

What is it like to work at QPASTT ? Reflections of two workers:

Taher Forotan, Early Intervention Counsellor and *Paula Peterson*, the first Director of QPASTT, discuss what it's like to work at the Queensland Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

Paula: Taher, if you imagine yourself in about 20 years time when you have retired from QPASTT, what stories might you tell your grandchildren about working at QPASTT? What would you identify as some of the standout experiences and how would you talk about these to your grandchildren?

Taher: I would probably say that working at QPASTT was a wonderful opportunity to work with diversity. Working with people from different backgrounds, was memorable. They all were special with their special kinds of culture, weaknesses, strengths and problems, and of course their own special perceptions and understanding of their situations. I remember many of them that I could talk about. For instance I remember a family from Africa. They came from a refugee camp in Tanzania where they lived there for long time. When they came to Australia no one of them could speak English, even they were illiterate in their own language. They had a lot of issues, particularly the man who was the only survivor of his family, his parents and siblings were killed during the civil war in his country. He then had fled to Tanzania, lived in a refugee camp where he had met his wife and married, and they raised their own family and children.

His experience and story was overwhelming, but the kind of strength that you could see in him was amazing. He was so optimistic about his life here and about the future of his children. This kind of show of hope, strength and resilience could energize everyone and would suggest a prospect to see things differently. Few months after their arrival in Australia his house caught fire and caused him to lose his household items. His family again had nothing. A couple of times when I went to visit them, no one was available at home but their door was open and unlocked. I told them to not leave their door unlocked. His reply was that they do not have anything worthwhile for

people to steal. The main point of the story was his personal courage, the resilience and the strength he was showing in the face of those terrible events. That case really was a source of inspiration for me.

Paula: Do you keep in touch with him? Do you still see the family?

Taher: No. At the end of specified time, my work with his family came to its end, he and his family members were doing well. I have not seen him since then.

Paula: What is the Dari word for 'grandfather'? If I was your grandchild, how would I call you?

Taher: It is Padar Kalaan

Paula: If I was your grandchild and I asked you "Padar Kalaan, why would you want to work with all those people when they are so different to you?", what would you say?

Taher: Yes the work was very different and therefore it was very special too. Working with different people from different backgrounds, can add something different to your perspective and can contribute something to your own richness, to your own humanity which otherwise you can never get from people from the same background as your own. The other thing is, having a refugee background myself, I know how difficult it was to come as a refugee to a new country, a strange country where everything is new and different. When you find yourself alone and unfamiliar with the new situation, you need help from others. It is particularly more eminent when people come from a disempowering situation of war, destruction, abuses and refugee camps. Working with them and helping them to stand on their feet is very fulfilling from my personal point of view. When you see a client some times after his/her arrival and again when you see him/her in six months time or more, and the changes you notice for good, make you feel good about yourself, about the service you have provided. That is very fulfilling, though you know that you were not the only one who made these changes possible but knowing

that you have played a role in this changes and somehow contributed to the life of another person, still is rewarding and satisfying.

Paula: I am pretending that I am your grandchild still; did you ever get sick of it?

Taher: Well, I would be not honest if I say no. The work is difficult and emotionally demanding. Sometimes you are overwhelmed, other times you feel stuck. You know you have your own limitations and limitations of resources. Sometimes you know your client problem is huge and you can't do anything about it, you felt disappointed and frustrated. You wished you were able to do something about it or not been involved with that person or the job at all. But most of the time you can offer some things that could be of some sort of help to them.

Paula: I think that was a wonderful story. You have captured what you do, and what is joyous about what you do, but also that it's not without difficulty. Essentially though, the personal fulfillment outbalances the difficulty.

Taher: I remember the words of the man I talked about earlier. When I visited him after his house was burnt, he said that, "This was not the first time that my house was put on fire. Before it was a lot worse because I lost every one of my family members, but this time thank God, my family members are alive"

Paula: That is a wonderful story; it is very inspirational.

Taher: How about you, Paula? You worked for QPASTT for so long, as a founding director of the agency. You must have many memories about the organization, the workers and the clients of QPASTT. Can you share some memories?

Paula: My perspective is slightly different to yours, Taher, because I was born in this town, grew up in this town, and am well-connected in this town. I am not coming from another place. I am in the place that is most familiar to me. In some ways I think the joy of working at QPASTT was that I liked working around people that could bring difference to me and could challenge me and in

that process I learnt a lot about myself. Also, my story is similar to yours in that getting to know people who are very different to me was very inspirational and helped me keep things in perspective. In the early days I did see a lot of clients – I had a counselling load like everybody else – but as the organization got bigger that load got smaller and smaller and in the end I saw very few people. I only did assessments and I did not see very many clients at all. But the staff, in some ways, had a similar role to me. At one point I remember I was the only person in the staff of about twenty who was born in Brisbane. Of the other two or three English speaking staff, one was born in England and one in New Zealand, so although I did have staff who were from English speaking countries, they weren't from my country. It was an incredibly rich interplay of cultures in the workplace which I found really enriching. Also finding a level of common humanity. That kind of working very intimately with very supportive staff did have a really big impact on how I raised my family and how I tried to conduct myself when I went back to that other world; that very kind of white Australian world which was the world of my childhood. I knew that when I went back I interacted quite differently because I was influenced by my friends and colleagues who I had worked with, and who I saw much more of than I did the people I came from.

This is a really little thing, but I still remember at one point realizing the difference when I went to a conference – this was years ago when I was still working at QPASTT. If you're at an Australian conference, when people line up at the buffet everyone gets their own plate and their own fork and walks along and serves themselves. I realized that at QPASTT this never happens. The first person picks up the plates and hands them along as far as they can go, and then you proceed. It's a difference between the individualist perspective of life, which is the white Australian perspective, and a collectivist perspective of life, which was the perspective of most of my friends and colleagues. Now I can never go to a conference without picking up plates and handing them along the line because I just think it sickens me that you're so selfish that you only look after yourself. So really little things in the way of not just picking up ephemera of culture but picking up some of the values of other cultures that I think that I'm a better person for having. Also, the awareness of working intimately with people of other cultures, that's not always easy either. When it comes to things like conflict in the workplace, and there are different cultural

perspectives, it can become impossible because people are upset and angry and there's all sorts of things at stake. It is very difficult for people to take that meta analysis view of cross cultural analysis when they're actually very angry and upset and then it becomes difficult, but mostly it's actually a wonderful process. So that's one part of it; the staff. There are also other kinds of inspirational stories from clients as well.

I remember one of my first clients was a man who had been horribly tortured and when I asked him what kept him so hopeful and so kind of alive here outside of his country of origin, he just said he thought to himself in the moment of being tortured that, "They can take everything from me but my faith." For me that was actually a very pivotal point in my own life, just thinking that most of our clients have a lot of faith and the ones who will flourish are the ones who bring a faith with them. So for me coming from a very secular world, that was a really important lesson in life. I've also learnt wonderful lessons along the way about the importance of inner life, the importance of a spiritual life and the importance of leading an examined life.

Paula: If a friend of yours was asking you what's it like to work at QPASTT because there is a job going there at the moment. How would you describe the work and some of the good points and the challenges that come with working at QPASTT?

Taher: Well I would say the job is difficult and demanding, you're facing many broken people with a lot of problems. Working with them is difficult and emotionally demanding. The situation may get more challenging particularly when the people are from different cultural backgrounds and you have no a sound cultural understanding. Understanding how to behave in a given situation and not to offend a client from cultural point of view sometimes is difficult. Communication barrier, particularly with some new emerging communities languages which there are no interpreters are available for them make it more difficult and problematic. But regardless of these kinds of problems some people find the job, as I mentioned earlier, fulfilling. When you work with people from different cultural backgrounds and you come to understand their backgrounds, their perspective on life and the difference you make in the lives of people are very rewarding as well.

Paula: I would probably say the same. I've interviewed a lot of people for a lot of jobs at QPASTT and I would describe it as a very supportive place. For people for whom it's their first job in Australia, it's an understanding place, and it allows people that room to actually get comfortable with the system in Australia, which is very different from the system that they came from, if indeed there was a system. There are a whole lot of rules about a workplace which are very culturally specific and QPASTT actually has those as well, so it is a good introduction to how to conduct yourself, but in a very understanding place that will cut you a lot of slack while you figure those rules out. So things like you really are expected to be here at nine o'clock, you are expected to do a certain amount of work, you are expected to give notice for various things, and all those kinds of things which are second nature to someone who has been raised here, but aren't necessarily second nature to people from other places. So I agree with everything that Taher has said, but I am also thinking more practically in terms of if someone is making a decision of whether to take this job or go and work somewhere else. The other thing that I'd say more generally is that I think there is another dimension of working at QPASTT that does not suit everybody. I think that it does engage you, it does challenge you a lot and if you are the kind of person that wants that, then that's good, but some people don't. Some people want a very ordered life, 9-5, don't want to think about it after five o'clock, don't want anything messy. If you think "I want to progress in my career, so after a year I actually want to be promoted, and I want study leave and all these entitlements and that's what I'm looking for" then I don't think you should be coming to QPASTT. I don't think that's the right place. I think there are other places that would be better if that's what you're looking for. I think QPASTT is for people who are looking for a challenge and who are comfortable with actually being confused and expect to be confused. Like my son who described his new job as being 'eaten alive.' You should expect to feel like you're being eaten alive at least to start with, because that's really good. You are learning so much if you feel like you are being eaten alive. But it's not for everybody, some people don't like that.

Taher: *The work environment in QPASTT is very different from what we used to have in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the work environment was very strict and authoritarian. You have a meeting time to discuss your issues ,problems*

etc , then you are expected to be in your work station and silently do your job. Going to another person and talking about issues, laughing etc. are regarded as breaching the work place rule and ethics. When I started working at QPASTT it was very strange for me so I had asked my colleagues whether the work environment was the same all over Australia. The answer was that probably not as much friendly and relaxed as here is, but not as strict as you mentioned about your country. In QPASTT the work environment is more like a family environment where everyone is very much friendly.

Paula: Lots of laughs and lots of stories too. I remember story told by another female Director of a multicultural service about how different it is for a lot of people as well, to have a female as the director. She said that because she was raised in a fairly liberal school of management and she wanted to be available to her staff, she would walk around the office regularly having a chat to see how people are. She said to me that it scared a lot of the employees who were thinking, “Here’s the boss” which I thought was funny. But it was probably scary for people thinking, “What’s the boss doing lurking around my desk, is she looking for something?” and the fact that the boss was a woman, it scared them.

I think the work is really compelling and it is hard in my experience, but it has been really hard to find other things as absorbing as working at QPASTT. I can live with the fact now that I won’t find a job as absorbing and unique; QPASTT is an unusual place.

Paula: Taher, what do you think about the work and the concept of counselling? How different is it for people as well as for different cultures? What, on a human level, are people looking for that QPASTT can offer them?

Taher: The concept of counselling for many cultures is completely strange and a new thing. Many of those people who are clients of QPASTT are not familiar with this word and the concept of counselling and what is going on in counselling sessions. Probably some form of counselling happens in every culture, but counselling as a profession doesn’t exist in many countries. If something happens to someone , they usually go to the elder of the family, to a clergyman or the wise man in their village and talk about their problem.

When they come here, they don't have the special network of support around themselves to ask for the help. When you talk about counselling, it probably does not make sense to them. It's strange for them to talk about personal things with a person who is not known to them and they cannot trust. That's why We usually do not use the counselling term, we usually tell them that there are qualified people who can help you with your issue/problem, it is a safe place to talk, it's confidential etc. When you say that you are a counsellor and you are there to offer counselling, it is strange for them. Usually starting from practical ways of helping is the beginning and when a trust worthy working relationships established then some may take a step further and ask/ accept counselling.

Sometimes counselling happens with naming the session as a 'counselling session' i.e. when you interact with people and ask them questions regarding their immediate issue of concern, a lot of things come out. Then they may bring the deep underlying issue(s) up and be willing to work on those issues.

Paula: It also raises other issues for me about what it's like to work at QPASTT. Another group who I would say do not work at QPASTT are people that are Western-trained in clinical work, who are actually passionate about doing clinical work. I think they get really frustrated about the lack of opportunity to offer that classical, clinical work that is about a one hour appointment once a week, with a very clear professional to client relationship, working only on psychological issues and using a range of techniques and therapies to work on these psychological issues. I think those people get frustrated working here, because the clients do not play this role properly.

I think the question of explaining counselling is a core thing to the whole organization and the experience of working here and the experience of being a client, and it is something that you have to dance around. I am not an elder in your community, and I am not your mother and your friend, and I am not your clergyman. I am something else and I am a bit similar to all of those, and I tell you that you can bring these certain issues to me, but these other ones I will send you somewhere else with. This is one of the hard things about working here I think, because these people bring a really overpowering loneliness and what they want is a friend. They really want a friend because they are so isolated and so lonely, but that's exactly what the counselor can't offer them. I

can't be your friend. In a clinical framework I certainly can't be your friend, but even in a counselor position, I can be friendly but not your friend. I won't be asking you to my house, we won't be going on shopping trips, and we won't be gossiping, and yet that's what the client wants because they are so lonely. That's a really hard thing for workers to deal with, because you know that that's what the client wants and really what they need, and yet that's what you're not offering. Even if you really might like them a lot and in a different set of circumstances think that you could be really good friends, in these circumstances that is not what you are going to be for them.

Taher: That's right; one of the main problems for the people coming here is loneliness. We can't offer friendship because of professional boundaries, we have the role of a counselor. Sometimes counselling happens without naming the session as a 'counselling session'. Without it being an official counselling session, when you interact with people and ask them questions, a lot of things come out. They will discuss their issues with you, and we keep working with those issues slowly and that is a kind of counselling. But naming those sessions as counselling sessions at the beginning is very difficult for the people.