

Never a dull senior moment for physicist, activist and restaurateur

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DRIVING across town from the Royal Melbourne Hospital to Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, Nouria Salehi is showing no signs of slowing down.

Named Senior Victorian of the Year this week, the 68-year-old biophysicist, restaurateur and human rights activist knows every short cut between her workplace in the hospital's nuclear medicine department, and the Afghan restaurant she set up in 1983 to provide work for recently arrived refugees.

As we motor through the rush-hour traffic, Salehi is explaining her latest project in Afghanistan, training science teachers. Her own education in the country's peaceful days before Soviet tanks rolled in, and then the Taliban took hold, provided a platform for her PhD in France and now her research here.

"I would love to be teaching nuclear medicine in Kabul," she says. "But there are no facilities. First we need to train 140,000 science teachers."

She was most recently in her country of birth two months ago and, most nights, is on Skype talking to teachers and students being funded by her organisation, Afghan Australian Development Organisation.

She recalls proposing the project to the Afghan government. "I met for the first time with the deputy minister of education and said, 'I want to offer training for science teachers.' He stood up from his place and gave me a hug. 'I wanted to ask an organisation to do that,' he said. It's working very well. We're now training 200 teachers."

Careful targeting of resources is a priority for Salehi. It's crucial, she says, that the finances of her organisation are transparent to both funders here and staff in Afghanistan, so everybody appreciates all the funds are going into the task at hand.

She stepped down from the board of the Refugee Council of Australia because she felt they were focusing too much on the relatively privileged asylum seekers at the expense of the huge number of refugees trapped in appalling conditions in camps.

"They were ignoring the rights of women and children in the camps who are living without any money, they have no voice," she says.

Professor Gareth Evans, Australian foreign minister when Salehi was campaigning in the mid-1990s for an international ban on anti-personnel landmines, remembers her as an "active, articulate and effective on Afghan community-related issues".

Rosemary Marquardt, treasurer of the AADO, marvels at Salehi's stamina and vision. "Her whole family had to leave Afghanistan when the Soviets invaded," Marquardt says. "Going back after that, she was shocked by the devastation."

As well as being an expert networker, Salehi is very practical, Marquardt says. "I remember somebody showed her some solar lights which store energy during the day and can be used at night. Straight away she said, 'I know people who can use these,' so we held an appeal and raised money to buy them for refugee camps."

Salehi opened the Brunswick Street restaurant with her two brothers, Aziz and Timur, after learning that she could not

sponsor Afghan women immigrants the usual way until she was an Australian citizen. "I could not wait," she smiles now, so providing employment at the restaurant enabled her to help. She estimates some 35 families were able to settle here, thanks to the Afghan Gallery. "Their children are growing up, everybody has jobs, some of them have got double degrees," she says. "I'm very proud of them."

The Senior Victorian award is an acknowledgment of decades of work, but one thing not on Salehi's mind is retirement. "I raised it with my director at the hospital last year and he just laughed at me. I have much more humanitarian work to do - I'm not ready to retire."

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This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/never-a-dull-senior-moment-for-physicist-activist-and-restaurateur-20111119-1nohy.html>