

# The Syrian refugees who run a Lygon Street pastry shop

By Carolyn Webb

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Sweet success: after three years in Australia, Joumana Charaf now runs the Trio Pasta, Sweets and Nuits in Lygon Street, Carlton, with her family

Photo: Eddie Jim

A Syrian refugee who arrived with no money, no job and no English has opened a pastry shop in Lygon Street, Carlton, after just three years living in Australia.

It is a bittersweet achievement for Jourmana Charaf and her husband, Akram Hamdan. While they feel safe and happy building a future in Melbourne, the civil war rages on in Syria.

Ms Joumana Charaf was unsure whether recent missile strikes – by US, UK and French forces on chemical weapons sites in Syria – would quell or escalate the war. "I fear for my family," Ms Charaf said. "My friends, everyone I left behind over there".

The mother of three owned a fabric factory employing 50 in the city of Sweita but had to flee to Jordan after her merchant husband was threatened for aiding victims of Syrian government bombs.

The family arrived with "nothing" including no job and no English when they joined her sister, Rima, in Frankston in 2014.

After selling her home-made baklava at markets for several years, last October the family leased a business called Trio Pasta, Sweets and Nuts, in the famous foodie hub, Lygon Street.

The shop sells delectable Middle Eastern sweets such as home-made mamoul, warbat, osh albolbol and eight types of baklava, savoury treats such as hummus and zaatar. And Arabic coffee to wash it down. Since then it's been busy with customers keen to check out the street's new fare.



Joumana Charaf at her Lygon Street shop with Luz Restrepo from SisterWorks

*Photo: Eddie Jim*

Ms Charaf's story is a rather brilliant success story of SisterWorks, a not-for-profit support network for migrant and refugee women.

SisterWorks was founded in 2013 by Luz Restrepo, a former doctor and political refugee who arrived from Colombia in 2010 and worked as a cleaner.

In a bio on the SisterWorks website, Ms Restrepo says: "I felt like a nobody; frightened, isolated and disempowered". Ms Restrepo met other women in similar situations and wanted to help them, "and myself".



One of Joumana Charaf's eight varieties of baklava

*Photo: Eddie Jim*

Members make jewellery, food, homewares and art to sell at SisterWorks' shop in Swan Street, Richmond, and learn skills and get advice to start their own businesses or find a meaningful job.

Ms Charaf started selling home-made knitted and crocheted garments with Sisterworks in 2016, seeking to make friends and get into work.

Members encouraged her to sell her baklava.

Ms Charaf says SisterWorks members are like family to her.

Ms Restrepo "pushed me and encouraged me". "She gives the women motivation and incentive, so they believe that they can have a future and get through the difficult stage they're going through."



Warbat, a pistachio-filled pasty, at Trio pastry shop

*Photo: Eddie Jim*

“Through her I made lots of friends and became more familiar with living in Melbourne.”

On April 19, SisterWorks opened a pop-up shop in Toorak Road, South Yarra, lent to them rent-free for three months by a generous landlord.

SisterWorks is raising \$70,000 through [a crowdfunding campaign](#); if they attain that by May 4, they will receive a further \$70,000 from the Ian Potter Foundation.

Ms Restrepo said she was "enormously proud" of Ms Charaf, "because it's proof that work empowers women. It proves that the model works – the way we are supporting women, to learn English and learn about doing business in real life.

"These are amazing people who just need the opportunity to prove how capable they are."



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