

# Opening Doors



*A Community Leadership Program for Social Inclusion*

February 2019 Program Bulletin

Edition #11-2



## Celebrating 10 Years of Social Inclusion and Community Leadership

*In 2009, The Inner East Social Inclusion Initiative approached Gayle Hardie, co-founder of Global Leadership Foundation, to assist in the design of an innovative new community leadership program. A decade on, Gayle reflects on her learnings from working with more than 200 Opening Doors leaders and graduates.*

For the past 10 years, I have had the honour of being part of the team facilitating the Opening Doors Community Leadership Program for Social Inclusion. Running over six months each year, it provides leadership development to more than 20 community members from Melbourne's East and South East who are passionate about working towards a more socially inclusive society.

Each year I find myself in the very privileged position of hearing the stories of an incredibly diverse group of people who have experienced their own versions of exclusion. I find myself disheartened and ashamed at what I hear, especially as some of the stories relate to present day experiences in Australia rather than experiences from the past.

At the same time, I am also uplifted, inspired and joyful to be with a group of people who genuinely believe in a better future for themselves and their communities – despite what some of them may have been through.

I am in the presence of those who want to make Australia a better place. People who believe in the power of inclusion, cooperation and collaboration, of finding what we have in common and what we are mutually curious about. People wanting to explore what we can do together that will connect us and move us forward.

How does this way of engaging and contributing come about? How do these people see the positives in situations that I find so concerning?

Where the question in my head is often 'How can we still have people in our communities that behave in ways that demean and disrespect others?', their question is more likely to be something like 'What can we do together that we can't do apart to make things better for everyone?'

To find out more about Opening Doors or how you can get involved, please contact Opening Doors coordinator **Alex Mills** on 8822 8327 | [amills@linkhc.org.au](mailto:amills@linkhc.org.au)

# Reflections From Gayle Hardie

## *Global Leadership Foundation*

These are the **emotionally healthy** leaders in our community who step up and take a stand in working together. They make **conscious choices** about how they relate to, engage and work with others. They lead by example in the way they go about fostering relationships and building inclusion. They look for opportunities to bring communities together and support others to be the best they can be.

We are at a time in history when we are faced with widespread political leadership that feels more like a reality TV show than governing. A time in history when we are faced with more and more people becoming physically and emotionally isolated from others rather than being invited to be part of a community. A time in history when we are faced with increased mental health and wellbeing issues across the country and the globe.

Thankfully it is also a time in history when we have Opening Doors, a program that both reveals and develops authentic leadership and a genuine, unselfish desire to make the world a better place.



# Opening Doors 2018

*Meet Our Leaders: Social Inclusion in Action*



## The 2018 Opening Doors Group at their opening three day retreat

Heidi Asperger, Jacqueline Hay, Meriem Abida, Marisa Bryant, Shahidah Jamal, Ali Hogg, Daisy Xie, Elisa Yeung, Cara Hardwick, Paul Fung, Nyawarga Sham, Abby Levy, Debbie McColl Davis, Sokim Lay, Hiroyo von Fischer, Carlos Fernandes, Hannah Lee, Troy Bryden, Sharon Lee, Alex Mills (Program Coordinator), Gayle Hardie and Margareth Thomas (Global Leadership Foundation)



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# Growth Through Diversity

## Reflections from Opening Doors Coordinator Alex Mills

*As Opening Doors celebrates 10 years of social inclusion and community leadership, program coordinator Alex Mills reflects on his Opening Doors journey, and what he's learnt about the power of diversity along the way.*

In my early twenties, I found myself managing a record store. I never really had a clear idea of what I wanted to do once I finished high school, but as a young music nerd with a reasonably serious vinyl addiction, it was pretty much my dream job. Listening to music all day long, spending all of my money on records - I'm sure you can imagine how it went.

This all changed for me on one afternoon in 2007. I was handing one of our regular customers their change when my hands suddenly started to shake. I was overcome with the feeling I needed to escape, and that something terrible was about to happen. Several hours later, I would be told by my doctor that I'd had a panic attack.

I tried several times to return to the job I loved, but the same thing kept happening. I started to anticipate the attacks. I became anxious about the symptoms of the anxiety. Growing ever conscious of the impact I was having on my workmates, I eventually realised I had little choice but to quit my job. I spent the following two years grappling with agoraphobia, social anxiety, and the terrifying prospect of returning to paid employment. I felt lost. And if not for my close friends and family, I would have been completely socially isolated.

As part of my recovery, I started volunteering at my local neighbourhood centre, Dixon House. I'd been supporting their emergency food relief program for around 6 months when the centre coordinator put a flyer in front of me. "Opening Doors: A Community Leadership Program for Social Inclusion."

I scarcely thought of myself as a competent volunteer, let alone a leader! But with some gentle encouragement and wonderful conversations with Opening Doors coordinator at the time, Jane Oldfield, I decided to take the plunge.

My experience in Opening Doors 2010 completely changed my life. I was pushed way beyond my comfort zone, and found myself overcoming anxiety challenges I'd been wrestling with for years.

I met incredible, like-minded people from every background imaginable - people I might never have crossed paths with otherwise. There were encounters on my first day of the program which shifted my entire perspective.

There was Philomena, a fierce and tireless advocate for people with a disability. She educated me about issues of access, inclusion, and the unseen barriers wheelchair users face every day. There was Wang, a leader from the South Sudanese community, who taught me words in his native Dinka, and challenged my notions of what being Australian truly meant. And there was Peggy and Jacqui, who through sharing their experiences of depression and anxiety, reminded me that I wasn't alone.

More than anything, my experiences in the program helped me to answer a question I'd never thought to ask before: what was I truly passionate about?



*Jane Oldfield, Inner East coordinator of the Opening Doors Leadership Program from 2009 to 2011. Jane worked closely with the program's steering committee to develop the program's content, model and delivery*



*The graduates of the 2010 Opening Doors Program at their graduation ceremony, held at Hawthorn Town Hall on Thursday 28th October, 2010 (Alex pictured left)*



Are you on **Facebook**? Search for Opening Doors Leadership and like our page to find out more about the program.

# Growth Through Diversity

## Reflections from Opening Doors Coordinator Alex Mills



In 2011, Opening Doors was looking for a new coordinator. I was encouraged to apply for the position, but like a scene from my first day at the program's opening retreat, I was overwhelmed with anxiety. This would be the first paid job I had applied for since quitting the record store.

When I was told I had been successful, I genuinely didn't believe I had it in me. "I still get anxious when I go to shopping centres. There's no way I can do this." These thoughts were still running through my head as I arrived for my first day on the job. On reflection, I might have temporarily forgotten what Opening Doors is all about: A diverse, inclusive community - warm, free of judgement, supporting people to overcome their challenges and realise their passions.

To date, Opening Doors has graduated more than 200 community leaders. Our youngest 19, our eldest 87. These leaders represent more than 50 diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. They have brought lived experiences of mental illness, disability, addiction, seeking asylum, domestic violence, homelessness, gender and sexual diversity, and an endless array of skills, talents and passions. Our graduates represent a community as diverse as could be found anywhere in the world, and they have been united by a single vision: a society where no one is left behind. One which is truly socially inclusive.

In our 2013 group, Sally and Lyn shared their personal stories, educating fellow participants on LGBTIQ+ rights and issues facing the transgender community. In 2014, Anthea and Rakia celebrated Ramadan with their group - for many, their first exposure to the Islamic faith. In 2012, Alan expanded his group's understanding of bi-polar disorder. That same year, one of his fellow participants Simone shared her experience as one of the first children with a disability to be integrated into the mainstream school system in Victoria.

In 2013, our group was welcomed into the Gurdwara Sikh Temple. In 2016, our graduate Amir shared his journey to Australia by boat, seeking asylum from persecution because of his disability. In 2017 Connie, who runs a dementia support group was able to connect with our 2015 graduate Emma, founder of The Black Dog Community Art Exhibition. Her participants' works were displayed on opening night. This same year, our 2015 graduate Mel would present to our entire group on her life as a carer of three children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

These stories could fill a book. There are hundreds of them. People connecting across culture, age, religion and lived experience, deepening each others' understanding of the barriers people face to participating in their community, and how we can overcome them together.

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# Growth Through Diversity

## Reflections from Opening Doors Coordinator Alex Mills

For me, this is the true power of social inclusion. It's not about communities working in isolation of each other. Our systems often dictate that certain funds will be allocated to strengthen 'that community' over there, while we'll take a different approach with 'this community' over here; one program for people with a disability, another for this cultural group. If there's one thing the Opening Doors journey has taught me over the past ten years, it's that genuine social inclusion means all of us, in it together.

Our graduates - this diverse cohort of social inclusion advocates - are working tirelessly in their communities. Day in, day out. But they are now equipped with the knowledge and learnings that can only come from a journey shared with people on different paths, united by a shared vision.

The world in 2019 can sometimes seem like a dark and isolating place, but thanks to my time with The Opening Doors Leadership Program, I've seen how the best of humanity can shine when we share our stories, celebrate our differences, and focus on the strengths and passions we have in common.

Our graduates spread this message on a daily basis. It has been an honour to stand alongside every single one of them, and I never cease to be amazed by their passion, dedication, selflessness and creativity. They are building the communities they wish to see, and creating space for all of us in the process.

I often think back to that day in 2010 when the Opening Doors flyer was placed in front of me. What might have happened if I'd pushed it away? This program has changed so many lives over the past 10 years, and I can't wait to see where the journey takes us next.

"A Community that does not have room for everyone has room for no one." - Mike Green

**Alex Mills is the Coordinator of The Opening Doors Program. To find out more about Opening Doors, visit the Link Health and Community website:**  
<http://www.linkhc.org.au>



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# She Called Me Red

*SBS Documentary Wins Walkley Award*



Opening Doors 2017 Graduate Yunus Mohamad has been on an incredible journey since arriving in Australia in 2012. Initially fleeing Burma to escape the systemic violence and genocide being perpetrated against his Rohingya community, Yunus found a new home in Melbourne's South Eastern Suburbs. Many of his friends and family, meanwhile, fled to refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh, where living conditions are precarious and every day essentials remain in short supply.

In 2017, award winning SBS photographer Chris Hopkins was commissioned to create a world first: a documentary told completely online through Instagram. Blending photography, artwork and live video footage - captured both in Melbourne and Bangladesh, Chris set out to tell Yunus' story.

At the 2018 Walkley Awards, Chris won in his category for Feature / Photographic Essay. Yunus accepted the award on stage alongside him. Congratulations to both Chris and Yunus on this incredible work being acknowledged, and to SBS Australia for sharing Yunus' story with the world.

*(Photos with kind permission from SBS Australia. All photos © Chris Hopkins, for SBS Online Doc, 2018)*



To find out more about Yunus' story or to view the documentary online, search for '**She Called Me Red**' on Google or Instagram

# Celebrating 10 Years of Opening Doors

## *Social Inclusion and Community Leadership*



2009: The Very First Group of Opening Doors Leaders at their Graduation Ceremony



The 2010 Opening Doors Graduation Ceremony at Hawthorn Town Hall

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# Celebrating 10 Years of Opening Doors

## *Social Inclusion and Community Leadership*



The 2011 Opening Doors Graduation Ceremony at The Clayton Community Centre



The 2012 Opening Doors Leadership Group at their 3 Day Opening Retreat

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# 2018 Graduate: Nyawarga Sham

## Leadership Across Communities

### **What motivated you to start working in your community?**

Because I need peace in my heart. If I try my best to work with my community and to talk to them... To understand what their goals and challenges are... If I can do something for them, I will always try my best. Life is precious. We need to give back and support each other.

### **When did you and your family first arrive in Melbourne?**

We came here in December 2005. Initially, it was really difficult. The hardest part was the language. We don't speak English, we don't know where to go... We don't know what to do. We just know we are there. We sleep, we get up in the morning... We don't know where to go. If no one comes to say 'Hi, how are you? Did you know you can go here?' ... It's very difficult.

### **Do you remember the first connection you made in the community?**

The first time I met with my people through community, they came to me and they said 'Hi'... They helped us to go to Medicare, to understand the schools and services... Sometimes someone can pick you up and take you to Church. And then through Church, we made many new friends... And we tried our best to connect with people and with the community.

### **Can you tell me about your work with Daughters of Jerusalem?**

I joined them straight away. They were a group of women through different churches, who had started one year before I arrived. It was familiar, because we also had it back home. In South Sudan, in Egypt... Daughters of Jerusalem is a big group in many places, working hard for the community.

I initially went there because I like to sing. I joined with the other women in a choir, and then after three or four years, I became a leader of the singing group. I was the leader. But then, something came into my mind. When I go outside, I will see young kids in the street... I will see they're having trouble. So I have to stop in my car to ask them what is happening.



### **What do you think the biggest challenge is facing the young people you work with?**

A lot. They are facing a lot. Because we come here now to our new home, and the mothers... They don't know how to communicate with their kids here. Because we have a different culture. Back home in South Sudan, until you're 18 years old, you have to be at home. But here, the kids have freedom... The culture is different. If my child comes to me and tells me they have a birthday party to go to, but I don't know the people... I will say no, you can't go. But this causes disagreement.

### **It sounds like some young people feel they're stuck between two cultures?**

Yes. Exactly. And our kids now adopt Australian culture, which is different from the culture we grew up in. I know so much more now about Australian culture, and how it fits with my culture... But I am learning about other cultures too. That's why I say I will try my best. What can I do to help?

### **What do you think has made the biggest difference to the young people you work with?**

Listening. Definitely listening. The way I am working with the young people now, I need all the mothers – they have to give a chance to their kids. In my culture, if your child comes to you and asks something and you say no, that's it... But now, I'm trying to give advice. I need to give my children a chance and to support them. If it's not right, I will tell them...



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# 2018 Graduate: Nyawarga Sham

## Leadership Across Communities



... But ultimately I need to support my children in the choices they make. We all need to listen.

### **As a community leader, what's the biggest thing you've learned?**

If you are a leader, you need to stand up for your people. In the right way. If I see you are in trouble, I have to come and listen to you. If I don't really listen, to understand your story... I can't give my advice or experience in a way that will help you. We need to understand before we act.

We also need to stand up more. At the moment, in the media... If one person does something bad, they put the entire community down as bad too. We don't want it to be this way. It's like anywhere in Australia. There are so many good people, so many I've met... Maybe there are some that are bad, but we don't label them *all* that way. I see it the same for my community. We need to talk more about the good in people, and the good that people are doing. We

need to tell stories of people supporting their friends, family and each other. We need to get these good stories out there and for people to understand what is really happening.

### **You're just about to graduate from Opening Doors. How have you found the program this year?**

Opening Doors... I can say it is a blessing for me. When I joined the program, it made me feel like I can do anything. I can step up and do something tomorrow. The other people in the class, they have helped me to be proud of myself. I feel I am doing something great. I feel I have more hands, to help me tomorrow. I feel if I need something, I could say 'I need help', and people will be there. I feel blessed. We are together. It really feels like a family to me.

To view a short documentary on Nyawarga and her work with *Daughters of Jerusalem*, please visit: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/south-sudanese-daughters-of-jerusalem-providing-support-to-community>

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# Celebrating 10 Years of Opening Doors

## *Social Inclusion and Community Leadership*



The 2013 Opening Doors Graduation Ceremony with Anna Burke MP and Jonathon Welch AM



2014: The Opening Doors Leadership Group at their Opening 3-Day Retreat

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# Celebrating 10 Years of Opening Doors

## *Social Inclusion and Community Leadership*



The 2015 Opening Doors Graduation Ceremony with Mayors of Monash and Manningham



The 2016 Opening Doors Graduate Ceremony with Very Special Guest Carly Findlay

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# Celebrating 10 Years of Opening Doors

## *Social Inclusion and Community Leadership*



The 2016 Opening Doors Leadership Group at Leadership Victoria



Celebrating Community Leadership at the 2017 Opening Doors Graduation Ceremony

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# Refugee Week 2018

## Refugee and Asylum Seeker Recognition Awards



In 2013 Opening Doors graduate Sri Samy established Friends of Refugees, with the aim of providing social and material support to refugees and asylum seekers in Melbourne's South East. Five years on, the organisation has supported thousands of community members with food, furniture, housing, social connections and pathways to volunteering, employment and education.

In 2017 Friends of Refugees launched the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Recognition Awards—an event to celebrate and acknowledge the tireless contributions that people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds make to our communities every day.

The 2018 ceremony featured a key-note address from very special guest and former President of The Australian Human Rights Commission, Professor Gillian Triggs. The event was attended by hundreds of community members, and it was incredible to see two Opening Doors graduates receive awards on the day. Amir Abdi and Yunus Mohamad were presented with their awards by Professor Triggs and spent some time sharing their stories with her following the event.



To find out more about **Friends Of Refugees** please visit:  
<http://www.friendsofrefugees.org.au>

# When The Black Dog Bites

## *A Black Dog Community Art Project*



In 2015, Opening Doors graduate Emma Finch launched The Black Dog Community Art Exhibition, exploring the lived experiences and stigmas of mental illness in our community. Four years on, The Black Dog has become a fixture in the Monash community, and has connected with thousands of local residents through art, craft and story telling.

In October 2018, the fourth annual Black Dog Exhibition was held, with the theme 'When The Black Dog Bites.' The exhibition attracted 250+ artworks and a record crowd of more than 3000 people. The artworks ranged from paintings to photography, sculptures to craft and dioramas. Emma looks forward to expanding the exhibition through a range of workshops under The Black Dog Banner in 2019.

To view a short documentary on The Black Dog, please visit: <https://youtu.be/0BnOFrd4vj8>



To find out more, contact Emma Finch on 0415 278 580 or visit: <https://blackdogproject.weebly.com/>

# Opening Doors

2019

**Applications  
Now Open!**



## A Community Leadership Program For Social Inclusion

This program aims to increase connections for socially isolated people living in the areas of Monash, Manningham, Whitehorse and Boroondara

If you are passionate about making a difference in your community and would like to find out more about Opening Doors, please contact Program Coordinator Alex Mills

8822 8327 / 0448 308 052 / [amills@linkhc.org.au](mailto:amills@linkhc.org.au)

# 2018 Graduation Ceremony

*Celebrating the Achievements of Our Leaders*



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# 2018 Graduation Ceremony

*Celebrating the Achievements of Our Leaders*



**The 2018 Opening Doors Leadership Program Graduates with Mayor of Whitehorse, Cr Bill Bennett and Mayor of Monash, Cr Shane McCluskey**



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# Opening Doors - Celebrating 10 Years of Transforming Communities

Since 2009, The Opening Doors Program has proudly supported:

- **208 graduates** from diverse backgrounds who possess the knowledge, skills, networks and confidence to create lasting change in their communities
- **More than 120 innovative community projects** which aim to build stronger, more inclusive and connected communities
- Over **20,000 community members** who are now connected with their communities in new and positive ways
- A network of over **150 different organisations, businesses and groups** collaborating to strengthen communities through their support of The Opening Doors Leadership Program



Opening Doors 2017 Graduates with Premier of Victoria, The Hon. Daniel Andrews MP



*Gratefully acknowledging the passion and support of our 2019 funders*