

# mini MercyWorks Bilum

SISTERS OF MERCY IN AUSTRALIA & PAPUA NEW GUINEA | FEBRUARY 2021



The beginning of the new year brings hope and optimism to

the forefront of our minds. Without forgetting the very challenging year that's been due to COVID restrictions and limitations, we look forward to a fresh start in 2021. We will also still remain cautious in our everyday lives. While our global community is still reeling from a pandemic, our Mercy Mission is still as important as ever. Learning from the drastic changes we had to make last year our programs and projects are now beginning to operate at full capacity keeping the safety of those we support our top priority.

In this edition we share with you the stories of two refugee students who have jumped straight back into their studies despite being faced with every obstacle imaginable. Mercy Connect is once again gearing up cautiously for the new school year. Volunteer Christine Burrows shares her experience at Merrylands Public School in Sydney where she supported adults learning English.

We are most grateful for your continuing support of Mercy Works and all our projects, especially with the uncertainties that COVID presents. Thank you!

**Sally Bradley RSM**  
Executive Director

## BANKSTOWN SENIOR COLLEGE

# Camera, sound & Zoom

Bankstown Senior College (BSC) has had a long affiliation with Mercy Connect Sydney. Volunteer mentors come each week to help students in the classroom with understanding assessment tasks and with Maths and English. Over the course of many years, Mercy Connect Sydney and the teachers at BSC have developed a strong relationship.

At 11:00am on a typical Wednesday morning, the now familiar sound of a zoom call filled my office announcing the start of the interview. In a classroom about 20 kilometres away from my office in Parramatta, teachers Hedy Brunet and Maria Pascalis introduced Fadi and Fatima, two students who had graciously agreed to be interviewed about their experience at Bankstown Senior College.

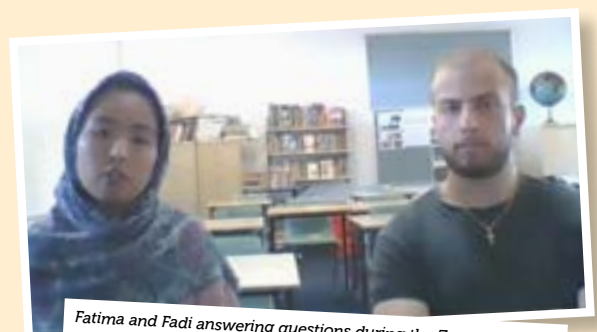
Fleeing violence and chasing their futures, both Fadi and Fatima struggled with the challenges that come with adjusting to life and school in a new country. Finding a school like Bankstown Senior College where they were able to complete their education with support and guidance to overcome challenges such as language barriers gave them the chance to complete their education. With the help and support of teachers like Hedy and Maria, and programs like the Mercy Connect project, Fadi and Fatima have settled well into school here in Australia.

Fadi's journey to Australia started with leaving his home in Iraq, traveling via Turkey before eventually arriving in Sydney when he was 21. Fatima was born in Iran and spent a large part of her life living without her father who had come to Australia 10 years ago via boat. They both came to Australia searching for a better life and they are now putting together plans for their futures after completing their HSC.

Staying outside school for five years meant that Fadi was well behind his classmates by the time he came to Australia. In order for the family to survive while they were in Turkey, Fadi and his sister had to work to support the family. Reflecting on the challenges he faced when returning to the classroom, Fadi says the biggest was actually 'going back to school.' Coming here when he was 21 meant that he was told to just go do a course somewhere and that's it. Fadi wanted to finish his HSC because he didn't have the chance to do that back home.

Fatima's visa problems prevented her from being able to enrol in university

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Fatima and Fadi answering questions during the Zoom interview

# My volunteer experience

BY CHRISTINE BURROWS

In 2019, I had the good fortune to be invited to help with an English Language Learning project at Merrylands Public School in the western suburbs of Sydney. It was designed by Catherine Gregory and her fantastic helpers Asma, Donna and Sarah to assist refugee and migrant mothers of children who attend the school or playgroup.

Initially we started with us all around a long table chatting about anything in varying levels of English language proficiency. Marilyn, another Mercy Connect volunteer, started with me and then we were joined by Debbie.

It became obvious that we needed to formalise the "classes" so that students could optimise their language learning experience. Catherine's organisational skills and her negotiations with the principal gave us access to a space to use as a makeshift classroom.

I then divided the mums into 2 groups depending on their English language skills and used the 1 ½ hour meeting time to hold two 45 minute classes at different levels. While one group was not being taught by me they were doing revision work or follow up activities close by with the other helpers.

Effective routines needed to be put in place regarding start/end time of classes for the 2 groups and also for the little ones who accompanied their mums. In spite of the many family responsibilities which sometimes

took them away from class the mums responded well to the rules imposed on them, the little ones soon forgot that mum wasn't there and feedback was good.

Everyone seemed pleased to be making progress. We all saw real improvement in their skills but just as importantly a growing confidence in their ability to take risks with the language and use it more often.

As the year progressed we started to have more new mums keen to learn. These new additions to the group tended to be from the very beginner level, Marilyn bravely took on the task of teaching this group. Between the two of us we were able to provide some useful resources and materials on numbers work, telling the time, and recognition of sound and letter patterns in English. Her career as a high school and TAFE Science teacher had not prepared her for this!

We were only one week away from starting up the program again in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic forced us into lockdown. This meant that we were unable to have any face to face meetings for the year.

Sadly, I will be unable to go back to Merrylands in 2021. Hopefully the mums will be able to resume their language development. At least there is a filing cabinet full of suitable materials awaiting their return.

While we said goodbye to Christine last year, we have had many new volunteers join the program in all our locations around Australia.

Mercy Connect is pleased to report that there are plans in place to restart the English Language Learning Project at Hilltop Road in the near future. Christine will be pleased to know that the new volunteer mentors will be able to put to good use her wonderful resources and start helping the refugee and migrant mums very soon. ■

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despite already starting a law degree in Iran. She says her biggest challenge, 'was starting high school again because I finished high school in my language in Iran.' It was difficult for her to have to start all over again but the support from the teachers at BSC and the Mercy Connect mentors has made it a lot easier for students like her.

Fadi's age was a big factor in coming back to school. His parents had different opinions on what he should do. Ultimately it was his mother's belief that he should go back to high school and finish it that helped him make the decision to complete his education. Seeing that everyone at Bankstown was around his age and finishing their high school education, he thought 'Why not me? I should do it as well.' Starting in the Intensive English centre, Fadi found the support he needed to improve his English before he moved into the mainstream classes.

Age and language barriers were also big challenges for Fatima. Seeing older people studying there gave her the confidence to say 'if they can do it, why can I not?'. 'I'm not that old that I can't study.'

Besides moving school closer to home, neither Fadi or Fatima would change much about their experience at Bankstown Senior College. They are both excited about what their futures hold. Fadi is hoping to become a real estate agent and Fatima is going back to university to continue studying law. ■



Hilltop Road Adult Conversation Class – Paul Taylor (Mercy Connect Sydney Coordinator) and Sally Bradley RSM (Executive Director) with one of the mums.