



# Belonging

A PLACE TO BELONG NEWSLETTER NO 34

January 2015

## Prophets and Champions: Dealing with Loneliness and Mental Health

Neil Barringham

This age could be dubbed the Age of Loneliness. We are shaped – perhaps more than almost any other species – by contact with others. We cannot cope alone. Yet with competition and individualism being almost the religion of our time, our loss of connectedness and happiness is the collateral damage.

In the mental health scene we see people engage in the struggle for belonging and connectedness. We can learn lessons from our companions as we see them brilliantly craft links and connections with others. These lessons and pathways are prophetic for our contemporary times in which loneliness is such a dominant problem.

Deborah is a woman we know who regularly assists with training professionals about community inclusion and mental health. She is a powerful character and has learnt lots of lessons from being homeless and in various institutions over the years. In her workshops Deborah talks about life in her local suburb, people she hangs out with and things she likes to do.

Deborah's story is an evocative reminder of people's capacities to grow, to engage, to participate, to be enjoyed, to be respected, and to craft out a sense of belonging in this age of loneliness.

Her story is also a reminder of some of the elements we can work with to assist belonging and connecting. Some of these components are:

1. Place – Deborah has a strong sense of 'place' around her local suburb where she has built relationships with a number of neighbours, households and businesses who welcome and respect her. We can assist people to build a sense of 'place' which they might call 'home'. This might be a suburb or town, a particular

chair or spot to enjoy, it might be a special 'place' in a local park or favourite coffee shop.

2. People – in her story Deborah speaks about people who provide valuable roles for her – as a neighbour (role) Deborah meets people who live nearby; as a customer (role) Deborah meets shopkeepers; as a cigarette smoker (role) Deborah meets her local tobacconist; as a bank account holder (role) Deborah knows all her local bank staff (including the manager); as a church participant (role) Deborah is well known by a group of people at her church. We can assist people to meet other people and support positive roles that can offer a bridge to real connections.
3. Passions – Deborah loves DVDs and her large TV screen. This passion has meant that she is a frequent customer at two DVD stores and her local library. Her relationships with staff at one of these stores led to Deborah keeping one of her house keys at the shop for when she locked herself out (note this is an unfunded local community safeguard). We can assist people to express their passions and interests as potential pathways to relationships and safeguards.
4. Personality – Like all of us Deborah has a unique personality. Some people are drawn to her energy and style – others are not. The ways we assist one person will be different from the ways we work with others but we can enable people to locate the places and spaces where they are welcomed and accepted. For example, some will prefer quality time with individuals - we can work towards that. Others prefer gatherings - let's work with that.

5. Perspective – our perspective and attitudes will affect how we relate with others. There are times where Deborah has been challenged to change her orientation towards certain people or events. This embraces her taking some responsibility for her own inclusion and has been a real part of her unfolding story. We can assist people to participate in their own inclusion by helping them shape their attitude, perspectives and approaches to others.

Deborah's experience is instructive for us as we know that connectedness and belonging are two of the foremost contributors to happiness and wellbeing. Deborah's experience shows how place, people, passions, personality and perspective can all be worked with to assist belonging, whether for ourselves or for someone else.

David Pitonyak says: *Our brain is hard-wired for belonging. We are preoccupied with it. It's isolation—not disability—that causes most problems. I believe that loneliness is the number one cause of difficult behaviours.*

If Pitonyak is right—and if we are indeed living in 'the age of loneliness'—then it behoves us to understand how we can rebuild a sense of belonging—for ourselves and those we assist.

## Connecting to the Margins

Some of the barriers for reaching out for support are well documented. A culture of self-reliance, stigma and accessibility to services are often challenges. On the outskirts of our city we find people disconnected from community support. These issues have become apparent to our Reading and Writing Group (RAW) as we extend our influence. An adult learner began to seek help from us and was willing to drive for over an hour to get support. The RAW group preferred process is to find support for reading within people's local communities. Adults are more likely to develop fluency through actively supported community participation. We know that we need to build cross-sectoral relationships in order to build a learning society.

We are looking for people who would be willing to commit a modest amount of time to support adult learning on the fringes of our city. Already the confidence of some rather isolated learners has benefitted from a small amount of support. One adult learner, for example, was rebuilding her confidence to use computers. She found that after only two weeks of support from a computer literate support person she had begun to re-establish important relationships.

At present we would like a learning ally for a mature adult learner in the Pimpama/Ormeau area. We are also looking for people who could support learning for adults in the Coopers Plains and Northgate areas.

If you are interested in being a learning ally or a tutor for the RAW program we have a number of pathways for your consideration. Our website has information about our program and stories of inclusion (see [www.aplacetobelong.org.au](http://www.aplacetobelong.org.au)). You can email me ([Damian@aplacetobelong.org.au](mailto:Damian@aplacetobelong.org.au)) to make contact and to learn about potential roles available to support adult learners. We are also running a number of training days to help you build your skills to support adult learners:

- 27th January, 9:30am-12pm. Venue: 69 Thomas Street, West End.
- 30th March, 9:30am-12pm. Venue: 1693 Logan Road, Mt. Gravatt.
- 23rd June, 9:30am-12pm. Venue: 69 Thomas Street, West End.
- 14th September, 9:30am-12pm. Venue: 1693 Logan Road, Mt. Gravatt.

## Learning and Inclusion Research

During 2013-2014 the Queensland University of Technology partnered with Anglicare Southern Queensland in a research project studying the Reading and Writing Group at *A Place To Belong*. This resulted in a published study *He was learning to read, but he wasn't learning to live*.

The finding of the report is that putting literacy learning inside an agency devoted to helping people connect to community has an amazing potential. People who can read and write take their ability for granted, but a little reflection tells you that almost everything we do in community, from paying bills to reading bus timetables, requires that skill. People in the Reading and Writing Group are

using their literacy to find places to live, to write their stories, and to apply for government grants. But it is not just about people fitting into community. People are using their skills to change the ways other people think about them and in the process changing society.

For more go to <http://aplacetobelong.org.au> , access Recent Posts and you will find “Publication of the RAW report”

## 2014 INCLUSION AWARDS

*A Place To Belong* presented the following inclusion awards at Wellbeing Day in September 2014 to individuals who have modelled and demonstrated inclusive spirit to others.

**Inclusive Professional Award: Robert Bland.** Many people in the community mental health sector in Queensland know Robert Bland. Over many years he has actively supported a number of community organisations and has spoken and written extensively about mental health. Robert is known to approach his work in mental health with a spirit of authenticity, humility and collegiality. One doesn't often hear of university students enjoying lectures but we have received feedback over the years from students who have valued – even been touched by – Robert's person centred and human approach to mental health.

**Inclusive Business Award: Fuel Espresso in Annerley.** We know someone who says – *Fuel is one of my local coffee shops and my whole family frequent it for several reasons - great coffee and food, great community feeling but most importantly, we like the welcome that Patrik gives and how everyone is treated the same. Many different people from all walks of life drop in. There are two couches inside the shop where strangers sit and chat.. Those couches act as great ice breakers! There is one particular man I have come to know who speaks openly about his mental illness. People accept him and Patrik does too. Patrik doesn't ask him to leave. He waits until he has a break in making coffee and then sits with the man and talks to him about his day and what has happened to upset him. I believe that Patrik utilises inclusion in his business and he does so naturally; without even thinking about it. He is accepting of difference and I have witnessed him showing kindness and patience to people and treating everyone the same.*

**Inclusive Business Award: West End Newsagency.** Narelle, Tony and the staff at West End Newsagency really value and enjoy the sense of community they experience with their customers. From the busy and bustling vantage point of their newsagency, they can observe and appreciate how people from many walks of life connect with and look out for each other in a community context. The newsagency staff make a significant contribution to this sense of connection through the respectful climate they seek to create with their patient and gentle responses to a range of people from diverse backgrounds, including many people with disabilities. Kindness, respect and understanding are among the key ingredients in their contribution to the vibrant and eclectic community landscape they are very happy to be a part of.

**Inclusive Family Member: Neil Davie.** This is a father who has demonstrated long term gentleness and honour to his son Nicholas. If you have the opportunity to speak with Neil you will find that he constantly communicates his son's strengths and capacities in the search for an ordinary and typical life. His inclusive and honouring spirit oozes through the pores of his skin. Neil has assisted his son to get a better life by arranging for a home to be built which takes into account his son's needs. Neil Davie takes up the challenge of being a family carer in a very inclusive way.

**Inclusive Business Award: Woolloongabba Antiques Centre.** A spontaneous visit to the Woolloongabba Antique Centre was the 'open door' for a person – let's call him 'Danny' – to start developing a relationship that goes beyond the conventional business-customer relationship. Weekly visits are now part of Danny's 'to do list' as he feels welcomed, respected and encouraged to share with all staff members his passion for music, coffee, style and friendship. Last year as part of his birthday celebration some staff members with their families joined him; they came out of work time to enjoy what had been a memorable afternoon for Danny, an afternoon full of fun, friendship, kindness, laughter and special gifts – such as a ride in a staff member's White Cadillac ... an unforgettable ride around Brisbane CBD where Danny certainly felt like a movie star.

## 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 2015 workshop is planned to take place on February 15. Tentative dates for other workshops are April 17, June 21, August 9 and October 18. The workshops should again be held at The Parish Centre, corner High and Jephson Streets, Toowong. Contact us if you would like 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 at 69 Thomas Street, West End. Tentative dates for 2015 are 12 March, 28 May, 27 August and 19 November. Again, contact us if you would like to be added to the mailing list.

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

Mondays (Mt. Gravatt) and Tuesdays (West End) from 9.30 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, 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. It is unlikely that we will coordinate a Wellbeing Day in 2015. Contact us to add your name to the mailing list or see our webpage for details and a brochure for the next Wellbeing Day in 2016.

### **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 tentative date for 2015 is Wednesday July 22 and we hope to be at the Chermside-Kedron Uniting Church again. 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 possibly done the wrong thing by someone. Please contact us for information about our policies in these important areas.

### **2015 Office Hours and Admin Staff**

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

---

### **A Place To Belong—An Anglicare 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)