a laugh. We've created a bond. They are starting to know the individual me, who is inseparable from her heritage, who is both a Yank and an Aussie. I ask how many of the words on the board are stereotypes - and I'm thankful when they all smile and tell me every last one.

Now when they write their stories they 'watch out' for any stereotypes they might inadvertently include. I wish the same could be said about the stories on television, radio and in the dailies.

Marilyn, 55, Karratha WA

'Lesson in equality and sharing'

With many children, my parents were always struggling financially, but they still had a free meal for the swaggie, the itinerant worker and the travelling show folk. As a child I never thought to even wonder how these people knew that Stan and Hazel would always help out. We didn't even have a real house, living in the back of the building my parents rented as a shop.

When I was nine, my parents bought a new refrigerator on hire purchase. Our fist ever. Our mother made ice cream and jelly. A real treat in the Central Queensland summer. We kids waited eagerly for the first batch to be ready. Then my parents called us all in. Whenever this occurred it was usually because we were in trouble. So, with trepidation, we gathered in the "kitchen".

My father told us about a family who were camping down at the show grounds, about a mile out of Biloela. Mum had made up a parcel of food and Dad was going to take it to them. He asked us if we wanted to share our ice cream and jelly with the children. Of course we didn't. Not the very first ice cream and jelly! But we couldn't say this. "Of course", we all said.

Our father took us with him so we could give the children some of our dessert. When we arrived, a woman was sitting under a hessian bag that had been cut open and tied to a tree. Their only shelter. A baby on her lap. Many young children running around. A man came over to our car. He looked scared.

When my father gave him the large box of food, he tried to hide his tears then called his children over. They were as shy as we were. When we gave them the pudding and spoons, they looked bewildered, so my father used sign language, pretending to eat the ice cream then rubbing his stomach and letting out a long "Ummm". Then their father spoke to them in their own Aboriginal language.

The joy on their faces as they ate it was beautiful. The lesson in equality that my parents taught us was powerful, and has stayed with me all my life.

Carol, 46, Guugu Yimithirr (Aboriginal), Cairns QLD

'The quiet achiever'

How to begin a story that's been around for many years? The damage and the pain that people carry throughout their lives, hoping for a small change.

I am talking about the Indigenous race that lives on a community, or on the outskirts of town, just because of the colour of their skin.

The challenges and pains can't be understood or categorised by the white man. The wrong impression of the Aboriginal person is already set, the judgment is made.

"The aboriginal inhabitants are treated exactly in the same way as the wild beast or birds the settlers may find there… Their gods are taken, their children forcibly stolen, their women carried away, entirely at the caprice of the white men."

Are we white people or are we black? For me the challenge was my identity.

I lived an empty life because of the battles within for identity. How do we change the stinking thinking that has been driven into our heads and hearts over many years? That you can't speak the language, you can't talk back, you can't live like that, and you can't say you are Aboriginal.

I got myself to a stronger place in my life, but it was not an easy walk. I kept the teaching from my grandfather. He told me over and over that although they took our language, and our culture and our living and hunting off the land, they can't take our spirituality.

I know what I've been through and I know what the assimilation law has done to my family.

Live as a people who have complete freedom, strong in identity - be proud of who you are. When we understand what has happened we start to heal.

Submitted as part of a Voices of Australia writing workshop by students (ages 12-17 yrs – all Indigenous background) at the Don Dale Education Unit, Don Dale Juvenile Detention Centre, Darwin NT

Don Dale Boys Hip Hop

In and out, in and out always stuck in Don Dale
Always been in Darwin, never seen my land
Have to see the world and stop wasting my time
Always in here for doing the crime.

We have to get back to that great big school
We need to get ourselves some qualifications and edification
We have to get out and get ourselves a job and
Get on with our lives in the big wide world.

Wanna put my effort into my community
Cleaning up the place instead of sitting under trees
Me and my mates working for some monies
So we can travel our big land and go overseas.

Represent our country
Live and die in NT
Represent our homeland
From the tableland to the sea
We have been here from the start
This land is in our heart.

45,000 years
We been full of fears
Now its time to hear our voice
We are the youth
And we are bullet proof.

It aint about black and white
It's just about doin' right.

Morag, 55, Scottish, Parramatta North NSW

'Making a Difference'

I arrived in beautiful Sydney as a migrant from Scotland in 1958. I was ten then and my world seemed to have tilted - it was challenging, exciting, and fraught with problems because of my thick Scottish accent. That is when I began a lifelong passion to help other migrants and advocate for their acceptance into Australian society.

My first efforts at English language instruction caused the school principal to say, "We have children from Greece, Malta, and Italy speaking English with a strong Scottish accent." She said this in a disparaging this-will-not-do manner. Devastated but not defeated; I practiced the Australian accent until I had just a dusting of the Scots brogue and I returned to my teaching within a few weeks.

I have taught English for speakers of other languages for the past six years as a home tutor. Last year I started teaching English to Liban, a 17 year old asylum seeker from Somalia. Liban has touched my heart and when he called yesterday to say that he has a job and is about to start a TAFE course I was ecstatic. He arrived here alone two years ago with no formal schooling, just a dogged determination to learn English and make a positive contribution to Australia.

My other learner is a lady from Japan named Keiko. We became friends after she arrived in Sydney last year. While she learns the finer points of English, we've also explored Sydney together and travelled to Maclean in northern NSW together, which was a delightful experience for both of us.

I find such pleasure in my teaching others, and find myself learning so much. My students have taught me that the world is here for all people to enjoy; and that we should respect each other and help where we can.

Lyn, 47 years young, Oztralian Aboriginal, Parkes NSW

'The Love of My Life – Black and White As One'

"Jeffrey & Me preggo's with Noni" - 1981

I was living on Sydney's North Shore in 1977, aged 18 and cashed up with my first pay. I bought hot chips and a bottle of wine and went to the house where my girlfriend Shawn, was renting a room. It was there I met her housemate Jeffrey, and it was love at first sight for both of us. He had the deadliest eyes - I just got lost in them.

I later found out he was a police constable. Being a dark-skinned Oztralian Aboriginal and him in his uniform, when I would walk him to work we stuck out like 'dogs balls'. People in cars and on the street would stare at us. Some of his fellow officers and bosses gave him hell for being with me. They even did a background check on me and my family.

He was told that when we were in public and he was in uniform we were not to hold hands or kiss. After months of harassment he put in his resignation. They tore it up and told him to wake up to himself – "I wasn't worth it". One of his older brother's came around and he and Jeffrey almost came to blows about it all. His brother's last words were – "It won't last!" That was 28 years ago, and I can honestly say we are more in love today than we were back then.

Even though he was white and a cop, my family welcomed him with open arms. The best thing we ever did was leave the city and head out this way.

Mary, 63, Aboriginal Nyoongah, Erina NSW

'Nobody's Child'

Australia is the land of my Nyoongah people from the south-west of Western Australia, although I am currently living on the land of the Darkunjung people on the Central Coast of New South Wales.

Being an Aboriginal person, Australia will always be my home. My people proudly walked this land before colonisation. But Australia caused terrible heartache to many Aboriginal families when they decided to forcibly remove children.

My friends are from a childhood institution. We have known each other for near on 60 years, having been raised in an orphanage known as Sister Kate's Children's Home. I am a product of what is known as the 'Stolen Generation'. As Aboriginal people we have learned the value of our friendships.

Racism was all around me when growing up. In the orphanage we were known as white children but when we attended the state school next door, we were "niggers".

There are barriers that have been with me for a life time. I was denied my Aboriginality and denied meeting my mother for 47 years. Having lived under a "white" environment and disowning my own heritage. I still struggle today to acknowledge her as my mother. I am not too sure when this barrier will drop.

As Aboriginal people we live in two worlds on a daily basis. It's hard, as I need to feel peace in my own heart. "I ask you, how hard is it for anybody to accept their own mother?" This is the question that I often ask myself: "Why am I having such a terrible struggle to come to terms with the woman who gave birth to me?"

Paula, 24, Polish, Potts Point NSW

One of the Other 'Them'

'Somewhere in western Queensland' - 2004

We arrived in Australia the day before my eighth birthday; a new year, a new start. Maybe I already thought that at the time, maybe the sentimental realisation came only later. In any case, I was happy.

I don't recall ever having even the slightest problem fitting in: in my very multicultural primary school you were more of an insider being from a Non-English Speaking Background than the Anglo kids. Only occasionally when there'd be talk among my peers of childhood games, television programs or traditions I had obviously missed out on did I feel anything even remotely like an interloper.

It wasn't until I went back to the country of my birth for the first time when I was 16 that I experienced anything close to a racial consciousness. Everyone there looked so…so…white! (Or, more specifically, an unsmiling, sour grey). It was quite unsettling; disconcerting. I was definitely out of my comfort zone. Much like, I suspect, those coming from such pervasive whiteness might feel upon entering the dazzling cultural colour that is Australia. I found myself, unknowingly at first, attempting to make awkward surreptitious signs at the occasional foreign face, to strike a bond. A bond, I soon realised, I had no right to make, and was doomed to fail in making; I was clearly not one of them – I was one of the other them.

And yet, I've never been quite that either. In subsequent visits, as I grew into an adult and my eyes widened to the world, I began to move within my ancestral society with a kind of quiet paranoia an undercover detective might feel having learned their role inside out but still knowing that at any time their cover might be blown by a subtle slip no amount of study could have prevented. Thus I'd speak the language almost flawlessly, and still have to ask seemingly silly questions about the contents of traditional foods; I'd be able to converse freely and knowledgeable on global topics, but not relate to kids my own age and their jargon; I'd understand the words but failed to grasp the significance behind certain news stories, cultural events or social mores. Most staggeringly, I could not for the life of me comprehend how apparently well educated, well travelled people, people in my extended family who I respected and looked up to, could hold the – in my view – ignorant, racist views they apparently did.

There I say I am Australian; here I say I come from there.

I think it's a common and not so self-conflicting identity many young migrants, straddling multiple ethnicities, share.

Steve, 55, Anglo-Australian (6th generation from pioneer families), Isaacs ACT

and

Samira, 40, Australian Yemeni, Isaacs ACT

'War brought us together: Steve and Samira'

Steve

War brought us together. I was sent to Yemen by Care Australia in 1994 during the civil war, having just finished a posting in Iraq. We came into Aden, my colleagues and I, behind the advancing invading troops and that's how I met Samira. She was the only CARE Australia worker in the office – a local Yemeni woman working under a lot of pressure to keep the office going. Once things began to improve, and we got back to normal operations, I stayed on to work there. I was impressed with her industry, her intelligence, her charm – and she was, of course, also very attractive.

I was very mindful of the fact that I couldn't court Samira - not at all. So Samira and I were simply good friends. I was very lucky to be invited to Samira's house by her father. I think he was a bit curious about who this Steve fellow was. So Samira and I maintained a strong but platonic friendship and that's how it had to be. When I left the country I maintained communication with Samira over a couple of years and we kind of decided by distant telegraphic transfers that we might get married.

Because of the differences between our cultures there have been some rough moments. Anglo-Saxons tend to be cooler, we're not as warm. Arabs develop very close, warm relations. So she's taught me the importance of warmth. I'm not saying that I've become a gorgeously warm person yet, but it's something that I recognise which is important. She's taught me that Arabic society is very close-knit and the strength of family and community links. And I see it when our Arab friends come here – there's that warmth and that bond and rather a lot of yelling and screaming that drives me nuts, which is the intolerant part of me. I'm still getting used to all the hubbub that goes in at those occasions. At the same time, while I might get a bit cranky about that, I also see there's a wonderful warmth there that we would do well to foster more of here in Australia.

I'm not a terribly religious person but Samira has taught me the significance of religion as a guiding influence for life. She's taught me that, while we can have a hell of a lot of fun in society, religious values are important. They help counter the commercialism and individualism that has begun to erode the ties that bind our families and communities. She's also been quite wonderful at choosing a school for our daughter, which is a major decision that every family makes. Samira is very keen for our daughter, who she wants to raise as a Muslim, to go to the local Church of England school. She's judged that it's a school which infuses the values of the common God of the three major religions of the book. Knowing that we've got strong connections with other Muslim families here in Canberra, I am very happy that our daughter gets a really healthy mix of both streams of Australian life.

Samira

While the civil war was raging, I was travelling to the Care Australia office all the time, keeping an eye on the place, as well as doing the shopping for my family. At the time my father had all the boys in his house, hiding, and the girls were off going to work, earning, doing all the shopping. My father is a very conservative person who believed that women could only play a limited role, so my experience with Care Australia at this time really increased my confidence, that yes, women could really do something.

My first impression of Steve was that he was just so easy-going. He was the very first expat I met and he was so easy-going. I was actually laughing my head off looking at him when we met – he's got

this Akubra hat on him, he's wearing shorts, it was really funny. I soon found out that Steve's got this personality which is very accepting of people. He's very trusting, very accommodating, very approachable – you don't feel that there's a barrier between you and him. He was very popular with everybody in the office and he was also extremely funny. So that's where our friendship started.

It's not common for a Yemeni woman to marry a westerner, or even an Arab from a different country. But Steve had the opportunity to meet with my family. They saw the good in him as a person and they accepted him. So it wasn't an immediate decision for us to marry, it took a long time, but my family are totally convinced now that he was the right person for me and I also was the right person for him.

What have I learnt from Steve? To be easy, to be yourself, not to worry. For example when we go out, you didn't have to dress to kill, you know it's easy, just a pair of jeans will do. I think I've become more relaxed over time and that's Steve's influence on me. He's also taught me to think logically, rationally, objectively. And that it's important to be frank and transparent.

The things he says are so funny and he has such a dry sense of humour. He makes me really laugh, even when I have tears in my eyes he can say something that makes me laugh. I think Australians are really funny – they like a good laugh just like the Arabs do. It's something I think we have in common with each other – they love a good laugh and to have a good chat.

We had a really difficult time when Steve was held in captivity in Yugoslavia. But the Australian government looked after us, and the Australian people looked after us. Before even coming to Australia I received letters from people I didn't know saying that they are thinking of me and praying for me. It was very touching and very humbling. In a sense, it makes me feel like I'm responsible as well – what can I give in return to these people, to Australia? I had an overwhelming feeling of being accepted and welcomed, even before I physically arrived in the place. And then the continuous support of the Australian people; so it felt very quickly like my home.

YEMEN

Rebecca, 22, Anglo-Australian, Epping NSW

'Chocolate Milk'

My story begins in my earliest years, before I can recall even a memory. Sleeping alongside my chocolate coloured cousin, after a meal of what my aunty called her special chocolate flavoured breast milk. My family is not unique within Australia's diverse multicultural society. However I believe it is the reason why I share an affinity with a wide range of cultures despite my own Anglo background.

My direct heritage can be traced back to Ireland, Scotland and Wales, a typical feature of many 'white' Australians. However, my extended family includes French, Aboriginal and Chinese/Filipino. We grew up close to most of our cousins, with whom our childhood was shared. I don't ever remember thinking my cousins were different, despite their darker skin or strange accent. To me, they were my family and we all came from the same place.

I remember my mother telling a story about my brother once. He was just a boy, with white blonde hair and a dusting of freckles covering his pale skin. He sat side by side our cousin, whose Aboriginality could not be mistaken with her black skin and flat nose. A news story came over the television about an English couple, who had just given birth to a black child due to the unusual phenomenon of genes skipping a number of generations. To my mother's dismay, my brother, oblivious to the colour of the arm that lay against his own, relayed his horror at the thought of having a black child. His beloved cousin didn't flinch.

The innocence of his remark, considering the context in which it was made, reflects a social conditioning rather than any inherent belief that the colour of anyone's skin actually matters. Funnily enough, he is now engaged to a Thai woman with a dark complexion.

Experience with, and exposure to, other ways of thinking and being is essential to the acceptance of difference. A fear of difference is ultimately a fear of knowledge, because knowing what is different challenges our own beliefs and forces us to learn. Yet growing up surrounded by difference feeds a desire for knowledge - and ignorance becomes that which is feared.

'In my cafe'

Yenenesh, Ethiopian, West Hindmarsh SA

I come from Ethiopia, but was a refugee in Kenya for 14 years. When I arrived in Australia at the beginning of 1993, learning English was very hard. I was not an educated person in my country, so it was especially hard for me. There are lots of barriers if you can't speak English. If a woman goes to the doctor for example she must use an interpreter and in some of our cultures we are embarrassed to explain personal things to an interpreter. That's why education is important to help people.

Opening my café was really a miracle for me. I didn't have any capital, but God and my children helped me. My sons bought me tables and chairs and one paid for the bond. They told me "Mum, your capital will be the spices in your food, not cash." Now, I have a lot of Ethiopian customers, but I have Australian customers too. Different people come all the time. Most of the people really enjoy our traditional coffee and our chicken and they seem happy that different cultures are coming to start up businesses in Australia. Everyone is very appreciative and always encouraging us. I like feeding people, because in my background we are a big family and we always have gatherings. I don't concentrate on the money and I don't think about profit. But I'm happy to see Ethiopians have a place to come and to bring their kids.

I received the Irene Krastev Award this year for my volunteer work with newly arrived refugee women. They gave me the award for helping people but I don't do the work for an award. I promised God that when I spoke English well enough to understand and to help people, then I will make sure I help people for the rest of my life, because I don't want people suffering the way I was suffering before I could understand English.

Arama, 30, New Zealand / Maori, Titjikala, Alice Springs, NT

'I just love living here!'

Titjikala is a remote desert Aboriginal community about 120kms south of Alice Springs and this is my seventh year in the community and eight years teaching out bush. I am originally from New Zealand and am now a teacher and the Principal of the Titjikala Community School.

Being a teacher in the Titjikala community, a barrier for me has been language. The kids here speak two or three languages before they speak English and that has been something that I've had to really learn to overcome if I'm going to be a good teacher and also build relationships. But it's a good barrier because it's helped me look at things from a different perspective. There's so much more out there than English and the western way of doing things.

Being from a bilingual background and a bicultural background in New Zealand, it has really helped me to get to know people and build and form relationships. I incorporate things like language learning for non-Aboriginal people like myself, so that it shows some respect for another culture that we're in, and it definitely helps out when we're dealing with little kids that don't speak any English in the school.

I like to think of activities for myself and even my partner to do out here that make an effort because it's easy not to make any effort when you are a teacher and you get caught up with all the daily chores and things like that. So the first thing that I did when I got to the community was take about 30 photos of my family and things that I like to do, to all the different women in the community. We sat down and had a cup of tea and I started to let them see a little piece of me and where I'm from and what I like to do. That was one of the first relationship building activities that I did.

There are a few pivotal people in the community that have supported me, mainly the women in the community. They've helped me step out of the city life and into a new setting. There have been different things that the ladies have done for me, taken me out for bush tucker and painting and arts and crafts and different sorts of things to the point where I've been invited to ceremonies where the women have sat me down and talked to me about the different things that happen. That's been a real privilege.

Overall, it is Aboriginal people that have brought me here and are the reason why I stay. Their friendliness and their acceptance of me, especially being from a whole other country is the thing that keeps me going in this isolated setting.

To me the Aboriginal race is one of the most interesting races in the world and the oldest race in the world and I just love living here. It teaches you different things and how to be different. There are so many cultures and so many languages and we're so privileged to live in a country that has all these different things all at the same time. If you want to learn a little bit about Aboriginal culture, it's a good idea to come and see how people live in these little communities.

From tolerance to respect

by Randa Abdel-Fettah

Randa Abdel-Fattah

Randa Abdel-Fattah was born in Australia in 1979 of Palestinian and Egyptian parents. She currently works as a lawyer in Sydney. She is also working on a second novel following the success of her recently published book '*Does my head look big in this?*', about the life of an Aussie Muslim girl and her decision to wear a hijab - or head scarf.

'You put up with head aches, not human beings!'

The desire to be accepted as an equal – and not be 'put up with' as a burden in the name of tolerance – is a strong under-current to the collection of stories that follow.

The language of multiculturalism and race relations can sometimes miss the point. Prominent journalists can write about their having 'no problem' with the hijab, the head-scarf worn by Muslim women. Politicians can call for Australians to 'tolerate' people's ethnic backgrounds; to allow for people's cultural differences.

As well-meaning as these appeals may be, the language of tolerance versus respect can unfortunately be steeped in its own prejudices. We must be aware of the value judgments and stereotypes embraced by those who presume a so-called right to tolerate.

As a Muslim, and the child of a Palestinian father and Egyptian mother, I have always felt rather indignant at the prospect of being tolerated by my fellow Australians. This is because I have always felt that to be tolerated was to be treated as a deviation from the Australian norm (whatever that may be); an externalised object to be endured and suffered.

Was I to breathe a sigh of relief that my fellow Australians were putting up with me and my cultural and religious traditions? Did this mean that I was not an equal? That, in fact, I was to be treated as a mere candidate constantly having to apply for an equal status with other Australians; having to prove myself, submit my resume, in order to secure the goodwill and forbearance of other Australians?

When viewed from this point of view, one can appreciate that there is something quite patronising about being tolerated. When a person sets out to measure the worthiness of another on the basis of the other's colour, race or ethnicity, there is an inevitable shift of power. A judge and the judged. Embedded in the process of determining whether another should be tolerated is a mini-exercise in which the judge – ready to dole out their self-righteous assent of approval or disapproval – is essentially assessing whether the other person is truly Australian. Or deserving of being called Australian because they happen to speak Italian or are dark-skinned or wear a sari.

A reliance on stereotypes to size up the other is unavoidable. The initial reference point is always a generalised and accepted stereotype, not the person's humanity. The familiar crude characterisations meted out in media headlines and news broadcasts: all Muslims are terrorists; all Indigenous people are

drunks; all black people deal drugs and so forth. Whether a Muslim or Indigenous person or black person is to be tolerated depends on whether they deviate from the stereotype.

We Australians are obsessed with defining each other. Of handing out tickets into the club of 'true blue Aussies'. When we tolerate, we position ourselves to either include or exclude. We conceive a definition of 'Australian' and we filter people in according to whether we accept that they fall within the parameters of our vision of Australian identity. The exercise is not necessarily racked with sinister intentions. It can be a subtle thought process – but therein lies the danger.

The *Racial Discrimination Act* is an attempt to counter act the assumptions that underlie this definition game. It is an attempt to erode the assumption that being Australian is somehow incompatible with a hybrid ethnic or racial identity.

We should not be interested in tolerating a man of Samoan background. We should not be interested in tolerating the cultural traditions of an Indigenous Australian. We should not be interested in tolerating somebody whose first language is not English. We should not be interested in tolerating human beings.

Nobody has the right to define another. We are all, each one of us, entitled to live free from judgment or labels.

However, there is one definition which we have the right, in fact the duty to apply, randomly, tenaciously, without restraint. If we learn to define ourselves and each other first as human beings, then our various traditions and ethnicities become our personal adjectives. They give shape and meaning and idiosyncratic detail to our core identity as human beings.

Australians may differ enormously or subtly in their individual belief systems, ethnic roots and cultural practices. Yet when we engage with one another, we should see each other first as human beings; recognising how we are the same, embracing our differences as rights, not offences.

In doing so we make a monumental shift from tolerance to respect. The *Racial Discrimination Act* states that its aim is to ensure that everyone enjoys human rights and fundamental freedoms in full equality, regardless of race, colour, descent, national origin, ethnic origin or, in some cases, immigrant status.

To remain true to the spirit and intent of the Act, the power imbalance of tolerance must be discarded in favour of the 'equality' which respect provides. It means dealing with one another on equal terms. In this way, one's ability to contribute as an equal citizen becomes a non-negotiable right.

In this collection are moving stories in which people show, in the little things and the big things, that important shift in attitudes from tolerance to respect. They share stories in which people's stereotypes and misconceptions no longer become the dictionary which they rely upon to define others. Instead, people have learned to look to the person's qualities and contributions and engage with them on an equal platform. They tell stories in which people have learned to earn respect, not put up with approval – and herein lies the true spirit of human rights.

From tolerance to respect

Ala, 38, Jordanian / Greek, Melbourne VIC

'Judging a book by its cover'

Migrating with my family in 2001 to Australia is the best decision we've made. This glorious country and its lifestyle, respect for human rights and the comradeship of people in good times and bad allow us to live every day to the full.

When my daughter started at primary school, the other parents welcomed us and were hungry for information about where we came from. They came across as friendly, warm, educated and willing to listen before they judge; that enabled us to integrate into our new community with ease.

Sensitivity to our religion was an undercurrent issue, but not in a negative way. For example, if there were BBQ's that we were invited to our host would plan so there was no pork on the menu. Or people might ask, "Do you mind if we have a beer?" As new immigrants, however, we believe in blending in with our new home rather than changing it to suit us.

The events of 9/11 had a huge impact worldwide. After those events I must admit that I felt that, with my Middle Eastern features, I was looked at in a different way. But armed with my new Australian attitude, I embarked on an educational journey, speaking out, explaining the difference between the normal 'everyday' Arab and the fanatic Arab and so on. The results were phenomenal; people began to ask questions, understand, and not blame a nation or a religion because of the actions of a very small minority.

They were hard days, but with time passing and in-depth information becoming available, tolerance changed to respect. The difference between the two is unbelievable. Tolerance is to be merely accepted, to be 'there' occupying space and just part of the scenery. However, to be respected means that you are taken in as a unique individual, a human being in your own right and part of a community.

Lyn, Lutana TAS

You wonder why people treat you the way they do. When I first came to Australia, people used to point at me in the streets, speak to me in sign language, or speak to me very loudly. I could not understand why this was so. Where I had grown up we never treated foreigners this way.

I can remember working in a school situation when the teacher in charge of languages asked me what my mother tongue was and I said "I don't have one" and he could not understand that. He said "There must be a language you dream in or the language you think in". He could not understand the fact that I had been brought up tri-lingual.

I used to get very upset with these sorts of questions. There were times I wish I could disappear. I would wonder why people stare at me and point at me while they walk down the streets or across counters? Now I use it as an opportunity for me to educate or raise awareness about other cultures. The broader community is still rather ignorant on how to deal with people of difference.

About 20 years after I arrived in Australia from Burma I got very close to the people I worked with and my boss at the time told me she and a friend would be going to my country of origin. At this stage I had not been able to go back because it would have endangered the relatives I still had living there. So I put her in touch with my relatives and in our conversation prior to her leaving for Burma I detected the slight disbelief of how I grew up and the privileges that I had in growing up. Nevertheless, she went to visit my relatives and came back with a totally changed attitude because she saw how they were living. She realised what I was telling her was not really fanciful stories but the truth.

Mia, 13, Kimba SA

(supported by Kimba Area School)

'Respected By Some, Tolerated by Many'

If you take the time to look up the word 'tolerate' in the dictionary, you'll find that it says "to put up with" or "to endure". And then in brackets it might refer to a drug or a poison.

People aren't drugs. People aren't a poison. We are all human beings, deserving of respect.

Denis, 20, Sudanese, Fairfield NSW

'You are what you are'

You are what you are.
Open your little big heart
So I can see who you are
And stop pretending what you are not.

You are what you are and brother
You sure have got a lot you know
To share with people
Who have not got what you got.

Oh no they have not got what you got
And brother that is a lot of love you got.

Jason, 15, Aboriginal / Lebanese, Waterloo NSW

(supported by Alexandria Park Community School)

I am a student at Alexandria Park Community School. Racism was a big issue in our school until people started to realise that it's not people's fault what race they are - it's not like they can choose what they want to be. If I could choose differently, I wouldn't change nothing.

Bashi, 32, Malaysian Indian, Gladesville NSW

I left Malaysia and came to Australia with my family in August 1986. I was almost 15 and experiencing all the intense, confusing feelings that overwhelm any teenage girl at that age - let alone one made to move to a new country.

My parents were anxious to put me in a good school with no distractions - like boys. So, on a rainy Monday morning, my mother and I went with freezing fingers and feet to Willoughby Girls High School. I was introduced to a short, sturdy PE teacher who took immediate charge. The teacher cast a cursory glance over me and then steered me, without speaking, to a small classroom, where I was introduced to a group of six girls and an English teacher who spoke to me slowly and with some precision.

"Hel-lo! Wel-come to our coun-try", said the English teacher rather loudly. "And wel-come to our ve-ry spec-ial c-lass". She swept her hand across the little room. Two girls were sitting on the tables swinging their legs, two were kicking a little gas heater and the other two were doodling love hearts on a piece of paper together.

The PE teacher left and I stayed. The English teacher resumed the lesson, but the girls barely paid attention. Two of them clearly had learning difficulties, and the rest could barely speak any English. After some time, it dawned on me that I had been put in the 'ESL' or 'English as a Second Language' class by my teachers. I was also a year older than this Year 8 ESL class.

If anyone had taken the time to talk with me, I could have told them that I not only spoke fluent English as a first language but had studied grammar with the British English Institute for 6 years. No one did, so I kept it to myself.

I put my summary demotion down to ignorance, my appearance and my accent, and decided to wear it. Besides, this small group of girls were quite unruly and, coming from my strict family background, I thought they were daring and a whole lot of fun.

Two months later, we had our final exams for the year. My English teacher patted me on the head and told me not to worry. "Just...tr-y...your best", she smiled. That is exactly what I did.

I topped the year in English and Mathematics, much to everyone's amazement. Once the results were published, I was marched into the English 1 classroom. There was an immediate hush as I walked into the classroom. I was trembling, uncertain and wanting to return to my ESL class. But as I walked towards the front of the room, the students and my teachers began to applaud. I was not introduced as the "little Asian girl from ESL", but was asked to introduce myself. I was also invited to read, out loud, the creative writing piece that had won me the accolade of "most proficient in English Language".

I stayed at Willoughby Girls High School until graduation, and can proudly say today that I owe much of my law degree to the grounding I received at that school. I will never forget my first year in Australia.

Nick, Greek Egyptian, Brisbane QLD

In the 80's I used the words 'tolerate' and 'tolerance'. But today I say "Mate I don't want anybody to tolerate me and do me a favour. I'm a human being". It's about respect, but it's also about understanding – so I have to understand that you are different, your politics might be different to mine, your colour might be different, you might be of a different gender. But, it's also about understanding that 98% of all human beings get up in the morning, they watch the TV, they go to the toilet, they have breakfast. They do the same things. Maybe the colour of their eyes is different or they have a different religion or skin colour, but we are all human beings.

I want to know about the blackfellas; I want to know about the women; I want to know about the youth. I don't have to agree with you, but we can move forward together, see each others ideas and how we can better build on them. Even if we don't agree today, by talking, I guarantee that in two or three year's time we'll come to a common ground.

Friyana, 14, Boxhill South VIC

Of Indian origin, I migrated to Australia in January 2002 when I was 10 years old. I entered primary school in Grade 6 and assumed all would be smooth sailing. What a shock! We came from a different culture where school kids in primary school were relatively 'protected' from the ugly realities of life. In school here, it was a brutal jungle of survival of the fittest – and for me it was sink or swim!

"Why did I speak different?" "Why did I look different?" "Why did I volunteer for all activities?" "Why did I know all the answers?" They were some of the crude questions flung at me, and I had to learn to cope straight away. The school bullies called me 'refugee', in spite of the fact that we had entered Australia as migrants.

These experiences made me develop survival skills and I promised myself I would meet these challenges head on. I refused to let any unpleasantness come in the way of my studies and extra curricular activities and went on to achieve success. In the process, I made friends and prepared myself for high school.

When I look back, I can almost smile through the tears. In spite of sounding different, I entered public speaking competitions and went on to win state level and national events. How ironic! If I had not been taunted I may not have had the persistence to participate and the determination to win. Sometimes you have to thank the hecklers as they encourage you to confront your fears and be true to yourself.

I am proud of being who I am. I bring with me the richness of my roots, the colours of my history, the brightness of my culture and the greatest gift of all - the gift of hope!

We are one, we are many!

We sing with one voice!

Grace, 29, non-white non-Indigenous Australian, Hilton WA

'My Voice'

The first time I became aware that I was not white was when I was about five or six years old. My sister and I were told by a teacher at school that we were dirty. That night in the bath we scrubbed our bodies with a nail brush until we were red raw trying to get clean: trying to get white. From then I started to feel different, and separated from the other children at school. I already felt different because most of them had a mum and a dad at home and I was just living with my mum and three siblings. I was friends with another brown girl at school and, like me, she just had a mum at home too - but her mum was brown like her. My mum was so white though - I used to wonder if she was really my mum.

My connections with my father and my Indian family were every second weekend which, as a small child, was long enough to lose my sense of self in between times. Growing up in a white Australia I began to see my father and his family as 'other', as 'different' and not want to be like them. The first time I can remember feeling respected as a human being was when I was nineteen. I discovered Quaker meetings and began to attend regularly.

It is strange to think that that was the place where I first felt respected rather than tolerated because the very vast majority of Quakers in Australia are very white and middle class. Nevertheless to this day within the Friends community is where I feel complete respect. There I am surrounded by people who are interested in me as a human being and completely supportive and excited about the decisions that I make in my life.

As a child in the 1980's I was seen as dirty on the grounds of skin colour; today I am seen as beautiful, stunning; because of my lovely skin and eyes. To look at another human being and think that their skin is more beautiful than your own is just another form of racism; it's something that confuses and separates us. Racism only ends when we have enough love and respect for ourselves that we can then love and accept all.

Nawab, 30, Baluchi / Aboriginal Australian, Alexander Heights WA

At work, when people have a birthday they bring their own cakes to celebrate. I was working there for six months when I realised that this was part of the culture and the rule, so I thought I would do the same on my birthday. So, that is what I did, except I took a cake for people on the morning, afternoon and night shifts, even though I was only working the morning shift that day. I figured I should share cake with three different shifts because I have worked with all of the people on those shifts.

So I brought three cakes and put them in the fridge, and one of the workers saw it and said "Wow! You bought three cakes - that's excellent!" and I told them it was my birthday and that I bought a cake for each shift because I had to think about the other people as well. Because I worked with everyone I would feel bad if people from the afternoon and night shifts found this small piece of birthday cake left and thought 'he didn't bring any cake for us'.

The workers really enjoyed it and they all wished me a happy birthday. I didn't see the night shift people until next morning when I came in for my shift as the night shift people were going home and this guy came up to me and said "Happy birthday and thanks for the cake."

It was good to know that you are a part of it all because now they think 'I am not going to let you down and I really consider you are one of us.' Most of them have seen me around for four years but have never really worked with me so I felt the attitude of most people changed towards me after that. When I first started working there I was quiet. But now they say 'how are you doing?'

You do something kind and people's attitude changes. You have to show some respect in your actions so people know you are a good bloke. This helps to get rid of the stereotypes that they show on the media, especially about Aboriginal people. It's important we try and change people's attitudes towards us because most people watch TV and learn from the media, because when bad things are said about Aboriginals I really feel bad and my heart stops.

Vicki, 50, Greek, Ardmona VIC

I loved growing up on a sheep and wheat station. I used to also love going to the main town of Shepparton with my Mum to do the shopping. On the main street you used to have Coles. Next to it was the cafeteria where a lot of Greek women used to have a bit of a break from shopping on the Friday afternoon. They use to talk in Greek and have really happy moments.

'Mum and the family'

One day I was with my mum and these Greek women and about four women who were walking past stopped, stared at us and one of the women said to the others with her "Why don't they learn English and speak English? They come to this country; don't they know that they should be able to speak English? Just look at them, it's appalling, just look at them."

My mother said to me "What did they say?" I just said "Mum don't speak Greek, speak English". "But you know I can't speak good English" she said.

And then I said to her "Well, you're embarrassing me. Go away. I don't ever want to go shopping with you again if you're not going to speak English".

Looking back, I know it was the wrong thing to say. I should have been proud of my Greek language. Later, I did learn to find peace within myself and I was later proud of my Greek culture. I decided I wanted to take what I knew and share it with other people. So I went to Rotary and the Lions Club. But walking into some association or club talking as a migrant and getting the looks, the snide remarks and the criticism was hard. I kept thinking 'What am I doing here? These people really do not want to know me'.

When I became President of the Ethnic Council, Shepparton District, I was the first woman President. It was a great honour - not just for me but for all our ethnic communities. But it was still a struggle. As a woman, I wanted to have a say on women's issues, but somehow if two hands went up it was always the one next to me which was chosen to speak and I kept missing out all the time. Presidents of other associations would be acknowledged and yet not me. It was always an 'oversight'. I felt that people were just putting up with me because they had to. They didn't see me as a leader within the ethnic community or realise that I had a voice. I felt that I was seen as a second rate citizen - that what I had to say wasn't really important.

It might have taken years of struggle, but now if there is a function, I am the first on the invitation list. I'm not just invited as President of the Council, or Commissioner for the Victorian Multicultural Commission, I'm invited as Vicki - a woman who is a leader, who has done a lot within a community, and who has a valuable contribution to make.

Not long ago I had a gathering at my house for dinner and there were about 50 people there of all different cultural backgrounds and you could see the respect and appreciation they had for each other – and we respect each other because we want to, not because we have to anymore.

CONNECTION

"Me in the green and Kodi, my Grandson in the arms of his father"

Maureen, Aboriginal, Mt Druitt NSW

'Koori and Irish Connection'

My grandson and I were in the car travelling from Botany to my place in Mt Druitt. He was spending the weekend with his Nan and Pop. He starts telling me in the car that they had Aboriginal dancers at his child care centre, and I asked how did he know they were Aboriginal and were they brown like me.

He said that they had paint on their faces and they did the Kangaroo dance and the Emu dance and then they got the children up to do a dance. So I asked him what animal he was and he told me that he was a Kangaroo. He then went on to say "Nan, I am Aboriginal on the inside and Irish on the outside" and with that I just melted. My grandson's father is from Belfast and my daughter is Aboriginal, and we are Wiradjuri people.

My grandson is 5 years old.

Dean, 25, Aboriginal, Alexandria NSW

'You can achieve anything!'

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 really reliable, to be on time all the time, to turn up to things early, put up my hand to do extra things all the time and also to make sure I train harder than anyone else at the club. I have seen the perception of Indigenous players at my club change since I have arrived, so I think I am doing a good job there. I find it really important to not fall into the stereotype and to show that we can do things as much as anyone else can.

It is disappointing that things are this way. But again if I fold my hands and say it is unfair I will only be the one going backwards - and so I pull my head in and deal with it. I think if people have got disadvantages you don't give into it. You rise above it.

'Scoring for the Parramatta Eels' - 2005

One of the main things I really try and impress upon young kids is to be proud. It doesn't matter where you are 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 has been the case with my rugby league career. This was something I really had to work hard for. I was not as naturally talented as a lot of people. It has been a long hard slog for me. So that is the message that I try and give kids. Believe in yourself, don't be silly, work hard and really reach out for your goals. You can achieve anything. Amongst young Indigenous kids, believing in yourself and being proud of where you come from is a big issue. That is something we really have to try and improve over the next couple of years.

Anher, 18, Iraqi, Prairiewood NSW

'Working in the orchards in Shepparton'

I left Iraq when I was eight years old and went to Jordan and stayed there for 5 years. When I arrived in Australia in 2000 it was hard for us because we didn't speak much English. After living in Sydney initially, we moved to Shepparton and lived there for four years. There wasn't a lot of Iraqi's when we first came and we were the first Iraqi Christian family there.

A lot of people in the community, when they know you they respect you. I remember an Iraqi community worker didn't like me very much. We didn't know how to speak English then so we went to him to help us fill in forms which was part of his job. But he used to say to me "Why do you put colour in your hair? Why are you wearing necklaces?" I said to him "This is my life and no-one can change me and my parents are happy so I can do what I want to do". From then on he hated me.

One day driving to Melbourne I saw his car broken down on the street, so I stopped for him and asked him what was wrong. He told me his car had broken down and he didn't know what was wrong with the engine. I said to him "I can take you to wherever you want". He accepted and I drove him to a place where there is a tow truck and while the tow truck was going to pick up his car, I drove him to his friends' house. I gave him my number and told him if he needed any help he could call me. Since then I could feel that he had changed his attitude towards me. He respects me more now.

Annie, NSW

'Pebble'

It starts within a child
"Speak English" demanded the teacher
The little child was new to the school
New to the country, new to it all
The older sister feels his pain
She gets up and takes the smaller hand in hers
They walk out of the classroom and a mile to home

"Why didn't you teach us your language Mum?" I ask
"I am proud you are Italian.
I am proud of our heritage," I say

"Why didn't you learn Italian" my children ask me
"We are doing multicultural day at school"
She continues enthusiastically
"We are sharing each others nations and cultures
What is Italy's traditional dress?"

This is our school
This is our Australia
This is our chance

This is my chance
I throw a positive pebble
We get on the internet and together we search.

'A family from Warakuran Community near Giles that I became good friends with' - 1996

Helmut, 52, German Born Australian, Wantirna South VIC 'There All The Time'

My story is one about discovery. I was bon in Germany in 1953 and migrated to Australia in 1954. For most of my early life I lived in Melbourne and did not have any contact with Aboriginal people during that time. I just saw them as one of the many groups of people living in Australia.

I worked in Darwin for two years in the early 80's and had some exposure to Aboriginal people while working as a Volunteer Ambulance Attendant. My experience here was somewhat tainted by the attitudes and inappropriate behaviour of some of the white people. I could not understand their attitude but I did not have the courage to confront them over it.

My whole world and attitude changed when I started my six-month term at Giles Meteorological Station in central Australia in 1996. The station was built at the foothills of the Rawlinson Ranges in 1956, approximately 360 kilometres west of Uluru. Giles is also five kilometres to the south of Warakurna, the Aboriginal settlement of the Ngaanatjarra people who live over a wide area of central Western Australia and Northern Territory.

What I discovered there was a people and a culture I never really knew existed. Sure I had read books and articles, but these are limited in their impact. I learned about the Ngaanatjarra people, some of their language and a lot about their customs and current way of life. I learnt about their country and the way they used to live. I also made several friends. There all the time was a people and culture that books and articles could not adequately describe.

I went back to Giles in 2003 for another six-month term and this consolidated all of the things I had discovered in 1996 – that Aboriginal people are more than just a group of people living in Australia. They are the True Australians.

Somebody once asked me "What do you think heaven would be like?" I replied "It would be living as a Ngaanatjarra before the white man came".

Thao, 24, Vietnamese, Enmore NSW

Last year I was the one person selected to be the Australian youth representative to the United Nations General Assembly. For the first time in our history, it was somebody who is from a refugee background and who is non - Anglo. 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 that is fine. For other people, it was like 'this Asian person' is representing this whole country. 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 thought having migrants, refugees, second generations, third generations, was normal. I faced a number of different reactions.

'Speaking at UN radio'- 2004

Being selected by my peers as someone who is able to represent this country in a very significant capacity, I think signals that even though I come from this particular background, I as an individual have something to contribute and offer. I think that compared to my parents generation, this represents a shift from tolerance to respect.

Looking at second or third generation young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, there is more of a dialogue of respect as opposed to tolerance because we know the languages of both the minority and the mainstream and we can therefore have exchanges.

Whether Australia has progressed beyond tolerance has been inconsistent. There are parts of Australia that have really accepted multiculturalism and cultural diversity. Australia is cultural diversity. Yet there are other pockets that are still really quite nostalgic about white Australia, and 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'. That is really problematic because we have not even defined what our way of life really is. Our way of life is hybridity, and our way of life is diversity and so how can more diversity threaten diversity.

It is not just about giving migrants and refugees opportunity, but voice, and my work has been involved in giving people a platform for representation and voice. I sincerely believe that even if you come from a middle class background or a lower socio-economic background, or whether your parents came here or your ancestors came here, it is all about giving people access to decision making capacity.

Dorothy, 62, English, Glebe NSW

I came to Holroyd High School ten years ago and it was a fairly typical suburban high school which had an Intensive English Centre on the site. At that time, however, very few of those students who finished at the centre stayed on to go to the high school. Today, about 25% of our students have been in Australia less than three years, and about 40% percent of all the students in this school are recent refugees. In this school alone we have over two hundred Afghan students and about 15% of the total Farsi speaking children in NSW government schools.

I have never had any doubt about the transformational effect of education and the importance of the right to freedom of speech. We have allowed that to happen in Australia and that freedom of speech has flowed out into public forums, meetings and rallies.

Some of our young people have helped to change the public attitude to asylum seekers simply by standing up and speaking from the heart about their experiences and what they think should happen in Australia. The students somehow move with this extraordinary courage to say this is what I have been through but please do not allow this to happen to other people. It's this courage and this capacity to go beyond your self that leaves me breathless with admiration. These young people will make a huge difference to this country. They bring to us an ethical richness that we must never deny.

Plain English Guide to the Racial Discrimination Act

Reconcilliation
by Katrin Chrysaphis ©, NSW.

In 1966, many countries around the world got together at the United Nations to discuss ways to deal with the problem of racial discrimination.

As a result of these discussions, the countries came to an agreement about the things that all countries should do to stop racial discrimination. This agreement was called the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (ICERD).

This Convention, or international agreement, is now an important part of international human rights law.

More than 156 countries have ratified ICERD, which means they agree to uphold its principles in their own countries. Australia ratified ICERD on 30 September 1975.

Countries that ratify ICERD must do things within their own countries to try to stop racial discrimination. The most important thing that Australia has done is to pass the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) ('the RDA'). This law began on 31 October 1975.

The RDA was Australia's first federal anti-discrimination law and supports the principle that everyone has a right to enjoy the same fundamental freedoms and human rights, regardless of race, colour, descent (ancestry), national origin, ethnic origin or, in some cases, immigrant status. Treating people differently because of these characteristics is against the law under the RDA.

On 13 October 1995, the RDA was changed so as to give additional protection to people who are being publicly and openly offended, insulted, humiliated or intimidated because of their race, colour, or national or ethnic origin. This part of the RDA is known as the *Racial Hatred* section.

What is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination?

When a country ratifies ICERD it promises to do the following:

- Not to racially discriminate against individuals, groups of people or institutions, and to make sure that public authorities and institutions do the same.
- Not to sponsor, defend or support racial discrimination by any individuals or organisations.
- To review government, national and local policies, and make changes to or abolish laws and regulations which create or continue racial discrimination.
- To ban and put a stop to racial discrimination by individuals, groups and organisations.

- To ban organisations and propaganda that promote racial superiority, racial hatred, racial violence or racial discrimination (note, however, that Australia has submitted a reservation[1] to this requirement and is not fully bound by it).
- To make sure there is effective protection and solutions for victims of racial discrimination.
- To take special measures, when needed, to make sure that disadvantaged racial groups have full and equal access to human rights and basic freedoms, and
- to tackle the prejudices that lead to racial discrimination, and eliminate the barriers between races, through education and information, and by encouraging communication and harmony between people from different races.

Under ICERD, racial discrimination is where a person or a group of people is treated less favourably because of their race, colour, descent, national origin or ethnic origin **and**, because of this treatment they are stopped from enjoying fully their human rights and fundamental and basic freedoms.

Some of these basic rights and freedoms include:

- The right to be treated equally by the courts and other tribunals.
- The right to be protected by the government against violence or bodily harm.
- The right to vote and take part in government and to have equal access to public services.
- The right to get married and the right to choose who you will marry.
- The right to express your opinion.
- The right to practice your religion and beliefs.
- The right to housing, education, public health, social security and services.
- The right to work, to choose where you work, and to be given equal pay for equal work, under fair conditions.
- The right to form and join trade unions.
- The right to participate freely in cultural activities.
- The right to participate in political parties and have political opinions.
- The right to use public spaces and services such as transport, hotels, restaurants, shopping centres, cafés, and parks.

For a complete guide to the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), visit:

http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/d_icerd.htm

[1]The reservation reads: "The Government of Australia ... declares that Australia is not at present in a position specifically to treat as offences all the matters covered by article 4 (a) of the Convention. Acts of the kind there mentioned are punishable only to the extent provided by the existing criminal law dealing with such matters as the maintenance of public order, public mischief, assault, riot, criminal libel, conspiracy and attempts. It is the intention of the Australian Government, at the first suitable moment, to seek from Parliament legislation specifically implementing the terms of article 4 (a)."

What is the Racial Discrimination Act?

The *Racial Discrimination Act* (the 'RDA') makes it against the law in Australia to discriminate against someone because of their race.

The RDA applies to businesses, schools, local governments, state and territory government agencies and departments and Commonwealth government agencies and departments.

What is racial discrimination?

Racial discrimination happens when someone is treated less favourably because of their race, colour, descent, national origin or ethnic origin than someone of a different race, colour, descent, national or ethinic origin would be treated in a similar situation. This is known as **'direct discrimination'**.

Example

A person complains (the complainant) that her 15 year old cousin who is Aboriginal was stopped and then followed around and questioned by security guards of the shopping centre (the respondent). The person making the complaint believes that they are being discriminated against because of their race and age. They think that the respondent (the security guards) follow all Aboriginal children/young people around and either stop them entering or from moving freely around the centre.

Example

An Egyptian man was employed by a real estate company for nine months as a sales consultant. He was being treated less fairly and harassed because of his race by the owner and another sales person. He says the other sales person made comments such as "dirty little Arab"; "Sand Nigger" and asked him about his camel and made fun of his accent. The Egyptian man felt pressured to resign.

Racial discrimination can also be hidden or less obvious than direct discrimination. This is called **'indirect discrimination'**.

Indirect discrimination is when a policy or rule applies equally to everyone and appears to treat everyone in the same way, but actually it has an unfair effect on more people of a particular race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin than others, putting them at a disadvantage. This sort of discrimination is only acceptable if the policy or rule itself is reasonable and has an important purpose that it is seeking to achieve.

Example

Having a high level of English language skills as a criterion for a job may mean that people with a low level of English, such as newly arrived refugees, are less likely to be hired. Unless having a high level of English language skills is necessary in order to do the job, this is indirect discrimination.

When is racial discrimination against the law?

It is against the law to discriminate against someone when it prevents them from enjoying their human rights, such as in the following situations.

- **Employment** – including when looking for work, advertising or interviewing for jobs, being employed, training, promotion opportunities, the terms and conditions of employment, termination of employment, i.e. being asked to leave work.
- **Land, housing and accommodation** – including when buying a house or land, or when renting a flat or a house, or other accommodation.
- **Education** – including school education, TAFE, University, etc.
- **Providing goods and services** – including when buying something, hiring a car, applying for credit, using banks, seeking help from government departments, lawyers, doctors and hospitals, or attending or using restaurants, pubs, entertainment venues, nightclubs and so on.
- **Access to places and facilities meant for use by the public** – including parks, beaches, libraries, government offices, hotels, places of worship such as churches, synagogues and mosques, entertainment centres, and public transport and so on.
- **Advertising** – including an advertisement for a job which states that people from a certain ethnic group cannot apply.
- **Trade union membership**.

If you are discriminated against in any of these situations you can make a complaint using the RDA in order to get fair and equal treatment. However, it is not against the law to make racial distinctions in all situations. For instance, in private life such as when choosing a live-in nanny or choosing your friends or people you have contact with or allow into your house, making racial distinctions is not against the law.

For more information about the Racial Discrimination Act, visit:
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/guide_to_rda/index.html

What are 'Special Measures' under the RDA?

Under ICERD and in the RDA, there is one type of act or practice, called a 'special measure', which is permitted even though it involves treating particular racial, ethnic or national groups or individuals differently. Special measures are an exception to the general rule that all racial groups must be treated the same.

Special measures are designed to help groups or individuals who in the past have been unfairly treated and now need extra support or programs so as to be able to fully enjoy their human rights as much as everyone else.

Indigenous people in Australia as well as some migrant and refugee groups experience greater social and economic disadvantage than other groups in society. Because of this disadvantage they may need special assistance to enjoy their human rights, such as their right to education, employment, and health, to the same level as other Australians.

What are some of the characteristics of 'special measures'?

Special measures can only be taken by governments and private organisations. They must:

1. be **helpful** to some or all members of a group who share a common race, colour, descent, national origin or ethnic origin; and
2. have the **sole purpose** of assisting the group to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms equally with others; and
3. be **necessary** to making sure that the group achieve that purpose; and
4. **stop** once their purpose has been achieved. They cannot last forever, even if they take a long time to achieve what they are meant to.

> **Example**
>
> *Health services specifically targeted at Indigenous people are a special measure, and not racial discrimination against non-Indigenous people. This is because Indigenous people are less likely to use mainstream services, and on average have comparatively poor health compared to non-Indigenous people. Indigenous health services are a special measure because they are designed to help Indigenous people equally enjoy the right to health (which is a basic human right). Since special measures must be temporary, Indigenous health services will no longer qualify as a special measure once Indigenous people enjoy health standards equivalent to other Australian.*

For more information about Special Measures, visit:
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/guide_law/special_measures.htm

What is Racial Hatred?

The RDA was changed in October 1995 so as to make it against the law to be racially offensive or abusive in public. Under the RDA, it is against the law to offend, insult or humiliate a person or group in public because of their race, colour, or national or ethnic origin. This behaviour is sometimes called racial hatred or racial vilification and includes using speech, images or writing in public that is racially offensive or abusive.

Offensive behaviour which is against the law because it is racially abusive might include:

- Writing racist graffiti in a public place including school playgrounds or bus stop shelters.
- Making racist speeches at a public rally or assemblies.
- Placing racist posters or stickers in a public place.
- Making a racially abusive comment in a public place; eg shops, workplaces, parks, public transport, schools (this can include singing, speaking, telling jokes and making gestures in public).
- Offensive racist comments or drawings in a newspaper, leaflet, website or other publication.

What does it mean when it happens 'in public'?

Members of the public must have heard or seen the racially offensive behaviour for it to be *'in public'*. For example, if the offensive behaviour happened in a place where the general public is invited or have a right to use, this may be against the law. It is **not** against the law if the offensive behaviour happened in a private telephone conversation or in a private place such as inside someone's home.

Example

A woman says her neighbour called her 15 year old daughter a "black nigger" out the front of their home, where it could have been heard from the street.

Example

A radio presenter made insulting comments about a Jewish American performance artist who had recently toured Australia. The presenter also made offensive statements about Jewish people, finally saying: "Hitler had the right idea". The performer or any member of the Jewish community could make a complaint on the basis that the comments were likely to offend, insult and humiliate Jewish people.

When is racial hatred not against the law and considered to be an acceptable type of free speech?

The law against racial hatred aims to strike a balance between two valued rights: the right to communicate freely and the right to live free from racial vilification. In order to strike this balance, the RDA says that racial hatred that takes the following forms is not against the law if it is **"done reasonably and in good faith"**:

- **an artistic work or performance** – for example, a play in which racist attitudes are expressed by a character.
- **an academic publication, discussion or debate** – for example, discussing and debating public issues and policies such as immigration, multiculturalism, or special measures for particular groups.
- **a fair and accurate report on an issue which the public may be interested in** – for example, a fair report in the media about something which happened that encouraged racial discrimination and hatred or was racially offensive behaviour.
- **a fair comment** – only if the comment reflects a view that a fair-minded person could have held and the person who made it actually holds that view.

For more information about the Racial Hatred sections of the RDA, visit:
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/racial_hatred_act/index.html

For a copy of the 'Racial Hatred Act – a guide for people working within the media', visit:
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/media_guide/index.html

Is religious discrimination and vilification covered under the RDA?

Under the RDA, it is **not** against the law to *discriminate* against someone, or *vilify* them, because of their religion. This means that there are **no** religious vilification laws under federal law. But, if a person believes that they have been *discriminated* against because of their religion in getting a job or at work, then under the federal *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986* (a different law to the RDA) he or she can make a complaint to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. However, under the *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986*, the person making the complaint cannot take the matter to court.

What about laws in the different States and Territories?

Anti-discrimination laws in all Australian states and territories make race discrimination against the law. That means that under both federal and **all** state anti-discrimination laws, it is against the law to discriminate against someone because of their race, descent or national or ethnic origin. It is only against the law in **some** states to racially vilify another person, and different states and territories deal with religious discrimination and vilification differently. The laws are not consistent. The following table shows those states and territories that have racial discrimination laws, religious discrimination laws, racial hatred laws and religious hatred laws.

Table: Shows which States, Territories and Federal Governments have passed laws to stop racial and religious discrimination and racial and religious vilification or hatred

	Federal	NSW	QLD	VIC	SA	WA	ACT	TAS	NT
Racial Discrimination	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Religious Discrimination	No*	No**	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Racial Vilification/Hatred	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Religious Vilification/Hatred	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No

* HREOC can hear complaints about religious discrimination in employment.

** There is protection for ethno-religious discrimination under the NSW definition of racial discrimination.

For more information about racial discrimination, racial hatred and vilification, and religious discrimination and vilification laws across states and territories in Australia, visit:
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/isma/report/chap1.html#1_4

What can you do if you experience racial discrimination or racial hatred?

If you have been discriminated against or vilified because of your race there are a number of things you can do about it. You can:

- Talk directly to the person or organisation responsible for the behaviour.

- Get help from an organisation which represents your racial, ethnic or national group eg: a Migrant Resource Centre or an Aboriginal Legal Centre.
- For complaints about media stories or broadcasts, complain to the Australian Broadcasting Authority; the Australian Advertising Standards Council for advertisements; or the Press Council for newspaper stories. You can also complain to the Editor or Manager of the media organisation.
- For complaints about neighbours, you may approach the Community Justice Centres to assist in resolving the problem or if you live in public housing then let the Department of Housing or other public housing authority know.
- If you are threatened with violence or you are violently attacked, including bullying, go to the teacher if it happens at school, or to the police.
- If you have tried to solve the problem, you or someone else on your behalf, such as a solicitor or trade union, can make a complaint to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission or your state anti-discrimination agency.
- A complaint must normally be made by a person who has been **personally affected** by what they believe was racial discrimination or racial hatred. For example, you cannot complain formally about someone talking about 'dirty Greeks' if you are not of Greek background. If a non-Greek person wishes to make a complaint, they can do so on behalf of a Greek person if they have their written permission to do so.

What happens if you complain to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC)?

- It does not cost anything to make a complaint to HREOC.
- HREOC does not charge a fee for investigating or handling the complaint.
- Your complaint needs to be put in writing.
- If you are not able to write about what you are complaining about, HREOC can help you with this. There is also a form to help you make a complaint.
- A complaint can be made in any language. The Commission can arrange an interpreter in your language if this is needed.
- You can also lodge your complaint electronically through the HREOC website.
- If you are blind or visually impaired the Commission can provide you with information in different ways if you ask for it.
- If you are thinking about making a complaint, you might want to also think about getting legal advice or calling your trade union. There are community legal services that can also give you free advice about discrimination and harassment.

Where can you complain or find out more information?

If you believe you have been racially discriminated against or racially vilified you may be able to put in a complaint at the following places:

Australian Capital Territory – Human Rights Office

Complaints Infoline: (02) 6207 0576 / TTY: (02) 6207 0525

Website: http://www.hro.act.gov.au/

National - Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

Complaints Infoline: 1300 656 419 (cost of a local call)

Website: www.humanrights.gov.au

(If you are deaf or hearing impaired, the Commission can arrange for an Auslan interpreter if you need it. You can also communicate with us by TTY by calling 1800 620 241)

New South Wales - Anti-Discrimination Board

Complaints Infoline: (02) 9268 5555 / TTY: (02) 9268 5522

Website: http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/adb

Northern Territory – Anti-Discrimination Commission

Complaints Infoline: 1800 813 846 / TTY: (08) 8999 1466

Website: http://www.nt.gov.au/justice/adc/

Queensland - Anti-Discrimination Commission

Complaints Infoline: 1300 130 670 / TTY: 1300 130 680

Website: http://www.adcq.qld.gov.au/

South Australia - Equal Opportunity Commission

Complaints Infoline: (08) 8207 1977 / TTY: (08) 8207 1911

Website: http://www.eoc.sa.gov.au/

Tasmania – Anti-Discrimination Commission

Complaints Infoline: 1300 305 062 / TTY: (03) 6223 6234

Website: http://www.antidiscrimination.tas.gov.au/

Victoria – Equal Opportunity Commission

Complaints Infoline: (03) 9281 7100 / TTY: (03) 9281 7110

Website: http://www.eoc.vic.gov.au/

Western Australia - Equal Opportunity Commission

Complaints Infoline: (08) 9216 3900 / TTY: (08) 9216 3936

Website: http://www.equalopportunity.wa.gov.au/

Other Options

Australian Advertising Standards Council – to complain about advertisements
Complaints Infoline: (02) 6262 9822
Website: http://www.advertisingstandardsbureau.com.au/about_the_asb.html

Australian Broadcasting Authority – to complain about material on TV, radio or the internet
Complaints Infoline: 1800 226 667 / TTY: (02) 9334 7777
Website: http://www.aba.gov.au/

Australian Press Council – to complain about newspaper and magazine publications
Complaints Infoline: 1800 025 712
Website: http://www.presscouncil.org.au/

Perth WA.

To read more stories from *Voices of Australia*, visit

www.humanrights.gov.au/voices

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

LIFE STORY PRODUCTIONS

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[For members' details visit:
www.humanrights.gov.au/voices]

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[For a complete list of schools, community and business groups who submitted stories after conducting their own writing workshops visit:
www.humanrights.gov.au/voices]

Audio CD interviews
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www.humanrights.gov.au/voices]

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