



# Belonging

A PLACE TO BELONG NEWSLETTER NO 33

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## When is Helping Helpful?

Neil Barringham

Bennelong is a well known indigenous Australian. When the first fleet arrived in Port Jackson in 1788 Bennelong was one of the first Australians to connect significantly with the new European arrivals. He learnt English, began to wear European clothing and lived for a time in the new township of Sydney. When he was offered a trip to England to meet the king of England he assented and proceeded to entertain the English courtiers with his good humour and wit. Here for all to see was someone who showed the possibilities for 'advancement', for education, for rehabilitation, for 'improvement'.

After his return to Sydney however, the story began to unravel for the Europeans when Bennelong quietly left his lodgings and his European clothes and moved back to live in the bush. Even though he was unable to reconnect fully with his own people and tribe Bennelong chose to leave the European settlement for good. His choice enraged the Europeans who had now lost their 'project person', the prototype of what was possible in the education, improvement and rehabilitation of someone 'in need'. Rather than being seen as an amazingly intelligent and resilient man, he was not forgiven and was seen as an 'irreconcilable savage'.

This story helps us think about helping – and when 'helping' may not be helpful.

We all need help and support with living our lives. Many of us also like to offer help – and we like to think that we are being helpful to others. Mental health is an area where it is believed that lots of people need help – but we also know that sometimes people are afraid or anxious about offering assistance.

How do we know when we are being helpful? Where does our do-good-ism stop and genuine help start? When is our help simply a projection of our need to feel helpful and good about ourselves?

Our work began in 1994 with the question –

*how can we find people in communities who can get alongside people with mental health experiences and who are asking for assistance?* As part of our consultation for this early research we were advised about the danger of recruiting helpers and assistants who would give advice, not be empathic and who might be volunteering because of their own needs to feel important or useful rather than a genuine desire to get alongside people who are vulnerable or struggling. *Do-gooders can do much harm, someone said to us, people who are vulnerable will withdraw.*

What do we do? How does this relate to our work in mental health as we seek to assist people, develop natural supports around people and to link in and provide services to people? What does inclusion and support really mean when people we aim to assist don't 'improve' or 'recover' in the direction we hope or expect they might? How can we avoid trying to 'colonise' people as Bennelong experienced? Here are some reflections:

- We need to keep asking *whose needs are being met here?* If our offers of assistance are made in order that we can have a more secure sense of our own well-being in relation to 'the other' who is 'disadvantaged' or 'deprived' we will perpetuate power differentials and most likely struggle to cope with rejection or reformulation of the work we are attempting.
- Co-partnership is key. We need to ensure that the authority of our assistance or work with people is a shared authority. The choice to act must always engage the person being assisted and any important others around and not just be an imposed act. Does this person believe that what we are doing is working towards their vision of the good life? Am I co-creating something here or am I foisting my views and hopes on this person's life?

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- Transparency is also important. We must continually open our efforts to others who can review, evaluate or critique what they see. This can happen informally (by constantly asking others around a situation for their feedback) or formally (such as organisations enlisting external stakeholders to evaluate and review their work).
- Our use of language is important. The words we use can perpetuate power differentials. In mental health the conspicuous and obvious example is about how we use medical and diagnostic language in our encounters with people – how much is this language asserting dominance and how much is it being helpful for each person? As we seek to assist others we can use language that is inclusive, human and engaging rather than professional, bureaucratic and formal which can be overpowering, separating and ‘colonising’.
- Honesty is important particularly when we cannot assist someone or have come to the limits of our capacity to respond. We know one person for example who says that her recovery was triggered by a doctor saying to her *we don't know how to help you any more. We have tried everything we can.* This professional honesty brought her to the realisation that if any recovery process was going to happen it was up to her and that she needed to stop looking to others to rescue and save her.

Perhaps a useful final word comes again from our indigenous history: *if you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine – then let's work together* (variously attributed). (for more about Bennelong's story see the SBS DVD series “First Australians: The Untold Story of Australia”)

## 2013 INCLUSION AWARDS

*A Place To Belong* presented the following inclusion awards at Wellbeing Day in October 2013 to individuals who have modeled and demonstrated inclusive spirit to others.

***Inclusive Person Award*** to Marilynne and Ralph Warner for their advocacy and inclusion of a disadvantaged woman and others over many years. In the 1990s the Warners would sometimes find a woman who was homeless sleeping on the step at the front of their city shop when they arrived in the morning. They shared coffees and time with her and eventually she asked for their assistance. They advocated for her to Disability Services Queensland and she was granted a support package. Marilynne and Ralph have stayed in regular and consistent (almost daily) contact with this woman over the years since then. They have helped save her life.

***Inclusive Worker Award*** to Surahna Liebenberg from the Home Ideas Centre in South Brisbane. Surahna and her colleagues have created a welcoming space for a woman with an overpowering mental health experience who drops in regularly. Surahna shows respect and courtesy towards this woman and has been open to exploring strategies which assist in communicating with her. Most importantly though, Surahna clearly values this person for who she is and genuinely sees her gifts and attributes.

***Inclusive Leader Award*** to Margaret Rodgers for her leadership over many years in the disability sector across a range of organisations and roles supporting the inclusion and betterment of the lives of many people. For thirty years she has enjoyed working with people with a disability and their families in Queensland in a variety of organisations; many involved in family support and most in the non-government sector. Her role as Director of the Community Resource Unit means she is strategically placed to offer leadership at this time when the community sector is undergoing enormous change and when values-based action is highly needed.

***Inclusive Business Award*** to West End chemist, Andrew Tanos and his team, for their inclusive response to people ‘on the edge’ in their business. There have been many times when Andrew or one of his staff have tended to people's wounds, provided help or assisted in other ways to support people who needed a hand. At a time when many businesses are concerned primarily for ‘the bottom line’ it is good to see a business team who care for people as well as their own business.

***Inclusive Professional Award*** to Melody Edwardson who has provided long standing leadership in the mental health sector in Queensland, building networks of collegiality between and across organizations to assist the inclusion of people with mental health challenges. She has done this in a humble yet enthusiastic way, with a quiet yet supportive approach and is a great resource in our sector.

## Emotional CPR training

*A Place To Belong* is pleased to be launching eCPR training for the first time ever in Brisbane. Through a combination of presentation, interactive discussions, and dynamic role-plays, trainees will learn about and practice the key concepts involved in effectively supporting a person through an emotional crisis and into healing. ECPR is appropriate for the general public as well as family members, service providers, peers and others. The training is being offered twice this year, February 15 and 22 and then again in May/June. The cost is \$50/\$20. For more details contact our office or see [www.aplacetobelong.org.au](http://www.aplacetobelong.org.au)

## RAW experiences

The *A Place to Belong* Reading and Writing Group provides a 'community literacy' approach to education. We work with adults with disabilities to create positive learning experiences. Traditional or mainstream education settings generally expect students to fit into existing learning programs. Many adult learners feel that their education opportunities are limited by a lack of options. The Reading and Writing Group works in partnership with adult learners to tailor individual programs of learning. Through our learning partnerships, we seek to:

- learn together
- encourage choice and
- enable people's inclusion in the community

The program is heavily reliant on volunteer tutors and we welcome people who are interested and able to assist us. You don't need to be a professional expert – you just need to be open to learning about community literacy and working collaboratively with adult learners. If you would like to offer a few hours a week, we are providing tutor training sessions this year as follows:

9.00am-11.00am 29<sup>th</sup> January 2014 Venue 69 Thomas St West End  
10.30am-12.30pm 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 Venue 1693 Logan Rd Mt Gravatt  
10.30am-12.30pm 24<sup>th</sup> June 2014 Venue 69 Thomas St West End  
10.30am-12.30pm 15<sup>th</sup> September 2014 Venue 1693 Logan Rd Mt Gravatt

Call us if you would like to chat about what might interest you in contributing to this work.

Many of us who are involved in the program are personally transformed through these mutual learning experiences. Many of our adult learners use the opportunity to not only increase their vocabulary but to make personal statements. Michael Kevill is a man who travels a significant distance each week to attend Reading and Writing Group. He is searching for ways of becoming more independent. He does not like being seen as "handicapped". His writing is a call to all of us to assert our personal freedom.

## Nobody Owns People

Some people have got to be reminded.  
you can't own a person.  
We are free.  
We're free as birds,  
Just no wings  
And no feathers.  
There's no stopping us from walking.  
Not a thing.  
That's why we've got legs.  
We've got to walk  
somewhere.  
I walk anywhere.  
I hope  
I make it home.

Michael Kevill

## 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. The first 2014 workshop will take place on 2 February. Following workshops will be on 30th March, 1st June, 27th July and 16th November. The workshops will again be held at The Parish Centre, corner 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 2014 are 20th February, 15th May, 7th August and 6th November.

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

Mondays (Mt. Gravatt) and Tuesdays (West End) from 9.00 am to 1.00 pm. These sessions 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, Christine or Amanda on 3217 2522 for more information.

### **Wellbeing Day**

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 eighth Wellbeing Day (most likely in early September) 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. Date for 2014 is 23 July. Location—Chermside-Kedron Uniting Church. Contact us or see our webpage for more information.

### **Learning Circles**

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

### **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 done the wrong thing by someone. Please contact us for information about our policies in these important areas.

### **2014 Office Hours and Admin Staff**

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday 9 am to 3 pm: Carlos  
Thursday 9 am to 2 pm: Sannie

### **Interested in Volunteering?**

Our work is strengthened by people's volunteer contributions. There are four primary ways that people can engage with us —as any ally for someone in community, as a learning partner in the Reading and Writing Group program (see previous page), assisting with organizing or hosting an event (such as Wellbeing Day or a workshop) or assisting with admin support in our office. Feel free to contact us if you would consider any of these kind of options.

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

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