



All are welcome

Christmas festivities at Gethsemane Community are about inclusion.

Go out into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in here the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame... Go to the open roads and the hedgerows... to make sure my house is full.

Luke 14:21-23

This quote from Gethsemane Community's letterhead, encapsulates our approach to Christmas lunch.

Phone calls start coming in from late November: "My name is John, Jim, Susan... Is Christmas lunch on this year? I'm coming".

This prompts me to start spreading invitations far and wide: to the mental health centres and teams, to boarding houses and about 15 group homes. Remote preparations begin. Raymond, our go-to handyman, uses a high-pressure water spray on our double carport, then cleans the trestle tables and 80 chairs.

In early December, the hams and turkey buffets are ordered. I contact volunteers from previous years and find others who will help with lunch. Numbers remain fluid right up to the day.



More volunteers arrive with salads for the meal. Soon the dining room table is filled with a colourful variety. Someone starts cutting the meat and putting it onto serving plates.

FIRST GUESTS

The first guests arrive before 10am, find a place and are given drinks and nibbles. More straggle in and link up with friends. At 10.45am the bus with residents from a nearby boarding house pulls up and 30 men and women walk up the driveway. Volunteers look after them. Tables start to fill up and there is a buzz of conversation. Carloads of people arrive from various group homes, some accompanied by carers. Smokers congregate at the end of the driveway.

CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS

The week before Christmas, helpers decorate the carport, assembling and decorating a Christmas tree, then the whole area. Christmas lights are tested. Gift packs are prepared for the estimated 20 women and 50 men who will come. Plates, bowls, paper cups and cutlery for 80, serviettes, tablecloths, salt and pepper shakers, serving plates and bowls are counted and more purchased, if needed, along with diet soft drink, light beer and chips.

On Christmas Eve, helpers arrive to set up tables and chairs, allocating tablecloths, serviettes, cutlery and paper cups to each of the 12 tables under shelter. At 7.30am, I go to the supermarket, collecting the hams and turkey and buying perishable nibbles.





By 11.45am, the first guests are asking about lunch and we can delay it no further. The main course of ham, turkey and salads is plated and taken to the first tables. Condiments are taken around. More guests are arriving and are given starters. It is a moveable feast. The noise level rises, drowning out carols. Years ago, guests often ate in silence. Now they recognise people from previous years and talk animatedly.

COMMUNITY OF FRIENDS

Gerry, a former resident of Gethsemane Community, now has his own apartment, bought with funds left to him by his mother. He gets odd jobs around Leichhardt, living happily alone.

Helen and Max arrive by taxi from Hornsby. We have known them since 1995, when they were living in a boarding house. Now both are in aged care.

Joan and John live in adjoining apartments, having met while they were clients of the Mobile Assertive Treatment team.

Caroline has lived in one boarding house for 28 years. Now quite frail and using a walker, she wants to stay there as long as she can, supported by the nurse carer.

Sharon makes sure I know she is there, having a great time. Having lived for many years in a low-standard boarding house, and sometimes at risk, she is now safe and happy in a group home.

Fred wanders over. When he came to live at Gethsemane, I noticed a sore near his eye that oozed pus and blood. After going to his GP to get a referral, we went straight to an ophthalmologist, who saw him immediately. A cancer diagnosis was followed by an urgent referral to an eye surgeon and, within a week, surgery that saved his sight. Fred now lives independently, with drop-in support.

DESSERT AND PRESENTS

The first group is now ready for dessert, so bowls of Christmas pudding, cream and custard are taken out. Gradually the others catch up.

‘THERE IS A CULTURAL MYTH OF A PERFECT CHRISTMAS. GIVEN THE TENSIONS THAT EXIST IN MANY FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS, THIS IS HARD TO ACHIEVE.’

Once everyone has finished dessert, it is time for presents. Gift bags are distributed, the contents examined and shown to friends. Then some guests stand up and start to walk down the driveway. More follow, then the boarding house bus arrives. As residents climb in, we give left-over meat and salads to the manager for the evening meal. A taxi is ordered for the Hornsby couple. By 1.15pm, all guests are gone.

Volunteers begin dismantling tables, stacking chairs and sweeping the carport. Helpers disburse, visibly moved by the experience. It is over for another year. ●