

Jose Zepeda



When Jose left El Salvador he headed for Mexico where he claimed political refugee status. This was a transitional stop as he was considering migration to either Canada or Australia. But a talk given by staff from the Australian Embassy encouraged him to apply to migrate Down Under; he would be one of the first to enter Australia under a refugee / humanitarian program that had been initiated, following the arrival of a group of political prisoners from El Salvador the previous year. Thus, on March 23rd 1984, he landed in Sydney, where he stayed for three months at a migrant hostel in South Coogee. There he began an intensive course in English for three months; after which he transferred to Wacol in Brisbane.

From day one, Jose began his volunteer work, organizing sporting activities for the young migrants and arranging volunteer English teachers to provide supplementary lessons at night to the new arrivals, in addition to their normal language entitlement. In Brisbane, Jose commuted daily to do volunteer work at the Catholic Immigration Office. This went on from 1984 to 1987. He then got involved with Radio 4EB (even though he did not possess many broadcasting skills), the then Brisbane Migrant Resource Centre and other ethnic organizations. He also organized various community activities especially for the Latin Americans and at night, he attended TAFE to upgrade his qualifications

Why would a newly arrived migrant plunge himself into a hectic regime of attending to the re-settlement needs of other new-arrivals? As long as he can remember, volunteering was part of the fabric of life in the Zepeda family. Not only was it a logical manifestation of their commitment to the Catholic faith; there was always this overwhelming sense of respect for the human being. His mother Estrella was a classic role model. A passionate educator she was involved in social justice activities that extended beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

This was fairly radical in a class-divided society; but the motivation was that by giving and being engaged, you in fact gained a great deal yourself. Contributing had its inherent reward: it made you a better person. To Jose, “volunteering requires courage, dynamism and an element of risk. You do your best but sometimes, it is not the best thing required in a particular situation, so you’re forced to change and transform yourself since you soon learn that it is NOT easy to change the world!”

Armed with this family legacy, Jose had a passionate energy to be an agent of social change for approximately fourteen years and, for five years he worked with indigenous Mayans in Mexico. (It was therefore an incredible surprise that almost two

decades later, in 1997, he received an award from Mexico, for his social justice work among the indigenous people). He later assisted Archbishop Oscar Romero in community development work among the poor, working especially to improve the living standards of people living in agricultural areas. The Archbishop was tragically assassinated in 1980, and the ensuing civil war forced Jose to flee to Mexico. Looking back at this turbulent period in his life, Jose knows he would not have changed his commitment despite the war and the events that forced him to leave. It was undoubtedly a significant phase in his life that shaped him for better things to come in his new life in a new continent.

In his new environment, Jose sought out Bishop James Cuskelly whom he had met back home, also working with grass roots indigenous communities. By 1987, he was so involved in the Catholic Immigration Office and the Migrant and Refugee sections of St Vincent de Paul, that he was employed as a part-time worker. He then graduated into full time work and today, is Director of the Centre for Multicultural Pastoral Care in Paddington. The centre replaced the Catholic Immigration office.



Jose and team at the Centre for Multicultural Pastoral Care

His strong Catholic commitment has resulted in Jose serving as a member of several Catholic organizations, including the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, Commission for Evangelization and Pastoral Planning, the Synod Preparatory Commission and St Patrick's Beenleigh Pastoral Council, to name a few. He also acts as the Archdiocesan Spokesperson on Multicultural Affairs, Spiritual Adviser to the Society of St Vincent de Paul State Committee for Migrants and Refugees, Adviser to Queensland Bishops on immigration issues and church representative on the Interfaith Multicultural Forum.

Jose's volunteering has extended to the wider community as he seeks to promote multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity. He is a member of the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ), the Police Ethnic Advisory Group, the Management Committee of Multilink Community Services in Logan, and is a Founding Member and past president of Multicultural Development Association (MDA). He strongly supports initiatives that promote the welfare of the indigenous people in the country, and in fact, a most prized possession is a 'Reconciliation and Peace' Stick given by an aboriginal community.

He acts as the International Co-ordinator of 'Always People Overseas Community Project Association' (he was a founding member in 1994) to fund projects internationally and locally. This organization has no office and no structures, but uses volunteers offering their skills and finances for worth-while projects that have included English classes for Asian women and establishing networking /socializing structures for business women who feel isolated.

As a refugee himself, Jose has a great compassion for refugees and asylum seekers. He is a member of the Refugee Council of Australia, and was instrumental in the foundation of the Refugee Claimants Centre, serving on its Management Committee for a long time. Jose devoted a lot of energy to Temporary Protection Visa refugees, attempting to find them jobs in country areas and offering them friendship, material goods and counsel. He has spoken often on radio and has appeared on TV to lobby for better conditions and easier access for refugees and migrants, in relation to housing and access and equity issues. Jose believes, however, that the entire refugee agenda should move to mainstream organizations.

His interest, support and work with all these groups have been extremely time-consuming, taking up many of his evenings and weekends. He is therefore grateful that he has the full support of his wife, Cong Huynh, and son, Roberto. Their adopted daughter, Than (nicknamed Be Nu) is presently studying in Vietnam. Jose acknowledges that his extended multicultural family (nieces and nephews) does all the nitty-gritty behind the scenes, like collect things and cook meals for people and does not get the recognition that they so rightly deserve.

Family gatherings (a mixture of Latin-American, Vietnamese and Aussie cultures) are totally multicultural affairs and Jose appreciates the cross-cultural skills that are honed – respect, honesty, integrity and being true to oneself and others. He counts himself privileged that within his own family environment is the daily encounter of East and West, often complex and challenging. The experiences along his journey of life have taught him to see the world with different eyes; and the exposure to different cultures and languages has been priceless! Jose counts it a 'treasure' in his life, that he has met all types of people in Australia.

Looking back on his life so far, Jose is happy with the way things have turned out; and would not do anything differently. He says, "If I wanted anything changed, it would have meant giving up some of my values, and perhaps, even my faith." Jose's hard work has been recognized by the community and government. He has received awards from St Vincent de Paul, and the Christian Brothers for 'Justice and Spirituality'. In 2002, Jose received the Multicultural Service Award from the Premier of Queensland. But Jose does not believe in resting on his laurels. He looks forward to his next big challenge: connecting with the half million Catholics in S.E. Queensland and getting them involved in the intercultural dialogue that he feels is no longer an option.

To Jose, "living in Australia's multicultural society has entailed the building of bridges at all times, with strangers and the mainstream. If we want the next generation to value multiculturalism and inherit our core of Aussie values (frankness and honesty, a philosophy that endorses 'the Aussie battler' and 'a fair go for all') we need to encourage a more dynamic inter-cultural debate in order to 'cement' values of diversity, respect, harmony and peace in society. Our first priority perhaps, is to get the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) to dialogue with our indigenous brothers and sisters." He sincerely believes that a harmonious multicultural society

does not happen instantaneously; it has to evolve and it takes courageous leadership that actively involves the next generation in the process.