



The community program helping young migrants and refugees learn to navigate Newcastle's iconic beaches

Newcastle Herald
(29 November 2020)
Simon McCarthy

Khadiija Ahmadi learned to swim with the "Welcome to the Beach" program, after her family emigrated to Australia from Afghanistan in 2014. She has attended the program each of the past five years. Picture: Simon McCarthy

Khadiija Ahmadi remembers moment she first set foot in Australia with her family from Afghanistan. It was February, 2014. They spent their first night in a hotel and the following day moved into their new home in Newcastle - a city where, as Cooks Hill Surf Club Chaplain Helene O'Neill described it, "life is about the beach".

But there was the complication. Khadiija, like many migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who arrive in Australia from landlocked countries, could not swim.

"The first time (I came to the beach) was really scary for me," she recalled at Bar Beach on Saturday afternoon.

The year after she arrived, she attended a beach safety course put together by the Diocese of Maitland's CatholicCare Refugee Program. There, with the help of John Sandy, a refugee himself who now supports migrant families in Newcastle, Khadiija was introduced to the beach and taught to swim.

She returned to the program each summer for the next five years. On Saturday, she was one of the most confident in the water.

"It feels great to come to the beach," she said. "I can swim with my mates. It's really fun."

The beach safety program, aptly called "Welcome to the Beach", teaches young migrants and refugees how to navigate the beaches safely - where to swim and when to stay out of the water, who to approach to ask for help, and how to navigate Australia's beach culture.



As organisers described it, it is a program to help explain all the lessons locals with local knowledge can sometimes take for granted.

"We invite and welcome migrants and refugees to our country," Ms O'Neill said, "But we need to go one step further and explain what we do. We have a responsibility to teach them. In Newcastle, life is about the beach."

Last year, Mr Sandy estimated around 200 young migrants and families attended the program, but this year COVID-safe social restrictions meant the event had to be split over three weekends, beginning on Saturday, with smaller groups of 20 booked in ahead of time, with focus on social distancing and public safety.

"Once they get this knowledge, they take that information back to their families to tell them how they felt, what the beach looks like, they will tell them about when you see the flags, if you get into trouble at the beach who to call," Mr Sandy said.

"It's a great way for our migrants, young people and families, to engage with service providers. The beach safety program teaches them how to appreciate the water safely, and also how to engage and interact with people socially."

"The first time (I came to the beach) was really scary for me ... Now, it feels good to come to the beach. I can swim with my mates and it's really fun." - Khadiija Ahmadi . Picture: Simon McCarthy

For some, Saturday was the first time they had ducked their head under salt water. For others, like Khadiija, it was a chance to catch up with friends and gain more confidence in the water.

Abdalah Maremkool, 18, has been living in Newcastle less than a year after his family emigrated from Syria. It was his first visit to Bar Beach. By the afternoon he knew how to navigate the flags and could identify the surf life savers.

T'ese Keddie, a young surf life saver helping guide the first-timers thought of it as her chance to give back to the Newcastle community.

"I didn't grow up here," she said, having come to Australia from Hong Kong, Singapore and Germany. "I didn't know about the surf, and other people taught me.

"I feel like now it is my turn to help other people. Newcastle is such a community, you know everyone, and for me to be able to do my bit and help the community back is really important."

Get stuck in task

Refer to the article “The community program helping young migrants and refugees learn to navigate Newcastle’s iconic beaches” and respond to the following questions

1. What is aim of the surf education program “Welcome to the Beach”? (4)

2. The article mentions several migrants who have a role in the program. Beside their name; list the location they emigrated from, their role in the program and what they learned. (8)

Migrant	Location they emigrated from	Role in the program	What they learned
John Sandy	Not known		
Khadiija Ahmadi			
Abdalah Maremkool			
T’ese Keddie			
Helene O’Neill	Australian		

Name: _____

3. What are 3 other benefits from the “Welcome to the Beach” program? (3)

Name: _____