

URBAN NETWORK

*...people together
...endless possibilities*

For more information about
Ruah Community Services
or
the Urban Network Program
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every day. Sometimes I think I should have kept going with that.

In October 2002 I was at Urban Network when Ruah launched The Big Issue. I decided to give it a go and worked as a vendor for four years. The highlight was getting my picture on the cover of the Christmas edition last year. I really enjoyed it but it didn't satisfy me fully and I started to think about TAFE again. I left The Big Issue and went back to study again. I earned my Certificate III in Community Services. I hadn't thought past that but after talking with the other students I think I will go for my Certificate IV now.

Part of the Cert III was a 90-day student placement and I did this by volunteering at Lorikeet Centre one day a week over about five months. I did typing and clerical work, cooking and craft and talking with people. I enjoyed the volunteer work. I would like to



volunteer at Urban Network and I've thought about ARAFMI too.

Urban Network is a place of opportunities. It's like an open door.

Introduction

This booklet is one of a series created in 2008 to celebrate Ruah's 15th year of mental health service provision. It provides an illustrated overview of the Urban Network program, which is in its eighth year of operation.

Urban Network is a social and community linking program for people with a lived experience of mental illness.

This booklet is dedicated to all those past and present participants and workers who have each contributed to the successful program Urban Network is today.

Ruah Community Services extends thanks to all who provided their personal stories for publication.

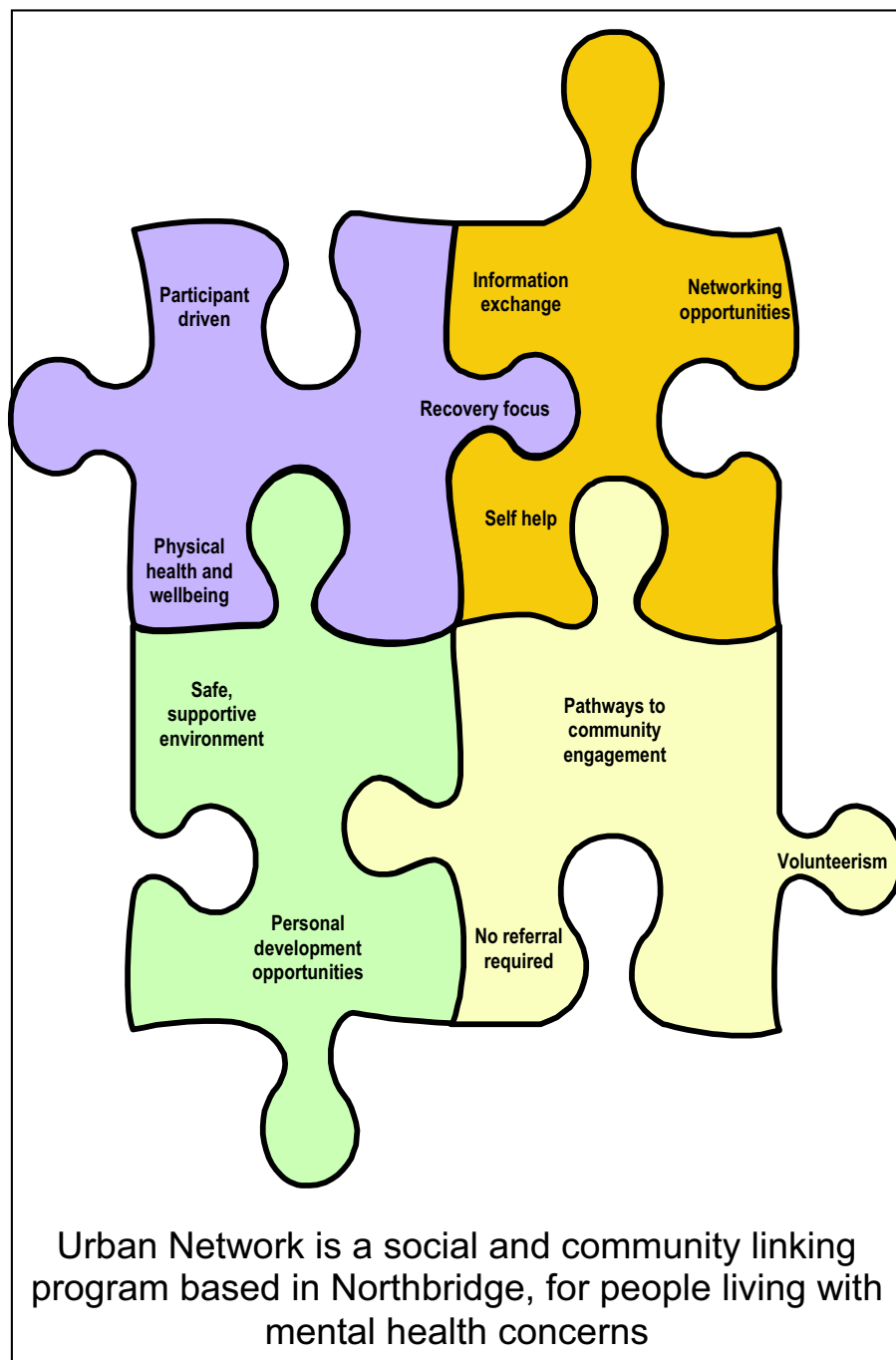
Urban Network Principles

Social connection and friendship: Creating opportunities for participants to form social networks, to join with others in common interests, to link into community activities and enhance their social skills and confidence.

Empowerment: Shared leadership is encouraged through involvement in planning, decision-making and review of Urban Network activities. Participants are encouraged to co-lead meetings and contribute to the personal growth and well-being program.

Personal growth and skills development: Organisation of information, skill development and wellbeing programs to assist people in their personal development and recovery journeys.

Independence: Participants take responsibility for their own transport and financial arrangements.



was heading for Graylands. I was really not well. I had a psychotic episode and it took a long time to recover. I was going to Palmerston Street and when they restructured in 2000 we all got letters and Urban Network became the place we could come to.

Urban Network is a place to connect, a place for encouragement and support. Living alone, not having a car, it's easy to become isolated. With Urban Network we can get out to places – like the day at Araluen. We can participate in activities like qigong shibashi.

I became part of the Leadership Group that met regularly and helped to organise activities. For a few years I also worked on the production of the Newsletter. We used to go to St John of God Healthcare and our petrol costs were covered. I was using the computer, photocopying, and addressing envelopes. I learnt a lot of new skills like how to mail merge and using the Publisher program. Eventually I was earning a small wage before we stopped producing it.



I've also been part of the Writing Group and we published "The Magnet." It had articles and poetry and recipes.

I've had a couple of periods away from Urban Network. Someone came and told us about TAFE so I decided to have a go. I did a semester of mature age study and then sat the Public Service Exam. I got a part time job on reception, working every afternoon. But it was very quiet and it was a long way to travel

great support to me through all of that.

I am working on several projects at the moment – environmental and charity. I correspond with MPs and I attend conferences and speak up on behalf of people with disabilities. Ironically, I was ejected from one that was about giving the disabled more of a voice!



I sing with the Spirit of the Streets Choir and I do a solo “Try with a little help from my friends” – I belt it out and it sounds great with the backing vocals. I also work with puppets and I have plans to expand that work as an early childhood education method. I hope it will give people with disabilities an opportunity to be a key part of it. The first rule of rehab is to give people something to do that they can enjoy being involved in.

Urban Network gives me strength.

Kate's story

My first day at Urban Network was Melbourne Cup day in 1999. I met a few people and talked to the staff. But that was the year I

Program History and Overview

In 1999, members of the Ruah Inreach Consumer Council identified a need for community networks in which people with mental health concerns could encourage and assist each other in making links with the mainstream community.

With the funding assistance of Lotterywest and St John of God Healthcare, three groups were established by Ruah Inreach to address this need in Northbridge, Fremantle and Gosnells, with a weekly contact meeting held in each region.

As resources were not available on an ongoing basis, Urban Network was restructured in 2002 to operate on a trimmed budget. St Brigid's Centre in Northbridge became, and remains, the central meeting point for participants in all regions. Urban Network also became co-located with other programs such as The Big Issue and The Spirit of the Streets Choir.

Today, Urban Network is funded via the Ruah Inreach Service contract with the WA Department of Health.

Weekly contact days provide opportunities for people to reduce their social isolation and to build social confidence and skills. They create a context for people to form social networks and to link into community activities.

Urban Network has evolved organically over time. Its success is based on its grassroots, participant driven approach.

Formal evaluation of the Urban Network program confirms that it successfully incorporates many of the characteristics identified as priorities in mental health rehabilitation and recovery support.

Weekly Contact Days

The hub of Urban Network is a weekly gathering at St Brigid's Centre in Northbridge. This contact day provides a regular and familiar structure for people to meet in a relaxed, developmental environment. The contact day also provides a consistent access point for new participants and interested people.

A range of activities are available, including meditation, qigong shibashi, a men's group meeting, laughter workshops and walks in the park. Several of these activities are participant-led. Other activities which take place under the banner of Urban Network are organised on the contact day, for example, day trips to places of interest.

A contact meeting follows a nutritious, shared lunch. This meeting provides an opportunity for participants to say something about their week and to hear from others. A few minutes are put aside each meeting to light a candle and remember others who are unwell or struggling.

The meeting serves as a forum to plan and reflect on upcoming and past activities and to share information about things happening in the community. For example, information about personal development opportunities, including those organised by Ruah Inreach. These courses are always very



popular and Urban Network participants are noted for their excellent commitment and attendance records.

Araluen and we have some activities planned for over Christmas. So many people don't have the support - there should be more places like Urban Network.

Richard's story

I was brought up in East Africa. I trained at the WA School of Nursing and went on to work in disability and rehabilitation. I had a motorbike accident on my way home from work and I sustained what is called contra coup damage to my brain. I have trouble with comprehension and it can be very frustrating. I keep note books and diaries to help.



Urban Network: top brick, fundraising wall, Prague 2007

I came across Urban Network when I gave someone a lift to the Doctor. While I was waiting in the surgery I read an article about the Big Issue Choir. I came along to Big Issue and then found out about Urban Network. It sounded interesting to me. I thought it was a good opportunity to network. The staff were really friendly and I made some friends.

Urban Network has really helped me to keep it together. I was having some legal problems – a government department was trying to evict me. I couldn't get any legal help. I was able to get the case adjourned but they went ahead and destroyed all my property. No one could help me. Too many people with disabilities get shafted. These guys at Urban Network were a

I have learned that life is what you make it. I try to think positive, keep focused, set myself goals and feel proud of what I've achieved.

Val's Story

I've been coming to Urban Network for five years. There are very thoughtful and caring people at Urban Network. I used to go to the June O'Connor centre in Alma Street where I did a living skills course - a recovery program. Urban Network is the next step for me - it's been a starting point for moving forward.

Courses like Effective Communication really helped me see myself as a person and helped me overcome my depression. The courses are eight weeks and they're held here at St Brigid's. I'm proud of the seven certificates I've earned—they're up on display around the walls of my flat.

I learnt a lot about myself when I did the WRAP course. Now I can recognise early warning signs and I can do something about it. I've learned to manage my life.



I was on anti-depressants for 40 years. I've been in Heathcote – I had shock treatment there. I've been in the system and I've seen all the changes. I've had every drug on the market. Now I take nothing. Now I don't have to see a psychiatrist. I have a good GP instead.

I came to Urban Network the day after my husband's funeral. Everyone was surprised I came but this is where my friends are. You couldn't get better friends. And I like the atmosphere and the support and the way of treating people.

Urban Network is good fun. We all go out together to places like

A selection of Participants' stories

Bill's story

I was a client of a Disability Employment Network in Midland in about March of 2006 when I first heard about Urban Network. A couple of months later I was involved with a different program called the Personal Support Program when I heard about it again. The social worker there encouraged me to attend but I was reluctant. When she offered to come along with me I felt I couldn't keep avoiding it. By September I finally agreed but I was anxious and nervous the first time and I struggled with going back. When the social worker said she would come with me again I felt embarrassed. I wanted to go again but I wanted to go back under my own steam.



I'm glad I did. The Urban Network support worker was very encouraging. All the staff are warm and welcoming. But I was still anxious. I worried about being late or not making it for some reason. Then a big thing happened – I realised I had the freedom to come or not, to be late or not, to participate or not. This freedom was very liberating for me.

While it can be really challenging, Urban Network is also a very comfortable environment to be challenged in. I started to join in the meditation and the qigong shibashi. I learned about opportunities that might be available. I began to be inspired to do more. I began to feel valued as a person.

Before Urban Network my life was pretty isolated. That's turned around now and a big part of it has been Urban Network. I have

connections to some wonderful, inspiring, accepting, encouraging people. I look forward to celebrating together – people’s achievements, people’s birthdays, Christmas. The people are what makes Urban Network.

Having an opportunity to challenge myself in a safe environment I’ve been more able to challenge myself in other places and doors have been opened for me. I’ve gained knowledge and skills. I’ve done a personal development course and I did the WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) course. I also did a group facilitation course – it was nerve wracking and really draining, but I did it. Now I facilitate regular laughter sessions here and I’ve been invited to deliver them for a number of other groups. My expectations of myself have been raised.

Urban Network is the most wonderfully sensible, well-rounded program – the safe environment, the range of healthy activities, the information exchange, the opportunity to build relationships. Sharing a meal together cements that connectedness. And the meetings are so important – every individual is valued and respected. At Urban Network we have a voice.



Kelvin’s story

When I was young, in the 1950s and 60s, I didn’t know my parents. I was sent to a “home” at an early age. I call it a prison. There were big dormitories and you could hear kids sobbing and crying all night long. They used to cane us. They fed us big pots full of porridge but there was never enough. I was fostered a

couple of times but that was just more abuse – slave labour and thrashings. I found myself in some serious life-threatening situations. Eventually, my Mum and step Dad got me out of there but he had a vicious and unpredictable temper and he would flog me with a rope.



I learned to put on a brave face and get on with life. I married, worked hard, made a home and raised a family. Then one day at work, three years ago, it all came crashing in on me and I ended up in Royal Perth Hospital. I was diagnosed with depression and sometimes I have cried and cried until I ran out of tears. It was a very scary time and the pain is still with me. I struggled with finding the right medication and the support I needed. One day I was at the Ruah Centre, where I was getting help with employment, and I found out about Urban Network.

I’ve been to lots of places but most of them are for younger people and I just didn’t fit in. Urban Network is brilliant. It’s a great place to meet people from my own age group. It should be more recognised – in the paper and on the TV. I can talk with people who have similar experiences and interests. I can catch up and reminisce about old times. There are people with similar problems so we can get things off our chests – talk about things without any feelings of shame.

I’ve been coming to Urban Network for three or four months now. I look forward to coming every Tuesday. The shared meal is always good and the staff are nice. It’s like a big happy family. It gets me out of the house and by the time I leave I feel like I’m on cloud nine.