



New(town) Beginnings #11

Dear Neighbour,

Over the past 12 months, my small Community Strengthening team has undergone some major transformations and we are now focused on outreach activities in the community.

One of those initiatives has been to establish regular get-togethers for residents in Social Housing (formerly known as public housing) complexes, especially for the older people who may be socially isolated.

In Newtown there are three main social housing estates (as well as smaller blocks too) dotted across the suburb. The majority of the residents we know from these complexes are either on disability support pensions or aged pensions, meaning money can be tight.

Our aim is to support these tenants in developing a tenancy action group which can advocate and address issues affecting their neighbourhood as a collective. Many feel quite defeated by the system and have lost their sense of agency and we hope to help restore some confidence in these residents.

A couple of weeks ago we hosted our fourth monthly morning tea/BBQ event in a local park and had 13 people come along.

John*, in his late 80s and Stanley*, in his 70s, are two sprightly gentleman who are always first to arrive and love having a chat with the team.

They enjoy sharing stories from their past – athletic country boys in their youth but with vastly different experiences. John, being white, tells us about how he would stand up for the local Aboriginal kids who weren't allowed to use the local swimming pool. He recalls arguing with the manager saying if you cut us both, you'd see our blood is the same colour.

Stanley, a Wiradjuri man, tells us beautiful stories of his family, about his brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews who come and visit him. The younger kids have taught him how to email and use social media and now he's a whizz at it.

A keen golfer, one of Stanley's proudest moments is when he asked his local golf club to start hosting a NAIDOC Week event. He's been heavily involved in organising it ever since.

Another elderly lady, Marion*, reaches out regularly to share news of what's been happening. She has a tremendous love of nature and gardening and helped transform one of the communal areas by planting beautiful plants and trees.

But the stories aren't always jovial.

At one estate, we have been told of situations where people with mobility issues have been forced to

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stay in their unit for days when the front door into the block stopped working – meaning they were unable to make it down the alternative access, the fire stairs.

So a priority for this block is to advocate for a ramp to be built, allowing people in scooters and wheelchairs to easily get in and out of the building.

Issues with waste management also feature high on everyone's list of concerns. Often the bins are overflowing and therefore not taken away. One man told us that he has to save his recycling and take it to his sister's house.

We contacted Inner West Council who have been very quick to respond with action. A representative will be coming to our next BBQ event to speak with the residents about finding solutions to the problem.

We are fortunate to have other partners attend our gatherings including Mission Australia, Marrickville Legal Centre and a staff member from MP Jenny Leong's office.

They too have been able to start building rapport, and together, we're so excited to see what's next for these tenants and their community.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team

*Not their real names.