



# Belonging

A PLACE TO BELONG NEWSLETTER NO 32

January 2013

## How can we work in complexity?

Neil Barringham

The story of Helen Keller is well known. Surviving an illness at 18 months she was left deaf and blind. She did not develop speech or other forms of communication. At the age of 7 she was incontinent and displayed serious behavior problems. She was not in school and her family was overwhelmed. She was treated and described as an undisciplined pet and was seen to need institutionalisation where she would die.

Yet as an adult Helen Keller was a university graduate, a social activist, a public speaker, an author, a world traveller and was voted the most admired person in her country!

How so? Helen's parents resisted institutionalisation and searched for an optimistic expert. Alexander Bell introduced them to Ann Sullivan who spent 30 days holding hands with Helen while repetitively doing hand signals with her. Vocabulary was soon developed, opportunities were provided and daily efforts sustained building on Helen's strengths and competencies.

The results confounded the experts. Helen Keller became one of the great personalities of her era. Because of her numerous valued roles her handicaps were almost invisible to the point where she became a much admired icon. Yet in her early life she displayed behaviors that would have had her fit neatly in our modern day 'complex and challenging behavior' categories.

At *A Place To Belong* we want to respond hopefully and creatively to people who experience dominating or disabling mental health experiences. What does inclusion mean for people who experience impairments and who are shunned and disrespected in their communities? How can we travel with people towards a good life when there are so many behavioural, emotional, social and health obstacles and challenges?

We know a woman who is difficult to

understand due to her overpowering mental health experience. She wanders her suburb visiting various groups and organisations but there are not many people who give her the time of day. Most people would not have the patience or time it would take to try and decipher what she is saying. Her experience of community and the systems around her has been one of benign neglect.

In the past few months two people have reminded us of the way forward. One of our workers spent time with this woman and noticed how she was attempting to communicate. He found a means of communicating with her that meant she was more easily understood. Importantly, he informed others who knew this woman that she is very conscious of what is happening around her. This is significant as it meant that others would be less tempted to demean or disrespect her thinking that she cannot understand what is happening around her.

Then another person began to spend more focused time with her, observing where she visits and getting to know her routines. This person also learnt more about what works and what doesn't work in communicating with the woman. Before long we began forming a picture of a woman who lives life with dignity and who has formed many of her own connections. Through this process a newer deeper climate of respect was forming around this woman.

Further, because communication was happening to a greater depth information was being transacted about how the woman wanted to be assisted. She lives in poverty in housing that she loathes and she experiences significant health and dental issues. Now there is some planning happening with her about how her life opportunities can be improved and there is a greater chance of different issues being dealt with.

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Along with this we are observing signs of her gifts and skills—her creativity, her advocate's heart and her courtesy. She is being seen more and more in a positive and valued light.

Here we see a model emerging – not dissimilar to the approach Helen Keller's advocates took – for how we can respond in such difficult complex situations, namely:

- Love the person and spend time with them
- Listen to the person
- Learn what works and what doesn't work
- Educate others around the person to build a growing climate of respect
- Then work on the issues that the person wants dealt with
- And observe and support areas of strength and capacity in the person towards positive social roles

This woman won't follow the same path as Helen Keller – but working with similar principles we can see possibilities of a better life emerging for her and for her community around her as she contributes and offers herself.

## **A PLACE TO BELONG'S DIRECTION IN 2013**

We continue to consider our place and contribution in the community, disability and mental health sectors. Our focus in 2013 is on three primary areas.

### ***1. Deepening our work***

Through constant reflection on our practice at a number of levels, for example, at agency gatherings; through people's stories; through open, visionary, reflective conversations; through our biannual Service User Assessments; and through formal research.

### ***2. Extending our influence***

We will aim to take our learning and thinking to others to encourage them to also see the community vision. We will endeavour to do this through the personal interactions of all people in our network with others, through learning circles, training, writing, active use of our website, annual Recovery Day, presentations at universities, TAFEs and conferences and through working with students on placements.

### ***3. Safeguarding our work***

This means preserving the mission, values and original intent of our work, to have a heightened consciousness about the risks to the work. This means sustaining ourselves in the work, continuing to think through succession and long term sustainability and building a strong leadership team to co-create, protect, deepen and share responsibility for the work. It means keeping *A Place To Belong* in right relationship with the people it serves. It means exploring alternative funding sources to reduce dependency upon government and having consciousness about our relationships with funders, administrators and auditors.

## **Social Connectedness, Literacy and Mental Health**

In 2013 *A Place To Belong* (and Anglicare) will partner with the School of Public Health and Social Work at QUT to understand better how improved literacy and numeracy increases people's social connectedness. The research will be centred around *A Place To Belong's* Reading and Writing program which aims to help people increase their functional literacy and social connectedness. For more information about this research contact Jeff Johnson at [jeff@aplacetobelong.org.au](mailto:jeff@aplacetobelong.org.au).

## Remembering Carmel

### Carmel Rosella: A personal reflection

When I think of Carmel Rosella, a smile comes to my lips. It comes from a sense of admiration and affection for this wonderful woman, a woman of significance who changed so much for so many. She had many friends and supported people in the community with whom she shared an understanding of the challenges life can bring.

Her childhood was one of massive abuse, an absence of trust when it was so needed and her life was scarred with alcohol and self-harm in her attempts to obliterate the pain. Carmel emerged as an adult who could not read or write - life for her was very unfair and she wanted it otherwise. Remarkably, she made it so and became an inspiration for us all. She learned to read and write and her abilities with communication, especially her work as Co-ordinator of the Reading and Writing Group, helped change the lives of others in her community.

Most of us reading this know these things about Carmel and something of the hurt she carried with her. But she was also a person of humour and kindness, with great depths of courage and goodness; a woman with persuasive power and a huge capacity for love and generosity. It was these qualities she shared for the good in her short stay on this earth. We are poorer without her presence amongst us. People like Carmel are rare though and never really go away. Who amongst us will ever forget that she had overcome so much and had given back what she could to others.

I will always be grateful for her friendship and the fact that she trusted me enough to talk about her life. I will take her with me always. Thank you Carmel. You are a profound spirit.

Debbie Price

Carmel left this life in October 2012.

**And I know with all my heart that the only way the world will change is if many more of us step forward, let go of our judgments, become curious about each other, and take the risk to begin a conversation.**

Margaret Wheatley

## 2012 SERVICE USER ASSESSMENT

*A Place To Belong* would like to thank all the people who contributed to our service user assessment in 2012. Every second year we employ external consultants who meet with people who access *A Place To Belong* to hear how we are doing and how we might improve. Two consultants, Jane Sherwin and Lynda Shevellar, conducted our evaluation in 2012 to try to find out *are we making a difference in people's lives and if so how?* At our March Guiding Group Jane and Lynda shared their findings and encouraged discussion.

Ten themes were identified from the conversations that showed how *A Place To Belong* had made a difference in people's lives. These themes were: fidelity, being safe, the worker-person relationship, felicity and fellowship, expanding the identity, equipping people to have a typical community life, freely given relationships, finding places that are welcoming, complaints are responded to, and individual advocacy.

The primary recommendation from the evaluation is for *A Place To Belong* to take its inclusion work deeper and further – to connect people more substantially into their localities and to discern and support the development of positive and valued social roles to enhance people's contributions.

Thanks to everyone who gave their time and shared their ideas and experiences so honestly.

## Opportunities for Training and Meeting Others

### **Sunday Workshops**

Every second month we sponsor a Sunday afternoon workshop, aiming to inspire and equip people to respond to mental health needs in their communities. These will usually feature someone's story, afternoon tea and a presentation. Dates for 2013 workshops are February 3, March 24, June 2, September 22, and November 17. In 2013 the workshops will be held at The Parish Centre, cnr High and Jephson Streets, Toowong. 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. Meetings are held on Thursday evenings and the dates for 2013 are February 21, May 16, August 22, and November 7.

### **Reading, Writing, Computer and Life skills Program**

Mondays (Mt. Gravatt) and Tuesdays (West End) from 9.00 am to 1.00 pm sessions 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 Damian on 3217 2522 for more information.

### **Recovery Day: Probably August 3rd**

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 seventh Recovery Day and hope that this will help us find ways forward in our diverse encounters with mental health issues. Contact us to add your name to the mailing list or see our webpage for details and a brochure

### **Mental Health Orientation Day for Chaplains and Pastoral Care Workers**

A day filled with seminars, resources and information about mental health for people engaging in pastoral care. The keynote speaker is Dave Andrews on *How can we develop a more human response to mental health?* To be held on July 24 at Chermside. Contact us or see our webpage for more information.

### **Learning Circles**

We facilitate learning circles for people who want to discuss, read and consider how to assist inclusion for isolated people. Contact us for details.

### **Building Better Communities Courses**

*A Place To Belong* is keen to work with a host organisation or network to offer a 20 hour *Building Better Communities* course in Brisbane. Developed by *The Community Praxis Cooperative* the course will equip and inspire people to build more connected, inclusive and safe communities. This is for people who don't have experience as well as for people who are already active in their communities. Host organisations will need to provide a meeting space, refreshments and find funding to underwrite the course.

### **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.

### **2013 Office Hours and Admin Staff**

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday 9 am to 3 pm: Carlos

Thursday 9 am to 2 pm: Sannie

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### **A Place To Belong—An Anglicare Mental Health Network**

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