

LUNCH FOR THE LOST

THE INNER WEST ISN'T ALL MILLION-DOLLAR HOUSES AND FANCY RESTAURANTS.



Invisible to most, a group of local homeless women, with a little help, have created their own support network.

Every Monday, at a park somewhere in the Inner West, a group of women gather to share a feast of finger food. Over a tablecloth spread out on the grass, Turkish bread is torn, hummus is double-dipped and oranges are quartered by hands hardened from long months of exposure.

Teenagers and the middle-aged, former career women and erstwhile domestic goddesses chat about their pasts – sharing experiences as diverse as the foods that pass between them. These women are the Inner West's long-term homeless and every Monday they band together to eat a communal meal at their makeshift kitchen table.

The ritual began four years ago when social worker, Georgina Abrahams, stumbled upon five elderly ladies chatting in a park.

Able to identify these women as what she calls the "hardcore homeless" – or those who have lived for years with nothing more than the possessions in their trolley – Georgina was curious to hear the women's experiences living without shelter in the Inner West.

Used to being overlooked by the park's visitors, they were surprised to see Georgina approach. She told them of her work with women's groups in Mulla Park and her life-long dedication to women's services. She asked if they would share some ground and, if they felt comfortable, their stories. After three hours talking Georgina left but sensed they had enjoyed listening to one another's experiences. "I asked if I could join them next week. 'Alright,' they said, 'but next time can you please bring us some lunch?'" Georgina recalls.

Four years on, what started as an unlikely conversation between five homeless women and a social worker has grown into a weekly meal shared amongst thirty. Every Monday, Georgina heads to her local shops to stock up on nutritious goodies that can easily be eaten without knives, forks or plates. At Christmas time she provides the women, many of whom have children, with hampers of chocolates, tuna and fruit in baskets donated to her by local op-shops. And in 2010 she was able to fundraise enough money to buy twenty swags for the women to sleep on. Despite her own efforts, however, Georgina is most proud of the support the women have been able to give to each other.

"THEY NETWORK WITH EACH OTHER, SUPPORT EACH OTHER. TOGETHER, THEY ARE NOWHERE NEAR AS ISOLATED AS THEY WERE BEFORE. I JUST GAVE THEM A PLACE TO MEET; NOW THEY ARE FRIENDS FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK," she says.

Losing a sense of safety, place and personal connection are some of the most distressing aspects of homelessness. Building relationships that offer protection and safety is difficult for homeless women, such as those in Georgina's group. These women have escaped places they perceived as being more dangerous than life on the street. Some have fled from mental institutions, dangerous rural communities or prison charges, but most are women and children who have escaped abusive homes. This year, the group has welcomed a big influx of women who live in cars with their children, in flight from violent husbands. For Georgina, it's difficult to watch the children's behaviour progressively disintegrate. "That is no way for a child to live. Their mothers are on the run and they are scared," she says.

However, for women such as these the invisibility of street life is their only hope. Sydney's women's refuges are notoriously overstretched and as Paul Abadie, house services manager of an Inner West community centre explains, "Many boarding houses exclude women out of concern for their safety among the male residents." So, without relatives and friends unknown to their abusive partners, outside is often safer than in.

For now Georgina's group serves as an example of possible companionship on the streets and an important support system. Ranging in age from 17 to over 60 and diverse in sexuality, religion, heritage and socio-economic background, the Monday luncheon guests are an eclectic collection of women who would probably never have crossed paths if they hadn't been united by the shared trauma of homelessness.

Despite the anonymity they must maintain for their own safety, Georgina is adamant that the story of these women be told, not merely to raise awareness of an often overlooked part of the local community but as an inspiring example of the struggles and triumphs experienced by many women. "That we are seen and that we are heard is more important than food and water. Everybody has a need to be acknowledged, to matter, to be heard... survivors stories deserve to be valued."

Words: Phoebe Moloney

Postscript: On the 9th of November Georgina Abrahams was given the Edna Ryan award in recognition of her work with marginalised women. (The Edna Ryan awards acknowledge women who are making a "feminist difference" in their communities.) www.ednaryan.net.au



HOW YOU CAN HELP:

- If you see a fellow Inner Westie without a home, Georgina recommends you, "buy them a sandwich, sit with them and have a chat."
- Be aware of acquaintances that are at risk of homelessness, and approach them with support.
- Georgina funds the Monday luncheons herself, but with growing numbers she is always looking for donations. Students at the University of Sydney recently hosted a Bake Sale on behalf of the group, which covered the cost of lunches for a month. If you would like to organise a charity event or donate, please email Georgina at: georgina@creativewomyn.net. Visit www.creativewomyn.net

• Detour House (www.detourhouse.com.au) and Twenty10 (www.twenty10.org.au) are two local organisations that provide services to women, youth and queer-identifying people in need.

CASE STUDY

ONE WOMAN'S STORY

When Georgina met Elaine, she and her two children were on the run. Elaine's husband had managed to catch up with her twice since she'd fled the violence of their home – both times she was hospitalised.

As a result of her difficult situation, Elaine was suffering from enormous anxiety and her children, who no longer attended school for fear of being found, lived permanently in a car.

But two months ago, during a Monday luncheon, she recalled one person from her past whom her husband didn't know that may have been willing to help her. It was an immigrant from Vietnam, who Elaine had voluntarily taught English to while she had been home alone on weekdays. Elaine and her pupil became close friends and most importantly, Elaine's husband never met her.

After the lunch, with Georgina's support, Elaine was at her old friend's door and the beginning of a new life. With shelter and a bed for her children, Elaine now has part-time work and her kids are happily re-enrolled at school. She asked that her story be passed on, to provide hope for other families suffering domestic violence.

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