

SPOTLIGHT ON ST LAURENCE HOUSE

Q&A WITH NIGEL PARKER, EXECUTIVE OFFICER, ST LAURENCE HOUSE

What is St Laurence House all about?

We are a charity that supports children and young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. We provide a fully supported 24-hour home for up to four young people aged 13-18, a second home for two young adults in partnership with St George Community Housing, and an outreach program that supports young adults to stay in their tenancies by teaching them much needed living skills.

Who are the types of people that you help? How did these kids get into this situation?

Many are from families that have struggled financially. Some were carers of parents with a mental illness; or families and relationships have broken down because of domestic violence. The situation becomes quite dire at home and then the kids find themselves homeless.

St Laurence House has been recognised as a leader in trauma-informed care. Tell us more.

The notion of trauma-informed care is quite complex. The easiest way to simplify it is that there is often a gap between chronological and development age in children who have experienced trauma. A child may be chronologically 18, but because of the trauma they've experienced they are at the developmental level of a 12-year-old.

It's once kids feel settled and safe that all their trauma comes up and can be dealt with. And that's the beauty of what we provide, because they are given that time to process.

What kind of traumas?

It could be episodic, like the death of a parent; if there wasn't enough support at the time, a child can fix at the age of the trauma. It could also be sustained trauma; if a child has lived in a state of neglect or domestic violence, there are no milestones expected. They are just living in chaos, disengaged from school, health, their peer group, and don't have any benchmarks to strive towards.

What makes St Laurence House unique?

We're the only 24-hour service that offers boys and girls a long-term supported housing solution. Most services offer a three- to six-month model, whereas ours can be up to two years. That, in itself, is important.

And with kids, their issues can come out at any time. I've got to be prepared to listen and respond whenever they are ready to talk, not at an appointed time. There are situations where I've been driving somewhere with one of the kids and they come out with a horrific story that's happened to them and we talk about it then and there in the car.

Do many go back to their families?

Sometimes it's not possible. What is possible is to change the relationship with their families. When a child is homeless, they've got no bargaining chips. When they're here, they can come from a position of strength. So, if you go home to visit and you're told to get out, it's ok, the kids have somewhere to go. The kids can mature and become the adult in

this situation because they are not powerless anymore. In those situations, they can repair their relationships.

What kind of support do you provide in the outreach program?

We provide an intensive three months living skills program for 18 to 24-year olds. We focus on finance, self-care, property maintenance, education support and employment support to name a few. It's delivered through an outreach worker on a one-to-one basis. We meet with the client at least once a week and discuss issues specific to their situation. It's important the individuals are invested in the program, so there is some degree of self-identification on what they need help with that also needs to happen.

What kind of results do you see with the outreach program?

80 percent of clients manage to sustain their tenancies, which is great.

Do they have similar backgrounds to the kids in your long-term accommodation?

Yes, they've usually been through the child protection and homelessness systems for years, and as a result haven't developed the necessary skills to live independently.

What do you love most about your job?

Working with children and young people. It's challenging, it's funny, and I can see how quite simple things can really make a difference in a child's life. Like having Christmas decorations in

our house and how it brings a sense of wonderment to a 17-year-old, because he's never had that at home.

What kind of network do you have to support the kids and young people?

We're fortunate to have been established for 40 years, and in that time, we've built relationships with people and experts in our area.

When you're working with complex needs children, you need to have an arsenal of expertise at your disposal. Some services struggle with that but for me it's about friendships and relationships I've had over the last 15 years. It's because of those relationships, there's rarely a case we can't work with – generally we can find someone or somewhere that can support them.

What are some of the organisations you work with?

We have strong relationships with Caretakers Cottage, Options Youth Housing, Prince of Wales Adolescent Mental Health Unit, Centre360 Paddington, South Sydney High School, The Lilian Howe Project, MyFoundations Youth Housing, and Taldumunde Youth Services, among others.

As a director on Yfoundations and My Foundations Youth Housing, a peak body representing youth homelessness in NSW, we've got state-wide connections to services as well.

What other kinds of support do you need?

Number one is financial. Only 70 percent of our programs are government funded and the rest we need to come up with ourselves. We're underfunded compared to other services. The shortfall

compared to a 4-bedroom crisis refuge is just over half a million dollars. When the bureaucrats look at our model, we don't support as many people as a high turnover crisis refuge, which somehow translates into different funding.

We also appreciate volunteers for different tasks such as house maintenance, gardening, administration, and clinical supervision.

DONATIONS TO ST LAURENCE HOUSE

St Laurence House is currently running its end-of-financial year appeal. They need to raise \$30,000 before 30 June to maintain their services for kids and young adults.

To donate, visit www.stlaurencehouse.org.au/donate. All donations over \$2 are tax deductible.



SHROVE TUESDAY FUNDRAISER

St Laurence House Treasurer Alan Soutar (L) is pictured with Executive Officer Nigel Parker (R) at Pancakes for the Kids, a fundraiser held at St James' Church on Shrove Tuesday. Parishioners from St James' and Christ Church St Laurence attended the dinner and helped raise \$3,800 for St Laurence House.