

## Zahra Rekai – my life so far

My parents named me Zahra, an Islamic name that means bright. My parents are from Afghanistan, a country that has seen war for more than 30 years and is still experiencing war. My father has always been on the run, trying to find a safe shelter for my family. Eventually he decided to put his life at risk and take the chance to cross the big oceans to get to Australia's border. He was what the Australian media call an 'asylum seeker'.

My parents, having fled Afghanistan, move to neighbouring Iran, an Islamic country. For nine years of my life I grew up with my siblings and my mum, but my dad could only see us once a week. As he worked at a manufacturer, which was far from where we were living. Life in Iran was getting difficult for Afghans, especially for my dad who had no resident visa or passport. Dad could not afford school fees anymore, so my brother dropped out of school to be help with providing food for the family.

Dad made the dangerous trip back to Afghanistan around 2012 to visit his dying father. We lost contact with him for a year, and many terrible thoughts went through my mind. I was getting to an age where I could understand more about the hardship my family was going through. I stopped asking for things and finally stopped going to school.

We then moved to Pakistan. My brother provided for us, but it was very unsafe. There were several attacks and explosions, Hazara Afghans were sometime targets. I came home one day, and my family told me some news. My Dad was in Australia and that he is trying to get us there. I only knew that Australia is continent thanks to the geography book.

I was shocked and happy at the same time.

Everything happened so fast and quick in our last days in Pakistan. I opened my eyes and we were sitting in a plane heading towards Australia.

We arrived at Melbourne airport at night. After the awkward reuniting with dad, we got in the car heading towards our new home. I was observing the new environment from behind the windows and all I could see was the tall buildings, trees and the roads full of cars. After we drove for an hour I fell asleep and when I woke up the next day, stepping out of the house I was shocked where all the tall buildings and busy roads are gone. In the end I understood that we are at Shepparton, 2 hours away from the place I had seen the night before.

My experience of moving to another country has been very difficult and stressful. It is difficult to fit in and settle due to the cultural differences and language barrier. To be a young girl and obviously different due to the headscarf I wore made me feel like the elephant in the room. I was initially not accepted by other kids. However, after a few months my classmates opened up to me. I found new friends from different backgrounds, such as Indian, Italian and Aboriginal. The teachers and the kids helped me learn English. I successfully graduated primary school at Gowrie St. Dad bought a house on the south Shepparton and I began Secondary school at McGuire College studying the subjects I like. Shepparton gave me the chance to restart my life and to grow into the person I want to be in the future.