



New(town) Beginnings #8

Dear Neighbour,

This week marks National Volunteer Week, which gives us an opportunity to reflect on the benevolent nature of our local community members.

Whether it's the countless free counselling sessions our volunteer counsellors have provided over many years, offering a lifeline to many who can't afford vital yet costly mental health support. Or our longstanding volunteer English teachers who have supported hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers with critical language skills allowing them to navigate their new environment.

These are just two examples of how our volunteers enhance and greatly contribute to our community.

This year, we'd like to pay special tribute to the volunteers who in 2020 helped us keep our flagship, program, Information and Referral (I&R), open when it was facing demise due to limited funding.

The drop-in service allows anyone to access information or referrals to other critical support. During each three-hour shift, I&R can have as many as 15-20 people accessing the service – whether it's to have a phone charged, use a computer or seek help in a crisis. For many of our regulars who may be socially isolated, it's an opportunity for them to connect and check-in.

It can be fast-paced, chaotic, and even at times a little frightening. It takes extraordinary spirit and fortitude to work on the frontline of one of Sydney's busiest neighbourhood centres as the stories we often hear are heart-wrenching and hard to reconcile.

Two of our original I&R volunteers both started as Newtopian Outreach volunteers, undertaking street patrols to engage with the area's rough sleepers. When an opportunity to get involved in I&R opened they were both eager to do more and NNC are extremely fortunate to have such committed and enthusiastic assets to the Centre.

Elise now volunteers every Wednesday and Narelle takes the three-hour shift every Monday.

"You always seem to get more than you give. I love how a few hours spent volunteering can result in really tangible outcome for someone else, for example – them getting housed, a meal, some new clothes", says Elise who approached NNC to volunteer after moving to Newtown from abroad and when she was looking for connection.

Narelle echoes Elise's sentiments:

"I have had some of the most important conversations of my life with some extraordinary people I would not have crossed paths with if I hadn't volunteered with NNC. Plus you learn a lot about how hard some people's lives can be and how much they need our community's understanding, respect and support. Volunteering at NNC makes me feel connected, effective and appreciated," reflects Narelle.

A common experience for many of our volunteers is how being at NNC changes your perception and broadens your knowledge of the social inequality facing so many people.

"They say "you don't know what you don't know". Before volunteering with the centre, I didn't know what specific factors could lead to a person sleeping on the streets. Now I think of humans with names, stories, and the complex issues that result in some tough situations and that there are multiple opportunities to engage daily if we don't turn a blind eye," explains Elise.

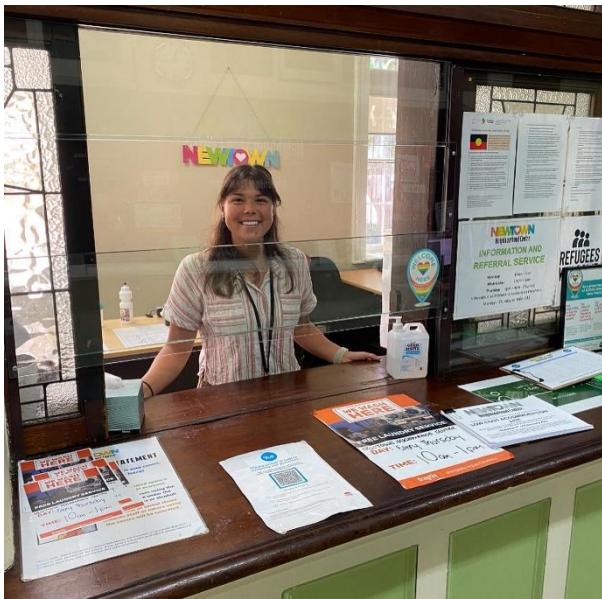
"My understanding of homelessness, its prevalence, how it can happen to almost anyone, how profoundly it affects people and its many dangers has soared since volunteering with NNC. My consciousness has definitely been raised", says Narelle.

And after every shift, there's undoubtedly a personal story that will touch you for life, as Elise shares:

"There was a woman who came in quite shaken up as she had just left a domestic violence situation and asked for where to get free meals and for help looking for a job, which we were able to help her with...She came back a few weeks ago in a lovely suit with a different demeanour. She said she was pursuing a career in real estate and was moving into lovely new accommodation."

Enormous gratitude goes to Elise, Narelle and all of our volunteers who dedicate so much of their precious time to improving the outcomes and lives of so many of our neighbours.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team



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