

Building Belonging: Celebrating Inclusive Communities



Colleen's Story



Colleen, a lady in her late 70's or early 80's, was referred to us because she was experiencing considerable 'depression'. She had looked after her sick husband for many years and he had now died: she was lonely and felt useless.

One of our community workers visited her. Colleen made it clear during the conversation that she believed that she had nothing much to look forward to, and frankly, what was life about at this stage. We often imagine what might have happened to Colleen, if it had been a worker who had lots of services to offer her (you know, domestic assistance, personal care, maybe an outing on a bus, or to the local social club) Whether or not she would have accepted them, we don't know, but for sure, it would not have made much difference to her life.

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This worker however, was not very good at offering services. Her name is Barb. What she did notice was that on the sideboard were a half a dozen extremely fine knitted tea cosies. Not just ordinary tea cosies, but ones with knitted butterflies, bees, and gardens on them. Barb commented on them, (Barb also has a very creative hobby, mosaics) and Colleen said that she made them in case the boy scouts came to the door asking for a donation; she could give them something to put on their trading table.

About that time, the trendy T Bar had opened in Adelaide. It was the first to celebrate tea in the way that coffee bars celebrated coffee. Barb asked Colleen if she could borrow a tea cosy to show to the T Bar, as she thought they might be interested in selling such wonderful tea cosies. Colleen agreed, and the T Bar were delighted. They bought some, which sold really quickly. Barb went back to Colleen, saying that she had found a market for the tea cosies.

Well and good said Colleen, but I don't really need the money—is there some group in UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide which could do with the donation of the money? Barb knew of another worker in the organisation, who was doing a fabulous project with women with an acquired brain injury.

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These women were getting together to create a quilt, with each panel made by an individual woman, telling her story. The panels were well under way but the next step was a bit unclear. The worker was most appreciative of the prospect of the donation. Colleen went to meet the women, and felt really inspired by what they were doing, and in great admiration of their courage in dealing with their disability.

The tea cosies sold really well, and Colleen could not keep up. So Barb put the word out among some other older women ('clients') – also people who were experiencing social isolation. Then they decided to get together on a Tuesday morning once a month to swap patterns, then they all occasionally joined in with the 'girls'; ie the women with acquired brain injury.

The older knitting women called themselves the Cosy Club, and it became a very active and committed group. They brought food to share to the meetings, they got to know each other socially and strong friendships formed. They started to make other things and hold trading tables, giving the money to the quilt project. Colleen was a real leader in this group. A journalist from the Adelaide Advertiser ran into Barb in the IGA, she chatted about it, so he did an article on the Cosy Club, with a large photo of Colleen as a feature.

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When the quilt was completed, (and professionally quilted with the donated money) a person who makes hand made books, also offered to make a beautiful book of the process, and the panels.

This was paid for from the donations from the Cosy Club. A video was made of the progress, and the making of the quilt, book and the stories of those involved.

At the huge launch of the quilt, all the women with brain injury got up to give a talk about their experience in doing it. Dignitaries and media attended, and it was a truly inspiring evening. The supper was something like I have never seen. Cakes were made in colours and arranged in patterns, to be a quilt. There was such an aura of celebration, achievement and pride in the room, it brought goose bumps. It was a big occasion, and grandly done.

Colleen was asked to present to a National Conference in Sydney during this time, which she did, with Barb. She said at one point that she had gone from having nothing to do, from feeling useless, to not having enough hours in the day.

What always strikes me about this, is that it was so simple; the difference between offering a service, and noticing a talent, meant that a lonely older woman, was a speaker at a national conference rather than a service recipient dependent on her care workers for some change of scenery in the day.

Thanks to Colleen and Barb for sharing their story