



Scarf trainees and mentors meet to discuss that night's service before the diners arrive.

Breaking down the barriers

Gillian Saxon talks to Hannah Coleman founder of social enterprise Scarf Community who is helping young refugees and migrants break into the hospitality industry and training them towards a brighter future.

When the seed of the idea for The Scarf Community organisation was planted in 2009, co-founder Hannah Colman, had no idea that seven years later the not-for-profit organisation which helps young refugees train for employment the hospitality industry would grow with such success. Scarf has now seen more than one hundred trainees move through the program with over 70% going on to find employment within six months, bucking the national trend.

The idea for Scarf grew from Hannah's time volunteering with young refugees in Fitzroy, Melbourne while she was working in hospitality. The official name came later and was so-called for the scarf being a symbol of community and support of cultures. "What I was hearing was that young people were keen to work but found it hard to get that first job and they faced a complex set of barriers." Hannah also knew that the hospitality industry was under-staffed, as always, but it was difficult to get in without good connections. "Jess Moran (co-founder) and I set about to change that by helping people get that first job by drawing on our existing hospitality networks with a focus on mentoring," Hannah says. Starting from an initial ten-week pilot program in 2010, Hannah, who now manages the program alone after co-founder Jess decided to pursue other interests, has refined the program into a successful working format with the help of two other part-time staff.

At the beginning of each season, Scarf reaches out to local not-for-profit organisations working with migrant communities such as Sail, Red Cross and Origin Youth Help for potential trainees who are young migrants aged 18-28 years old and who are seeking protection.

Shortlisted youth are then interviewed to assess their interests and suitability for the program and to ensure that they have a proficient level of English. If the applicant is successful, they are then matched with a hospitality mentor for the duration of the program that will teach them the front of house skills they need. The training is industry relevant and hands-on and trainees develop skills in waiting tables, pouring wine, taking orders and cocktail making. These skills are then put into practice during a series of dinners with real customers held once a week over eight weeks.

“This can be the turning point for a trainee making them realise that they are absolutely capable”

Development of skills is just one part of the program. The barriers to future employment are also systematically addressed throughout the ten-week program. Hannah explains that trainees also gain positive feedback, friendship and community connection, interview training and help writing their resumes. “This can be the turning point for a trainee



Trainee Eyayaw discusses his training focus for the evening with his mentor



Trainees Senuri, Eyayaw and Abul catch up with a mentor before the dinner



making them realise that they are absolutely capable,” Hannah says. This confidence is reflected in the 95% retention rate of trainees during the life of a program season.

“The barriers faced by young migrants in gaining employment are complex and many newly-arrived people find themselves on welfare, unable to break into the job market,” Hannah says. Barriers to the hospitality industry include a lack of social networks not having grown up in Australia; little English language and confidence; racism and a lack of basic hospitality skills including front of house and responsible service of alcohol.

The difficulty in gaining employment is supported by a recent report from “The Building a New Life in Australia” project which found that just 1 in 20 newly settled refugees had found a job after six months living in Australia. It is also reflected in the unemployment rates among humanitarian migrants currently standing at 43% compared to 6.1% of the overall adult population. This experience certainly rings true for current trainee, Eyayaw Zage, 27, who arrived from Ethiopia 8 months ago.

Before joining the program, Eyayaw had lost count of the number of resumes he had sent off despite having years of work experience in Ethiopia. “I was ready to give up” he says. He found out about the program



Eyayaw and Abul fold the signature scarf napkins

through a social worker from his local community and he immediately applied. He says that the best thing about the program is “just getting the chance as a migrant and getting so much experience.” Eyayaw now feels very positive about his future.

Another trainee, Abul Adub, who arrived in Australia sixteen years ago from South Sudan, shares this sentiment. Abul has learnt to “be more confident and stop being so shy” and says the best thing about the program is “serving people and seeing them smile.” Abul hopes to become a waitress in the Crown Casino complex once she finishes the program.

However, it’s not only the trainees who learn something new: the mentors learn to become teachers and start to see things from a different perspective as they break down each lesson to teach a particular skill. “I love to see the friendships that develop between mentors and the trainees as their confidence soars,” Hannah says. These friendships are an important first step in creating networks in the hospitality. Trainees are also paid a wage at hospitality industry award rates so their time at Scarf counts as recent, relevant work experience. “This holds significantly more weight on a resume than just a training program,” Hannah explains.

With these newfound skills, the trainees are rising to meet the needs of Australia’s growing tourism and hospitality industry that is projected to require an

additional 123,000 workers by 2020 according to the Australian Labour Force Report 2015 to 2020. “Our trainees have gone to work at respected Melbourne establishments such as the Sofitel, Sheebeen and the Penny Black cocktail bar,” Hannah says. More formalised relationships with hospitality businesses such as that of Scarf ambassador, Nathan Tolm owner of highly successful Melbourne cafes The Kettle Black and Top Paddock, can see Scarf graduates accepted for paid traineeships and taken on as permanent staff members.

Now, after 6 years, Scarf is 70% self-funded through fundraising events such as the eight week dinner season and one-off pop-up events. The other 30% comes through philanthropic donations (Morris Jones Foundation), community grants, government funding and programs like Solidarity Accor which seeks to empower humanitarian migrants through training and integration into their new communities.

So where to from here? Hannah would like to diversify the range of programs on offer for more people with alternative pathways to employment. She is also exploring the idea of running scarf in regional Victoria and interstate and would like to scale up Scarf’s fundraising events. In the meantime, there is something Hannah never gets sick of and that is “seeing the change in the person you met at the beginning of the program and then the one who presents at ten weeks later is just amazing.”



Trainees Yasmin and Senuri set the tables



Yasmin takes her first order of the evening



The autumn season of the Scarf dinners is held at Rupert on Rupert in Collingwood