



## Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning program

Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning,  
Melbourne, Victoria

*This project also relates to:*

-  Families
-  Youth
-  Women

The Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) program provides a variety of free services to Melbourne and Sydney's Sudanese community. The program runs English as a Second Language classes for children, teenagers and adults every Saturday morning. Extracurricular activities are arranged for school-aged participants held after the Saturday morning classes.

The SAIL program aims to empower its participants through mentoring and a positive whole-family learning environment to build their confidence to engage with Australian society on all levels. The classes and activities are all run by volunteers. Tutoring is provided to around 450 people at seven different campuses in Melbourne and Sydney.

The biggest issue facing students who participate in SAIL activities is low levels of literacy in any language. A large number of Southern Sudanese refugees who come to Australia are single mothers and have entered on a Woman at Risk visa. This means there tends to be a high proportion of female heads of households run by mothers with low literacy levels.

The program caters for children under five years old under the same roof as their parents, so that both women and men with low literacy levels can attend the tutoring sessions. Other English classes do not always accommodate the childcare needs of refugees.

Almost all the young refugees who attend the program have come from very difficult situations. Their schooling has been highly disrupted and, in some cases, they have had no schooling at all. Students often have very limited knowledge of English and may have suffered torture and other traumatic experiences. Young refugees have high educational needs that require special consideration.

Many of the children are placed in classes based on their ages but have never previously attended a school.

When placed at an academic level above their experience, they are unable to make effective use of the learning experience and suffer frustration and humiliation.

Coordinator of SAIL's Robinson campus in Dandenong, Nik Tan, said:

There has been a massive dislocation of identity and culture because of the time spent in refugee camps and there's nothing to do except hope that something will come along. Many of our families have spent four, five, six years in camps in Uganda and Kenya, or in Egypt with little formal education or any idea about what happens in a classroom.

### Identifying a need

The SAIL program began in 2000 when its founder, Matthew Albert, and a friend, Anna-Grace Hopkins, saw an advertisement at Melbourne University for volunteers to help a Sudanese single mum and her family of seven children learn English. The family lived in Footscray in Melbourne's western suburbs where a high number of Sudanese families have settled.

Their weekly visits to the family quickly started to include extended family and friends and by early 2001 there were around 20 students.

From this grassroots level community consultation and feedback, it was evident that there was a need to expand the program. More volunteer tutors were found and by mid 2001 the program had funding, 50 students, 20 volunteer tutors and was given the SAIL program name.

### The program

The program has expanded over the years to include English tutoring for adults, extracurricular activities, a bursary program and a student newspaper, which is written by and for the SAIL students. Each mini-program has its own resources and volunteer staff. SAIL is run in community centres and church halls which are provided free of charge.

SAIL provides a free pick-up and drop-off service to all students and free lunches to all participants. These services have helped ensure participants are able to attend on a regular basis and have enabled them to socialise and make friends.

All volunteers in the program undergo induction training. They are asked to read segments of the SAIL website to familiarise themselves with the aims and other details of the program and the cultural background and refugee experiences of the students. They are also provided with an information package.

The volunteers then complete a 45-minute induction tour of one of the campuses and take time to observe the students and teachers working together.

Every five weeks the volunteers are invited to attend a tutor talk where English as a Second Language teachers pass on expertise and service providers such as social workers and counsellors from torture and trauma services provide advice. On World Refugee Day parents of the students tell their stories at a special tutor talk.

The assistance the program now provides encompasses:

- **SAIL:** Sudanese children and teenagers are given free tutoring in English as a Second Language on Saturday mornings across seven campuses in Melbourne and Sydney. The venues are in Footscray, Dandenong (two separate locations), Braybrook and Altona in Melbourne, and Glengala and Seven Hills in Sydney.
- **SAIL Senior:** Small groups of adults are provided with English as a Second Language tutoring. The small size of each group encourages students to support one another in their first language. SAIL Senior aims to provide adults with networks to improve their English language skills and enable them to consolidate their children's learning at school.
- **SAIL Junior:** Students under five years old are given the opportunity to learn socialisation skills in an English-speaking environment.
- **SAIL Xtend:** Extracurricular courses are provided for school-aged SAIL participants on Saturday afternoons at the Footscray, Braybrook and Dandenong campuses. Students complete their English class in

the morning and then start a one-hour extracurricular course after a short lunch break. Activities include art and craft, hockey, soccer, circus acrobatics, cooking, drama and Auslan (sign language).

- **Home Help:** Sudanese single mothers are given support with home life and childcare for three hours a week during weekdays. The service provides support and time free from care of their children. The volunteers who are also volunteer tutors must be female and must first undergo a trial period at a SAIL campus.
- **SAIL About:** Free camps and excursions for the Sudanese community to cultural events such as the Australian Ballet, movies and plays.
- **SAIL Bursary:** Financial support is provided to Sudanese high school students to pay for school textbooks.
- **Community talks:** In order to inform and empower them, the parents of the students and other members of the Sudanese community are offered community talks from guest speakers about issues relevant to them, such as health, housing, migration, tracing lost family members and job hunting. Agencies sending guest speakers include Centrelink, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, local councils, legal centres and the police.
- **Tutor talks:** These occur every five weeks for SAIL tutors' professional development.

### Drawing on volunteer expertise

Volunteer tutors in the SAIL Program have sometimes offered up their professional expertise in ways that have proven enormously beneficial to the program's efficiency and effectiveness.

Six program volunteers were enrolled at university in information technology programming courses. Over a 12-month period, they developed the SAIL website and an online administration system that manages all the data about the students and volunteer staff and allows administrative access for all program coordinators.

The website includes a wealth of tutor resources to assist the volunteers, including a fact sheet on Sudanese students developed in consultation with the community, lesson plans and worksheets. The teaching materials on the website were developed by volunteers who are trained English

as a Second Language teachers and who also act as advisors for the volunteer tutors.

A volunteer from the United States translated information about the program into Arabic and this has also been placed on the website.

## Funding

Obtaining funding for the program was initially difficult because the organisation had no track record. Now that the SAIL Program has become widely known and enjoys an excellent reputation, it has been fortunate to have a secure and consistent funding stream from private philanthropic donors (organisations and individuals), and has no difficulty in attracting volunteer tutors.

## Achievements

A key strength of the program has been the grassroots approach of its founders. They saw a need for such an immediate program and rather than conduct endless planning sessions, acted upon the issues immediately.

The most significant achievement of the program has been its continued growth from strength to strength. SAIL founder, Matthew Albert, said:

Through SAIL we feel that we are providing our students with a key to the door of Australian society. We greet them and welcome them and, most importantly, assist them as they come to know about their new country and try to settle in it. We are very mindful that there is a vast array of talent, particularly among the children. We are mentoring a new generation of Australians, not 'just refugees'.

Coordinator, Nik Tan, said one of his biggest achievements over the past year had been to organise two summer camps for Sudanese teenagers. He said:

It's a real a chance for these kids to be 14-year-olds again. In the SAIL context, there is important social networking between campuses which crosses tribal divides, geographic divides and family divides.

SAIL has also secured scholarships for 10 Sudanese students to attend top private schools in Melbourne.

## Challenges

A perpetual challenge has been that of the need to turn people away because of long waiting lists. SAIL has never needed to publicise the program

within the Sudanese community. Everyone has joined by word-of-mouth.

Another difficulty has been locating venues large enough to accommodate all the students and volunteers.

## Key factors in the project's success

The positive learning environment created by all involved has meant that a trusting environment has been nurtured. All the participants, volunteers and students alike, have felt included and have wanted to be involved. Any volunteer-run program faces a potential hurdle in retaining volunteers. However, the SAIL program has managed to avoid a high turnover of volunteers because of the positive and supportive environment that has been created.

Also crucial to the smooth running of all SAIL programs is the free pick-up and drop-off service anywhere in Melbourne and free lunches for all participants.

## Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

SAIL founder, Matthew Albert, describes himself as a 'brutal pragmatist' and suggests that, for anyone to attempt to achieve what his program has done in Melbourne, they should just 'do it'. Matthew and his co-founder, Anna-Grace Hopkins, started the program on a small scale, slowly building the program to what it is today, and learning from their mistakes as they went. He said:

We had no logo and no money to start with but things fell into place.

There was a clear need for greater English as a Second Language support and mentoring for the Southern Sudanese community in Melbourne's western suburbs where the project started, and no real need to conduct a needs analysis.

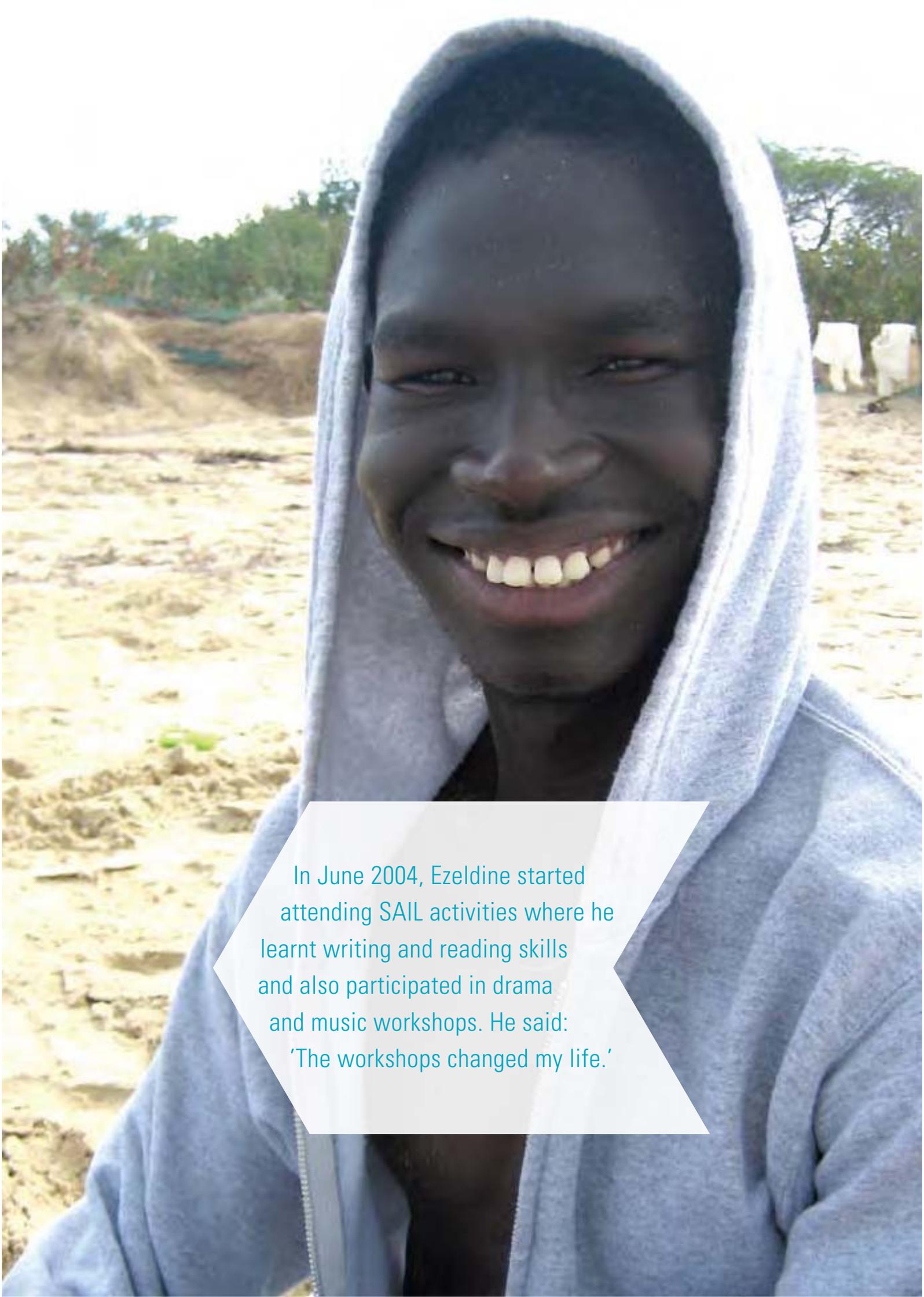
Resolve any practical issues such as transport and childcare first, as these were by far the most crucial to the overall success and sustainability of the program.

## Contact details

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In June 2004, Ezeldine started attending SAIL activities where he learnt writing and reading skills and also participated in drama and music workshops. He said: 'The workshops changed my life.'

## Profile > Ezeldine

**Ezeldine** comes from Southern Sudan. He was 19 when interviewed and had been living in Melbourne for three years.

He and his mother, grandmother and younger brother and sister lived as refugees in Egypt before coming to Australia as part of the Australian Government's offshore humanitarian program.

The only impression he had of Australia was from magazines in Egypt where he saw pictures of houses in Australia. When he arrived he was still surprised at the number of buildings he saw in Melbourne. Ezeldine said:

When I first got here I had nowhere to go. They told me there was a venue nearby where the SAIL activities were held. What I liked was getting together with young Sudanese people and meeting with students who volunteered.

In June 2004, Ezeldine started attending SAIL activities where he learnt writing and reading skills and also participated in drama and music workshops. He said:

The workshops changed my life.

He joked that now he's the most wanted guy in the African community in Melbourne because of the experiences he has had with the drama and music workshops which have given him fantastic skills over the past three years.

The program lets the volunteers get involved with the community and do something meaningful with their lives.

Ezeldine, who works in his spare time at a fast food outlet, was in his final year of high school when interviewed, and felt confident about his final year VCE exams. His favourite subjects were Foundation English and History.

photo < Ezeldine, a SAIL participant