



Opening Christmas to everyone

For those on the outside of family and support structures, Christmas, rather than a time of joy, can be a time of despair. The Christmas Project hopes in a small way to change that.

Sparkling lights, a decorated tree, presents, cards, carols: Christmas is portrayed as a time of celebration and joy. For those of a Christian faith, there is the deeper dimension of the Incarnation and the Nativity. For others, the family gathering, gift-giving and the celebratory meal is the central experience.

There is a cultural myth of a perfect Christmas. Given the tensions that exist in many families and relationships, this is hard to achieve. However, for many it really is a time of joy and belonging.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

How much harder it is then for people who are estranged from their families and have few, if any, friends. If this social isolation is compounded by poverty and hunger, it can lead people to despair.

The Christmas Project was born out of a realisation of the deprivation experienced by residents of what are now called, in NSW, assisted boarding houses for people with disabilities.

In December 1994, I walked into the backyard of a boarding house in Stanmore NSW. It was a scene straight out of Dickens. A semi-circle of men and women sat around a courtyard.

Clad in dirty, unmatched clothing, with holes from cigarette burns, and filthy slippers or shoes, they sat smoking or staring into space. Severely disabled people staggered across the yard to get water from a tap. I went home and brought back afternoon tea, repeating the process every week. For Christmas, I made up gift parcels for the residents, the only presents they received. Having alerted the authorities to what emerged as the worst boarding house in the state, there was a constant presence of case-workers until the facility was closed 18 months later and the residents relocated.

COMMUNITY HOUSE

Gethsemane Community Inc had begun in 1990, a community house for a small group of people with mental illness, intellectual disability or both. Its aim was to help people develop living skills and become independent.

The Christmas project became its major outreach. Gradually, we identified boarding houses and built a database of the names of residents. Named gift packs consisting of socks, a range of toiletries and lollies were packed and delivered, to be held for Christmas. Hampers of festive food were delivered to each facility. This process has continued every year



since. Funding comes from an Advent appeal at St Patrick's Church Hill and from other supporters.

GIFT PARCELS

In 2018, named gift parcels were packed by volunteers for 882 men and women in six assisted boarding houses, 35 group homes and 29 aged care facilities and to 15 people living independently with support. Six schools pack parcels for 512 people in 28 facilities. When a boarding house resident went to aged care, we asked for the names of other residents who had no family. We reached out to people across Sydney, in the Blue Mountains, Central Coast and Southern highlands.

Years ago, a coded system was designed that allows people



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in schools, parishes and other organisations to send a personal Christmas card to one of the 882 people on our database. These people never receive personal mail. If all labels are used, each person receives up to 10 cards. All mail returns here and we redirect cards to one of the 79 facilities on our list. The process goes on throughout December.

Some years ago, I was approached by nurses from the Mobile Assertive Treatment team at Camperdown. They care for men and women with complex mental health and physical issues. They were so worried about the poverty and isolation of their clients that one nurse bought a case of mangoes and gave one to each of her clients. She wanted them to have something to wake up to on Christmas day. Most clients live alone in rented rooms. After rent, there is little money for food, so they are often hungry. Often their only outside contact is their case-worker.

CHRISTMAS HAMPERS AND LUNCH

We decided to pack hampers consisting of a range of toiletries, which are luxuries for these people, and socks. Then general food to cover meals for three days, and festive food were added. Finally, there was a calendar to record Centrelink and medical appointments and a gift parcel. Feedback from recipients said that the women wanted perfume and the men aftershave.

Gift parcels and toiletries are packed by volunteers in cellars under our house. Hampers containing Wildflower calendars and toiletries are brought up to our double car port where food and gift packs are added. Calls are made to the teams to come and collect the hampers so we can start on the next group.

In 2018, 400 hampers were packed for Redfern Mental Health, the Camperdown Core teams Aboriginal Mental Health, the Mobile Assertive Treatment team, the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Drugs Health team and Canterbury Mental Health. Marrickville Mental Health took what was left.

Sixty to 70 people with disabilities join us for lunch on Christmas Day. They are seated at tables under our carport and are served lunch consisting of drinks and nibbles, turkey, ham and salads, Christmas pudding, custard and cream. Everyone receives a gift parcel. All are welcome. ●

GETHSEMANE COMMUNITY

The community's mission statement is: To provide the safety, security and permanence of a home to a group of men and women who have mental illness and/or other disabilities. By this means, to assist them to develop living skills and become independent.

It does this by providing:

- 1** A physical home for a small group who are assisted to develop the skills to live independently and to make choices about their living. About 50 have been helped this way and a partnership with Ecclesia Housing provides the structure. www.ecclesiahousing.org.au
- 2** Support and advocacy for hundreds of people who live in 'insecure' housing in boarding houses and other places. It operates a large Christmas project to provide them with basics for living with personal dignity. Many groups and individual volunteers work in informal partnership with Gethsemane to achieve this.

www.gethsemanecommunity.org.au