

# CONNECTING CULTURES

ISSUE 24 WINTER 2015



 **ENGLISH**  
LANGUAGE PARTNERS  
NEW ZEALAND  
Working with Refugees and Migrants

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# Kia ora

One of our greatest strengths as an organisation is our ability to create small, tailored programmes to suit quite specific learning needs. It's this flexibility that allows us to design special courses for a wide range of businesses. Our courses address learning issues in a focussed and individualised way.

Two stories in this *Connecting Cultures* provide a fascinating glimpse into the diversity of our English for Employees programme.

As the stories show, this programme's critical feature is its responsiveness to a unique need – whether we're designing bespoke factory lessons for Pacific Islanders responsible for operating expensive laminator machinery, or running classes in the rural Waikato for skilled Filipino farm hands.

Our centres also extend their programme development to meet the specialised needs of their learners locally – such as those of Ahmed Ahmed, who now has his owner-operator licence after attending a short 'taxi driver' course run by our Waikato centre. You can read about his successes and how he's found a way to give back to English Language Partners in his own unique way.

In this issue, we're also revisiting a learner who featured in a *Connecting Cultures* story five years ago. Re Ber Paw Sein and her family have recently purchased their first home in New Zealand and Re Ber is still employed by the same café that took a chance on her when she and her volunteer home tutor, Maria Work, spontaneously went cold calling for a job.

I'd like to thank Re Ber for once again sharing her settlement story with us. Re Ber and Maria demonstrate how volunteers and learners, meeting through our ESOL Home Tutoring programme, form deep connections and build stronger communities throughout New Zealand.

**Nicola Sutton**  
Chief Executive

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Design and production Paradigm

Cover Filipino farm workers with  
Aaron Jeffares (right), Moondance  
Farms, Tirau

Photo Michael Jeans

ISSN 1175-8945



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Rimmar Singgo



Norm Barker





# Rural Waikato *thrives on* community spirit

The farming community in South Waikato is a tight-knit one. Martine Rolls / Photos Michael Jeans



Jorge Alberto



Alfredo Dela Cruz

In this part of the country, more than 200,000 cows are milked, fed and cared for each day by Kiwis, as well as by a growing group of skilled migrants.

Experienced farm hands are in high demand and, as Waikato farmers increasingly realise and appreciate, some of the best workers come from the Philippines.

Johnrey Emperado, second-in-charge at a 270-hectare farm near Tirau, is one of them.

Johnrey and his wife Iris moved to New Zealand in 2009. With their two children, daughter Skye (4) and baby Brian, who was born in January, they live on Moondance Farms, where Johnrey works.

The young family have been in Tirau for two years now, after some time in Taupo and Reporoa, and enjoy it.

“We came here for a better life, a safe country for our kids,” Johnrey says, and Iris adds that living on the farm is especially nice because they are so close to town, and to their friends.

“We have many friends in the area who also come from the Philippines, and not all of them work on farms. There are nurses, engineers, and people working in other professions as well,” Iris says.

They do miss their homeland at times, but thanks to Skype they are in touch with friends and family in the Philippines regularly.

“We have it good here, but there’s no place like home,” Iris says, and Johnrey jokes that he misses fresh mangoes the most.

Moondance Farms is owned by former South Waikato Councillor Norm Barker and his wife Eileen, together with their daughter and son-in-law, Helen and Aaron Jeffares. Helen and Aaron manage the day-to-day business.

The family are strong supporters of helping migrant workers to integrate, and this includes learning better English and about the Kiwi way of life.

Because of the large Filipino community in and around Tirau, English Language Partners Rotorua began offering evening classes to rural workers last year. The lessons are part of the English for Employees programme for permanent residents.

Moondance Farms provide the use of a building for the lessons free of charge – greatly appreciated by English Language Partners’ manager Anna Hayes and her team.

Iris says the lessons she and Johnrey have had are very useful. She explains that although they learned English ▶



“We came here for a better life, a safe country for our kids.”



Johnrey and Iris Emperado with Bridget Skinner (centre)

in the Philippines, they don't speak it at home and that made it difficult to start a conversation when they first came to New Zealand.

“We had a lovely teacher, and it was good to practise everyday conversation and learn about safe topics. The last thing I want to do is offend anyone.”

Lessons are given by Bridget Skinner, a dairy farm owner herself, who graduated with a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults from Waikato University last year.

“I was born here in the Waikato and started out in horticulture, then spent 20 years dairy farming with my husband. I enjoy being outside, I'm definitely not an office person, but I do have a passion for teaching.”

Bridget says studying English language teaching and then teaching English has been a bit of a learning curve, mainly because she has had to improve her own grammatical skills.

“However, I thoroughly enjoy it, especially what these learners are teaching me. Teaching English has opened my eyes to other cultures. It's given me a different way of looking at the world.

“I've built a good rapport with the learners. We work in small groups with a focus on building confidence to use English in a day-to-day setting. We're here to help and encourage each other.

“These people are so supportive, of me and each other and they're keen to learn. Maybe it has something

to do with the way they've been brought up, but they appreciate every opportunity they get in New Zealand and make the most of it.”

Aaron, who works closely with Johnrey and three other Filipino men on the farm, adds that he's seen quick progress.

“Not only do they quickly gain a better understanding of the language, but also about how and why we do things the way we do them.

“These guys have a high level of skill and work ethics, and they are very positive which is refreshing. I would like to thank them for what they've brought to the farm. It's all very much appreciated.” ✂

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# It's all about the *giving back*

When taxi driver Ahmed Ahmed's customers ask him where he comes from, he tells them to guess.

Alison Robertson / Photos Michael Jeans



“I tell them, if they guess right, I'll give them a discount. I've only had to do that once.” While New Zealanders often know the names of several African countries, Djibouti seldom springs to mind. “They don't guess, even when I give them the first letter.”

Djibouti, a French territory until 1977, has had its share of internal strife. Ahmed's people are Afar, coming from the northern mountainous part of the country on the horn of Africa that borders Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. It was from a refugee camp in Ethiopia that Ahmed, his father and stepmother came to New Zealand.

That was in 2001 and Ahmed was 17. His English was limited. “I knew ‘water’ and ‘\$5’. They were the only words I knew, but I had a smattering of French and I worked out that some words were similar. That was a help.

“I had never heard of New Zealand, but it's so clean and quiet. I'm so lucky to be here, and especially in Hamilton.”

Ahmed attended Fairfield College, which was where he learned to drive, and when he left school, he completed a number of English courses, at Wintec, Vision College and the University of Waikato.

He also did an English Language Partners' short course for taxi drivers led by Jenny Field, a former manager.

“The taxi course taught me about car maintenance, finding important city locations and especially important – how to deal with customers, to be very polite.” Ahmed also gained his taxi driver's area knowledge certificate.

Ahmed wanted to develop his taxi driver skills even further, to get his owner's licence. So Jenny also worked as a volunteer with Ahmed and his uncle – who wanted to pass his taxi owner-operator licence. ▶

"I was pleased to help them. Ahmed's very diligent and I really enjoyed working with him," Jenny says. "The owner's licence is all online; you need 80% to pass and the language is very complicated, so I worked with him on understanding or moderating the English."

Waikato manager Jo de Lisle says English Language Partners is lucky to have the flexibility to offer English support with a strong practical focus.

"We try to tap into what learners say they need to be able to fit in and contribute to New Zealand. People don't want to be dependent on the benefit; they want to develop skills they can be proud of, and gain some control over their lives."

And with the support of other family members and keeping a clean driving record, Ahmed is now driving for his uncle's taxi firm and hopes to have his own business soon.

"This work suits me," he says. "Before I was working at the Halal meat works which was physically demanding, and hard for me as I haven't been well for about 18 years."

Ahmed's torso is flecked with scars after several exploratory surgeries to try to find out the cause of an illness that has affected him since he was in the refugee camp.

"I've been cut open, had MRIs and ultrasounds – the staff at the hospital have been wonderful – but no one knows what's wrong with me. I'm a lot better, but even now my illness still comes and goes."

Now 30, Ahmed is married with two young daughters and an extensive English vocabulary, and he's helping others improve their language skills – by driving them to classes and giving English Language Partners a good rate.

Ahmed initially made his connections with English Language Partners through the Waikato Refugee Forum,



**“Once you can help yourself, you then help your family and your friends, and then your community or country. You grow like a tree.”**

of which he's a member. They meet to discuss issues and needs of local refugee communities. Each country has two representatives, and Ahmed is one of Djibouti's.

"We take refugee children to a holiday programme, pick them up from all over town. I was driving the van one day, and found no one was looking after it. No one was checking the oil and water. I told them they wouldn't have a van if they didn't look after it."

As well as driving the children, Ahmed now has a contract with English Language Partners to pick up refugee-background learners with transport difficulties and take them to ESOL-Literacy classes.

"It's all about giving back," he says. "When you arrive, you're just like a

new baby, you need help and guidance. But once you can help yourself, you then help your family and your friends, and then your community or country. You grow like a tree."

He doesn't pretend that taxi driving is without its dangers and dramas, but he says he'd rather drive away from a fare than drive into trouble, and while he doesn't particularly enjoy working late nights at the weekends, "you've got to pay the bills".

"Most people are good," he says. "Ninety-seven per cent are good, and I'm living in the best country in the world." ✈





Moré George

# Factory lessons build communication *and* safety

Auckland company Thermakraft is finding that lessons in the workplace are decreasing the risk of damage to expensive equipment and making the factory safer for workers. James Fyfe / Photos Andrew Lau

**T**he classes – run by English Language Partners as part of their English for Employees programme – aim to provide what could be considered a ‘talking’ user manual for the company’s expensive bitumen and laminator machinery.

The equipment – used to make building insulation and underlay papers – was replaced after a fire from a nearby yard spread to the factory last year, causing extensive damage.

With potential repair costs for the new machinery costing hundreds of thousands of dollars and requiring an

engineer to be flown over from Holland, the company is keen to avoid any mistakes, and eager to make sure all workers are properly trained in the ins and outs of the technology. With many workers non-native speakers of English though, making sure they understand can be a challenge. ▶



Tonga Poteki



Kaipahatu Tupou

Sharon FultonBever is the learning and development consultant whose job it is to 'translate' the tech-heavy machinery instructions into easy-to-understand English, ensuring all workers understand how the technology works and the factory is up to health and safety standards.

"I've written it to Year 3 level, which is basic; no more than two syllables, phrases no more than five or six words," she says. "On technical pieces of machinery like these – it's not the easiest thing I've done."

Sharon describes her job as putting in a "learning infrastructure" and, with the workers having more knowledge of the machines and causing fewer accidents while also improving their English, both employers and employees have been pleased with the results.

One of the major hurdles to overcome was just teaching the shy workers to speak out when they don't understand.

"Sometimes they're too shy to say something, just in case they make a mistake," says leading hand supervisor Moré George. "If you sit around without saying anything, you won't improve at all."

Moré says communication can be difficult within the teams due to the language barrier, but people have started to open up since the lessons began.

"I said to them, 'It's alright, when people make mistakes, please don't laugh at them, it's not nice. As a team you should be working together'."

Tonga Poteki, who has worked at the factory for 13 years, echoes his supervisor's words. "We learn if we

don't know something, ask, ask someone," he says.

Like Tonga, many workers speak their native languages at home, meaning they don't get much chance to improve their English.

"It's very difficult to work with other people who don't know English. When we know English, it's easy to do the work," says Tonga.

Sharon estimates the level of English varies, from people who left school at age 10 to those who have a university-ready level, and credits English Language Partners Auckland South with their ability to deal with such varying levels.

The diversity these guys deal with as teachers – it's really impressive," she says.



Edward Tell



Sharon FultonBever

Teacher Karesse Angelo admits it can be tricky juggling multiple levels, but says everyone put a lot of effort into their learning.

“The guys created the learning environment by their openness, great attitude and humour. They showed patience and tolerance towards each other and to me.”

Karesse’s approach is also a hit with her learners. “I always look forward to seeing her,” says Edward Tell, who has worked at the factory for around four years.

He says Karesse’s technique of remaining flexible and building the lessons around individual needs has led to his English improving.

“[It’s] the little things you might think aren’t important, but that are very effective.”

Sharon is also a fan of Karesse’s learner-centred approach. “She treats them as individuals.

“If something comes up in class that somebody’s interested in, she’ll do the research and find material that’s interesting and fits in with their literacy level.”

Sharon has been in the learning industry for more than 25 years, and has taken a trial-and-error approach to applying a philosophy she’s evolved to the way workers learn.

“It’s all about how we get learners from where they are to where they need to be. It’s basic project management, but on a literacy level.”

And even after so long doing her job, Sharon’s still learning. “You’re constantly updating yourself and your peers; trying to work a cooperative model.

“The diversity these guys deal with as teachers – it’s really impressive.”

– Sharon FultonBever

“For me, the philosophy is extended to where I’m saying ‘I don’t know what you do, I’m describing it’. So my job is to describe their processes back in a written form, at a level they can understand. I make mistakes, and they correct them, because we’re all in this together.”

It seems the approach of all learning together is working out well. 🍀

# Settling into the Kiwi dream

The beaming smile rarely leaves Re Ber Paw Sein's face as she talks of her life in New Zealand.

Leigh Dome / Photos Leigh Dome

It is eight years since Re Ber, her husband Win Sa and their four children arrived in the country, after spending 22 years in a refugee camp in Thailand. They have wasted no time in settling in Palmerston North.

The Burmese family recently moved into their own home, a sprawling four bedroom house on a large section. "It's a nice neighbourhood and very quiet – I like quiet," says Re Ber.

Re Ber says their neighbours were very welcoming when they moved in four months ago. "The next door neighbours are nice and the lady from across the road also came to say hello."

It is clear from their easy conversation, that Re Ber and her former English Language Partners' volunteer tutor Maria Work have forged a close friendship.

It was Maria who, four years ago, helped Re Ber find a job at a local cafe. "I was blown away by Re Ber's determination to get a job. Not so she could be better off, she wanted simply to be contributing to society and give a little back," says Maria.

The pair, armed with Re Ber's CV and a dose of cautious optimism, approached the cafe owner and Re Ber was offered work on the spot.

Re Ber is still working as a dishwasher and cleaner in the busy kitchen of the popular Cooperage cafe. "Everyone is very friendly and helpful," she says. "They look after me."

She admits that she is far more talkative now than in the early days. "I can understand the conversation and be a part of it."

"I remember when I first started I didn't know what ramekins were – or the word 'tongs'. Now I know what everything is called," she says with a giggle.

Win Sa had a similar experience in the Bethany's restaurant kitchen where he works full time. "It is a big, busy and noisy kitchen," he says. "Once I didn't hear the chef clearly and whether he asked for prawn or corn!"



Left: Re Ber Paw Sein and Maria Work. Below: Read Re Ber's earlier article in issue 16:

[www.englishlanguage.org.nz/connecting-cultures-magazine](http://www.englishlanguage.org.nz/connecting-cultures-magazine)





Re Ber, Maria,  
Say Lah and Win Sa

Win Sa is a kitchen hand and prepares desserts at the inner city restaurant. He has worked there for four years and takes great pride in his end-of-shift cleaning duties – “the kitchen is shiny and spotless”.

Twice the age of most of his workmates and with twice the energy, Win Sa says: “I like to do the best job quickly.”

Re Ber and Win Sa set up a coffee shop in their refugee camp in Thailand, so it is no surprise they have both found work in the food industry in their adopted city. Win Sa is a keen baker and he would love to study at a Polytechnic and learn more skills.

The move into their new home was very timely as Re Ber’s elderly mother Say Lah arrived from Burma to live with them last year. The sprightly octogenarian has lost her hearing but communicates with written notes and with smiles as wide as her daughter’s.

The eldest of Re Ber and Win Sa’s adult children, 30-year-old Lu Taw Sa, is married and lives in Brisbane, Australia. He works as a roofing

“We have a dream to own a small business – maybe a corner dairy.”

contractor, and ironically, married a girl he used to play with as a child in the camp in Thailand.

Daughters Eh Taw Sa and Edina Sa both work as carers in a Palmerston North rest home. Edina is also studying Business at Massey University.

Youngest daughter Eh Hese Mu Sa has just finished Special Education studies at Freyberg High School. Living at home, the 22-year-old is very keen to find a job suited to her limited skills. “She gets very bored at home,” says Re Ber. “My boss at the cafe has allowed her to help out with dishwashing, when we are busy.”

The family keep up with the latest news and improve their English by listening to the radio and watching television. Win Sa admits they watch Shortland Street and Neighbours to keep up with new phrases and practise their understanding of English when it is spoken at speed.

Re Ber works a 30-hour week and has weekends off, allowing time to attend church with her family on Sundays.

She can walk to church from her home and enjoys learning new songs every week while surrounded by Kiwi parishioners and the new friends she has made there.

The couple have plans for a large vegetable garden in their backyard and even bigger hopes for their future.

“We have a dream to own a small business – maybe a corner dairy,” says Re Ber.

Her face lights up with that familiar smile and you believe it too. 🌸

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# How to live *and breathe* New Zealand

After more than a decade in New Zealand, Delia Giurgiu has found the best thing about learning a language is the people you meet along the way.

James Fyfe / Photos Andrew Lau



Delia Giurgiu  
and Margi Keys

**T**he Romanian-born bank employee says her new life down under has been filled with novel experiences and adventures, with one of the most rewarding bonds she's made being with her English teacher, Margi Keys.

"She taught me not just English, she taught me everything about New Zealand culture and I changed myself through this journey – it's not just English teaching, it's a lot more," says Delia.

The pair met through English Language Partners' 'English for Migrants' programme back in 2002 and have remained firm friends ever since.

"For an immigrant, it's so important to have somebody to show that you can do it," says Delia. "To find somebody from the local community to really connect with... it's so important."

Putting people before words and grammar is crucial for Margi, who has an extensive background in English teaching.

"To me, it's all about the relationship, and English Language Partners tries to match the teacher with the learner.

If the match is right, then you just form a relationship, and we did that pretty much straight away."

Despite having help, Delia says learning to navigate a new culture and language wasn't easy, though she admits, in the end, the process has made her a stronger person.

"Margi really supported me, she made me believe in myself and whatever she gave me, I tried to do my best."

Delia, now a New Zealand citizen, also has her husband, a mechanical design engineer; son, a university student; and mum living in the country.

Delia says she "never dreamed" of being proficient enough in English to work in the same field here as she did in Romania. Now working as a risk analyst for the Bank of New Zealand, she says getting there took courage and lots of hard work – as well as dose of realism.

"I knew my limits, so honestly, at the beginning I didn't apply for any banking jobs because I knew – I wouldn't employ myself because of the language."

Instead of diving straight into the banking sector, Delia hit the streets armed with her CV and an open mind to work anywhere. Before long she had secured a job in a small, family-run business and had some Kiwi work experience under her belt.

"I keep saying to my friends and other people who came from Romania; 'Don't worry about what job you already had, that is a good experience, you will use it one day, but move a step or two or three or 10 down, and then show to other people that yes, you can do the job. Then you'll have good references and you can move a step ahead'."

Margi says this "intrinsic motivation" of Delia's has been inspiring to watch over the years.

"What struck me about Delia right from the beginning was that she'd have a go at anything... I noticed that early on. She had, and still has, that spirit of giving it a go – she was so courageous."

Seeing Delia's English improve has "just been fantastic," says Margi. "I feel very proud of her. It's just wonderful that she came into my life."



“I think nothing just happens in your life, sometimes it’s meant to be like that.”

And it seems the two were destined to meet, crossing paths when Delia applied for a job – “to get myself familiar with interviews” – at the North Shore Women’s Centre, where Margi was working at the time. Although unsuccessful in her application, the significance of the meeting was not lost when, at a later date, Margi knocked on Delia’s door to introduce herself as a teacher.

“I think nothing just happens in your life, sometimes it’s meant to be like that. We were meant to meet each other,” says Delia.

As well as working on her professional English, Delia also got stuck into learning her adopted tongue at every possible level, enrolling in community courses, volunteering and even taking a small role in a local theatre production.

“I try to use English in any situation, that’s very important. Working as a volunteer is critical, because you have

to meet people and they teach you more than just language, they teach you how to live and breathe New Zealand,” she says.

Also important, says Delia, is the ability to laugh at yourself and accept your linguistic faults.

“Don’t be afraid of making mistakes. We are human beings, we are all making mistakes in different ways, so just learn from mistakes – otherwise you won’t progress.”

Delia’s next challenge is to perfect her public speaking by becoming a toastmaster, proving if you have a will to learn there really is nothing that can hold you back. ✨

**Want to volunteer to teach English?**  
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## Network news

### English graduates celebrate

Learners at the Hutt centre received the New Zealand Certificate in English Language, Level 1, in April. Nearly all graduates on this course had a refugee background.



### Auckland centre reopens in New Lynn

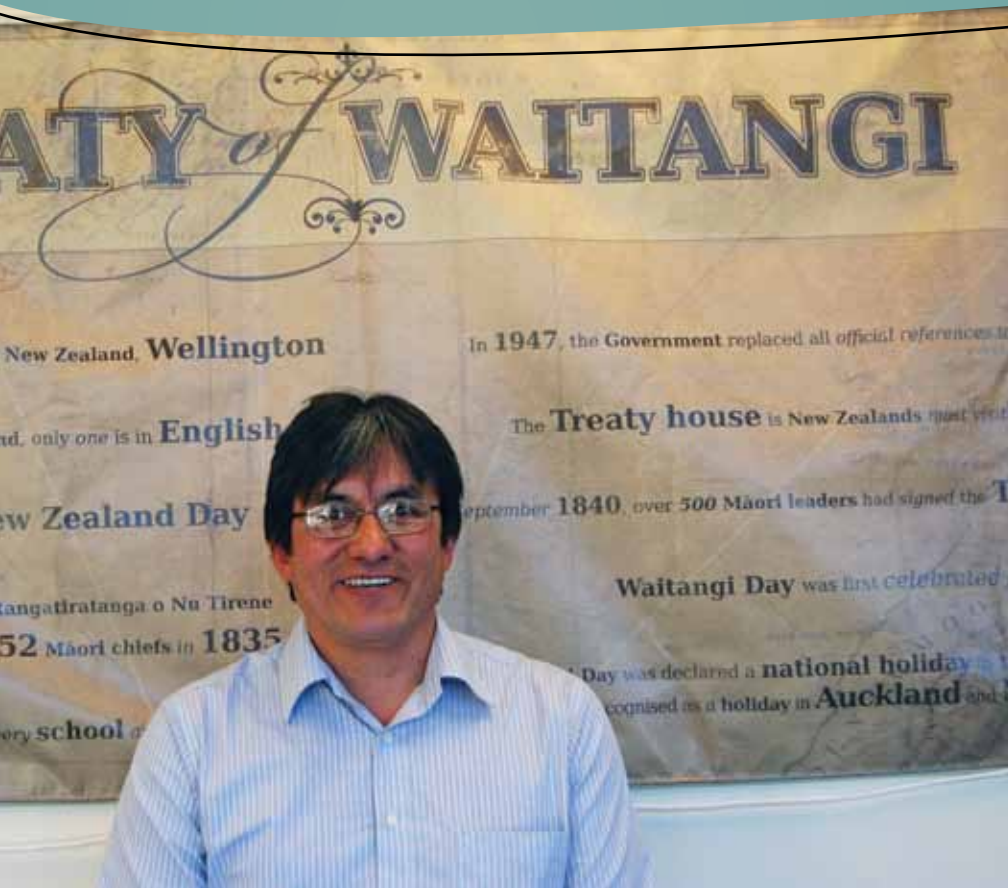
David Cunliffe, MP for New Lynn, launched the centre’s new presence in West Auckland. With him are Jean Harding, centre manager; Melissa Lee, Parliamentary Private Secretary for Ethnic Communities; and Dolly Pan, centre administrator.



### Taupo manager farewelled

Val Hoogerbrugge’s long association with English Language Partners began in the 1970s. Originally a home tutor, Val managed two centres and chaired the national board in its early years. Angie Hendricks, Electorate Assistant to Louise Upston, Taupo MP, is pictured with Val at her farewell celebration.





## From Peru *with skills*

Studying psychology has proved a real advantage for Valentin Farro Gomez in his work as a bilingual assistant for English Language Partners.

Patricia Thompson / Photos Patricia Thompson

Valentin, who moved to New Zealand from his native Peru in 2007, brings his own work experiences and studies in education and psychology to bear in helping to boost learners' confidence and motivate them in their job hunting.

He was recently awarded a Volunteer Connect Award for New Migrants for his work – an accolade he modestly says, “should have gone to someone

else – so many people are doing great work here.”

Valentin moved to New Zealand with his wife Rebecca and their two children after Rebecca was offered a job here. They had been keen to leave the volatile situation in Peru behind them.

“I love Peru, but Wellington is a much smaller, safer city. When we came to New Zealand, I felt a lot less worried,” says Valentin.

“We loved this country even before we got off the plane. Then, when we did get off, the children were tired and hungry and I wanted to buy them some food but only had American dollars. I said ‘Can anyone change some American dollars for me?’ But someone just stepped forward and offered to pay, and then four or five people helped carry our suitcases.

“It is my own karma. When people here say ‘our government does not do enough’ I say ‘but compare it to what some other governments are doing.’”

Valentin grew up in an urban environment in Peru.

“My father was a teacher, training mechanics. I was lucky because, even though we were not rich, my mother encouraged education. I studied accountancy and administration at polytechnic.”

While still a student, Valentin worked for Noticias Aliadas, an NGO active on behalf of human rights in Latin America, producing *Noticias Aliadas/Latinamerica Press*, their bilingual publication. It was there he met Rebecca, who is Canadian.

At Noticias Aliadas he became one of the first people in Peru to have an Apple Mac and, after 11 years, he left to set up his own translation business, which soon included design and quickly grew to become a small print shop.

In 2007, Rebecca was offered a job on the West Coast of Canada. They had sold their home and Valentin's business and were ready to leave when the role was switched to the much colder East Coast.

“We said no and, fortunately, the company offered my wife an alternative position in New Zealand, so we came here.”

“With Rebecca working, initially Valentin looked after the children full time.



"My wife said, you can have a sabbatical of one year," he laughs. "But I realised after a while that everything is more expensive than in Peru and I needed to find a job which worked with looking after my children. So I got an evening job as a delivery driver and I still do that."

Keen to improve his English, he approached various providers but was told his English was already too good. Eventually, he did do a semester in an English programme run by Massey University.

"I would have liked to have done more, but they put me in the top class and after one semester I got my certificate," he says.

He then studied Maori. "I want to get to know people and understand the culture and make friends. It is easier to do that if you speak someone's language."

He also enrolled for a degree in psychology which he has been fitting around his childcare and work commitments. He has achieved his diploma in educational psychology and now just needs three more credits to complete his double major in psychology and education.

Since last year, he has also worked 10 hours each week at the English Language Partners' classes which are held at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa in Porirua.

"Last year we had mostly Colombian people, with some from Myanmar and one or two from Cambodia. So speaking both English and Spanish has been very useful.

"It is not just translation, I bring my experience and studies to help motivate people too and encourage them in finding employment."

"I do get to use a combination of skills," Valentin says. "And having had children and managed people, combined with the wisdom that comes from age – that's all really helpful too.

"I like this job a lot." ✨



# Garden city helps new arrival bloom

**It's a scorching day and Shah Jan Jaffery is worried about her seedlings.**

**Rosemary North / Photos Simon Forsyth**

**E**arly heat and forecast hail could hurt the precious, tender aubergine, chilli, lettuce, peppers, Chinese cabbage, garlic chives and red okra plants that the Papanui woman has lovingly raised mostly from seed.

"I'm thinking about that hail. I don't have a cover for most of my plants," she says, casting a protective eye over her vegetables and herbs.

Gardening is an interest she has in common with Rachael Drace, who has been her volunteer home tutor for nearly two years.

"When we were matched, I thought I'd be able to teach Shah all about gardening in New Zealand, but she's teaching me. Her garden is much better than mine," says Rachael, a retired physiotherapist. ▶



Rachael Drace  
and Shah Jan Jaffery

“A few years ago, when we were still recovering from the earthquakes, the garden was very calming.” – Rachael

“I’m just so thankful to find someone who shares my passion for gardening and family.”

The pair soon began visiting garden centres and the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. At other times, they cooked traditional Afghan cuisine.

“We were getting into gardening and cooking and it was such fun that I realised it was engaging her more. Now I try to turn everything into a lesson.”

Shah’s growing skills with English have given her confidence to make friends wherever she is – at the gardens, in the bus or with her neighbours.

She didn’t get a chance to exercise her green fingers back home in Kabul, Afghanistan, or during the 16 long years she and her six children spent in a refugee camp in India.

“We couldn’t garden in India. It was too hot and you had to pay for the water. It was a bad time for us, but I feel much, much better in New Zealand,” says the grandmother of nine, who came to New Zealand as a refugee in 2007, speaking no English.

Gardening also helped both women cope with the Canterbury earthquakes.

“A few years ago, when we were still recovering from the earthquakes, the garden was very calming,” says Rachael.

Initially, Shah lived in Dallington. Her house – and garden – were red zoned. So she did the sensible thing. She dug up and moved her roses and dahlias.

At first she wasn’t impressed with the tiny garden at the Papanui house she moved to. But with her children’s help, she turned it into a blooming oasis with raised beds and carefully disciplined and nurtured plants.

“She can pick up a bit of a rose bush and stick it in the garden. I think: ‘It won’t grow’,” says Rachael. “And the next time I come it will have grown leaves. She’s magic.”

Shah has a secret beyond sheep pellets and mushroom soil for vegetables, and blood and bone for roses.

“I’m always talking to my plants. ‘How are you? What do you want? What do you need? Water? Sheep pellets? Shade?’ Sometimes they say, ‘I’m good’.”

Another organic project has been to record Shah’s life.

“Shah told me all about her childhood,” says Rachael. “I went home and wrote it out. She copied it into her journal. One day, her grandchildren will be really interested. They won’t believe the sort of life she’s had.

“We’ve gone over her childhood, going to school, getting engaged at seven and married at 16. It’s the whole history, good times and bad.

“Right from the time she was a little girl she wanted to go to school. Her sister decided she didn’t want to, but Shah took off to school with her grandmother and did her homework. In another world, she’d have a PhD in something if she’d just had a chance.”

Shah has weathered many storms.

“In the past, life was hard. Bringing up the children mostly on my own was hard,” Shah says.

“Now I want only good times. A good life. I want to do something for my children. I want them to have a good life, good jobs and families – for both girls and boys.”

Shah’s daughter Fiza says gardening helps her mum feel more at home in Christchurch.

“This is the house she’s always dreamed of. She’s had a really tough time but now she’s more peaceful and more relaxed than I’ve ever seen her.”

Training to be a volunteer home tutor for English Language Partners helped Rachael flourish too.

“The training was excellent and I learned an awful lot. I didn’t know anything about refugees and what they go through.

“And, although we’re pretty independent, I know English Language Partners is there if I need them.”

By the time Rachael is getting ready to leave Shah’s place, the wind has picked up. The heat dissipates. There won’t be hail today. 🌧️

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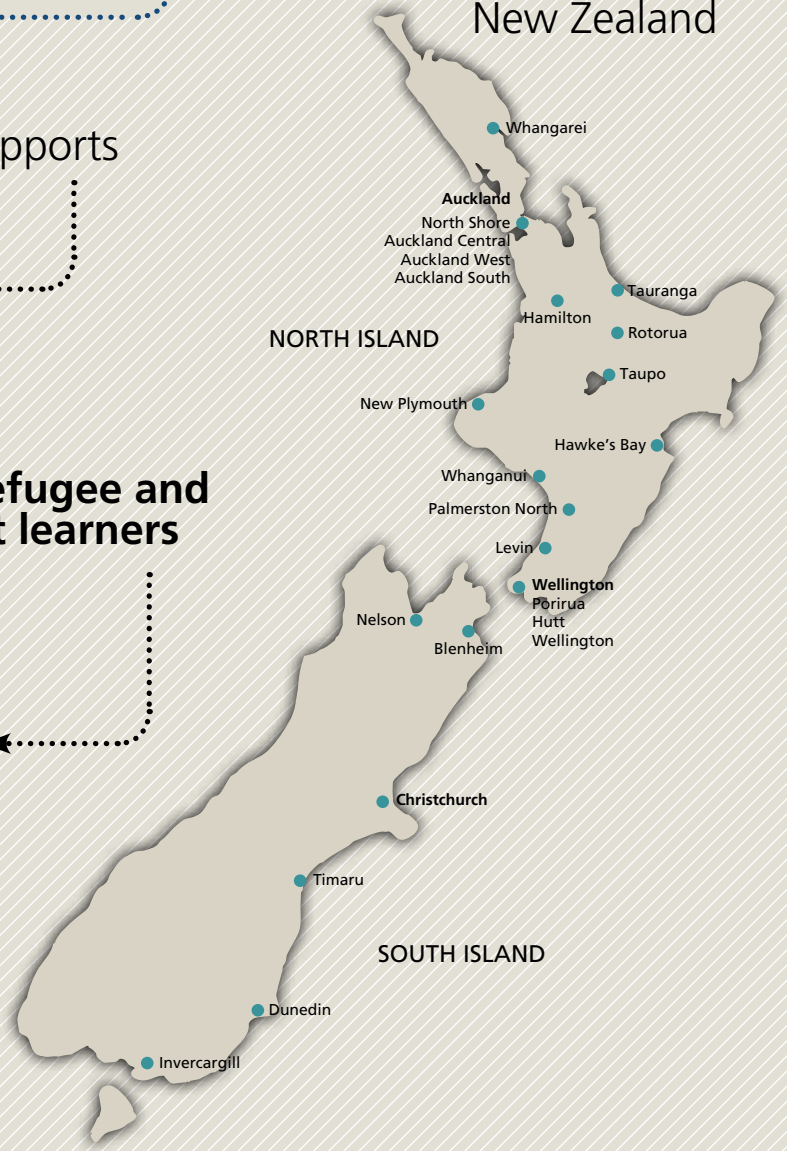
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