

Community and welfare



COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Next year, Victoria University is offering diplomas of community development and community welfare. The courses can be studied either full-time or part-time and applicants must demonstrate paid and/or voluntary experience in community-related work. Details: 9919 8546 or facs.admin@vu.edu.au.

YOU GO, GIRL POWER

Girl Power is an early-intervention program for marginalised young women in Melbourne's north and west. Run by YWCA Victoria, the program helps young women avoid becoming involved in crime or victims of crime. It covers self-defence as well as topics such as drinking, drugs, self-harm, sexual violence and mental health. The information sessions can be conducted at schools and organisations. Details: 8668 8151 or gscordinator@ywca.net.

Setting the record straight

USED to feel safe, a good environment, a good school living in harmony, accepted, respected, but now ... I'm being disrespected; I'm being treated unfairly. What the Minister (former immigration minister Kevin Andrews) said is rude and it's racist, and it's encouraging other people to act like that," says Veronica, a 17-year-old Sudanese refugee who is one of the faces of a new campaign to defend Australia's migrant and refugee young people.

"I think people should be more accepting. There's only one difference and that's the colour of our skin, and that doesn't matter," Veronica says.

Carmel Guerra, director of the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues which has launched the Multicultural Youth Pledge, says it is designed to "set the record straight, get some balance into the discussion, counter myths and provide information about the situation of migrant and refugee young people".

The centre believes the recent debate on African refugees has distorted the facts and fuelled misconceptions. The campaign, run off the centre's website, highlights positive stories and the contributions newly arrived young people make to society.

The centre's multicultural youth liaison officer, Claudia Abakah, says

there has been an increase in racism and discrimination since the debate started. "This is having an impact on the young people," she says. "There are lots of positive things happening out there but that's overshadowed by the negative things people are reading or hearing in the media."

"Before when they walked on the streets, the young people felt a bit different because people do look at them. But now the looks are more fierce in that they are starting to feel like they are being targeted and being watched a lot more because of what's been going on in the media. "There has been talk of some

young people's parents being told to go back to their country when they are at shopping centres; people have had racist comments screamed out to them while they are on the streets, so the racism has increased."

Born in Ghana, Ms Abakah has lived in Melbourne since the age of nine, when she was reunited with her mother whom she had not seen for seven years.

As a youth worker for the centre's multicultural sport and recreation program, she helps young people from migrant backgrounds to become involved in sport and leisure. She also provides cultural awareness training for sporting associations and leisure centres.

While she had always wanted to be a social worker, Ms Abakah



Claudia Abakah, from Ghana, helps African youth in Melbourne.

PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

focused on young people because of her own background.

"Because I am African myself I realised how hard it is for the young people to have a say and to take part in the usual day-to-day life that any average Australian would take part in. Our families are very strict and (there are) cultural reasons."

"I guess I thought that by becoming a youth worker I could help the young people achieve the things they want, and be an advocate between them and their parents in explaining why they need to take part in sport or recreational activities or other things that will benefit them."

Ms Abakah joined the centre 12 months ago after completing a

degree in youth work and enjoys seeing the young she works with achieve their goals. Some go on to elite sport. "It's time to get the (positive) stories out. We hope people realise that newly arrived migrants ... actually do contribute to the community — they've got a lot to share with us, a lot of things that we can learn from them. And we all need to do our best to support that and not think about the negative things that are going on — there are negative things that happen in every community, not just the African community."

DEBI TAYLOR

LINK
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