

CASE STUDY – SEPTEMBER 2008

Jo Wickes – The Magdalene Centre

Helen is a young woman in her early thirties who had moved full circle from having employment, housing and a loving relationship to unemployment, ill health, homelessness and isolation and back again. Helen's courage and resilience and access to information were crucial in her making positive changes in her life. Helen's engagement in employment and being able to make a meaningful contribution to the community were the critical point in her recovery.

Helen presented at The Magdalene Centre emergency assistance program seeking help with basic food, clothing and personal hygiene products. She had lost her employment due to mental illness and this in turn led to the breakdown of her relationship and the loss of her housing. Following a period of couch surfing she was housed in Catherine House and was staying in the transitional housing when staff at Catherine House referred her to The Magdalene Centre.

Helen continued to access material assistance at emergency assistance and was introduced to the community arts program and volunteering at the Centre to assist her to overcome her social isolation, lack of confidence and mental health issues. Helen became involved in a range of arts programs and demonstrated a great skill and flair that led her to volunteering and assisting other people who attended the classes at The Magdalene Centre. Helen participated in the 2007 Fringe Festival Opening Night street party display with The Magdalene Centre, which was a series of personal dioramas about what home meant to each person who had been homeless. Helen participated in the Lavish creations social enterprise and was able to generate income to assist her to stabilise her life and set up her new home. She then came to us with an idea to run an arts course focussed on recycled art materials. We thought this was such a good idea that Helen was offered the role of course coordinator and gained her first paid employment for 5 years. This led Helen to explore study in the field of art. We assisted her.

Helen continues with her studies to this day and while she was working at The Magdalene Centre she received help with her résumé and was kitted out in the Working Wardrobe program for her first job interview in 5 years. Helen was successful in gaining employment as a casual cleaner and after 6 months was offered full time employment with the company. During this time Catherine House worked with Helen and found her long term housing in the city where she remains successfully today.

In this instance Helen was able to access traditional support services and counselling through Catherine House to address her housing and mental health issues. The Magdalene Centre was able to provide access to innovative programs designed to respond to needs that clients had identified and where there were gaps in the community. An example of this is the Lavish social enterprise which is flexible enough so that anyone is able to participate as and when they feel able and there is no punitive action or disincentive if people do not attend regularly. This flexibility is critical as many of our clients have chaotic lifestyles or chronic illness or

recurrent mental health issues that preclude them from working in mainstream employment. Working Wardrobe was set up in response to requests from people who were encouraged to return to work.

This case study demonstrates one of the most important aims for our programs and that is to ensure that people seeking assistance become independent of our assistance as soon as practical and that we recognise and work from an asset or strength-based point of view rather than focussing on people's challenges or deficits. It is an important philosophy of The Magdalene Centre that we ensure that we help people to realise all of their aspirations. Sometimes homeless people are seen as being only houseless and that provision of housing will address their problems. This is not an adequate response and any response we offer must also address personal aspirations around education, employment and meaningful engagement in the community. This case study also demonstrates the importance of employment.