welcoming
safer
time
heart
In Our Own Words
me
light
possibilities
peace

30 YEARS
The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture
In Our Own Words

30 YEARS
The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture

2017
30 years
The Pearl Anniversary
Natural pearls are rare jewels of great beauty ... formed as a defence mechanism against irritants, parasites and potential threats
Project Team

Interviews, writing, concept development: Tricia Bowen

Project coordination: Siobhan O’Mara

Copy editing: Rebecca Cole

Project inception and editorial support: Susanne West

Editorial support: Paris Aristotle, Minque Stephens, Josef Szwarc

Visual communication support: Rebecca Cole, Briele Hansen

Portrait photography: Arnaud Domange

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Genevieve Timmons
The Hon Mary Wooldridge MP

Board, management and staff:

Paris Aristotle AO – Chief Executive Officer
Sue Casey – Manager, Sector Development and Partnerships
Donna Chesters – Program Leader, Education and Early Years, Sector Development and Partnerships
Pina Garasi – Office Coordinator, Dandenong
Lynne Haultain – Chair, Board of Management
Ida Kaplan – Manager, Direct Services
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Introduction
In Our Own Words has been produced to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. (VFST), also known as Foundation House, in celebration of our work and the extraordinary people who give our organisation life force. This document provides a companion piece to More Than Just Words, produced for the 20th anniversary, and continues to give account of the contribution our organisation makes to our wider community.

The process of bringing In Our Own Words to fruition began with conversations. Clients, staff, Board members and supporters were invited to describe their impressions and memories of Foundation House. Each of these conversations was potent, but what reverberated most strongly was the way in which each client spoke their story into existence. Short and pithy turns of phrase managed to successfully describe the enormity of their experience, and the significance of Foundation House to their lives.

In keeping with our desire to focus on and honour our clients, a small selection of these phrases have been used to build the framework for this document. They act as titles to every section. From there, each section begins with the story from where that phrase was drawn. Other voices are then added to the mix, offering insights to the theme embedded in each of these compelling phrases. While readers can dip in and out, In Our Own Words has been designed to also offer a rich narrative, a story of displacement and loss, of strength and courage, of recovery and possibility, and the role and response of Foundation House. While each phrase has resonance, woven together they manage to illustrate and tell a much bigger story.

It starts with a kind and welcoming tone that people feel and hear on arrival at Foundation House. Then, once in a safer place, an acknowledgement that it takes time for recovery, and that the support they receive comes straight from the heart. In the next two sections we find the beginnings of recognition and hope: they saw me and the light is back in our lives. The last two parts of our story broaden the view. I love the sky and the possibilities it offers us tells of the outstanding contributions being made by people to build good and robust communities, while the final section is a call to arms, asking us all to locate and honour the peace that starts within us.

In creating this publication, patrons and supporters were asked to write their thoughts about Foundation House. These reflections have been assembled in the ‘Words from our supporters’ section. Foundation House’s significant achievements have been summarised in a timeline and are presented here in ‘Milestones’. Throughout the 30-year history there have been certain inspiring and pivotal individuals who have left a lasting impression. They have been celebrated in the section entitled ‘Their legacy lives on’.
Ten years ago Sundes, one of the clients featured in *More Than Just Words*, poignantly described arriving in Australia with no family members or friends – just her two young daughters. At that time she spoke of the critical role that Foundation House played in helping her to build a new life for her very young family. Ten years on, *In Our Own Words* revisits Sundes’ story and introduces us to her daughters, Farah and Reem. We learn about their achievements, the longstanding and influential relationships they forged with Foundation House, and how these relationships continue to contribute to their inspiring story.

As with all the clients’ stories featured here, *In Our Own Words* stands in testimony to the power of people, their resilience, their capacity for hope, and their courage. It demonstrates what can be created and flourish in an atmosphere of goodwill, support and genuine care. As the symbol for our 30th anniversary, the pearl, attests, if a safe and nurturing environment can be found, then despite the most menacing of experiences, transformation can occur, and new lives and possibilities can be built.
Background
OUR MISSION

To advance the health, wellbeing and human rights of people from refugee backgrounds who have experienced torture or other traumatic events.

Our services

Foundation House provides services to people of refugee backgrounds in Victoria who have experienced torture and other traumatic events in their country of origin or while fleeing those countries.

Politically neutral and non-aligned, Foundation House is constituted as a not-for-profit organisation managed by a Board of Management elected by members. Our work is funded by the Commonwealth and Victorian governments, charitable organisations and donations from private individuals.

Working throughout Victoria, Foundation House is a state-wide organisation offering services in metropolitan, regional and rural areas. It now has over 200 staff located across five offices in Brunswick, Dallas, Dandenong, Ringwood and Sunshine. Services are also provided in partnership with other agencies in Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Shepparton, Swan Hill and the Latrobe Valley.

Foundation House is a member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), a network of Australia’s eight specialist rehabilitation agencies that work to reduce the impact of torture and trauma on individuals, families and communities.
Foundation House:

- provides services to clients across the lifespan, including children and adolescents, who are survivors of torture or other traumatic events, in the form of counselling, advocacy, family support, group work, psycho-education and complementary therapies.

- works with client communities to improve their capacity to access services and to enable them to support recovery.

- offers professional and organisational development, consultancy and resources to assist health, education, employment and other community service providers to enhance the responsiveness of their services for people of refugee backgrounds.

- works with the Commonwealth and Victorian governments to ensure that policies and programs are responsive to the needs of people of refugee backgrounds.

- conducts and contributes to research regarding the needs of people of refugee backgrounds and the best possible ways of meeting those needs.

Our history

In 1987 members of Melbourne’s refugee communities joined with a small group of medical and legal professionals and human rights organisations to convene a public meeting to discuss the provision of health services to survivors of torture. A range of professionals became involved and developed plans for a unique model – a hybrid that transcended discipline differences and would provide a range of approaches within a holistic service.

In 1988 two philanthropic trusts, the Myer Foundation and the Reichstein Foundation, provided seeding grants to explore the feasibility of a service for survivors of torture. This eventually led to government funding, and one community development worker, Paris Aristotle, started work in a small house in Parkville. Over the years that have followed, the agency has grown to become a world leader in the provision of services to survivors of torture.

Paris Aristotle AO
CEO
(1988 - present)
Our guiding principles

• Torture is an unacceptable violation of human rights regardless of the perpetrator or the purposes for which torture is used.

• Survivors of torture have the right to services to support their recovery from the harm inflicted on them.

• The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST) is independent and not aligned politically, and will denounce the use of torture by any regime.

• VFST will provide services that support our clients to rebuild their lives and foster their self-determination and independence.

• VFST will advocate for policies that respect and advance the health, wellbeing and human rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

• VFST will maintain a productive, innovative and sustainable culture that supports and strengthens the capacity of our staff.
In our own words
A kind and welcoming tone
My mother, my sister and I were so exhausted when we arrived in Australia. We’d been running and running. But we’d kept our minds open. We knew we would resettle, start a new life and feel safe. We had all these plans. Once you get to the place where you can finally put your bags down, reality hits.

I was 13 when we first went to Foundation House. It was in Parkville then. Dr Ida had visited us at home, but the house where we were living was small and dark so we all decided it would be best to meet in a consulting room. We caught the train from Upfield. I remember the animal symbols at Royal Park Railway Station. I remember walking in the park and thinking it was beautiful. I remember entering Foundation House and noticing the gentle lighting. It didn’t feel clinical. I also remember the wooden giraffe that sat on the reception desk. I’m so glad to see it’s still there at the Brunswick office.

When you go through the sort of trauma we’d experienced, you remember very random details. I don’t think our brains had adjusted to the idea that we were safe, that we could sit down. So why do I remember that giraffe? Perhaps one of the reasons is that in Jordan my sister and I weren’t allowed to mingle with other people. We were in hiding, we couldn’t go to school and we were very isolated. So we always kept a bunch of stuffed toys. Those animals had personalities and names, and we would play with them and talk to them. They were such a part of my world for those years.

I also remember English felt rough to my ears when we first got here. I don’t feel that way now. But at the time I remember thinking when someone is speaking to you and you don’t understand what they are saying, it is such a confronting feeling. You are reminded that you have left your homeland and everything that is familiar. But it wasn’t like that at Foundation House. The people at the desk smiled at me.

I remember a kind and welcoming tone. That is my earliest memory of that space.

– REEM
We put great effort into the notion of welcome, and really seeing the person when they come here. When you meet clients you can see the way that their experience of persecution and oppression is so physically present. Someone has tried to convince them that they count for nothing, that they are an utterly discardable human being. So we welcome people and we show respect. Warmth, welcome and recognition matter.

– IDA KAPLAN

I first came to Foundation House when it was in Parkville. We all had physical and psychological problems and huge imbalances in our bodies but we received fantastic attention and care. After a few months I started to have a rich understanding of the work. They offered many different services and therapies. The group therapy gave us a chance to talk with each other. We also did reflexology and massage. As we received all these complementary therapies, we were also interacting with each other, giving each other energy. It felt so good coming here.

– JOSE

At reception there is a sense of closeness. You are treated with dignity and respect. It creates the feeling that you can build relationships here, but you can remain anonymous at the same time. It seems to say, ‘I know you are here, but I have no idea why you are here.’

– FARAH

What made it even more welcoming for me was the fact that Joyce, my counsellor advocate, was Sudanese. I didn’t have to explain certain things to her. She knew what was going on in Sudan. She made it so comfortable for me. There were things that I simply couldn’t explain in English, but I could say them in Arabic and she understood.

– ABOUK

If you think about people who have been tortured, their very existence and the assumptions that they held about their humanity may have been destroyed, flipped on their lid, turned upside down. We have to reconstruct new meaning. How do we reconstruct this new meaning? We bring the community into our work so the whole community is able to support and welcome people as best it can.

– DONNA CHESTERS.
For people to feel that they belong, for them to feel settled and welcomed in all the aspects of their lives, services need to be responsive and aware of what someone actually needs to feel welcome. I think all the work that we do in sector development, in education, in health, in other services, has been really helpful for our clients, while we also continue to focus our lens on our core business, which is around supporting survivors of torture and trauma.

— ROSLYN LEARY

It has always been a continuum of responses that we provide here at Foundation House. We have direct services working individually with the client, and the work of the sector development team is at the other end of the continuum. That work is about all those places that intersect in our client’s day to day life, so that when a client goes in to use those different services they are welcomed, and each service knows about their unique needs. For recovery to happen, everything else around the person needs to be strengthened too.

— DONNA CHESTERS

The things that we have learned from our clients and their communities have informed the character of change that we have tried to achieve over time. We use the things we have learned to assist and advise other services in the sector critical to responding to the needs of new arrivals, especially those who have traumatic pre-arrival experiences. There has been substantial growth in our organisation and the scope of the programs we undertake but the one thing that has never changed, the one thing that has to last, is the support and welcome we give to all those survivors.

— PARIS ARISTOTLE

I think it’s about the commitment we have to making life better for people. The environment we create is one of respect. I notice the pain on many people’s faces when they first arrive. They may present as quite frightened, reticent, so if we can give warmth, a greeting, it can help them to relax. The first greeting that people get must provide a sense of safety.

— PINA GARASI
In a safer place
I came here with no family members. No friends. There was no one at all. Just me and my two little girls. There were days when I thought everything was just too hard. I would cry and pray, but I was very determined.

I made contact with Foundation House through our case worker. I was having terrible nightmares and I couldn’t sleep. Seeing someone at Foundation House was such a good support. I had an open heart to this treatment. People take medication for blood pressure or physical problems, so we also need help to review our lives and our experiences. My work with Foundation House has created a big part of who I am today.

Of course I can’t forget what happened, but Foundation House would always remind me of what I had achieved and what I could do. They knew this would not be easy, but they helped me to believe it would be okay.

The memories are still in my body, but now there are times when I can say I am happy. I was in a very bad situation but I carried love with me. Love for my girls. That is what made me do it. And this is what I wanted, to be in a safer place.

— SUNDES
How much more in danger do you have to be if death is not dangerous? We started to feel a sense of hopelessness. I remember going into the Australian embassy. They called Mum in alone. She came out crying. We were used to that scene. We just assumed it was another NO. Then she asked us to go to the bathroom with her. So we sat down in that public toilet in the embassy, and Mum whispered to us that we could go to Australia. I still remember the colours of those cubicles. The memory is so strong.

— REEM

Everyone experiences loss and trauma in their lives, but ultimately you walk out of the house, you might have something terrible going on at home, but the bus still works, the school and the shops are still open. That is the weird thing. When you are going through a traumatic experience in Australia, things around you are going on normally. But that is not the case for our client group. Everything has been destroyed at every structural point, everything has been wiped out for that individual. This agency is an acknowledgement of that and as a service we provide a whole range of approaches to support people through their trauma.

— DONNA CHESTERS

Sundes and Ida Kaplan (Manager, Direct Services)

You must consider the place that people have come from and the regime that they have lived under. The aim of persecution is to destroy you, and not just you and whatever group you represent, but to do so for generations. People are displaced from their homelands, breaking down the most sacred values of that community. If someone has tried to annihilate your very existence then the only antithesis to that is to be someone who helps to build, to be someone that fully acknowledges and witnesses the destruction that has been wrought. When you work with someone and you genuinely offer a regard for their existence, that is extremely therapeutic.

— IDA KAPLAN
I have four children. They are all very young, so you can imagine the journey here was extremely hard. But while the journey was difficult, we knew life would be better here. We knew there would be no bombing. There was no threat. I knew we would have a better future than we would have had in Afghanistan. I think about how I used to live. The pressure in Afghanistan you cannot imagine. I just assumed there was nothing to look forward to in life. Happiness didn't exist. That has all changed for us now. Since I have been coming to Foundation House I can see life in a more positive way. We are in a much safer place.

— SAHAR

When I came here I had an open mind, but I had to adjust myself to life. I didn’t choose to be far away from my family. I didn’t choose to leave my country Iran. I didn’t choose to be imprisoned. My only crime was to be Bahá’í, and I have always felt honoured to be raised Bahá’í. None of that was fair. When I started my new life in Melbourne, after a long journey and years of displacement, I could not accept life had changed. I felt alone. I only knew a few words of English. I was afraid, especially at night, of any loud noise. If people in the street made a noise or a neighbour’s screen door slammed shut, it would remind me of my life in prison. Seeing a police car or people who were wearing military clothes made my heart beat faster. My body would shiver with fear. They reminded me of those who had arrested, attacked and tortured me. Then I met people from Foundation House, and over time I have learned ways to overcome, or reduce, my fear and sadness.

— ROSA
It takes time
When I first came to Foundation House we had a garden. It was open to us all. There were people who knew about gardening and people who didn’t. It didn’t matter. We started by preparing the soil. Then we planted flowers and vegetables and watched them grow. Whoever saw that the garden needed water, they watered it. Whoever walked past and noticed weeds, they would pull them out. Things were done when they needed to be done. Contact with the earth made us feel better in our bodies because there was a change in our energy. Then as the vegetables grew we harvested them, and at lunch time we ate them together like a very big family. It was such a beautiful time.

In Chile I was also a gardener. I used to help my grandmother with the garden. Then my grandmother passed away and my mother took over, so I helped her. Then when I was older and started working I still went to that garden and helped to keep it beautiful. I did this because I loved it and it always made me feel better.

I have changed over time. It took a while for my body and mind to feel better; to recover. People who come to Foundation House can find it difficult to talk about what they have been through. But, at the end of the day, it is a necessity for people to talk about things. When we have pain in our bodies it must be released. Time is crucial to the healing. It will not happen from one day to another. It takes time.

— JOSE
It is about careful, slow, developmental work. For example, we have a group of between 25 and 30 Cambodian women who come every fortnight. They arrived here 30 or 40 years ago with very limited English and they worked in manufacturing jobs. They worked and they worked and they worked. Now the manufacturing jobs are disappearing, they are retiring, and it is only now that they are dealing with their trauma. They are doing it in a group-work context. The model is communal and they share, even the most horrific stuff, the impact of what happened to them and their children under Pol Pot and in the camps afterwards. There is healing in that. They go up to the room and start talking. Sometimes it is a topic, say when elections are on here, they might talk about democracy. From that, curious questions come up, someone will talk about what happened in Cambodia. The facilitator is very skilled and brings it together and then things gently unravel. The core of the work is about people connecting and making some sense of their past. It is a long and gentle process.

– ROSLYN LEARY

Systems and people and communities can only work at a certain pace. We don’t immediately see the outcomes of a lot of the work that we do. You have to be patient. We did an early childhood project a few years ago. The Department of Education told us they were getting information from primary schools that kids from refugee backgrounds were starting school and they didn’t know what to do so they were having to repeat their prep year. We located a school with a lot of new arrivals and we went in and spoke with the school and we consulted with parents. We brought the parents and the school together. We spoke to the feeder kindergartens as well and discovered that the kids weren’t going to kinder. They were going straight to school, so the children, the families and the school were having all these issues. That was about five years ago. Last year one of our workers spoke to one of the kinder teachers that worked on that project. Now, four years later, half of the population of that kinder are kids from refugee backgrounds and when they go to school they are ready for that environment. When we started, the kinder teacher didn’t know there was an interpreter service she could access for free. She didn’t know anything about refugee background children or parents. It’s about community and services having really good dialogues. Together that dialogue will identify barriers and challenges. They ended up winning an early childhood award last year. In four years it has been an amazing turnaround for that community.

– DONNA CHESTERS
Rebuilding must occur in a meaningful way. If you acknowledge what people have been through then I think you can introduce the notion that things take time. With clients I often use the metaphor of building a house. As much as you want that house to be finished as quickly as possible, there are simply things that you must go through before it is built.

— IDA KAPLAN

We made decisions very early on in the life of this organisation that we would focus on quality. Whether it was in our case-work or in our advocacy, quality would be paramount. Working with clients we would aim to deliver the best service we could. In advocating for improved policy and debate we would be as sophisticated as we could possibly be in our analysis and in our appreciation and balancing of different views. We’ve been able to do that over a long period of time because we set it up at the beginning to operate in that way. That created a platform for us. Like most things, if you want to build something that is going to last, you’re going to have to set the foundations right and make sure they are underpinned with the right sort of architecture. We were very focused on that in the early days and I think we are even more advanced in our thinking on this now.

— PARIS ARISTOTLE

Over time we have maintained a level of rigour. We do things in a way that is evidence-based, but always with a strong and over-arching lens of compassion. The longevity of our Board is also interesting. We are long standing and we are stable. There is a profound need to take time, and we ask that of our staff. We are a very patient place.

— LYNNE HAULTAIN

When you see a client come in for the first time, they are very withdrawn and disturbed by their experience. You can see it in them. But over a period of time people change. They begin to feel the effects of a process that has happened within them. When that happens the client will often cook some food and bring it in for us. That small gift, particularly that gift of sharing food, really touches us all.

— PINA GARASI
Bernie Farrell (Complementary Therapies) and Jose

Over the time I have been coming to Foundation House I can see dramatic changes in me. Four years ago I went back home to South Sudan to visit my family. While I was there the war broke out and it was very hard when I came back to Australia. I was referred to Foundation House. I wasn’t settling in. I was emotionally distracted and having very disrupted sleep. I would never go out. I would never go into the city. If I saw police I would get so scared. I know they are there to protect us here, but when I saw police I would just panic and think that they are the people that killed people back home. So I came to Foundation House and got some counselling. I was also introduced to massage. It was all so new to me. But now I love coming here. My flatmate also notices the changes in me. She sees me use oils, take gentle showers, put on music. She knows these strategies will help me work through things. It has taken time, but bit by bit Foundation House has taught me how to get myself back.

– ABOUK

The fact that Foundation House has sustained itself for 30 years speaks volumes about the fact that people need this service. To heal from the kind of trauma we are talking about needs a specialised and specific service. It is so very deep. There were layers of it in my subconscious. Layers I still don’t know exist. You have to dig deep for the layers of trauma and fear that you have been through.

– REEM

Having systems in place allows us to go deep and helps us to understand the experience of people from their perspective. You need to shape your interventions to respond to different cultures, different religious faiths and different types of persecution. That is challenging. But if you don’t do the deep work then you dilute or diminish, to potentially dangerous levels, the depth of the expertise you are trying to share. If it doesn’t do justice to, or honour, what people have been through, and the fact that they’ve found the courage to share their experiences with us, then I don’t think we would have been able to inform and work across different sectors in the way that we have. If I am going to advocate on policy with integrity, I have to be very confident that it is based on actual experience, and that there is an evidence base. That makes it very difficult for people to question the credibility of our work. That is the importance of going deep.

– PARIS ARISTOTLE
From the heart
I remember the day when Mardi from Foundation House came to my home. She was friendly and because of the way she spoke to me I felt maybe I could trust her. I felt something else too. She had such deep kindness. With some people perhaps you have a job, but you are only doing your job according to the book. But if you work from the heart, then you will succeed in a very different way. If someone really looks at you, and works with you because of who you are, that feels so important.

Since I have known Mardi I have changed a lot. She has connected me with so many organisations. She never judged me when my speaking in English was incorrect. She has only ever spoken with love. She has taught me how to practise sitting, to be with my difficulties and memories. I don’t tell anyone my whole story, of what happened to me in Iran, I couldn’t do that.

I think Mardi knows around 70 per cent of that story. She is the person I am able to talk to and she encourages me to write the books that I now write.

I cannot have a different life, I cannot forget what happened to me, but I can start a new life. It’s like a person has two lives, the past and the one in the now, and Foundation House gives us hope for that new life. I want to serve society here and help other people from all communities. We have to share and be brave. We have to learn about love and forgiveness.

Friendship and relationship are power. I have found that myself. I found people who love me for who I am. They don’t look at me with a sense of duty. They are honest with me and work with love. This is the best healing we can have.

– ROSA
Rosa came to Australia on her own. She had no family and she had been through horrific experiences in Iran. I think it is a privilege to be allowed into people’s lives and to have them share their experiences and how those experiences have impacted on them. Being truly in relation is so important for people who have been tortured, where people have done truly horrible things to them. The developing of a relationship and the forming of a relationship to be honest and to do no harm actually provides an alternative to what they have been through. We’ve always said in the work that the relationship is the most important aspect. And it doesn’t go one way. I have learned so much from Rosa. One thing I’ve learned from her is the use of the word ‘refugee’. She doesn’t like being called a refugee because she feels it is a label of pity. When I listened to her say that I thought yes, fair enough, I understand. So it’s changed the way I speak about people. Now I talk about people who are of a refugee background. Also her capacity to continue to live her life, considering what was done to her and to many other people, has taught me so much. Years of her life have been stolen. She has told me many times that she can never forget but she can forgive. That is a very powerful thing to learn from someone.

– MARDI STOW

Good relationships can bring about change. I think about the life force that exists in relationships. There is life force in your experience of, and with, other human beings. Sometimes people’s life force is crushed. There are too many losses, too many people eliminated. Sometimes grief is at such a profound level you simply can’t rebuild the relational aspects of a human being. Survivors often don’t really expect that life force to return, but they might express their life force by making sure their children have opportunities. In the face of mass loss, which characterises some people’s lives, you can’t expect to recreate life force. But you always take very deep account of the person who is sitting there with you.

– IDA KAPLAN

So many friendships have been created at Foundation House. I’ve had the chance to listen to other people who have problems; people who are in need of someone to listen to them, just like me. I talk with them about different ways to get better; ways that helped me. Real listening is a form of love.

– JOSE

When we arrived we had our family, but that was the only constant. Now we are as healthy as we can be. I think the contribution that Foundation House made to that, and the work they did, was a contribution to our lives. It was one of the reasons we are the people we are now. Of course we worked at building ourselves too, but it would not have been the same without that help. You are respected as a person. Despite the fact that the work deals with the core of you, you are seen as the whole.

– FARAH
They saw me
Before Sudan was divided, we from South Sudan simply didn’t have the opportunity to walk into a library, borrow a book and then bring it back. We were not allowed to do that. We could look, or we could buy, but we could not have a membership. We were not trusted with that. My mother used to buy me second-hand books and I would read those books, over and over, so that I literally memorised large pieces of text from them.

When I came to Australia, I would go to the library, borrow books, and read and read. More than anything this was a way to improve my English. I’d always finish books before the return date. I loved reading people’s personal stories, what they went through, and how they overcame their personal challenges and problems. Those stories motivated me so much.

I remember when I got the study grant at Foundation House. I knew what it would mean to my life. I know that I would not have come so far without that help. Now I’ve completed a Bachelor of Health Science. I majored in health promotion. I know I have changed so much as a person.

I remember the celebration on the day I received that award. There was music and there was food. I remember my name being called out. I was overjoyed. Somebody was giving me a chance. They were saying, ‘You deserve this’ and they acknowledged my hard work. Getting that study grant changed everything for me. It felt like they saw me.

— ABOUK
It is such a fundamental aspect of the work to behold someone as a human being and for that person to feel that. Working with a person who has been disrespected, terrorised, their connections have been so broken, it is so important to see that person as a person. It’s fully taking in another human being. It’s not compartmentalising them. I might get a question like ‘How do I help this person with sleeping difficulties?’ My response would always be, ‘I don’t know, tell me about that person.’

— IDA KAPLAN

I have never had anyone at Foundation House tell me you should do this. The counsellors show me different paths and different methods, then I choose the best path for me. What they do is help me figure out what I need to do and who I want to be.

— NAZ

You cannot know people, and you cannot make any assumptions about who they are, how they are, or where they are from, until you sit down and unpack all of that with them. I remember when I first came to see Paris about joining the Board. I’d looked at an annual report and I remember asking him why Foundation House had a budget item committed to dentists. He told me this was because a lot of the clients had been tortured through their mouths and through their teeth. They were pulled out. Or they were electrocuted through their gums. Or they had spent so much time in refugee camps that they hadn’t been able to see a dentist. They couldn’t eat solid foods. That was something that had not entered my range of understanding, as well-informed as I thought myself to be. Still to this day, that has such a profound impact on how I view the world.

— LYNNE HAULTAIN

Listening means not assuming that I know what someone is going to say. Listening means hearing what is said and then exploring further what that means. Listening is not about judging. It’s about being open to who another person truly is. Listening is also about giving back. You are sharing information. You are finding out what the other person thinks. It’s taking the time for that, not assuming that you know. You are present intellectually and you are present emotionally. It’s not just about hearing the words. It’s also about hearing what is underneath the words.

— MARDI STOW

Part of respect for a person is understanding things through the history and the nature of persecution in that person’s life. You don’t have to require people to say it, but you should be familiar enough with the history of a conflict to appreciate, for example, forced displacement, or to understand if it’s a war. You look at who is here in Australia, and just as importantly who is not here. You acquire information about the history of their community over time. You can ascertain the losses they have been exposed to without them having to say it.

— IDA KAPLAN
We always knew we needed to go to where the people are. So we have made very conscious decisions around decentralising the service. Moving out of Parkville was part of that. Moving to Brunswick was part of that. Moving to Dandenong, to Sunshine, to Ringwood, to Dallas is all part of that. It’s about making sure we offer a service that is accessible to people. That is part of our rationale – being where people need us to be. What we are saying to the Australian Government and to the Australian community is you need to support people where they are, and we need to reflect that too.

– LYNNE HAULTAIN

It has always been about our clients receiving what they need, while the agency maintains a focus on our values and ethical underpinnings. Our principle of political neutrality means that we can maintain that focus no matter who is in government. We have a reputation for not being partisan and for being very focused on the needs of our client group by providing the assistance and services to support them in rebuilding their lives. The decisions we made in the early stages of this organisation, laying the foundations and principles that guide our work, means that we have credibility and have established confidence and trust in what we do. From our perspective it means we are making a contribution to the way in which we here in Victoria, and in Australia, treat people who have survived the horrors of torture.

– PARIS ARISTOTLE

Jenny Adams (Complementary Therapies) and Abouk
Light is back in our lives
I have been in Australia for three and a half years. I am so happy to feel free, to do the things that I always wanted to do. I used to dream of driving a car, but as a girl I couldn’t do that. Now I can drive around. I don’t have an expensive car but my car means so much to me. I can take the kids to the park and they can play. We have that opportunity.

My husband and I have two girls and two boys. We are here for the future of our children. We have been through so much back home. But I can see now that my children are going to school and they tell me they are happy. Seeing them grow and be happy means the world to me.

Life in Afghanistan was difficult. If I hadn’t come to Foundation House, what would have happened to me? It has changed my life and the way I used to think. They’ve helped me to work through everything I have been through. They have helped and supported my whole family. My daughter was afraid of sleeping at night. She was always having nightmares and telling me she was seeing white shadows. Foundation House has helped her through that.

Of course, I am still working on being afraid of many things. I used to wake up in the middle of the night with nightmares. It felt like there was something pushing on my chest that I wanted to get out. The crying has stopped most of the time, but we are still working on all those feelings.

Without Foundation House I would have lost my life. I would have lost everything. I have a saying from back home about the people that bring light into your life. It is God directing and supporting you. Without Foundation House I think I would have lost my light. But the light is back in our lives.

– SAHAR (not her real name)
You can hear from people’s stories, you can hear from feedback from clients, that life is just that little bit better. There is success there, in having held a human and helped them function despite the trauma that they have been through.

— PINA GARASI

Yes, it is still difficult, but I don’t want to call it difficult. Instead I call it exciting. It’s learning about a whole new world. When you learn a new language it’s not just the language, it’s the pathway into the culture, to meeting people, to communicating with others. I came into this country. I certainly wasn’t planning to, but this is life. Now I am here I must learn how to communicate. One of the things that has really helped me was receiving a Quentin Buckle Study Grant from Foundation House. That prize was one of the main steps that helped me to move forward on my journey. At the time, I was struggling to take the IELTS exam, the English language test, which was a university requirement. It cost about $300, and that was so expensive for me and my family to afford. So I used that grant to sit that test and to buy study materials. Now I’m studying at Swinburne University. Winning that award meant so much to me.

— NAZ

Foundation House gives us hope. People find there is new hope for them here, hope to achieve their goals. This helps many people and it helps society. It helps all of us.

— ROSA

Some of the really good memories I have are of the projects that involved music that we did with communities. I remember we worked with the Karen community writing songs. This was an intergenerational project. The older people played their traditional instruments and got in touch with the way they used to perform and dance. We had younger members of the community as well. Their style of music was more modern. They wrote their own songs that described their journey. That was a wonderful project. It brought generations together. It provided the opportunity for people to express themselves and to share that with the wider community.

— MARDI STOW

Since coming to Australia I’ve been working and studying. I completed a Diploma of Community Welfare, a Diploma of Community Development and now I am studying an Advanced Diploma in Interpreting. My girls always encourage me. What motivates me? In the beginning I just wanted to take a chance. There were three of us, and I was the person who was responsible for my daughters, so whatever was available I would take it. Studying, working, I wanted to take up those challenges. I often heard people say women cannot do it alone, but I proved I could do it. Now all of us are doing very, very well.

— SUNDES

I have been studying for six or seven years. I love learning. There was a massive part of my early education that I missed, so I can’t let go of study. I did a Bachelor of Fine Arts, I studied film theory and then I started studying psychology just under two years ago. I’ve had my eye on psychology since I was in Year 11. I would love to be a clinical psychologist and do clinical work. Hopefully I will be registered one day. I think I will always have a hunger for knowledge.

— REEM
I love the sky and the possibilities it offers us.
I now work at the Melbourne Magistrates Court. I am a family violence practitioner. I started the first Arabic Speaking Men’s Behaviour Change program in Australia. This is a group based on working with men who have committed acts of violence against their female partners. I work with people and try to give them other options. I am quite lucky to be able to wake up each morning and go to work. It is something that I care about very much.

Through my experience with Foundation House I learned that you can get really stuck in your own head. I could have been jailed by my thoughts, in my emotions and how I viewed the world. Because of what I have seen, and where I grew up, I am committed to the field of family violence and the mistreatment of women. But I also realise that it exists everywhere.

My life experience is vital to the work I do now. Yes it was a difficult life. But I know it’s not all about me. My experience has helped me to relate to the experience of others, to the experience of children. It has helped me understand the complexities of people’s lives. This seems to be the right path for me. Perhaps if I had a different life I would not be able to handle this work. I am certainly the youngest woman who does this kind of work. I often get asked why as a young woman I do this work, but it makes a lot of sense to me.

When I came here I was 15 years old, and I was very excited about being involved in things. I took part in community and youth organisations. Now when I reflect back on why I wanted to be so active, I realise it was because it was the first time in my life I was able to express myself, to give an opinion, to have an opinion. Just like my mum, I love the sky and the possibilities it offers us.

— Farah
If we teach people, then the growth in understanding can be exponential. I think about our capacity building across so many different sectors, whether it’s in health or in education, or in other parts of the community. We do that so that people can understand the reality of our clients’ experience. That multiplies the impact we can have.

— LYNNE HAULTAIN

We have done a lot of work to support the development of a Refugee Health Program in Victoria, including the first needs analysis around refugee health services. Now there is a whole refugee health sector. Ten years ago there was one refugee health nurse and now there are 40 positions across the state. It means that if someone is a new arrival or has been here for longer, they can go to a community health centre in their local area, and there is a refugee health nurse there. Ten years ago that was not the case. If they need to see a physiotherapist, and they identify as being from a refugee background, they’ll have priority access. And that physiotherapist will know something of their chronic pain and the impact of torture and trauma for that client. Addressing the social justice issues is important. Seeing change is important.

— SUE CASEY

It has always been about doing the work. It’s not about it being our work. The idea is to let it go. We share what we’ve got and what we know. We want to work ourselves out of a job. People have to be at the centre, not this organisation. And we work with hope. We work with clients to find hope again. In some sense we do this because we believe in hope. We have a belief that things can change.

— DONNA CHESTERS
Now I have such big dreams for my children’s future. My oldest son says he wants to be an engineer. My older daughter wants to be a doctor and my youngest daughter wants to be a teacher. My kids wish for me too. I would love to work as a receptionist in an office one day, dress for work and carry a briefcase. Maybe it will happen. I hope all our dreams come true.

— SAHAR

Our training programs also provide a fabulous form of reach. They build capacity. They mean that people working across a range of different sectors can do the work themselves.

— IDA KAPLAN

We do about 250 sessions of professional learning in health and community services each year with three and a half thousand people sitting on seats. We realised that before people were ready to think about changes they could make, we needed to do training on understanding the refugee experience. The other area of work that resonates is the rural and regional program. Ten per cent of new arrivals settle in a rural or regional town. We have created a model where the coordinator of that program works in partnership with agencies and community health services to provide torture and trauma counselling. She not only does training with staff but she also provides support to the agency and to the whole of the town. It’s not about jumping in, and doing stuff when people are not ready. It’s about providing a presence. That has made a really big difference in rural and regional centres across Victoria.

— SUE CASEY

Over time we have developed a level of confidence in our approach to supporting refugees, asylum seekers and survivors of torture. The ethical and philosophical pillars we put in place at the beginning have helped create an organisational culture that in turn draws staff to the organisation who reflect and adhere to those standards and values. We’ve been able to retain exceptional staff members for a long period of time, which has given us the ability to support and develop new people who have joined us as we have grown. Ensuring that our ethical and philosophical settings were right when we started 30 years ago is why we have been able to cope with the difficult nature of this work and reshape those difficulties into positive outcomes with our clients.

— PARIS ARISTOTLE
Peace that starts within us
I was only 20 or 21 when I arrived here in Australia. It’s only been four years, but I feel like I have grown up so much in that time. When we were in Iran, my mother would talk on the phone to my aunt and cousins who had come to Australia 10 or 15 years ago. When they talked about Australia they would say, ‘You don’t know what words like freedom or justice or equality mean, until you can see this country.’ So I had that first impression of Australia. Those beautiful words were dancing in front of my eyes.

While I was in detention, I was trying to figure out the real truth about Australia because you have no idea what is going on outside. You have no idea what outside even looks like. But since leaving detention I have learned that Australian people are good. I have always been treated kindly by them. So I guess, for me, that is the real impression I have of Australia; not the one I had in detention.

My main goal has always been to affect people’s lives and to help bring peace into the world. In Iran I originally planned to study law. But for political reasons, the government in Iran didn’t allow me to study law, even though my scores were very high. So then I decided on a different field, media, thinking if I couldn’t change the laws, maybe I could inform people and help create a pathway to a new kind of freedom.

But then I had to flee with my family. When I came here I was introduced to a whole new set of laws. But it also got me thinking. If people can change the way they interact with each other, then individually they can get to that point of peace. I’ve seen how the counsellors at Foundation House can affect people. They help people to find a pathway to peace. I believe in the peace that starts within us.

– NAZ
I’ve got the chance to help work towards a vision of Australia and what this country can be. Ten years ago we had our 20th anniversary celebration at Government House. It was such a joyous occasion. There were hundreds of people there from every continent. We had incredible colour. We had women wearing beautiful silks and fabulous wraps on their heads. We had gorgeous children. We had proud men. It was humanity at its very best. Happy, safe and feeling connected with the ancient culture that exists in Australia. I remember saying, this is the Australia I want to see.

— LYNNE HAUTAIN

I love coming back to Foundation House because it takes me into other people’s worlds. It’s full of inspiration. My husband Ian loved the clients that he met here. He loved their passion for life and their ability to overcome the things that had happened to them. He was inspired by their ability to care, to interact, to laugh and to love. Yes, many of the stories are tragic and sad, but they are stories that need to be talked about. These are incredible people. Look at how they contribute. The potential for all of us is so vast.

— LOUISE McKENZIE

There is no single memory for me. There are so many memories. They are about the very beautiful people I got to work with in those early days. They are about observing the incredible work that people are doing now. The memories are about exceptional people – staff and clients. I know people’s lives are infinitely better because of the underpinnings we set up all that time ago. What I anticipate is that we will be able to hold onto that and we will continue to build the architecture. Of course, there will always be change, but there will be the legacy of all that work that we’ve done and all that we’ve achieved. It will never be lost. All of it will be carried forward.

— PARIS ARISTOTLE

I love this work. We’ve been a small agency, now we are a middle-size agency, and what we have been able to achieve over the years is astounding. We now hear principals getting up and talking our talk, promoting the benefits of changing the way a school welcomes a family of refugee background. You never take for granted you know it all, because every story you hear, every table that you sit at when you go and talk, offers a new way of seeing and doing things.

— DONNA CHESTERS
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Words from our supporters
It seems like just yesterday when I and a few other concerned people came together in Melbourne, to create momentum and to attract funds and premises for a service for refugee survivors of torture. For obvious reasons we believed that Victoria should offer such a service. Once our group obtained some funds from the Myer Foundation in 1987, we employed a young man named Paris Aristotle as a project officer – in retrospect a stroke of incredibly good fortune and a defining moment – and created a legal structure, the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. The general manager of Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital where I was working, Robin Blackman, generously allowed us to use a vacant doctor’s residence rent-free. House Number 23 at 35 Poplar Road Parkville became the original Foundation House. The late John Gibson took on the role of inaugural Chair of the Committee of Management and Paris embraced the role of coordinator with the full force of his being. Paris’s devotion, courage, patience and leadership has created a unique organisation, a health-giving culture that has changed the lives of countless people, given rise to a nationwide system of care for refugees and influenced national and international policy. Most impressive is how Foundation House has endured the very dark times we have passed through as a nation. In the early years I took on a number of roles, most specifically the clinical role, working with substantial numbers of asylum seekers who were enmeshed in an increasingly hostile process. I regard it as a huge privilege to have formed a bond with so many truly remarkable human beings from many nations, most of whom are now Australian citizens. At first there was unambiguous support from government for the mission of the Foundation. But, as we all know, with the passage of time governments have become more and more ambivalent and unconscionably cruel in relation to those legitimately seeking asylum. On this anniversary, I would like to celebrate the achievements of the Foundation. I’d also like to acknowledge Paris’s decisive role, and the large number of people who have supported and led the Foundation’s vital work over three decades. Acknowledgement goes especially to those like John Gibson and Quentin Buckle, who are no longer with us. I’d also like to express my deep gratitude that I have been able to remain a member of the very wide family of Foundation House for 30 years – so far.

— PROF PATRICK McGORRY AO
Executive Director of Orygen, Professor of Youth Mental Health at the University of Melbourne, and a Director of the Board of the National Youth Mental Health Foundation (headspace).

The founding members of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture had a vision for an agency that, in the words of Paris Aristotle, had the courage to sit with the pain and anguish of survivors to help rebuild their lives. In the 30 years since, under Paris’s wise and steadfast leadership, Foundation House has grown to be an organisation with impeccable credibility, offering a culture of innovation and the highest standards of care. In the process it has retained, at both its very core and in its everyday work, a very human compassion that reaches out to meet the needs of vulnerable people, respects their stories and walks alongside them as they journey towards healing.
When the Myer Foundation was approached in 1988 to support the development of a specialised service for refugees, we were convinced by the necessity to not only address the education, employment and housing needs of new arrivals – something taken care of more or less well by existing settlement services – but also by the challenge to respond in very sensitive ways to the needs of people who had fled from conflict, trauma and torture before their arrival in Australia.

The Myer Foundation is very proud to have been ‘at the ground floor’ with Foundation House. Our belief in the idea of Foundation House and in the people behind it, backed up by a relatively small amount of financial support, has been repaid countless times over, in the beneficial social impacts the organisation delivers across our community.

— CARRILLO GANTNER AO
Chairman, Sidney Myer Fund

It gives me great pleasure to contribute to a document celebrating the 30 years of service delivered by Foundation House.

When Paris Aristotle approached the Reichstein Foundation 30 years ago for support in the development of a centre for newly arrived refugees who had experienced torture and trauma in their country of origin, our trustees were quick to support his vision. The Foundation saw Paris as a strong advocate for change and social justice and everything that Foundation House has achieved over the last 30 years has come from a vision for a fairer and more just society.

Foundation House has grown from a small organisation to one that works with thousands of clients each year, advocating for policy reform and better service delivery across several government departments. Paris has been an adviser to government and a voice in the international arena of policy reform for refugees and asylum seekers.

Foundation House is one of my favourite examples of the power of philanthropy. Thank you, Paris, and the wonderful team of passionate people supporting you, for making our world and the lives of thousands of people that much better.

— JILL REICHSTEIN OAM
Chair, Reichstein Foundation

There are many different reasons to love the work of Foundation House and many different triumphs to treasure and celebrate. Among them, for those of us who work in philanthropy, is the fact that the organisation is a rare and special example of catalytic philanthropy at its best.

It was a rare privilege for the Myer and Reichstein Foundations to invest in an innovation over 30 years ago, and then step back and watch as it stormed through the proof of concept stage to become a source of national and international pride. It was clearly the time and place for such an innovation, and it was in the hands of the right people who could bring our philanthropic dollars to life with courage and creativity.
This vision was driven – and still is – by people committed to a service that was compassionate, respectful, and socially and economically sound – an idea almost ahead of its time, but not quite, because it was understood and supported by people in strategic leadership roles who could bring it to full term.

And now here we are 30 years later, celebrating this initiative that has not only succeeded and been brought to scale, it has delivered beyond expectations, and made us all proud.

This celebration is a great moment to salute the commitment, acumen and creativity of the people who have led this work and held fast to a promise over so many years, believing in and matching the courage and optimism of so many of the clients who have been part of the vision. Australia is a better place for all your efforts.

– GENEVIEVE TIMMONS
Philanthropic Executive, Portland House Foundation and VFST Ambassador

The enormous number of refugees, and events leading to the displacement and death of people from a large number of countries, have created the need for assistance, care and support in many parts of the world. Australia has been no exception and has been challenged to assist people who have made a hazardous journey to reach our shores. Many of these people have been exposed to physical and mental stress of such a nature that they have struggled to survive. Foundation House has been exemplary in its response to this challenge. In 2016 alone, Foundation House provided services to over 5,000 clients.

My wife and I have been delighted to take on the role of patrons to Foundation House over the past few years. We have been privileged to meet the caring staff and volunteers and have observed the empathy and compassion with which they approach those in need of support.

Given the ongoing turmoil in many parts of the world, there will continue to be a need for the services provided by Foundation House. Therefore, there is also need for all of us to support the staff and volunteers, both emotionally and financially, over the coming years. It is our responsibility to bring to the attention of both Commonwealth and State governments the needs of the refugee population. It is also the responsibility of those of us who are supporters of the Foundation to bring to the attention of both state and federal politicians the high quality of assistance provided by this organisation. We can provide support to the staff, bring to the attention of our friends and contacts the nature of the challenges faced by refugees, and highlight the excellent service provided by Foundation House.

– PROF DAVID DE KRETSER AC
Patron
It takes many words to attempt to describe the breadth and depth of the wonderful work done by Foundation House over 30 years to counteract the damaging effects of appalling events experienced by many refugees coming to live in our community. The realisation of the initial dream, to create a place of hope and healing, has seen the creation of a service that has enabled thousands of people to receive the holistic support necessary for them to make a fulfilling new life in our community.

I congratulate Foundation House as you celebrate all your achievements over this time, not only the direct support and assistance given to individuals and families, but also the development of diverse programs in the community to assist in other aspects of settlement, as well as your extensive advocacy, advisory and educational activities.

I congratulate all those inspirational people who have been and are associated with the operation and delivery of services at Foundation House. They are driven by all the very best attributes of human nature as they use their skills, knowledge, experience, dedication and compassion to help people recover from their traumatic experience.

The atmosphere of gentle caring created in this place of healing is palpable. I give thanks that such a special place exists in our community.

– JAN DE KRETSER
Patron

Red Cross greatly values the enduring and collaborative relationship we’ve had with Foundation House over three decades. We respect and acknowledge the expertise, practice focus and collegiality you bring to the work you do. We admire how you have contributed to key systemic changes in an environment that is complex and comes with a lot of uncertainty, while maintaining a sharp focus on supporting the resilience of people who have too often experienced devastating losses. Congratulations on 30 years of amazing service.

– NOEL CLEMENT
Director, Migration, Emergencies and Movement Relations, Australian Red Cross

AMES Australia is honoured to have worked closely with Foundation House for more than a decade in the work of supporting refugees newly arrived to Australia in their settlement journey. For 30 years Foundation House has provided the highest quality care for people from refugee backgrounds who have experienced torture or traumatic events in their lives.

The organisation stands as an example of the very best practice, staff commitment and innovation in the humanitarian sector. It has been a tireless advocate for programs and policy reforms benefiting people from refugee backgrounds, and it has worked cooperatively with other agencies to improve the lives and futures of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Congratulations on 30 years of dedicated and crucial work that has made a difference in so many lives.

– CATHERINE SCARTH
Chief Executive Officer, AMES Australia
Responding to the plight of refugees is one of the great moral issues of our time. Many governments, including our own, have treated refugees with disdain or even with fear, regarding them as interlopers, undermining the fabric of our society. For 30 years Foundation House has modelled an inspiring alternative, seeking to understand the nature of the refugee experience and to redress the ordeals suffered by many refugees. This is an institution that lives up to its name in many different ways. It offers support to refugees to assist them to rebuild their lives after torture or other forms of trauma have shaken the foundations of their lives. It also works with those providing services to refugees to shape their programs to be more responsive to refugee needs. Through engagement with individuals, organisations and governments, Foundation House provides the bedrock of care, concern and expertise on which secure futures of those with refugee backgrounds can be based. This in turn has enriched our Victorian community and its capacity to welcome and sustain those fleeing persecution.

– HILARY CHARLESWORTH AM
Patron

A 30th anniversary celebration is an excellent opportunity to reflect on the achievements and work of Foundation House.

It has been an honour to work with Paris Aristotle and Foundation House for over 10 years to support the health and wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers in Victoria.

Foundation House’s work has made a difference for thousands of people who seek refuge and asylum in Victoria each year. The approach is always one of respect, engagement and support so that each individual can settle in their new community, manage the issues of their past, and importantly, work towards a better life.

Paris’s leadership throughout this time has been inspirational, and so much of Foundation House’s success is as a result of his leadership and ability to draw a capable and committed team around him to work for the benefit of this community.

There is still much need and so much more work to do, but it is clear that Foundation House will continue to be a leading and integral part of ensuring better futures for refugees and asylum seekers in Victoria.

– THE HON MARY WOOLDRIDGE MP
Shadow Minister for Health, Former Minister for Mental Health and Community Services (2010–2014)
Foundation House is an organisation that I wish we did not need to have but am very pleased we do have, since the number of refugees worldwide who have been subjected to awful events has, tragically, grown in recent years.

It is a tribute to the significance and quality of the work of Foundation House that successive Australian governments have maintained and indeed increased its funds over the decades as Australia’s intake of people seeking protection has expanded.

Certainly less welcome to governments, but an absolutely critical aspect of Foundation House’s work, is its voicing of its concerns about those policies and practices that violate the rights and damage the health and wellbeing of recognised refugees and asylum seekers.

– PETRO GEORGIOU AO
Patron

I am honoured to be one of several patrons of Foundation House. Over the years I have had the privilege to observe and speak for this organisation headed by Paris Aristotle. He has an exemplary Board of Management and staff team, every member of Foundation House is inspirational and has my highest esteem.

The individuals and families who are clients of Foundation House have often risked their lives and wellbeing for safe refuge in this country. The work with them is vitally important because we know that, in recovery and growth, their citizenship and their contribution enriches our country.

The programs Foundation House provide have had the support of successive governments, both Commonwealth and Victorian. This is a testament to the high level of respite, repair and restoration of the spirit that is provided.

That we can provide such excellent service to the most vulnerable, and provide safe haven from chaos, confusion and hurt, helps me as a citizen to believe in this country.

– DUR-É DARA OAM
Patron

I’ll never forget my first visit to Foundation House, the music, the dancing and the aroma of spicy, delicious food. The celebrations were infectious. I was there to announce additional government funding for mental health services, a serious matter, and I ended up at the feast. I learned then that this amazing organisation, which supports some of the most traumatised people from around the world, wraps them in love and support, in order to heal their wounds and to bind their broken hearts.

Visiting Foundation House many times over the years, in old and then new digs, this impression never left me. The waves of people from differing, disparate and despairing places sadly keep coming. But the Foundation’s determination to give them a better life has never faltered.

The restoration of hope to so many is something for which our community should be enormously grateful. It is always worth a party. Best wishes to you all.

– THE HON BRONWYN PIKE
former State Member for Melbourne, former Victorian Minister, and Member of Parliament (1999–2012)
I send felicitations on the 30th anniversary of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, I have been associated with you for all of these years.

I congratulate Foundation House on the practical programs and advocacy of more compassionate initiatives in Australia. I was proud to participate recently in the Charlesworth Lecture. I honour all those who have contributed to the wonderful work of Foundation House.

I am proud to support you and to be involved with you, if necessary, for a further 30 years!

– THE HON MICHAEL KIRBY
AC CMG
Patron

Much has been said of Paris’s contribution to supporting refugees and asylum seekers, particularly in providing support services to survivors of torture and trauma. The extent of his contribution goes well beyond his own organisation and well beyond Victoria. His leadership in building excellence in the sector has guided organisations throughout Australia and internationally.

Less is known about Paris’s efforts behind the scenes to build an effective national strategy to safeguard this work – a significant part of that strategy came to be known as the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT).

The early days of service delivery to refugee survivors of torture and trauma in Australia were characterised by patchy and inconsistent commitment from government funding bodies. Some states struggled to build their agencies at all. Paris deftly analysed the state of play, identifying that a commitment to a strong and effective national network, supported by the Commonwealth, would provide the best chance for continued improvement and would further strengthen Australia’s refugee resettlement program. By the early 1990s he was fully engaged in building the FASSTT project. FASSTT emerged largely because of Paris’s energy and commitment, and his capacity to build relationships and alliances. He brought his capacity to acknowledge the strategic concerns of other stakeholders and his willingness to work with them to build effective and vibrant partnerships while maintaining a commitment to an ethical and principled approach. Ultimately Australia saw the development of a unique national network of services (FASSTT) which continues to work towards excellence in this field.

Over the past 30 years FASSTT agencies have played a leading national role in developing services, and policies relating to refugees and survivors of torture and trauma. Australia’s leadership in this endeavour is recognised across the globe. Such a status has been made possible through our collaborative national FASSTT framework and the commitment to working in partnership with government and non-government sectors. FASSTT, and indeed Australia, owes Paris a huge debt of gratitude.

– PAULA PETERSON
FASSTT National Coordinator
Milestones
1987–1990

Refugee communities join with health, legal and community professionals at a public meeting to discuss establishing a service for survivors of torture in Victoria.

The Myer Foundation provides seed funding to employ a coordinator for six months; the Reichstein Foundation provides funds to secure a further two years for the coordinator position and service development; the Victorian Government initially provides a one-off grant and then subsequent core funding; the Commonwealth Department of Immigration provides funding for three years to employ a full-time caseworker; funding is received to commence a family support program and natural therapies program.

The Victorian Foundation for Victims of Torture (VFVT) is established as an incorporated association.

Name changes to the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST).
1990

NUMBER OF CLIENTS SUPPORTED
185

TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF BIRTH
El Salvador, Chile, Vietnam, Cambodia, East Timor

STAFF EFT (EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME)
7
1991–1995

VFST is appointed to the Victorian Department of Health Ethnic Health Task Force.

VFST opens outpost in Springvale to assist clients in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

VFST Director is appointed to Australian Government Settlement Advisory Council.

Department of Immigration establishes funding for the Early Intervention Program for newly arrived refugees.

Australian Government allocates $5.2m over four years for the Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma to be provided in each state and territory.

Inaugural meeting is held of the National Forum of Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

VFST’s Family Support Program is selected by the Australian Government as one of 13 exemplary approaches to working with families.
1995

NUMBER OF CLIENTS SUPPORTED
378

TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF BIRTH
Former Yugoslavia, Iraq, East Timor, Somalia, Sri Lanka

STAFF EFT (EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME)
15
1996–2000

VFST is selected for a humanitarian award by Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) and the Early Intervention Program is granted an award for public health excellence.

VFST produces *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*, a training manual to respond to the needs of torture and trauma survivors.

VFST and Western Melbourne Division of General Practice are awarded high commendation in public health for production of *Refugee Health and General Practice*.

VFST is engaged to provide debriefing to UN staff on mission in East Timor in the lead-up to the independence ballot and subsequent evacuation.

VFST receives Public Health Award for *Easing the Transition*, a resource about improving food and nutrition for refugees and the Primary Health Care Award for its Early Intervention Program for refugees and survivors of torture.
2000

NUMBER OF CLIENTS SUPPORTED
1,817

TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF BIRTH
Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, Iran, Croatia

STAFF EFT (EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME)
43
**2001–2005**

- UNHCR contracts VFST to prepare an international handbook to guide reception and integration of resettled refugees.
- VFST is awarded Strategic Impact Program funding by ANZ Trustees to establish the Service Innovation Program.
- VFST receives the Public Health Award for Excellence in Health Research for the Off to a Healthy Start project.
- Vic Health funds five-year refugee youth research project Good Starts.
- VFST helps to establish Refugee Education Partnership Project.
- VFST works with Victorian Department of Human Services on the development of the first strategy to improve healthcare for refugees.
- Annual grant award is established to support client education in the name of Quentin Buckle, founding committee member and first life-member of VFST.
- The Victorian *Refugee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan* is published.
- VFST relocates to new purpose-built facility in Brunswick.
In Our Own Words

2005

NUMBER OF CLIENTS SUPPORTED
3,102

TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF BIRTH
Sudan, Iraq, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Liberia

STAFF EFT (EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME)
50
2006–2010

VFST is contracted to provide services for newly arrived people under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS).

Inaugural oration is held to mark the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture.

Ucan2 Program is established to assist older children and young people to make successful transitions to mainstream pathways in education and employment.

Victorian Government funds VFST Schools Support Program.

VFST continues to develop a research program with substantial financial support from the Myer Foundation and the William Buckland Foundation.

Major Commonwealth funding stream Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma is made a recurrent program.

Foundation House establishes partnerships with counselling agencies in rural and regional areas for delivery of torture and trauma counselling and related services.

The Victorian Refugee Health Network, auspiced by Foundation House, is formed to support health services to be more responsive to people of refugee backgrounds.

The Capacity Building Team is formally established.

VFST opens new office in Dandenong to assist clients in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

The Immigration Department contracts VFST to develop the Vulnerability Identification and Assessment Tool to assist officers to identify vulnerable asylum seekers in the community and target services that enable them to resolve their immigration status.
2010

NUMBER OF CLIENTS SUPPORTED
4,048

TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF BIRTH
Burma (Myanmar), Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ethiopia

STAFF EFT (EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME)
85
2011–2015

VFST opens new office in Sunshine to assist clients in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

The Early Childhood Access and Participation Project is established with Victorian Government support to identify access barriers and strategies relating to maternal and child health and kindergarten services.

Founding Chair John Gibson passes away, VFST establishes an annual prize in his honour and name for best student in refugee law at the University of Melbourne.

VFST enters into a partnership with Monash University to develop a postgraduate unit in Refugee Health Nursing – the first of its kind in Australia.

VFST publishes research report Having a Baby in a New Country: the Experience of Afghan Families and Stakeholders in partnership with the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute.

VFST’s Child, Adolescent and Family Program, funded by the Victorian Government, is established.

Board member Ian McKenzie passes away and leaves bequest, which is used to fund the Ian McKenzie Endeavour Grant to support nominated clients in their chosen area of study, business or creative pursuit.

VFST publishes research report Promoting the Engagement of Interpreters in Victorian Health Services.

The Refugee Education Support Program and Relationships to Enhance Accessible Learning is developed as a partnership between school leaders and parents/carers of refugee backgrounds.

Founding patron Prof Max Charlesworth passes away and annual orations are named in his honour.

In collaboration with the University of Melbourne, VFST begins to develop a computer-based tool to assess the wellbeing of children and young people.
2015

NUMBER OF CLIENTS SUPPORTED
3,977

TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF BIRTH
Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar)

STAFF EFT (EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME)
123
2016–2017

VFST publishes the Integrated Trauma Recovery Service Model to document the VFST specialist approach to working with survivors of torture and other traumatic events.

VFST establishes early years program, funded by the Department of Education and Training and partners.

VFST receives Victorian Early Years Award in the Improving Access and Participation in Early Learning Award for work with the Chin community at East Sunshine Kindergarten.

New office is opened in Dallas to assist clients in the northern suburbs of Melbourne.

Australian Government funds Ucan2 as part of their Youth Transition Support pilot to help ‘young humanitarian entrants and vulnerable migrants under 25 to participate in work and education’.

CEO Paris Aristotle is named the 2017 Victorian Australian of the Year and Victoria’s nominee for Australian of the Year, and is made an Officer of the Order of Australia in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List for ‘distinguished service to the refugee and asylum seeker sector’.
2017

NUMBER OF CLIENTS SUPPORTED
5,403

TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF BIRTH
Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Burma (Myanmar)

STAFF EFT (EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME)
166
Foundation House has experienced significant growth over our 30-year history, as is seen here with a comparison of the numbers of clients and staff (equivalent full-time) from 1990 to 2016 (financial years).
Their legacy lives on

Throughout the history of this organisation many extraordinary people have contributed to its inception, its growth and its longevity. Some of these individuals, who sadly are no longer with us, have left a particular mark and an enduring legacy.
Cesar Benalcazar  
(died 2009)

Foundation House lost a friend and supporter in 2009. We first came to know Cesar when he arrived in Australia after years of work in Colombia as a doctor. His work helped the poor and the dispossessed, the persecuted and the innocent, and he did this at great risk to his own wellbeing.

He became a friend of the VFST and joined our management committee to share his insights and thoughtfulness about the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. Cesar always spoke for those whose voice was being silenced, and did so without anger or self-interest and always with complete respect.

In particular, Cesar was pivotal in the development of our research program. He believed that knowledge was crucial to progress and that our service had a responsibility to not only deliver the best services possible but to also build and share the knowledge contained within that work. It is a vision we remain vitally committed to.

Quentin Buckle  
(1953–2003)

Quentin was a fiercely committed human rights campaigner and social justice activist. He was particularly active in his solidarity with people struggling against repression in Iran and Chile and this led directly to his work in helping to establish Foundation House in 1987.

Foundation House CEO Paris Aristotle said at the time of Quentin’s death: ‘It is difficult to fully describe Quentin’s contribution to the creation and development of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. What began as a seed of hope among a group of committed community groups, professionals and human rights activists, has grown into a flourishing and innovative service for thousands of people who have survived the horrors of torture and persecution. Quentin’s passion was to shape the service into one that had the courage to sit with the pain and anguish that survivors feel and to help them rebuild their shattered lives is borne out in their actual stories of rebuilding. His vision of an agency that would constructively carry that learning into the political realm, where social and systemic change could be achieved, has also been one of his most enduring legacies. There is no doubt that Foundation House is an infinitely better place as a consequence ... In some important and fundamental ways, much of what Foundation House has achieved and what it has become, is because of Quentin. Our good fortune is not that Quentin crossed our path, but that we managed to lay the path together.’

In 2007 Foundation House established the Quentin Buckle Study Grant in Quentin’s honour. The award is designed to support its recipient from a refugee background to undertake or continue education or training in their chosen field.
Ron Castan AM QC  
(1939–1999)

Ron was a founding patron of Foundation House, and we will always be thankful that he lent his name and standing to our organisation in our establishment years. A barrister and human rights advocate, Ron is especially remembered for playing a leading role in some of Australia’s most important legal cases regarding the environment and Indigenous affairs and is best known for his decade-long work on the Mabo native title case. In recognition of this enormous contribution to Australian society and his work in constitutional and human rights law, the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University is named after him.

Prof Max Charlesworth AO  
(1925–2014)

Max was a founding patron of Foundation House. He was a leading philosopher and ethicist who devoted his life and career to challenging entrenched ways of thinking and to improving Australian society.

Max spoke at the launch of Foundation House in 1987, and his support in our formative years and beyond was critical in establishing our innovative model of service and sound reputation. In July 2014, as an expression of appreciation for Max’s commitment to Foundation House, we were delighted to name our annual oration in his honour. On this occasion, Foundation House Board Chair Lynne Haultain paid tribute to Max: ‘His support for Foundation House was sure, right from the start, and we are indebted and proud to have had him as a friend. To quote from Douglas Kirsner’s obituary in the Age – “Max did not see philosophy so much as a technical pursuit as a way to communicate with the wider society about the big questions of life. He did this in a wonderfully clear and distinct fashion.”

The oration is a fitting tribute to Max’s significant and lasting contribution to survivors of torture and trauma in Victoria, and we thank his family for allowing us to honour him in this way.

Rev James Weston Elvins  
(1927–2016)

Weston was a founding member on the Foundation House Committee of Management and served as the organisation’s treasurer for more than eight years. He is remembered as a staunch supporter of Foundation House and its work for many years as well as having spent a lifetime advocating for social justice for marginalised people. We will remember his service to the community with gratitude and respect.
John Gibson AM  
(1950–2012)

One of the Australian refugee sector’s best-loved and most admired advocates, John was respected both in Australia and internationally for his knowledge of refugee law, his tireless advocacy for refugees and asylum seekers, and his leadership of Australia’s refugee sector.

John was one of a small group of people who banded together to establish the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture. Of that time John said, ‘It was December 1986 when that first meeting happened. We had doctors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and administrators in attendance. After the speakers had done the lead-up, describing the need for a service for survivors of torture and trauma, we were asked to indicate our willingness to be involved, as a steering committee. There were about 15 of us there and we all stood up.’

In 1987, John put pen to paper – literally – to sketch a detailed plan for the establishment of a new agency to assist survivors of torture living in Victoria. John was the founding chairperson of Foundation House and served until 1992 and was pivotal in leading and shaping the work of the VFST.

John also served as the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) President between January 2006 and August 2012 and as a member (part-time) of the Refugee Review Tribunal for four years. A member of the Victorian Bar, he operated a specialist practice in refugee and migration law, served as junior counsel in a number of significant High Court cases on refugee issues and provided information, advice and training on a variety of refugee-related issues both in Australia and overseas. In 2013, John was made a Member of the Order of Australia ‘for significant service to international relations as an advocate for human rights’.

In honour of John’s outstanding contribution to this field of work, Foundation House established the John Gibson Memorial Prize in Refugee Law in partnership with the University of Melbourne and the Melbourne Law School. This annual prize was established in 2013 and is awarded to the top student in a refugee law subject. It recognises John’s outstanding contribution to the care of refugees and to refugee law.

Ian McKenzie OAM  
(1939–2014)

Ian was a long-time friend and Board Member of Foundation House. He made a deep and valued contribution and is dearly remembered by the Board, senior management and staff.

Ian was an exceptional photographer and communicator, and used those skills to support Foundation House in a variety of ways. His talents were recognised when he was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia in the Queen’s Birthday 2014 Honours List for service to the visual arts as a photographer, and to the community. Many of Ian’s images of our clients...
and our work grace our walls, and mean that his contribution is ever present. All at Foundation House feel enormous gratitude for the expertise, laughter and community spirit Ian brought to the life of our organisation.

A measure of Ian’s indomitable spirit became apparent after his death in October 2014 when his wife, Louise McKenzie, revealed Ian had given a considerable sum to Foundation House. We have chosen to direct these funds to establish the Ian McKenzie Endeavour Grant.

Alexander Stitt AM
(1937–2016)

Alex and his partner Paddy Stitt came to be involved with Foundation House through Board member, the late Ian McKenzie OAM. They worked closely with the Board and staff through the early 2000s. As a formidable team, Paddy, Alex and Ian collaborated on a pro bono basis with us to publish a series of Foundation House calendars featuring the stories and photographs of refugees. Later, Paddy and Alex consulted with us, again on a pro bono basis, to conceptualise and create our ‘house’ logo. Paddy and Alex’s different skills were woven together in many collaborative projects, and in their shared commitment to the work of Foundation House with survivors of torture and broader refugee issues their extraordinary partnership was never more apparent.

We will always be grateful for the contribution Alex made to Foundation House and the way we present ourselves to the wider community.
Words of thanks
So many people over our 30-year history have contributed so much to Foundation House.

WE WOULD LIKE TO SAY THANK YOU TO:

Clients
Staff
Board of Management/Committee of Management
Institutional Ethics Committee
Members
Patrons
Supporters
Commonwealth Government
Victorian Government
Local members of parliament
Philanthropic trusts and foundations
Private donors
Refugee, health, education and community sector colleagues
Corporate supporters
Contractors and suppliers
Volunteers
Media representatives
Foundation House
The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.

HEAD OFFICE - BRUNSWICK
Foundation House – The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.
4 Gardiner Street, Brunswick, VIC 3056 Australia
t: 03 9388 0022
e: info@foundationhouse.org.au
w: www.foundationhouse.org.au

METROPOLITAN OFFICES

DALLAS (NORTHERN)
Level 4, 61 Riggall Street
Dallas VIC 3047
Australia
t: (03) 9389 8899
f: (03) 9277 7871

DANDENONG (SOUTHERN)
155 Foster Street
Dandenong VIC 3175
Australia
t: (03) 8788 3333
f: (03) 8788 3399

RINGWOOD (EASTERN)
Suite 5, 45-51 Ringwood Street
Ringwood VIC 3134
Australia
t: (03) 9879 4638
f: (03) 9277 7871

SUNSHINE (WESTERN)
163 Harvester Road
Sunshine VIC 3020
Australia
t: (03) 9300 8670
f: (03) 9277 7871