

Hello everyone! My name is Raghad, like 'kind regards' and I'm a year 12 student at Brentwood Secondary College. My story is...an interesting one to say the least. I was born and raised in Mosul, Iraq - which was the city that ISIS targeted the most. My family was able to immigrate to Australia after my mum secured a Scholarship to complete her PhD here, at Monash University.

We lived in Australia for a couple of years but returned to Iraq after being stuck as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. We had originally returned to attend my Grandfather's funeral and that short visit extended to almost 3 years. My family was finally able to return to Australia in June of last year and since then we have been building our life up again.

Because of my circumstances, I had somewhat struggled with my identity. I loved my culture and heritage but I also loved my Australian side, and so I always felt like I lived 2 lives, purely due to the difference of the cultures I was exposed to. Although my parents loved living in Australia and all the opportunities they were given, it was hard watching them struggle. When we first came here, no one in my family knew English. While my siblings and I picked up the language with ease, my parents struggled to reach fluent proficiency, regardless of the countless efforts they made.

I watched my parents balance arduous work and unfamiliar social expectations. They left their entire life behind, their family, their friends, their jobs, their possessions, but not their memories. Safety had a price, and it cost them their livelihoods.

Because of this and the way I was brought up, I immediately took on many different leadership roles within my school. Growing up, I never met anyone who spoke my specific dialect of Arabic, or who came from the same state, because it was that difficult to survive and get away from all the wars and conflict. It's exactly why representation is not only empowering but necessary.

Promoting diversity isn't just an easy way to gain popularity and credit, but a way to genuinely help people and give people hope. There are so many people, especially youth, who have unlimited potential, but they don't dare to explore it due to their insecurities and unease.

Imagine you want to teach a child to swim, and you take them to a deep, dark pool, and you turn to this child and say, jump in, kick your feet, and you won't drown. Obviously this child is going to not only resist but develop a fear of the pool, even though they could be the next Michael Phelps. But when you get into the water, and show them how you slowly swim and float in it, the child will excitedly jump in and join you.

Humans have a complicated mind, and we tend to all doubt ourselves, regardless of how much or how little we've achieved. Now this may be due to the way we were raised, our experiences as children, or just the feedback we've gotten from society, but none of it matters.

Take a look around, we are at a dinner that was established purely to support and promote people like you and me, which is a part of an even bigger festival, celebrating youth. There's always going to be someone who benefits from your work, and at the end of the day, even if you help just one person, you've still accomplished a great feat.

Thank you all for listening to my story, and I hope that it helps you.