

eAustralian of the Year Jamal Rifi: ‘Our shared values must unite us all’

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Dr Rifi with his wife, Lana, in their western Sydney home. Picture: John Feder Source: News Corp Australia

ANYONE who has ever heard a bomb drop knows how the sound vibrates in the cavities of the chest, the heart and, forever more, the memory. Jamal Rifi, who as a schoolboy studied by candlelight in Tripoli as bombs rained down, will never forget that sound.

For the winner of The Australian’s Australian of the Year, it matters little how war is waged. He will meet its dark heart head-on. The duty that has fallen to the father-of-five during the past year has stretched beyond the task of uniting and fortifying Australian Muslims — shaken by a global jihadist juggernaut that has never seemed so near — against the spectre of hate and intolerance.

GRAPHIC: Our Australians of the Year

The weight has been far heavier than that. In these past extraordinary months, illustrated too frequently from virtually all corners of the globe with images of horror, not only Australian Muslims but also the nation itself has looked to leaders such as Dr Rifi to speak sense in the face of the incomprehensible.

The 55-year-old has done that, and so much more. “I have always believed that we all share this country, because it’s a country of all of its citizens,” Dr Rifi says. “I hate war and I hate conflict.

The Australian’s Australian of the Year award seeks to highlight all that is inclusive, productive and prospective about our nation. It celebrates big ideas and remarkable people, and it promotes cohesion, courage and unity. That is why Dr Rifi is the perfect choice: in a year where values have been challenged, he stood up time and time again.

“Ultimately, we are a community of communities,” he says. “My community shares a commitment to human values, to Australian values, and to Muslim values. And to me there is no contradiction among them whatsoever.

IN DEPTH: The Australian’s Australian of the Year

“The past year, it showed that it’s a global terror that is taking place, and the main victims are people in our Muslim community. But my community has to realise one thing: we cannot be accepting of radicalisation in any way, shape or form. And we cannot be an environment that breeds such ideas and such ideology.”

As the terrorist threat from the Islamic State militant group escalated during the latter half of last year, bringing with it personal and credible threats to his own family, Dr Rifi countered the inhumanity he witnessed in the war-torn Middle East with a very Australian gesture: he threw a barbecue.

Gathering together his large networks, which stretch wide across Sydney’s migrant communities and both sides of politics, the GP also guided the hand of an old friend, Sydney businessman Mamdouh Elomar, who donated \$10,000 to the barbecue and spoke publicly of his horror at actions of his son, Mohamed, who had been pictured in scenes from Syria that depicted severed heads.

There could scarcely have been a more vivid way to illustrate the shattering impact of terrorism or its danger to democratic societies, which might have assumed the sons of hardworking migrants would love the country of their birth that had given their parents so much.

“It was an incredibly powerful demonstration that there’s far more that unites us a society and a community than there is that divides us,” says Paris Aristotle AM, chief executive of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. “It was also a clear repudiation of the extremist elements that have operated in the context of groups overseas.”

For Dr Rifi — who donated \$14,000 towards the barbecue — seeing the pictures of Mohamed Elomar and fellow terrorist Khaled Sharrouf with the severed heads last winter was a body blow.

“One thing which will never make any sense to me is that the majority of our Muslim community here are refugees from the civil war in Lebanon,” he says. “They came here ... so they can provide their kids with a better future in the country I would consider is the best country on Earth. Now IS wants to take their kids back into a war zone. There is no logic in that.”

Dr Rifi’s denouncement of terrorism this year has not been a professional gig. On any day, the surgery of his southwest Sydney practice is full, many patients of 20 years’ standing. As a young boy, he swore he would enter the medical profession after the death of his younger brother in Tripoli from an anaphylactic reaction to a penicillin shot.

The son of a wheat mill owner, he had to work hard. As he studied towards final exams at school, war almost derailed his ambition.

“There was no electricity. We had to study under candlelight with the sound of the bombs. I knew what I wanted to do was to become a doctor, and to be able to become a doctor I had to get good marks. The future was looking bleak.” At 19, he left Tripoli for Romania, where he began his medical studies. During a trip home to Lebanon, he met Lana, the daughter of Lebanese migrants to Australia who had grown up in Coogee. She was visiting family, and their courtship, via correspondence, stretched over four years.

Mrs Rifi described how in the early days of their marriage her husband would stay up late in - Sydney listening to the radio, frequently calling talkback stations to improve his conversational English. After mastering language to a sufficient level, he was accepted into Sydney University to study medicine as a second-year student. He graduated in 1990.

“He’s a worker. He’s a powerhouse. He’s a doer,” says Jihad Dib, school principal and current Labor political candidate, who walked the Kokoda Track with Dr Rifi and politicians Scott Morrison and Jason Clare in 2009. “When you go through something like that, you see what the real substance of a person is ... He would give up the last of his food for somebody else.”

The trek came after Dr Rifi had been involved in the push for community cohesion following the Cronulla riots, when he helped organise for 22 young men and woman from his community to become volunteer surf lifesavers at Cronulla beach.

Mr Morrison, the beach’s local member, has become a firm friend. “I would describe him as a great Australian,” he says. “He is the epitome of everything you would hope to see for someone who has come to this country. He’s got a doctor’s heart. I would walk Kokoda with him any day of the week.”

Dr Rifi's work as a community organiser follows in the footsteps of his father, Ahmed, known as Abu Ashraf, who in Tripoli in the 1960s and 70s would collect small monthly sums from the poor of his community. The money would be pooled for the medical and education expenses of needy families.

It was a radical scheme that attracted the ire of the Lebanese government, and Dr Rifi's father was at one point jailed for his activism. "They told him he was a threat to the establishment," Dr Rifi says, "but he never stopped. He told us: 'I'm not going to leave you much money, but your wealth is the credibility you will have, and the support of the local people.'

"That's why I feel I am very protected ... Nobody who is going to threaten me is going to cause me to be fearful. Because I've got the support of my community and I know my community will protect me.

"I walk the streets with my head high."