

Each day, senior lawyer for not-for-profit legal service Peninsula Community Legal Centre Sousan Gholami assists individuals in Melbourne's South-East with free legal advice. It's a service she wishes her family had access to as refugees in Iran, when a tragic accident changed the course of their lives forever. Gazette journalist **ELEANOR WILSON** caught up with the community lawyer during National Refugee Week, to hear about the importance of justice and her triumphs in "the land of opportunity".

Sousan fighting for justice

When Sousan Gholami immigrated to Australia as a teenager in 2003, the English language resembled more of a series of pictures than a coherent arrangement of the alphabet.

"I still recall sitting in the classroom and the teacher was writing on the board, I was copying the teacher's words as if they were a drawing, because Persian writing is very different," she said.

The senior lawyer was born the second of four children in Afghanistan, before her family escaped war in the country to neighbouring Iran when she was just a few months old.

While it was a fresh start, life in Iran was "very difficult" for the family of six, with strict limitations on education, employment and health care for refugees and immigrants.

"Especially being an illegal Afghan refugee, you were never gonna have any rights," she recalled.

Her parents were required to cough up large amounts of cash to afford their children a primary school education and the concept of owning a home, car or even a motorbike was inconceivable for refugees.

"There was a lot of racism... they couldn't really tell I was Afghan but because we didn't have the ID card and that sort of thing that was very obvious to them," Sousan said.

But things became pointedly difficult when Sousan was seven years old.

Her father, who worked in construction, was involved in a workplace accident in which a wall collapsed on a group of workers, leaving them with life-changing injuries.

"He was trapped under the wall for four hours before he could get medical assistance, so as a result he became quadriplegic, he couldn't even walk."

For two years thereafter, Sousan recalls her mother transporting her wheelchair-bound father to and from the hospital for treatment for his ailments.

"When you go to hospital in Iran, the first thing they want is money before they can actually look after you or to know why you're in the hospital.

"It got to the stage where my mum sold whatever valuables we had at the house to give him that medical attention, to the extent where we had none."

With her dad, the main bread winner of the family, unable to work and a lack of social welfare options, most of the time they would be sent home from the hospital.

Each time they returned home, her father's infections would worsen.

When Sousan was eight, he passed away as a result of the complications.

"He passed away because of that situation, where our voice was not heard in the justice system and also the medical system itself, because we couldn't even afford the medical attention that he needed.

"If we were in Australia, if my father were alive, we'd at least have access to the hospital and that sort of thing."

While she admits losing her father at a young age was incredibly difficult, it became a significant driving factor in her life from that point forward.

She credits her mum as the family's 'hero' in the aftermath of her father's death.

"I remember she used to go back and forth to the UN, until eventually we got approved to come to Australia.

"It was like a dream come true."

Immigrating to Tasmania in 2003, Sousan was thrust straight into a Tasmanian high school, as a Year 8 student, without a word of English to ease the culture shock.

"I remember asking my friend 'can you please teach me two or three words a day,'" she laughed.

Throughout her high school years, her English improving each day, Sousan remained feverishly determined to succeed in her new life.



Sousan became the first former Afghan refugee to become a practising lawyer in Tasmania.

Picture: ELEANOR WILSON

“It was a horrible situation and all of it could have been prevented if we had access to justice, access to medical [care].”

"In Australia, when I came here, I saw that anything could be possible - I was learning English, I never in my dreams thought I could be able to speak English.

"Everything was available to us - it was a land of opportunity where if I wanted to achieve something and I tried hard, I could achieve it."

It was there, in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class in Year 10, that she decided she would work towards her biggest goal, becoming a lawyer.

"[My teacher] asked us what we wanted to be when we went to university, and I said I wanted to be a lawyer and she just looked at me and said, 'no I don't think you should consider that, because even Australians find it hard to study law.'"

"She said that, but it didn't mean anything for me, because knowing what I came from... I knew I could do it."

"If I was in Iran I would never dream of becoming a lawyer, it would probably always be my wish, but it would never come true."

In her final year of her law degree, she fell pregnant, giving birth to a son while juggling her studies.

But again, she drew on the strength of her personal experience to help her through.

"I remembered my mum [at the time], who was really young, as a widow with four young kids.

"It was a horrible situation and all of it could have been prevented if we had access to justice, access to medical [care]."

"That really motivated me to become a lawyer."

In 2015, Sousan became the first former Afghan refugee to be admitted to the Supreme Court of Tasmania.

She spent the next six years working in private law firms, practising in everything from family law, to criminal law and migration law.

In 2021 she moved to Melbourne and took up a job as a senior lawyer with the Peninsula Community Legal Centre - a not-for-profit legal service assisting individuals in Melbourne's South East.

"My main motive to be a lawyer was always to assist the vulnerable individuals in the community, to ensure they have access to justice and their voices are heard.

"At Peninsula Community Legal Centre we assist a lot of clients where, if it wasn't because of our free service, they would not understand the court process, they would not understand about their rights.

"So it's such a privilege that you know de-

spite my differences I'm still assisting people who otherwise wouldn't have access to justice."

About 40 per cent of Sousan's clients come from Persian and Afghan backgrounds, making her language and cultural skills an asset.

"The legal proceedings and legal wording, it's not an easy process so it's always an advantage to speak to a lawyer who knows their language who is able to explain the process to them in their own native language," she said.

Amid National Refugee Week, Sousan hopes her story of triumph can be a beacon of hope for fellow refugees.

"I want to inspire them and I want to make sure they know that whatever they put their mind to, they can achieve it.

"Australia gives you that opportunity, so we may as well use those opportunities and give back to the country that made our dream come true."

Peninsula Community Legal Centre offers free legal advice to people who live, work or study in the municipalities of Frankston, Casey, Cardinia, Glen Eira, Kingston and Mornington Peninsula.

The service also provides free migration services on the first Friday of every month at its Cranbourne office, for individuals seeking advice on partner visas and legal support for family violence instances.