



THE WELCOME DINNER PROJECT

There's a grassroots movement sweeping across Australia which aims to break down cultural barriers and foster connections – all in the comfort of your own home. By *Gillian Saxon*.

Inside an unassuming family home in Melbourne suburbia on a Wednesday night, the table is set and the hosts stand ready to receive their guests for the evening. The excitement is palpable – but this isn't your usual dinner party. Tonight's guests will include refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and international students from Sudan, Iran and Egypt, as well as established Australians from the local neighbourhood. They are here for a Welcome Dinner, which aims to break down cultural barriers and foster connection, one potluck dish at a time.

The Welcome Dinner Project, which began in March 2013, is the brainchild of Penny Elsley and an initiative of her not-for-profit organisation *Joining the Dots*, which she founded in 2010. Penny realised that although there were many great cultural events going on across the country, there was a real lack of a shared space or platform to connect with others from culturally diverse communities on a more intimate level. "You don't normally go home from these events having made new friends," Penny laments. And it is this lack of connection, Penny believes, that is at the heart of all social issues.

It was during Penny's earlier years volunteering in the slums of India and in remote communities across the world that the seed was planted for the project. Her experience led to an 'epiphany' that happiness and

human connection were indelibly linked. When she returned to Australia, she began to hear more and more from the refugee community that they were looking to connect with Australians but didn't know how. "At the same time, I was also hearing from friends that they wanted to meet newly arrived people but they also didn't know where to go and were worried that their efforts would be viewed as tokenistic." She was also dismayed to learn that more than 90 per cent of Australia's approximately 600,000 international students will return to their home country without ever being invited into the home of an Australian citizen.

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

The idea behind a Welcome Dinner is simple, but the lasting effect is profound on both a personal and community-wide level. "The aim of these potluck-style dinners is to create a platform for meaningful connection, sparking friendships between people of diverse cultures who are living in close proximity to one another but have not had an opportunity to connect in a supported environment," Penny says. Indeed, one of the main objectives of the project is to 'change the conversation' and shift personal values and perceptions in the face of the government policies, fear-based campaigns and rhetoric that have effectively created barriers that prevent meaningful connection within



the community. The very first dinner, held in 2013 in Sydney in a private home of a local Sudanese family, was supposed to be a trial, but Penny says the project gained so much momentum from the get-go that the trial never officially ended and it quickly spread across Sydney. Now the project is gaining momentum right across the country.

So what can guests, facilitators and hosts of a Welcome Dinner expect? “You’ll be welcomed with lots of smiles, and experience the joy of new and interesting food – maybe try something you’ve never even heard of before,” Penny says. Everyone is supported in their interactions by two facilitators who are experienced in leading groups and trained to handle any difficult situation that may arise. Penny describes the facilitators as ‘the glue of the project’ and, along with the host, they create a welcoming, emotionally safe and engaging space which helps to overcome language barriers and cultural nuances. Newly trained Melbourne facilitator Lucy Clyde says of her first event, “The energy and the fun as connections were made were so inspiring. Sharing the food and explaining where it came from started the conversation. The guests were so generous and brought an astounding range of food.”

No money is exchanged during these dinners. The project relies on funding received through local council community grants, amnesty international and, in June 2013, it raised over \$23,000 through crowd-funding platform Chuffed. However, what they are in desperate need of is corporate sponsorship to grow the organisation.

Finances aside, food is the common denominator among all participants. “We are all human and we all enjoy food, which brings us

to conversations about the other things we love in life – where we find our essence of humanity and our connection,” Penny says. Guests are requested not to ask each other what they do for a living or how they came to be in Australia (which can often be a traumatic experience to talk about). Instead, they are encouraged to share their interests such as food, travel, sports and favourite hobbies or other information about themselves through both conversation and other mediums such as art, photos and musical displays. “It is hoped that these new connections will turn into permanent friendships which break down the isolation and provide practical assistance to guests in getting them what they need,” Penny says. At the end of the night, she says, “Most people leave with a big smile on their face or tears of joy.”

Iranian refugee Hamed Alekamis attended his first dinner last year and had never eaten with a local Australian, let alone cooked for one before. The dinner introduced him to new friends and he even discovered a love of Mexican food. “The flavours reminded me of my family’s cooking back in the south of Iran and I just felt at home,” Hamed says. Penny later offered him a role as a volunteer photographer for the project and he has since attended numerous Welcome Dinners.

“It gives me hope every day to be involved in something that’s had a snowball response that never stops for a day – it just keeps growing, as does the waiting list of people wanting to be involved,” Penny says. ✨

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