

SCHOLARSHIPS

A PASSION FOR TEACHING

A family's generosity has supported one graduate's vision for a more positive classroom experience.

THEY were born decades apart, but Olive Battersby and Merjam Musić have a lot in common. For one thing, these two women have known firsthand the transformative power of education.

Merjam, who recently finished a Master of Teaching and received the Olive Battersby scholarship in 2018, originally came to Australia as a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite the fact that many of her fellow high-school students faced severe disadvantage, she says the school did not have adequate support in place for their wellbeing, although she notes that this has since changed.

"Because of my own experiences, my aim is to help schools focus more on the wellbeing of students who come as refugees or migrants, and those who are really disadvantaged in other ways," Merjam says.

Merjam enrolled in the Master of Teaching to pursue those goals and was shocked but extremely grateful to receive the scholarship. It instilled in her a "strong sense of responsibility" and, above all, gave her an invaluable gift for a university student – time.

"It provided me with so much more free time, and enabled me to focus entirely on my master's degree, without the added weight of extreme work hours," she says. "It also provided me with a wealth of opportunities to be engaged in professional development, as I was able to attend certain events like the Victorian Institute of Teaching conference. I did a lot of volunteering, and because of that I was invited to attend the state conference, which expanded my professional circle, particularly in the field of English.

"I never would have been able to attend such events without the scholarship, because I would have been working instead of volunteering, and not developing my CV as much."



Merjam also became a peer mentor and took part in the University's Graduate Student Ambassador program. The hard work paid off, and she was offered a job teaching English and the humanities at a newly opened secondary school in the suburb of Wollert in Melbourne's outer north.

"At the job interview ... while I did have good academic results, members of the panel were mostly fascinated by my attendance at the state conference, and my engagement in academic assistance programs. I became so grateful that I had the time to engage in these activities throughout my degree."

The Olive Battersby scholarship was established in the memory of Olive Battersby by her siblings. Olive dedicated nearly 40 years of her life to the University of Melbourne's School of Education, starting as the assistant to the Dean. She then studied librarianship and served for many years as the school's librarian.

Merjam is clearly passionate about the transformative role education can play for students facing disadvantage. She solidified her passion when, as an undergraduate student, she tutored refugees and international students in Melbourne's south-east.

"I realised that I actually really enjoyed talking about books and unpacking their themes, and connecting with the students, to instil in them a love for English and literature."

She says that her experience of learning English as a second language makes her a uniquely qualified role model.

"I understand that it can be a struggle. But the students recognise themselves in me and my past experiences. They learn that someone, who was once disadvantaged like them, still completed high school and attended the University of Melbourne.

"I want to thank the donors so much for their generosity. I'm sincerely honoured to have been a recipient of the Olive Battersby scholarship."

MERJAM MUSIĆ

Merjam Musić aims to help schools focus on the wellbeing of refugee and other disadvantaged students.

"I felt really privileged to be able to inspire them, while simultaneously teaching them to read and write in ways they may not have learned in their home country."

Merjam plans to gain vital classroom experience for a few years before returning to study a PhD.

"I feel like a positive education model could be preventative and help all students become more resilient. It could explicitly teach them how to focus on the positive aspects of life."

As part of her Master of Teaching, Merjam wrote a thesis looking at how important it is to focus on students' character strengths in traditional classroom environments. She also used similar positive psychology techniques in her teaching placements.

"I did little activities throughout my lessons that I learnt in the positive psychology classes I studied as an undergrad," she explains. "I started every class with an activity called 'What went well', which required students to reflect on something positive that occurred the day or lesson before. This allowed them to develop that positive mindset from the onset of my classes."

While she's set on a PhD, for the moment she is focusing on getting classroom experience. "I'm currently hoping to work with adolescents themselves, and to find out more about them and how they learn, at both an individual and collective level."

And thanks to the Battersby family's generosity, her journey towards making a difference is off to the best possible start.

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