

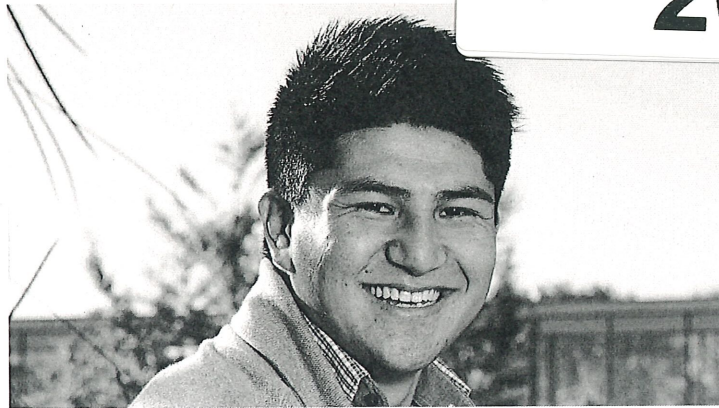
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NEW ZEALAND

Tampa refugee thriving in new life

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Former refugee Abbas Nazari plans to join an international aid agency after graduating.

A refugee from Afghanistan who arrived in the country without being able to speak a word of English came third in a spelling bee just five years after arriving and is now studying political science and history so he can make a difference.

Abbas Nazari was only 7 when he was among 430 people rescued by the Norwegian freighter Tampa from a sinking fishing vessel off Australia in August 2001. New Zealand accepted 131 of those refugees, including Mr Nazari, his parents and siblings.

Mr Nazari said he did not understand the gravity of the situation at the time. "Because I was young and everything seemed like a really big adventure, but looking back on it now there was a huge, huge learning curve. Not just for me but for my parents because they were used to a certain way of living and their world was turned upside down, in a good way, but that took a lot of time and a lot of adjusting to get used to."

It took the now 19-year-old just two years to become fluent in English while attending Riccarton Primary School in Christchurch, which he put down to hard work, staying home watching TV and reading books.

"As a kid you pick things up quite easily and I picked up English quite easily. I don't look at learning English as a huge achievement. I only came here when I was 7 so it became natural to me but it's harder for people who come here at an older age."

As a 12-year-old he entered a national spelling bee and placed third. Now, he is in his third year of a political and history degree at the University of Canterbury with the goal of joining an international aid agency.

Mr Nazari is one of dozens of refugees who have excelled. His sister has completed a medical degree and he is aware of another 24 refugees of his age also rescued by the Tampa who are completing or have completed degrees. There are another 24 who are employed in trades to rebuild Christchurch.

The majority of the Tampa refugees were eventually re-settled in Christchurch at the beginning of 2002 after spending three months at the Mangere Refugee Processing Centre and Mr Nazari said it was a tight-knit community.

He returned to Afghanistan for the first time in 2012 and said it was a real eye-opener.

He is giving a public lecture at the University of Canterbury on 23 July based on his experiences.

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