



WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



IN OUR WORDS

STORIES FROM THE SHED

MOUNT DRUITT



There is power in a story.

A story affects the person hearing it and the person telling it. Epstein & Grey (2011)¹ tell us that stories not only allow people to share their experiences with others, but also assist us to understand ourselves, explain challenging situations and form friendships. Adler et al (2015)² found that when a person can highlight their personal agency, social connections and positive outcomes when reflecting on even painful events from the past, it helps them heal and find satisfaction in the midst of life's unexpected twists and turns. For people from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island background, this process has greater poignancy, as storytelling – or yarning – is an integral cultural practice. Terare & Rawsthorne (2019, p1)³ tell us that "yarning is a process of storytelling that involves both sound and silence. It requires embodied deep listening through which stories emerge that create new knowledge and understanding". They, and Gibson et al (2018)⁴ assert that reconnecting to culture through story provides hopeful insights into wellbeing.

According to Flynn (2010), narrative interventions are an emerging field with an encouraging evidence base, but have rarely been applied in men's health.⁵ Now, these intersections between story and wellbeing are breaking new ground. Peretz, Lehrer & Dworkin (2018)⁶ argue that while narrative-based strategies are increasingly being used in public health programs, no evaluation publications exist to date for programming that employs men's public narrative-sharing as a central means for promoting healthy masculinities and transforming life experience.

As the NSW Mental Health Commission (2014, p.15)⁷ notes, "mental health and wellbeing is an essential

- 1 Epstein M & Gray F, 2011, *Speaking Our Minds: A guide to how we use our stories*, Melbourne: Our Consumer Place
- 2 Adler J et al, 2015, 'Variation in Narrative Identity Is Associated With Trajectories of Mental Health Over Several Years', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2015, Vol. 108, No. 3, 476-496.
- 3 Mareese Terare and and Margot Rawsthorne, 2019, 'Country Is Yarning To Me: Worldview, Health and Well-Being Amongst Australian First Nations People', *British Journal of Social Work* (2019) 0, 1-17.
- 4 Gibson C, Crockett J, Dudgeon P, Bernoth M & Lincoln M, 2018 'Sharing and valuing older Aboriginal people's voices about social and emotional wellbeing services: a strength-based approach for service providers', *Aging & Mental Health*, 1-9.
- 5 Flynn D, 2010, 'Narratives of melancholy: a humanities approach to depression', *Medical Humanities*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 36-39.
- 6 Peretz T, Lehrer J & Dworkin SL, 2018, 'Impacts of Men's Gender-transformative Personal Narratives: A Qualitative Evaluation of the Men's Story Project', *Men and Masculinities*, 1-23
- 7 NSW Mental Health Commission, 2014, *Living Well: A Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW 2014-2024*, p 15

part of the fabric of our society. It runs through everything we do. We are all affected by it and we are all responsible for it". Australia has achieved some successful changes in mental health policy, treatment, education, awareness and advocacy, however the issue of stigma associated with mental illness and help-seeking still exists. This stigma can have a considerable impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing, with the build-up of this and other situational pressures in people's life being a potential pathway to suicide attempts. As is clear from recurring yearly figures, male suicide continues to be a major social issue for men and boys of all ages in Australia and remains the biggest single killer of men aged 15-44.⁸

Arbes et al (2014)⁹ suggest that men experience unique factors that frame and inhibit their capacity for support-seeking and are largely unaware of the impact of some of these discourses. This may be true, but men may also go through life events that impact on their social connectedness where they are less likely to seek help, or – when it is sought – more difficult to find. Stories are one way of encouraging men to offer help and support to their friends going through tough times. Services need to be developed that do just that, and be an effective way of improving general connectedness to reduce loneliness and isolation but also take into account the situational factors that lead a person to walk down a path of despair towards suicide. That this is a more significant issue in Aboriginal communities is without question. Armstrong et al (2017)¹⁰ identify that indigenous males are 3 times more likely than non-indigenous males to report recent suicidal thoughts, the disparity being greatest among men aged 30-55 years.

'The Shed' in Mt Druitt is a service to fills that gap. It is funded as a suicide prevention program for the Aboriginal community, founded on a Social

Determinants of Health (SDOH) framework. Macdonald et al¹¹ have shown that acknowledging the broader social factors, stressors and systems that impact on someone's life can have a positive outcome form reducing suicide and improving wellbeing. Calma¹² agrees and identifies that there are further social determinants to specifically consider for indigenous communities such as racism, lack of collective control and access to traditional lands. The Shed takes all these matters to heart. It was founded in 2004 as a partnership between WSU, the Holy Family Church and the Mt Druitt Aboriginal community. It provides a place for our indigenous community to drop in, eat, drink, and talk to a worker or another community member in a non-judgmental relationship. Further, The Shed is a venue for a broad range of health and support services to be present all on the same day. On any given Wednesday, someone could, if they needed to, see a mental health worker, probation worker, community worker, podiatrist, legal advisor, housing worker, nurse or counsellor and get a hearty lunch while they're at it. The informality of the arrangements, the importance of relationship, and the locality of being 'in-community' rather than in an office are key features in the Shed's success. And stories are shared every day.

Very recently, Zac Seidler¹³ asked the pertinent question: "We tell men to open up, but are we ready to listen?" This collection of stories provides the beautiful opportunity for Aboriginal men – and women – to share their lives, and make it possible for the broader community, including those who have capacity to do something about it, to listen; and listen deeply.

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8 Australian Men's Health Forum, 2019, Male Suicide, https://www.amhf.org.au/male_suicides_in_australia_up_10_in_2017

9 Arbes V, Coulton C & Boeket C 2014, 'Men's social connectedness', *Report for the Movember Foundation*, Hall & Partners, Open Mind.

10 Armstrong G, Pirkis J, Arabena K, Currier D, Spittal MJ & Jorm AF, 'Suicidal behaviour in Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous males in urban and regional Australia: Prevalence data suggest disparities increase across age groups', *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 2017, Vol. 51(12) 1240-1248.

11 Multiple documents can be found on the MHIRC Website, https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/mhirc/mens_health_information_and_resource_centre/our_work/research_projects/the_shed

12 Calma T, 2007, 'Creating futures: influencing the social determinants of mental health and wellbeing in rural, Indigenous and Island peoples', *Australian Psychiatry*, Vol 15 supplement, s5-s9.

13 Seidler Z, 2019, 'We tell men to open up more. But are we ready to listen?', The Age, October 18, 2019. <https://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/we-tell-men-to-open-up-more-but-are-we-ready-to-listen-20191017-p531mg.html>

Interviewer's Note

I would often say to people at The Shed that I had the best job. I got to listen. I got to listen to the inspiring, heart-breaking, joyous, and inconceivable stories. There is a safety and comfortability at The Shed that is not present at other services. It feels strange even calling The Shed a service. It doesn't feel like a service; it feels like an open family that look out for each other. A family that welcomed me – an outsider – with kindness and warmth.

Outstandingly, The Shed are able to maintain long-term and meaningful engagement. It is difficult to overstate the kind of importance that The Shed provides for the community. It is a telling part of The Shed that everyone keeps coming back. There is also a false distinction between the 'worker' and 'client' at The Shed. There are no such power differences that often exist in those relationships. It doesn't matter what your role or status, people looked out for each other just the same.

Perhaps my favourite question to ask was: How has The Shed impacted you personally? This question seemed to elicit the most powerful response. This was not exclusive to participants; workers often talked about how The Shed had improved their personal lives. I can also relate to this. There was a great deal of wisdom and insight shared with me. The Shed showed me how effective services are run, but more notably, it showed me the importance of communities, family, and culture. There was more than one conversation that finished with watery eyes.

I am so grateful for everyone opening up and sharing their stories with me. It was a privilege yarning with you all. I hope I have accurately captured the strength and resilience of your stories.

Chris Panagiotaros

In Our Words

RICK (Shed Co-ordinator)



I was working at the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council and there was a project going on there which was a joint initiative with the Men's Health Information Resource Centre. We did a lot of things to encourage Aboriginal men or Aboriginal health groups across NSW to look at developing locally based Aboriginal controlled men's groups. In which, it really fits in with Aboriginal culture in any sense because quite often men would meet and talk, and I was trying to get some more infrastructure around it. Then, there was a guy who was coordinator here at The Shed and he ended up packing up and going home so I applied for the job and I've been here about 9 years. There was some great partnerships here we still continue with like mental health and probation and parole – but then what we done, was to pull other organisations in. Ones that have been identified by people, so we would have a lot of people coming in who were homeless, and we ended up getting in Housing and Mission Australia – at the time we were pretty lucky because they were just finishing building a lot of properties in Western Sydney and I think we ended up housing about 70 families over 5-6 months.

I remember talking to a guy that has passed away now – what we had to do was work out how to intervene as early as possible – and I'd known this guy as a child in Redfern, so there was a close relationship there; and I remember him coming in once he'd been released and he said, "all the brothers that are inside are in breach of AVO's". So, we had to look at apprehended violence orders. We had to look at housing, we had to look at mental health stuff. And we found that a lot

of the blokes that we were dealing with, a lot of the community members that were coming here were dealing with a lot of different things at once. They were in the process where their kids were being removed or an AVO and they couldn't have access to their kids and see their families. There was generally mental health stuff going on because they were depressed, they were homeless – so, we sort of had to work continually to bring all these other organisations in to start addressing the needs. I think when I first came here, it was a place for men to come and sit down and talk. But then it was wait, we've got them, they're sitting down and talking but we need to take the next step because you can only talk so often before you get sick off saying, look I'm homeless and I'm not seeing my kids – you know, we had to take the next step and find out about getting access to the kids, find out about getting housed. So, we sorted progressively started to do that. We are at the point now where we have about 28 service agreements, all sorts of services, you know; mental health, drug and alcohol, mental counselling, gambling services. I think one of the advantages is that even if the services aren't here, we can still get things to happen pretty quickly and make it responsive. So, in the one day, we can engage the person with something like 5 different services, which isn't hard to do here because of the way we've got our relationships and the outreach services that come here. But one of the biggest advantages is – as much as we engage with services – our priority is the clients and what we've got to do is make sure our clients feel supported.

RICK

A thing I will quite often do is ask them if they feel comfortable with their workers because we want to keep people engaged and if that means, somebody comes in and they don't like the lawyer we referred them to or they don't like the counsellor or psychologist, we will go back to the services and get them to change the worker. People have got to determine their engagement points themselves and we will support them and provide on-going case work in some sense, just to see how they are going. Quite often, it could just be a conversation; how are you going with that lawyer or how's your counselling session going, or how's this or how's that going. And people will quite often – because it takes a bit of time to build a trusting relationship with you – sometimes people might come here for a couple of months and not really engage, only on a social level, and then all of a sudden, they will walk into the office and offload all sorts of things on you. I think it's a matter, that those people want to have a trusting relationship, they don't go around telling people their personal business. I think that's one of the things that we have done because we have clientele who still come here from when I first started 9 years ago. We get a lot of new clients, sometimes we will see people, they might have been homeless, and they have been housed, and everything's going alright with them, but they will still come back here to drop in and have a feed, cupper, and a chat.

I think one of the biggest things I've worked out is – it needs to be a space where people feel comfortable. They have got to be able come in – and when you're looking at blokes – they can sort of come in and talk about shit, the footy, and the shit about something else. You know, give a little bit of stick and cop a bit. I think it makes it a place where people want to come. We don't make people come here – they have got to come here by choice. It's the same if they do come here and engage – it's got to be their choice to want to come back because we're not the bloody police or ones to say if you don't drop off, it's going to be a bad mark against your name. It's got to be up to the people for when they want to come in and when they want to come out. And it needs to be safe for them. I think one of the good things – because we get people who have been here before I've come a long – they have seen the service works and they trust it enough within their own family and friends, where they will bring people up here as well. You know, it's quite often about a person's word where they will come up and help or engage. We will get dad's bringing daughters or mum's bringing sons or people turning up with a cousin. A lot of it runs on community energy, more so than anything. It has taken a while to build it up to a point we are at now. We've even had feedback from the services saying people engage here better than they do at the office.

Sometimes you will go somewhere, and they will get you to ring a number on a card. People in their normal daily lives lose cards, lose flyers, don't have the time to ring – they've got too much going on in their lives.

I think it's good where they can just go somewhere, engage with the service, have a feed, have a cuppa and be able to talk which can make the difference. And generally, with the Aboriginal community, they will come here, and they will end up running into someone they haven't seen in a long time or a relative. So, we get a lot people that might be down from the country for a couple of days and they might come along or come here looking for their relatives as well. It becomes pretty good like that – I think it's a good space for people, but I think – as well as that – that non-Aboriginal people come here. And a lot of them having been coming here for a while, a couple of years, it's not just a one-off thing. They come here, and I think they feel just as safe as Aboriginal people. They engage a lot, they talk to each other, and I think there is a lot of that racism and gender bias gets left at the gate. We get a lot of men here, a lot of women; aboriginal or non-Aboriginal; young, old. We don't restrict anyone from coming here unless they abuse staff or abuse other people that come here. I think in the 9 years we have been here we've only had trouble with 2 people in all that time. People usually won't come here at all when they are drunk or under the influence of drugs or something like that, which is good because it shows they have enough respect for the place. And I think the other thing too is, that with some of the elders that come along, they will generally pull them up pretty quick – don't go coming here pissed or whatever. I think The Shed provides a good space for not just the people but for the services, because they can come in and build trusting relationships with people as well. Also, the services know they can find their client by coming here if they change their number every couple of weeks or don't have phones. I think the services that fit in here best are the staff that have a bit of willingness to be a bit more flexible about what people need because it's about people's needs not service's needs.

People's lives are much more complex. Maybe just being homeless, there might be something that's gone on underneath it. They might have an audit that says they can't go to their own homes or they had a family breakdown and they can't afford something new. So quite often, they might come here looking for one thing but once you sit down and talk to them, they might have 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 different things that they might need. So, it's not just a one sized shoe fits all. Quite often, it's about that big network, not just with the people here but each one of those staff members or people that come with another network. For instance, we can have the health check bus come out, but they can do internal referrals within the hospital system. So, you could get on there and get a health check, where they check out your liver and your heart. Then they'll say, "we've got a new dental service or do you want to see about diabetes". That way, you might jump on a bus and find out you have diabetes and then the next thing, they can link you to a diabetes educator and you can see the people you need to see. So, people that come up here are quite often doorways into something else.

In Our Words

BUDDY

I lived down here once and then I lived & worked in Port Macquarie, but had some trouble with drugs and drug court and jail. I moved back here because I was sick of going to jail. Then the kids' mum was on drugs and her mum started to live with us and it went downhill. She was giving her money to go get drugs while I was at work.

I knew about The Shed but because I'm so quiet I never used to come here. When I moved back here, I thought 'I won't associate with no one - I'll just work and stay with my kids'. Otherwise you end up picking out the drug friends again. But when the kids got removed, I came up here and saw Rick and they just helped me. That was about 18 months ago.

It was a bloody mess. I've been through criminal court but never been through DOCS. First, I rang up and made all these appointments to see what I had to do to get my kids back. The kids' mum was saying we have to stay together, but I came up here and they were saying to get my kids back, separation might be better. I grew up without a mum and dad, so I thought, I don't want my kids going through that. First the court said I wasn't getting them back, even after separation. I was in shock. I came here again and they made some phone calls to

the solicitors and said things have changed. They really had my back and got people to understand my story and then we went back to court. In the morning, they said it was still no deal in the morning, but then next minute, it went to court room and there was no hearing at all. The judge just told DOCS to give me the kids back. If it wasn't for Rick and The Shed, I wouldn't have got the kids, honestly. Like, if I didn't get them back; I was thinking am I going to get back on the drugs again?

So, from The Shed I learnt not to give up. It's just all positive stuff. They know who is serious here and who's not serious. If they see someone here who is serious, they will work with them and try their hardest. It's like there is a 100 Ricks - I don't know how he does it all. He does a lot of bloody work. I've been put in touch with a lot of other services and that's been a big help.

There's been domestic violence too – but that was after I had about 18 months of copping abuse years ago, and then I abused, but I changed as soon as I had the kid. I promised that I'm not going to be one of those fathers that go to jail, and the kids come to jail. And I haven't done that. I haven't gone back to jail ever since. The passion of the people at The Shed keeps them going and it keeps me going.

In Our Words

CHARLES

3 years ago I was homeless, recently separated and in a very toxic relationship. I was still in recovery, had depression & anxiety. I was living in a caravan at that stage, and a bit before that I was in a car. I was disconnected because I had no family and for Aboriginals, that's disconnection. Anyway another koori guy used to come here (I don't see him around too much anymore) and he told me about The Shed. So, I came with him one day for a Wednesday lunch. And I just joined in. I didn't know anyone – I don't know anybody here, it's not my tribal area either. So I had a yarn with the workers and introduced myself.

They helped me out with a few things – even got me a house. Then I started volunteering here, helping out, because that's the kind of person I am. Before long, the mob across the road heard about me and employed me as a counsellor. I got involved doing things, so, I continued helping out here and I run a men's group. The Shed got me on my feet – doing things, helping myself, they put a roof over my head, a paid job.

I've been involved in community & men's programs for 40 years, so it's not new for me. I just went through a bad circumstance. The Shed helped me straight away with my support. It was a comfortable place to not be judged and to just be yourself. That's what I like about it. You keep the politics out of it and try to keep the personality stuff out of it. That was the most comfortable thing about it. So, you have the opportunity to sit and unpack. So, people can just share their day, tell stories, have a yarn; get that validation, get that dopamine fix. But, it's also an opportunity to delve deeper as well. Don and Rick always have an ear, and

it's a chance to unpack further. A place like this – it's comfortable, relaxed and cultural in a lot of ways they specialise, which is great – it's unique specialist, niche. They're big on advocacy, big on social supports, big on cultural support, and big on a healing framework.

The mob at The Shed were a ready-made community. They were always a phone call away, or come in on a Wednesday and have a feed and a yarn. It's an oasis in a desert, and people know the oasis is there and they gravitate to it when they need the nourishment. That's the sort of environment, and here – no matter what tribe or mob you're from – here is that escape from judgement and criticism. You can be yourself in that moment.

The yarn-ups are a chance to sit and feel connected – belong to and belonging. For those ones with a mental illness or depression or addiction or who are lonely and isolated or people who are just having a bad day – it's an opportunity just to sit and gather. Much like a family; I reminded people it's just like sitting around a kitchen table or a family function.

The connections are everything; you don't want to be around misery or negativity either all the time. Come in, and just belong. You don't have to tell your story; you don't have to do anything other than just be there. If you want to volunteer or get involved, be free. When you're ready and most people eventually tell their story or parts of it. Again, it's about being safe, supportive, and nurturing. There is [sic] always people here you can talk to. Everyone just contributes. You know everything fits.

In Our Words

KOEN

I've been involved with The Shed on and off. My role is the cultural and community worker. I was here 4 years and took a year off to go study depression and anxiety then came back. I've seen The Shed create change in a range of different ways. Say for example, walking into an office and sitting down and getting case managed or a bit of a counsel. The shed will come in and give you a bit more insight into the real-life things. If people are struggling in areas - it changes from them thinking about it to how to get out of it. It changes a lot of people's perspectives and views but more importantly, it gives them the right path. That's what The Shed is about, it's not about sitting there and getting told where you are going wrong, it's about people life's stories and relating to what people are going through. That's how I see it.

There is a real welcoming atmosphere here. People are coming here for a reason, they are not coming here to find out what's wrong or how I can be better, and no one is coming here to tell them how to change. They find out through what we do at The Shed. That's the way it works here.

Say someone comes in and says I've got an alcohol problem, then I say, yeah let's talk about that. Then we start to unpack, why are they drinking? Everyone's been telling that person they are an alcoholic but maybe that's not the reason. By having a variety of services here, you can link that person into to someone who works with relationships. Having links to up to 50 services here, you can always hit the mark and that's the good thing about it. Addiction is addiction but you categorise, they will dwell on that, but they are taking drugs for a reason.

I don't have a particular case study because there are so many times, I've seen The Shed make change. The people that use The shed regularly are not suicidal, that's the thing I look at. The amount of people that come here regularly or come here for help - they are still here today. I cannot name one person who has harmed themselves, suicided or attempted. They might have gone down a bad track, but we are not burying anyone or going to anyone's funeral. We are not regrouping and asking what did we miss [sic]. You can look at all of them and people keep coming back. That's the benefit of The Shed, it's not about sitting down and getting told; it's about being a part of.

Sometimes, like today, you will have a group but the next week, you might have 4 to 5 people who have never been here before. All of the sudden there in the same system as us. They might sit here for an hour or so but as soon as the feed is on, everyone's a friend. They will talk, talk, talk. That's the magical part of The Shed: Once they get used to people and comfortable, they start to open up. You would be surprised how many pop in at any time of the day. It's not all about the big Wednesday lunch - it's about the days where people just pop in or call on their way to the car. That gets overlooked.

It's different at The Shed, not like the four walls with someone writing on a piece of paper. They get to a point where they get sick of telling the same story. They just want to hear what's wrong with them or how to get out of it or are they healthy. Besides people coming here from help, people come back. We get a lot of people with mental health issues and a lot of the men who don't want to talk about certain stuff. The doors are always open here - it's an open-door policy and we don't categorise and file and put people in a system.

They open up more when someone isn't writing down or listing them under A for alcohol or B for broke. We don't have that time managed, diagnosis all that sort of stuff. There were a few people here today and I had a short talk to them and guarantee they will be back Thursday and Friday and then it's a matter of saying let's sit down together. It might be as simple as doing paperwork. They have to do housing, but they can't read and write. So, it's about us sitting down with them and doing the paperwork together. Then approaching services and saying this is the problem. We just break the ice for them - it's another preventative thing. We got the time and the atmosphere that doesn't box them in, and they can open up quicker. We don't need a 8 or 10 week analysis period to find out what they have got.

I've worked here for 4 years and I couldn't get away from the joint. When you start working for a service that is providing a formatted service like requirements and ticked boxes, you look at these people and think 'I'm not really helping them'. You've got half an hour or forty-five minutes tops and I won't see them again for a week. This place doesn't do that, it does a great job. It does more than people would know. I live in the community; I love the mob. It's a package deal for me.

In Our Words

FATHER PAUL HANNA

From 1988 till 2003, this was a community center and a community type church. We used to have a lot of people coming in, bringing all their needs – men and women. In the years 1988 to 2003, we would have had over 600 funerals in those 5 years. Of that 600-odd plus, 100 were suicide.

So, we called a meeting with the people and said what are we going to do? A lot of things went round and round, they come up with the idea of trying to have a meeting space. Have an open-ended meeting space. We said OK, let's do it. We set about working out what to do and we built this place. We got a double garage and we were supervising 500 hours of community service orders. If you had to go court and you had community service hours or you had periotic detention, you would come out of jail on Saturday and Sunday between 8 and 4, and come here. They were locals, they were from here. With a bit of school and guidance, we built this. It was a bit messy but we did it. They owned it on that basis.

We didn't want it to be an exclusively male thing because we wanted to respond to the needs of the community. It's all about the community. It's owned by the community – the really important thing is it's a community looking after its wounded and its rejected.

Every community should look after each other rather than sending them off somewhere else or put them under a government management problem or send them off to some other mob. The beauty of this place is that it is run by the community, it's labour intensive so the community, the people are the greatest gift of all. This community has got it. If it was a manager model, it would be a challenge – financially, costing a lot. But it's been running all these years.

We wanted a legal center, people wanted other issues (advocacy type things), so we got a container which is next door and the legal center opened up on a Wednesday. We get legal aid from Penrith and others – and it just took off. It's a bit out there, it's a bit different. The last figure I saw was that we have 400 contacts a month, 35 agencies come here from all over.

You know, they have a good feed on Wednesdays and when you have a place for sit down time and yarn up time, things start to germinate. We can do this and we can do that – that's what happens here. It's a bit of a light house, that's how I would describe it. **It's a Mount Druitt lighthouse for people on the edge.** It is constantly flashing, and they are sending out signals, saying hey, you can come here. The community will decide whether it's OK or not – and it has decided



it's OK. It's a voice coming out of the dessert or the wilderness. Mount Druitt has the largest public housing estate in Australia – people don't know that.

I've seen many people come here and get back on their feet again. I've been to court a lot where a reference from The Shed has been the tipping point between locking up. There is a guy sitting just over there. He would be in jail but for a letter from here. He came here and came with a report from the medical, report from the court, and it was all saying 'listen, he hasn't been coming here for five minutes, he's been coming here for five months'. The judge said 'well, tell me about the place' and I told him, and the court decided in favour. This place is an advocacy – a voice on the edge.

I was talking to someone this morning, they are sleeping in a car but today, they are here. And they said this is important. It's about unpicking this stuff. You see, it doesn't cost much. In jail, if you go, it costs a hundred thousand dollars a year to look after one person. And it creates such an important network here. If something is not right, they can always come here and catch it. Suicide rates have gone way down since people have started coming here. It's a voice and an echo. You've got the services, legal people, home support workers, health workers.

What's interesting is – if people in this community suffer a suicide or a massive trauma. It's them who come to these places. They walk the walk and they help others. Some of the people in the photo when we opened it, their children had died – tragically – they found this a place of healing and they can give.

When professor Michael Marmot came from Oxford University just before Christmas, he is the world number 1 social epidemiologist. He just sat on these logs, listening to people tell their stories. He was blown away. He was a man who studies the entire world. He has been to every part of the world where there is dysfunction. He knows what parts of the world are sick. He just came here without any fancy gear, no professor or sir, and he just sat on the logs and listened. He couldn't believe it.

The governor general also came here and said to me that he was going to the uni afterwards. I said, this is the university here. This is the real place where university happens. We haven't got the books; we have the people. You learn a lot more here.

In Our Words

HARRY

I used to run the youth and fathers' program, and I was running therapeutic groups with fathers who had lost their children to FACS. I used to refer some of the Aboriginal dads to The Shed that wanted some Aboriginal support. Rick used to refer dads who were trying to get their children back from foster care and needed parenting courses for general support. Dads that were really prepared to make changes in their lives. When I retired two and a half years ago, Rick said how about you come over here and that was a great invite because I didn't want to assume anything but, he asked me to come and I've been very very thankful.

I think there are a lot of – particularly – Aboriginal men that come who are probably falling through gaps for a whole lot of reasons (housing, poor mental health issues). Here, I believe, it's one of the emphases of supporting dads here. There is engagement here. The dad's or otherwise men wouldn't engage with anybody – possibly. Once you engage them and listen to their stories, you get the feeling that there is some sort of purpose in their life. Even if they don't come every week, they know it's here. They love coming and they get to know you and get to appreciate you as a person. It's stability. It's a bit of stability in their lives, and a resort for every which way, whether that be housing or legal aid or health nurses. I think it's a great stability. It's a reliable resource for them. A place like this is a must to have.

There are a lot of examples of how The Shed has created meaningful change – specifically working with dads and them needing to change and other dads doing the work and pointing out their deficits. 'I used to be like you, it didn't work, now I do it this way'. I think the people that are here to support these men are excited by just being there for anybody that comes. There is so much mental health within the community but it's not putting them in a box at all. It's loneliness and isolation – that in itself is mental health. That is a big factor and point in this place. I'll take Professor John Macdonald for example; he engages everybody and anybody. That's a big surprise for a lot of men who are completely isolated and feeling depressed. To think that this man is a professor and yet he is down to our level and ask me how my week has been.

I've made a lot of friends here. While I'm fortunate. I've got a wife and children and a house and a roof. A lot of these people haven't. It's the highlight of my week to come here. My life hasn't been easy, but so many men here make my life look like nothing. I've got a passion for connecting and seeing someone come in to the center when they are feeling down or angry and just engaging them. Just listening to their story. They can change so much in such a short time if you just listen. It's also an opportunity for other men to come here from the bottom and work their way up. They learn to engage people because they see other people do it and they have lived experience.

In Our Words

JARRAH

I've been coming here since it opened, over 10 years ago now. Before I came here, my family walked away and left me. I lived two blocks away from here, and I just happened to pass one day when they were building it. My partner gave me the choice – it was either drugs or her. I said I wouldn't choose between the two loves of my life. Then, she chose for me and walked away with our boy. We are back in contact now. I just came back from spending a week with them.

I got arrested and sentenced to seven days in jail. I had no one to look after my dog. When I got out of jail, they didn't give me a payment because it was only 7 days. So, I couldn't get the dog out. I showed up here, broken. The coordinator at the time said, 'it looks like you lost your best friend'. I couldn't get the dog out of RSPCA because I didn't have the money. So, they [The Shed] went down and got him out. When I showed up next week to pay them back. They said no, we aren't taking your money. I said, you either take the money or you own half the dog. They said 'well, what are we going to do, if we own half a dog?'. I said nothing really. So, they owned half the dog!

The Shed was somewhere and something to lean on. It gave me a place where people listened, and I could unload. They took me out of my depression I was going into. It just gave me somewhere where people would listen to my problems. This place has taught me not everyone is out to get me. I just thought everyone was

out for themselves, but through here, I've learnt that they are not. This place is like my second home. I don't like being at home. So, I come up here and spend my whole day up here. I do the maintenance, I help cook. All for free. I do it because I still love the place. I've got a lot of time for the place.

My son is hoping to move in with me! My son's been in the same job for 10 years coming up to long service year. I've changed since they left. I'm no longer that angry person I was. I got my drug habit under control. The Shed has helped me gain that control. The Shed has opened me up to other agencies that can help me for my drug habit, rather than resorting to crime and that shit. I never really did crime for drugs but when I would spend all my money on drugs, I would thief. The Shed have also linked me to other services like Centrelink, public housing, paediatricians.

It's a welcoming place here. I don't know that they have turned away anyone, as far as I know. They have got people of the streets, into public housing. If someone is interested in coming, don't hold back, come. I've made lots of friends here. Most of my friends at the moment, come from here. We keep in contact outside The Shed. A couple of them live in my block of flats. Others that don't, I go and see them.

I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for The Shed. When my kid and partner left, The Shed gave me a will to live again.

In Our Words

JASON

I've been coming to The Shed probably around 8 years on and off. Before that I had a lot of issues that kept stopping me getting here. A lot of my stuff is still the same today but this place – you know, you've got to have somewhere where you can come and feel welcome and relaxed. Without these places, it's a bit difficult. If you didn't have a place like this, well it would be a lot crazier than what it already is.

I'd known about The Shed for a long time but with a lot of issues I've had, it's been difficult to get somewhere. It's been a slow process. A lot of allegations and a lot of garbage about me but you just got to try deal with it and keep a level head. I've been coming here on and off for the past 8 years, and the support that is here; you can't get any other place that's better. It doesn't matter what you need – if you need solicitor help or you need accommodation help or stuff with Centrelink; medical reasons any other issues, there is always someone available to talk to.

Yeah, there's more than enough people that can come here and support you with what you need – if you can be open and honest about things to do with yourself. With the help and everything I needed and a lot of issues that I had to get sorted – through the courts, police and all that type of stuff. The Shed was the only place I got the help from. Otherwise, I was just beating my head against the brick wall.

You build friendships, not just as somewhere to come; everybody here is like family. It's not just one person – it's not you're here for this and you're here for that – you're not a number; you're a human being. Whereas a lot of people class you as a number, not a person. It's pretty well community. There are all different types and you can speak to anybody but it's feeling comfortable with speaking with someone. If you're not comfortable speaking with someone – say mental health or something like that – if you're not comfortable with that person, they'll put you to the right people, so you can speak to someone. It's not just the one person, it's the same as solicitors and stuff like that – you might have a disagreement, but the solicitor is still prepared to help you whereas a lot of place aren't prepared to help you, they will just push you away; don't want to know you. Plus, on Wednesday they put a lunch on and everything else – all the other services too. You got the officer from the police, you got bits and pieces. Any issue you've got; there is someone here who can help. If there's not somebody here on a certain day, it's every second week that person will be here, or you can ring them. They'll do anything for anybody in that sense.

You know, if you get mixed up in the wrong crowd, instead of going out with your mates and doing silly things that will get you in trouble, you can come to The Shed and **do** positive things. Then you always **get** positive things from The Shed because no one is classed as a number and no one gets degraded from what's going on. If The Shed wasn't here, it would be more of a poorer community for it. The Shed needs to be here for a lot of people.

In Our Words

JOHN

I first got involved through Father Paul Hannah. I was going to do my placement here when I was studying, and he recommended here. That's how I first got introduced to The Shed. Then, later on, when I got my placement at catholic care in Parramatta then when I became employed, this was another location where catholic care worked out off. I've been working just over the road and a big part of this was getting in touch with clients (Indigenous people at The Shed) and yarning. It's been about four years now. Most Wednesdays I'll come here.

It's hard pushed **not** to find a meaningful case study here. I guess, speaking in terms of clients I've seen. I've seen massive amounts of change with clients I've engaged with. Some of the most recent things, I've been counselling parents without their children through to restoration through FACS. That's been enormously meaningful for them.

Suicidality is a frequently discussed topic here and it's unfortunately all too common, especially for Aboriginal people but also men especially. I've seen people who have come here with very little hope, a lot of despondency, suicidal ideation, sometimes attempts – then I would see people just through the attention of another fellow man gives them, yarning, talking, sharing a meal. That would then just lift people above the low spirit they are in at the time. I see that on a daily basis when I'm here. I see people engage with each other, talk, yarn, share stories. That in and of itself generates huge amounts of meaning for people. It generates connectedness to other people and often this place links people to family or an area they have been from or part of. Connecting people to their own family or their own clan. People come for that connection.

Something very recent with clients I've seen, would be, clients going through homelessness to housing. That's a huge shift for some people. That is through The Shed linking services. I would have accompanied clients up to Mount Druitt or Blacktown in terms of Aboriginal housing. Especially if they have been removed from housing for whatever reason – re-engaging a relationship with people who are in charge of housing and advocating for them. Then having them housed again after a long period of being homeless.

A recent example was when a young mum engaged with Mary initially around legal help and restoration. She gave a huge sense of belonging, even cutting up veggies with everyone. From that started a sense of belonging here and we could see how she shifted from fairly low self-esteem to hope in restoration to – with the help of Rick and Mary telling her to keep fighting and go through the channels – and the restoration went ahead. That's probably one of the most recent great stories that I've been apart off.

This place provides a foundation and a face. They know Lisa by name, they know people from housing by name, they know Simone by name. They know who she is so they can just go up and tap into her for whatever reason. Same thing with Rick and Mary. They have a face and a service; they don't have a no name on the end of the phone. It's a soft entry point into services and help where it's hard otherwise. I would also say it's an open, non-judgmental environment. There is availability of services.

The Shed is its own entity, so it doesn't have a screening or a glass or a door in the same way. It's got a free flow feel to it where you can talk – as we are at the moment – on a telegraph pole and you can talk about some pretty important issues or some lighter issues, but you can do it anywhere you like. There are less barriers. It's a soft entry – it's informal here, formality can often be a barrier to people. Also, the food, having a feed with someone is a good way to yarn and find out about them. This is one solid meal they get a week and a lot of the time they are not getting one, sometimes they are getting less than that.

The Shed has influenced me hugely. It's demanding work in a way but I certainly get a reward out of helping people but also, it's such a learning process, especially with the elders here. I'm always learning, even from making scones or jonnies cakes through to language, painting, culture, stories, and I just feel generally very grateful to be able to rub shoulders with Indigenous people. That is a reward in itself. Being custodians of this land for 60,000 years plus is just a privilege that I don't think people get and I get it and I get payed for it, so I'm very grateful for it. I don't have that lineage or connection to the land that a lot of these people have. There is [sic] great people to yarn to and talk with and catch up with. There is a lot of interesting people and stories to hear.

In Our Words

KADE

I've been coming here about 3 years. I come to The Shed every Wednesday. I try not to miss one because I've had so much going on since I've come here. I heard about it in the community and through some other people and they spoke very good about it so, I thought "this is going to be my starting point, and we'll see how it goes from there". My life wasn't really much before I started coming and good things started happening. I've had a lot of dealings with FACS and out of home care services; The Shed has helped me with all that. They have supported me through everything. I started getting children back, so it's been good. I've got two children home, about to get a third child home. My life would have been filled with a lot of anxiety and worry about things but since coming to The Shed; all that has been lifted. They have given me a lot of strength and courage.

I've found that there are people out there willing to support you – no matter what – and there is somebody willing to listen. You know, and show you what's right and wrong. That's what made me stronger; having somebody that's always there – and shown me that no matter what, they will always be there to support me. I think having all the services in one place has been a lot better. So, I've now got a house, two kids home – it's been great because everyone works together.

See, when you come here, all the other services here in one place - you don't have the anxiety of running here and trying to collect things from there and going there and then running back here and then going there. You can come here and everything is here, and they all work together. There's Aboriginal workers as well. It's good because when you go to a service and people don't understand you, you want someone who understands

your background and where you come from, and they know your family roots. You can connect with them on a different level – culturally and professionally. I've seen a homeless lawyer here because I was homeless for a very long time. I've seen Legal Aid which has helped me with the stuff I'm going through with court for the children. I've seen Rick who's also been a great support with services. I've seen Mission Australia, Housing, podiatry, mental health, Daryl from the police, everybody! All been connected through The Shed.

Rick is really cool because he has been a support in and outside of hours. He is laid back and himself, so he makes you feel comfortable. Trust is a big thing for me, and I feel like Rick has showed me in so many ways that I can be comfortable and trust him. Mary has been great too – I've talked to her about a lot of things that I wouldn't usually talk about. And she makes me feel good, and looks at it from a positive perspective, not a negative thing. I think it's made home life for me and the boys a lot brighter and happier. More supported.

Wednesdays, you have all the services, you get to have lunch together and listen to yarns, and you meet a lot of elders here. Yeah, it's culturally appropriate, and I've met a lot of family members here that I didn't even know I had! You know, like I'm a lot stronger than I thought I was. I'm a lot more free-spirited. I'm not embarrassed about myself and my situation. I've learnt to accept it and be happy and just know that there is more to my future that I thought there would be. I just needed the right people to bring that strength out of me. And they did, in more ways than one. I look forward to coming up here every Wednesday.

In Our Words

KYLIE

I'm a community leader for link-up. My role is to refer clients to services that will meet their needs. I also work in the community. I'm there to support kids. I'm involved with the koori court in Paramatta where we work with a lot of young kids that are under the care of FACS or under the radar at FACS. I work with those services out in the community here.

I was here back in 1997, when we had a big meeting here. The late Evelyn go [sic] and get a rock to lay the foundations for The Shed to be built. That's how far back I was involved here. They got all the different services and council to come together and do that.

The best thing about The Shed is it's a place where a lot of Aboriginal people can come together and get support. A lot of services come here, it's a place where they can all meet. They make them feel comfortable because it's an Aboriginal service. When they meet those other services that come here, they get linked into other services in the community. We get people from Penrith, Mount Druitt. We get young people and even from the [Blue] Mountains. They don't have to go around visiting different services, they can come here.

I get a lot of referrals from here. I have clients who come here. I meet them here if they need to meet up with some other service. You're not walking into a civilised office. The Shed is a place of belonging, we own it, we feel comfortable here. It's added that connection with other people from other Indigenous cultural backgrounds. You also meet other people from other cultural backgrounds that are not Aboriginal.

Yarns mean you can talk about anything and everything – and it doesn't matter, there is always someone to listen at The Shed. I have had people who I've worked with and meet here who are homeless. They needed accommodation and some of them needed assistance with food, and even with legal issues. I worked with a client who I was able to connect with lawyers.

The Shed differentiates from other services because it's open! You don't have to come here and knock on the door or be invited in. It's family orientated and very friendly. You can walk in and say hello to anyone. You don't have to feel uptight or frightened or intense or intimidated.

It's influenced me that I know I can keep coming back here. It's influenced me because I'm able to go out there and refer clients to meet me at The Shed. I use this space a lot because a lot of them won't go into other services and meet you. They even feel frightened to meet me where I am. Transport can be one of those issues, but it's a lot easier to access and meet at The Shed. Everyone knows where it is and that's the best thing about it.

I come here once a week, sometimes three times a week. I'll get clients come over – female or male – and we will meet with Rick or whoever is here. If they need that support, then I just refer them over. I work with a lot of the men here to because we have a large number of clients who come here and have been removed. They are able to talk about it a lot here. I knew one person here, it took him three years before he could talk to me but after coming here, he was able to. I built up that relationship by coming to The Shed. We have done a lot of restoration here. We can develop relationships here.

There are always Uncles and Aunts and Elders here who are able to talk to. It makes you feel at home. It's friendly and a lot of lovely people come here. People connect with family here. I've seen Rick and that make food for funerals, and we get busloads of people who come from the bush to the funeral service, and they will pop in here and have a feed. It's really good. When there is a death in the family and there needs to be food put on. They will help.

In Our Words

KIRA

I first came in contact with The Shed through my daughter. The Shed has been very beneficial. It's helped me get housing. And there's a good feed there! It's a good place to meet other people and catch up with family and friends.

I went to The Shed every Wednesday and got support letters. I was talking to the housing services up there – Mission Australia was one of them.

I've met many valuable people from the Shed. The paediatrician, Mission Australia, Mental Health services. The Shed has helped my family – my two sons and my daughter. The Shed helped get her housing. They helped her with court cases and getting a lawyer. I wouldn't have been able to be linked into other services like Mission Australia if it wasn't for The Shed.

In Our Words

LUKE

This place broke the monotony of being on a disability pension. You need some sort of outlet and people who are like-minded. This place has that, and I was able to access the services here. It was good, when they had the Centrelink here. Rather than go through the system with Centrelink, you can talk to the person that comes here. Last week, I had my toes done by the paediatricians – cut and polished.

It's a place where you can be connected. For example, it's much better to come here talk to the provisional parole officer. There is a whole array of services available. They had the health team. Aboriginal people still have the highest issues with diabetes. I feel much more at home here than going to the medical center. I just came from the doctor today because I had a fall. But the people here are better. This place provides community and it's a fun place to come and chill out as well.

Mental health is also a big problem and it's not very long ago in the world's history – 200 years since colonization.

I'm 60 this year, and I can remember being taken away from my family. When I tell people, because I'm one of the younger ones involved, people say really? It's still fresh in my mind. A lot of people who were taken are fairly angry. After meeting and talking to people, I realise I wasn't alone. I live far away from here and I've been absent for a while, but I come back again because I've got a few things to sort out. I will use the solicitors here like Mary. Rick and Mary have been a support. I'm always wanting to catch up with Father Paul – he's good value.

This place not only connects you to the services, but you build up a real rapport with the workers. You get to know everyone and when you're down, they are here. I suffer from PTSD from being taken away and it comes in waves. You might start and wake up and have a miserable morning but coming over here, life is not so bad. I think people will have their different reasons as to why they come here – they must have their reasons because this place has been running for so long. It would be such a shame for the funding to go away and for this place to shut down.

In Our Words

MARA

I actually got in contact with Rick first through Facebook. I put my story up there and saying that I have lost my kids to my white mum, and that's how I came to have contact with Rick. I'm known as stolen generation. I'm from Queensland and I got illegally adopted. I got bought from my family to a white family and that was confirmed for me when I reunited with my family. That was last year. I found out that I am actually stolen generation, even though I'm 28, it's very unknown to hear things like that. Even the elders up here, they think 'nah, that's not right' but I was bought by my white mum and she tried to do the same to my kids.

I spoke to Rick and he has been a really good support for me through that process. Even just to talk to. I've had my ups and downs on the emotional rollercoaster with my family. I've had to actually get on the phone because I was feeling that down. I was feeling suicidal and Rick was on hand and he pulled me out of it. It was so good to know that he was there. I can't thank Rick and Mary enough. I don't know what I would have done without them. They got my kids back. Mary did a fast response and that's how I got both of my girls back.

I've got in contact with my biological mother now, but I didn't know her for 28 years. After that unification, we don't talk still, and I think 'why me'. Why did it happen to me? But now that I've got my own kids back, it's time to focus on them now. It feels amazing going forward with my kids back. I'm doing psychology courses. I analyse things too much and I like to see things on

paper and do it myself. That's how I learn. Going through those courses has helped me through everything. Even teaching my kids. I haven't had my daughter for 4 years and she turned 5 yesterday, and that was the first birthday I've had with her. I can't believe it. It's really amazing just to be back with family. After my youngest one goes into daycare, I'm going to do more study. I want to go into paramedics. After losing my kids, I went through drug and alcohol problems and I've been suicidal, but now, my life is back on track.

Mary has been awesome. I didn't know about legal stuff and Mary was able to tell me what to do. I felt comfortable because she knew – and she just felt like a real person. You know how you feel like you're getting judged with lawyers, Mary was not like that. She was down to earth. It's what we need more of, not plastic people. They have been linking me into services on their own accord. I've learnt that The Shed works with suicide and mental health. Anyone can go there and talk to them. Even though it's considered a Men's Shed, Rick opened his door up to me. I feel comfortable calling Rick at any point. They should have more Sheds like this one, especially in Queensland. What Rick's doing is amazing, and I've seen some of his stories on YouTube and what he has set up to do down there is really more than other services. It's not as formal as other services, it's open and you can finally feel comfortable. If you don't feel comfortable talking to a white fella, you can go to Rick.

In Our Words

NICOLE

It feels like I've been here for about 8 years but I'm not entirely sure. I'm a solicitor at legal aid with the early intervention unit, and I come to The Shed and give legal advice in the family law and protection. I come once a week, every Wednesday. We will assist people to get access to the system who need access and then people who don't need access and are better off staying away from the system, we help them resolve the issues without having to use the system.

This is the most extraordinary service that I've ever had any dealings with. I've worked within legal aid and attached to various community agencies for years, like community health services, relationships with women refugees – I'm on the board of a women's refugee. The model that this place here has is the best model that has the most extraordinary impact that I've ever seen.

It's a place where people feel culturally safe and happy to come and talk about their issues. It's all the other service providers that are here and the way Rick works – he works out what the client's problems are and refer them to the appropriate service provider, but then makes sure the service providers actually do their job. He will make sure I do my job and even after the bits done that I need to do; he will then refer them onto other lawyers, and they go through a litigation process. He [rick] is watching it at every step of the way.

I used to work at legal aid Penrith and we had a series of cases for Aboriginal clients that did not have good outcomes, and one of the things we couldn't do is maintain that engagement. Working here after so many years, I realized we will never get it; we will ever be able to do it. Mainstream legal service just can't achieve that feeling of community and safety, and where people feel connected.

This feeling has been fostered because the clients know that Rick is on their side and that he will advocate for them. And if I'm doing the wrong thing or not doing as much work as required or whatever it is, that he will support them and advocate for them and put salt on my tail if that's what he thinks need to happen.

There is a trust that he is on their side and that they have that advocacy here at all time with whatever

their problems are. In a funny way, it's similar to how a lawyer actually works. As a lawyer, your role is to be an advocate for your client and work in their best interest. But often, that's tempered by not having that cultural engagement and all those other things. With community workers, they are not like that.

Other community workers aren't like Rick, they are much more tempered by guidelines, often they are funded by FACS or big bureaucracies etc. that will dictate how a client needs to relate to a service. This service has a level of independence that just doesn't exist anywhere else. If you go to another service, they might say, 'we only assist women' or 'we only assist Aboriginal people' or 'we only assist people with a mental health issue'. There is a robustness here that doesn't really happen anywhere else.

I've seen with working with mentally ill clients and I've done work in mental health hospitals. People there kind of tip toe around what their clients delusions are and people don't really talk about it in a direct way. Whereas people here, say 'brother when did the television start talking to you' – this is happening to you because there is a problem, if they give you some medication, you don't get messages from the television anymore. It's an honesty that you don't get anywhere else.

It's about the best way to help and solve the client's problems, that's what The Shed's value is. Even though you might have to haggle it out and it can be a pain explaining it to a community worker. You don't normally get this anywhere else. There is nothing like the level of involvement Rick has in other services.

There are so many people who have come through here and created meaningful change. They just walk in and out of the door every day and you forget. Talia, when she first came in, I talked to her and talked about her matter from a legal view, and I just thought, oh my god, this is absolutely hopeless, I can't see a way through for this client. I feel like I have to have a level of honesty as well. I told her that. We referred here to a zillion services, got her seven binders of documents and picked through it all – tried to find a way through. Then, what I thought was going to be the answer, ended up being a big red herring. Three years later, she actually got her kids back,

NICOLE

but it was a treacherous path and we would never have guessed it would have happened.

It was just going nowhere, we tried mediation, we tried meeting with FACS, we tried conferences. There were no alcohol issues, there was no drug issues, she had attended every kind of counselling program, we got reports out of all of those agencies. Then her little girl ran away and walked 10km down a highway looking for her mother. And I just thought, oh fuck it, let's file. Just file. Because we had her working with all those therapeutic providers, we could get reports from them all. She had an existing lawyer that had looked after her matter before and she agreed to take it back. So, the matter was pretty much ready. All the therapeutic providers were ready saying she addressed this and that. I was chasing all that up and we were doing work alongside those service providers which meant it was ready.

The Shed is like a hub. I suppose the other benefit of The Shed is that most of the service providers – these court cases hinge on what they say – and if the service providers aren't confident about what they are doing and what reports need to be done, nothing happens. If you took Talia's case without any of those services providing reports, and she had to go to court, she has nothing. Whereas if she has all that backup from all those services talking about how well she is doing, the evidence is already there.

Part of what we are doing here as well is training up those services on how to write reports, what sort of things the court is interested in, what they have to work with the clients on. On an early intervention basis, before FACS are looking at removing, if the clients have

got three issues and you can identify those issues, then you send them off to the therapeutic service providers and they deal with those issues, those kids aren't going to be removed.

We have had so many phenomenal outcomes here. Dads who were separated and not seeing their kids that then get 'spent time' orders. Where they have no contact with their children to seeing their child regularly. We just had one young fellow a few weeks ago and he was not seeing his son at all and the mother wanted to move some distance. Now, they have reached an agreement at mediation and he has his son in his life.

Most of the blokes we deal with in that sort of category, we would not be able to retain engagement through mainstream services, and in fact, one dad I saw here a few months ago had actually been to the Penrith legal aid office and then he came here and I pretty much told him the exact same things but the manner in which it was delivered – the engagement and the person feeling like it's actually going to happen. You get that here but not at other places – like why did he come here when he had already been to Penrith? Because he didn't have that sense of engagement and after he came here, we put in place the train of events, he was happy and it was all happening, and he did.

The Shed has had a really significant influence on my life. I remember when I was working at Penrith legal aid; we had a series of cases that had quite poor outcomes, and there was one client in particular who was in the cells at Penrith under the court and I went down to see her. I did a matter that day then I worked with her for the next 12 months or longer, but she taught me so much, but it was such a struggle to maintain

NICOLE

engagement with her. She didn't understand anything much of the process, and there were so many problems and me trying to bridge this gap of communication and it was just so hard. That was a massive learning curve for me. This place here just cuts across all of that. I've learnt so much about Aboriginal people. I've learnt so much about the connections they have with their children and how that works and family structures.

I feel so much better about being able to provide that information to the court, but I also feel really humbled. I really know we can't do this work by ourselves. We have to have Aboriginal community workers, people like Rick. But for me personally, this place has had an extraordinary effect on my life. Rick, I would class, as a very good friend and a lot of the clients here. Normally, in this kind of work, there is a much more professional separation.

Like, my mother-in-law passed away and I nursed her to her death. The main support I got – that I really felt helped me – was from the people here and Rick who understood about death and dying. That would have been four or five years ago now.

Some of the stories here, you couldn't make it up. The other thing that really strikes me about this place is the lack of gender politics that you get everywhere else. Here, people do talk pretty rough and it can be pretty rough, but it's not as politicised. Most of those young blokes we have reconnected with their children, their mothers bring them in here. Heaps of young women are brought in by their uncles, dads or brothers. The sense of connection across gender and across age is unbelievable.

The other thing is, the grandparents and even the aunts, what they will do for family members is unbelievable. I've done so much work for mainstream clients where you ask the grandparent to be involved in a matter, they will pretty often be a witness and participant, but that's it. We have grandmothers here who will take kids in and don't even take the Centrelink payment – allowing mum to remain getting an income. The instructions you get here are not replicated anywhere. I don't see that anywhere else. I really don't.

There is a poor general view in the population about Aboriginal people or people on the poverty line, but these people here are just amazing. We have to be that bridge to help people keep their children. Let them walk on us to keep their fucking kids. That is all they want.

I've been working with a lady. She was not Aboriginal, but in a relationship with an Aboriginal bloke. She had 9 children and having another one. She was just broken. This last one was one hundred percent going to be removed. But because she was with him, she started engaging with us and other Aboriginal services. She came here and said to me, I know probably what's going to happen, but still I feel like this for the first time, I feel people actually care. She was mute so she was writing this all down. She said, people here actually want to help me and want to help me keep this baby. She said, everyone else treats me like a piece of shit. She sat here with other mothers who have lost all their children and not feel like she is rubbish. You can tell people and you can look at this woman, she is not a bad person. She said, the only time I can love my baby is when she is in my belly.

In Our Words

SANDRA

I've been coming out to The Shed every Wednesday for the last fourteen years, basically since it opened. My role here is triaging and assessing; we are looking for people who have an undiagnosed or diagnosed mental illness. And looking for ways of supporting that person to get well. I also look out for people who are suicidal or homicidal, people who are distressed, people who are just really anxious. So, anything to do with mental health or mental illness. I found out about The Shed through a fella at Probation & Parole who was the first Aboriginal person to get a traineeship with corrective services. He was based out here in Mount Druitt and he found that a lot of the Aboriginal fellas were not presenting to parole, but they were coming up here. So he thought, "why don't we have an outreach here at The Shed – a reporting centre on a Wednesday". That's how that came about. And the fellows would come up and they would have a feed and then go home but he also realised that there was a need for mental health outreach and drug and alcohol. So, he approached the Aboriginal worker within Blacktown Hospital and she asked me if I would meet with him and that's how it all started. Everything happens organically with community. It happens for a reason but you don't know what those reasons are until it's there. We've just got to be on the lookout for opportunities.

The Shed has changed but also if you look at the way I've changed: coming from a female prison, working with women, out into the community with mostly men, it was a way for me to engage with the community and a way for me to change my views about men and to not focus so much on men or women but on families. The Shed has grown. I mean, we might have had six people at the outreach at first – now there's probably sixty. There's those that come regularly – Monday to Friday, they may not come on the weekend. They may not come on a Wednesday because they don't like big crowds, but they'll come Monday to Friday. And there's a lot of people that have been coming here or years and everyone knows them. And we all know when they are well, and you know when they're not well. For me it's a good place to monitor people and their wellbeing without having them under the constraints of the Health Service or reporting to a psychiatrist or case manager. It's more laid back, and it's a very different way of engaging from a way of working. See, I've known those fellas in the courtyard there for ten years. And I know if they don't say hello to me, then there's something wrong and I'll go say hello to them.

These guys here wouldn't normally engage with services. If you as a worker are known to attend The Shed, the

community think, "well, I know where they are on a Wednesday, I'll just go up there". Or if we've got someone who comes into Emergency being aggressive or violent, or looking for an Aboriginal worker they'll get 'Sandra from The Shed', and their anxiety settles straight away. If they know you go to The Shed, they trust you understand where they are coming from much more than the doctors and nurses in Emergency. You've got to be vouched for in the community and The Shed does that. Every time Rick refers someone to me, he's telling that person that Sandra is ok – you can go and talk to her. And because they trust Rick, well then, you are just one step ahead of another clinician because you've been vouched for.

There was one fella called Uncle Todd, and he was very well known in the community. I'd been talking to him about the basic signs of mental illness. So, I got a phone call from Uncle Todd one day because he had a young fella up here. And he said: "San, where are you?" I told him I was nearby and he said, "I got a young fellow here and he's got those voices that you talked about". So, Todd was able recognise that this guy wasn't well and the fact that he knew that with a phone call, he could get someone from mental health to come instead of having to ring the 1800 number. Because we have that relationship, they will ring, they will pop in. If they are unwell, I can take them back with me to the hospital and get a psychiatrist to see and then I can drop them at home or organise a bed. They don't have to go through emergency, they don't have to go through police. We try not to do the police business.

It's easy for services to come in; it's easy for the community to pop in; and the wealth of knowledge that Rick and Don have is amazing. They know just about everyone; if you're looking for someone or if I've got someone missing in action, I'll come up to The Shed and ask: have you seen that person? And Rick will tell me "Yeah, I saw him down at the shops last week – he usually sits between Woolworths and the pub".

The Shed has a structure, but it has its own structure which has been developed around the needs of the community, whereas a lot of mainstream organisations have developed their structure around policies and funding. Spend some time here! Cause I think there is a certain feel about The Shed as well, there is a good spirit here, and to get that spirit and develop it somewhere else is going to be very hard. It's just something really different and special.

In Our Words

TALIA

I've been coming here for about two and a half years. I lost the kids three years ago – just over three years now. My life was lost before I came here. I didn't know where to begin. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know any of it. I knew nobody in Sydney. I had just moved to Sydney and I was just lost. I found out about The Shed through a service I was working with. I went and did some counselling and they recommended to come here. They brought me here the first time and that's where I meet Rick and Mary, and I've been coming here every Wednesday since. They roped me in, and I knew there was no going back.

The Shed were the biggest support through everything. When I thought I had no hope of getting my kids back. Rick and Mary were the ones that pushed me through it. I hit lows twice or three times where I thought it was impossible, there was no way to win. The biggest thing that Rick said to me was, the back door is closed but we will find a crack in the window. The very first thing that Mary said to me when I first came to The Shed was 'this is the worst case that she has ever seen', not because of what happened but because of the way it has been handled by the system. From that moment, I knew it was going to be hell to get them back, but here we are, with all three of them!

Mary is the one who helped me apply for my Section 90 – to open it up for court and prove that I have changed enough to get my kids back. We did that in November last year – the end of November. We didn't

expect everything to happen this quick, but fortunately, we won. Mary did all the groundwork and preparation for my solicitor to take over. I had Mary in my corner and my solicitor in court, it was so great. The Shed gave me hope because every week I'd sit down with Rick and Mary and chat about what the next step was or what the next week would look like. Then if I needed help to send an email or a phone call, they would help. Whatever needed to be done for that next step to happen, they were there helping me one hundred percent along the way. They provided direction.

If anything happens to your Centrelink, they will come out here and saves you waiting for hours in a Centrelink building and they can do it here. The paediatrician is a big one I use a lot because of my toe nails, but everything is here. If you need it, it's here for you. The support keeps me coming back to The Shed, even though I have my kids back. If it wasn't for the people here, who knows where I would have been. These people to me are family. I wasn't here for two weeks in a row because it's been hard with the kids and Rick rang me to make sure that I was OK. You know, they aren't just friends anymore, they are family. It's the community here.

If anyone is interested in coming here, one hundred percent do it. If they haven't got the service you need here, they will find someone who does. They will direct you in that direction. If you have a doubt about coming, come anyway.

Epilogue

Even a quick read of some of the stories in this booklet will have given the reader a glimpse of what The Shed in Mt Druitt is about. It is funded as a suicide prevention program (originally by the Commonwealth and now by WentWest, our local Primary Health Network). It is well known that there are many more men than women taking their own lives and the Aboriginal community has even graver statistics than other groups.

From my perspective on the history of The Shed, Fr Paul Hanna challenged me to show the university's interest in dealing with people's distress and even suicidal ideation by "doing" something. I, as Director of the Men's Health Information and Resource Centre, employed an Aboriginal scholar to "scope" the needs of Aboriginal men in the west of Sydney. He found that they wanted a safe space for men and they identified this as being near to Fr. Hanna. I sought, and obtained, money from the Commonwealth, which, to its credit, recognised the importance of what we call the social determinants of health and of suicide, in this case, the factors in people's lives pushing them to despair. Fr Hanna supplied the place, the building in the grounds of the Holy Family Centre; The Shed was born.

The stories in the booklet, and the insights into the lives of the people telling their stories, tell us more about both the need of the community and the response of The Shed to meet that need.

It is fair to say that it is a unique model, which will hopefully continue to be supported and learned from in the years to come

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THE SHED



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