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Shepparton's Albanian community's stories told on the big screen

By **Youssef Saudie**
Mar 17, 2022



Storytelling recognised globally: Reg Qemal has wanted to do a film about the Albanian community for a long time, and it has become a reality. Photo by Contributed

Shepparton's Albanian community has attracted worldwide attention, after the stories of the diaspora were told on the documentary *Australia My Home: An Albanian Migration*.

It has won awards and been showcased at international film festivals, and screened at the Shepparton Village Cinemas on March 2.

Documentary producer and president of the Shepparton Albanian Moslem Society Reg Qemal said the project had been a long time coming, and started when he met the director, Dritan

Arbana, 20 years ago.

“We’ve been friends ever since and I saw some of the work he had done 20 years later, then I had this idea of doing a documentary,” he said.

When Mr Qemal caught up with Mr Arbana four years ago they decided to turn the idea into a reality.

In 2019, they wrote the story and filmed across Australia and Albania, with the film screening at festivals throughout 2021.

Mr Qemal said it felt “amazing” to tell the stories of Shepparton’s Albanian community.

“The message really was that it's the next generation that needs to keep the culture continuing on because if they don't, it'll be lost,” he said.

“We've been able to keep it now for 100 years and we're into the third generation of Albanians here in Australia.”



On the big screen: Zinet Hasankolli, left, has been a part of Shepparton's Albanian community for decades. Photo by Contributed

Zinet Hasankolli was featured in the documentary, as she was one of the early Albanian migrants who came to Shepparton.

“I’ve been a part of it since as far back as I can remember,” she said.

“We have a very strong community, it’s a very close-knit family.”

Her father migrated to Australia in the 1920s, got married in Albania, and came back to live in Queensland, where Ms Hasankolli was born.

The family moved to Shepparton once they heard there were more opportunities for work and an Albanian community.

Ms Hasankolli said the film was a chance to learn more about the diverse Albanians of the area.

“To learn more about the life of the new Albanians here, to see their struggles, and what they have achieved since coming here,” she said.

“It feels pretty good to tell my story, people would find it very interesting to know the lives of the first Albanians who came to Australia, which were the toughest for everyone.”



Screened at home: The film was screened in Shepparton, which helped to fund the Shepparton Albanian Harvest Festival happening this Sunday. Photo by Contributed

Mr Qemal said it was overwhelming to do this for his community and to have his work commended on a global scale.

“I’ve lived all my life here in Shepparton being part of the Albanian community, and I’m very honoured,” Mr Qemal said.

“I think my mother and father would be very proud; they’re not here with me today, but it’s something that is in my heart,” he said.

The documentary has been screened at festivals including Docs Without Borders in the US, the Tirana International Film Festival in Albania, and the International Multicultural Film Festival in Perth.

It has won awards including the Merit for Documentary Feature at the Impact DOCS Film Festival.

The documentary has been entered in upcoming festivals around the world.



By **Youssef Saudie**



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