

# My Story

By a member of Uniting Vic.Tas Homelessness Advocacy Reference Committee

It all started back in 2003. My partner and I were living in a house in Melbourne and paying a mortgage, both working in our own business. I got a call that my Mum had cancer and only had six months to live. She lived overseas, so we went there to see her before she died.

My partner lost her driver's licence around the same time, and this was essential to us being able to work our business. As a result of this we lost our jobs. We couldn't pay the mortgage, so the bank sold the house. We got some money from the sale of the house and were able to get a rental property. We were okay for a while, but then without work it was hard to get by. We fell behind in rent and got kicked out of the rental house. We were also put on the rental blacklist, so couldn't get another rental property. This is when we became homeless.

We initially slept in the car. It was an unregistered car, and we were unlicensed. The police were pretty good and checked on us but didn't fine us or impound the car or anything. After a while though, the car stopped working and we had to get rid of it. This meant we were now officially on the streets in Melbourne.

We slept in a swag mostly, but sometimes we just rode the trains and slept until someone would wake us up telling us it was the last stop. We were struggling in Melbourne, with limited food services available and feeling unsafe a lot of the time. You just had to keep to yourself. It was pretty lonely and isolating.

We ended up in Ballarat, by chance really. We were sleeping in one of the sports grandstands. It was a bit sheltered, and there were a few sleeping there at the time. We met people who

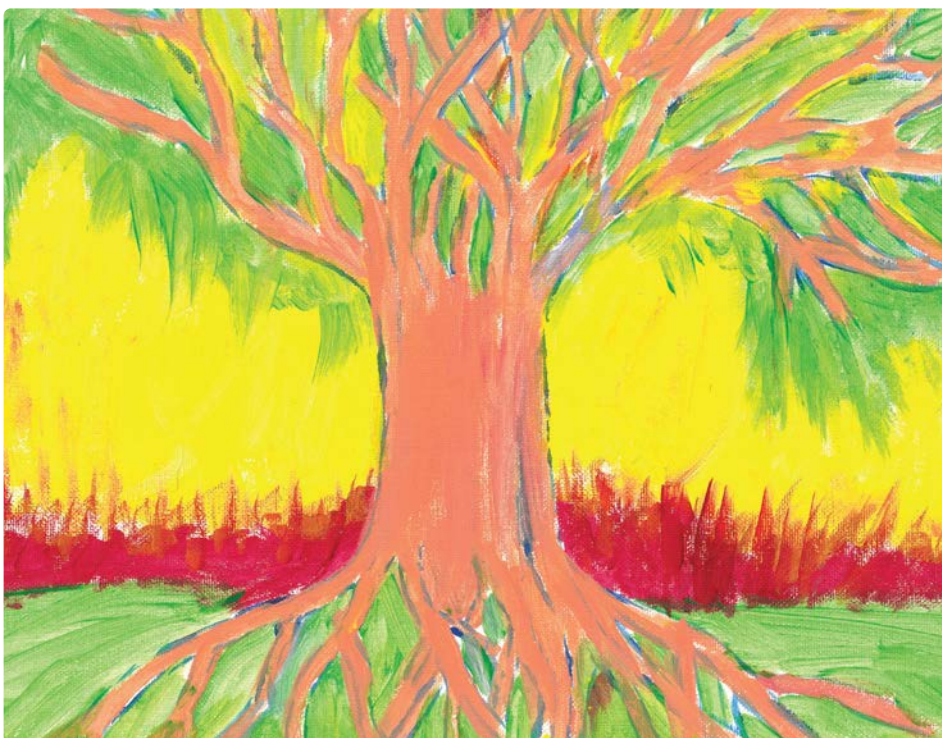
were just like us, doing it a bit tough, and they understood. It felt like a bit of a community, we supported each other.

We realised there was so much more support in Ballarat. There were food services we could access every day — breakfast at the church [Anglicare], lunch at Breezeway [Uniting Vic.Tas] and the Soup Bus at nighttime.

We moved to the old 'Hot Gossip Church' and slept behind there for a long time. There was a stairwell and we could hide some of our stuff in there.

You just feel so lost when you're sleeping on the street. We had each other, but it was still really hard. It was cold, we didn't feel safe. Lots of things went wrong when we were homeless. We were robbed while we slept — you'd wake up and people would be walking around you or sitting and just staring at you. In summer it is so hot, in winter it is so cold, and when it's wet it is just so miserable. You just don't get any relief. You always feel dirty because you can't have a shower. Your clothes are all dirty and it's a big hassle to go and find a laundromat or somewhere to wash and dry your clothes, so you just don't do it.

My partner and I did use substances before we were homeless, but maybe once or twice a week. This increased so much when we were homeless. We were using every day. I think this increased because we had lost hope for the future. We had lost everything. You want to cover the shame and pain, to forget. But it doesn't work, you get numb for a short time and then it's all back. You've already dug a hole and the drugs just make that hole deeper and deeper. You have no control over your life, so no opportunity to stop using.



Artwork by a member of the Uniting Ballarat Homelessness Advocacy and Reference Committee (HARC)

One day in 2017 some Outreach workers turned up to where we were sleeping, behind the church. I call this place the 'Magic Church' because it is where good things started to happen. The Street2Home Outreach workers from Uniting Vic.Tas didn't judge us. They told us where the food services were, that we could shower at Uniting, (they) linked us in with a doctor and provided transport. They gave us a little bit of hope, that maybe we were now on the 'lucky' side.

When you are homeless you really want to change and have a positive future, but you can't. You are just worrying about the next day. It is just survival mode every day. Knowing you can make a phone call to a worker though and say 'hey, I'm having a bad day' means a lot. Knowing people care does make a difference, especially on the bad days. It gives you hope.

My partner and I now have our own house. We were so stoked the day our Street2Home worker let us know. It was such a big relief. To have security, and be warm, to have a washing machine and a fridge,



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your own space. It's unreal. We have a chance to make positive changes now. We can start to think about the future, instead of one day at a time.

Everyone deserves to have security, a safe place. Black, white, rich or poor, it shouldn't matter. Everyone deserves a second chance. People who are homeless are not all on drugs or drinking alcohol, they're just struggling. It's so hard on a person's physical and mental health. Lots don't make it; they end their life because they lose hope.

People just need a chance, an opportunity. I am so thankful to Uniting for caring for us. The support has been past, present and future. We know the support is there, always.

\* This is a true story about a real person. Some details such as names have been changed to respect the privacy of the people in the story. The author requested to be identified only as a member of the Uniting Vic.Tas Homelessness Advocacy Reference Committee — a committee established by and for consumers with lived and living experiences of rough sleeping.

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