I decided that the next film was going to be about the refugee experience. Refugees started to arrive by boat in 1991, and this was 2001. The government had built detention centres. That’s where the people were incarcerated to have their claims to asylum assessed. The majority were assessed as genuine refugees. They had all been given 3-year Temporary Protection Visas (TPV’s) which allowed them to live and work anywhere in Australia. However the TPV meant they couldn’t sponsor their families here, and they were ineligible for a wide range of benefits, including access to English classes. Technically they were second class citizens.

I wanted to make this film because I felt strongly that people weren’t really getting to know refugees as people, as human beings, apart from the fact that they were being detained. There was nothing there that really gave a human perspective to these very truncated stories you were getting from television and current affairs. I was wanting also to explore how temporary protection visas were affecting refugees’ psychological well-being when they left the detention centres. It was another form of punishment in a way – the uncertainty of knowing if you were allowed to stay, or that they might have to unwillingly leave the country.

The way I got to this particular story was via a little piece I saw in the paper. It was in The Australian actually, about a whole lot of Afghans working in the abattoir in Young. I had contacts with people in the refugee support network at the time and also from my father who knew people in Rural Australians for Refugees. Turned out that Sue Varga who ran RAR was a colleague whom I knew from my early video days.

I called Sue and asked her if she had contacts with anybody in Young because I heard there were a lot of people there who’d just recently arrived? And she said yes we know people in Young, and look I can put you in touch with one the organisers. So I rang that person and she said look there’s a barbecue next weekend why don’t you come down? I did.

Young was a small town of 11,000 people 4 hours drive from Sydney. 90 Afghans – all men from the Hazara ethnic minority were working at the local abattoir. What made Young interesting was that a small group in the community decided to make it their business to help these Hazara men. volunteers, mainly women, were drawn from a wide cross-section of the community: school- teachers, farming people, nurses, a catholic nun, and a manager of a local supermarket. Ann Bell, an enterprising TAFE teacher, organised a group of volunteers to teach the men English one night a week.

When I went down to Young for that weekend I took a small DVCAM camera I’d recently purchased. I wanted to meet as many people as possible and also do a bit of filming. The filming didn’t really work out. You know you try to do too much. And I looked at the rushes of that days filming and they were pretty awful so they never ended up being in the film.

I didn’t leave that night, I stayed for the next few days and met people individually in their homes. These were some of the people who had come to the barbecue, who’d organised the barbecue, plus the Hazaras who were living in small groups around the town. One of those people was Lyn. I found out when I spoke and interviewed Lyn just a couple of days later that her daughter Molly was giving a young Hazara man, driving lessons. And I thought oh that’s interesting, that’s something a bit unusual. This is more than just organising picnics and get-togethers, this is more practical. I suddenly thought it would be good to be able to film one of those driving lessons. I asked Lyn if that would be possible? And she said: Oh look I don’t know, I don’t think Molly will have any real problem but you’ve got to ask Mobarak.

So I saw Molly later in the afternoon and she said yeah I’m fine with it, talk to Mobarak. I had met Mobarak at the picnic and I managed to seek him out a few days later because I had a meeting at the abattoir called by Tony Hewson. And I said to Mobarak I believe you’re being taught how to drive and he said yeah. Do you mind if I sit in the back seat and do a bit of filming? And he said fine, so a day later there I was filming Molly meeting Mobarak at the car. She’s addressing camera and she asks: Mobarak, do you know Tom? And he says: yes I know Tom I’ve just met him, and then she puts a little learner plate next to the number plate on the car and off we go. And that’s how the year of filming began and how their relationship started.

As the weeks went by it quickly became apparent that this was more than just an innocent friendship. Mobarak had romantic intentions for Molly, which weren’t necessarily reciprocated. I knew this would lead to complications down the track. I also knew, however, that this could provide the film’s narrative structure as well as its emotional power. A universal story about unrequited love would give the film strong audience appeal. But what would make it so complex and poignant would be the underlying cultural differences and Mobarak’s vested interest in remaining in Australia.

I decided to film and record sound myself. This was in the interest of greater access and intimacy – something I quickly realised when one weekend I hired a cinematographer to help with a particularly difficult set-up. Just having an additional person around altered in a subtle way the relationship between myself and Mobarak, Lyn and Molly. I vowed to continue on my own after that.

After filming with Molly and Mobarak over a number of weekends, Lyn invited me to stay in the house whenever I came down. There was a spare room ‘out the back’, and so this is where I moved in. It was especially handy because a lot of the filming ended-up being done in the kitchen. I used to keep the camera close by - in the corner of the lounge-room. It was in a handy place whenever I needed to film.

One can easily become invisible with this kind of filmmaking. People become so used to you with the camera. However not entirely would I say that they weren’t aware. You are there, the camera is around! Naturally I wanted to get as close as possible, but at certain times Lyn and Molly told me to stop and not to film, so the rules for filming evolved through my relationship with them. They were the ones who set up the boundaries. Every film is different.

The film’s narrative drive is bound-up in the relationship between Mobarak, Molly and Lyn. Getting the dynamic of the relationship right was quite subtle and tricky. I wanted the viewer to identify with Mobarak’s desires for Molly but also to feel uncomfortable with his emotional neediness. We start to feel for Molly as she’s being suffocated by Mobarak’s cloying affections, then switch to Mobarak as we watch him being pushed-out the door by the two women and experience the pain and anguish of his separation.

Earlier in the film I’d established Mobarak as someone who awkwardly feels his way with an Australian family. His efforts at being understood in a second language make him appear very vulnerable. Mobarak’s loss of country and family have left him feeling isolated, lonely and fearful. These feelings are compounded by the uncertainty of the Temporary Visa process and the racism in the town. These experiences leave Mobarak forming strong attachments that may not be sustained. Mobarak’s relationship with Lyn and Molly is underpinned by these unresolved needs. So when Mobarak feels Molly cutting off from him, her imminent loss re- awakens his feelings of isolation and loss that he experienced when he first arrived in Australia.

Molly feelings towards Mobarak are a mixture of compassion and genuine affection. She was genuinely attracted to him and enjoyed his company. Her boyfriend lived in a faraway corner of the State. She saw him only occasionally and he never came to Young. The presence of the boyfriend is a useful ploy that Molly adopts to keep Mobarak at a distance. However when Mobarak declares his love for Molly she doesn’t want to hurt his feelings by confronting him directly. The job of telling Mobarak the truth falls on Lyn’s shoulders who uses the ‘almost fictional’ boyfriend also as a handy excuse.

I remember one particular scene – an evening Mobarak crept into the kitchen and I knew this was probably going to be the time when Lyn was going to talk to him about Molly, and probably tell him that this was as far as he could go with Molly in terms of any relationship. Mobarak at that point in the story was sensing that something was up and that he as madly in love with her, but that she was falling out of love with him. It was a crucial time to film this obviously terribly sensitive conversation that was going to unfold. So I quickly loaded up the camera with tape and I crept into that kitchen and sat opposite them at the table. I did not move from that position for about 40 minutes and just panned the camera between the two of them.

I could feel that Lyn caught my eye once and I knew she could either say “continue” or “that’s it, cut”. But the two of us had a good relationship going and she believed in the film. She thought it was an important story to tell. Later I found out she was very uncomfortable with that scene. I actually thought that by looking at me then looking back at Mobarak and not doing anything she gave me the permission and the go ahead.

I stayed in one position at a right angle to their conversation for about 20 minutes, and then I did change position, enough for a good over the shoulder shot which I really needed. Just at the time I’d moved to that position Lyn went across with her hand and put it on Mobarak’s hand, just reassuring him to say its OK mate, it’s OK. You know she kind of gave him this very friendly, intimate sign that things were going to be fine. Of course Mobarak was still broken up by the whole thing.

Lyn directed me quite a bit when it came to filming. Often she would simply say: look I don’t feel like it today, or just made a funny gesture to me and say look I’m just not up to it, sorry. But that only happened a few times, most of the time she was quite happy for me to film. One of the times she wasn’t was when she and Molly were together. I said: look you guys I really want you to chat about Mobarak and Molly how you feel and so on, because I wasn’t getting enough of her on camera. And Lyn straight away stopped that. She said no, for that to happen I want Mobarak in the room, we can’t talk about him behind his back. I understood that I’d stepped over the mark.

The power a filmmaker has is an interesting question. Personally I don’t think its all one way, the subject has agency well. In observational documentary it’s assumed that the filmmaker because he/she has access to the media has absolute power over the participant, and that this is a negative force and leads to domination. This throw up all sorts of ethical and. moral dilemmas. However it doesn’t have to be like that. Sure, for participants who they haven’t seen a filmmaker before they don’t know what to expect of a filmmaker. And that can lead to exploitation.

I don’t think that making these kinds of closely observed narratives that power is one way. It seldom works like that. Both parties usually have something that they want to get out of the process for themselves. In *Molly and Mobarak,* the reason that Lyn said to me at the outset why she agreed to get involved was because that the film would be a positive contribution to the refugee debate. That humanising refugees through the documentary would be significant. I shared these goals, but I also had another agenda which was both a practical economic one and a creative one. I had received government money and had to deliver a film to a broadcaster, and at the same time wanted to make the film that satisfied my aesthetic goals. And these goals tied in with the social impact and advocacy objectives.

So it became a collaborative project with Lyn and Molly being able to retain control over their contribution. However this did lead to some tense and stressful moments. I wanted to tell a fair and accurate story, but I had to do that within parameters that my participants had set up. Round midway through filming (and about 3 months after I’d met the family), Lyn invited me to move in to a room in the house whenever I came to town. I took up the offer, knowing that I would have access at a more intimate level. It mean that I would also have warning of events about to happen – like for instance the kitchen table conversation, where Lyn essentially informed Mobarak that any relationship with her daughter was not on. This was a very sensitive scene to film, and would never have happened without a strong level trust between all of us.

Trust is a two way process in any documentary. The documentary maker trust the participants to continue with the process and provide access to relevant moments. While the participants trust the documentary maker with their reputation and personal information to be protected.Kate Nash writes:

*From a Foucauldian perspective Rule and Zubrycki are engaged in a contested relationship in which each is acting with the goal of influencing the actions of the other.*

Sometimes it was touch and go. When could I film and when not. The structure of the narrative was determining when I should shoot the next scene. After Mobarak suddenly left for Adelaide I went to Young, back to the town to find out how Lyn was going because I knew she’d be talking to Mobarak and it was usually Saturday afternoons when she called him or he called her, so I wanted to be around on a Saturday afternoon in case the phone call came. Lyn agreed for me to be there. And sure enough the phone call came and Lyn talked with Mobarak and after that she was really quite cut up and told me on camera words like “you know I’m really worried about him, I’ve heard about this other Afghan guy who committed suicide and now you know Mobarak’s taken a real hard blow because of Molly and what happened and he feels rejected”, and she started to cry. It was a really emotional time.

There was another incident when Molly returned from overseas when they were at the airport welcoming her back and she was in a funny mood. She tolerated me filming, but that all changed when I came down to Young and I went with Mobarak to visit Molly again and filmed that. But even much later, much, much later I discovered in fact Lyn didn’t really want me around the day of Molly’s arrival. But I thought this was a completely innocent scene, what could have been more innocent than that! So it’s funny how those things happen, but you know I did feel there were times, certainly times where Lyn was directing me. At times she was making herself available, at other times unavailable.

Mobarak enjoyed the closeness of Lyn and Molly ’s family and found security and certainty in this bond, while Lyn increasingly feels caught in the middle between her daughter and Mobarak. She wants him to be part of the family but she can’t really help him with her daughter. Being a ‘bad cop’ confused her emotions. She became racked with guilt, made even more palpable when Mobarak suddenly left Young and made a 1,000 kilometre journey to Adelaide to resolve his feelings about Molly and start afresh. Then Molly returned to Young, quickly Mobarak returned as well and the family was reunited – albeit briefly, before Mobarak made another transformative decision.

Confronting the uncertainty of the visa process (and his whole future) one is aware that Mobarak has taken on something quite huge. Suddenly he becomes articulate when his very survival is at stake. Finding his voice in the scene with the lawyer and interpreter is symbolic of this moment of personal growth. The film observes Mobarak being a boy and then follows him growing-up and becoming a man. His decision to leave Young after Molly rejects him is the only way he can come to terms with the loss of Molly. It’s also part of his maturity that he takes risks in another city – finds a job, somewhere to live, and a new girlfriend.

As a temporary visa holder Mobarak is in a perpetual state of limbo. Despite this pervading sense of uncertainty Mobarak wants to change, to assimilate, to throw off absolutely everything that represents the culture he came from, including the Islamic religion. His open change of identity and yearning to be Australian - to look the same and behave the same as other people – can be seen as an *act of resistance*. His need to change quickly and dramatically creates a distance within his own community. He is no longer interested in associating with other Afghans. He just wants to become ‘one of us’.

At the end when I showed the Molly and Lyn the film I just didn’t know how they’d respond to it because the film became a love story, and a lot of people had been cut out of it including other people in the town and a few other Afghans I’d filmed with, plus a whole other side story that I had part filmed and then abandoned. As I played them the film they saw the title “Molly and Mobarak”, and there was this groan and they said oh it’s the love story!

Anyway they watched the film. They were very emotional and said that everything in the film had been fairly portrayed and it was accurate and they had no problems with it. But of course then showing it to Mobarak was very difficult. Lyn and Molly actually came up to Sydney specially to hold Mobarak’s hand when I screened the film to him.

At the private screening he was quite teary because it reminded him of the good times that he and Molly had together. I think he took a long time to recover emotionally and certainly the premiere of the film at the Sydney Film Festival took its toll. He was there with Molly and they both went up on stage later and, yeah, it was hard for him for sure. But a few days later he cheerily rang me up and said: hey you know the film, well do you think people think I’m good looking? I said yeah of course they do. Well you know do you think you know maybe this could lead to some work for me?

So I actually registered Mobarak with a talent agency and his face was there for people who were looking through looking for faces for commercials. I don’t know if he got any work out of it but at least it’s something that I thought I should do. He frequently asked me if I could help me find jobs. Eventually he found a job in Sydney as a tiler, in a tiling business run by other Afghan refugees, quite a prosperous business and he seemed to find his feet.

Over the years following the screening Mobarak always used to ring Molly and Lyn around Christmas time. He used to ring me as well and we used to connect on the phone and then eventually he stopped calling.

The film did cause waves in the refugee community, the Afghan refugee community. Some people felt that Mobarak was too upfront. I always thought that he was very brave and he did a great job and simply spoke for everybody in that position, same situation, trying to find their feet in a new country and trying to start up friendships with Aussie.

But Mobarak, what I loved about him was he never doubted that this was the right thing to do, that launching out with this was something odd or something that he shouldn’t do. Very clearly he needed to be with a family and he found a family with Lyn and Molly and he fell in love.