

6MINUTES NEWS

Dr Jamal Rifi turns to gardening to escape pandemic's 'black cloud'

The work of the inspirational GP helped guide his multicultural community through the worst of COVID-19

🕒 1 minute to read | 1st July 2022

By Carmel Sparke

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Dr Jamal Rifi has resumed his pandemic-interrupted retirement by moving to the NSW Central Coast where he is planting trees as an antidote to the mental stresses of the past two years.

The inspirational GP said he made the change in January as he started to feel low after helping his multicultural community in Sydney navigate COVID-19.

“I moved to a very lovely community and I immersed myself doing a lot of planting of native shrubs and trees,” Dr Rifi told ABC Radio Sydney.

“I needed to dissociate myself because I felt in January of this year that I had a black cloud over my head and I needed to do something about myself and my wellbeing.”



Dr Jamal Rifi.

When the pandemic first began, Dr Rifi moved his practice in Bankstown into his home, setting up a drive-thru COVID-19 testing clinic and later a vaccine clinic in his front yard.

He described going to Bunnings to buy tents, face masks and white painter's overalls for himself and staff as protection against the coronavirus.

And his efforts saw COVID-19 vaccination coverage in the Canterbury-Bankstown areas soar from among the lowest to the highest in the state during the Delta wave last year.

Before the pandemic arrived, Dr Rifi said he was planning to retire with visions of driving his motorhome around Australia with his wife Lana.

Back in 2005, the GP who grew up in Lebanon played a leading role in healing the deep social wounds resulting from Cronulla race riots.

His public health messages over the last two years were translated into numerous languages and promoted vaccination through YouTube and webinars in Arabic.

“I am still involved in decision making because, yes we can’t change the past but we can learn from it,” he told ABC.

“Decision makers need to acknowledge that people at the grassroots know their community and have sensible advice.

“To their credit, the state and federal government have listened to us ... overall.

“We as Australians should be proud of our achievement. We saved many lives collectively because every one of us knew what our role was and we excelled at doing it.”

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More information: [ABC Sydney News; 30 June 2022](#)

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