

Feeding connection: The story behind the Woodlea Islamic Network's Neighbourly Table Initiative

For the members of the Woodlea Islamic Network, community has always been about more than simply living in the same suburb - it's about belonging to something bigger than yourself.

Many of the families who now lead the Network first moved to Woodlea between 2020 and 2022, drawn to the area's greenery and welcoming atmosphere. For Mohammed Umar and his family, the decision was immediate.

"We fell in love with this place at first sight," Umar said. "It was so beautiful, so welcoming".

What began as a small gathering of four Muslim families, meeting in each other's homes, soon grew into a thriving community organisation. Today, the Woodlea Islamic Network brings together dozens of local families through cultural celebrations, educational programs and volunteer initiatives designed to foster belonging, understanding and care for others.

One of the group's most recent and impactful initiatives is their Friday night "Neighbourly Table" - a weekly food relief program providing warm meals to people experiencing hardship at the Melton Amphitheatre.

For the organisers, however, the initiative has never been just about food.

"We do not anymore see that there is a recipient and there is a donor," Umar explained. "When we go there, people are sitting and chatting. They're eating together and making connections."

Turning values into action

The idea for the Neighbourly Table was born during Ramadan earlier this year - a time of reflection, generosity and community for Muslim families.

Umar came across a key message that stayed with him: "Be kind to the near neighbour and the distant neighbour."

"That inspired us to take action," he said.

At the same time, the Network had launched a youth initiative called 'Talent Lab', encouraging local children to practice values including kindness, fairness, respect and care through team challenges and activities.

Children participating in the program were awarded prize money and given the option to donate some of it to support people in need.

The response surprised even the adults.

One child simply said, “They deserve more.”

Another shared, “Initially I thought it’s fun to play, but when you said it was for the homeless and for the needy, I was with more passion, and I wish I could give all of my money.”

“We created Talent Lab for them to practice values,” Umar reflected, “but they were teaching us by giving back.”

That moment became the catalyst for the Neighbourly Table initiative.

Turning an idea into reality

While the vision for the initiative came together quickly, bringing it to life came with its own challenges.

The group knew they wanted to provide warm meals in a safe, sustainable and respectful way, but navigating approvals, food safety requirements and council processes was initially overwhelming.

“The thought came in February on a Monday,” Umar explained. “We wanted to do it on Tuesday,” he laughed. “That’s the kind of speed and enthusiasm within the community.”

Instead, the group encountered permits, food handling requirements and operational processes they had never dealt with before.

“It was a bit frustrating,” Umar admitted.

Rather than giving up, the group leaned on the support of the wider community. With guidance from Pauline, InCommunityCare, Vinnies and local organisations, they learned how to safely operate a food relief service and spent time observing existing community meal programs before launching their own.

The group also worked hard to ensure the initiative would remain sustainable long-term. Core members committed to contributing financially each month, while local businesses and workplaces stepped in to support through donations and discounts.

One local restaurant immediately offered ongoing discounted meals after hearing about the initiative.

“There are enough people willing to support you,” Umar said. “You just have to take the first step.”

More than food

Every Friday night, volunteers gather to distribute warm meals to members of the Melton community doing it tough. But the organisers quickly realised the greatest impact often came through something much simpler: conversation.

“People not only just need food, but also need your company,” one volunteer shared. “They want someone to go and talk to them.”

Over time, familiar faces became regular conversations and relationships formed around the table.

One recipient approached volunteers to thank them, saying, “Nowadays, it’s very rare to see people coming, taking up time and spending time with strangers they don’t know.”

For many of the volunteers, these moments have become the most rewarding part of the initiative.

There are many moments that have stayed with the group long after each Friday night ends. On one occasion, a man who received donated clothing immediately asked whether his friend could have something warm to wear too. On another night, a recipient waited to eat his meal until he was sure everyone else in line had been served first.

“These moments really stay with you,” the group shared.

Building future leaders

One of the most important aspects of the initiative has been involving children every step of the way.

From speaking at events and helping hand out meals on Friday nights, the younger generation has become central to the organisation’s growth.

“The kids are the future growing leaders,” Umar said.

Parents within the Network have watched shy children grow into confident young leaders through these experiences.

“Now they don’t give us any mic space,” one parent laughed.

The group believes giving children the opportunity to witness compassion firsthand has helped shape their understanding of empathy, responsibility and community service in a meaningful way.

Creating understanding through openness

Beyond the Neighbourly Table, the Woodlea Islamic Network has become known for its openness and commitment to inclusivity within the broader community.

The group regularly collaborates with other cultural organisations, schools and local community groups to host events that encourage connection and understanding across different backgrounds and faiths.

One recent collaboration with the Melton Chinese Friendship Association included cultural exchange programs and dumpling-making workshops that brought hundreds of locals together.

For Pauline, who has supported the group throughout their journey, this openness has been one of the most powerful aspects of the initiative.

“You’re so intent on creating community,” she said. “You’re so intent on breaking those barriers.”

She described the group’s work as “one of the most genuine, probably one of the most selfless” community initiatives she has experienced.

A community built on kindness

For the members of the Woodlea Islamic Network, the Neighbourly Table represents something much bigger than a weekly meal service.

It represents connection, belonging, and acceptance - and the belief that small acts of kindness can strengthen an entire community.

The group hopes their story inspires others to find their own ways to contribute, no matter how small.

Everyone is human and “you need to respect others” Umar said.

And every Friday night in Melton, that respect begins around a shared table.