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Give homeless a chance to find common ground

St Vincent de Paul Society

By Dr ANDY MARKS

21/12/2008

Joe McGarry, senior manager with the UK charity Novas, spoke recently at a forum at Sydney Town Hall. Novas is a leading provider of accommodation, support and specialist care services for homeless people in London and throughout Britain and Ireland. As will be revealed, Novas has a special link with the St Vincent de Paul Society. Joe has considerable knowledge of the issue of homelessness, having amassed nearly 20 years' experience in management roles within the sector. While his professional background is impressive, his unrivalled insight into the experience of homelessness stems from two decades as a homeless man in inner city London. This is the story he shared with those fortunate enough to attend the forum.

Born in Belfast in 1950 into a Catholic family of nine, Joe recalls how in those days people felt differently about how to treat children. Joe's older brother died at a young age, sending his mother into a deep depression from which she never recovered. He felt as though his mother somehow blamed him.

"We never celebrated birthdays in our house," recalls Joe. A severe alcoholic, with a violent streak, Joe's father was sent to prison. Around the same time, his grandfather was murdered.

"To cope", says Joe, "mother took to us kids with a stick. In her mind she thought this would make sure there was no anger in us. It had the opposite effect.

"I was a child who desperately wanted to learn and please people," Joe explains, "but physical, emotional and sexual abuse made that impossible."

By the age of 16, Joe's self-esteem was at rock-bottom. "All I knew was fear, I was very despairing and insecure." It was at this point, says Joe, that he first experienced alcohol.

"It took all of my anxiety away", he recalls. "All of a sudden I felt quite normal, as though I could join the rest of the world. My world was upside down."

As if growing up in a violent home and a violent city were not bad enough, Joe's life worsened when in 1968, "the troubles" descended upon Ireland.

"A lot of people I went to school with," says Joe, "got involved with organisations like the IRA."

This was an incredibly damaging time he recalls. "I remember drinking with two friends one evening in the pub, the following day I learned they'd been brutally tortured and murdered." Like many people wracked with personal pain and anguish, Joe decided to flee. Before the year ended he emigrated to London.

"My fear had become terror and I took that with me."

Like thousands of his countrymen, Joe found bare-basics accommodation at Arlington House in Camden Town, one of several hostels in London, low cost "digs" made famous by writer George Orwell who described them in his tome, *Down and Out in London*.

Joe picked up cash-in-hand labouring work in the black economy. Lacking order and responsibility he began to drink heavily. "There was nothing else to do," he says. "I liked working hard, it made me too tired to focus on the pain. I worked in a macho culture, I drank in a macho culture. It was a culture in which you couldn't say, 'I'm frightened, I don't know what to do'. I was mentally exhausted."

One night, Joe breached Arlington House's strict rules of by taking a bottle of alcohol back to his room. He was thrown out onto the streets.

"I slept rough," he says. "I was a young man, I continued to work, continued to drink, but in time it took its toll." On referral from the hospital, Joe saw a psychologist. "I sat on one side of the desk and she sat on the other", Joe recalls. "She was an incredibly kind woman." It emerged that she had been born on the exact same day as Joe. "I told her my story and we both sat there with tears in our eyes". Joe was referred to a psychiatric facility in Surrey. Joe was ashamed to be in a mental hospital. Ironically, he said, he was not ashamed to be homeless or an alcoholic. Although he received treatment for alcoholism, his refusal to admit he had a problem saw him return to Camden Town upon his discharge. Over the ensuing years, he continued to drink, continued to work sporadically and run into trouble with the police and the magistrate. In-between stints on the street and in prison, Joe stayed at a notorious London hostel, The Bruce. "One night I was robbed of my last £18 in my sleep," he says. The insecurity and harshness of the hostels led him back to sleeping rough. "I felt it was safer to be on the streets."

In 1989, Joe recalls, he finally broke the cycle. Arlington House had reopened. The philosophy had changed dramatically. "Arlington allowed people to drink, if they chose to," Joe says. "They decided, 'we will accept you and your problem and work with you to get through it'." Joe sees this as "a major breakthrough". As he explains: "I was

barred from nearly every other hostel in London. The set-up at Arlington House enabled me to get de-tox.

"I failed a few times, but because I knew they accepted me no matter what, I was able to develop the self-belief to try again. I got sober; got an understanding of me. One of the most important things about Arlington House was the fact that they gave people assured tenancy, regardless of their problems."

Having successfully come through the trauma of alcoholism and chronic homelessness, Joe was asked to join the Arlington House Tenants' Association. "This gave me a purpose. I was responsible for others. I sat on the hostel's management board." Joe says he succeeded because he was "included" by management. The Arlington model soon expanded to other areas and Joe eventually became chairman of the management board, part of the charity Nova. "I'd gone from being homeless to being in charge of a charity with an annual turnover of more than £20 million," says Joe.

"I decided to take the hostel model back to Ireland," says Joe. "We were very fortunate that the St Vincent de Paul Society donated a property to Nova in Limerick City." Within a matter of months, Joe recalls, "we'd dramatically reduced the homeless population in the area". The hostel is a combination of "dry" and "wet" areas where clients are given the support necessary to attempt de-tox, yet they are not thrown-out or barred if they fail. It has proven to be a very successful model, recently receiving a major government grant to enable further expansion.

In consultation with Catholic groups like the Mercy Foundation in Australia, Joe is now looking to bring facets of the "Common Ground" housing-first model of homeless services to areas further afield.

Like his own story, Joe's progressive approach to homeless services is characterised by re-invention and innovation. Most importantly, his insights come from his journey from fear to hope, a journey made possible by the right measures of compassion, acceptance and honesty.

Whether or not we agree with his approach or understand his journey, it is important that he and others who have experienced homelessness are given the chance to tell their story and feel genuinely included; the chance to find common ground.

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