# Stories of Welcome

## Ideas for building a culture of welcome

## Volume 6

Welcoming Australia

Volume 6. May 2025

Demographic information: The demographic statistics provided for each local government area featured in this volume are taken from the 2021 Australian Census.

Cover photo: Participants at the Altona Gators Inclusion School Holiday Basketball Program. Credit: Brian Doherty

All other photos are courtesy of featured councils and organisations.

Welcoming Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional custodians and ancestors of this country, and the continuation of their cultural, spiritual and ceremonial practices.

We respectfully acknowledge the past and present Traditional Owners of the land, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and respect their culture and identity, which has been a continuum with the land and sea for generations.

We have a role to play in achieving a just Australia in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights as First Peoples are recognised and respected.

Welcoming Australia also seeks to engage local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as leaders in welcoming activities.

Welcoming Australia

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# Belonging starts with us

**Belonging starts when we smile at people who are often received with fear, prejudice or patronising curiosity.**

It starts when we listen to understand rather than respond. Belonging begins when we assume the best in others. But we can't have belonging without first feeling welcome. In essence, welcoming lays the foundation, and belonging is the goal.

At Welcoming Australia, we are encouraged by our growth and expanding impact through the exceptional work of our members. With four core initiatives – Welcoming Cities, Welcoming Clubs, Welcoming Universities, and our newest addition, Welcoming Workplaces – we remain committed to fostering inclusion and belonging across all aspects of Australian society. As we continue to evolve, it's vital that we celebrate the diverse stories of the people we work alongside, advancing our shared journey towards inclusion and belonging. None of this work would be possible without our passionate and dedicated members.

In previous years, we've shared case studies from Welcoming Cities member councils through *Stories of Welcome*. These case studies have provided valuable insights into the innovative programs, policy changes and strategic collaborations driving positive change across the country. As our initiatives expand, this year's edition highlights an even wider range of stories, showcasing how communities come together to embrace diversity. In a world increasingly defined by fear and injustice, efforts to foster inclusion in sporting clubs, universities and workplaces have never been more essential.

This year, we're proud to again feature the winners of the Welcoming Cities Awards for Change and the Welcoming Australia Medal recipient. These awards recognise the transformative work of individuals, organisations and local councils that are making a real impact in building stronger, more cohesive communities. They represent our ongoing commitment to empowering all communities – whether newly arrived or receiving – to fully participate, belong and thrive in an inclusive Australia.

Belonging starts with all of us – in our households, neighbourhoods, schools, sports clubs, community groups, universities, cities, regions and workplaces. I hope you enjoy reading this edition's examples of striving for belonging.

Aleem Ali, CEO
Welcoming Australia

> "Belonging begins when we assume the best in others..."
>
> Aleem Ali, CEO
> Welcoming Australia

Credit: Jordan Gonzalez / Unsplash

Welcoming Cities

Welcoming Clubs

## Welcoming Cities

Welcoming Cities is a national network of local governments committed to an Australia where everyone can belong and participate in social, cultural, economic and civic life.

Welcoming Cities recognises that, of all tiers of government, local councils are best placed to understand the complexity and diversity of their communities. Members of Welcoming Cities have unprecedented access to a community of like-minded local governments and community stakeholders through knowledge sharing, celebrating success, the Welcoming Cities Standard and accreditation process, and partnership development.

## Welcoming Clubs

Welcoming Clubs embraces the power of sport and recreation as a vehicle for inclusion, opportunity and belonging.

The initiative involves collaborating with sports organisations, councils, facilities and clubs to promote diversity and inclusion so that our codes and clubs reflect the communities they aim to serve and support.

Welcoming Clubs achieves this through the direct delivery of programs and activities in areas of high diversity and low access for women and families from migrant and minority ethnic groups (MMEG), including for children with intellectual disability, psychosocial trauma, autism and additional support needs. Welcoming Clubs provides training, coaching and learning opportunities to over 150 sports clubs representing over 25 codes and activities.

Welcoming Universities

Welcoming Workplaces

Credit: Marsha Dhita / Unsplash

## Welcoming Universities

Welcoming Universities is a network that inspires and supports Australian universities in developing a culture and practice of welcome, inclusion and belonging within their institutions, in the community, and across the higher education sector.

Historically, universities have not been places of safety and inclusion for all, even though many universities have strong policies and research focused on equity and inclusion.

Welcoming Universities will become providers of choice to both domestic and international students. The initiative has 13 member universities and is working on place-based research projects and a critical study into international student experiences across the university sector.

## Welcoming Workplaces

Welcoming Workplaces is a network of Australian employers who recognise that workplaces thrive when they are welcoming and embrace diversity.

Advancing inclusive and community-minded workplaces increases productivity, retention, reputation, compliance and employee wellbeing.

Welcoming Workplaces provides employers with the knowledge, resources, networks, partnerships and frameworks to enhance employer readiness for engaging, recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce.

# The Hub fosters vibrant exchange

## City of Canterbury Bankstown, NSW

Approximate population 380,000
45% overseas born
0.8% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

**A new cultural space has opened its doors in the Bankstown CBD in Darug Country. This space – the Canterbury Bankstown First Nations Cultural Hub and Resource Centre – is not just a physical location. It is a platform for fostering vibrant cultural exchange and understanding between the First Nations and non-Indigenous community.**

After identifying a lack of a cultural space for First Nations peoples to share stories, raise awareness about cultures, support each other and address social isolation, the Canterbury Bankstown First Nations Cultural Hub and Resource Centre (The Hub) was established in 2024. During years of community advocacy and consultation, local Elders, community members and organisations identified the need for a culturally dedicated meeting space within the Canterbury-Bankstown local government area. In response, the City of Canterbury Bankstown, in collaboration with the Canterbury-Bankstown City First Peoples Advisory Committee, secured an appropriate location and developed a programming model for a new centre.

City of Canterbury Bankstown First Nations Community Development Officer Barbara Grant underscores the inclusive nature of The Hub's activities. 'The Hub is for First Nations related programs. These are not only for First Nations people but also for the broader community to attend and find out about First Nations cultures, heritage, local programs, information, events and contacts. It's a space to bring people together, learn and maintain cultural heritage.'

The Hub will operate for a two-year trial period at Bankstown Senior Citizens Centre. To manage and run the facility, City of Canterbury Bankstown initiated an expression of interest and selected the

Bankstown Community Resource Group (BCRG) as the successful anchor due to its connection with the First Nations community. Barbara says, 'BCRG is very respected, not only by the First Nations community but the community in general.' BCRG has identified First Nations Officer positions, runs First Nations family group programs, and 'is very involved in the First Nations community,' Barbara says.

While The Hub is still in its early days, it is already making strides towards reconciliation by fostering relationships, respect and trust between the First Nations people and the broader community. BCRG is currently running a weekly First Nations children's program, a First Nations youth group, women's programs and a Women's Hope Group. Goals for the future include homework help, language classes, support for employment, cultural art and cooking classes. Barbara explains, 'By providing a variety of programs for the First Nations and general community, we can create a better understanding of First Nations culture, maintain cultural heritage and work towards reconciliation together in our community.'

There have been several challenges to get to where The Hub is today, including 'securing a venue and, once established, making the community aware of the space and how they can be a part of it, whether they are First Nations or from the broader community.'

The Hub was officially opened by Canterbury-Bankstown Mayor Bilal El-Hayek, local First Nations organisations and Elders in a special ceremony at Bankstown Senior Citizens Centre. Mayor El-Hayek says the launch had been a long time coming, and he was proud as the Mayor to be part of it. 'It is quite clear that there was a need for First Nations community members to come together and meet, a place to embrace and celebrate culture and connect with Country,' he said. 'And importantly, a place where our non-Indigenous community could come and learn about the oldest living culture in the world. You can imagine the benefits to our children and grandchildren!'

The Canterbury Bankstown First Nations Cultural Hub and Resource Centre represents a significant step towards fostering cultural exchange, understanding and reconciliation within the community. By providing a dedicated space for both First Nations and non-Indigenous people, it creates opportunities to celebrate heritage, build relationships, and work towards a more inclusive and respectful future.

Above: Traditional dance at the opening.
Main image: Smoking ceremony to celebrate the opening of the centre.

# City of Unley's commitment to diversity, belonging and inclusion

## City of Unley, SA

Approximate population 40,000
26% overseas born
0.5% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

**The City of Unley's internal Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging Plan outlines a robust approach to building a workforce that reflects the diverse community it serves. This plan fosters an inclusive culture and a sense of belonging for everyone involved in the City's services.**

Located just south of Adelaide's CBD, the City of Unley is committed to nurturing a diverse and inclusive community both within its workforce and through its services. Recognising the need for a workforce that enables all staff to thrive and deliver innovative services, the City has introduced a comprehensive Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging Plan. This plan includes awareness training across six areas: gender, disability, LGBTIQA+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse people, and age.

Teresa Nilsson, Manager of People and Culture, describes the motivation behind the initiative.

'We knew we had to make sure the workforce was supportive, informed and inclusive, especially if we were going to be doing some more proactive recruitment. We needed to make sure that the environment people were coming into was as welcoming and inclusive as possible.'

A key part of the plan is training to equip staff, volunteers and elected officials with the knowledge and tools to provide respectful and supportive services to all community members. For instance, the disability access training helps staff create environments that enable people of all abilities to participate fully in the City's programs and services.

Left: City of Unley staff celebrating Diwali.

Some actions in the plan are simple but impactful, such as requiring hiring managers to assess all new vacancies to determine if a driver's licence should be an essential requirement of the role.

'This is the first plan of its type, and we very deliberately started at "awareness", making sure there are no barriers,' Teresa explains. 'We did a lot of work with JFA Purple Orange (a South Australian organisation that amplifies the voices of people with disability) around our recruitment processes, ensuring they were inclusive and supportive. That has guided the training delivered so far.'

An important aspect of Unley's approach to training is its broad reach. Volunteers, often the first point of contact for community members, are also included in the training. By giving them an understanding of diversity and inclusion, the City ensures its volunteers are prepared to offer a welcoming and respectful environment for all.

This commitment extends to all levels of the organisation, including elected officials. By making diversity training available to elected members, the City reinforces the importance of leading by example. This involvement helps shape leadership decisions with a deeper understanding of diversity, fostering a more inclusive approach to policymaking and community engagement. As Teresa notes, 'For me, that's about our desire to impact the whole organisation and, where possible, to have a broader influence with the resources we have.'

The establishment of a Diversity Champions group – a team of staff dedicated to encouraging participation and enhancing diversity awareness across the City of Unley – is also a crucial part of the plan. 'This group has been meeting and delivering initiatives over the year, focusing on building awareness and increasing cultural competence across the organisation,' Teresa explains. The group will also play a pivotal role in reviewing the plan in 2025.

Karen Cini is a Digital Communications Officer at the City of Unley and also Chair of the Diversity Champions Working Group. 'Being part of the Diversity Champions group has been a rewarding experience and enriching for the inclusivity of the organisation,' says Karen. The group loves raising awareness among colleagues through activities and sharing information. 'For instance, we've put together celebration packs for Diwali and organised a "bring a plate of purple food" morning tea for Wear It Purple Day.'

Karen also highlights how the group benefits from researching and promoting important awareness days throughout the year. 'It's a great opportunity to share our own experiences and family traditions with each other,' she explains. 'When we highlight a day that really matters to someone, the personal stories we hear are so inspiring and meaningful for everyone involved.'

The City of Unley's plan sets a powerful example for local governments, showing how to make meaningful progress towards inclusion. To measure success, the City uses demographic data to gain insights. 'We wanted to understand our basic workforce demographics within the themes of the plan,' says Teresa. 'Initially, we didn't have a lot of metrics, so part of our approach was creating an environment where people felt comfortable sharing their diversity, and implementing mechanisms to start capturing metrics. With that data, we can understand stories and make informed recommendations.'

Through this strategy, the City of Unley demonstrates how local governments can embed diversity and inclusion into daily operations and community services. As Teresa reflects, 'These cultural journeys take a long time. That's why we started with awareness. There was no point in making an overly ambitious statement or setting an audacious goal in your very first plan – it's too big a leap. It takes time for hiring managers to realise that hiring someone with disability or someone a little different is not a compromise: it's a fantastic recruitment opportunity for so many reasons.'

# Leading the way in Willoughby

## Willoughby City Council, NSW

Approximate population 78,000
46% overseas born
0.3% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

**Through 'Inspire to Lead', Willoughby City Council has helped build a stronger, more connected community by giving multicultural leaders the skills, confidence and networks to make a real difference.**

The Inspire to Lead project responded to an identified need for structured leadership development among multicultural leaders. Previously, community leaders operated in silos and were primarily engaged within their own community groups. The Covid-19 pandemic made things worse, leading to a drop in community engagement and causing increased isolation, especially for elderly residents, people with disability, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds. Language barriers also made it harder for these groups to access support networks. The 2021 Census showed that nearly half of Willoughby's population was born overseas, highlighting the need for better leadership to bring people together.

Dinaz Rather, Multicultural Community Projects Officer, shares how the pandemic still affects the community. 'The message I got from the community was that the pandemic is still in their mind. People still don't feel like life is the same. It is harder to connect.'

To tackle these issues, Willoughby City Council launched the 'Inspire to Lead' project to give multicultural leaders the skills and connections they need to create real change. The goal was to shift leadership from a 'me' mindset to a 'we' mindset, encouraging collaboration across cultures. The council worked alongside community leaders, government agencies and stakeholders to co-

Left: Inspire to Lead's final presentation and certificate ceremony.

design the project, taking on more of a supportive role rather than telling people what to do. Dinaz explains, 'We wanted to empower the community leaders and lead them to work together and see how they can use their learnings. We also wanted them to bond and have that social interaction and connection.'

Through training and peer learning, participants – who initially saw themselves as leaders in their own cultural communities – began to understand that leadership is a journey that goes beyond their own group. This helped them focus on the strengths of their communities rather than just the challenges.

One of the key components of Inspire to Lead was a cultural exchange program that enabled participants to experience and understand other cultures in Willoughby. Dinaz explains, 'Our aim was to bring all these different groups together, so we went to all the religious temples. We went to the Buddhist temple. We went to the church. We went to the mosque. The aim was for people to get different cultural experiences.'

The results were clear. The project helped create a strong network of leaders who now actively collaborate, share ideas, and support each other. They've also organised events like the 2024 International Women's Day celebrations, showing how far they've come in sharing resources and running community-driven initiatives.

The feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. Francis Yazdani says, 'We learnt many different aspects of leadership and how to apply that to the society.' Another participant, Lynda Kartout, says, 'It was a great opportunity to increase my knowledge about the community and share my own experiences. In terms of networking, I have met wonderful people from different cultural backgrounds working with CALD communities with whom I am planning future collaboration.'

The project has ensured its long-term success by stepping back and letting community members take charge. Leaders now actively organise events, advocate for diversity, and work together across cultural and religious lines. Willoughby is also partnering with other councils and stakeholders to keep growing the initiative. The program has helped strengthen community bonds and empowered leaders to create lasting positive change.

# A community-driven approach to fight racism

## Sunshine Coast Council, QLD

Approximate population 366,000
21% overseas born
2.4% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

**Racism has far-reaching consequences, impacting individuals, communities and society. On the Sunshine Coast, a local campaign strives to change that narrative. 'Shine a Light on Racism', launched in 2022, is a bold initiative designed to raise awareness, inspire action, and ensure the region remains welcoming and inclusive for all.**

At its core, the campaign calls on individuals, businesses and organisations to take active responsibility in fostering an anti-racist society.

Sunshine Coast Councillor David Law, who holds the Strong Community portfolio, explains the Sunshine Coast is experiencing rapid growth, making it essential to foster a community where everyone feels safe, respected and welcomed. 'Shine a Light on Racism aims to ensure that all residents, visitors and newcomers feel a true sense of belonging,' Cr Law says. 'Businesses and sporting clubs play a vital role in demonstrating respect and creating inclusive environments for people of all faiths, cultures and backgrounds, setting a positive example that extends throughout the broader community. By working together to build a more welcoming and inclusive Sunshine Coast, we take meaningful steps towards eliminating racism and strengthening our community.'

The campaign calls on the community to #DoTheWork, and participants commit to three steps:

1. **Pledge** – Acknowledge that racism exists, commit to embracing diversity, and take a stand against discrimination.
2. **Learn** – Examine personal biases, educate oneself, challenge inequitable policies, and speak out against racism.
3. **Celebrate** – Engage in events that showcase cultural diversity and recognise efforts to create inclusive spaces.

By focusing on learning and action rather than blame, Shine a Light on Racism empowers individuals to engage meaningfully and constructively in anti-racism efforts.

Shine a Light on Racism campaign patron Walters Nkemfack says it is important that people recognise and understand the psychological and economic impacts of racism on communities. 'Racism often goes unnoticed and unchallenged, yet it significantly reduces productivity in both businesses and society as a whole, on top of the trauma to victims,' Walters says. 'If change is to happen, it requires action; action demands compassion, and compassion begins with information and awareness.'

The campaign was born out of growing concerns about racism within the Sunshine Coast community. Council networks, including the Multicultural Advisory Group and Community Strategy Leadership Group, identified racism as a key barrier to inclusion and social cohesion in the region. In response, Shine a Light on Racism was developed to provide tangible pathways for change.

This initiative aligns with important council strategies such as the *Sunshine Coast Community Strategy 2019-2041*, the *Reconciliation Action Plan* (RAP) and the council's membership of the Welcoming Cities network. More than just a government-led program, it is a grassroots, community-driven campaign grounded in education and collective action.

From the outset, the community has shaped the campaign. Co-design workshops brought together multicultural residents, council representatives and design professionals to craft messaging, visuals and engagement strategies that resonate across the region.

The campaign launched its first phase in July 2022, focusing on raising awareness about individual racism. The second phase was launched in February 2025 to address systemic racism through businesses, community groups and sporting clubs, shifting the focus towards fostering structural change and creating more inclusive organisations.

Sunshine Coast Council Community Development Officer, Kim Price, says the community identified racism as a growing concern, making this a local, community-driven initiative. 'Shine a Light on Racism has been co-designed with the community, with Council providing facilitation and support, including engaging design and communication partners as needed,' Kim explains. 'In its first phase, the campaign focused on raising awareness of everyday acts of racism and encouraging more welcoming and inclusive behaviours across the Sunshine Coast. As the conversation has evolved, the second phase has expanded to address structural racism, particularly through businesses and sporting clubs. The campaign continues to grow alongside the community, and its next phase will be shaped by the insights and needs identified by the co-design group and the broader public.'

In just two and a half years, Shine a Light on Racism has garnered widespread recognition. In 2023, it received a Better Future silver GOV Design Award and acknowledgement from the Queensland Human Rights Commission for its innovative approach to social change.

The campaign exemplifies Sunshine Coast Council's vision and commitment to fostering a truly inclusive community. By equipping individuals with the knowledge, confidence and resources to act, Shine a Light on Racism paves the way for a region where everyone feels a genuine sense of belonging.

Shine a Light on Racism campaign patron Christine Thomas says that, as a proud Aboriginal woman, she had experienced and witnessed her fair share of racism. 'Despite our communities becoming more aware of racism, it still exists and is incredibly destructive to the wellbeing and sustainability of our people and our communities,' Christine explains. 'I became a patron of this campaign as I strongly believe we need to hold racism in our awareness, in our conversations and be actively working towards addressing anything that creates separation and division in our community. I appreciate the courage of our council to support this campaign in which we can talk openly and safely about the truth of racism and its existence in our communities and seek to develop strategies to address it, building safer communities for all.'

# City of Canning Cultural Ambassadors Program

## City of Canning, WA

Approximate population 104,000
51% overseas born
1.3% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

**By identifying, valuing and investing in leaders from within, the City of Canning developed a model of collaboration, cultural celebration and social inclusion. The Cultural Ambassadors Program is a powerful example of how local governments can partner with their communities to create meaningful change.**

With half of its residents born overseas and 42.8% speaking a language other than English, the City of Canning is characterised by a rich tapestry of cultural and linguistic diversity. Along with a thriving restaurant scene, the City hosts many cultural and religious associations, many operating out of City facilities, running various activities from dance and language classes to worship and support services.

While the Covid pandemic highlighted the City's diversity as a defining strength, with many cultural and religious associations being the first to step up to support others, it also revealed challenges in engaging effectively with residents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. To better understand these communication differences and identify opportunities for strengthening its relationships with CALD communities, the City partnered with Curtin University and Multicultural Futures to undertake a research project. This research identified gaps in communication and access to services, with community members emphasising the importance of culturally responsive communication and culturally informed services supported by trusted individuals from within their own communities.

In response, in 2021, the City of Canning introduced the Cultural Ambassadors Program. Initially piloted, the program transitioned to being city-led in 2022, demonstrating a strong commitment to inclusion and collaboration. The initiative brings together

Left: City of Canning's Cultural Ambassadors 2025.

several Cultural Ambassadors each year, focusing on recruiting representatives from different religious and cultural communities in Canning.

Cultural Ambassadors are instrumental in driving improvements across a wide range of City initiatives, leading to more inclusive services and increased community awareness of the available resources. Mayor Patrick Hall praises their improvements. 'Through the Cultural Ambassadors Program, we support community leaders to act as a bridge between their communities and local government, ensuring voices from all cultural backgrounds are heard and valued,' he says.

The City's library team has worked closely with Cultural Ambassadors to find ways to better serve Canning's multicultural community. As a result of this collaboration, several new initiatives were created to help make everyone feel more welcome at Canning's libraries. These initiatives include a community languages book swap, library tours led by community leaders, library staff wearing welcome badges displaying the languages they speak, hosting Harmony Week events, and setting up 'Welcome Points' where patrons can access Welcome Packs and other resources in multiple languages.

The City's Community Safety team also engaged the Cultural Ambassadors to seek feedback on better reaching CALD communities. The Cultural Ambassadors' advice led to better communication through amendments to the annual community safety survey, a simplified fire hazard reduction brochure specifically designed for CALD communities, and the *Community Safety Handbook*, which was translated into the top three languages. One Ambassador ran a safety pop-up stall at their local shopping centre, reaching over 350 community members with information about safety services and distributing anti-graffiti kits.

The City values Cultural Ambassadors' vital contributions through their volunteer roles and looks for ways to support and give back to them as part of the program. Cultural Ambassadors receive access to extensive training and capacity-building opportunities, access to City facilities to lead projects, and free membership to the City's gym and aquatic facilities. Through monthly workshops, Cultural Ambassadors gain insights into local government functions, leadership, grant writing and project development. This investment builds their capacity to contribute meaningfully to community life and co-design initiatives that reflect local needs.

Anbumoly Kuppusamy, an Alumni Ambassador for the City, says the Cultural Ambassadors Program was a powerful experience for her and many others involved. 'It was a great opportunity for me to learn about local government, its services, and the facilities available in the community. I became more confident because of the knowledge, experience, and connections I built through the program,' she says.

'It was also a stepping stone for my growth, providing the foundation for my next level of achievement. The skills and insights I gained have directly contributed to my success in my current role, allowing me to better serve and engage with the community.'

Mayor Hall says the impact of the program and the leadership shown by participants like Anbumoly are essential features of the program. 'Stories like Anbumoly's show the true value of this program. It empowers individuals to grow, connect and give back to their communities in meaningful ways. Our Ambassadors are helping shape a more inclusive, informed and united Canning.'

Cultural Ambassadors also work closely with the City and each other to lead a wide range of community projects. These are as diverse as the Ambassadors themselves – 'sip and paint' art workshops, community safety information sessions, social badminton and pickleball for young people, information for Chinese-speaking families on supports for children with special needs, and story-sharing sessions that build bridges between migrants and Aboriginal people. Ambassadors also play a visible role in City events, from hosting Diwali celebrations to participating in cultural festivals that attract thousands of attendees, showcasing the richness of Canning's multicultural identity.

# The City of Darebin leads the way in welcoming

## City of Darebin, VIC

Approximate population 156,000
31% overseas born
1% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

**In August 2024, Darebin City Council, in Melbourne's inner north, became the first local council to be awarded Welcoming Cities accreditation at the Excelling level. Welcoming Cities accreditation recognises local governments' commitment to advancing inclusion in their community.**

This successful accreditation acknowledges the significant work of Council and the Darebin community to make the City more welcoming and inclusive. Achieving the Excelling level both reflects and builds on the City's commitments to being welcoming to all. These commitments include equitable access to services and facilities, safe and inclusive neighbourhoods, economic development opportunities, and respect for human rights for all people who live in and visit the City. The City's commitments also provide an opportunity to plan for further improvement and change.

Welcoming Australia's CEO, Aleem Ali, congratulated Darebin City Council. He said, 'Darebin has a long-term approach to this work. They understand that welcoming and inclusion are about continuous engagement and learning, and we congratulate them on their success. Becoming the first council in Australia to be accredited at the Excelling level underlines their role as a leader in welcoming work in Australia.'

Responding to the accreditation, then Darebin City Council Mayor, Councillor Susanne Newton, said, 'I am so proud that Darebin is the first council in Australia to be awarded 'Excelling' status in our Welcoming Cities accreditation. This reflects what I see every day in our community: a place where everyone can find their people, a place to call home and connect with community, whatever their background. This award acknowledges the commitment and significant work of Council and the Darebin community to build a truly inclusive and equitable City.

Left: Welcoming Cities National Manager Sebastian Geers and then Darebin Mayor Cr Susanne Newton.

'We are fortunate in Darebin to be home to people from over 112 countries who speak more than 88 languages, and we are always striving to be a city where everyone feels welcome, respected and empowered to contribute to our wonderful community.'

To achieve Excelling accreditation, councils report on all six categories of the Welcoming Cities Standard and provide evidence for all the indicators. The City of Darebin achieved an overall score of 4.7 out of a possible 5.

## Accreditation highlights

### Promotion of positive messaging and community-wide benefits of migration

Darebin City Council excels in promoting positive messaging and highlighting the community-wide benefits of migration through a comprehensive approach that includes cultural events, community awards and internal initiatives.

### Events and celebrations

Darebin City Council excels in organising events that celebrate cultural diversity, promote the stories of refugees and migrants, and address community needs effectively. The *Darebin Library Strategy 2020-2024* prioritises these initiatives, with annual evaluations ensuring they meet community expectations and are responsive to feedback. The council's use of rigorous checklists ensures events uphold high standards and effectively engage diverse community groups.

### Language Aides remuneration

Darebin City Council stands out for its practice of verifying the language skills of its staff and providing a Language Aide allowance. This remuneration acknowledges the valuable cultural competency and language skills that bilingual workers bring to the workplace.

### Comprehensive engagement standards

Darebin City Council excels in establishing minimum standards for engagement that thoughtfully consider the diverse intersections of its population. These standards ensure that marginalised communities receive extra attention, promoting inclusivity and equity across all council initiatives.

### Targeted learning opportunities

Darebin City Council's libraries excel in supporting targeted learning opportunities for the community. They organise a minimum number of events annually and provide information and courses in multiple community languages, focusing on areas such as digital literacy and elderly rights. Additionally, they offer English classes, including pronunciation workshops and other related activities. This inclusive approach ensures all community members access essential learning resources.

> "I am so proud that Darebin is the first council in Australia to be awarded 'Excelling' status..."
>
> Councillor Susanne Newton
> [then] Darebin City Council Mayor

# Altona Gators Inclusion Program – community, connection and basketball

## Altona, VIC

**The Altona Gators Inclusion Program has made a real impact within the Altona Bay Basketball Association (ABBA), showing how sports can bring people from all backgrounds together. This initiative focuses on creating a welcoming space where kids with disability and neurodiversity can experience the joy of basketball, building friendships and skills along the way. With an emphasis on inclusion, movement and fun, the program reflects Australia's diverse community.**

Before 2023, there had been no inclusion basketball program for kids at ABBA. This meant many families were excluded from basketball. To address the need, the Altona Gators Inclusion Program was created to make basketball accessible to children with additional support needs, embracing values of connection, openness and support. The aim is simple: break down the barriers that often prevent kids from joining mainstream sports, and create a safe, enjoyable environment that values everyone's unique abilities.

ABBA took a significant step by partnering with Welcoming Clubs, which helped the club expand its efforts. This partnership provided training and support for staff and volunteers, which helped them to better understand the needs of all players. With these new skills, ABBA set up a weekly program that invites children with disability, autism, psychosocial challenges and additional support needs to enjoy the sport in a welcoming and supportive setting. The children have varying levels of basketball skills and experience. Jessica Scannell, Welcome to the Game Coordinator at Welcoming Clubs, says 'Every sporting association should have an inclusion program that sits alongside their mainstream competitive programming. This would really improve the quality of life for so many children who are currently excluded from all the physical, social and mental health benefits that developing your skills and feeling a sense of belonging at your local club brings. We are so proud to see the Altona Gators leading the way with their inclusion program. Having this program available has been life-changing for many of the families involved.'

Left: Participants in the Altona Gators Inclusion Program. Photos by Brian Doherty.

Through Welcoming Clubs, ABBA offered coaches, volunteers and staff hands-on training through two workshops, 'Active Inclusion' and 'Inclusive Coaching'. This training gave the team practical tools to make sure each child felt welcome and supported. The coaches and volunteers then implemented their training by co-delivering a free come and try school holiday program for different age groups with Welcoming Clubs. The success of this event helped shape the Altona Gator's weekly Inclusion Program, which continues to make a lasting difference.

Leanne Hindle, Inclusion Program Coordinator and Founder, is passionate about the program's mission. For her, it's about 'bringing the ability in their disability' and showing how basketball can be a place where kids feel included, supported and confident. Her dedication, along with the other coaches and volunteers, has created a program that truly values and supports each child's individual needs. Coaches Sean Crees, Zahli Cunningham, Peyton Knox, Kiana Dayao and Chloe Millar have been particularly wonderful with the participants.

For many families, the Inclusion Program has become crucial to their weekly routine. It's not just about basketball but connection, support and trust. Laurey, a parent of three autistic children, shares that the program has given her kids the support and understanding they need. 'For my children, it's about trust. They need to be able to trust who is teaching them. If [the coaches] don't understand my children's needs, then my children aren't going to learn from them.' Thanks to this program, her kids have found a safe, fun place where they feel understood.

Hai, who also has two sons on the autism spectrum, has also noticed a big change for his family since joining. One of his sons, who struggled with social skills, has especially blossomed. 'I really think it's a good program for the social development it does for the kids,' Hai says. 'I've seen the progression – socialising with other kids, being part of a team.' For many families, the program offers a rare opportunity for their kids to experience the joys of teamwork, self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

With ongoing support from Welcoming Clubs, the Altona Gators Inclusion Program has become a model for inclusive sports. Kate Coffey from ABBA explains, 'I think it's exceptionally important to include as many people as possible in our sport. We can bring people together from a whole range of different backgrounds, but without an inclusion program, we weren't really allowing the whole community to be involved.' The program has helped the club embrace a fuller version of its community, connecting more deeply with the families they serve.

The program has proven to be deeply rewarding for the kids and families involved, as well as the volunteers and staff who run it. The program has had a big impact on its coaches too. They have grown as people and developed their coaching skills in ways many did not expect before becoming involved with the program. Leanne and the team hope to expand the program to reach more kids and families in the City of Hobsons Bay and surrounding areas in Melbourne's western suburbs. 'I'm hoping the program gets bigger in the future,' Leanne says. 'These kids get to come and be unified as one.'

The Altona Gators Inclusion Program shows how the power of sports can bring people together. The program has created a community where kids with disability, neurodiversity and individual support needs can thrive, make friends and simply enjoy the game. It's a place where basketball is more than a sport – it's a way to connect, support and build an inclusive future for everyone.

Welcoming Clubs coaches Bella Gai and Nyidier Riak take a person-centred approach to player engagement at the Altona Gators Inclusion School Holiday Basketball Program. Photos by Brian Doherty.

"We are so proud to see the Altona Gators leading the way with their inclusion program. Having this program available has been life-changing for many of the families involved."

Jessica Scannell, Welcome to the Game Coordinator, Welcoming Clubs

# Belong in Hockey

## Toowoomba, QLD

**An innovative hockey program in regional Queensland may provide the ideal template for building inclusive practices in sports organisations. An emerging talent on the field and now an active volunteer away from the action, one member of the local *Êzidî* community is living – and sharing – the benefits of the 'Belong in Hockey' project in Toowoomba.**

Amir Abdalla remembers mixed emotions upon his arrival in Queensland in 2022. His happiness was tinged with confusion as his family set down roots and started a new life in the garden city of Toowoomba. Almost three years later, confusion has become a connection as the 19-year-old Iraqi native goes from strength to strength in his new community.

He attributes a key part of this transformation to sports involvement. 'I had never heard of hockey,' Amir says, recalling his introduction to the sport. He had started his studies at TAFE Toowoomba, where one afternoon, Jessie McCartney came into his orbit.

Jessie explains, 'I had recently taken up the hockey manager role at Toowoomba, and I had been approached by Elizabeth Laverty with an idea for a psychosocial sports program. I had no experience but was very agreeable to the idea. I was familiar with the benefits of sport for international students from a hockey program I had worked on in Melbourne with students from Punjabi backgrounds.'

Elizabeth, also a member of Toowoomba Hockey, brought knowledge of this territory from her work with Multicultural Australia. It was decided to market the fledgling Belong in Hockey initiative directly to people from multicultural and refugee backgrounds by running a 'try hockey' session at TAFE Toowoomba. The response among students was enthusiastic. However, this did not translate into large numbers attending Toowoomba hockey grounds the following day, where Jessie had assembled a small team of volunteers for a cultural awareness session. 'On Friday, we're there and we are ready, and nobody comes. Zero,' Jessie says.

Left: Amir and Jessie practising hockey.

Plan B involved an additional string to the bow of the volunteers who were initially recruited to pass on their hockey skills. 'We decided what we're going to do now is organise transport for the people to get them here. We returned to TAFE and ran the session again. At the end, we asked who had fun and who wanted to come to hockey tomorrow. Again, there was great interest, but this time, we said to the group, "Give me your name and address and phone number, and we'll pick you up from your house." And once we started doing that, that's when our numbers began to increase.'

Over time, more than 20 regulars took part in the Belong in Hockey project on a Friday morning, including a 50-50 male/female split. This group was consistently supported by a band of informed and versatile volunteers who were now also reaping their own benefits from being involved.

'A lot of the volunteers we get are older retirees for whom there were physical benefits as well as the mental health benefits gained from having such a useful and important role in the community,' Jessie says.

'In many ways, they are the most crucial element because we require them at every step of the project. If we didn't have enough volunteers or a high turnover of volunteers, then the program would be more difficult to continue to execute.'

The volunteers played a key part in supporting emerging talents like Amir to get involved in the sport at a more structured level. Key to this graduation was an eight-week 'Summer Sixes' bridging competition. Teams were made up of volunteers and some members of the 4,000-strong *Êzidî* community in Toowoomba, including Amir, who had taken to hockey like a natural.

'Our aim is to have these people involved in ongoing hockey participation both as players and volunteers,' Jessie explains. 'To achieve this, they will eventually have to join an established hockey club. But there is a big gap between Friday morning trying hockey with volunteers in a non-structured, casual, non-committing environment to very structured, organised sports participation.'

Showing a natural aptitude for goalkeeping, Amir Abdalla bridged this gap impressively. With the support of knowledgeable volunteers and guided by the thoughtful structures of the Belong in Hockey project, he went on to sign for Rangeville Hockey Club. He has already collected an array of trophies recognising his rise through the ranks and has been put forward for trials at representative level.

'My English wasn't that good at first, but it has improved so much through my time playing hockey,' Amir says. 'Belong in Hockey has also been great for my mental health. It changes the lives of people like me who come here from other countries and, at first, don't feel like we belong.'

Having gained so much from the high-quality team of volunteers at Toowoomba hockey, Amir has recently joined the club committee and is looking to extend his network of new connections through volunteer roles alongside his on-field role as a player. He also described his lived experience at the Queensland Volunteering Conference 2025, showcasing how participation in sport can change lives.

> "Belong in Hockey has also been great for my mental health. It changes the lives of people like me who come here from other countries and, at first, don't feel like we belong."
>
> Amir Abdalla

Left: Leah Subijano, Nema Madnani, Christine Afoa, Anusha Muller and Zozan Balci.

Below: Nema Madnani, Perpetua Burt and Christine Afoa.

# Creating a welcoming space for multicultural women

## University of Technology Sydney, NSW

**At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), a dedicated group of women is driving change and fostering belonging through the Multicultural Women's Network (MWN).**

Established as an employee resource group, the MWN is a safe and empowering space for multicultural women, ensuring they feel valued, connected and supported in their professional and personal journeys.

Dr Elaine Laforteza, MWN Project Officer (Special Projects), explains the significance of such a network. 'The network is important as it enables a space for staff members who identify as coming from CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) and CARM (culturally and racially marginalised) backgrounds to work together on issues pertinent to us. We have a core committee dedicated to driving the strategic priorities of the MWN, which fundamentally is about amplifying cultural diversity and acknowledging the intersecting influences of gender, race and ethnicity in the workplace. We are the only employee resource group in the university to have this focus.'

Created in 2018 by staff from the UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion and the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, the MWN emerged as a response to the need for a stronger support system for culturally diverse women at UTS. In 2019, a university-wide survey highlighted the distinctly unique experiences of Indigenous and CALD women, leading to the formation of separate networks to better address their different needs. After a brief pause during the Covid-19 pandemic, MWN was reactivated in 2022 with a renewed commitment to advocacy, professional development and community-building, aligning with UTS's anti-racism initiatives.

'Personally, the network has been a great way to contribute to and lead campaigns and projects focused on cultural diversity and anti-racism. It has also given me a substantial network of support, which is very much needed in equity work. The network is also a fantastic way to meet and collaborate with amazing women and allies across the university,' Dr Laforteza says.

Since its revival, MWN has grown significantly, expanding its core committee and delivering impactful initiatives with financial support from the UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion. From professional development workshops and speaker sessions to more informal social events, the network continues to create opportunities for connection, learning and advocacy.

There are three areas of primary focus for MWN:

1. **Empowerment & connection** – Establishing safe spaces for professional and personal networking, mutual support and learning. The network also serves as a platform through which UTS can integrate multicultural women's perspectives into institutional policies and programs.
2. **Advocacy for equity & inclusion** – Influencing systemic change through targeted recruitment and retention practices, ensuring multicultural women's meaningful representation at all university levels.
3. **Celebrating cultural diversity** – Acknowledging and valuing the lived experiences, knowledge and expertise of people from diverse cultural backgrounds through meaningful initiatives and events.

MWN member and Project Officer (Grants Delivery) Dr Zozan Balci explains, 'These focus areas are not just about creating opportunities; they are about fostering a culture where women, particularly from minoritised backgrounds, can thrive authentically. An essential part of this journey is drawing attention to current barriers and injustices and using our collective strength to challenge them.'

Some key initiatives the MWN has delivered are the Say My Name Campaign and Say Our Names Research Project. These are decolonising initiatives that celebrate and acknowledge names often mispronounced or considered 'foreign' in Anglo-Australian contexts. This project aims to shift attitudes and provide practical tools for fostering respect and inclusion.

Dr Balci explains, 'This initiative is about more than just names; it's about reclaiming identity and challenging what we consider "normal". Names serve as an easy entry point to spark broader discussions about cultural competence and inclusion. But importantly, if you can be named, you can be seen, and you can be heard. And it's important that our voices are heard.'

Another groundbreaking initiative was the Acknowledgement of Country Project, a multilingual initiative (set for release in 2025) that enables individuals to deliver an Acknowledgement of Country in their mother tongue, strengthening the connection between cultural identity and respect for Indigenous people, communities and Countries.

'At its heart, the Acknowledgement of Country Project aims to inspire people from CALD backgrounds to more deeply care for Indigenous sovereignty and reconciliation,' says Dr Laforteza. 'Using our mother languages is a way to action this in a meaningful manner. This has been one of the most beautiful projects I've ever worked on. There's a special kind of magic in hearing stories and multiple languages, such as Wiradjuri, Sinhala, Ilocano, Samoan, Turkish and so on, and feeling very enriched by the linguistic diversity we have at UTS and beyond.'

MWN is an outstanding model for other institutions and communities to draw on. The network takes a grounded approach to inclusion grounded in strategic advocacy, institutional support and community leadership.

While MWN's core committee operates on a volunteer basis, the network is not content with maintaining the status quo. It continues to push for more profound systemic change, ensuring that multicultural women's voices are embedded in UTS's policies and practices. Looking ahead, MWN aims to expand its advocacy beyond UTS, building partnerships and influencing broader conversations about cultural inclusion and equity.

MWN Project Officer (Advocacy) Tofa Amanda Moors-Mailei shares her vision for this critical initiative. 'I envision the MWN as a movement that continues to break barriers and redefine what true inclusion looks like. We're not just advocating for seats at the table – we are reshaping the table itself, ensuring that your voices are not only heard but truly valued. Our work is about shifting mindsets, transforming systems and creating spaces where multicultural women can unapologetically thrive!'

In reality, the MWN is more than just a network – it is a movement, creating a university culture where all women, regardless of background, feel seen, valued and empowered.

# Celebrating inclusion, conversation and community through a diversity festival

## University of New South Wales, NSW

**Each year, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Kensington campus transforms into a dynamic space of conversation, connection and celebration through the UNSW Diversity Festival. It is the university's flagship event for equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).**

Since its inception in 2019, the Diversity Festival has grown and now offers more than 40 free, in-person, online and hybrid events annually. Through an expression of interest process, students and staff are invited to propose and host events that reflect the issues and experiences that matter to them.

'The inaugural Diversity Festival was held to bring the community together to embrace diversity and ignite bold conversations for a more inclusive society,' explains Abi Scott, Senior External Engagement Manager (EDI), Division of Societal Impact, Equity & Engagement, and the festival coordinator.

'UNSW was the first university to have a Division of EDI back in 2017, and the festival was a visible and engaging way to not only showcase the valuable work EDI was doing across many different areas of the university, but also to include more people in conversations around inclusion – what it is, and why it is important for a progressive society,' she says.

Togetherness is one of the core strengths of the UNSW Diversity Festival, bringing people together from across the university and wider community to share lived experiences and explore active approaches to diversity and inclusion. And with an annual attendance of 8,000 people, the festival is continuing to grow in scale, impact and engagement.

'With such a diverse community at UNSW and new students and staff joining every year, it gives everyone the opportunity to be seen, to raise important issues, share lived experiences and help educate each other, strengthening a positive and inclusive culture and creating a real sense of belonging,' Abi reflects. 'This truly is an event for our community, by our community. We want to stay true

Main image: Participants at the Diversity Festival.

to that premise while continuing to grow the festival and the impact it has on our community.'

The flagship event of the 2024 festival was *Trump's America and the Future of Diversity*, which turned out to be a portent for the future. Held before the 2024 US presidential election, the session was hosted by Verity Firth, Vice-President of Societal Impact, Equity and Engagement, who was joined by former BBC foreign affairs correspondent, journalist and author Nick Bryant, UC Law San Francisco's Chief Diversity Officer Mario Lopez, and Frances Voon, Executive Manager of the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law. Together, they explored the global implications of shifting political landscapes and their effect on diversity, inclusion and social justice.

Another standout event was the Forced Migration discussion as part of the Speak Out sessions. Chaired by Madeline Gleeson, the discussion featured Dr Parisa Glass, Abang Anade Othow, Sherine Al Shallah and Frances Voon, who brought both expertise and lived experience to the conversation. Through their stories, the event fostered a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by forcibly displaced individuals, highlighting the resilience, systemic barriers and opportunities for greater inclusion. This dialogue underscored the importance of justice and access in shaping a more compassionate and equitable society.

There was also the engaging *My Name Is…* activation, which explored the stigma and discrimination that people with non-Anglo names face. They often feel alienated in everyday situations such as the coffee line, during class, or seeing a red underline beneath their name every time they type it, making them feel different and excluded. This activation aimed to decolonise the understanding of names and start conversations to create a space where everyone feels seen and heard.

Over the last five years, the UNSW Diversity Festival has become more than just a university event; it has become a statement, a commitment, and a celebration of the diverse tapestry that makes UNSW thrive. By continuing to expand its programs and reach, the festival serves as a beacon of inclusion, reinforcing the university's dedication to creating a welcoming and equitable environment for all.

# JBS Riverina leads the way in workforce inclusivity and support

## Riverina region, NSW

**JBS Riverina has cemented its position as an industry leader committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive workplace by prioritising employee welfare.**

JBS Riverina in New South Wales is a significant player in the Australian agribusiness industry. JBS faced an ongoing challenge of attracting and keeping workers in a competitive job market and was losing talent to other locations and related industries. In response, the business focused on employee wellbeing and was the first Australian business to join the Welcoming Workplaces program.

Ken Dachi is the Coordinator of Welcoming Workplaces. He explains, 'It was essential to the organisation to focus on its "employer readiness" efforts. Through this, JBS Riverina has not only cemented its status as a founding member of Welcoming Workplaces, but it has also made its workplace more inclusive and been recognised as an Employer of Choice.'

Understanding that people are at the heart of long-term success, JBS Riverina is committed to supporting its workforce, particularly in beef production, through opportunities for skill development and career growth. A key part of this approach has been hiring Knox Kalounisiga as the Engagement & Support Coordinator. Knox provides vital wellbeing support to workers, particularly those from the Pacific Islands, helping them adjust to life in Australia. He also plays a role in recruiting workers under the PALM scheme. 'My work covers everything to do with their welfare, both in and out of work,' says Knox. 'My phone is always on because you never know when someone will need help. I support them through challenges – big or small. For many, moving to Australia is a huge culture shock, and it's important to be there for them.'

Knox, originally from Fiji, understands the differences firsthand. 'Back home, I grew up without running water. We washed in the river and used candles at night. So when these workers come to Australia and see electricity and neon lights, it's a

Far left: Crawford Gapu (left) and fellow slaughterman Yumin Bao.
Left: Robert Johnston (left) and Knox Kalounisiga.

big culture shock. It's not just about work – it's about helping them adapt to their new life.'

One of Knox's key roles is offering practical support, like teaching workers how to manage their finances. 'Many of them come from low-paying jobs, and suddenly they have extra money in their accounts. It's a new concept for them, so I help them learn about budgeting and saving.' This approach is more than just about improving business results – it's about creating a workplace where people feel supported, valued and empowered. In regional areas, where skilled workers can be hard to find, investing in your people has positive results not just for the business but also for current and future workers.

A great example is the story of Crawford, a team member who started with JBS Foods Riverina as a cleaner and received the training and support needed to be one of the best neck boners at JBS, if not in the country. 'He was given a chance, and he took it with both hands,' says Knox. Today, Crawford is on a skilled visa with a pathway to permanent residency, and JBS is also working to bring his partner to Australia. Crawford has also taken on a mentoring role, travelling around the country to train and guide recruits. Crawford's journey is a perfect example of the power of investing in people. With the right support and development opportunities, JBS Riverina has helped him grow in his role and make a real impact on the organisation and the industry.

The organisation's focus on employee welfare is a big part of why it's so successful. 'Before, it was all about numbers – costs and yields,' says Knox. 'Now, it's about looking after the workers first, and the numbers will follow. It's great to be part of a team that understands that.'

He recalls a recent tragedy in the community when a worker tragically drowned. 'We all went out to search for him,' Knox says. 'Robert Johnston, the Plant Manager, understood that we were short of workers and losing money, but he told us, "You do what you need to do, and when you're ready, come back to work." Most companies would only give a day or two off, but JBS Riverina was understanding and gave us a week. That kind of support makes workers feel valued, and they want to give back.'

Since Robert Johnston assumed leadership at JBS, the management team has focused on creating a more supportive and welcoming environment. Over the past couple of years, his approach has contributed to a healthier, more inclusive culture with a renewed emphasis on employee wellbeing. As a result, the plant has experienced improved performance and set new records in 2024.

JBS Riverina's efforts to create a welcoming and supportive workplace highlight the importance of investing in people. By focusing on workforce development, the company has positioned itself as a leader in nurturing talent. Like Crawford's, success stories reflect a broader cultural shift at JBS, where growth, inclusivity and long-term success are at the core of the business. As JBS continues to invest in its people, it sets a strong example of how companies can thrive by supporting their workers and creating a productive and genuinely welcoming environment.

> "This approach is more than just about improving business results – it's about creating a workplace where people feel supported, valued and empowered."

Knox Kalounisiga, Engagement & Support Coordinator, JBS Riverina

# The Welcoming Cities Awards for Change
## Local Government

The Welcoming Cities Awards for Change recognise the progress that strengthens social cohesion with newly arrived and receiving communities to ensure everyone has a chance to participate, belong and thrive. In recognition of its impact, the **City of Greater Dandenong's Community Connector program won the 2025 Welcoming Cities Award for Change** in the **Local Government** category.

# Community connections create real change

## City of Greater Dandenong, VIC

Approximate population 167,000
58% overseas born
0.4% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

**The City of Greater Dandenong's Community Connector program began as a temporary Covid-19 response. It has since evolved into a permanent initiative to address critical service gaps for vulnerable residents, particularly Afghan families. The program has empowered hundreds of families to access essential services and build stable lives by fostering connections, breaking down barriers and providing direct support.**

In 2021, as the City of Greater Dandenong grappled with the widespread effects of the pandemic, it became clear that many vulnerable community members were struggling to access vital support. People seeking asylum, refugees, low-income families, elderly individuals and single parents often face language barriers, limited digital access and a lack of awareness about available services. To address these challenges, the council initially created the Covid Material Aid Officer role as a six-month position. However, what began as a short-term response soon highlighted a deeper, ongoing need for long-term community support.

Arif Azizi, the Community Connector and Dads Support Officer for the City of Greater Dandenong, witnessed firsthand the service gaps affecting the community. Many people were unaware of available resources or struggled to navigate complex systems such as health care, social services and financial support. Recognising that a temporary solution wouldn't be enough, Arif recalls, 'We had big numbers of asylum seekers and bridging visa holders who didn't have support. Quite a few people had been rough sleepers, and with my background I was able to support them. We wrote a long submission to the council about how valuable the work was.'

This insight led to the creation of the Community Connector program, which evolved into a permanent initiative providing continuous support to vulnerable residents. The program became a vital bridge between community members and essential services, focusing particularly on the needs of Afghan families who settled in the area following the fall of Afghanistan in 2021. By making the role permanent, the council reinforced its commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring vulnerable residents could access the support they needed.

The program tackled significant barriers by engaging with individuals directly and offering personalised assistance. Language barriers and cultural differences often left community members unaware of available resources. The Community Connector program became a trusted point of

Left: New arrivals to Dandenong receiving supplies.
Far left: Arif with goods to be distributed.

contact, reaching out to those in need through word-of-mouth referrals.

Hassibullah Hashimi, who arrived from Afghanistan in 2021, shares how Arif and the council helped him and his three children settle after moving from the City of Melbourne to Dandenong. Now with four children under 12, Hassibullah is grateful for the support. 'They helped us so much,' he says. 'With clothing and helping us find a house. When my parents arrived in July last year, they needed lots of things. I connected them to Arif, and he helped them a lot.'

The Community Connector program also fostered community engagement, creating initiatives like a dedicated dads' group to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) fathers. From July to December 2024, this initiative brought together 498 parents and children, strengthening family relationships and fostering meaningful connections. Hassibullah, a member of the dads' group, says, 'The connection is very, very good. Because three of my children were born in Afghanistan, they were not speaking and playing – they were too naughty. The group helped my children connect to the community and learn English.'

Additionally, partnerships with local charities have expanded the program's impact, such as one that provided clothing and footwear to 600 people and another that distributed 60 Christmas food hampers to vulnerable families. Arif emphasises the importance of distributing sewing machines to support women, explaining, 'We had 50 machines, and once received, women can not only sew the clothes they need for their culture but also start small businesses.'

Wayne McGough, National President of the Cardijn Community of Australia, works through the Catholic community to collect and deliver resources to Arif, who then distributes them within his networks. Wayne also advocates for new arrivals, saying, 'We do a lot of work with people who are anti-migrants, both through anti-racism messaging and recognising qualifications.' He shares an example. 'We knew some people from the Iranian community who were fully qualified medical professionals but couldn't get jobs here. Yet hospitals were short of doctors, so we wrote to the Federal Minister at the time, which coincided with the building of hospitals in Bendigo, Wagga Wagga and Albury. They're now all employed.'

Beyond immediate aid, the Community Connector program has created lasting change by empowering residents to navigate support systems independently. By breaking down barriers, fostering collaboration among service providers and advocating for community needs, the program has become an essential pillar of support in the City of Greater Dandenong.

Reza and Hossain Attai, brothers who have been in Australia for less than two weeks, have already received help through the program. Translated by Hassibullah, Reza explains the simplicity of the support in the early days of arriving. He says, 'I got Arif's number, and he told me about the facilities and other things the government has.'

Arif reflects on the importance of understanding newcomers' challenges, especially from an Afghan perspective. 'It's like a tidal wave of information when they arrive,' he says. 'But I'm in the middle, trying to find services in the area and link people.'

The program's grassroots approach drives meaningful change, ensuring the community's most vulnerable members receive the support they need to build stable, fulfilling lives. By empowering people with the tools and resources to navigate their new environment, Arif and the program, more broadly, foster long-term resilience and self-sufficiency within the community.

# The Welcoming Cities Awards for Change
## Organisation

**Integreat Queensland is the winner of the 2025 Welcoming Cities Awards for Change** in the **Organisation** category. Their initiative, the Moving Feast, fosters social cohesion and economic empowerment within Gladstone's multicultural community.

Integreat Queensland allows everyone from everywhere to get involved, feel welcome, learn new things, and contribute to a strong, thriving local community. For over 10 years, they have been helping new and existing residents across central Queensland to come together and enrich their lives through these connections. They support people from different countries, backgrounds and parts of Australia to confidently settle in, make friends, share their skills and culture, and build relationships with local people that benefit everyone.

## Celebrating cultural heritage through food

**Designed to equip culturally diverse individuals with culinary and business skills, the Moving Feast program provides pathways for employment and entrepreneurship while celebrating cultural heritage through food.**

Initially designed as a micro-food business course, the Moving Feast combines accredited training, such as the Food Safety Supervisor Certificate, with hands-on experience through pop-up restaurants and community events. Since its inception, the program has expanded its reach, featuring events highlighting food as a powerful medium for connection, education and economic opportunities.

The Moving Feast exemplifies how food can unite people across cultures. 'Food is a universal language that transcends cultural and language barriers, creating opportunities for people to connect, share stories and build relationships,' says Charmaine Bennett, General Manager of Integreat Queensland. 'By gathering around the table, individuals not only experience new cuisines but also develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of different cultural traditions, fostering stronger community bonds.'

In 2023, the Moving Feast showcased international cuisines from Egypt, Vietnam, Colombia and Nepal during a pop-up restaurant at Artmatters, an art gallery and workshop space. Participants also prepared a morning tea for Integreat Queensland's Biggest Morning Tea, raising funds for the Cancer Council. These events were more than just culinary experiences: they allowed individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their cultures through food, creating connections and fostering a sense of belonging.

One significant barrier many face when entering the food industry is navigating the complex food safety regulations and the Australian food business landscape. For individuals lacking formal qualifications, business knowledge or confidence in navigating regulations, entering the industry can be daunting. Charmaine explains that one participant,

Left: Trainer Pierre and three proud participants of Integreat Queensland's Moving Feast program, showcasing their hard work, cultural heritage, and culinary achievements.

> "Food is a universal language that transcends cultural and language barriers, creating opportunities for people to connect, share stories and build relationships..."
>
> Charmaine Bennett, General Manager of Integreat Queensland

Dalia Ahmed Elseddik, initially struggled with English, but through Integreat Queensland's free Conversational English classes, '(she) gained the confidence and knowledge needed to successfully participate in the Moving Feast and showcase her culinary talents.'

Through the Moving Feast, Dalia was empowered to pursue her culinary dreams. Her journey is a testament to how such programs can break down the barriers many individuals face when entering the food industry. Integreat provides a variety of programs in conjunction with the Moving Feast, through which individuals receive holistic support.

Cross-cultural conversations and community engagement are critical to fostering empathy, understanding and social cohesion. Charmaine explains, 'Conversations foster empathy, reduce prejudice and strengthen social cohesion by allowing people to connect through shared experiences. Events like the Moving Feast provide a welcoming space for diverse groups to engage, exchange ideas and celebrate cultural traditions, ultimately enriching the broader community and promoting inclusion.'

Testimonial feedback from event attendees underscores the program's success. 'The Syrian-style Fattah definitely took top spot for me, but the rest of the food was exceptional,' says Cornia Williams, a guest at the Authentic Multicultural Lunch. 'Brilliant event! Three Michelin hats!' says Gayle Black, a guest at the World Fusion Dinner, reflecting the high level of appreciation for the cultural exchange facilitated through food.

The Moving Feast has also profoundly impacted its participants' personal and professional growth. Many graduates have launched their own food businesses or secured employment in the local food sector. Devlin Bain, for instance, opened Old Time Fish and Chips in Clinton using the skills and knowledge gained from the program.

The program doesn't just teach people how to cook – it helps them build the skills they need to thrive in business and life. It gives individuals the confidence to believe in themselves, the tools to succeed, and the opportunity to share their culture with others. As the program continues to evolve, its success in fostering multicultural inclusivity, economic empowerment and social connection remains clear.

By using food as a tool for social change, the Moving Feast has enriched the Gladstone community, providing an innovative model for building stronger, more inclusive societies.

# The Welcoming Cities Award
## Individual

**Eva Mwakichako** is the Senior Community Development Officer at City of Stirling in Wadjak Nyoongar Country, Western Australia. Eva has over 10 years' experience working in the community sector in various private and public sector roles in Perth. She is committed to, and passionate about, providing and improving culturally appropriate services for people of diverse backgrounds, particularly those who are disadvantaged or facing adversity.

During her career, Eva has overcome various challenges and experiences which have shaped her leadership style and helped her to become a resilient and adaptable human. She is a strong advocate for the industry and actively promotes diversity and inclusion in the workplace and the community she serves. **Eva is the winner of the Welcoming Cities Award for Individuals.**

**Welcoming Cities: Can you tell us a bit about your journey in local government and welcoming work and maybe what you've seen change over that time?**

Eva Mwakichako: Yeah, sure. I'll start from when I volunteered with the SASA Youth Program. The SASA Program was run by the City of Stirling for young people of diverse backgrounds, with a specific focus on African young people. The program aimed to build resilience as they settled in Australia and navigated the challenge of living between two cultures. They were being pulled by the culture that they have at home and then the culture they have at school with other young people. That laid an interest for me to want to work in community services.

**What made you want to work for local government?**

In local government funding didn't start and stop. This meant that the programs I was going to hopefully work on would be sustainable programs. My first role in 2013 involved activating the multicultural centre in Mirrabooka which had just been opened. The Centre was a space where we ran workshops to build capacity in newly arrived migrant communities. It was also a space where communities could run their own programs and celebrations. This is so important for diverse communities, when they have a place where they feel comfortable to celebrate who they are and a space where they can access education to build their capacity as they settle in Australia.

**You've been working with the City of Stirling for 12 years now. When you reflect on this journey, what do you feel most proud of?**

I'm proud of the film we produced last year for Welcoming Week. It encapsulated everything that we've been working for over the 12 years. It showed the welcoming spaces that we have in City of Stirling and then it showcased the capacity building work we do. It featured some people who've started their businesses through the 'how to start a small business in Australia' workshops we've run. Then it showcased people connecting with our spaces – the beaches, the libraries and the recreational spaces. These spaces, they change people's lives, you know. Welcoming spaces foster a sense of place and belonging. I'm most proud of connecting people to all these spaces.

**The effort you have invested in building strong relationships with community is one of the reasons why you were nominated for the award. In Perth, when people want to connect with multicultural communities, they come to you, don't they? How do you develop and nurture relationships in your work?**

Building relationships is not easy. It requires time, it doesn't happen overnight. It requires intentionality, and respect. I try to meet people where they are without any expectation and then we work through what it is that they need, in a respectful and culturally sensitive way, in a culturally safe space. I think that's the most important thing.

**Q On the topic of relationships, you have done quite a bit of work at Stirling in building bridges between different communities. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?**

It's not easy when people's experiences differ from those in their countries of origin. One person told me, 'If we were back home, I would not talk to that person.' They actually were brave enough to tell me that, and I just said, 'Well, we're in Australia and it is wonderful when you unite to get something done.'

So conflict resolution has been part of what we do, slowly and over a period of time, once people get to know what it is that they want. For example, for the Eid festival, people from all different backgrounds came together and made sure the event was a success.

We can't discount the trauma that one group has caused the other, but ultimately it is wonderful when people unite to achieve a common goal. I tell them it's about the next generation that you're raising here – unity is something that will benefit not only yourself but also your children.

**Q You've also worked to build relationships between some of the newly arrived communities in Stirling and the Aboriginal community, too. Can you tell us a little bit about that?**

Through our Newcomer Tours we take newcomers out to the Wadjak Northside Aboriginal Centre, and one of our Elders, Len Yarran, has been instrumental in making our communities feel at home and feel welcomed. He talks about the history of Aboriginal people, helping newcomers understand how the Aboriginal community has been affected by colonialism. They went through so much with separation of families and children – sad history. This helps newcomers understand the Aboriginal community better.

**Q When you think about what you've learnt over the years that you've been driving welcoming work at the City of Stirling, are there some tips that you'd like to share for those who might be starting out in this space?**

I've learnt a lot. I've learned to be patient. I've learned to work with communities on the programs that they want. We can't be top-down in our approach. We need to work together. It's about really collaborating and having strong partnerships and relationships with the community, so you get the best results for everybody.

Communication is key – intercultural communication. Sometimes we might say something, and it's received in a different way. Through our in-house cultural awareness workshops, we focus a lot on building intercultural communication skills so that we can make sure we understand one another.

I've also tried to work with my fellow colleagues to build understanding of the diverse communities because that can be a bit daunting, and people don't know what they don't know. Sometimes it's just that they've never met or had exposure to people of diverse backgrounds. The same principles apply to building internal relationships – it takes patience, and good communication. Sometimes you can feel discouraged because you'd host a cultural awareness workshop and only six people turn up. It's learning not to be impatient with the process.

**Q What have you seen change within the organisation in the time that you've been there?**

When I joined the team, I was one of the few people of diverse backgrounds; now I can say we are very multicultural, community services especially. The Welcoming Week video we made has staff saying 'Welcome to the City' in their own language. It wasn't hard to find volunteers for this – we are so diverse now. Once our Multicultural Framework was developed, we were also able to embed certain principles and policies in the different business units, and the City's Diversity Champions helped us a lot because these were staff from different business units who supported our vision. For example, the recreation team did a lot of work in making aquatic centres more inclusive for women from diverse backgrounds with the Women Only Swimming Program. So, I'd say the City has evolved in the last 12 years. A lot of people have come together to work towards this vision of becoming a more harmonious and inclusive city.

**Q What does welcoming mean to you?**

The word for 'welcome' in Swahili is 'karibu'. The way I did that with my hands (gesturing to come in), it means welcome. 'Come in, come in.' And when you come in, you sit down, and you will be served a cup of tea and something to eat... Welcoming is being nurtured, it's being made to feel at home. It's being made to feel like you belong. It's that feeling you get when someone says 'Come in, welcome, welcome' in a genuine way, not just because of what we want from you, but welcoming because we really want to bring you in and to get to know you so that we can support you better. That is what welcoming means to me, and I hope our spaces can be more like that. I hope that the people we work with can be more like that, so we can make people feel like they belong.

# The Welcoming Australia Medal
## Gary Lee

The Welcoming Australia Medal recognises individuals who have played a significant (and often unassuming) role in developing Welcoming Australia as a movement and organisation. Since 2018 it has been awarded to key individuals who have been instrumental in making Welcoming Australia what it is today and whose legacy deserves to be honoured. **In 2025, the Welcoming Australia Medal is awarded to Gary Lee.**

Gary Lee has played a crucial role in the Welcoming Australia story, particularly in Victoria. In 2012, Gary joined Welcome to Australia (former name) as an ambassador in the movement's early days and has been actively involved since. Gary helped to coordinate multiple Melbourne Walk Together events between 2014 and 2018. He has championed the Welcoming Universities initiative, particularly in its early research, development and implementation stages. In addition to promoting Welcoming Australia's work, values and goals, Gary is also an active ambassador for Bully Zero Australia Foundation, Melbourne Victory Multicultural Program and the Moroccan Children's Appeal.

Above: Gary with Kern Mangan-Walker, Missy Higgins and Brad Chilcott at Walk Together 2016

**Welcoming Australia: Congratulations on winning the Welcoming Australia Medal. What does an award like this mean to you?**

**Gary Lee:** It means a lot. It's a win for diversity. It's a win for all the international students I've worked with. It's a win for migrant communities, refugees and asylum seekers because I think we have made lots of progress since I started this journey. I feel this is a recognition of the work and the people involved with it over the years. I hope it's encouragement. So, it's very humbling, always very humbling.

**Can you tell us how you got involved in Welcoming Australia, which was Welcome to Australia back then?**

I was already working at the City of Melbourne, where I've been for about 15 years now. A lot of our work involves welcoming communities to the City. We are very proud of this city. One day I read up about 'Walk Together' and got my dance crew to perform at it. But I had FOMO. I wanted to do more. So I reached out to explore how I could contribute. I wanted to connect my work in the City with Welcome to Australia. The chemistry was obvious.

**And in the time you've been working alongside Welcoming Australia, what changes, if any, have you noticed?**

These days, there is better diversity and inclusion/representation in mainstream media, be it in advertisements or films. It's slowly becoming part of the norm. There's stronger presence of successful diaspora and migrant communities and their stories in our everyday lives. People that I can relate to.

I am observing more businesses practising inclusive and welcoming initiatives that promote retention, upskilling and inclusive employment policies. An example of this success is Seek removing the 'permanent residency' requirement on their job sites.

Welcoming someone extends beyond merely opening a door; it conveys a message of acceptance. We strive to make our guests feel a sense of belonging and value, affirming our acceptance of them as they are while providing support for all their aspirations.

**More recently, you championed the Welcoming Universities initiative. What do you envision for the higher education sector in the coming years?**

I have the privilege to work with people I highly respect and adore in the sector. Lots can be done, I guess, in terms of government leadership. They are the people we all want to speak with to change mindsets. I want people to start looking at students for what they bring to the country. Twenty years ago, we talked about students being 'cash cows'.

But we all know students bring so much more than tuition fees. They bring the vibrancy. They bring in new perspectives. They bring new ideas. They've changed the landscape.

There are probably 20 bubble tea shops in the city, and there is delicious Thai food. That landscape has changed because of migrants and international students. I want people to care more about their welfare and truly understand their intentions for coming here. We know many people now come here and have embraced the lifestyle in Melbourne, so if they want to stay, we should encourage that.

**Q There's been a lot of talk about student caps and the impact of international student numbers on the housing situation. How would you like to see the conversation change nationally around international students and their impact?**

People who discuss it just need to understand it a bit better. A lot of the negative comments come from what the media tells them. I encourage the debate around it, but I think people must understand or be open-minded enough to understand the situation. We often talk about students contributing to the housing crisis, but we also know that students are in it themselves. There is no statistically significant evidence between international student numbers and the rental costs, so it's quite unfair for that comment to come through.

As a sector, the struggle is speaking to the main-stream. When we have experts talking to a roomful of education leaders, that conversation needs to go a bit further. We need to engage political leaders in that discussion and debunk some of the myths behind it. The reality is students are also in the crisis, and probably in a worse scenario than most people.

**Q Welcoming Cities, Universities, Workplaces and Clubs – you have made your mark on many of Welcoming Australia's initiatives.**

And it gets me excited. I guess I see opportunities in everything I do. I've been very lucky. I have no work-life balance, and I'm very proud to admit that. My life is a lot of my work. We don't clock off at 5:00. We spend time with students outside office hours. We'll have coffee. We have students who graduate who might need some advice. We've got students with families who need different support, so I feel quite lucky to be in a space where I can influence change.

The key is the people I get to work with, and to have an organisation like Welcoming Australia behind it; it is essential to have more champions in that space.

**Q And let's not forget the arts and festival scene. You're involved in the African Music and Cultural Festival, Colours of Malaysia, the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne, and you coordinate your own dance crews, PoisE'n and PoisE'n Bollypop. Tell me more. How can the arts influence a culture of welcome?**

The arts is such a magical way to connect with people. In university we started PoisE'n, a hip-hop group. A few years later we established PoisE'n Bollypop. All of us had no dance experience, but we just liked the idea of dance and how it brought people together. We also found out that if you're not confident speaking in English, it doesn't matter, because dance is from the heart. Many of our performers weren't dancers when they started – they were just people wanting to give it a go, and that's the essence of being a migrant here. I think we are like that whole. Just give things a go.

I'm Malaysian and I'm very passionate about my culture – mainly through food and culture – but I want to connect arts to different people because everyone likes music, theatre, fashion or dance, or at least one of them. You feel attached to something, and it's such an important thing to make you feel at home.

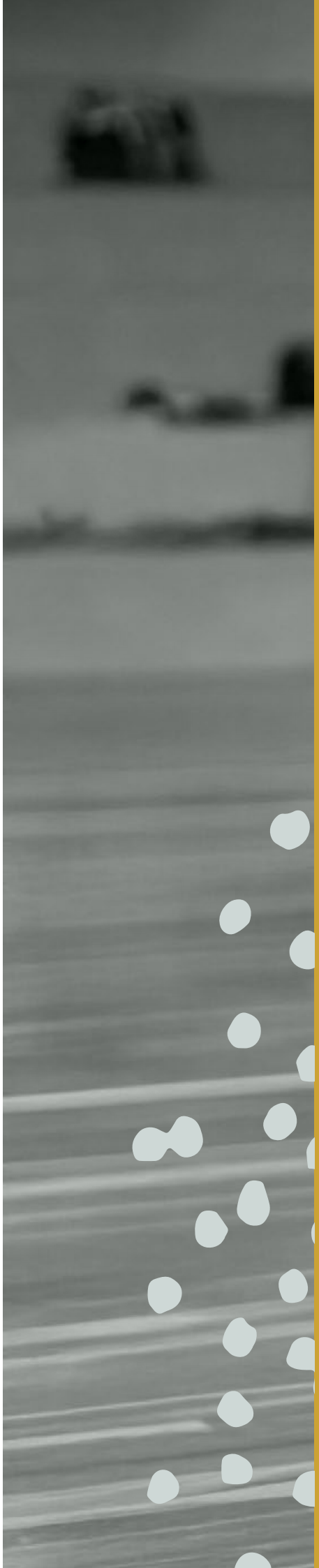
There has been an influx of South American students, particularly now. When we host festivals within the City, they feel at home. They are miles and miles away, but just to hear salsa music, to see arepas being sold, to meet Spanish speaking people – whether they're students, migrants or locals – they feel at home. And I think when you feel at home, you are empowered to do more.

**Q We can't let you go without talking about food, actually. What did you have for dinner last night?**

I had dinner with friends who used to be students and are now living here. One is French, one is Thai, and the other is from Vietnam. So, it was nice that four different cultures came together. Thai food is probably my favourite outside of Malaysian. We had som tum, which is the papaya and green bean salad. We also had spring rolls that we got to make together. But the topic of discussion for that table was pineapple on pizzas.

**Q And yes or no?**

I'm a yes because I grew up with it, but food from all cultures excites me. It's so good.

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