



CREATING HOMES
LIVES CHANGING

STORIES & IMAGES
OF 22 RESILIENT PEOPLE

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SUPPORTIVE HOUSING: HOUSING PLUS SUPPORT

Micah Projects' vision as an organisation is to create justice and respond to injustice. Every day we are confronted by the inequality and injustices which impact on the lives of people with whom we interact. Our teams work hard to break down barriers that leave people without housing, healthcare, employment, meaningful connections and importantly, a voice.

After ten years of watching people trapped in poverty, homelessness and abuse we committed to **ending homelessness** in our community and finding **new approaches** that would work for people to break the cycle and create quality of life.

We started with housing.

We created a Housing and Homelessness Fund, asking for donations to support us to provide emergency accommodation and ensure that no child we had contact with experienced homelessness.

Then we started creating homes.

If people moved into empty houses, they quickly left, as it took too long and was too expensive to set up their unit and didn't feel homely or welcoming. We raised more money to establish units with the household goods people needed to get started in their new home. Items like fridges, beds, doonas, pots and pans and toiletries helped create a home for people and made a real difference. People were staying in their homes.

Then we started connecting support with people's homes.

We learned that people who have been homeless for long periods of time, need support to stay housed. We discovered **Supportive Housing**, a model with more than 20 years of evidence that connects up permanent housing and support in an intentional way that breaks the cycle of homelessness. This concept of Supportive Housing realigns our efforts from crisis and transitional housing options while people are homeless, to connecting up permanent housing and community services. **It is the difference between managing homelessness in our communities and ending it - one person at a time.**

As an organisation we could never have achieved these learnings without the generosity of our many donors. The RBS Morgans Foundation, which has donated \$25,000 each year for the past five years, has greatly assisted us. *GIVIT*, and individuals donating furniture, have contributed to hundreds of units over the years. The Mater Foundation funded the 50 Lives 50 Homes Campaign in 2010, which gave us a burst of new energy in how we approach rough sleeping, improve access to housing, match housing and services for success around a person's circumstances and help a person sustain tenancy. Through the Campaign period from June 2010 till October 2012, 167 people have been housed.

We had the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government Green paper, a consultative process resulting in the landmark *The Road Home*, a policy framework directing a National Partnership Agreement between Commonwealth and State and Territory governments. Never before has there been such an ambitious investment, combining a building program for new housing stock and new services in local communities across Australia. In Queensland this resulted in

4000 new units of housing and over \$100 million in services, jointly funded by the State and Commonwealth for three years. These are funds which have allowed us to put our learning into practice.

Then we integrated healthcare with housing and support.

Through our commitment to ending homelessness we have learned that healthcare is a critical platform for success. Poverty, homelessness, traumatic events in childhood, poor nutrition, experiences of violence and mental illness create chronic health conditions that make it very difficult to get out of homelessness, stay housed and achieve quality of life. Bringing quality clinical healthcare to people in their homes once they are housed makes a difference.

We have shifted our thinking and our practice.

Our commitment to turning people's lives around has meant a shift for us from feeling powerless, to being more engaged in learning, reflecting, and being more proactive in doing whatever it takes within our capacity to bring about change. We now know that we can make the difference between someone living or dying on the streets; from having a hidden life to a connected life; to witnessing people move from crisis and feeling hopeless, to once again experiencing connection with their own aspirations and hope.

As the stories in this book demonstrate, our journey of integrating housing and community services, regardless of the source of our funding, has been one that has proved effective in its outcome. We have listened to what people have said they wanted, and looked at where we could find pathways that have proved successful elsewhere. Through national and international mentors, research, partners, evidence-based practices in relation to supportive housing, we have adapted what we could within our context, and have found key elements that have changed the way we work. Our services operate 7 days a week, 365 days a year. This enables us to be responsive, prevent crisis from getting out of control and,

most importantly, be available with a person as they make the journey from being on the streets for years to creating their home.

We have developed new partnerships that have contributed to change – with housing providers such as the Department of Housing, Four Walls, St Vincent de Paul and Common Ground Queensland; healthcare providers such as Mater Health Services, UQ Health, Greater Metro South Medicare Local and St Vincent's Hospital Brisbane; community organisations such as Rec Link, Big Issue and The Hive; with Footprints and Centacare South West Brisbane Community Options Project who provide domestic assistance and social support; specialist services such as Lotus Place, the Homelessness Health Outreach Team, TransitCare and Queensland Police.

When people have a home, they can then build the web of connections that they seek for their own circumstances and aspirations. A healthy interdependence between organisations and services, family and friends can co-exist in a person's life without their personal needs having to spiral into a crisis in order to access a service. The poverty and the trauma of their lives does not disappear. But as these individuals say - a home and access to services can make the difference. People can feel their own strength come back, a sense of dignity can emerge again, and as their portraits show, they can smile at the future.

The search to create a home, to have a meaningful and healthy life, to have people in their lives to rely on, to learn and grow personally, have connection with family and to have a job are the aspirations of people that we hear over and over in our work.

This approach makes sense... for each person, for services and for funders. It makes sense for everyone.

Karyn Walsh
Coordinator, Micah Projects



VICTOR

“With the help of Tanya I am now getting out and going to coffee shops sober. I’ve turned into a yuppie!”

I was taken away by the department when I was five. All I can remember of my parents is them standing at the gate waving goodbye. I haven’t seen them since. Some of the stories I could tell about the boys’ homes would blow your mind. There are still court cases going on because of the abuse.

I used to ask people who I was, where my parents were? I felt that my parents didn’t want me and hoped that the army would, that I could be part of something, belong somewhere. They wouldn’t take me on academic grounds and this opened up a lot of my depression. What I learnt as a kid was to never trust adults, never trust anyone at all.

I came to Brisbane in ‘88 because I had a big problem with gambling and they didn’t have many poker machines here then. When I was first here I squatted under the Grey Street Bridge. I was the only white bloke there, looked like a grain of salt in a pepper jar.

I was on the streets full-time till about 2000 when I got some help. But most of the boarding houses are full of alcoholics, drug users and psychos

and it gets on your nerves after a while. Some places you get up of a nighttime and look down at the ground and it’s moving. You turn the light on and see thousands of cockroaches scatter. They were dives, so I’d sleep out instead.

My worker Tanya helped with getting my own flat, which was a lot better. I now live with my best friend who I consider as my sister. I moved in with her when her husband died of alcohol poisoning. He was only a year older than me. My sister would tell you that I’m helpful, kind and a pain in the butt sometimes. Just like all brothers are.

And I don’t drink now. I’ve seen it kill too many of my friends. No gambling either. I was working for a while but the pressure of it led me back to drinking so I quit. I’ve been replacing alcohol with pot but plan to be off that in a year as well. I don’t get any enjoyment out of it anymore and feel like I need to smoke to get out of the house.

With the help of Tanya I am now getting out and going to coffee shops sober. I’ve turned into a yuppie! When I go out I feel like I’m being judged by people. She’s slowly helped me get over that feeling and I can look up instead of looking down at the ground.

It took Tanya a year before I’d even talk to her but she kept at it, was like a stalker. I’m very thankful that she stuck with it. I’d still be in my room, not leaving the house.

I’m thinking about getting back into work and may even try the army again as I have one year till I’m 45 and can still apply. It’d be good working on the streets as I’ve seen everything, lived through everything. Most of my friends have ended up dead or in jail. Sometimes I ask, why me? Why have I survived all this when some of my friends didn’t deserve it? They were bought up in poshy homes, had a family, knew their parents.

I doubt myself all the time and can’t really get close to anyone, including women. There’s only one woman in my life now and that’s my parrot Sasha, my companion animal. She knows when I’m in one of my moods. She’ll come up and sit on my shoulder and rub her beak up against my cheek and whistle and chirp, cheer me up a bit. It always works, always melts me. And then she’ll wolf whistle and say ‘love you’.

Dad was in the army when I was little and got transferred to Malaya in the war. I was playing in a drain there that wasn't covered over. My skull got stuck and smashed up and I got brain damage. I got a plate put in and have had a bad nervous system since.

Mum and dad had fights. Dad gave her flogs all the time. I was very upset when mum left. I waited till my older brother came home from school and he found a note. The note said that she didn't want dad to know where she was and to take me to a friend's place for safety. I eventually went back home after a while but dad kicked me out and I ended up on the streets of Sydney. I was only seven.

I ended up in Brisbane where my mum was with another fella. I lived in the homes – you name them, I was there. I ended up running away at 13 and lived for many years on the streets in Brisbane City. Karyn from St Mary's used to run a van on the streets and put tents up out the back of the church for us.

I had foster parents out at Beaudesert for a while but I wanted to go back on my streets. There were heaps of us and they were watching me as I was on the streets the longest and I knew what the streets were like, knew what the police were like. There were some nasty ones and one officer was after me all the time. I used to bolt to the gardens, climb up a tree and stay there till I was safe.

I was on the glue for a long time. It eats your brain cells away, just eats it. Some of the kids on the streets now come to me, respect me cause they know I was on the streets. I give them advice about what to do. One girl I know was

hitting the drugs bad and I said to her 'what do you want to do, kill yourself or get off that drug?'. She wanted to get off so I told her to go to a rehab and since she's been off the drugs she's got a little baby, a job.

I wanted my own place but needed help to get it. The homeless centre got me my own place and they still visit me, help me to get to activities. I go down to Lotus Place and go on Facebook. Heaps of my family are on Facebook, my daughter, my cousins, my big brother, my grannies.

My son's been locked up in Rockhampton for two years. He's schizophrenic and we clash. He rings me up as he gets worried about me, tells me he loves me. Dobbo is going to help me get him back to Brisbane in a halfway house soon. It's important that there are people I can trust like Karyn and Dobbo.

The hardest part of life has been doing things for myself. I've depended on workers a lot but have to depend on myself more. I've got myself into TAFE and done some English and am doing some maths now. I'm proud of it.

I'm almost 50 and grown up now and realise that I've got to do things for myself now, instead of doing the things you did on the streets. It was bad... bad... real bad. I used to get picked up all the time when I was little. It was bad being on those streets. People took advantage but I was OK as a bigger friend looked after me a bit. I didn't go to the cops. They didn't like the streeties.

I've been OK since I started my medication. If I don't take my meds I go off my head bad. It improves my life if I stay on it. I still think about things, think about my mother, things I will never forget.



PATTY

“I've got myself into TAFE and done some English and am doing some maths now. I'm proud of it.”

I was in foster families as a kid and went to heaps of schools. I made friends but when I went to a different school I learnt the same stuff and missed out on learning heaps of other stuff. I skipped back, jumped forward, and ran away quite a bit.

I was on the streets for the first time when I was eight or nine. I was trying to make my way back to Cunnamulla to find my family. If I have brothers and sisters, I wouldn't mind getting to know them. But I got picked up and taken to Boystown. It's like a prison for kids and I ran away when I could.

The first good thing I was taught was in an Ipswich pub when I was 13. One old bloke taught me about respect. To take people as they are, don't judge them because of what they've done or who they are. I've kept it on board and make good friendships.

I went to prison for adults at 18 and have been in and out since. But I did a violence prevention program and it has woken me up. They get right down to the nitty gritty about your memories of the offence, about how you felt at the time, the remorse feelings you get. The psychologists there tell you it's OK to feel angry but not act it; teach you how to walk away from a fight.

Two old lifers took the time to teach me to play guitar. I fell in love with it and write songs regularly. When I pick the guitar up I often do some AC/DC stuff first, then down to the reggae and bluesy stuff, getting chilled out.

When I got out of prison the last time, all my stuff was gone from where I used to stay including my car and furniture. I'd put a housing form in when in jail but the department lost it. So I went to live in Wickham Park and that's where Micah found me and put in my forms. When I was in the park they checked up on me every couple days to see if I need blankets, sleeping bags and clothes; telling me that my name is closer to the top of the list to get a place.

I did my part of the deal, went to rehab first. I've slowed down on the grog and am going to wean myself off it. I don't drink every day and make sure my cupboards are full of food first. It's great to go to the shopping centre and get five or six bags of food. It makes me feel real good.

I'm really happy here and can relax for the first time ever. I've made some friends and it's hard for me to walk down to the shopping centre without running into someone for a chat. In boarding houses there are people doing all sorts of drugs, violence.

People run up and down the hallways banging on doors, making noise. Last time I left to go and sleep in the park again.

There's no one here going to bother me. I feel like I've dropped myself an anchor and am going to stay put. Guys from the team come a couple times a week and make sure to see if I'm right with everything. They furnished the flat and dropped a heater off the other day 'cause it's getting cold. It makes me feel good to walk in the door and see everything. So I take care of it.

Given where I've come from, I want to help other people. To show them that it's not all down and out. There's someone there to give you a hand up. I was living on the streets with nothing and given a place out of nowhere. There's life when things seem lost.

I want to pass on my experience through music, writing songs. Like Bob Marley did sending the word out about love, not hurting people. With a mentality of human respect, of the brotherhood. Everyone knows Bob Marley; he's a love activist.

HERB

“Given where I've come from, I want to help other people. To show them that it's not all down and out.”





RUBY

“I love the place, especially when there’s people outside. You can be with people and if you don’t want to be with people you can go in your room and you can’t hear anything at all.”

I was born in Charleville, outback. Dad was an Aboriginal drover, Mum a drover’s cook. When my grandmother died my mum couldn’t look after us and we got put with family or institutions. They wanted to put me in a Down’s Syndrome place because I’m different to everyone else. I was born with brain damage and I can’t remember a lot.

I ran away when I was 7 or 8 to try and find mum. And I kept running away from welfare families. So I got put in Wilston in the psychiatric ward and Kalimna, The Salvation Army place. But I was in Tufnell first; bad things happened there. They use to come at nighttime to the dorms, take us away and do bad things to us. When I was going to tell on them they said they were going to hurt my brother.

When I was 15 I was taken to a farm to work. I never got paid, just my food. I took off when I was 20 but I got into some trouble. I ended up in the police cells a few times.

I learnt when I was 25 to up and leave if I didn’t like something. I travelled a lot, hitchhiking. I’ve tried to work

a lot but nothing has lasted long. I’m on disability now as I broke my back at Wilston. I tried to run away and fell from the roof. The lady there kept kicking me and wouldn’t call the ambulance.

I’ve lived on the streets on and off. When my oldest boy was 13 the Salvation Army didn’t cater for us anymore. So I lived in a toilet in Sandgate with my 2 sons, the dog, the bird. The man used to lock us in for the night so no one could hurt us.

My sons are 23 and 25 now. One’s working and the other one helps look after a friend’s children. I see them on weekends and whenever I can. I tried the best I could as I didn’t know how to love anyone.

Before Common Ground I lived in a supported place in Highgate Hill where they cook for you, do your washing and everything. My independence was going. I said I was going to take off and live on the streets but the head lady at Micah, Karyn, said don’t you go anywhere yet because there is a building coming up soon. So I waited and waited, and it came.

I’m in my fourth week here. They got me something for my chair to get in easy and it goes straight through the

unit onto the balcony. They got me a shower chair too. I love the place, especially when there’s people outside. You can be with people and if you don’t want to be with people you can go in your room and you can’t hear anything at all.

When someone wants to visit you don’t have to let them up as security call you first. And the security card doesn’t let everyone on your floor. I’ve met people and hope to meet more. The building is close to Lotus Place, close to the city, close to Southbank. I go to Lotus every day unless there is something on here at Common Ground like the painting. At Lotus I go on the computers. They set me up on Facebook so I can get my grandson’s photos.

My mum showed me how to defrost a meal and to use the washing machine. They’re going to teach us to cook. They’ve got a pool room and the painting group. My painting from the Lotus painting group was displayed at ‘Art From The Margins’ and someone bought it.

I love it. It’s the best thing they have done. I feel safe.

I grew up in Melbourne in a Latvian refugee family. We were dirt poor as my Dad was an alcoholic and gambler. Dad was trying to assimilate so he spent a lot of time at the pub being an Aussie. We never saw the physical markings of his violence towards mum but knew it was there. We were all scared of him.

For all intents and purposes, I was the man of the house. From the age of seven I was paying rent, going to the butchers, doing the groceries; all the adult duties my mum couldn't do when she was at work. I protected my little sisters too. I'd get the hidings so they wouldn't. I'd set myself up for it.

After school, I lived with the hippies in Nimbin; spent a couple years naked as a jaybird. We built a house and made our own cottage cheese, yogurt. One of the best things I ever did. After a falling out, I hitched around and met the mother of my two kids. She was from a wealthy family that used to bail her out from her heroin dramas.

I worked extra shifts to put her through a social work degree. But she became convinced that because I was molested as a child, I would molest our children. We broke up and she summarily stopped me seeing the kids. I went through the courts so that my children could have access to me as we had a strong bond. I didn't have much of a father figure in my life and I wanted to make sure my children did.

Heroin was never an issue for me. It was more the speed. And alcohol was always there as I'd grown up with it.

I started drinking in pubs at 14 and first put a needle in my arm at 18. I've got no interest in speed now.

I was on the streets for the first time when I was six, climbing out the window to escape my father. And I've been on and off for years. I'm a street survivor. I've done foolish things on the streets that I'd never have done in secure housing. I wouldn't have broken society's rules, broken the law.

Last time I was on the streets I went to the Homeless Centre and they got me into a boarding house. It was abysmal. I was surrounded by alcohol and drugs: that mentality, the violence. Kim from Micah came to rescue me. I was literally standing in a sea of broken glass and she said 'I won't have you live this way'. She started pushing to get me into public housing and got me into a secure flat within two months because of my chronic osteoarthritis. Furnished it and all.

And then they got me into Common Ground. Said we're going to get you a place where you've got easy access to doctors, nurses, schooling, the whole gamut of everything. TAFE being close was important as I'm going to do an IT course and set myself up as a computer technician. I loved it here from the beginning. I was awe inspired. I love being above everything, being taller than, bigger than.

It was a logistics nightmare to move but the wonderful staff of Micah yet again came through. David, Paul, Kim as a motivator. I like to drop names because they're good people who should be mentioned. I've got a not so secret crush on Kim. I adore the woman. Everything she says she's going to do, she does. A real go-getter.

ANDREW

"I was on the streets for the first time when I was six, climbing out the window to escape my father. And I've been on and off for years. I'm a street survivor."

I won't talk to my older brother anymore because he hates me being gay, used to pick on me and call me names about being gay. He used to drink and get agro on me but then he gave it up.

When I first came out my family didn't believe me and I had to explain it to them all again a second time. Mum told her family that I was gay without asking me first. I told her 'you have no right to say that, you should have asked me first'. I was pretty pissed off about it, very upset. It wasn't very nice.

I've spent most of my time since in hostels and boarding houses. But Micah and Ozcare have just got me a permanent place. I've got my own kitchen, my own bathroom, my own bedroom. Micah got me furniture, everything. I'm pretty neat and tidy and it will be better than hostels which can get pretty messy.

I listen to the radio a lot. My favourite singer is Kylie Minogue but I've never had any of her albums or singles.

I only like her old stuff. I like the Backstreet Boys, Elton John, Ricky Martin, The Spice Girls. Maybe I can get some albums now?

Some people say I'm a nice person, kind and caring and that. Nice to talk to. I'm looking forward to meeting some new people at the flats. But I want some more privacy too.

I met a man in my last hostel but he got kicked out for drinking on premises. We are starting to know each other a little bit. We don't really argue or have blues, get along like a house on fire. I can't imagine living with someone but the new place lets me have visitors.

I want to get into a long term relationship with someone nice. Someone on who I can trust and rely. Someone who is not going to do the wrong thing by me – not going to cheat on me. I don't believe in that shit and he doesn't either. Micah has helped me meet my family again on Facebook so maybe I'll introduce him to the family one day.



MICHAEL

“Some people say I'm a nice person, kind and caring and that. Nice to talk to. I'm looking forward to meeting some new people at the flats. But I want some more privacy too.”



ROBERT

“When you’re on the street the future don’t look good, but here there’s a bit of hope.”

My dad was a drinker and gambler. He used to take me to the trots at Rocklea from when I was 12. There are races on every minute of the day now – from all over Australia, Hong Kong, England, America. You can bet all day and night. They’ve taken it to the point of insanity. For anyone with a problem like me, they’re just abusing people’s weakness.

Gambling cost me my missus and kids. That’s a big loss in your life, bigger loss than your money. It depresses you when you haven’t got your kids, when you love them so much and don’t see them anymore. You have no idea how that affects you. You’re so full of guilt.

Gambling is everything to the gambler. Relationships are nice but they’re not affordable. It’s one of the reasons I like being on my own. I know I’m not going to hurt anyone else, only me.

I’ve analysed myself over the years and still can’t think of a good reason why I want to destroy myself. It’s not for the money you gamble; it’s for the thrill of it. Because no matter how much you win you just keep going till it’s all gone. If not, you put it through the next day.

I gave it away for 12 months once. I remember how comfortable I felt. It takes a lot of stress out of you. But boredom and that nagging in your head, that need to gamble, it brought me back. You’re addicted to your own adrenalin they tell me.

I ended up on the streets three years ago. I couldn’t pay my rent as I kept blowing my pension cheque. I slept alone under

gazebos in parks, like Picnic Island down at Southbank. I had a push bike and kept everything I had tied to it in those green bags.

Noel found me in Dutton Park Cemetery when they were looking out for homeless people to help. He said they could get me a place. He must have been taking the piss when he told me they’re not very flash. I said, ‘hey mate, you gotta try live in the cemetery for 18 months’. What’s important is staying dry and feeling safe. I couldn’t possibly have foreseen this flat. It’s way out of anybody’s imagination. I wasn’t expecting anything brand spanking new.

Rent comes out every week from Centrelink so I can’t touch the money. I can’t get thrown out for not paying the rent. The guys visit regularly. They have literally bent over backward to help everybody here. I’ve got my privacy, my security. I wouldn’t have got off the street without this.

I’ve got a lot of experience with this problem, been fighting it all my life. Although I’ve never been aware of it as I am now. I’m trying to turn my life around. I’m almost 70 but it’s never too late. I just want the peace of not being broke all the time and that stressful feeling you get.

Being in this flat helps no end. Being out on the street you have got a lot of dead time on your hands. Here I can watch the TV, listen to the radio, chat to people and catch up with the guys when they visit. I’ve been here 12 months now and am 100% certain of staying. When I leave it will be feet first.

I’m doing a day at a time but I’ve got a lot going for me. When you’re on the street the future don’t look good, but here there’s a bit of hope. This beautiful apartment is just too good to be true. That in itself helps me. This sort of thing just doesn’t happen.

I was born in Mount Morgan, the second eldest of six. I remember watching my father and mother running away down the road when the government car was taking us to Neerkol Orphanage. It still affects me to this very day. Maybe they were ashamed that they were incapable of looking after us.

At Neerkol the girls in my family got called a disgusting name that means 'untidy woman' and the nuns said we must have been brought up in the hills because we couldn't read. I don't think the nuns understood that if you are neglected and taken from your home your mind doesn't concentrate on what you are doing.

Things like that haunt you in your life and you wonder whether you are fit to be around people. I feel lower than a lot of people and wish I could do the things they did. I feel there's something missing from my life.

I started going to Lotus Place for support six years ago. They help you achieve things you want to and they find

people jobs. They help you help yourself, not do it for you. I'm learning some computer skills here and planning for a literacy course.

I used to live in a dumpy boarding house down the Valley with drunks and everything. But Micah helped me find a brand new studio apartment. It's the first time I haven't had to share a toilet and bathroom for 10 years. I feel more secure and independent. I definitely enjoy not having people knocking on my door all the time.

I've been there three years now and plan to stay. Even though it's cruel what the nuns did, I learnt you have to have a clean place, your house has got to be clean no matter what. People aren't going to come and see you if you've got a dirty place, they're going to walk out on you.

A lot of people when they're lost in life tend to go to churches trying to find themselves. But they never succeed because how you find yourself is within yourself. It's the hardest thing to do, to find yourself when you're lost. I'm still trying to find what I really want in life. I think if I learn some more reading it will help. No one else in the world can do it for me. It is up to me.



SHERRYL

“... how you find yourself is within yourself. It's the hardest thing to do, to find yourself when you're lost.”



WILLIAM

“I’m off the drugs and alcohol since I’ve moved into Common Ground. It’s like a new start for me.”

I was adopted at birth and grew up in the Lockyer Valley. My parents were good but I was a little rat of a kid. I didn’t do much school, wasn’t very good at it.

When I was 9 I started working at the sideshows, on the dodgem track. I went out on my own and lasted quite a few years. I was working 9 months at a time at the shows and did seasonal work on the farms in the off time. It was a bit rough but really good. You work a lot of hours but you get rewarded very well. I met heaps of people and still run into them years later.

I then worked mustering in the Channel Country, on prawn trawlers and tuna boats. I’m always travelling around, a bit of a gypsy. But when I was 22 I was put on the pension for my schizophrenia. I was such a free spirit travelling around working here and there. Then I had to go into the doctors every week for an injection. I just hated it. If I didn’t go in they’d issue a warrant for my arrest and the cops would round me up. Mental illness has ruined my life.

It started when I was using drugs and alcohol too much and got put in the psych ward. I’ve been in and out 58 times but not for a couple months now. I’m off the drugs and alcohol since I’ve moved into Common Ground. It’s like a new start for me. The illness is more manageable when I’m not drinking and drugging and I’m taking oral medication. Getting my medication right has taken a long time.

I was camping on the street a bit and Micah said they could put me in a place here. Some of the boarding houses I’ve stayed at are very alcohol and drug affected. It’s good not to be in that environment, good to be here. It’s hard not to have a drink when you’ve got 20 drunks saying ‘come on, come have a drink with us’. Then they start smoking that green shit and it just sends me crazy.

I saw this place on the plans and didn’t like it very much. But I had a look once it finished and it was like a palace. My oven’s great. It turns off by itself. You can put a roast on and come back in a couple hours time. It took me a while to get used to being on my balcony on the 9th floor, a bit high up. My view is Mount Nebo way. Watching the sunset is amazing.

It’s good to wake up not surrounded by alcoholics and drug affected people. I find I just don’t have some. I just made a choice to go without it and haven’t looked back since. I buy food, I do grocery shops, I don’t mind a flutter on the TAB. Just a few dollars start as I’ve done some work in the racing industry.

I’ve been selling *The Big Issue* and helping out at the old Maritime Museum. I went and asked for volunteer work. There’s all sorts of tradesmen there and I learn different aspects of boats. I go to the art class, computer room, cooking upstairs. Wouldn’t mind going further in the art classes. I like the teacher. Andy from Micah helps me out a bit too, good as sliced bread.

I ran away from school nearly every day. The kids used to make fun of me, teasing me. They used to stick super glue and gum in my hair. And the teachers wouldn't do a darn thing for me. So I just gave up and took off. Instead of going to school, I hung around the shopping centre all day.

I was then sent to Inala Opportunity School, for people who have got something wrong with them, they're not that good at learning things. It was better but I still got teased and I couldn't put up with it. So I took off from there and went to shopping centres again.

At eight or nine I got sent to Montrose, a home for crippled children. I'm not crippled but I was there till I was 16. If I ever got the chance, if I ever could, I'd love to meet the kids again from Montrose. I wish I knew where they were.

I was at Wirilda after that and then was back home with mum for a few years. I couldn't put up with how my stepfather treated me and in the end I ran away from home.

I slept under a ramp at a shopping centre for a couple of years. I didn't

have money and couldn't get food. But I made sure I always had a certain jacket with me and I'd go into Woolies and walk out with the pockets full of cat and dog food, openers, forks, spoons.

Then I ran into Mum at the shopping centre. She took me back home and my stepfather belted the arse off me, made me a ward of the state and shoved me off to Wolston Park.

I was there for a long time. I was let out for a day but didn't go back and hitched to Melbourne. I lived in Fitzroy for 3 three years, on the streets for a while. A social worker helped me there but I got sent back to Brisbane and have lived in hostels ever since.

I hardly get any money from the trust but Trish gets me to Campbell's Club on Mondays and Thursdays and The Transformers Choir on Wednesdays. Choir has been bloody great. I don't think I'm any good at bugger all, but I've had so many people say to me I'm so darn great with my singing.

Trish has helped me to learn shopping and talked to the trust for me so I have money to go places. I'm talking to her about going to a cooking place on Fridays so I can learn to cook. I've got a cookbook that was bought for me so who knows what I could pick out of that. I see the nurse at the Homeless

Centre and go to Lotus Place. At Lotus you can help with lunch, do things on computers.

I went to the hospital a while ago to get my chest checked out and they said to me I have emphysema from smoking. I've got to give it up and Trish is going to get me those patches. I've been smoking since I was seven years old when I used to flog mum's smokes.

I'm with a guy from the hostel I was at. We're engaged now and I'd like to get married. He's different to some others, more decent. Some people have found out that I'm epileptic, got brain damage and other problems I have. They'll turn around and say POQ and DCB – Piss Off Quick and Don't Come Back. He's not like that.

I hope he can live here at Common Ground too one day. The staff buzz you if you have a visitor and people can't come up without me letting them. You've got your own TV here, a fan, a couch. And people can't take stuff from your room 'cause they can't get in.

The view is amazing. You want to be up here in the bloody night. You got the XXXX lit up, the buildings light up, the city cats come up and down the river, the milk factory. It's beautiful.



HEATHER

“Choir has been bloody great. I don't think I'm any good at bugger all, but I've had so many people say to me I'm so darn great with my singing.”

My dad was an alcoholic. My mother died when he kicked her in the stomach when she was pregnant. We were taken on the train to Neerkol Orphanage.

The more I was belted at the Neerkol school the less I seemed to be able to learn. I was called a 'dunce' and 'useless' by the nuns. They broke my left hand with a cane as I was meant to be writing with my right.

Other children were sometimes forced to hold me across my bed with no clothes on so the nuns could lay into me with a machine strap. If you wet the bed you were forced to stand there with the wet sheets wrapped around you and made fun of in front of the other kids.

When I was 16 I was told I was going to a nice farm to work. But the police met me at Roma Street Station and took me to Westbrook Detention Centre. I was confused about where I was till the other boys told me what they were in there for - break and enters, stealing cars, rape, attempted murder. I couldn't believe it. I'd committed no offence. I'd never seen the inside of a court.

I was regularly sexually abused in the showers at Westbrook, by other inmates as well as the screws. They

took kids out of the dormitory at night and sexually abused them. There was not one night when I didn't cry myself to sleep.

I was part of a mass break out and got put in Boggo Road Jail. I felt like a king at Boggo Road compared to Westbrook because they had good food. I even broke the law to get back in when I was released. I got three years and thanked the judge.

I've had two serious relationships. I still have contact with my kids and have never been violent with them. One child I reared myself. He is 26 now, has his own house and is a mechanic. I screamed at him once. He was only in Grade Two and I called him names for not learning well. What sort of father does that? It's always eaten at my stomach.

I've been sick and seen a psychiatrist all my life because of Neerkol. I still get panic attacks, depression and take medication. I can't walk anywhere I don't know and can't take a bus. I still beat myself with a stick really hard. I often don't realise I'm even doing it.

When I first met Jo from Micah I was living in my car down by the river. They got me a unit at an old person's place but it felt like I was in jail again. My youngest son couldn't stay over and I got so sick I would sleep in my car every night rather than

inside. I became known as the 'night watchman'. Jo worked with housing to get me a two-bedroom unit where my son could have a room. Over time I've spent more and more time at home but I still need support to stay.

I want to reduce my reliance on tablets and look after my health. With help from Jo I've learnt little exercises that help get the rubbish from childhood out of my head. I'm learning how to not have panic attacks in the toilet - from what the nuns did, rubbing my head in the sewage. Jo got me a cross which I had blessed with holy water at Mary Mackillop's Statue. I focus on the cross in the toilet so I can overcome the anxiety and pain.

The only thing that guides me is God. I know it sounds silly after everything but I believe in God. And my children, all children. I don't want them treated how I was treated.

BRYAN

“When I was 16 I was told I was going to a nice farm to work. But the police met me at Roma Street Station and took me to Westbrook Detention Centre.”



I was born in Wodonga, went to school in Albury. Mum died when I was 10, which was really hard on all of us. My Dad's a fruit picker and I've done a lot of picking too. All over the place, a lot of travelling. I moved to Queensland for a full-time job and I got my Dad a job there too.

I lost my job cause I was drinking. I started drinking at 22 when I first went picking and never turned back unfortunately. All the pickers drink. It started off for me at the end of the day but a few years in I'd drink before work, during work.

After losing my job I was on the street for 4 - 5 months, mostly in the Botanical Gardens. Then I got a house with my brother but he drinks as well and has got some serious anger issues. He stabbed me a few months back. I was 9 days in hospital and very lucky to live. He'd pulled a knife on me before but he never got me. I'd always been able to stop him.

I called Micah from hospital. They got me a boarding house to go to but I hated it there. I got back on the streets and as soon as Micah found me they started giving me regular visits. They told me about Common Ground months ago and I told them that'd be great. When the building was ready I did an interview, had to wait a couple more days, and I was in.

When I first got here I had all my mates over and we were a bit noisy so I got a quiet talking to. But I won't be noisy anymore and I've kicked a few mates out for being too noisy. My mates have to go through security to visit and be gone by 10. Gives me my space.

The flat is absolutely amazing, really impressed. I'm still finding it hard to accumulate stuff cause you're so used to not bothering with it on the streets. You lose it or it gets stolen.

They said I can stay here as long as I like which is a big relief. I started cooking for myself straight away. Brand new stove and oven here. On the streets I was eating crap or not eating at all. Plus it's secure. My brother can't just waltz in and try and attack me. That's pretty important cause I'm just over it.

If I want to see a Micah worker I can but there's no real need for it at the moment. They'll always be there. I'm sick a lot of the time and have to do something about the drinking. I can't keep putting myself through this. Micah has offered to help but I want to do it myself. Now I'm in a relaxed place it should be a lot easier for me.

I'm doing a day at a time at the moment. I'm enjoying this place and I've got some thinking to do. Helps that I've got a balcony and a mad view of the city from the 11th floor.



STEPHEN

“They said I can stay here as long as I like which is a big relief. I started cooking for myself straight away.”



LYNETTE & DIANA

“We go to Lotus Place and are learning leatherwork at the moment. We’re learning computers there and want to go on Facebook.”

We moved around a lot as kids. Our parents never stayed in one place. The police were always around. They said our parents were neglectful and we agree. Drink was a lot of the cause but we don’t think they really cared.

We spent time in homes in Queensland and South Australia. Even though we were given stale bread to eat it was a lot better than at home. At home we had to steal for food, eat from bins or go to Sunday School just for the food.

There have always been little cliques in our family. Even though we are eight years apart, we have stuck together. Once the department tried to split us up, and another time the church. We’re closer now than we have been before. We know what each of us is going through.

We’ve always felt homeless in a way; rarely felt any permanency. Even if you’re in a house you can have no support, no one you can rely on.

We’ve had to sleep rough a bit over the last couple of years. The first time in Logan was due to a landlord who wouldn’t fix up a broken hot water system and upped the rent massively when we complained. So we had the two of us sleeping in the car with our two dogs.

We got into a hostel where you couldn’t have pets so the dogs slept in the car. Someone called the RSPCA. The

RSPCA said the dogs weren’t overheated, were well fed and that we took them for walks but it wasn’t good to have them in the car like that.

We got a house with a couple but they pissed off when the first bill came through and we got stuck with rent and bills we couldn’t afford. We ended up in a caravan park and then living in our car again. But the rego was running out and it needed the brakes fixed.

We went to Homeless Connect through the City Council at Sandgate. We needed a place we could go with the dogs instead of living on the street. Noel from Council found us a couple of boarding houses that weren’t ideal. He started to work for Micah and got us into the Housing Commission unit that we’re in now.

Micah furnished the flat and keep in contact. It feels strange, as no one else has shown us that kind of care. They pick us up and take us to the community meal. We go to Lotus Place and are learning leatherwork at the moment. We’re learning computers there and want to go on Facebook.

We’ve lost the car so it’s great that there are good buses close by. Our next step is hopefully to move into a house. We love animals and want a yard. Dogs need to be outside running rather than inside all the time.

I was adopted out at 2. Dad was a lunatic and Mum wasn't well either. She thought it would be best for me to go into care and have a better life.

She got me back when I was about 10. It was good for a while but her schizophrenia got to her. When I was 14 a Christian Brother program allowed me to board at Nudgee College. I got expelled after a while for stealing columbines from a food machine.

So I went to DOCS who sent me left, right and everywhere. No one could handle me. I did a lot of runners and the cops would pick me up. I self abused and have a lot of scars. People ask what it was all about. I think it relieved the pressure, took my mind off what was going on around me.

By the time I was 18 I had a family of my own. I was an alcoholic, verbally abusive. It just wasn't working. We were together for a long time but in the end she didn't want to stay at home raising the kids while I worked. I send her messages on Facebook saying I want to be in the kids' lives but she doesn't reply.

I started using at 24, heroin to start and then speed. I went cold turkey 18 months ago but my girlfriend couldn't handle me coming off it. I was hell; couldn't sleep, very agitated, abusive. I wanted to jump out of my own skin.

We broke up and I went to my Mum's but she used to come around and cause hell. She did the same at a boarding house, assaulted some guy, slashed her wrists. I went to stay with my brother but she somehow found me and caused more trouble.

I've been on and off the streets through my life. In boarding houses and shelters too. I've never been long anywhere, never felt like I fit in. I felt like I had a home once in my life, when my first child was born. I lived there for 5 months.

I got into a brand new place, like Common Ground but with no security. There was a lot of drugs, dealers, alcoholics. A friend there I was trying to help jumped and killed herself. I didn't want to stay at all after that.

It's quieter here. The concierge service and security are great. I told them about my ex and they told me about the security systems and CCTV. People

here are friendly and accommodating. Any issues here and they'll go out of their way to help you.

I've had a brother and sister die since I've been here. They offered to help, to arrange stuff, but I wanted to deal with it in my own way. Westy is helping me connect with another brother, and my mum again.

I've liked art since school when I had a crush on my art teacher. I've gone to the group here but I don't like working in front of other people. So the art teacher bought me some better paints to use up here, other materials, a sketch pad. It allows me to express myself. I have issues with that, can become anti-social. Think it's childhood stuff.

I'll never go back to needles. I don't want to be in that head space anymore. It's not real. My sister died of drugs. I haven't seen anything good come of it.

I'm in the right place now. I don't have stresses around me, people on my back, drama. I've got the peace to think what I want to do in the future. I'm not going anywhere. If I go from here I'll be dead.

ANDREW

"I'll never go back to needles. I don't want to be in that headspace anymore. It's not real. My sister died of drugs. I haven't seen anything good come of it."





JESSICA

“I’ve got bipolar and get depressed without a cat. Charlotte loves it here. She’s still in a kitten stage and runs around the flat. The room is excellent and you get the city lights.”

I was born in Royal Brisbane Hospital. I went to a state school for a year but Mum and Dad put me in a special school as I had learning problems. I didn’t really want to, I wasn’t happy. I had more friends at the state school.

Both Mum and Dad died in my 20s, heart disease and cancer. Dad caught me smoking once and made me smoke a whole packet. I’m glad I never smoked since.

Alcohol is in my family. Every time I say I’m an alcoholic someone gets angry at me. They say that an alcoholic is someone who craves every day for a drink. I’m more of an ex-binge drinker. My husband when he was alive was open about being an alcoholic and he got very upset when I said I was too.

My ex-boyfriend was abusive, very violent, and wouldn’t let me go to AA. Said I’d meet a nice alcoholic like my husband. Now he’s out of my life I’m going back to AA cause he can’t tell me what to do no more.

Everyone begged me not to move in with him. I thought he’d change, that he’d stop abusing me when I moved in with him. I’d leave but I kept going back to him cause he’s legally blind. And I had a cat Katrina that I loved and he used her as a weapon against me.

I got another cat there too, Charlotte, a little sister for Katrina. I’ve still got her. My caseworker got me to call DV

Connect and we managed to get the cats in a shelter. I went to a refuge at Ipswich and Katrina and Charlotte went into the RSPCA. Katrina died at the RSPCA but the workers told me I could keep Charlotte at Common Ground. I didn’t believe them at first, thought it was a hoax. It was too good to be true. The workers were brilliant and I want to send them some photos of my new place here.

I’ve got bipolar and get depressed without a cat. Charlotte loves it here. She’s still in a kitten stage and runs around the flat. The room is excellent and you get the city lights.

My ex-boyfriend gave away a lot of my furniture. With housing you get nothing but this place has everything. I’m a Catholic and said it must be a miracle. I’ve bought a couple of pot plants since moving in and want to get back into my gardening.

I’ve always taken photos of high-rise units and always wanted to live in a high-rise. I’ve just got a fascination, it’s the way I am. I’m a bit wary about the other people here because of the domestic violence, especially blokes. I’m happy we have security guards. If I was anywhere else I’d be scared, wouldn’t feel safe.

I’m looking forward to going back to AA next week. Alcohol ruins lives, gives you hangovers. There’s a guy there who’s been dry 40 years. I like helping them out, buying coffee and sugar. I’m going to go to Girl Power as well, a women’s group for people with disabilities. And I want to volunteer at the RSPCA. I’d love to help out with the cats and dogs.

I was brought up by my Grandmother on the mission at Cherbourg. I went to the Catholic primary school in Murgon but I didn't get to go to high school. I wish I did. It's been hard to get work.

I was off the alcohol for 4 years when my son was born but got back on when family members died. When I was on the streets drinking he was with my mum. Mum's doing good now and we make sure he goes to school.

I met Kevin through friends. He's got a good personality. We've been together for almost three years and stayed together on the streets and boarding houses. I was stressed having to be in a boarding house or a caravan park with my baby. I didn't want child services to take her away.

What we needed was something stable. This place Micah got us has everything we need. We don't have to share a bathroom and it's safer. They have done everything they can for us. It makes me feel more confident being here, especially for bub. I hope she does her schooling. I'm thinking when she is older I'll try and get my Grade nine and ten certificate.

My son can stay with me permanently now. We're going to move him to the Murri School on the south side. School is important to me so they have more opportunities that I did. If you haven't got education you've got nothing.

KAYLENE

“I was stressed having to be in a boarding house or a caravan park with my baby. I didn't want child services to take her away.”

KEVIN

“Now that I have a stable house my other kids can come and see me every second weekend.”

I mainly grew up at Boystown. They said I was uncontrollable but I wasn't. They just wanted to lock me up. I didn't mind it there. I liked riding horses and going camping. But I spent some time in children's homes for stealing. Westbrook was a pretty violent place.

After Westbrook I went around on the streets, sniffing and drinking. It's killed friends of mine and I don't sniff anymore. I keep telling the kids around now that it's no good, but you can't tell them anything. They're stubborn.

I used to be an artist. I sold my sandblasting and traditional style paintings at the markets. Then my marriage broke up and my wife wouldn't let me see the kids. I started drinking heavily then and stopped making art.

I still drink everyday and it's affected my heart, my back, my memory. Kaylene looks out for me a bit and tells me what's been going on when I forget things after drinking.

I met Micah a couple years ago on the streets. They got us into boarding houses but we don't like them. Sharing

a shower, kitchen. We need a bit of privacy. And the drugs too. Never liked the drugs; just a drinker.

Micah interviewed us as part of the 50/50 campaign. They managed to put us forward when our daughter was born seven weeks ago as no one wants us to have a baby living in a boarding house. We have this place for 18 months and then plan to move to the north side near family.

Now that I have a stable house my other kids can come and see me every second weekend. I'm hoping my drinking slows down now and then to give it up. Micah are going to link us up with the family team so they can help us out with the little one, and the kids visiting.

I want to start my art again and to sell it. I feel relaxed and calm when I do my art. I make stories up, and people tell me their stories, and I put it into an artwork. They appreciate it.

It's good to be here and stable, not running around everywhere. We've got a mailbox now!



MICHELLE

“I ended up homeless after my Auntie collected my rent and then kicked me out. I had enough money to last two days at a backpackers.”

My adopted dad was in the Air Force so I went to school all over Australia. I worked at a mechanic workshop for 16 years after school. After the shop I went into powder coating and welding. Every job I've had is a male's job. I'm one of these people that if you're a bloke and got a job, I can do it too.

I tried to commit suicide in 2007 after being bullied at work for many months. I ended up in hospital. The side effects of the drugs stopped me working and the psychiatrist basically told me to grow up. I ended up in hospital again but I found another counsellor. I've been seeing a counsellor ever since; will never stop.

I ended up homeless after my Auntie collected my rent and then kicked me out. I had enough money to last two days at a backpackers. The police gave me the homeless information phone number and they sent me to the homeless centre.

The centre workers got me into a hostel. I stayed there for a while but got kicked out. I had a young caseworker who wasn't competent

or very nice to me. We got in regular disputes and I got kicked out when my friend Julie's three months there were up.

We went straight to the Queen Street Mall. The first couple days we didn't sleep. It's pretty scary on the streets. Sometimes Julie would sleep and I'd stay awake; then she'd wake up and I'd go to sleep. Then we slept near the cameras for safety as the police were keeping an eye on us.

The Street To Home guys found us in the mall. I had my back up and gave them a hard time. I didn't trust anyone. They said they'd find me a place but I didn't believe them and was quite rude to them. But they came back in half an hour and gave us some blankets and toiletries.

The next day they checked to see if I was OK and promised again that they'd help me. That afternoon they came by and said they had a place for me to look at. I was stunned and said, 'Excuse me?!' and he said, 'Yeah, you shouldn't be on the street at your age'.

They took me to this flat. I popped my head in and said 'This is cool!' They said I could move in the next day and I thought 'You liars!' But they moved

me into the flat full of furniture and food the next day and my attitude completely changed. I'd never met anyone who had done something like this for me. It's always been me fighting for everything I might want, what I need and what I've got.

I slept for three days and when I woke up it was like I was in real life. I've been here months but Micah keep checking I'm OK. If I need help, they're there. I've got work as a security guard now. The most full-on shift is the 24-hour McDonalds, especially the ones near pubs. I'm getting more shifts and I'll be off the dole soon. The day I'm off the dole I'll throw a party!

I've cleared my debts and just put a deposit on a car. Once I pay that off I want to save a deposit for my own place. I have cut my medication down so that I can drive for my job and want to get off it altogether.

I've had Julie staying here as she is diabetic and I couldn't leave her on the streets alone. But Micah just got Julie a place in the same block. We can still be friends but not in each other's hair. The best of both worlds.

I grew up in Cherbourg. I got into the wrong crowd early and started stealing. I ended up in Westbrook Detention Centre when I was 15 for stealing horses. It's you against the screws in those places. Then I went to adult jail when I was 17. The cops were pretty bad those days. Give you a biffing and make you sign a statement.

I've worked most of my life - tree lopping, ring barking, cane planting, labouring, council work. Then the police signed me up as an Indigenous Police Liaison Officer. It started out as prevention but ended up putting people in. It was meant to be helping people rather than identifying them and locking them up.

I camped in and around New Farm Park for four years. Then Micah got me into a unit of my own with everything in it. They promised it and then did it. I'd been promised by others before but told I had to wait six years. Micah helps with work, doctors, Aboriginal organisations. They are good people.

Micah organised me to pay my rent before I got it. It stopped me spending all my money drinking and smoking yandi. I lost my job at Council and was ready to chuck the unit in and go sleep rough. I would have just gone on the piss and back to my old ways. But Micah helped me get a medical report so I could start working again.

I was having trouble at the unit with people coming over at all hours. I'd be sitting back having a soft drink and people would turn up with grog cause they can't drink on the streets. I was getting into trouble and got 3 eviction notices.

So I applied for Brisbane Common Ground. It's the same rent and the workers are always here. It's great to have someone to talk to if I need. A lot of park people keep things to themselves and will drink themselves to death if no one shows they care.

Here I can let people up or not. I've been breaking the drinking down a bit. Have a couple days off, have a drink, have a couple days off. Not drinking every day, drinking yourself to sleep.

So the best thing about here is the privacy. That and the luxury!

IAN

“A lot of park people keep things to themselves and will drink themselves to death if no one shows they care.”





MICHAEL

“I didn’t have a voice or any choices growing up in institutions. Once I found out I did have a voice, I’ve used it.”

I got in trouble and got regular floggings at Nudgee Orphanage, particularly by one sadistic nun who obviously enjoyed it. So the first lesson I learnt was never trust a woman. Never like them, never trust them. I’ve talked to counsellors and psychiatrists but I think it’s become part of my DNA.

I got fostered out but it didn’t work out. A former foster child of the family ended up bugging me. Every time he did it he went down to the Catholic Church and said his ‘bless me father for I have sinned’ and the church would forgive him. Then he’d do it again.

I ended up with family members, foster placements and in Westbrook Detention Centre over the next few years. It was at Westbrook that I found my voice to speak up. I organised a mass break out over a harsh punishment detail and the superintendent actually changed the detail rather than flog me.

I’ve moved regularly between jobs, probably 40 all up. The longest was the tax office and I became involved in the union there. I didn’t agree with the process of the union amalgamations

and spent 18 months bitterly fighting a losing battle against it. I saw it as institutional abuse at the highest levels. I had a complete nervous breakdown and haven’t worked since.

It was only by sheer luck that I became a union organizer. I was hitchhiking and got picked up by a psychiatrist. As we started up, he looked at me in the mirror and the first thing he said was ‘you are angry and don’t trust people’. Without me saying a word. He said I should start channelling my anger and mistrust. And the union was the perfect vehicle.

I linked in with Micah six years ago when I was homeless and living in a tent with my dog Jessie. I couldn’t go to boarding houses or emergency accommodation because I had to have Jessie with me. I got a housing commission place out at Winton and Micah actually paid for me to go first class so that I could smuggle Jessie on the train.

Winton didn’t work out because of my neighbours – a situation took me back to my childhood abuse. Lotus Place had a dedicated Micah homelessness worker and she found me a place at Kangaroo Point where I still am now, years later. I visit Lotus about three times a week and seek support from the workers when I need to.

Security for Jessie and I has kept me alive. A couple years ago she disappeared but luckily ended up in the RSPCA. I couldn’t afford to get her out but Jo from Lotus stuck her neck out for me and paid the bill. I have bipolar and when I am at my lowest point, Jessie is what’s kept me alive. I have to look after her.

I’ve taken on the name Michael Collins from two people I admire. The Irish revolutionary and the pilot of the Apollo 11 who stayed with the craft so the other astronauts could walk on the moon. I am very principled and I won’t sacrifice them, especially when it comes to people being abused, by people or institutions. I didn’t have a voice or any choices growing up in institutions. Once I found out I did have a voice, I’ve used it.

We survivors use tools such as counselling, psychotherapy, hypnosis and even denial in order to deal with life. Yet the scars of the damage caused by abuse still remain. We can never fully heal until the churches and governments that allowed the abuse take full responsibility rather than just cover up or band aid the consequences. How this is to be achieved is a complex issue, but finding and asking the right questions is a good start.

My dad was a drunk and I ended up a drunk as well. Where we differ is if I get drunk I don't use violence as a tool. It is the last thing on my mind. When he drank it was the first thing on his mind.

I was an original street kid. I first lived on the streets when I was eight. I ran away from home all the time and had to work out ways to feed myself. I used to go to the cooking shows in Grace Bros and David Jones just so I could get a feed.

Once I passed out in the street due to malnutrition. I ended up in a boy's home and was in and out of homes till I was 18. I survived by sticking to myself. I don't really need people, don't trust them. Every time I trusted someone they hurt me.

I worked in rock and roll for over 20 years. In the early days I only did staging, but in the '80s lighting became more available and I could see a way of expressing myself artistically. I toured with regular bands and was on call for major acts. I worked for David Bowie, U2, Joe Jackson, James Taylor, The Stray Cats and a lot of others.

I never considered myself an alcoholic. The simple fact was that even though I drank every day I didn't ever feel too

pissed as I was concentrating on my work. I was smoking pot, doing coke, and amazed people what I could work on.

I only realised I was an alcoholic when I stopped. I got half way through the Madonna 'Girly Show' tour and my back went. I drank the same amounts but started getting really pissed. I noticed it, as my mind wasn't occupied.

I spent all my pension money on booze and ended up on the streets. I spent years on the streets and in and out of hostels. I didn't have the free accommodation and free booze touring anymore. All I used to pay for was my food and drugs.

I started working for *The Big Issue* and everything seemed to fall into place. I got a place in West End and still live there six years later. It's the longest I've lived anywhere. I needed the extra money to put a roof over my head but it was more directing my drinking money to better uses. I moved in with one bag and now I have a fridge, vacuum cleaner, rugs, doonas, curtains, TV, DVD player, stereos, guitar, a fan.

Selling *The Big Issue* was never about the money too much. That was just a little extra. It was about trying to be sociable. I only sell to a few regulars

now but I'm still involved. I come to all the meetings, just come to say hello to people.

I haven't drunk for a long time but still have days where I wouldn't mind a few. My life was going down the gurgler and I had to do something. I came to the realisation that I had to stop, especially as I got Hep C through injecting. Liver failure means that's it and I want to live to at least 80. I thought if I start to do stuff now I might even make it easily.

I tried AA but didn't believe in the doctrine. God doesn't put a drink in your hand, you put a drink in your hand. God doesn't say to you keep drinking, you do. And being a loner I need to rely on myself. *The Big Issue* made the difference. It gave me tools to be more independent. It gave me something to do, gave me social interaction and gave me a purpose. I never really had that purpose before.

I'm on my way back to being a normal person. Getting money to drink was a consuming passion but now I can decide to spend money on something healthy. I can afford to go to the gym with a friend and have put on weight. Instead of putting alcohol in my guts, I put food.

PETER

“*The Big Issue* made the difference. It gave me tools to be more independent. It gave me something to do, gave me social interaction and gave me a purpose.”



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Stories

Compiled by Ben Pennings

It's been an absolute privilege working with these wonderful people over time to tell just a small portion of their stories. I cannot state how appreciative I am for their openness, humor, bravery, and honesty. Despite almost 20 years experience working with people experiencing disadvantage, the stories elicited a number of emotions for me including shock, sadness, awe, amazement and gratitude. I thank them.

It has been enlightening for me to learn how the supportive housing model has made such an impact. Not in data and statistics, but in the lives of real flesh and blood people in front of me. I am so glad for them and hope multitudes more get the support they both need and deserve.

Ben Pennings

Photography

Katie Bennett, Embellysh

Meeting all the people in this book to photograph was just amazing! I often photograph families and people in their homes, but I noticed a particular sense of ease, of comfort held by these people in their homes, which I think must come from appreciation. It wasn't until after I'd met most people that I read their stories and really began to understand where their gratitude came from. They now have some sense of security and stability after a life of anything but.

Having your photograph taken is never the easiest thing, and I want to say a big thank you to everyone who welcomed me, warmly, into their homes for this reason! It was great to bring to light the faces of such incredible life stories that I believe are so important to share, acknowledge and begin to understand.

Katie Bennett

Graphic Design

Robyn McDonald

I've been the Communications Manager at Micah Projects for three years. My work is stimulating and varied and I feel privileged to be part of such an innovative community organisation that endeavours to make a difference in the lives of people experiencing disadvantage.

Reading the powerful stories as I designed the book often moved me to tears. It's so easy to take a relatively stable childhood for granted. I don't anymore.

My thanks to Ben and Katie for their efforts and skills to honestly represent the people who have shared their stories with us.

Robyn McDonald

MICAH PROJECTS

Micah Projects is a community based not-for-profit organisation with a vision to create justice and respond to injustice at the personal, social, and structural levels in church, government, business and society.

We believe that every child and adult has the right to a home, an income, healthcare, education, safety, dignity, and connection with their community of choice.

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia as the traditional owners of this land and support the right of Indigenous people to self determination and cultural expression.

Micah Projects provides a range of support and advocacy services to individuals and families in Brisbane.



MICAH PROJECTS INC



**Breaking Social Isolation
Building Community**

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Micah Projects is fortunate to receive funding from government, generous philanthropists, corporate Australia and the Queensland community to enable its vital services. This generosity and commitment is the reason we are able to support people who experience disadvantage.

It is becoming increasingly important for us to grow our level of non-government funding to enhance our programs that create justice, social inclusion, economic wellbeing and connection within the community. Together we are helping more people get back into life. Please consider helping us help others.

www.micahprojects.org.au/donate

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