

WHY DARWIN IS A SPECIAL PLACE

Melaleuca Australia is a small organisation which has been making a significant impact in the NT since 1997. Since that time, it has annually been receiving and supporting up to 230 individuals and families on humanitarian visas. Melaleuca is able to provide a level of tailored, individualised support which can be challenging to provide in other capital cities as those places receive much higher numbers of arrivals and essential settlement agencies are often spread out. For instance, newly arrived humanitarian entrants in Darwin can access most services under one roof, without the need to travel across suburbs to access services.

Melaleuca's approach involves having a suite of complimentary services in the same building, meaning counsellors, clinicians, social workers, case coordinators and bicultural support workers can all connect as colleagues, having a shared interest in providing holistic services to the people they serve. This spares clients the need to repeat their story over and over again – a source of frustration for many who navigate different services in larger cities.

Settling into any city is complex. When you grow up in a place, you take for granted the knowledge

of how to complete simple, everyday tasks such as grocery shopping and catching a bus. Even more complex tasks such as navigating services such as health appointments or understanding basic laws and acquiring a place for your family to live are not usually insurmountable. A large part of Melaleuca's role is to support people arriving here to acquire these skills and learn all that it takes to settle successfully. Successful settlement requires a whole of society response. This is where Melaleuca comes into its own as an organisation that is well-connected into multiple parts of communities, businesses, and government agencies in this special place.

What makes Darwin special is how accepting and welcoming it is to newcomers, regardless of whether they come from interstate or overseas. There is a unique openness and true diversity, stemming from having a third of the population being First Nations and a third being multicultural. There is no apparent 'rite of passage' for new arrivals such as a certain number of years one has to live here to prove one's credentials. As a former staff member puts it, 'We are in the business of welcoming people'.



FROM REFUGEE WORK TO PIZZAIOLO AND BACK

When Hugo moves to Australia early 2020 on a temporary visa, the idea of continuing his work with refugee groups is so far in the future, it is not even a dream. In Colombia, Hugo worked with people internally displaced by the violence inflicted on rural populations (mainly poor farmers) by drug trafficking militias – essential work as Colombia has one of the highest numbers of internally displaced people in the world.

In Australia, Hugo quickly finds a job with a pizza restaurant, while joining the dynamic organisation Kindness Shake, a community and student-led initiative launched during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic to support international students, migrants, refugees and temporary visa holders. It is through Kindness Shake that he hears about Melaleuca and the activities open to him: first a drumming workshop through the Connecting Experiences program, then the ManKind group. Hugo gets a better sense of the work of Melaleuca and decides to volunteer for the organisation.

This starts several months of Hugo showing the range of his skills and his willingness at every opportunity, from providing childcare during orientation sessions, managing phone calls and appointments at reception to taking newly-arrived families to the beach on weekends.

Seeing the many gifts that Hugo has, he is then offered paid work at Melaleuca in the Reconnect program, working with young people at risk of homelessness.

Interestingly, Hugo does not mention the prospect of getting paid work as a motivation for volunteering: he was attracted to Melaleuca's work in the settlement sector (the closest he could be to his work in Colombia) and that he enjoyed his interactions with Melaleuca staff. Today, Hugo is one of the coordinators in the Family and Children Services team, facilitating at times difficult relationships between clients and the Territory Families team.

1700 Afghan evacuees transit through Darwin

On 15 August 2021, the Afghan capital city, Kabul, fell to the Taliban. The eyes of the world were on Kabul airport as tens of thousands of Afghans were fleeing. On the other side of the world, Melaleuca Australia (and similar services around the country) was asked to respond urgently to the need for resettlement of the thousands of Afghans arriving in Australia. On September 1, the first plane arrived with 192 Afghans on board. By the end of the first week, over 500 people (145 families) had landed in Darwin.

This was at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic; all families were met at the airport by quarantine officers and taken straight to the Centre for National Resilience (Howards Springs quarantine facility). Melaleuca was tasked with 'triaging' them (assessing their needs) and sourcing mobile phones, clothing – many women, men and children had fled with only the clothes on their back.

Supporting these hundreds of traumatised people on arrival was an enormous logistical effort, requiring Melaleuca staff to be 'all hands on deck' and focus on this task, regardless of their substantive role. Volunteers were brought in quickly and trained to triage people according to their needs; relationships with the private sector were leveraged to source essential items; local mosques and Muslim communities were approached to source Qurans and prayer mats.

Owing to quarantine restrictions, this was done by phone. Staff and volunteers would meet people for the first time only when they accompanied them to the airport as they moved to other parts of Australia to join their family and community. After hours spent on the phone with some families, listening to the story of their flight for freedom, those meetings could be emotional but also full of hope as people left for a new life.

Over the next 6 months, over 1,700 Afghan evacuees would transit through Darwin and be assessed by Melaleuca – more than seven times the number of people Melaleuca would receive in a calendar year.

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CEO tells the evolution of Melaleuca across the past 25 years

1st Decade – Pioneering 1997-2007

“The year has been a challenging year for TTSNT with changes in staff and management committee as people moved interstate and overseas”

Our early days as Torture and Trauma Survivors Service of the Northern Territory (TTSNT), under the leadership of Jenny Michell, was characterised by significant challenges of establishing a sustainable funding base that will enable the sustainability of the organisation, and to expand beyond a staffing base of less than 3 fulltime equivalent.

We were governed by a Committee of Members who operated hands on and provided many hours of practical support from mowing lawns through to writing letters to seek funding support. Our inaugural Committee was chaired by The Rev Steve Orme.

Our client services included early health assessment services as well as the Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (PASTT) and then grew to include humanitarian settlement and family services.

Our external environment was characterised by significant social fear and ignorance regarding asylum seekers and refugees on the backdrop of various global issues including the 2001 Tampa Affair and September 11.

Our genesis involved being connected to the national Forum of Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT) which informed the basis of all our major funding sources. FASSTT played a major role in generating a cohesive voice for refugee issues.

At this early stage, one of our key focuses was on forming partnerships and raising community awareness about our vital work. We provided training and capacity building to service providers and government departments in Darwin and Alice Springs to help educate and increase understanding of refugee issues.

During this period our name changed to Melaleuca Refugee Centre to reflect the main focus of our work and be easier for our clients to identify with. We introduced the figure of the Melaleuca tree to symbolise the meeting of diversity (Melaleuca meaning black and white), draw in the NT flora, and align the organisation with its healing qualities as a representation of our work in trauma healing.

Key challenges included the inability to source long term accommodation for clients and the inability to access appropriate refugee health screening for new humanitarian entrants.

2nd Decade – Building 2008-2017

On the morning of April 16, 2009, an intercepted 25-metre diesel-powered fishing boat that was carrying around 50 refugees and Indonesian crew, exploded over 800kms west of Darwin.

Melaleuca Refugee centre provided counselling services to the asylum seekers after the explosions.

During this decade we launched our first website and celebrated our 10th anniversary.

Our Management Committee were maturing in their processes as governance training become an onboarding prerequisite. Staff representation on the committee was also introduced. We embraced business planning and a focus on strategic directions.

We established a model of Patronship and welcomed our first Patron, Tessa Paulin, during this period.

At this stage, our workforce numbers rose and peaked at about 50 staff across multiple programs.

A significant part of our work during this period was the provision of trauma counselling to detainees at the Wickham Point Detention Centre, whilst continuing to deliver the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP).

While this was the period with the most refugee arrivals in Darwin under the HSP, it was also the time that we commenced services to other clients from culturally diverse backgrounds who had not experienced the refugee journey.

Our work included supporting clients on Christmas Island, introducing school-based support across multiple schools in Darwin inclusive of child focused therapy and an expansion of our community development programs.

This was the period when we moved to McLachlan Street in Darwin as our central office.

Towards the end of this period, we begin to realise our wider identity of supporting clients from migrant background, so started deliberating the opportunities to remove the words “Refugee Centre” from our name.

“Melaleuca provides care and hope for people who desperately need it, and continues the history of care and love lived out in this building.”

Bishop Eugene Hurley 2024

Patron and Goodwill Ambassador



Everyone
belongs



For over 25 years, Melaleuca has been humbly serving individuals and families from refugee backgrounds and migrants from the land of the Larrakia people in Darwin.

Kwame Selormey, CEO, Melaleuca Australia

3rd Decade – Consolidating 2018-2022

As we entered our 25th year, our services expanded significantly when we partnered with AMES Australia and became a generalist employment service provider. During this time our workforce grew by 300% and peaked at about 70 staff across multiple programs.

We also decentralised the Darwin office and expanded to three additional sites.

Melaleuca Australia's values are embodied in its work, reflecting maturity in its thoughts, actions and presence.

The Committee of Management changed to a Board of Management, and is guided by a revised constitution, clear governance protocols, frameworks and practices. The first full Executive across the organisation was established in 2019.

There are systems in place for capturing data to inform future work, inclusive of a client management system, HR systems, payroll systems, quality outcome measures and sound policies and practices that support high performance and good service to all clients. These strengthen our accountability to the people we serve, our funders and our colleagues.

The name change to Melaleuca Australia was an intentional systemic advocacy, given that the refugee journey ends on arrival in Australia, where our clients are permanent residents, not refugees. Melaleuca was noticed nationally across humanitarian sector for this systemic shift in how to refer to individuals who have experienced the refugee journey. Our migrant clients were more easily identifying with the name and self-referrals began to increase.

The entire brand was refreshed including the vision "a world where everyone belongs", revised mission and values, and a new logo designed to represent Melaleuca's foundations, story and clients.

We introduced culture change strategies, annual staff satisfaction surveys and have focused on workforce retention strategies, as well as skilling our workforce by intentionally introducing learning and development as a key pillar within the organisation.

In 2022 our client base expanded beyond humanitarian entrants and migrants to include a generalist service. We are proud to support the First Nation people on whose land we live and work. All our clients have access to a range of approaches that ensure their voices are heard and that they can hold us accountable for good service.

We provide expert advice to various NT government departments and are also now a life member of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs in the NT (MACMA).

Strategic alliances have been strengthened both within the Territory and nationally, including sitting on various national boards and peak bodies, and Melaleuca now speaks with a clear voice and certainty about matters related to the communities we serve.

Government departments, ministers and policy makers across the NT increasingly seek our expert advice on multicultural affairs. We are a known agency within the Territory as a place where cultural diversity comes to life.

In 2021 the social enterprise Mela Kulcha was established to engage the communities we serve and to create employment pathways that enable them to influence greater belonging in the Territory.

Melaleuca is there

Over the past 25 years, Melaleuca Australia has responded in times of crisis.

In the early days of the organisation, many volunteers became involved with East Timorese evacuees. An evacuation centre was set up in Darwin for people fleeing violence in the newly independent Timor Leste.

In 2005-2006, asylum seekers (mainly from Afghanistan) were being released from detention centres and from Christmas Island. While they did not intend to settle in Darwin as their community lived in other states, they requested transit support. 'You would get a chartered flight from Christmas Island with around 300 people

on board, we would have to find hotel rooms for them. Or you would go and get people at the gate of the detention centres' reminisces a former staff member. Melaleuca was offering counselling support in detention centres; they also worked on Christmas Island, where people who had survived the sinking of their boat and the death of their loved ones were deeply traumatised.

In 2020, as borders closed and jobs were lost, international students were left out of government support and struggled to meet their basic needs. Melaleuca was selected by the Chief Minister's Office to be part of the Worker Wellbeing Funds Working Group and participate

Headlines

- 1997 A new organisation is created to provide a program of assistance to the survivors of torture and trauma and our first clients of new agency are from East Timor Sudan, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Somalia.
- 2000 Commenced annual Refugee Week celebrations.
- 2000 We became the humanitarian settlement provider for newly arrived refugees in the NT.
- 2001 Tampa affair.
- 2001 Refugee Support Network was formed and is now known as Settlement Services Network and expands to migrants, international students, asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants.
- 2002 Commenced Humanitarian Settlement Service.
- 2008 Asylum seekers granted full community access.
- 2010 Commenced partnerships with schools to support humanitarian and people from refugee background.
- 2011 Inaugural World Music Festival was launched and is now Melaleuca's flagship celebration hosted annually during Refugee Week.
- 2011-16 Wickham Point Detention Centre Counselling.
- 2013 Former PM Tony Abbot and the Australian Liberal government introduced the national military-led border security operation to "stop the boats".
- 2013 Football Without Borders is formed to connect NT communities through soccer.
- 2014 Awarded Recognition of Community Support Award.
- 2014 Refugee World Cup Partnership commenced.
- 2016 Inaugural Member of the NT Human Right Awards.
- 2016-2019 NT Multicultural Participation Framework.
- 2020 Melaleuca stepped up to lead strategic directions for international students impacted by COVID-19.
- 2020 Multicultural Policy for the NT.
- 2020 Portable Panel was introduced.
- 2021 International borders close (COVID-19).
- 2021 Afghan evacuation.
- 2021 Constitution changed to include services to our multicultural communities.
- 2021 Melaleuca Refugee Centre becomes Melaleuca Australia.
- 2021 Mela Kulcha social enterprise was established.
- 2022 Melaleuca welcomes and auspices Multicultural Youth NT (MyNT).

in the response. As well as practical support, this included the Connecting Experiences project to address the isolation experienced by international students, in Australia without families and strong networks.

More recently, in 2021, Melaleuca was heavily involved in helping 1,700 Afghans transit through Darwin after the fall of Kabul. A monumental task that required staff to extend themselves across programs and working hours (see article 1700 Afghan evacuees transit through Darwin). This support, provided to a sizeable proportion of all Afghan evacuees in Australia, was essential to the success of the overall enterprise.



1997 - 2022 MILESTONES

Everything we do is in collaboration

Melaleuca has a long history of collaborating with Darwin agencies, in and out of the refugee and migrant sector. Since 2001, Melaleuca has convened the Settlement Services Network and the membership includes service providers, education institutions and government departments. Our collaborations extend locally (NT), nationally, and internationally.

A VERY SPECIAL BIRTHDAY TAGHREED HADDADIN

I remember very well the day I arrived in Australia. It was my birthday, 20 September 2016. When we- my husband, my sons and my daughter- arrived in Darwin airport, people from Melaleuca were there to welcome us. I felt so happy to see them and so safe and comfortable. Happiness was the first feeling. I also felt that, finally, we can relax and re-start our lives, because for a long time, our lives were on hold. We didn't know if we were going to be accepted or not or what was going to happen- but that changed once we got off the plane and I breathed a sigh of relief.

When we got to the house, they showed us around and it was amazing. I remember I said to my son, 'Look, it's like your drawing!'; because before we came to Australia, he drew a house like that when they asked us where we imagined we would live. I was amazed because my son drew a square with a triangle roof - nothing like we have in Jordan or Syria. I loved that house and I am still friends with the neighbours we had back there. I remember on my first day, after some rest, I cooked something and took it to the neighbours and introduced myself- it was the start of lovely friendships.

In the beginning, I had very little English and I spent about 3 years learning. It was a really good experience and I met people from all over the world. By 2021, my English was much better and I applied to work on a project at Melaleuca where I could use Arabic. Since then, I have worked at Melaleuca as a Bicultural Support Worker. I also teach some cooking classes at Mela Kulcha and regularly make food for clients and staff. My cooking is how I share love, culture and yummy food. I am working on starting my own business now. It's hard, but bit by bit, I hope to achieve my dream.

