New(town) Beginnings #5

Dear Neighbour,

It's hard to think of a busier place than a local shopping centre and our local, Marrickville Metro, is no exception. Often known as 'informal' community centres, shopping centres host the broadest spectrum of any community, people of all ages and backgrounds.

We knew that there was an awareness of Newtown Neighbourhood Centre in the community, but many locals only interact with us by attending Newtown Festival. Many people also make the assumption that we only work with Newtown residents, when in fact we support people in a variety of ways across the entire Inner West area.

In late 2019, our team made a decision to actively increase our presence outside of the Centre and Marrickville Metro became the obvious place to start.

When we approached their management with our idea of having a weekly Information and Referral pop-up stand at the shopping centre, we were met with an emphatic yes and enthusiastic support.

We commenced our outreach service in early 2020, setting up tables and chairs in the corridor near Woolworths. We packed flyers, information sheets and activities for kids to help engage with local families. And then COVID-19 hit and after only 6 weeks we were forced to pull the pin.

Thankfully after 9 months, we were able to return and the team have been visiting the Metro ever since.

Every Tuesday, between 10am and 12pm you can find us outside Kmart. The team are happy to engage with anyone who has any questions or simply wants to chat. Some weeks it's quiet, but after 12-15 pop-ups, people now know we are there and we have had multiple engagements where we have been able to support people who may not have accessed the Centre.

Individuals have been connected to aged care, legal and domestic violence services and we have been

able to provide information on essential items such as free meals and clothes. With the generosity of Marrickville Metro's management and businesses we have also been able to have long conversations over a coffee and donut and meet the locals in our neighbourhood.

I recently met a young woman who, a few days prior, had left her share house due to an incident with a housemate. She'd been sleeping in her van for a few nights and had decided that she was temporarily going to convert her van into her home. She was doing a postgraduate degree and found the freedom and peace living on her own conducive to her studies.

Being extremely self-reliant, she had a clever system for all sorts of 'van' challenges. On the day we met she had $20 and was keen to buy some warm pyjamas from Kmart and shared how much she enjoyed checking out the Metro street libraries as she was an avid reader.

We spent over an hour getting to know the woman and her situation and we were able to share information about where she could find additional support including a referral for some new clothes with one of our local services.

We also get the pleasure of meeting many lovely parents or grandparents who are looking after young children. It has been an extremely tough time for young families as most of their regular activities were cancelled last year, so it is wonderful to be able to offer some activities and a friendly face for these families on their outing.

We are now running a regular story-time event at the Metro with our friends from Connect Marrickville and Paint Inner West REaD.

We are loving the opportunity to meet more locals in our area and hope to see you at the Metro sometime soon.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team

P.S. – To find out more about our Outreach service and upcoming events, please follow us on Facebook.