



New(town) Beginnings #38

Dear Neighbour

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre is known for producing many great resources but our most popular is a carefully (and lovingly) constructed [low-cost accommodation directory](#), which lists rooms in boarding houses or studios available for rent under \$250 a week in the inner west.

Initially developed over a decade ago, today it's accessed by hundreds of people on a weekly basis and even distributed by Housing NSW and Centrelink staff to their clients, many of whom are in desperate need of accommodation.

Behind the list is a person with a harrowing story of loss, struggle and eventual triumph – our dedicated volunteer, Chris, who has lived experience of homelessness, addiction and mental health challenges.

"I've definitely improved it over the years. I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I have to get the fonts right, make sure it's clearly laid out and easy-to-read because I know it's being used by people who are in crisis," explains Chris.

"It takes me about 3 to 4 hours to scour rental websites and place all the info into the template. Normally, it's about 30 pages long but at the moment it's 70-90 pages!"

Joining NNC as a volunteer in 2011, Chris was slowly recovering from battling his own demons. His nightmare had commenced two years prior when he'd lost everything after a painful separation from his wife which left him estranged from his children.

He endured months of instability, including addressing an addiction to alcohol, before finally getting transferred to a recovery and therapeutic residential program.

"I initially opted to stay for 6 months, partly because I was promised cake if I hit that milestone", he adds jokingly.

"I hated it at first because I felt out of place, but ended up staying for 12 months and grew to love it."

Chris volunteered to become a house coordinator at the rehab and was able to see his eldest son every second weekend (travelling over an hour or so to get there) at supervised visits. During this time he also applied to study Community Services at TAFE.

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Despite being knocked back, he persisted with completing other foundational courses and since then has not only completed a Certificate 4 but also a Diploma with Distinction. An incredible feat for someone who claims to not like studying.

It was through TAFE he met a woman who volunteered at NNC teaching the elderly basic computer skills. When he finally decided to apply for a volunteer gig at NNC he had forgotten she worked there, so was shocked to see her and learn he would become her assistant. This role eventually led to him becoming the producer of the accommodation list.

Through a private rental subsidy scheme, Chris also secured long-term accommodation, and this year marks 9 years since moving into his 2-bed apartment, where his eldest son has recently resumed regular overnight stays.

“I can’t believe it’s almost been 10 years since I started at NNC – it’s gone quickly. I still find it fulfilling and I actually credit the routine for saving me when I plunged back into depression after having to go through the family courts.”

Along the way Chris has had additional challenges including suffering a stroke in 2016, but despite all this adversity Chris continues to volunteer every week. “I love coming here and it’s fulfilling helping the community in some capacity. Everyone always tells me what a huge impact it has on people. It’s also great for my mental health, which is much better because of this.”

I often say that I’m in awe of the people I get to meet through working at NNC and Chris is no different. We, along with countless others, thank him for helping many finally get on their feet, just like he did.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team