



Yazdaneh Galt and her daughter Noora Niasari reflecting in front of the poster of their movie *Shayda*.

Images: Yazdaneh Galt.

A triumph of the human spirit

The powerful story of Melbourne audiologist YAZDANEH AMIRYAZDANI GALT has made it onto the silver screen and was nominated for an Oscar at the 2024 Academy Awards. *HPA* goes behind the scenes to meet the courageous woman who inspired the award-winning movie *Shayda* which is now streaming.

In 1995, young Iranian mother Yazdaneh Amir Yazdani fled a violent marriage with her two young children to live in a Brisbane women's refuge in search of a better life. Her daughter Noora Niasari, only five at the time, grew up to be a filmmaker and has turned her mother's inspirational story into an award-winning movie.

Yazdaneh's courage, resilience and hard work have transformed her from a struggling single mum to a celebrated audiologist who owns an independent practice, Ace Audiology in Bulleen and Ivanhoe. Her success is a testament to her strength of character and the support she acknowledges receiving from many in her adopted country, Australia.

"When I watched the film, I was struck by how distant I felt from that version of myself. It was an emotional revelation—this is how far I've come. The past is always with you, but you move beyond it. I've managed to leave it behind, and



Yazdaneh with staff, family and friends at the opening of new premises for Ace Audiology by Bulleen MP Matthew Guy, standing next to Yazdaneh.

that feels like a victory," she reflects.

Arriving in Australia in 1991 from Iran with her children, Noora and Ali, and her then-husband – whom she had married in an arranged union at just 17 – Yazdaneh endured years of abuse and domestic violence, far more harrowing than depicted in the film, before escaping to the refuge.

The refuge's head, Ms Deirdre Doherty (portrayed as Joyce in the movie), offered them protection and support, and the bond with her remains strong.

"We still keep in touch with Deirdre; we're very close friends," Yazdaneh shares. "She attended the movie premieres and events, including the Sundance Film Festival in America. For me, she was not just a role model but a beacon of feminist advocacy. Her life's work has been a testament to her unwavering dedication to women's rights.

"Deirdre's relentless commitment to advocating for women's rights and her profound influence on so many lives truly define her legacy. So, obviously for her, this was a proud moment. She and Leigh Purcell, the actor who played her in the film, had a wonderful time in Sundance. They have a striking resemblance and even sound alike."

The film does take creative liberties to enhance its cinematic appeal, Yazdaneh says. For instance, the movie features only one child, and Yazdaneh was portrayed as a nurse, whereas in reality, she pursued psychology at the University of Queensland for a year (1993-1994).

After separating from her husband, Yazdaneh and her children spent seven months in the refuge. She later secured permanent residency and returned to university in 1998 to continue her Bachelor of Psychology.

"I completed my degree in 2000 but I realised that my own trauma made it challenging for me to handle others' problems as a psychologist," she recalls. "I discussed this with one of my lecturers, Professor Doug Maher, who suggested audiology as a potential path."

To explore this new direction, she volunteered at an audiology practice.

"I approached audiologist Ms Joyce McIntyre, manager of the Neurosensory Unit in Brisbane, to gain hands-on experience in audiology and offered to assist at the front desk," Yazdaneh recalls. "She kindly agreed, allowing me to observe various aspects of the field. After three months, I was certain this was my career path. Her encouragement and support, including a letter of recommendation, were instrumental in my acceptance into Macquarie University in Sydney."

In November 2002, just before graduating, Yazdaneh already had a job lined up with National Hearing Centres (now Amplifon). She moved to Melbourne six years later, where she and fellow audiologist, Mr Jonathan Galt later married. Yazdaneh opened clinics in Bulleen and Ivanhoe, with a new state-of-the-art facility recently established in Bulleen.

Meanwhile, Noora, having made a name for herself in short films and documentaries, was determined that her debut feature film would be about



Above: At the AACTA awards, *Shayda*'s actors and executive producers including Cate Blanchett, fifth from left, with Yazdaneh, far right, and the women's refuge head, Deirdre Doherty next to her.

her mother. She wrote the script based on her mother's experiences and her own fragmented memories.

"Every week, we'd sit down; I'd read my memoir, and she'd record and transcribe. It took six months to capture about ten years of my life – 50,000 words," Yazdaneh recounts.

Noora reached out to producer Mr Vincent Sheehan, who suggested involving acclaimed Oscar-award winning actor and producer Ms Cate Blanchett. After meeting Blanchett and her husband Mr Andrew Upton, the project gained momentum, and Blanchett became an executive producer.

The film, *Shayda*, took a more humanised approach, avoiding graphic depictions while focusing on the refuge experience. "Noora chose to highlight the women's refuge angle, which is rarely depicted in cinema. I respected her decision," Yazdaneh notes.

Shayda premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in America in January 2023, winning the World Cinema Dramatic Competition audience award. Noora, Yazdaneh and Yazdaneh's American brother Mark who she has recently found and connected with (another story!), her husband Jonathan and Deirdre were present.

"I was overwhelmed. It was an indescribable feeling," Yazdaneh recalls. "The editor surprised me by showing footage at the end from our home videos of Noora dancing as a child. I actually screamed – it was breathtaking. The audience applauded."

The film has garnered 21 nominations and seven awards at various festivals globally and nationally. Notably, it was nominated for Best International Feature Film at the 96th Academy Awards in 2024.

After the nomination, Noora told entertainment industry news website, *Deadline*: "I see this film as an open invitation for audiences to recognise and celebrate the courage and resilience of Iranian women, Australian women, and all women fighting for freedom from domestic violence. To have *Shayda* represent Australia on the world stage fills me with immense hope and pride."



Above, L to R: Yazdaneh in 1993 with her children Ali and Noora; Yazdaneh and Jonathan Galt with Noora and Ali.

Though Yazdaneh is deeply proud of her daughter's work, she admits: "At times, it felt strange to see my life portrayed as entertainment. It can be painful when people ask questions like, 'Why didn't you leave earlier?' People survive as best as they can and leave when it's safe."

Noora described the experience to *The New Arab* as "an incredibly healing and cathartic process, even through a fictionalised lens."

The family has flourished in Australia. Alongside Noora's successful film-making career, Ali worked as an audiologist before studying medicine and is about to start a medical intern position.

Yazdaneh remains profoundly grateful to those who supported her during her darkest times, including solicitor Ms Stephanie Tonkin. "I feel incredibly fortunate to have encountered such pivotal individuals during one of the most challenging periods of my life," she says. "Stephanie was a beacon of hope, whose unwavering bravery and dedication not only guided me toward freedom but also made the journey to rebuilding my life significantly easier."

"Her presence was a true stroke of luck and I am deeply thankful for the extraordinary people who stepped in to help me when I needed it most."

Tonkin will undertake the Great Ocean Walk from November 12-15 to raise funds for the Women's Legal Service Queensland, which she co-founded.

Yazdaneh adds: "As a survivor of domestic violence, I understand the immense courage it takes to seek help and the strength required to rebuild. The 'Walk for Change' is more than just a journey; it's a tribute to every woman who has bravely taken steps towards safety and freedom. I invite everyone to support this vital cause and help ensure no woman faces this struggle alone."

The walk will honour the brave women who seek help to escape domestic and family violence. Over four days, the team aims to raise \$25,000 by walking 40 kilometres to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Women's Legal Service Queensland. Yazdaneh says donations can be made to womens-legal-service-queensland.grassrootz.com/



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Melbourne audiologist and domestic violence survivor