

Capturing diverse heart

Warrnambool's



Capturing Warrnambool: Photographer James Mepham with partner Emily Reeves and their six-month-old daughter, Elliott.

Words and pictures: Carol Altmann

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[/dropcap]n the surface, Warrnambool and its surrounds may appear to be a very Anglo-Saxon kind of place, but professional photographer **James Mepham** and his partner **Emily Reeves** are seeking to capture another side.

The couple – who recently moved back to what is Emily's hometown – have travelled the world and immersed themselves in various cultures, particularly across south-east Asia and

India, but their latest project involves documenting the many cultures that make up south-west Victoria's largest city.

"When I moved away 20 years ago, Warrnambool was thought to have very little culture and seen as very mono-cultural, but that has really changed," Emily says.

About six months ago, the pair launched [the Cultural Diversity Photography Project](#) – "we could probably do with a better title," James laughs – where James would photograph local people who were born overseas, while Emily recorded an oral "snapshot" of their stories.

These people and stories would be contrasted with local residents who were born and bred in Warrnambool and who have never been abroad: there are quite a few people who fit that category too.

"We are not here to judge, we are not here to put people in boxes, but to simply get this information out there – these stories out there – and hopefully generate a bigger conversation," Emily says.

"Yes," adds James, "in that way it is a documentary: it is documenting a moment in time, capturing how things are in Warrnambool right at this moment."



Local faces from faraway places: Alex (USA) and Artur (Brazil) are among those photographed for the cultural diversity project. Their actual portrait will be revealed next year. Image: James Mephram. www.warrnamboolphotography.com.au

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[/dropcap]ith the help of **Phil Hoggan** from the Warrnambool City Council's now-disbanded skilled migrant program, the pair has made contact with people from a number of countries, including China, India, Sudan, the Philippines, Scotland, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Poland and the USA, but are keen to hear from more volunteers.

The stories are already proving to be fascinating.

One Polish couple, for example, was asked by Emily about their dreams for the future.

“They said ‘there is no dream for the future, because this is our dream: this is it,’” Emily said.

While the experiences captured so far have been overwhelmingly positive, the pair know that not all migration stories have a happy ending – racism and isolation can make living in a regional area very difficult. These stories, if people are prepared to tell them, will be included too.

James and Emily are still in the gathering and interpretation stage of the project, but hope to have an exhibition ready by next March. Both the Warrnambool City Council and Warrnambool Art Gallery have shown a strong interest in showing the work, which will be the first time those involved will see their portraits.



Polish couple Danuta and Vladek are among those who have volunteered so far for the cultural diversity photography project in Warrnambool. Their final portrait will be revealed next year. Image: James Mepham. www.warrnamboolphotography.com.au

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Before coming to Warrnambool, James worked as a professional photographer in Melbourne, having taught himself photography while in the army and going on to become a photo-journalist for the military. His assignments included East Timor, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Sumatra and being the first photographer on the ground after the tsunami hit Banda Aceh.

Such experiences not only left him worldly, but open-hearted to suffering and how fortunate we are to live in Australia.

“I have always been interested in people’s stories and meeting people from all walks of life: it’s a world I have always enjoyed and I want my daughter (Elliott) to enjoy,” James says.

While in Melbourne, he was part of the [Free Photography Project](#), offering free portraits to low-income earners, homeless people, or unemployed people who needed a photograph for a job.

Emily, meanwhile, has just returned to work after the birth of Elliott and it says a lot about how much Warrnambool has changed that she is the Asia-Pacific manager for [World Animal Protection](#), yet works from home.

Both are loving life back by the ocean and say the cultural diversity project has provided an instant friendship circle.

“I must admit that was another one of my motivations: it is a great way to get to meet really interesting people,” James says, smiling.



Here's looking at you: James Mepham and partner Emily Reeves are behind the project to capture the cultural heart and diversity of Warrnambool.

[box] If you would like to be photographed for the Cultural Diversity Photography Project – either as a migrant to Warrnambool or someone who has never travelled overseas – you can contact James on 0414 833 012 or james@warrnamboolphotography.com.au. There is no charge. Visit the [Warrnambool Photography website here](#) for more details.[/box]

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