



Keeping faith close from point A to B – Aleppo to Brisbane

# Franciscan spirit opens new doors

AMAL Eskifeh has the Franciscan spirit running through her veins.

She, and her family, fled war-torn Syria after the 2014 Good Friday bombings destroyed their home city of Aleppo and killed many life-long friends and family.

After fleeing to another Syrian city, and later to Lebanon where they applied and were granted a visa to Australia, Ms Eskifeh and her family settled in Brisbane.

The family faced many challenges settling here – it was a new language, new culture, a loss of their old community, unsure financial security, unemployment and many other challenges.

But, hope arrived for Ms Eskifeh, coming in the form of an old connection in her father's past – the Franciscans.

Ms Eskifeh was employed at Padua College, Kedron under the Work and Welcome program, an initiative started at the college 25 years ago and supports refugees in gaining employment.

"I heard a lot about the Franciscan ethos from my father and I have many Franciscan friends in Aleppo," Ms Eskifeh said.

"I have often been to Franciscan churches, and I have a close relationship with the Franciscan community in Syria.

"They are always friendly and engaging, you can feel the love and joy in their actions and their service, they show courtesy and respect to everyone.

"The Franciscan school Padua College in Brisbane where I am now working is another great example of this Franciscan spirit."

Her family's ties to the Franciscans go back more than half a century.

Her father, Samir, was born in Aleppo in 1955 and did all his schooling at the Franciscan school – Terre Sainte School.

"The school was given the name Terre Sainte (Holy Land) during the time Syria was a French colony," Mr Eskifeh said.

"I remember the principals – Pere (Father) Jedion from the Netherlands, Pere (Father) Penavantara from Jordan, and Pere (Father) Joseph from France," he said.

"I also remember some teachers – Pere (Father) Renhart from Belgium, Pere (Father) Eloie from Spain, Pere (Father) Vito from Italy, Frere (Brother) Bernard from Syria and Frere (Brother) Michael from Egypt."

Mr Eskifeh loved his school and said it was "the main reason for my success in life".

"I'm not the only one who was impacted positively by Terre Sainte school – every single student who studied there had a rewarding experience," he said.

"We were taught the basic principles of respect and service to others.

"Many of the most successful people in that generation studied at this great school."

Mr Eskifeh soon met his wife, Houda Kalala, a French teacher.

The couple raised their four children and lived a happy life, until the war.

But, many years later in Brisbane, Ms Eskifeh – a French teacher in Syria like her mother – is following in her father's footsteps.

Through the Work and Welcome Program, Ms Eskifeh gained employment as a teacher's aide at Padua College.

The Work and Welcome program, supported by the Franciscan Friars of the Holy Spirit Conference, was created at Padua College to offer short term employment opportunities for refugees and migrants.

It has since expanded to 20 schools in Queensland and New South Wales and also into the corporate sector.

More than 200 refugees and migrants have benefited from this program.

Ms Eskifeh has since been employed by Padua College after completion of her Work and Welcome placement.



Family connection: Amal Eskifeh on Greccio campus at Padua College.



Old school: Samir Eskifeh (third from the left at the back) with principal Pere Philip Mestrih and classmates at the Terre Sainte Franciscan school in Aleppo, Syria in 1972.