

Faiths unite on Harmony Day

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A picture of unity at the Greater Dandenong Interfaith Network event. (SUPPLIED)



by Sahar Foladi

A room full of belonging, brimming with positivity and a sense of oneness summed up the celebration of Harmony Day hosted by the City of Greater Dandenong Interfaith Network.

Speaking of unity, speakers such as deputy chief executive officer of ASRC Jana Favero also addressed the looming period before the Federal election where politicians use agendas to divide the community.

She says generally Australia's political leaders and media don't embrace harmony "in any way" compared to Greater Dandenong's welcoming community.

"Harmony means welcoming, belonging and you can't really have harmony when there are certain groups and individuals in our community who are still being subjected to racism, discrimination and injustices.

"There's a lot of compassion in the community but unfortunately fear and division is used for some political leaders and the media and they actually need to listen to the community more."

She says complex issues where there are different opinions voiced in the community should be dealt with inclusivity, respect and unity.

The room full of orange balloons and tablecloths was crowded with community members, including key speakers Peter Johnstone, coordinator of community advocacy at the council, and Anisa Sharif, community liaison of the Australian Federal Police.

The event on Thursday 20 March also hosted Federal Police members as well as people of faith and Monash Interfaith Network.



Interfaith network executive officer Livia Carusi said interfaith networks are fundamental in leadership specifically when it comes to bringing people together.

“The way that we go about our service and the support to members is through a community development approach, which is about respect, dialogue and getting people actively involved to sustain the work that we do because it needs to be everlasting and meaningful.

“Our vision is really clear – many faiths, one people. Certainly this is emphasised through the leadership of our president, that if we start from shared values, we actually can reach peace.”

Network president Mehtap Williams said she hopes the network’s place-of-worship tours educates individuals to acknowledge their different faiths but also their oneness in humanity.

The topic of the day was mainly to explore belonging and connection and Ms Favero opened up about where she belongs as a dual citizen of Australia and Italy with strong connections to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

She spent six months of her childhood between Afghanistan and Pakistan after her father who worked as a journalist was killed on his very last day in Afghanistan before he was set to reunite with his family waiting in Bali, Indonesia.

The documentary, ‘Frontline Afghanistan’ a tribute to Raffaele Favero was completed by his wife who went back to the country with her three young children to complete her husband’s project.

“Even though I was only six years-old that really had a very long-lasting impact on my life.

“We were very blonde and fair as kids and we went to a refugee camp in Pakistan where children and families from Afghanistan had to flee into Pakistan.

“When we walked in, the first thing the kids did was they screamed at us and ran away.

“People explained to us the only other blonde-haired people they’ve seen are the Russians who want to target them,” she shared.

“I was thinking about it because it really stayed with me forever and I really understood then that people intentionally harm other people just because of where they’re from and what they look like.”

Now 15 years at the ASRC, she is working to protect people seeking asylum and refuge and for humanity, something she cares for deeply.

The ASRC have put forward their priorities ahead of the Federal Budget, asking to redirect the billions of dollars spent in offshore detention centres in Papua New Guinea and Nauru to instead evacuate and resettle people in Australia and invest in faster processing times.

ASRC are seeking an increase in Australia’s humanitarian intake especially at a time when displacement is at an all-time high and to ensure all people seeking asylum have the right to work, study and access Medicare.

“We did consultation with people to inform our priorities and that’s how we came up with them.

“Because that’s our community telling us they want to be safe permanently and with their family.”