



New(town) Beginnings #39

Dear Neighbour,

At school we learn things like Maths and English to help us succeed, but rarely do we learn how to support those in our society who are struggling, despite how easily it could be any one of us who is in need.

I'll be the first to admit that when I joined Newtown Neighbourhood Centre my knowledge on homelessness was limited at best. I arrogantly assumed that because I kept abreast of key social justice issues that what I knew was enough. But I couldn't tell you what practical help to offer if you came across a person who looked to be experiencing homelessness. I also had little understanding as to how easily someone can end up destitute.

It is this practical knowledge that can change the course of an individual's life. And it is this principle that underpins our volunteer homeless engagement program, known as Newtopian Outreach.

The extensive in-depth training schedule includes learning about the complexities and challenges surrounding homelessness, and importantly how to navigate the labyrinth of the social welfare system. It also provides participants with the delicate skills needed to offer assistance.

In February this year, our newest cohort of volunteers were recruited to roll out the homeless outreach pilot, based on the Newtown model, in the Sydney CBD. The pandemic then hit and all training was paused. It would have been easy for this group to withdraw from the program during a pandemic, but much to our surprise only a couple did.

Our volunteers not only support the work we do, they also become our biggest champions and ambassadors in debunking the myths surrounding homelessness. I recently had the chance to talk with a few of these enthusiastic and passionate volunteers. When I asked what motivated them to sign up for the program and what has had a lasting impact, this is what they said:

Tamasin – I wanted to get out and learn while doing something constructive. I have a much better idea about how people can become rough sleepers and get stuck there. And also more about the system itself and how difficult it can be to access.

Siobhan – During COVID-19 it really made me think that I needed to do more for myself and others. It was interesting to find out there are different kinds of homelessness that I wasn't aware of. It was also good to get an understanding that you can't force anyone to get help, they would need to want it.

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Emily – I have always wanted to give back and connect more with the community, but wanted to know that I was genuinely helping with my engagement rather than intruding or overstepping. It has helped me to be able to start conversations with friends and colleagues to help break down the negative perceptions and encourage them to make more effort to acknowledge and engage with the homeless community.

I also asked them about how the outreach experience has changed their perception or interactions with people sleeping rough:

Tamasin – I think I am much more comfortable in interacting with people sleeping rough now that it's less of an "unknown", I've discovered it's nothing to be scared of. The program really emphasised rough sleepers' vulnerability, and the program design really honoured that by investing in training us as volunteers.

Siobhan – Previously I wasn't too sure what to do when I walked past someone that was homeless, I always felt guilty and would put my head down. This program has helped me understand that even if you don't have anything to give, a simple hello and smile could make someone's day. We all need a little bit of human interaction, we're all human.

Emily – It reminded me that everyone has a story and life can have unexpected turns. If they are comfortable to share them, the stories that some people have are devastating and heartbreaking and they deserve to be heard.

Since completing their training, outreach has been happening twice a week where the teams patrol the streets around Martin Place in the CBD. The teams have chatted with dozens of people sleeping rough and had meaningful engagements with around 30 of those individuals where they were able to provide useful information.

The extension and expansion of our Newtownian Outreach program would not have been possible without the generous support of our funders – City of Sydney, Uniting, Westpac and Westfield.

As we come to the end of a challenging year we want to express our gratitude to all our volunteers. Your patience, understanding and willingness to stay involved through the uncertainty is a sign of your genuine commitment to making our city a more just, caring and inclusive place.

Mel

Community Strengthening Team

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