



Cuc Lam

Department of Human Services

A workplace champion for harmony

The minute you meet Centrelink employee Cuc Lam you are struck by her infectious smile and positive attitude.

You would never guess that the road has not always been easy for Cuc, as a former refugee. It was in 1978 that she fled Vietnam with her husband disguised as a fisherman and carrying only a small number of belongings – a watch from her sister, her wedding ring and her mother's earrings.

Cuc was in a Malaysian refugee camp when she found out she was accepted into Australia. After hearing the news, she sold her wedding ring so that she could buy a red vinyl suitcase, not wanting to arrive empty handed.

Since arriving in Australia, Cuc has worked hard, achieving many great things and making a happy home. She has children, grandchildren, worked in the public service and was the local Mayor and Councillor of Maribyrnong City Council in Victoria.

But never does Cuc forget (or want to forget) her plight as a refugee, the opportunity a life in Australia has presented or the home that she originally came from. She has become a workplace champion for encouraging others to take on a similar attitude, and embrace their culture and background as a positive thing to bring into the workplace.

One of ways that Cuc achieves this is by taking part in the cultural diversity initiative A Taste of Harmony. She has hosted events at every workplace since it first started in 2009. In her current role with the Department of Human Services, she even coordinated events across several locations.

It is very important because it provides Cuc the opportunity to share her story, and also hear the stories of her colleagues. She is the ultimate workplace champion for harmony.

Why is A Taste of Harmony important?

For me, I believe it is important to bring your 'outside life' into your workplace, especially your culture. It is such an important part of who we are, and we should be able to show our whole self at work. A Taste of Harmony is an opportunity to meet new people on a more personal level and hear their stories.

In my opinion, this should not just happen at an A Taste of Harmony event – people should always feel their cultural background is important, 365 days a year.

What benefits have you seen from people taking part in A Taste of Harmony?

It's really inspiring to hear others share their stories and encourages people to think 'I can do this too' and 'it is ok to be my true self' at work. It gives us the opportunity to get to know our colleagues better, and from there we can develop a greater sense of empathy for each other. Now in my workplace people just expect that we will do A Taste of Harmony events because they enjoy them so much.

What are some of the ways you have taken part?

Having been involved for over ten years I always look for new and interesting ways to take part. Some of the things I have done include:

- » Organising a lunch and asking all of my team to bring a plate and share their dish from their culture
- » Using the event materials from the A Taste of Harmony website. There are lots of great resources to make the event fun!
- » Printing out 'hello' in different languages and sticking them up around the staff room
- » Wearing cultural dress to work – I have a special Vietnamese dress that I have worn to work a few times (not just for A Taste of Harmony)
- » Rostering our events so there is one in the morning and one in the afternoon so that everyone can take part, including those who have a customer facing job.

How does it work when coordinating across multiple offices?

It is pretty easy to co-ordinate across multiple offices. Usually I work with the team leader in each location to get their support. Once this is done, I download materials from the A Taste of Harmony website and send onto each office. Then it is just a matter of letting people know which day it is on, and asking them to bring in a dish. People really look forward to it so it is not a hard job.

Is it difficult to get the support of management?

Not at all. The Department of Human Services strongly supports cultural and linguistic diversity in the workplace and staff are strongly encouraged to celebrate special days and events like Harmony Day.

What are some memorable moments/dishes?

I really like the food that is different from what I eat at home. I am a big fan of Indian food and someone once brought in a delicious Spanish paella. These are things that I would not cook for myself so it is a treat to have them at work.

What dish do you bring?

To be honest I don't really consider myself to be a cook! But you don't have to be the best cook to take part in A Taste of Harmony. People really just want to experience your culture. I cook and bring in exactly what I would eat at home with my family. Usually this is something like spring rolls with organic chicken.

Why should others get involved?

I believe it is very important to live in a harmonious way, be caring, help to foster a friendly and supportive work environment. This is a simple way to help achieve that, and it does not cost anything!

For me personally, I always want to give back to this country for accepting me and say thank-you to the Australian people. I will happily host an A Taste of Harmony event every year!