

SSI ARTS & CULTURE



Acknowledgement of Country

SSI Arts & Culture acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which our organisation is located and where we conduct our business. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

SSI Arts & Culture is committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

Image: Dreamtime Warriors Dance Group, First Nations Revival and Welcome to Country at the 2019 SSI New Beginnings Festival, Darling Harbour.





About SSI

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a leading community-based, social-purpose organisation that provides services in NSW across areas including refugee settlement, asylum seeker assistance, support for people with disability and multicultural foster care. SSI's vision is to achieve a society that values the diversity of its people and actively provides support to ensure meaningful social and economic participation and to assist individuals and families to reach their potential.



EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE ARTS – FOR EVERYONE

In creating its Arts & Culture program, SSI embraced the philosophy of UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Adopted in 2005 and ratified by Australia in 2009, the convention aims to ensure that artists, cultural practitioners and citizens worldwide have the right to cultural practice and preservation.

Being able to experience – and participate in – arts and cultural life is essential to the wellbeing of every human being. For refugees and new migrants to Australia, such interactions have a doubly important role. By providing a platform for connection and self-expression, arts and culture initiatives can empower individuals, bring communities together and help build a stronger society.

Community business and refugee-services provider SSI has long recognised the enormous potential of the arts to help people forge their identities and to build more inclusive communities for everyone. In 2014, it established a new and innovative **Arts & Culture** program with the aim of encouraging cultural engagement and of nurturing artists and cultural practitioners from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

From humble beginnings, this self-funded program has grown to become the catalyst for a range of significant festivals, cultural events, creative workshops and arts initiatives across Sydney and NSW, adding greater diversity and richness to Australia's cultural landscape.

FOUR THE FOUR PILLARS OF THE SSI ARTS & CULTURE PROGRAM



*Community arts and cultural
engagement*

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*Festivals and
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*Creative pathways for newly arrived
artists and cultural practitioners*

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*Advocacy, leadership and
capacity building in the arts*

Festivals and cultural events

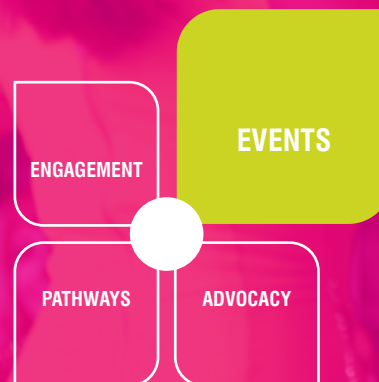
Vibrant, exciting and full of life, festivals and cultural events provide an ideal platform for artists to connect with the community. **SSI Arts & Culture** facilitates a range of such events to provide public platforms to talented artists and cultural practitioners from refugee and migrant backgrounds, enabling them to reach new and larger audiences. As well as enabling artists to share their artistic skills and cultural heritage, these events increase community cohesion and help create a positive – and more layered – narrative around newcomers.

This focus on festivals and cultural events has been a core element of **SSI Arts & Culture** since its inception in 2014. In 2015, the program's flagship event, New Beginnings Festival, was born; a multi-form arts event that showcases the artistic vibrancy and cultural heritage of migrant and refugee artists to Sydney's diverse communities and beyond.

The festival is held annually at Darling Harbour where its mix of lively dance and music performances, interactive workshops and culinary market stalls regularly attracts several thousand attendees. Some 3,500 people attended the event in 2019.

Another key project is the Homelands Regional Tour, a dazzling arts tour across Queensland and New South Wales delivered in partnership with Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre (BEMAC). The inaugural tour in June 2019 visited seven locations, showcasing the considerable artistic talents of three musicians from refugee backgrounds. Homelands aims to build social cohesion and a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity within Australia through the sharing of stories, art, music, and settlement experiences.

Over **3,500**
people attended the
New Beginnings
Festival in 2019.





“When I arrived, not many people knew what an oud was so when I go on stage to play it, I feel very proud. I love to present my art to people.”

George Karam, Oud player, Assyrian singer & music teacher

Deeply connected through music

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Music has a tremendous power to connect people – and it has helped talented Syrian musician George Karam to develop a deep connection with his new home in Australia.

In 2017, George and his family arrived in the country as refugees from Lebanon, to where they had fled from the war in Syria in 2012. “We lived in a village where there was no security, so when ISIS began attacking our home, we ran, taking nothing but our passports,” George explains while his daughter, Atra, translates.

In Syria, George was highly regarded as an oud player, an Assyrian singer and a music teacher. When he arrived in Australia he assumed he wouldn’t struggle to find work, but despite holding certificates from three music schools his qualifications weren’t recognised. He was told he required new accreditations – something his limited English made too difficult to achieve at the time.

SSI provided George and his family with assistance in settling into the Australian community. Through this connection he came into contact with **SSI Arts & Culture**, which helped him find a platform for his music. “When we first came to Australia, we didn’t know anyone and didn’t have any connections who could help,” he says. “But SSI helped by getting me work at parties and also at festivals and cultural events.”

George appreciates the opportunities his new country has provided; so much so that he is writing a song to thank Australia for all that it has done for him and his family. “It will be in Syrian and English and played with an oud, so it makes a connection between the two countries and between myself and Australia.”

He adds that his proudest moments in life are when he is on stage. “When I arrived, not many people knew what an oud was so when I go on stage to play it, I feel very proud. I love to present my art to people.”

From refugee to celebrated photographer

Things were looking up for Elham Behinaein's dream of becoming a photographer. She had completed a photography course and managed to land a job as an assistant at a photographic studio in her hometown of Isfahan in Iran. That's when the studio manager discovered she belonged to Bahá'í faith – a religious minority systematically persecuted in the country. "When they found out that I am Bahá'í, they said to me, 'don't come back anymore'," Elham recalls.

With harassment of Bahá'ís worsening, Elham and her family made the decision to flee to Turkey. After three years as a refugee there, she arrived in Australia on a humanitarian visa in 2016. Elham initially had low expectations for herself. "Before I came to Australia, I feel that I couldn't go forward," she says. "It's hard to arrive in a country with a different culture, different language, and different people."

Four years on, Elham is a remarkably accomplished photographer with multiple exhibitions under her belt and her own commercial photography business. Help from SSI has allowed her to find her confidence, and she is now spreading her wings into new areas, including tertiary study.

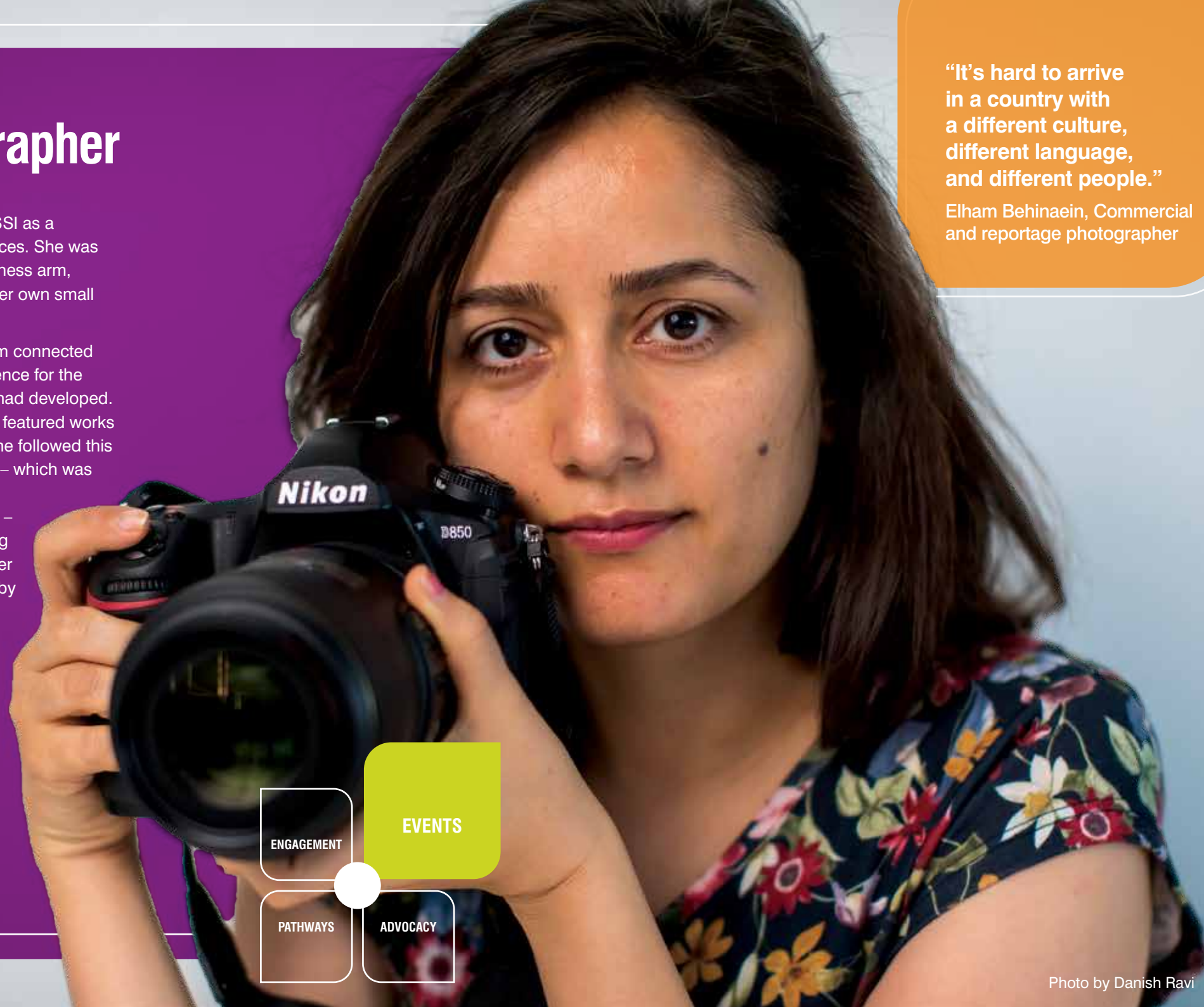
Elham first came into contact with SSI as a client of its refugee settlement services. She was later referred on to SSI's small business arm, Ignite, which helped her to set up her own small commercial photography business.

A referral to the **Arts & Culture** team connected her to opportunities to find an audience for the impressive reportage portfolio she had developed. Elham's first solo exhibition in 2017 featured works depicting climate change in Iran. She followed this up with works in a group exhibition – which was staged at 107 Redfern and formed part of the New Beginnings Festival – where she exhibited works depicting Kurdish children in Turkey. In another group exhibition in 2019 produced by CuriousWorks, Elham created an audio-visual presentation focusing on two women who were refugees in Australia.

Elham now has plans to study biodiversity and conservation and wants to stage an exhibition featuring her photos of the Australian bush. "I love photographing nature and landscapes," she says.

"It's hard to arrive in a country with a different culture, different language, and different people."

Elham Behinaein, Commercial and reportage photographer



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Community arts & cultural engagement

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Since its inception, **SSI Arts & Culture** has been underpinned by its community-minded approach to cultural engagement activities. Working closely with artists and communities from diverse cultural backgrounds, **SSI Arts & Culture** has coordinated a number of unique creative projects with lasting impact. Through these initiatives, participants are able to express themselves, find their creative voice and share in truly meaningful cultural exchanges.

Between 2018 and 2019, **SSI Arts & Culture** partnered with public art collective Muralisto to create ArtCrew, a youth refugee mentorship program working to empower young people through creative expression. The program aimed to harness, magnify, and empower the voice of young people as the future generation of change-makers through creative expression in the form of public activism (a marriage between 'art' and 'activism').

Initiatives over the years have ignited partnerships with Sydney Writers' Festival, The Iraqi Cultural Festival, the Human Sound Project, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre and CuriousWorks.

Another initiative was Home, a Rohingya women's art exhibition at Bankstown Arts Centre, staged as part of Canterbury Bankstown's International Women's Day celebrations in 2019. This powerful exhibition explored the cultural and personal stories of local Rohingya women and their experiences of living in a new country after leaving their home behind. It followed a 10-week workshop program facilitated by local artists and hosted by Canterbury City Community Centre.



“SSI Arts & Culture introduced me to projects such as ArtCrew, where other young artists pooled their migration stories and painted a mural in Liverpool.”

Mariam Abbas, Abstract artist

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A bright, artistic future

Art has always been a key part of Mariam Abbas’ life. Her father is a well-respected abstract artist who fled Iraq for Jordan in 1992 to escape Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Mariam was born in Jordan and came with her family to Australia as a refugee in 2005, at the age of four. “My father wanted a better future for us, and he is very happy to now be in Australia,” she says.

“His dream was to live in a safe country.”

Mariam has long held an interest in art – especially abstract art – and her father encouraged her to find opportunities to learn more about it. She is now studying at the National Art School, and in 2018 she heard about **SSI’s Arts & Culture** program.

“**SSI Arts & Culture** introduced me to projects such as ArtCrew, where other young artists pooled their migration stories and painted a mural in Liverpool,” she says.

“Also, during Refugee Week, SSI helped me present a version of my story at the Casula Powerhouse Centre through a partnership with WestWords.”

Mariam appreciates how **SSI Arts & Culture** has enabled her to share stories with people whose journeys are similar to hers. “I don’t think there are many programs out there like this,” she says. “I was happy that I got to connect with other people who love art like me. This is important as it is the best way for my work to get known.”

Mariam’s aspirations are to travel the world and help other countries, especially Iraq through providing services like painting and art therapy. “There are many people with horrific stories and sometimes you can’t speak the same language but want to express your feelings,” she says.

“Art is one way of doing this and through the **Arts & Culture** program, SSI is enabling this to happen; they are very focused on making people feel included.”

Creative pathways for newly arrived artists & cultural practitioners

25 newcomer artists were supported through the Creative Pathways program in 2019.



No matter how talented they might be, artists from culturally diverse backgrounds who have recently arrived in a new country typically struggle for both work and recognition. They are generally unknown to local audiences, their artforms may not be fully appreciated, and limited English proficiency may stand in the way of developing industry contacts. This can be particularly frustrating to refugees and people seeking asylum, a large proportion of whom have artistic training and tertiary education.

SSI Arts & Culture undertakes a number of initiatives to help make things a little easier. Over the years, the program has developed a clear and effective process for assisting newcomer artists. Once an individual is referred to the program, a team member helps them plot out a career pathway. The Creative Pathway Program provides individual development pathway opportunities, including showcase, networking, business-planning and project support for newly arrived artists and artisans, who are looking to take their practice to the next level.

The program also lends support in the form of contacts, materials, and mentoring, until the artist is able to fly solo. In 2019, efforts in this area resulted in 25 talented artists being supported.

The Artist Development Program, meanwhile, facilitates one-on-one mentorship pairings between newly arrived artists and established artists working in the same field. It supports newcomer artists through a focused and tailored program aimed at helping them learn, grow and achieve their artistic and career aspirations. The Artist Development Program receives assistance from the Australian Government through its arts funding and advisory body, the Australian Council for the Arts.

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Photo by Danish Ravi

“I feel I have
something worthwhile
to say with my art.”

Maher Al Khoury, Art teacher
and graphic artist

Remarkable success, second time around

Building a career as a successful art teacher once is a major achievement. But having the drive and tenacity to do it all over again as a refugee in a new country is nothing short of inspiring.

That's what Maher Al Khoury is doing with help from **SSI Arts & Culture**. He and his family fled Syria when war broke out and came to Australia as refugees in 2017.

“When I first arrived, I was very confused,” Maher says. “I felt my English was not good enough to start a new life, and because of this, I felt I would hate the life here. But I do not feel this now. SSI helped me to settle in, and its **Arts & Culture** program is now helping me find work in the Arts.”

Maher ran a successful graphic design business in Syria and also taught art at university. “I have a passion for fine art, but in Australia to teach you need Australian qualifications,” he says. Maher initially received settlement support from SSI and CORE Community Services and was then referred to **SSI Arts & Culture**. “SSI knew about my experience and asked me to help run an arts workshop for kids.”

The workshop was so successful, SSI asked Maher to design adult art classes, which he now teaches regularly. He also teaches at the NSW STARTTS program that supports refugees dealing with trauma and has shown his art at exhibitions.

“I thought when I came to Australia that my brain was too old to learn new things; I didn't know how to take the first step,” Maher says. “SSI has been very good at encouraging me to carry on with my art while helping people with lessons, and now I am also studying for a Diploma of Illustration and Graphic Design.”

Maher says he would eventually like many people to see his work. “I feel I have something worthwhile to say with my art,” he says. “And Syria has so much history, I would like to enrich Australians by sharing my knowledge. But more than anything, I want to be useful.”

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Advocacy, leadership and capacity building in the arts

Artists, cultural practitioners and audiences from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are significantly underrepresented in Australia's arts and culture sector. The advocacy, leadership and capacity building pillar has evolved in recent years in response to this under representation. It has three key aims.

The first is to collaborate with key stakeholders and partners in the arts and culture sector to find solutions to the issues faced by artists and cultural practitioners from diverse backgrounds. The second is to develop leadership and capacity in the communities within which SSI works.

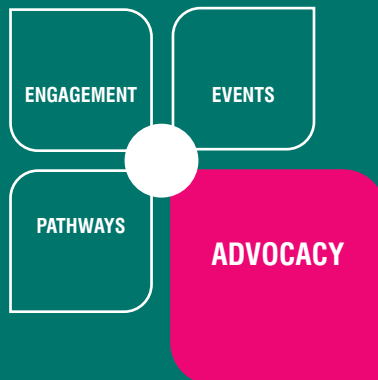
Finally, **SSI Arts & Culture** seeks to develop strategic partnerships with advocacy, government and arts organisations that enhance understanding and promotion of cultural diversity in the arts.

A key first step was the SSI-led 2016 Arts and Refugees Forum, a two-day event that provided networking and development opportunities for artists, arts organisations, academics, policy makers and community workers. A more recent activity was SSI's collaboration with academics at UTS to study the social impacts of cultural events on refugees and minority migrants, with the 2019 New Beginnings festival used as a case study. The study (see *Lives Changed by Cultural Inclusion*) found significant socialisation and integration benefits for those involved.

A partnership has also been developed with the Australian Women in Music Awards, helping to highlight the achievements of First Nations and culturally diverse women in music and provide role models for newly arrived female artists.

The initiative enabled 12 Sydney-based female artists from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to attend related forums, networking sessions and awards ceremonies in Brisbane in 2018 and 2019. SSI also continued to sponsor the Diversity in Music Award, won by renowned songwriter Christine Anu in 2019.

SSI Arts & Culture has established strategic partnerships with Australian Women in Music Awards, Twitter Australia, PYT Fairfield and Diversity Arts Australia, among others high profile arts and community organisations.



Leading by example

In 2007, Lebanon-born jazz musician and composer Zela Margossian arrived from Armenia where she had been studying music. She had been forced to make a tough decision about where to live. She couldn't stay in Armenia and, with the political situation in Beirut worsening, she decided to follow her brother to Australia. "I was born during the civil war and, at the time, everyone of my generation wanted to leave Beirut," she explains.

Once in Australia, Zela found she lacked connections in her professional field and landing performance-related work proved difficult. However, she has since formed a quintet, earned a 'Best World Music' ARIA nomination, and now regularly performs at festivals around the world.

Recently, **SSI Arts & Culture** gave Zela's career a further boost. "I was introduced to SSI through the New Beginnings Festival where I performed," Zela says. "Then in 2018, I was invited to join a delegation of women to attend the Australian Women in Music Awards (AWMA)."

The following year, Zela received a call from Vicki Gordon, Founding Director and Executive Producer of AWMA asking if she wanted to perform live at the 2019 awards ceremony. "I couldn't believe it. I was being asked to perform at an event I'd been in the audience at the year before," she says.

Because of her experiences, Zela wants to be an example to women who think they've left it too late to achieve their dream. "It is never too late," she says. "And music unites people of all cultures. That is what my quintet does, and SSI stands for the same. They bring women of different backgrounds together and give them a chance to make their voices heard. SSI are amazing in how they encourage women. They are very inclusive."

Photo by Anna Kucera

"I couldn't believe it. I was being asked to perform at an event I'd been in the audience at the year before."

Zela Margossian, Jazz musician and composer

Photo by Anna Kucera.

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LIVES CHANGED BY CULTURAL INCLUSION

SSI Arts & Culture strives to bring about cultural engagement and to nurture artists and cultural practitioners from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Research suggests the hard work is paying off.

A 2019 study by academics at the University of Technology, Sydney and University of Otago examined the impact of the New Beginnings Festival on the lives of refugees and migrants.

Researchers conducted a series of interviews and reported that the event improved the sense of self of attendees and participating artists, creating long-lasting opportunities for integration.

Other benefits included the provision of a safe space where people from culturally diverse backgrounds could freely exchange and network with the broader community.

“[New Beginnings] improved the sense of self of attendees and participating artists, and created opportunities for integration.”





Messages from arts & culture practitioners

Shyamla Eswaran

Performing artist, choreographer, educator and writer

“I specialise in cultural dance including hip hop, semi-classical Indian and Brazilian samba, having trained and or performed each style in its country of origin. I began working with SSI in 2018, and I’ve since organised workshops and produced performances with them at events including TEDx Sydney, the New Beginnings Festival and the International Metropolis Conference.

Working with SSI has been one of the most understanding, enlightening and inspiring professional relationships I have ever experienced. The SSI staff members have real-life personal and varied experiences of what it means to be a migrant, refugee or asylum seeker in Australia.

The **SSI Arts & Culture** program is based on the belief that every migrant, asylum seeker and refugee contributes a valuable thread to the rich tapestry of multicultural Australia. It reflects the stories of people whose voices are not always represented in mainstream media or programs but deserve to be heard and developed.”

“Working with SSI has been one of the most understanding, enlightening and inspiring professional relationships I have ever experienced.”

Hazem Shammas

Stage and screen actor and 2018 Logie winner

“I came out to Australia as a baby with my oldest sister and my mum and dad in 1975 from a Palestinian village in the north of what’s now Israel.

A couple of years ago, I came into contact with SSI when I was involved in an adaption of an old Russian play that had been re-contextualised in a refugee camp. As part of that production, we were doing some advocacy work and we teamed up with SSI. It was just the most brilliant experience, raising awareness of real-life refugee stories and providing support for the real-life heroes. I’ve now taken on the role of an ambassador for **SSI Arts & Culture** to continue that work.

I’m constantly humbled and inspired by the quality of the artists that the Arts & Culture program supports and the creative endeavours and shows they put on. The impact of that support isn’t just felt by the artists, but by their families and the wider community.”

“I’m constantly humbled and inspired by the quality of the artists that the **SSI Arts & Culture** program supports”



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