

Some reflections on homeshare ~ a more natural way of support

by Kieran Jeff

Kieran Jeff has worked for Wesley Mission Victoria for 5 ½ years with people of varying disabilities within the residential and day services and is currently enthusiastic about people's independent living choices. Having experienced 12 years within the traditional disability service provision model he has become aware of its shortcomings. He is committed to the establishment of individual, person centred approaches for people with disabilities and is currently working with Homeshare (Wesley Mission).

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Having nursed my wife during her battle with cancer it was my introduction into what it is like to support someone in a carer role. After she passed away I was a single parent with 3 young children. I gave away my profession as a musician and started a journey of learning and self reflection.

I then met a young lady with Cerebral Palsy, and her family. Jane's (not her real name) mother, was a single Mum with two other daughters. Jane's Mum was one of the most inspirational people I have met. Jane's support needs are very significant. Jane had no obvious communication skills or aids and most people treated her in a patronising, fearful and very uncomfortable way. I became this beautiful young lady's support worker and friend. After 12 months of support I began to understand the signs and signals of Jane's communication and her sense of being, her humour, her grief, her compassion and her anger. It was one of the most inspiring times of my life.

I then went on to coordinate a program supporting young adults to integrate into adult life. Supporting people to independence through vocational, educational, training and skill development leading onto employment. Through this I formed strong relations with the people I supported and their families. I have personally witnessed the trials, tears, laughter and love, family persistence and fortitude in navigating the minefield of service provision and funding requirements to achieve the best possible outcomes for their children. I have witnessed family struggles with a seemingly unjust system of government and service provider rhetoric.

Over the next ten years I managed a day service

supporting 35 people to live in community residential units, supported residential services and supported employment.

When the new Victorian Disability Act 2006 took effect the focus shifted from the service provider to the person with a disability. Person Centered Planning and similar approaches were now the vogue. As a person providing a service to people with a disability I was expected to support people individually within a group structure. How was I supposed to do that? It did not make sense to me.

Things changed in the way I perceived the disability sector when I attended a forum where Dr Michael Kendrick spoke. Dr Kendrick made a statement which has stayed with me, "you can't make apples out of oranges." This is in reference to supporting an individual in a group environment. You can't do it. If you think you can you are fooling yourself.

After much soul searching and reflection I decided to leave the day service and took a role with a program called Homeshare. This program is supported by Wesley Mission Victoria. Disability Homeshare is an innovative shared living arrangement where two people come together for mutual benefit. The program matches householders who are looking for companionship and some practical help around the home with home-sharers who are able to provide this assistance and contribute to household expenses in return for free accommodation. The real essence of Homeshare, I believe, is the creation of informal support, forming a natural system of relationship, breaking down the stereotyping and preconceived ideas. I have witnessed this process and have seen these relationships bloom.

Home sharers come from a wide and wonderful array of backgrounds and experience. For example, some of the home sharers include a chef, a PHD student from India, an accounting student from China, 2 nurses, a commerce student, and other people from all walks of life with no disability background. All forming very close and personal relationships with the people they live with who have an array of disabilities.

As the Wesley Disability Homeshare continues it is becoming much clearer how amazing the outcomes are for Homeshare people living with a disability. The matches being monitored and supported by the Homeshare coordinators are proving without doubt the importance and potential of Homeshare.

I believe the more natural supports in place within someone's life the more viable and secure that life becomes. The idea that paid supports are fulfilling the wholeness of a person's life is unsubstantiated. Paid supports directing a person's life is not always what the person really wants. Yes, the physical needs are supported, and as well meaning as support services are, the real wants and aspirations cannot be met. This is why Homeshare can be the missing link in introducing and providing wholeness, wellbeing and natural supports into a person's life.

Here is an example of an elderly gentleman living with an Acquired Brain Injury. This person (I will call John), has been living in the family home alone for the past 10 years after the death of his parents. John has no family support, and as such has become significantly dependant on his paid supports, including Case Managers, who have changed four times in 12 months, and on his Personal Care Attendants. He calls his Case Manager "the boss" which is indicative of how he feels toward his paid supports. Ironically both the Case Manager and Support Worker consider each other to be the cause of this person's emotional dependence on paid supports, leading to an uncomfortable situation. The Case Manager has just resigned and has organised for the new Case Worker to locate a new Personal Care Attendant leaving the householder confused and angry. Again, the breakdown of the paid support mechanism is demonstrated.

Recently Wesley Disability Homeshare has matched a Homesharer, Allan, to move in with this gentleman. Allan is a male psychiatric nurse who started nursing at the age of 59. Allan has great empathy for people in general and particularly people living with mental health issues or have a disability. This empathy is something Homeshare

looks for when recruiting a potential Homesharer.

John had interests in farming and horses, as he worked on a farm as a horse breaker and jackaroo before his injury. Allan grew up on a farm and was a farmer for much of his adult life and had great interest in horses. Both John and Allan had similar interests. Allan's experience in psychiatric nursing supports him in understanding some of the complexities for someone living with an acquired brain injury.

The trial period of one month was reasonably successful for both people as they got to know each other. John's carers were suspicious of Allan, making this quite obvious by insisting Allan abide by the rules. This type of control shown by John's carers, always well meaning, was very disconcerting for Allan. Allan chose to stay out of the home, or stay in his room when John's carers were present. His behaviour changed, becoming submissive and compliant around his carers. When the carers asked John if everything was ok John would always respond in a positive way, even if this is not true. For example, John's serious migraines went undetected because John wouldn't tell anyone. Only having Allan in the home has made the frequency and severity known. As the match progressed Allan has become aware of John's behaviour and the complexities of daily living that no-one else is aware of. Only having someone live with John have these issues come to light.

John's quality of life has improved significantly due to Allan living and sharing with him. His social skills have improved and he is communicating his feelings more openly. Allan has created strategies to support John when his inability to cope with a situation causes anxiety. These strategies have occurred naturally rather than the previously experienced service driven strategies which sometimes lead to a power imbalance.

Recently Allan was asked by one of John's carers "what are your future plans?". John responded "I am not sure". The carer responded "you can't leave, because John really likes you". John "liking" someone who is not a paid person is a significant breakthrough as Allan is the first person in many years to become a friend. The formation of friendship is the ultimate outcome for any person moving from a life of isolation into the community. Homeshare is proof that with the right planning and support any vulnerable person can live a life without loneliness and fear of community exclusion.