

# Bears of hope

*After 30 years, Tambo Teddies are going stronger than ever, partly because of a Queensland refugee community.*

STORY KIRSTY MCKENZIE

There's a low-level clatter in the background at the Tambo Teddies Toowoomba workshop and showroom as 4 people have their pedals to the metal sewing together the 19 components that go into each Toby and Basil bear, the Queensland brand's bestselling soft toys.

For Khalil Rash, this kind of work is second nature because he worked as a tailor in his home country of Syria before the horrors of religious persecution forced him and his family to flee to Australia as refugees in 2017. Today Khalil is working on the prototype for the new limited-edition, jointed Banjo bear that's being created to commemorate Tambo Teddies' 30th anniversary.

The teddies' story began in the central-western Queensland town of Tambo in 1992, when the wool industry was suffering from prolonged drought, a market crash and a massive unsold wool stockpile. A government-sponsored workshop came to town to help residents brainstorm new industry ideas for the ailing community. Three local women – Helen Sargood, Charm Rylie, and Mary Sutherland – came up with the idea of making teddy bears from sheepskin and selling them to the emerging tourist market from a shop on the main street.

Little did those original partners imagine that 30 years down the track, their teddies handcrafted from Australian and New Zealand sheepskin have put the tiny town on the map as a caravan of grey nomads and outback travellers takes its winter waltz up the Matilda Highway, stopping to buy a special memento for their loved ones. In the ensuing years, more than 68,000 numbered teddies and countless more flat teddies known as Bickies, possums, koalas, echidnas, Tambo Lambos and dogs called Digger have made their way into the arms of children all over Australia and overseas, including the royal households of Great Britain and Denmark.

The present owners, former Kiwi farmhand-turned-wool-classer Alison Shaw and schoolteacher Tammy Johnson, took over the business in 2014, increased the range and introduced it to arctophiles (teddy collectors) all over the world via the World Wide Web. "Some days you can't swing a cat in here during the tourist season," Alison says of the people who stop by their little weatherboard shopfront that's signposted at the entrance to Tambo by a 'Teddies Crossing' street sign. "Easily 100 people come in a day during the busy months. We tried to increase

production to meet the demand by hiring local sewers, but that wasn't sustainable, so we came up with the idea of developing a regional sewing hub in Toowoomba, where the potential workforce is much larger."

In a stroke of serendipity, Alison and Tammy connected with the Toowoomba office of Multicultural Australia (MA), a not-for-profit organisation that was established in 1988 to provide work and study opportunities for refugees, asylum seekers and international students in Queensland. MA helps new arrivals ease into society through language and employment skills courses and sports, provides cultural awareness training for prospective employers and curates a raft of social events to promote multiculturalism. It operates employment hubs in Brisbane, Townsville, Toowoomba and Rockhampton as well as smaller bases in towns including Biloela, Gladstone and Dalby, and has placed new arrivals in workplaces as diverse as a mango farm in Bowen, orchards in the Granite Belt and abattoirs in Rockhampton and Charleville.

Through its many arms, MA supports more than 5000 newly arrived Queenslanders each year, including the growing number of Yazidi (Ezedi) people who have arrived in Australia since 2017 seeking safety from persecution and the genocide of the ongoing civil unrest in the Middle East. Yazidi people have formed communities in Coffs Harbour, Armidale and Wagga Wagga in NSW, Mount Gambier in SA, and Toowoomba in south-east Queensland. The 2021 census revealed Toowoomba is now home to the largest group of Yazidi people in Australia and their traditional language, Kurdish Kurmanji, is the second most spoken in Toowoomba, after English. Since Tambo Teddies opened its workshop and outlet in Toowoomba, Khalil and 3 other Yazidis, Dilo Maho, Tbrah Ghebremedhin and Noora Alomar, have gained employment with the business, simultaneously allowing it to expand and giving the refugees the chance of a much better future.

"We can't thank the Australian government and people enough for the support they have given us," Khalil says, during a break from sewing and cutting at Tambo Teddies' Toowoomba home. "We are grateful to everyone who has been so kind to us and given us a new start." Khalil and his extended family, his wife Evleen, son Jan, parents Saeed and Hamida, sister Aisha, brother Waheed, his wife Rojin and



LOCKWISE FROM TOP: Millie and Dylan Johnson love their Tambo Teddies; the Toowoomba family of Yazidi sewer Khalil Rash (from left): sister Wabeed holding son Mira, Rojin with daughter Janet, and parents Hamida and Saeed; 'Abo Jan' on Khalil's shirt means 'father of Jan' in Syria.

their children Saeed, Janet and Mira were thrilled to receive Australian citizenship in this year's Australia Day ceremony.


'Welcome to the Rash house' declares the sign on the front door at the home they're equally delighted to have bought in Toowoomba's south. Rojin acts as their spokesperson, her excellent English is a testament to the high standard of the education she was forced to abandon at the age of 14, when the family had to flee Aleppo and return to their hometown of Afrin during the war. Rojin, Waheed and Saeed, who was 18 months old at the time, arrived with Khalil and Evleen in 2017 after a harrowing 3 years, the last of which was spent in Iraq. Their parents and Aisha came in 2022 and the family is hopeful Rojin's parents will also be able to join them before too long. They all hold their breath for brother Jwan, who has been missing since the Turkish army attacked in 2018. He would now be 20 if he has managed to survive.

Rojin, who now works as a cultural support worker for MA, tells the harrowing story of her family's escape from Syria. Their first attempt was unsuccessful when they were caught and jailed in Turkey, then released and sent back home. "We tried again with a different smuggler," she says. "We were about 20 families in total and we had to walk overnight through the mountains in the freezing cold. Saeed was only 6 months old, and I was terrified he would freeze to death, so we covered him with our jackets. We

had to sedate him, so he didn't cry, but finally we made it to Iraq, where we were met by Khalil, who had gone ahead of us." Rojin, Evleen and Saeed spent the next year pretty much hiding behind closed doors, while the menfolk worked for a petrol company, and they waited for the United Nations to process their refugee applications.

"We were so happy when our papers were finally granted and we were able to fly to Australia," she says, as everyone in the room fights back tears at the memories. "Toowoomba is heaven for us. We love the fresh air, the park down the road, the jobs we have, the fact that our children can go to school without fear and how kind and welcoming everyone has been. We have met so many good people here and we couldn't be more grateful."

Tambo Teddies Toowoomba hub supervisor Bonnie Hood explains that since the arrival of the Yazidi sewers they have been able to ramp up production and keep administration assistant Paula Hearn busy tracking orders and dispatching up to 250 units a week.

The teddies are named after properties in the Tambo district. Eager collectors aim to build a full collection and supplement it with limited editions, including the recently released Banjo and the new Stewart teddy, which is modelled on an heirloom bear from New Zealand. "We have collectors with hundreds of teddies and others who buy one for every addition to the family," Alison says. 



*Tambo Teddies owners Tammy Johnson and Alison Shaw in the Tambo shopfront.*