

Sisters work their way to a new life

May 25, 2015 [Keith Platt](#)



Honoured citizen: Luz Restrepo shows her joy last October after receiving the St Michael's medallion in recognition for her work in helping prevent violence, trauma and destructiveness or promotes growth, health and wellbeing.

A NEW land, a new language and no friends or job. It is a situation that is hard to imagine and even harder to experience.

However, that was the predicament confronting Luz Restrepo when she arrived in Australia five years ago after fleeing her native Colombia.

"I was a political asylum seeker with no contacts, very little English language and no employment," Ms Restrepo said last week.

“I had left my successful communications business to protect my family under threat.”

It was a fear that she was unable to shake.

“When I arrived in Australia I was full of fear, I felt like I was invisible to society and I had lost my sense of identity.”

Without realising it at first, Ms Restrepo was part of a community: “I started to meet women with the same story, some were depressed, socially isolated, lacking confidence and some were at risk of domestic violence.

“One woman I met had been here 20 years and didn’t speak any English. I knew I needed to do something to turn this around.”

Believing the best way to become part of the wider Australian society was to achieve some sort of financial independence, Ms Restrepo wrote a business plan – in Spanish first, out of necessity – and start to learn English.



Ana Maria runs a colourful stall at Mornington's Wednesday market under the auspices of SisterWorks. Picture: Yanni

She contacted other refugee and migrant women “and we started teaching ourselves craft”.

Although their products were being sold to shops in Melbourne, she realised the women were being isolated by making them at home.

“So I looked for some opportunities for us to sell our products together at markets. This way we were able to help each other by exchanging skills and improving our English.”

Meanwhile, several women from the Mornington Peninsula had joined others in supporting Ms Restrepo’s efforts and in May 2013 SisterWorks was established.

The organisation comprises 68 asylum seeker, refugee and migrant women, 44 volunteer supporters and three part time staff.

Now living in Dromana, Ms Restrepo says SisterWorks encourages the vulnerable women “to tap into their underlying business and entrepreneurial abilities to find self-sufficiency”.

Under her business by 2020 SisterWorks will be “a leading social enterprise known for the power of women from many nations working together to achieve amazing things”.

“We believe that together women are stronger and together women can create opportunities for personal and economic growth.”

Asked if she has a personal ambition, Ms Restrepo is quick

to reply “be the minister for women, or entrepreneurs”.

As the organisation’s executive officer she is also its “main voice” and as part of fundraising to find a permanent for SisterWorks Ms Restrepo will “share the stories” of the organisation’s members at Mornington Community Theatre 10am-midday Wednesday 10 June. Entry is \$25, bookings call 5989 2962 or email s-home@bigpond.com.

[First published in the Mornington News – 26 May 2015](#)