



# Belonging

A PLACE TO BELONG NEWSLETTER NO 29

July 2010

## NO EASY ANSWERS

Neil Barringham

Recently we have been confronted by the pain of unmet expectations.

A person we have been working with for some years has told us how unhelpful we are to her! This person is highly isolated and very vulnerable. As a network we have made a commitment for some years to include and support her. With little funding to draw from we have worked with primarily voluntary support. We have found three allies who have visited her and spent time with her at various times. We have worked hard to include her in network gatherings. We have assisted with transport to events and activities that she wanted to attend. We have worked with leaders in two churches that she has been a part of to facilitate inclusion in those associations. Recently she was evicted and became technically homeless and we have assisted her to locate a number of housing options.

Now she has again told us a number of major problems she has with our work, our style and our lack of availability and support for her! Of course we have felt hurt, rejected and wanted to withdraw to lick our wounds. We want to throw our hands in the air and walk away from her thinking that our best efforts have been trashed – why hang around any more?

Like most people we want to feel needed and we desire to feel good about assisting people. The Messiah complex is alive and well around here!

As we have talked together we have heard another voice – saying *Listen to her! Hear the invitation! You are now coming to the real work!*

We know that other organisations and groups have come to this point and walked away from her too.

Sure enough, as we stop and share more with her we hear the invitation to take the work a little further. In her complaints and condemnation are hints of what she is really yearning for. She is giving us signals about how she wants to connect and what she deeply yearns for. We cannot satisfy those yearnings but we can meet with her, offer to plan and work together in the directions that her complaints are leading us to.

There is our next step – if we can transcend our disappointment and desire to spit the dummy and walk away! We can gather people, meet with her and profile together the specific things in her feedback that gives us the way forward for what inclusion might really mean for her.

Some of us attended the Community Resource Unit's *Vital Communities: Vital Conversations* Conference earlier this year. One of the themes of this excellent gathering was *There are No Easy Answers*. Our recent work with this person has validated this message!

Wendell Berry challenges us to go beyond our first responses, to take a step further, to see challenges, obstacles and rejection as the *music* when he says:

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

## Visit from Senator Ursula Stephens

The Hon. Ursula Stephens Senator for New South Wales and Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector visited the Thomas Street office of *A Place to Belong* in April 2010.

She was given a tour of 69 Thomas Street and informed about the numerous community organizations that operate from the West End facility.

*A Place to Belong* staff, members of the *A Place to Belong* Operating Committee, participants in various activities, people supported by *A Place to Belong*, and representatives from Spiritus including the CEO Mr Don Luke then met with Senator Stephens.

The Senator listened carefully as speakers outlined the history of *A Place to Belong*, its role in community capacity building and mental health public education. This was reinforced by the sharing of personal stories of recovery and inclusion.

We gave Senator Stephens a document summarising some Key Principles for Facilitating Community Spaces for Inclusion in our work which included the following:

- 1. inclusion is supported when the agency is based in an inclusive context rather than an isolated or stigmatised context – the building, the office, the signage all have a part to play*
- 2. inclusion is supported when staff and volunteers are selected and trained in skills and models which support inclusion – not just on issues of compliance and formalisation*
- 3. inclusion is a way of thinking, working, living and being that is best supported when this 'life practice' permeates all aspects and levels of an agency's work – when the policies, practices, plans and procedures are flexible and prioritised around people's needs for belonging and connectedness*
- 4. inclusion is supported when staff and volunteers are encouraged to reflect on their own experience of marginalisation – our work is a human work, not just a dispassionate professional exercise*
- 5. inclusion is supported when all agency meetings model community engagement – involving a mix of people rather than streaming people into various separated meetings*
- 6. inclusion is supported when one of the knowledge bases of the work is centred around honouring and learning from people's stories and lived experiences*
- 7. because of the exclusion and isolation that people experience, often the first critical step towards inclusion is in our imaginations – we need to imagine together for something better*
- 8. inclusion work is best supported when due consideration is given to building capacity of communities in tandem with working to support isolated individuals*

### Webpage

Recently we were very pleased to launch our new webpage. This provides information about our work and regular updates about upcoming events. Soon a conversation space will be added to allow interaction and discussion about how people are going with including others. See newsletter insert for more information or check out the site for yourself on [www.aplacetobelong.org.au](http://www.aplacetobelong.org.au)

## Volunteering: Theresa says "It's what I want to do"

Part-time university Social Work student Theresa Davis began her involvement as a volunteer when she had finished a university placement at *A Place to Belong*.

*"I found at the end of the placement I wanted to keep going. I found the work that was happening there with people with complex health issues so special and rare."*

She now spends half a day each week with one of the people whom the agency assists.

*"Just spending time with her in her daily life is so important – having company. We are always walking around the area together – it's good to be with her and know that some things are now possible for her as she knows someone is on her side. She doesn't need my 'help' but sometimes she asks for it."*

As a volunteer, she takes part in team discussions and meetings along with staff, community allies and program participants, including Janet.

*"The team supports her and any decision-making that is made regarding her life, she is part of. The whole process is very inclusive and really supports her self-esteem. She is always there, she says what she thinks and no decision is taken away from her."*

Theresa understands first-hand what an impact illness

can have on one's life having recovered from serious illness herself.

*"It's different for people with mental health issues as the way in which they are supported makes a difference to their capacity to stay well. They don't want to end up back in hospital and with more personal support they don't get sick as often. It's good to help make that possible."*

Theresa had wanted to volunteer for a long time and started out volunteering at the New Farm Community garden, joining in with a group of local people.

*"It's a good niche for lots of people to volunteer."*

Her volunteering experiences have been very positive.

*"My circle of friends has exploded – that's the most amazing thing. It's what I want to do and for me it is part of life's balance. I absolutely recommend volunteering to anyone and particularly if they are looking for a way to connect to their community. It's a really good way. People will be very surprised at just how well it works. And people shouldn't be concerned about mental health volunteering. People think odd, strange and challenging things will happen but they never do. It's no stranger than spending a morning with a second cousin – it's quite normal actually."*

## A New Publication

A recent publication *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* will be of interest for anyone interested in policy and mental health.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett compare statistics from across 30 of the most developed countries and show how for some of these countries mental health issues, obesity, violence and imprisonment rates are all increasing! Getting richer is not helping many of these countries. Others however are doing better. Why is this so? The authors then show that it is the most equal of the developed countries – such as Japan and Sweden – that are doing much better than the most unequal of the developed countries – such as Australia and the US. Their conclusion is that countries such as Australia could reduce our mental health statistics by about half if we became more equal – that is, if we reduced the growing gap between rich and poor! Now there's a challenge!

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*.

## An Interesting Study

A study by Dr. Barbara Tooth and some colleagues in Queensland asked people accessing mental health services about factors which had helped and hindered them in their recovery journeys. Mental health professionals were not rated as particularly helpful, and sometimes were considered to be absolutely harmful to recovery – except for those who showed extraordinary humanity and caring, and were prepared to go 'the extra mile' and show people something approaching genuine friendship. The message coming out of this important qualitative research was that people are vindicated in saying: *just treat us as people, with care and compassion, and we will get better*.  
*New Paradigm, VicServe, September 2004, p. 17.*

## Companioning Research

Rachael Neden is doing a community development placement with A Place To Belong for the next three months. A key focus for her will be researching the needs of people who are companioning others and how we can support companions better. If anyone would like to share reflections about companioning with Rachael please contact her at our office.

## Opportunities for Training and Meeting Others

### Sunday Workshops

Every second month we sponsor a Sunday afternoon workshop, aiming to inspire and equip people to build community links. These will usually feature someone's story, afternoon tea, small groups and a short presentation. Dates for upcoming workshops are October 10 and November 28. Contact us if you want to be on the mailing list.

### Guiding Group

A quarterly meeting for people who want to help shape the work of this network. Come and meet others who are holding a vision for better lives and better communities. The next Guiding Group meetings will be held on Thursday, September 16 and Thursday, November 4.

### Reading, Writing, Computer and Life skills Group

Mondays and Tuesdays from 9.00 am to 1.00 pm classes are held that facilitate learning to read, write, use computers as well as teaching various life skills that aim to assist greater inclusion in the community. Please contact Penny, Carmel or Damian on 3217 2522 for more information.

### Recovery Training Day: Saturday, 28 August

Many of us yearn for a fuller more enriched life for ourselves and for those we know who experience the struggle of working through mental health challenges. We are planning our 4th Recovery Day and hope that this will help us find ways forward in our diverse encounters with mental health issues. See our web-page for more information or call or email [admin@aplacetobelong.org.au](mailto:admin@aplacetobelong.org.au) for brochures and/or registration details.

### Service User Assessment

Every two years we engage an external consultant to interview participants of our work and to feed back to us what people are saying about our engagements with them. Kathy Buckler recently completed such an assessment and we thank her for this. Kathy made a number of recommendations to us. An Executive Summary of her report is found on our webpage.

### Important Policies and Processes

*A Place To Belong* welcomes advocates to be with people whenever we are working with others. We also realise that our work could often be done much better. We value your feedback to help us do better. Complaints can also be made if we have possibly done the wrong thing by someone. Please contact us for information about our policies in these important areas.

### Comings and Goings

This year *A Place To Belong* has been honoured to have some very competent people join our work teams. We welcome Suellen Welch and Grant Nelson to our inclusion team, Damian le Goullon to our Reading and Writing and Lifeskills program, and Tania Davenport, Rebecca Howlett and Lucy Kinivan to our lifestyle support teams. We would like to thank Owen Strong for his invaluable voluntary support to the manager. After many years of working with us, Penny Barringham will be taking an extended time of leave. And, sadly, we have to farewell Alex Caddie from the admin team.

### Building Better Communities Courses

*A Place To Belong* will be working in partnership with the Community Praxis Cooperative to offer *Building Better Communities* courses in or near Brisbane. These courses will inspire and upskill people to build more inclusive, safe and open communities. Look at our web page or phone the office if you would like to find out more.

---

### A Place To Belong—A Spiritus Mental Health Network

PO Box 5873, West End 4101 Phone: 3217 2522 Fax: 3217 2274

Email: [neil@aplacetobelong.org.au](mailto:neil@aplacetobelong.org.au)

Webpage: [www.aplacetobelong.org.au](http://www.aplacetobelong.org.au)