

Rana undertook the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program here at Our Lady of Fatima Parish in 2018 and was baptised in our church at the Easter Vigil mass on 19 April 2019. Rana is an active member of our Parish, regularly attending mass and participating in the readers' roster. He is also a member of our local St Vincent de Paul Conference and is active in many charitable works within the Parish and beyond. He is as an active member of the youth ministry at the Eastern Deanery. Yet most of us, even if we know Rana through these activities, will know little of his life story. On this Migrant and Refugee Sunday it is fitting for us to take a little time to learn something of it.

Rana was born on 25 June 1986 in Bangladesh and grew up in a strongly Islamic family in Dhaka. He attended a strict Islamic school from age 10 years. At school, corporal punishment was common, even for the most minor infringements. Punishment consisted of being hit with sticks and belts and being humiliated by being forced to stand on one leg while holding an ear for long periods. Rana was subjected to all of these.

For the last two years of High School, Rana attended a Catholic senior High School (Notre Dame, Dhaka) as a non-Catholic student, after convincing his parents that it had superior facilities, courses and results. During his two years there, Rana was impressed by the example of the teachers and became interested in Christianity.

Rana completed his school studies in 2004, then undertook an intensive English course. He applied for and was offered entry as an international student to a Diploma in Information Technology at Sydney's Global College, Australia. He arrived in Australia by plane and commenced study in August 2004. Shortly after his arrival, he commenced part-time work with Arrows Electrical Maintenance.

Rana's interest in Christianity continued to grow in Australia and he started Bible study in 2006 developing a network of Christian friends.

Global College was one of the Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) which opened when the government allowed private colleges to compete with TAFEs in the provision of Vocational Education and Training (VET). Unfortunately, in 2008, Global College lost its registration and Rana was forced to suspend his studies and seek fee-recovery through the Government assurance system for VET. The lengthy process in refunding fees, delayed Rana's studies. Eventually he was able to enrol in a less preferred course in Illawarra Business College. By July 2010 however, Rana gained acceptance into a five-year Electrical and Telecommunication Diploma to Degree course through Bankstown TAFE/ University of Western Sydney. However, his parents ultimately withdrew financial support following his conversion to Christianity. He was ostracised by his family and intimidated and threatened by Islamic community members in Australia due to his conversion. Rana did not have enough money to pay the full cost of tuition fees, leading to him having to suspend his studies in 2011. Rana continued to work with Arrows Electrical Maintenance as an Electrical assistant until 2017 and acquired a range of other skills in the building industry. He continued his journey towards Christianity by joining various events with the Disciples of Jesus Catholic community, registering for and attending the week-long Christian Summer School.

In March 2018, Rana was detained by Department of Home Affairs at Villawood due to a visa breach. He applied for protection, given the risk to him of returning to Bangladesh following his conversion from Islam to Christianity. (See Note below*). He was granted a temporary bridging visa following support by community members and sponsorship by Patrick Muller, Patrick's wife, Yvonne and their nine children, who are active members of our OLF Kingsgrove Parish, undertaking variously roles as Church Wardens; Music Ministry; operating the overhead projector and other support.

The temporary bridging visa restricts Rana from working and studying. He is not covered by Medicare; has travel restrictions and is required to report as directed to Immigration. His accommodation and food and basic needs are provided by his sponsor Patrick Muller and Patrick's wife, Yvonne supported by their nine children.

On 25 January 2021, the Department of Home Affairs (Immigration) rejected Rana's application for Protection. Rana appealed this decision and his application has been referred to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. Rana was granted an extension of his bridging visa while the appeal is heard but is still restricted from working, studying or travelling and is required to report to Immigration as directed. He has no idea of when he might receive a decision on his appeal. **Rana is now 36 and has spent half his life here in Australia**, studying and working up until he was stopped from doing so. He has made a wonderful contribution as a valuable member of our society through many charitable works with different organisations. His work for Vinnies has involved him undertaking home visitations, providing meals and other support, a number of times each week. He has also helped the neediest in our community by distributing food and meals to various Vinnies refuges. He is also active in Church ministry and his strong mastery of our language has been demonstrated by his capability as a member of the Church reading roster.

The Government has recently held a Jobs and Skills Summit the outcome of which identified the need among other things to

- increase the permanent Migration Program ceiling to 195,000 in 2022-23 to help ease widespread, critical workforce shortages; and
- Extend visas and relax work restrictions on international students to strengthen the pipeline of skilled labour, and providing additional funding to resolve the visa backlog.

Rana's main work experience and studies was towards gaining an electrician's certificate and this is one of the trades identified where our workforce has critical shortages. A petition is being undertaken to the Minister for Home Affairs to personally consider Rana's visa application and provide him a protection visa with work and study rights to allow him to resume his studies and to work to become an electrician and resume a normal life.

Note*

In Bangladesh, a majority of more than 90% are Muslim and only less than 1% are Christian. Bangladeshi people believe that no Muslim can become Christian, as it is considered to be blasphemy. Anyone who becomes Christian is considered an infidel and a betrayer. In general, most Christians in Bangladesh experience discrimination from authorities and non-Christian leaders but specially from radical Islamic groups and extremists. An Islamic person who converts to Christianity experiences the worst discrimination. They face constant death threats and persecution by family and the radical Islamic extremist group members. Their families, too, can face interrogation from authorities, constant ridicule, sometimes even being sent to psychiatric institutions. Some Christians have been beaten in public as an example for others and there have been several occurrences of Christians being kidnapped and never found again.