

The trauma of refugees



Journey: Sana Al-Ahmar, of Mount Annan, is a refugee and through Macarthur Diversity Services now helps other migrants and refugees start their lives over. "It takes courage to become a refugee - courage to start a new life against all odds," she said.

Picture: Luke Fuda

By **Milana Stillitano**

A PICTURE of the bleak feelings of isolation and even depression felt by refugees was painted for a small group last Thursday during Camden's inaugural Refugee Week on Thursday.

Sana Al-Ahmar, a Macarthur Diversity Services family settlement worker, told of refugees who had been tortured and imprisoned and had seen family members being murdered.

And she told of children left orphaned. "Have you ever felt so afraid and terrorised that your heart is going to explode?"

'It takes courage to become a refugee. Courage to start a new life against all odds.'

- **Sana Al-Ahmar**

Mrs Al-Ahmar asked. "This is exactly what refugees feel all the time."

Mrs Al-Ahmar, who lives with her family in Mount Annan, has helped countless migrants and refugees settle in Macarthur by offering them support services.

"We speak their language, so sometimes they trust us more to talk about issues they might not feel comfortable speaking to a counsellor about," Mrs Al-Ahmar told the *Advertiser*.

"They bring with them a lot of trauma and for many it is difficult to settle in a new country."

Since 2000, Camden has welcomed more than 300 migrants from countries that include South Africa, Fiji, India, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Mrs Al-Ahmar has an affinity with the people she helps.

Her family fled war-torn Iraq in 1979 and she arrived in Australia in 1991.

Mrs Al-Ahmar saw many atrocities, but she counts herself "very lucky".

"We chose to leave," she said.

"When refugees leave their country, the trauma, stress and depression comes with them and it takes a long time to overcome it."

Mrs Al-Ahmar said some refugees never overcame these feelings.

She said her parents suffered a backlash for being "involved in politics".

Her father fled to Iran and her mother, with their youngest child, 4, in tow, escaped to Lebanon.

"We were very lucky and still are one of the luckiest families because we eventually came back together and eventually lived more or less a normal life," she said.

Asaad Kadir, a volunteer with Afghan communities in Sydney who's a veterinary surgeon in Harrington Park, also spoke at the Refugee Week event.

Mr Kadir said he still bore the scars from the time when he fled Afghanistan 28 years ago.

In 1980, after seeing three children being murdered ("we had to collect their body parts"), he decided that he and his wife had to flee.

They spent three months in Pakistan before moving to Germany and later the US. They came to Australia three years ago to care for his ailing grandmother, who died shortly after.

"We are thankful to the Government for its humanitarian support and letting us live in this country," Mr Kadir said.

"We ran away from dictators and tyrants.

"Now we live in peace, security and harmony."