



Breaking down barriers and building bridges: Saeed Saeed and Inaz Janif have completed a leadership training course for Muslim youths.

PICTURES: EDDIE JIM

## Working to take the 'them' out of 'us and them'

By **SUSHI DAS**

ASK Inaz Janif to tell you the story of what happened when she and 19 other Muslim students met the Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and she laughs.

The story goes like this: Archbishop Mark Coleridge asked the students where they came from. All were Australians, and half were born here. Nevertheless, they dutifully answered the question, explaining the geographical roots of their families: Lebanon, Ethiopia, Pakistan.

Implicit in the question, explains Ms Janif, 25, was a belief that because the students were Muslim, they must have come from outside Australia.

"The archbishop said most of you must have come from war-torn lands and disrupted backgrounds, and I just started shaking my head and thought: no! no! I was born in New Zealand and I came here when I was two months old and I consider myself Australian."

Ms Janif, a school teacher, says his failure to understand that it was possible to be Australian and Muslim came as no surprise. It happens all the time.

Fellow student Saeed Saeed believes the term "Muslim community" has become politicised because Prime Minister John Howard is "always pushing the 'us and them' agenda".

Mr Saeed, 25, a youth support

worker, was born in the United Arab Emirates and moved to Australia when he was 10. He describes himself as "an Australian who happens to be Muslim".

Yesterday the students came to the end of a 10-week leadership training course organised by the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University and the Islamic Council of Victoria.

The state-funded course, to empower young Muslims and encourage leadership skills, provided them with the opportunity to meet decision makers in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra in the hope of dissolving the stereotypes, prejudices and labels that have become associated with the "Muslim community".

Apart from Archbishop Coleridge, the students met Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews and told him what they thought of citizenship tests. They met the Department of Foreign Affairs' ambassador for counter-terrorism, Mike Smith, and asked how many Muslims the department employed. (A few.) And they stayed with Catholic nuns and asked them whether anyone forced them to wear their habits.

They also met lawyers, business leaders, Aboriginal leaders, police, journalists and members of the Jewish community.

Breaking down religious and cultural barriers and building bridges is not easy. It requires nuanced discussions, says Larry

Marshall, the course's project officer at La Trobe University.

He is keen to explain that Muslims are not just people who pray five times a day, wear hijabs and who range from moderate to extreme. They are people who make valuable contributions through their jobs as teachers, youth workers, health workers and more, he says.

And like most people, they also have prejudices. The course aims to deal with them too. Mr Marshall says some in the group believed the media and politicians were responsible for demonising them. The hope is that by meeting people face-to-face, the students may soften hard-line positions.