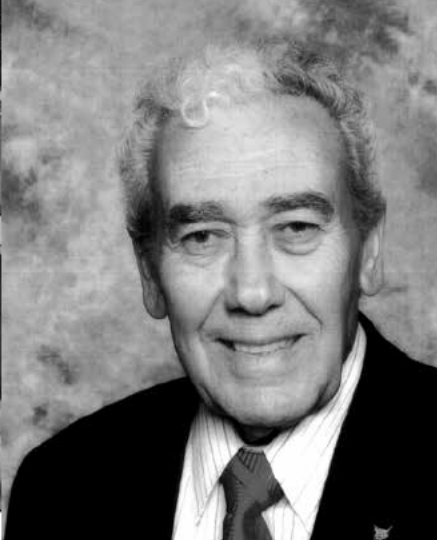




Prominent Victorian Muslims: from l to r: Abdul Khalik Kazi, Ibrahim Dellal, Riad Galil, Sherene Hassan, a young Ibrahim Dellal boarding a plane, Hyder Gulam, Berhan Ahmed, and Waleed Aly.



Ammar Sachak

Profiles of Prominent Victorian Muslims

Abdul Khalik Kazi

After arriving in Victoria in 1961, Abdul Khalik Kazi has witnessed the Muslim community in Australia grow, particularly after the White Australia policy was abolished in 1973.

The Karachi-born professor was the head of the Arabic and Islamic Studies program at the University of Melbourne for more than 30 years.

After growing up in Pakistan and studying theology at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, Dr Kazi remembers the surreal feeling of being in a Muslim minority country for the first time.

‘When I came in 1961, it was “White Australia”, so we were an oddity, you couldn’t see a non-white in the streets of Melbourne except for the odd student’, said Dr Kazi.

Initially there were very few students at Melbourne University opting to study Arabic and Islam. ‘Gradually the program of Arabic and Islamic studies in the University of Melbourne built up and there were more students. Students became aware of the subject and also Australian society became more open because there were a lot of young people who had been to the Middle East or South East Asia.’

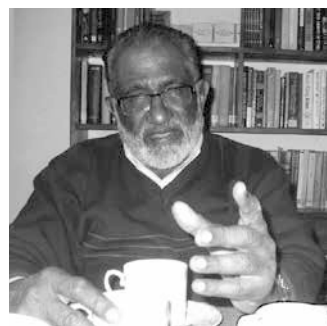
In cooperation between the University of Melbourne, the Myer Foundation, the Spalding Trust of Oxford and the Pakistan government, Dr Kazi was offered a five-year contract to start the Islamic Studies program at the University of Melbourne. Since its humble beginnings, the Islamic studies program has developed into a popular full honours program.

‘There would always be about 15-20 first year students but as Muslims grew in number, the Arabic program became more popular, a lot of students would do Islam or Arabic as a cultural subject for the arts degree’, said Dr Kazi.

In addition to his significant contribution as an academic, Dr Kazi also became an important community leader, almost by accident.

‘I came to know of the Muslim community in Melbourne within two months of my arrival, when a telephone call came’, he said.

‘At that time a Muslim academic coming to Australia was big news so it was published in the *Herald*. Anyway, an old Muslim passed away and there wasn’t anyone to wash his body or perform the funeral on him so someone thought I could help. So I



attended the funeral. I was asked to wash the body. I said "I've never seen a dead body, I'll faint!" So somebody else did ritual washing.'

It was at the funeral where Dr Kazi met a nucleus of Muslims who were born in Melbourne or grew up here. Dr Kazi was introduced to the Lebanese Muslims and they and others would congregate for Eid for prayers at the Cyprus club in Carlton.

Dr Kazi re-started the Sunday school at Metro in Russell Street, which took place every Sunday morning. 'There was a ballet class going in the next room and they'll be playing ballet music and we'll be reciting Alhamdulillah!' said Dr Kazi.

Dr Kazi became the president of the Islamic Society of Victoria and was instrumental in purchasing a mosque in Drummond St, Carlton. Dr Kazi also became the imam of the mosque. After finding the mosque too small, the ISV purchased a larger property in Preston. After the mosque was built with a minaret, it came to be known as the Preston Mosque or Umar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque.

In 1962 contact took place with Muslims of Adelaide and the ISV decided that there needed to be a body that spoke for all Muslims in Australia. Dr Kazi was instrumental in establishing The Australian Federation of Islamic Societies in 1964 and was the chairman for the first ten years.

Dr Kazi took an early retirement in 1992. After a seven-year stint at the International Islamic University in Malaysia and four-year stay at the University of Islamabad, Dr Kazi returned to Melbourne where he now lives with his wife, son, two sisters and grandchildren.

Dr Kazi says he only has pleasant experiences from his time in Australia. But it could have panned out differently. When Dr Kazi came to Melbourne for an academic role, he was given a five-year contract and intended to return to Pakistan. The head of Dr Kazi's department (Middle Eastern Studies), Professor John Bowman was insistent that Dr Kazi should buy a house.

'I said I can't buy a house, I can't even buy a bicycle!'

'He said that's no problem. He was keen that I should stay in Australia and not go back so he wanted to tie me down.'

Dr Kazi and Professor Bowman went to a bank, where they eventually agreed to give a 95 per cent loan, but only after asking the university vice-chancellor for a five per cent deposit. With the loan secured, Dr Kazi bought a house in Caulfield.

'After five years, I thought it was time to go back', said Dr Kazi.

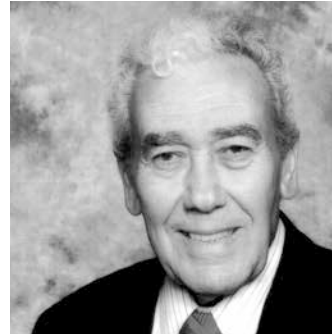
'I called an estate agent. It so happened the market was down as it is today, I was getting 10 per cent less. I couldn't even pay the bank and the University because I had a 100 per cent loan. What a fate! Ultimately it was the will of Allah that I stay on in Australia to serve the growing and divergent Muslim community, help them to keep their faith, learn more about Islam and live in harmony with the wider Australian community'.

Ibrahim Dellal

For more than 50 years, Ibrahim Dellal has worked tirelessly to help the Turkish and wider Muslim community in Australia.

Cyprus-born Mr Dellal came to Melbourne in 1950 as an 18 year-old after his brothers Ahmet Mustafa Dellal and Hasan Hussein Dellal migrated to Australia in 1948.

Mr Dellal was employed by the Postmaster-General at the automotive engineering plant that later became Telecom Australia.



Until his retirement in 1991, Mr Dellal continued to volunteer his time towards helping one of Australia's most vibrant Muslim communities.

He recalls greeting the first wave of Turkish migrants to Melbourne in 1968. Soon after Mr Dellal set about helping the Turkish community integrate into Australia.

In 1969 he started a housing project that helped one family per month to buy their own house and settle once an initial \$2,000 deposit was made. The houses were to be paid back in 10 years.

Later the project gained approval of the state and became a corporative housing society.

Mr Dellal says the project was a huge success. They settled at least one family per month.

'They were working, settling and contributing to the economy of Australia,' he said.

'It's very important that migrants support and enrich the country. We're part of this country, and therefore we have to do our part.'

The Turkish community would also collect old furniture, recondition it and donate it to new homeowners. Within a few months, the homeowners would be ready to buy new furniture and the existing furniture would be given to another household. Mr Dellal said many members of the community would offer their skills such as painting or paving to help families furnish their new homes.

During this time, Mr Dellal started an English language class program, run by Turkish Muslim volunteers. The first intake had about 30 people and within three months, they were able to speak English.

'We called the television and the newspapers and told them to ask all the questions they wanted. We had to prove to the State Education Department that this could be done!'

Mr Dellal also noticed there was little communication between Turkey and Australia, so he started a newspaper called *Turk Sesi* in 1970.

‘Our own community and others contributed to the newspaper by advertising with us’, he said.

‘We covered local news and also had people who used to write their opinions and ideas. This kept people going because they need to have something to read.’

As the Turkish community grew, so too did the newspaper. The newspaper is still running, albeit under the new name, *Zaman*, after Mr Dellal donated it to the Selimiye Foundation in 1996.

By helping to establish extensive support services and networks, Mr Dellal has seen the Turkish community continue to prosper.

‘When you look back, it’s about 40 years. And the community is doing quite well. The young ones who are born here are providing many services to the whole community and contributing to the total economy.’

Mr Dellal is also involved heavily with the wider Muslim community. He and Abdul Khalik Kazi helped set up the Australian Federation of Islamic Societies in 1962, which later became the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils. He also helped establish the Islamic Society of Victoria. Dr Kazi and Mr Dellal became the inaugural president and vice-president of the Islamic Society of Victoria and the Australian Federation of Islamic Societies respectively. After two years they swapped roles. Mr Dellal also volunteered his time as the founding chairman of Australia’s first halal certification system, which was established in 1976.

After his retirement, Mr Dellal began his contribution to the education sector. In 1997, he opened his first school, Isik College in Eastmeadows. The school building was heavily damaged and had been unoccupied for months. Mr Dellal remembers being told that the building would take three months to prepare. With the help of about 25 members of the Turkish community the school was fully refurbished in just one weekend!

Isik College now has campuses in Shepparton, Meadow Fair, Keysborough and Sunshine. Mr Dellal beams when he discusses the progress of Isik College.

‘We started with 28 students in 1997; just two teachers, 28 students and a principal. Today, we have four primary and five secondary schools in Victoria, over 300 employees and 2000 students. It’s great for the community.’

Mr Dellal was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977 for his contributions to Australian society and the Order of Australia in 2007. More than 60 years after his arrival, his passion for helping his community remains as strong as ever.

‘It’s important that people think positively. Unless there is action, there is no prosperity and there is no health. You have to have that sincerity and intention and make it happen and you are doing it for the pleasure of Allah. Not for self-interest and selfishness.’

The overwhelming motivation for his years of voluntary service, principally to the Turkish community, derive from deep, abiding love of humanity, a devotion to the Islamic faith and the belief that happiness comes from service.

Riad Galil

As one of Victoria's founding imams, Riad Galil has established himself as a respected leader in the Islamic and wider community.

Mr Galil played a key role in the establishment of the Preston Mosque in 1970, contributed to the establishment of the West Heidelberg Mosque built in 1985, and continues to generously donate his time to interfaith projects.

Mr Galil migrated to Australia from his native Egypt in 1969, at a time when many youths were finding somewhere else to live after the fallout of the Six Day War between Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Israel.

He arrived in Sydney first and, despite a limited command of English, found a job in teaching maths and sciences using the Bachelor of Science degree he completed in Egypt. During his first year, Victoria started advertising for teachers, offering very generous terms. Mr Galil moved to Melbourne and completed a postgraduate Diploma in Education at the University of Melbourne.

Mr Galil recalls the early 1970s as a time when there was a huge influx of Muslims coming to reside in Australia. During this time, Melbourne had one mosque (in Drummond Street Carlton) with another one soon to be established in Preston. Mr Galil and his wife acted as librarians at the Preston mosque and volunteered their time to teaching the Sunday school.

In 1976, Mr Galil and his family moved from Bundoora to Vermont South and he was approached by the Islamic Society of Melbourne Eastern Region to conduct the Sunday school in the Glen Waverley area. Mr Galil also went on to lead the prayers.

In the late 1980s, the Egyptian Muslim community was looking to buy their own mosque. The building they wanted was a former church that would eventually become the West Heidelberg mosque.

'When we applied for the permit from the council, the council had to advertise that a Muslim group was going to be there', says Mr Galil.

'We had so many objections from residents around the place. The brothers of the old church were the ones who picked up the flag and batted on our behalf until the council agreed. It was a Presbyterian church and the elders there took up our cause and managed to convince the council that they would prefer to have the place left as a place of worship rather than something else.'

Mr Galil became the founding ixmam (leader of the congregation) and has been ever since, leading the prayers and giving the Friday sermon.

'The membership that started the whole thing going would have been about 40', he said.



‘Nowadays we get between 400-600 in the juma’a prayers and over 1500 in Eid. In the night prayer that we had in Ramadan again we had very decent numbers. We had to use the hall, what is used for the social club as an extension for the mosque itself.’

The Egyptian Muslim community forms the core of the congregation, but Mr Galil says many other nationalities, including African Muslims, come to pray.

Being the imam for more than 20 years gives Mr Galil an enormous sense of pride

‘I enjoy it. Giving the Friday sermon as well as leading the prayer is obviously a gift from almighty God. Besides the fact you develop relationships with members of the congregations, which is very rewarding. Whenever I’m called into help, I’ll try my best. Usually the members gather there on Fridays after the prayers and they share a meal, except for Ramadan period. And on some weekends the members get together for social interactions.’

Mr Galil retired from teaching in the early 1990’s, but still continues his many voluntary commitments. He is a chaplain at RMIT and Deakin Universities, a member of Knox Interfaith Network, serves on the Knox City Advisory Committee on Multiculturalism and is currently the President of JCMA (Jewish, Christian, Muslim Association of Australia).

Mr Galil’s tireless work and passion to integrating Muslims within the community has not gone unnoticed beyond the local community. His efforts were formally recognised when he received an Order of Australia from the Governor-General in 2010.

‘The ceremony was beautiful’, he said.

‘The governor said something to the effect – “we need more of you”. I’m very grateful to so many people who held so many functions in my honour. I don’t deserve this recognition. However, as it comes, it gives the feeling that any of us can distinguish him or herself in this place and Australia is a fair dinkum society to a great extent’.

Sherene Hassan

The Islamic Council of Victoria and its members have been under the media spotlight a lot in recent years. None more so than Sherene Hassan, an Executive Committee member and one of two media spokespeople for the ICV.

Mrs Hassan admits the greatest challenge is having to be accountable for any Muslims in Australia or even other parts of the world whenever they do anything wrong.

‘Sometimes I just lay in bed in the morning and hear the news headlines and think I really don’t want to have to get out of bed’, she said.

‘The frustrating aspect of dealing with the media is so much of it is negative, so



much is reactive, which takes me away from my real role which is to try to empower Muslim women and help Muslims be integrated into the wider community’.

Now serving her third term as a board member, Mrs Hassan joined the ICV after September 11 because she felt a need to get involved with the Muslim community and reach out to the wider public. Mrs Hassan is grateful for the support she has received from the Muslim and non-Muslim community, which she says makes dealing with the media much easier. Throughout her time with the ICV, Mrs Hassan has found that the general public is starting to understand Islam a ‘little bit more’.

‘People are starting to discern between extremists and mainstream Muslims. Now when journalists report on Muslim issues they are getting Muslim spokespeople’.

The Perth-born former school teacher says she tries to uphold her values when dealing with the media, whether in a crisis or dealing with good news stories.

‘As a Muslim leader, I’ve tried to be principled in all my dealings’, she said.

‘I believe in the beauty of Islam and I just want to portray that to the wider community. In dealing with the media I’ve tried to be consistent. I’m passionate about asserting the rights of Muslims. I’m also passionate about Indigenous people and about the rights of non-Muslims in Muslim minority countries so I just try to hold by that principle regardless of race and religion’.

As one of two media spokespeople and one of three female board members of the ICV, Mrs Hassan says by completing her third term, she is now seen as an elder. She is also quick to dismiss the myth about her not having the same rights as her fellow male members.

In addition to her media commitments, Mrs Hassan conducts cross-cultural training almost everyday. She has also completed more than 700 talks on Islam to diverse audiences ranging from school students, community organisations, and corporate organisations.

From her vast experience, she says the common trait of her audiences is the lack of understanding of Islam, an alarming fact considering it has dominated the public discourse for so long.

According to Mrs Hassan, the public’s general lack of understanding towards Islam has not changed compared to when she was growing up in the ‘Anglo suburb’ Thornlie in Perth.

Being the only Muslim student in her primary school, she didn’t tell anyone her parents were Muslim until she reached year nine. Mrs Hassan says her secondary school years were the toughest, especially with so many year 11 and 12 functions centring around alcohol.

However, a freak accident at an Islamic youth camp in New South Wales that Mrs Hassan attended while at university led to her finding her ‘love for her faith’.

Mrs Hassan and her friend were swimming at the beach when the water became

very choppy and they were caught in a rip.

‘And I don’t know how long I was treading water for’, she said.

‘It just seemed like an eternity. There were some younger boys and they were swimming out to save us. I remember getting on the shoulders of one of them and he kept saying “get off me” because he was struggling to carry me. So they went to get help. I got to the point where I said “I can’t do this anymore”. I just let my body limp. By some miracle I just got washed onto shore.’

After the life changing experience, Mrs Hassan says being a Muslim became a lot more than just following rules and regulations.

‘Prior to that I was a Muslim because I was just following the examples of my parents’, she said.

‘I didn’t really pray because I wanted to, I felt it was just a sense of duty. Afterwards, I read the Qur’an from cover to cover. I became a much more loving, respectful daughter. I started to pray because I wanted to pray. And then three years later, I put my headscarf on. I was proud of my faith and I loved my faith’.

Berhan Ahmed

Berhan Ahmed is one of Australia’s most visible and influential African leaders. The Melbourne University Senior Research Fellow donates his time helping the African community, in particular mentoring young newly arrived refugees.

Dr Ahmed left war-torn Eritrea for Sudan at age 15, leaving his family behind. He went to high school at the United National High Commission for Refugees in Sudan and then went to Egypt to study at the University of Alexandria, before coming to Australia when he was 23 years-old in 1987 under the humanitarian program.

Dr Ahmed admits coming to Australia was the most challenging stage of his life after living in Muslim countries – Sudan and Egypt.

Upon arriving in Australia, Dr Ahmed could speak very little English so he made mastering the English language his first priority. He worked as a tram conductor and then as a taxi driver to learn English and mainstream Australian culture. He later studied his Masters in Animal Science at LaTrobe University and completed his PhD in Agricultural Science at the University of Melbourne.

Another challenge facing Dr Ahmed was adapting to a Western society.

‘In a way, we (Muslims) have a good religion that brings communal spirit’, he said.

‘Coming to a western country, it’s an institutional based society, unlike the



communal society where I came from. But here as a new person, you have to be known by individuals and organisations to prove yourself that you are a good member of society and a good citizen. To rent a flat you need a reference, to find a job you need a reference. To build that network around you is the biggest challenge and this is the biggest challenge facing refugees and migrants in Australia’

Dr Ahmed acknowledges that leaving a comfort zone is a challenge for many people, which is why he is heavily involved in new and emerging communities settling in Australia, in particular, African communities.

‘To be an African leader is the most challenging task and requires a special skill of communication. Africa consists of 54 countries, with each country having many races, tribes and faith groups. To be trusted and respected by everyone is the hardest. During a crisis, I have to say bad is bad but I also have to defend my communities from collective punishment. I should not pretend to stand up for Africans when there is wrong. I have to stand for it and condemn. I built that trust by working with many different communities at their time of need.’

Dr Ahmed uses a community office in Flemington, helping more than 60 young boys and girls. He helps them reach their potential, giving them a reference for employment and education.

Another project Dr Ahmed is proud of is a weekend community centre at the North Melbourne community centre for young people, which opened six years ago.

‘I did it because for most of the young living in high rises and housing commissions, on Saturday night they are empty, they don’t have anything to do so they engage in anti-social behaviour. Instead, here they can play games and sports.’

Dr Ahmed has also enjoyed his role as one of the media spokespeople for the African Muslim community, but says African Muslims can still do more to create goodwill towards the wider community.

‘I have made myself a profile within the media so they come to me to ask some questions. Instead of us just preaching to each other in the mosque, if we go out and make ourselves visible, they will help us. We need to create a visible leadership for the good and bad times.’

Dr Ahmed is also the chairperson of the African Think Tank, which aims to act as a voice for refugee communities in Australia and board member of Adult Multicultural Education Services in Victoria. The African Think Tank also nurtures young African-Australian community leaders.

Dr Ahmed was formally recognised for his outstanding voluntary work as Victorian Australian of the Year in 2009. Dr Ahmed is still extremely passionate about helping the African Muslim community reach their potential in Australia.

By mentoring tomorrow’s leaders, Dr Ahmed believes the current investment will be harvested within the next 5-10 years.

‘As individuals we have potential to do so much. It’s not that we can change the world tomorrow. But if we can change ourselves in doing the right thing, that is the first step.’

Hyder Gulam

As President* of the Islamic Council of Victoria, Hyder Gulam strives to represent the full spectrum of an increasingly diverse Muslim community.

Indeed, this is Mr Gulam’s foremost vision for the Victorian Muslim community’s peak body.

‘We’re one mosque for the whole community, so we represent Salafi, Sufi, Shi’a, Sunni and everyone in between,’ says Mr Gulam.

‘So I say to everybody, I’m a Salafi, Sufi, Sunni and a Shi’a because I have to be. Anybody can come to our mosque and anybody can pray. I don’t care who you are, the mosque is yours and the ICV is your organisation.’

The current make-up of the ICV is what Mr Gulam describes as a microcosm of what is reflected in the broader community.

‘On the ICV board we have Salafis, Sufis, Shi’as and Sunnis and that’s what it should be. We’ve got women, we’ve got a Turk, we’ve got a Sri Lankan, we’ve got a southern Indian, we’ve got Australian-born Muslims and we’ve got someone from Africa.’

Cultural diversity is something Mr Gulam is used to, having grown up in Singapore. ‘Growing up in a multicultural country like Singapore you appreciated other values straight away. So we respected Deepavali, we knew about Buddhist customs and we knew about Christianity. Muslims were the minority in a largely non-Muslim country.’

Mr Gulam and his family came to Melbourne in 1976 when he was seven years-old.

Being part of a wider community was a common thread throughout his school life in Melbourne. Mr Gulam has fond memories of his school days at King Street primary school and then University High School.

‘We had the Vietnamese immigrants come, we had Chilean immigrants come escaping persecution from Pinochet and we had Sri Lankan refugees. So we had a diaspora that was coming from overseas, as well as those who lived in the housing commission flats around North Melbourne and Carlton. Religion was never a factor. Yes, we fasted and people accepted that we prayed. We didn’t eat pork, we fasted during sports days and no one made a fuss about it. Those friends from school remain some of my closest friends to this day.’



* Since this profile was compiled, Ramzi Elsayed has become the President of the ICV.

Following his father's death after performing hajj in 1984, Mr Gulam had to become 'tough and resilient' to support his mother and three younger siblings. Mr Gulam and his siblings worked a series of odd jobs, including working at Victoria Market in the morning and coming back to clean up till late at night.

Mr Gulam says his father always instilled in him the importance of education and contributing to the community.

After finishing school in 1988, Mr Gulam completed an arts degree, specialising in sociology, Japanese and media studies. He then went on to complete a nursing and a law degree, the latter according to his late father's wishes. He has also completed two Masters in Law, as well as an MBA.

After initially joining the military as a nursing officer, Mr Gulam went on to work full time as a lawyer with the Royal Australia Air Force, with postings around Australia and experience overseas. It's the desire to help society that led to Mr Gulam working for the Australian military, as well as part of a family tradition.

'For me it was about contributing back to the community', he said.

'Nursing helped, especially working in outback indigenous communities, but the military helped on a wider perspective and made me feel like I was contributing back to this country. Sometimes when I hear racist attitudes against Australian Muslims, some even targeted at me, when I point out that I served in the military, people say I've done my part. When I say I've served in the air force and I've achieved the rank of squadron leader, they go "ok we can't say anything bad about you".'

However, Mr Gulam has also faced discrimination and animosity from part of the Muslim community who have a very negative attitude towards the Australian military and Australia in general. Many of these people were born in Australia, lived here most of their lives, have been educated here, or have converted to Islam in Australia.

'It is sad to see such negative sentiments, given the freedoms and rights we enjoy in Australia', said Mr Gulam.

'Being part of a democracy and part of civic society means respect for the rights of others, and also being part of the broader community.'

After the Air Force, Mr Gulam worked for the world's biggest law firm in Saudi Arabia, practicing in Shar'a law. He then returned to Melbourne where he continued to work as a corporate lawyer. After three years, he moved onto his dream job as a human rights lawyer. He still does volunteer work and is the co-founder of the Muslim Legal Network and the City Circle (revival) – an organisation that aims to highlight a proud Australian Muslim identity and build relationships with the wider community. Mr Gulam also serves on the Australian Red Cross international humanitarian law sub-committee, the Royal College of Nursing Australia (Vic), and is the Deputy Chair of the International law committee of the Law Institute of Victoria.

His voluntary work makes him immensely proud, but it is discussing his involvement with the ICV and the community when Mr Gulam is most passionate.

‘We do hospital chaplaincy, prison chaplaincy servicing more than 300 Muslim prisoners in jail. We do detainee management so we go out and do lunch for the detainees, we did iftars (meal to break the days fasting), we do a Muslim leadership program – there’s things that we do that people don’t realise’, he said.

‘When you realise the amount of work that we do, you get kind of shocked – how on earth do you do it with the time that you’ve got? It’s all voluntary. That’s another thing that people get a shock with.’

Mr Gulam recalls a recent Ramadan as a classic example of the incredibly hard work done by the ICV.

‘We fed over 10,000 people at the iftars at ICV. We had three people convert to Islam and we had five marriages. We had the first Eid prayers in the city at Flagstaff Gardens where we had a few thousand turn up.’

Mr Gulam believes the desire to help others is a trait that comes with being a Muslim.

‘Islam has always been about the community. It takes it a step further and says I don’t care that you’re not a Muslim, that’s not an issue. I will help you because it’s my obligation to help the poor, the weak, the disadvantaged and the oppressed. That reciprocal assistance to the community helps build everyone up. We can work under any political system, because within our religious system is the way to actually help each other.’

Waleed Aly

Despite being one of Victoria’s most prominent Muslim voices, Waleed Aly started working in the media almost by accident.

Mr Aly regularly appears in broadcast media such as the *ABC Conversation Hour* and Channel 10’s *The Project*. His commentary is also regularly published in major metropolitan and national newspapers and as of January 2012 began hosting a Radio National drive-time program.



Mr Aly was on the ICV board from 2003 and was one of the media spokespeople for the ICV from 2004 until 2007.

The Melbourne-born Engineering and Law graduate says that when he started his law degree, he assumed he was going spend his life being a lawyer (he stopped working as one in 2007).

When he finished university in 2002, one of the jobs Mr Aly considered was the

coveted cadetship at the *Age*. He didn't attend the exam because he got another job, but he found his first byline through a less conventional pathway.

During his last year at university and in the week of the September 11 attacks, Mr Aly's beloved Richmond Football Club was playing in the finals. He went to Richmond's training session along with his sister-in-law and her children. That night, the planes hit the towers.

'On the Saturday, Richmond are playing Carlton in the semi-final, and I open up the paper and Martin Flanagan [a sports journalist with the *Age*] writes an article about how important sport is at a time like this,' said Mr Aly.

'Then he writes this paragraph describing a family that he saw during Richmond's training session and he just described us! I read that and thought "that's me! Martin Flanagan is writing about me.'"

Mr Aly immediately sent Mr Flanagan an email informing him of his interest in journalism.

'I said, "if there's anything you can tell me, that would be great". I didn't hear anything for about a month. Then he called. I was just buzzing and at the end of it he asked if we would like to keep in touch. He became a mentor for my writing. He convinced me that I had something to say. He asked me to send him some stuff so I had written some things up after 9/11 and I sent them to him.'

Mr Aly had his first piece published on November 24, 2002. The piece was on politician Fred Nile's comments on banning Muslim women from wearing loose clothing because they might be covering bombs.

Following his first byline, Mr Aly became determined to never go more than three weeks without having something published in a major metropolitan newspaper.

'I kept that up for four years,' he said.

'It never even got close to three weeks. It was a good exercise because it meant I was always looking for something to write.'

During this time, Mr Aly was one of the media spokespeople for the ICV. He also became involved in broadcast media and was part of the popular television show, *Salam Café*.

Mr Aly is glad to have made the transition from being a spokesperson to working within the media.

'I just think it's an important natural evolution. I don't think about it when I'm doing it but I do often get people come up to me saying "my son gets really excited when you're on air because he draws a lot of comfort from hearing someone on air in that position who has a name that's as funny as his". I appreciate the impact that can have.'

Mr Aly says since his time at the ICV, the media avalanche has 'slowed to a trickle'.

'Go back to the London bombings and the terror raids and the convictions in Melbourne and Sydney. I was doing multiple interviews just about everyday, on every

different network. It was nuts. It was totally out of control. I think that's slowed down. Muslims are not as instant news as they once were. The conversation around Muslims has changed quite a bit. It used to be a about security. Now it's about culture. Can Muslims fit into society?'

From attending his favourite footy team's training session to being chosen to host the ABC Radio National drive program, Mr Aly has taken an unusual route to working in the media.

'For a long time a lot of people have been complaining that the mediascape is very homogenous and doesn't really reflect the breadth of Australia. Well if that's the case, you have to take up opportunities to get involved. So I'm happy to do that and I enjoy it.'

Mr Aly has made a fantastic contribution to helping Muslims find a voice in the public sphere and hopefully many more are to follow.