

# The power of youth

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Nicola Parkes stumbled into a youth work career by chance and has since dedicated her life to supporting people with refugee experiences from Melbourne to Malawi. While she's already contributed much to young people facing disadvantage, Nicola says she's just getting started.

"I know what it sounds like, but all I did was read a little blurb about studying youth work at ACU, just a few sentences, and that was it. I knew it was for me," said Nicola.

While this year's Young Alumni of the Year award winner readily admits to knowing little about the realities of a youth work career when she began her studies, Nicola's passion for helping people began while she was still in high school.

"I went to a fairly progressive and inclusive school in a low socio-economic area in Brisbane. I was exposed to a lot of disadvantage," she said. "This got me thinking about a career working with people."

After school Nicola moved to Melbourne. It was there she applied to study youth work at ACU.

"It was only once the degree started that I understood how lucky I was to have such a supportive family and

home environment. I felt overwhelmed by my privilege and the power imbalance that existed in society.

"Learning about people seeking asylum and the multitude of people living in refugee camps gave me a strong desire to advocate for systematic change."

After her final exam in the last year of her course, Nicola began work the very next day as a full-time multicultural youth worker.

## THE WORK BEGINS

In her first professional job, Nicola was working with young people who had arrived in Australia by boat after seeking asylum from Afghanistan.

"They were granted humanitarian protection in Australia and many had arrived by themselves as minors. At the time, the government was taking a punitive approach to those seeking asylum through the means of a boat," Nicola explained. "Working with young



people who had to navigate their family reunification options under awfully harsh policies was heart-wrenching.”

After spending a year in the role, Nicola moved home to Brisbane and began working with homeless youth for The Salvation Army.

While Nicola found this type of youth work challenging, she knew a job supporting people with a refugee experience was where she was meant to be. Soon, she was in a new position with Access Community Services and was back to helping newly arrived young people and families navigate life in Australia.

But while she was helping others settle into their new home, Nicola realised she was ready to move on from her own.

### OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE

“I took some time off to backpack in East Africa. In Australia, I had worked with many families from The Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Burundi and Eritrea. I thought maybe I could work with those communities in countries like Kenya or Tanzania and learn to speak Kiswahili.”

But when this plan hit a road block, a new door opened for Nicola in Malawi.

Nicola began working for the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and was placed in Malawi’s Dzaleka Refugee Camp, which is home to almost 35,000 people, mostly from The Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Ethiopia and Rwanda.

“It was incredibly rough conditions for people living in the camp and in

the surrounding villages. Sometimes electricity would just shut off across the entire country and families had limited access to food and decent shelter,” Nicola said.

“I lived in a village outside of the camp and I hitchhiked to work each day. I had intermittent electricity and no running water, but food was the hardest thing to get used to. My only option was to cook outside with coal. It took me a while to adjust but at least I know now how to light a fire, thanks to my Malawian housemate.”

In the camp, Nicola met with the different community-based organisations to discover what sort of projects they’d like to work on.

“Our organisation provided funding and I helped oversee the implementation of those projects. I also arranged training sessions on topics like proposal writing, micro loans, and networking.”

### AN UNLIKELY LESSON

When Nicola’s position came to an end and she flew home to Melbourne, she was surprised to see how much her own perspective had shifted after her time in Malawi.

“When I first got back, I needed temporary support from Centrelink. During an appointment in their office, I was shocked to see the staff member had her own printer. I couldn’t believe it! I had needed a printer so badly to do my job in Malawi, but with limited resources and country-wide electricity problems, I had to beg and bribe to

get anything copied. And there she was, just printing away so I could sign documents immediately on the spot!”

For Nicola, the sight of this printer proved to be a gamechanger.

“This experience really opened my eyes to the perspective of people who’ve come to Australia from refugee camps. All of these complex systems we have here, such as job network providers like Centrelink, and our easy access to things like hot water, electricity and printers are simple pleasures that new families only dreamt of when they were living in refugee camps.”

### NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Since she returned home, Nicola has begun working for Stonington City Council’s Community Hub in Melbourne, implementing child development programs. She has also made time to begin volunteering as a project manager for the THREE For All Foundation, which partners with grassroots community-based organisations all over the world.

“I’m in a working group made up of ACU lecturers and undergraduates who are studying international development or youth work. We run fundraising activities for projects in Malawi, Uganda and Kenya. I assist with the communication between organisations in those countries and THREE For All.”

### LEARNING TO LISTEN

With six years of experience now under her belt and a masters degree in the works, Nicola has learnt it’s not all about what she has to say.

“Listening has been my biggest lesson, especially in an international context. If locals give you advice, take it. If they disagree with something, be curious and take it on board.

“Because of my experiences in Malawi, I’m now better equipped to work with families who are new to Australia. I understand that it may take them time to feel comfortable here, but I promised myself I’d meet people where they are at. It’s not about me telling them what to do and how to do it.”

*Nicola Parkes won the Young Alumni of the Year Award in ACU’s Alumni Awards 2019. She completed a Bachelor of Youth Work at ACU.*