

NEWTOWN

Neighbourhood Centre

New(town) Beginnings # 1

Dear Neighbour,

It's hard not to reflect on change in the New Year. Words such as fresh, new, transformation are synonymous with January, but for many of us the novelty of change fades as the year progresses and routines settle. By contrast, those we often support at NNC, change is forced upon them and forms a natural part of their day. It's likely to be unwanted and beyond their control.

Often the need for change derives from immense horror and trauma. At NNC we're privileged to have capacity to support this change over time and ultimately contribute towards a person's healing and new beginning.

Late last year, amidst the frenzy December brings, an older gentleman came to the centre clutching a letter from a lawyer. The letter confirmed that the firm would represent him and that the client would need to gather supporting documentation; it didn't elaborate beyond that. The gentleman was asking for assistance with writing letters and filling out forms.

It was a Tuesday morning, before our Info and Referral Service opened for the day, and on the same morning our English classes are held. With limited resources, we're usually quite restricted in being able to provide such support, but in this particular case both my manager and I could feel his sense of urgency.

After some gentle probing, she found out he was a victim of the stolen generation and had decided that now was the time he wanted to make a claim, and he wanted to do it before Christmas.

We were both determined to refer him to an appropriate service who would help him transcribe his story. We hit the phones and Google. Half an hour later, after several calls, including accidentally waking up a man in the middle of the night who was holidaying in Taiwan, we were yet to find a suitable organisation.

While we were researching further places to try, our volunteer English teacher, a proud Aboriginal woman from Gadigal land, walked in. I quickly explained what we needed and without much hesitation she told us exactly who to call for help. This led us to two organisations who agreed to help the gentlemen that week. One wanted him to go and see them that day.

During the hour we spent with the gentleman, he shared some of the details from his horrific past. The day he was picked up from school by strangers, without any prior warning and put on a train to a town foreign to him, away from his family, without any contact. He endured many horrible years in convents and was abused in ways that are unimaginable. Every Christmas he was sent to a different family to spend 6 weeks during the summer holidays.

"Some of these so-called Catholic families were even more horrible than the nuns in the convent," he painfully described. Thankfully he also encountered some loving families, and to his day, he's still friends with the ones who treated him respectfully. A scenario easy to imagine with his gregarious, friendly nature.

I'll never know what the catalyst was for him to make the claim now but I'm so glad NNC was able to play a small part of his healing. He exuded calmness and so much warmth, his positive spirit was contagious. I felt truly blessed to have met such a gracious, open and strong person.

When it was time for him to leave, I apologised for what he had to go through and thanked him for sharing his story with me. My last words to him were, "I'm not religious but I think you're my Christmas angel." He gave me the biggest smile, a hug, and left the centre, happier than when he arrived.

Thanks to my job at NNC, the 'new' in Newtown has definitely brought a more poignant and profound meaning. We have an abundance of stories to share you this year, and can't wait for you to learn more about our incredible, resilient community members.

Thanks for reading,

Mel
Community Strengthening Team