



New(town) Beginnings #35

Dear Neighbour,

It's uplifting being around someone who gets immense satisfaction from their job. That's exactly how you feel when you spend time with one of the longest serving members of our Boarding House Outreach Service (BHOS) team, Jay. As a Case Manager, he is a fiercely strong advocate for his clients and enjoys getting to know their strengths and personalities.

This year Jay has had to endure the heartbreaking tragedy of losing a few clients, while also trying to keep the spirits up of many clients who've been deeply affected by the social isolation brought about by the pandemic.

Like his colleagues, he's an expert on boarding houses and is always keen to share his experiences so people can learn and better understand this community. I asked Jay a few questions about his work and this is what he told me ...

In the context of COVID and people being restricted to their own residence, what impact does this have on someone living in a boarding house?

To put it bluntly, being locked down in a boarding house would be akin to being locked in a jail cell in solitary confinement. Residents don't have the luxury of all the mod cons of a functioning household, like internet, a fridge, or even a microwave, so there's definitely no Netflix marathons.

Those with no family or friends were left to fend for themselves, so I spent lots of time on the phone and for many it was the only conversation they would have all week.

Can you tell me about how you build a rapport with your clients?

I respect all my service users: they are the strongest, most resilient, funny, creative and intelligent people you could meet. Many share colourful stories with me from their past and how they've ended up where they are now – these moments help build rapport.

How hard is it to try and help individuals who don't feel like they deserve support?

Most of the people we work with have complex past trauma whether it's intergenerational or from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This can be compounded by poor experiences with the system, which

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means that by the time we start working with them, they've lost faith that things will go their way. So like any relationship, trust is integral between a case manager and the client, and if that trust is ever broken, even inadvertently, it can have a detrimental effect on the person and lead to disengagement with a service or even the sector.

We don't force our opinions or ideas onto our clients, we assist by identifying their strengths and working with them to make positive changes in their life. Sometimes it's slow going but I think the key to working with people is empathy, everyone wants to be listened to and feel validated.

Sadly, this year has been extra tough for you with the passing of a few clients, can you please share with us the impact this has on you as a case manager?

Unfortunately, all case managers have to deal with clients dying, especially because many of our clients often have poor health. I've spent days in hospital visiting clients who are in a coma – they often have no family or friends so I'm the only person who sees them in their last days.

Most recently I was assisting a lovely old man who was thrilled to have finally been offered his own place in housing. On the day he was meant to sign the paperwork and move in, I couldn't reach him. After a couple of days I contacted the police who eventually told me that he had passed away. That shattered me, it just wasn't fair.

Another client I actually knew through the local music scene when we were younger, was recently released from prison and wanting to turn his life around. Unfortunately I lost contact with him and then found out he had passed away. Nothing hits you harder than going to a funeral where you are one of only two in the crowd.

In 2020, everything seems more amplified - more sorrow, more guilt. It's a sad and challenging time for a case manager as you question whether you could have done more. Lucky for me I'm part of such a supportive team and have the best work colleagues ever that I can talk to and be supported by.

We are extremely lucky to have such valuable staff working for Newtown Neighbourhood Centre. Thanks to Jay for sharing his unique insights and raw experiences, and on behalf of the rest of us at NNC a big thank you to Jay and all of the BHOS team for continuing to support those most vulnerable in our community.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team

DID YOU KNOW?

Boarding houses often house the most vulnerable members of our community, those on very low incomes with limited social support, plus other challenging issues. People living in Boarding Houses are classified as "tertiary homeless" – they don't have as many rights as other rental tenants and sadly they can easily end up on the streets without warning.

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