

Stories of Recovery

FROM THE BUSH

Images and narratives unravelling mental illness, self and place

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Dr Joy Paton

Ms Amie Carrington

Professor Debbie Horsfall

JUNE 2016

benevolent SOCIETY

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



WARNING ABOUT IMAGES

The researchers warn Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that this publication may contain images of people who are deceased. We do not wish to upset or cause distress to living relatives and community members.

REFERENCING GUIDE

Paton, J., Carrington, A., and Horsfall, D. (2016) *Stories of Recovery from the Bush: Images and narratives unravelling mental illness, self and place*, Exhibition Catalogue, Western Sydney University.

ISBN: 978-1-74108-406-1

DOI: 10.4225/35/575a37cd52579

*Stories of
Recovery*
FROM THE BUSH

FAIRVIEW ARTSPACE

6 Henry Lawson Drive Mudgee NSW

June 23 – July 11 2016

Tel: 02 63722850

Thurs to Mon 10-5pm (including weekends)

Stories of Recovery

FROM THE BUSH

THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition emerged from a collaborative exploration of how creative media like photography can give voice to the recovery process for people with lived experience of persistent and severe mental illness. The exhibition showcases photographs taken by participants in the Stories of Recovery research project. The photographs are accompanied by the voice of each participant in the form of a written narrative which is reproduced in this catalogue, together with a selection of the exhibited photographs. The process began with each group of participants meeting for a 'photovoice' workshop where they were provided with cameras to document what was important to them on their recovery journey. Some weeks following each workshop, participants met with the researchers to discuss their photographs and begin the narrative process. The exhibition was curated by Dr Joy Paton in collaboration with the participants and researchers, Ms Amie Carrington and Professor Debbie Horsfall. The Catalogue is also available at: <http://handle.uws.edu.au:8081/1959.7/uws:35492>

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Ms Amie Carrington from The Benevolent Society Mudgee joined with Professor Debbie Horsfall and Dr Joy Paton of the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at Western Sydney

University to conduct *Stories of Recovery from the Bush: Unravelling the experience of mental illness, self and place*. This research project gives voice and visibility to the self-generated stories, photographs and aspirations of people with lived experience of severe and persistent mental illnesses from regional and rural NSW. The project asked participants of the Western NSW Partners in Recovery (PIR) program how their identity, relationships and social inclusion is shaped by their lived experience of mental illness; how that lived experience is impacted by living in regional and rural NSW; and what they have found helpful and supportive in their recovery journeys. The project uncovered stories about what works in the service system and wider community to support people experiencing severe and persistent mental illness with complex needs. Through their engagement in this project, the participants have contributed to our deeper appreciation of the relationships, ideas, values and practices that can sustain and be significant for people with lived experience of mental illness. The research was conducted by Western Sydney University in collaboration with The Benevolent Society and was funded by Marathon Health through the Western NSW Partners in Recovery (PIR) program. The full research report is available at: <http://handle.uws.edu.au:8081/1959.7/uws:35379>

EXHIBITION CONTRIBUTORS

(ALIAS CHOSEN BY RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS)

BULLDOG 1

MARY

BULLDOG 2

NED

CHARLIE

POSSUM

CRIKEY

ROCKSTAR

FOT

SHELL

GHOST

STEF

GRACE

STEPHANIE

GRANNY

SUNSHINE

GRETAL

TIGER

JESSICA

TREES

KITT

WEBBY

LOVE

YARN



BULLDOG 1: FAMILY'S IMPORTANT

That painting there was drawn by someone that was deep down in depression, couldn't really concentrate, hardly sleep, so she'd stay up till four o'clock in the morning painting it. Yeah. I'm happy just to sit outside and just look at what goes on with the weather, the homestead. Quiet. I like growing vegetables. I'm growing pumpkin at the moment.

My daughter, she's a laugh. She was born when I turned 15. She's my pride and joy and so is my fiancée. We get along so real well we are very connected. We do practically the same stuff. Like I've been told by a couple of mates of mine 'if you want to stay a real strong long couple you always got to stick together – do things together'. When we first met we realised we were going to be a long-time relationship and be always faithful to one another. Her former partner and my former partner, we were both mistreated by them. And this photo here – she's happy but she's got a lot of hurt in her heart. Family's important. I've got sisters – I'm their big brother, their medium brother and their little brother 'cos I'm the only one! Grandpop taught me everything to know on a farm: fencing, cattle, sheep.

I nearly killed myself. These fellas at my uncle's 40th they were bullying me saying I was nothing but chicken

shit and I should ride a four-wheeler. I raced a race quad. The axle steering snapped - I was clocking about 100 kms straight into a four-wheel drive. Lucky the car wasn't moving or I would have been dead. I was only about nine.

My story of the dog: I got him from the previous owner. He used to get punched a lot, hit with a stick sometimes. You could see his ribs when I got him. He's noticed and realised that 'You took me home, you looked after me. You don't beat me up all the time. You feed me you look after me – you feed me well'. Now I've had him he's turned into – he can be gentle. Now the white dog there I've raised her – she's very loyal, a very good listener.

Some services they tell you they're going to do this, they're going to do that – but nothing ever happens. The Benevolent Society they're good. I can trust them not to let my information get loose. They've promised a lot. I hope they can stick by it. And if I win the lottery we're going out of town 'cos I love it out of town. I could build fences. I'll be able to work, I'll own my own tractor, build my own house. Have a couple more dogs than I have. I love the farm because it keeps me quiet.



BULLDOG 2: COMING OUT OF MY SHELL

I took that photo from my kitchen window in my new place. I like living in the country, once I knew people and that. I used to get bullied down in Sydney so we came here, me and my Mum, just me and her. I didn't know who or what to turn to when Mum died. I was lost and I was down and I had nowhere to go and that. My anger just spiralled out of control. I took a picture of that tree in particular because if I was a tree I would probably be like that: I was all alone and that tree's all by itself. This time last year I was pretty much locked in my house and looking out.

The Housing Commission got me onto PIR and PHaMs and that. It's helped me a lot. I work with PHaMs and the Schizophrenia Fellowship and I volunteer there and I help people and do what they ask me to do. The Schizophrenia Fellowship helped me become the person I am now. I was a lot quieter back then and a lot shyer. I wouldn't open my mouth, wouldn't say nothing and I was pretty upset. I had an anger problem which I was trying to control and they've helped me work it out. After me Mum passed away they helped me along and pushed me in the right direction and it was like a new beginning, new journey and just coming out of my shell and opening up a bit.

This time last year I wouldn't have had a heart for it – and now I'm out and about helping people. I was once in their shoes with people helping me and I like to give back now. I'd rather help other people than myself sometimes. Just to see them happy and just listen to me and understand me and that. It's helpful. Boosts my confidence and this time last year I would have been nervous and shy and that. I wouldn't do it. So yeah it's been a big change. I wasn't very independent before and now I'm independent in my new place although it gets a bit lonely now and again.

I'm a sporty person. I used to play football, soccer, cricket, tennis. Now I play lawn bowls. I'm involved in helping them out and playing. On Saturday night we had 120 bowlers there. I was helping them and teaching them. It's a big part of my life. It makes it a lot easier with the support and help that I get. It helps me along the way.

I'm just locking the past behind and moving forward.



CHARLIE: FINDING PEACE

I photographed that tree because that's where my life turned. I knew I had to get help or I'd kill myself. That was nearly 10 years ago. NALAG and Neami, the help they gave me – their support – saved my life. They're the greatest places in support. Yeah, NALAG, they're a really, really good service. They do a program that's called Flourish and they work on your goals and what you sort of want to look forward to in life. It was tough at the time but now I look and say, 'They're goals'. There's ups and downs...it's a bumpy road.

NALAG actually helped me a lot with the loss – when I lost my Pop – when I was 15. They helped me a lot then and then also when I lost my Nan. I was really lost. I probably wasn't the nicest person and I had a lot of regrets and they really helped me out and really gave me a lot of directions and I owe a lot to them. And they even got you to make little plaques to put in your garden and stuff to make little things to have in your house – and like to have in your garden – to grieve with and to go out in your garden and sit with them – have plaques in your garden and stuff.

There are still services to help you here in the bush. These guys still help you and take you to places to get over anxiety and stuff. To help with stuff like that. When people fund these sorts of places they help us to get out even if it's to go down the street or to go to the shops or wherever. Yeah – when someone helped me I think that I can help somebody else in a different way. And I think

maybe one day someone will change their aspect of life for me and do something kind for me.

I like going to the Japanese Gardens and feeding the fish. I just like to watch the water run down – it's relaxing. And the zoo, I just find animals really interesting I just like watching them. There's the relaxation side of it: that you can feed the animals that you can walk around and just relax and watch other things go by; a sense of peace and relaxation without any pressure or anxiety. I get that with my creativity, too. I love colouring and scrapbooking. And I've always been interested in photos. I find taking photos relaxing especially taking photos of people or animals. Like my dog. My dog was basically my rock through everything. She still is. She has been through so much with me. She's basically like my best friend.

A lot's changed in my life in the last 18 months since I've been with my partner. She brings out the best in me – she helps me to do things and she looks after me. She's caring and supportive in whatever I do. Yeah, family's important to me. My Mum and Dad are always there if I need help – they're caring and supportive, too. You know, my Dad works at the hospital – it couldn't have been easy for him when I've been there as a self-abuse patient... but when he'd get the call, he didn't hesitate in coming. That meant the world to me. Family means the world to me - my partner, my parents, my brother, my nephew. And my kids – they get me through when I don't want to face the day.



CRIKEY: CONFRONTING SELF-STIGMA, SELF-CARE AND BEING PRESENT

So that in itself was a step in facing my own self-stigma because it was, 'Must have a lived experience' in the job ad. So yeah, applying for this job was very confronting. I've just sort of kept flying under the radar and just living with it and trying to manage and battle the voices and anxieties. I'd kept it to myself for a long, long time. The encouragement was there from one particular fellow in my group of mates. And then really thinking that what I've experienced was real and this was a way to then support others during these stages because it doesn't really end – it's an on-going – it's up and down –and getting to help others to stay out of hospital – that's basically it. To live a meaningful life and be part of the community even though it might be frightening. Facing self-stigma is talking about what recovery is as a concept I suppose – you know the empowerment, the hope and everything else that comes with it. Using my experience as a benchmark and not ever wanting to go back to that is enough of a motivator for me to be interested in helping others to do it in their own way. I think I'm in a better place because of it.

I was the eldest of a large family. My brother he died when I was about 11. So in between Mum's moving

around then the loss of a child and being a single mum as well – and another baby on the scene – and then it just went from there. Didn't stay anywhere more than a year. Family has been an important part of my recovery. Meeting my wife just as I was coming out of the darkest stages and being in a better place and being active about it. Wanting to settle down and have a family which is something I really wanted, was longing for when I was in hospital. And now I've got kids and grandkids.

So yeah the environment has been important 'cos I've grown up in a lot of different places. Being just present with the environment and that helps with my mental wellbeing. It's an energiser – it tops me up, it fills me up. Yeah you just exist in this surrounding and we're just a small part in that. There's peace in it which I think it's good to get doses of. Noticing just the crunching of the leaves underfoot, the differences in the countryside as you're walking up a hill and the layers and different rock types that come out and the trees that change and all of that. 'Cos you just exist. Wherever you are, wherever you're breathing – wherever your heart beats. It's a living experience. I'm not dead yet!



FOT: GLIMPSES OF HOPE ARE ALL AROUND

Trying to find out as much about mental illness as possible - research and labels - because everyone is given a label. We're told all these things you know - you've got a troubled mind, you're trying to tackle depression and demons and things. Services are very, very limited and that's why I have to travel to either Dubbo or Orange to get professional help because although we have a mental health nurse here, he's only there for virtually three and a half days a week and he's got over 120 clients on his caseload. So he's told me he's too busy to see me. So immediately you feel like you're not valued.

I used also to work in mental health and look after people with serious mental illnesses and now I'm in the reverse. I'm being looked after by other people and I can see it from both sides and recognise what those people were going through. It's a humbling and fulfilling experience. It makes a big difference that someone's accepted by someone else and they don't feel like they're on their own. I think that makes a big difference. I'm also a volunteer. Confidence is part of that and learning from other people. Lots of opportunities to do things. I was asked if I would come and work - that gave me back a sense of worth by doing that.

I guess it's seeing messages or seeing glimpses of hope. Because if someone loses hope that's when they suicide and that's when they aren't themselves - relationship breaks down and all of that. But as long as there's an ounce of hope there's life I think. I could actually see that

leaf fall over the aerial the chances of that happening at 100 kms an hour: it was amazing. And it was enough to keep me alive - to want to be alive at that time. So I've still got that leaf in a little container at home. It was a church picnic and where I was sitting I just happened to look down on the ground and there was a cross there and it was a sign for me. And rainbows when I needed something positive - to see something positive - especially from God. And the footsteps where you can see where you've been is important to me and not just my footsteps, other people's so you don't feel alone. Yeah and there's something about this old railway bridge, to me it symbolises getting across the valley that's hard to get across - rough terrain, there's a bridge there to help you to get across.

I've tried to sort of be open to things that are happening around me and look for the positives rather than the negatives. The negatives will make themselves known but if you don't look for the positives quite often you don't recognise them. I love the ocean and sand - has a great calming presence on me. You can hear the waves - that rhythm the regularity of it is therapeutic. But I like the bush - I've always loved it - it's been somewhere I can immerse myself and find a place that's quiet and peaceful and explore nature. I find solace in creation, in its rhythms and seasons and plants and animal life - being close to animals. My animals are my best therapy that I have. Probably better than medication.



GHOST: I'M STILL ALIVE, I'M STILL HERE

That's my house. Just shows you what I've got to live in. That's why I took the photos. There was only one pillow given to me and I had to cut it out and I use it as a hankie now. I've got nothing, no-one – what I'm wearing and what I earn. People in town they took that, stole that, killed that, broke that. Every time I get somethin' they steal it off me. Only reason I've got me watch and rings is 'cos I sleep with them.

Went to war and back and I'm alive. I cried all the way back on the Greyhound bus because I'd seen things I shouldn't have. Everything I went through no human can live through but I did – I'm alive. On Remembrance Day I get to see all me old mates again. I went through all that crap and come back to town and, 'Oh you'll be a hero': I ain't no hero. I get spat on, kicked at, bashed up. Me house gets destroyed. Town treats me like dirt and they wonder why I want to move out. I went there to try and start a life.

I always liked motorbikes– I just got to get the money out of the government. I've got \$1500 savings from the government and they won't give it to me. I rang and rang and rang and rang and they won't give it to me. It's my money. If I've got \$1500 why should the government tell me I can't spend it! I'm 47 years old not 4.

I love birds and animals. I love eagles – they're beautiful birds. I've got a friend – a hawk follows me everywhere. When I look round and get bored and lonely –there he is somewhere. When you die you're not dead you just leave the body 'cos that's all you got. Your spirit goes somewhere else into somethin' else like a bird.

The girl next door she gave me wind-chimes and we secretly fell in love. Your heart tells her heart what's wrong and her heart makes it better. She was there whenever I wanted something. Wasn't asking. She talked to me. She didn't have to – she'd come over and talk to me.

When I took the photo of the fence I said, 'I remember most of my life was spent behind a fence'. You don't get to go outside. That's it. That's all you see all day every day. Trees outside, birds and that flying around. Then you've got the windows. People will say, 'What does that mean?' 'Well that's how he lived life: looking out the window'. It's a photo that's opening the fence – where I can walk out and be free.



GRACE: THE HEADS AND TAILS OF DEPRESSION/ANXIETY

You slowly become unwell, and as you get better you come back; it's sort of like a circle. And then there's the cycle of bipolar with the depression. I want to show people who don't live with mental illness how opposite the two states are and even when you are well you can't explain it to anyone 'cos it's lost its tormenting sting. It's such an agonising thing to be in. I can't get out the house, yet when I'm well, I go on my own to India and Italy!

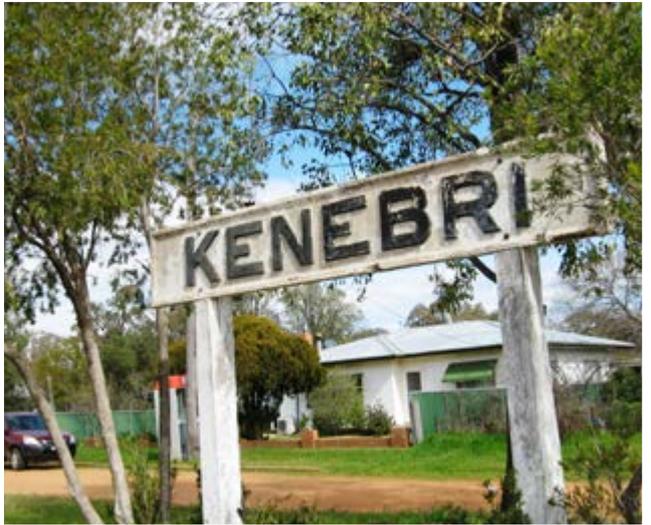
In this heads and tails of depression and anxiety, there's the cycle of your mood in its darkest times and then, well, a lot of fun and colour. I made that quilt...it's beautiful. See all the colour? But that pillow to me signifies the whole agony and thrashing and turning and not being able to get out of bed. Then there's the garden. I'm either going out to the garden and enjoying it, or it shuts right down until I'm better. The implements are there; they're not being used. Everything's dead.

Even everyday things like the shower can be torture. There's no energy, there's no motivation, your head's spinning with all this crap. It's like 'No, not today Josephine. I'm not going in there'. You don't want to be wet anyway, but you don't even want to get your clothes off because you've got to pick something else to put on. And then when you're feeling well...I love a nice bath; it's luxurious. Every morning when I get dressed it's like a painting. I've been creative for a very long time. I went through about three years of painting – this is one of mine on corrugated iron. And then the opposite; everything's shut down and gone home.

I've had a lot of shock treatment. I've sought a lot of counselling. I'm learning to be more mindful. And my art has been good. I'm calling my contribution to the exhibition Gratitude - it's just the joy of the colour and life that you have again. I've probably got more friends now than I've ever had in my whole life. I've got my three daughters and my three grandchildren. All my family's in Dubbo. I'm very, very blessed. They're 10 minutes away from here. I can go any day I want. They're beautiful!

I wouldn't rave about Dubbo's services – we just don't have enough psychiatrists and psychologists – they won't come past Orange. A few episodes ago I became a client of Mission Australia – and now I'm employed there! I'm employed as a part-time peer worker. I'm doing the Cert IV in Peer Work, too. I love assignments and stuff. I go down the library and get books out and study up. Even when I'm unwell, I'm always negotiating with my thoughts so that the illness can't rob me of my intellect.

This new job is monumentally amazing. 40 years ago I studied to be a teacher and my first year out I had my first psychosis and lost my teaching. I believe I was born to be a teacher. Now all the bells and whistles start going when I start talking; everything just comes together. I want to encourage people; share with them and help them grow. I think of all the wanting to be important or finding your purpose or potential – I'm just finding myself, just finding myself at 60!



GRANNY: STAYING CONNECTED

Family's very important. I've got grandchildren and great grandchildren. They're just beautiful. We often have celebrations like birthdays and so-forth and so-on. And I love having the get-togethers with good friends and just having little celebrations. I'm really animal orientated and I think they've saved me from a life of depression and this little dog, she's my best mate. I've loved horses all my life I just think that they're a great companion. A horse is your best mate – that's if you haven't got a dog. Second best mate if you've got a dog. A lot of people unload their problems to their horse when they're riding. They give you a feeling of togetherness.

I never knew that you could feel physical pain in your chest from heartbreak, you actually feel pain. Gaby is the person that saved me. She talked to me and tried to make me understand and just unloading my whole problem made me realise that just to withdraw wasn't the answer. Then Karen from Marathon Health came and visited me and we talked. She's very down to earth and I've just felt better and better. I trust them. They give me a feeling of being safe like I've got a net and I can't fall any further than the net. Talking to someone and realising that I'm not the only one that gets in these downers

makes me feel like I'm not alone, there are lots of people in the same boat. The biggest thing is knowing I've got that backup there if I get really down.

The thing that really used to worry me a lot was I could go to town and be bright and happy but that wasn't me. That's a front you put on and you can feel dying inside but you don't show it. I still have a cover-up front. I still have it and I talk about it to a certain degree but not put it out there for everyone because they can ridicule you a lot of the time. They think you're a loony tune.

I love the freedom of living in the country. We watch the wild birds coming in, the cockatoos and everything: it might be parrots and it might be little finches. Just the freedom of being in the bush and everybody knows everybody and they're like mates. If you've got a flat tyre on the road, they pull up and fix it for you. I love the freedom of the bush life and what you can do and I love the open spaces. I spend a lot of time in the garden now. I love it. Just seeing new growth and how beautiful things can be in the garden that I've planted. Now I just have breakfast, wash up and go outside. It's helped me heaps.



GRETEL: ALL THESE HAVE HELPED

That's my mother: she was instrumental in my recovery because she looked into mental illness and all the things of schizophrenia and she was part of the way I was and the way I got better. So that's my mum. And my father he was also pretty important in recovery. That is a very peaceful place – the Japanese Gardens. And the Cenotaph is pretty important to me as well because my grandfather was a Returned Soldier and he fought for our country and figures in my family childhood.

I think that's all Dubbo there. That's the place I grew up with – I was born here. I'm a local through and through. My partner's here and my friends are here. There are good mental health services. There's a unit at the Base Hospital. And then there's Schizophrenia Support services and there's also Mental Health GWAHS. There's the mental health that Louise belongs to, Marathon Health. Oh she's a lovely support. It's a lovely support. They provide places where you can see your psychiatrist and also they encourage you to be part of the community.

Religion's important to me. I don't go to church and I don't preach religion but I do have that in my heart. I think that might be the TAFE which was important to me in the beginning 'cos I did about seven or eight courses. I had

good teachers and even the students were reasonable to get on with. I've been told it'd be good for me to go back and do things but I don't seem to have the ambition these days. I'm getting old – I'm nearly 60 and I just don't have the ambition to do those things.

Now that's important because that's the new Dubbo Convention Centre. And that's where all the big plays and big shows that come to Dubbo – that's where it's held. I haven't been to any. I know it's there but I just haven't been able to afford any. And that's in Victoria Park and that in the middle's a little gazebo thing and when I was a child I used to go in there and sit down. Just be yourself, that's right, that's what it is.

Home and Mum and the overseas dolls and the TAFE where I did courses and the Convention Centre and the War Memorial and the Japanese Gardens, which is a peaceful place, overall they were all instrumental in my recovery.

I had no idea this was going to go so far – to an exhibition of my photos! I'm just pleased that my story, it's all been recorded and said.



JESSICA: HEALING MY BROKEN HEART

I come from the coast where the waters are see-through blue, with beautiful clean sand. I'd like to get back to the coast because I have those feelings of complete, utter confidence and freedom just flood back to me when I go for a swim in that ocean.

I used to do dancing and I was told to lose weight. So from that I started to have anorexia and bulimia. No matter how much I starved myself I could never lose weight and that's part of the broken heart as well. I was ostracised in my local town. My family wasn't completely whole my dad had addictions. I was just picked on. I never thought I had the right to stick up for myself. So it was hard growing up in a small town, there were men problems and my drug and alcohol addiction and then I had a friend commit suicide. In the end I had a massive psychosis. When I fell mentally unwell I lost all my friends and this older man I had fallen in love with didn't want anything to do with me. I kind of diminished my light through drugs and alcohol and cigarettes and I've let myself go down to being this withering mess. So it's been a very hard life. I was drug-addicted at 14 and I became a monster at 20. I'm slowly coming back to being my real self again.

I'm homeless at the moment. I feel this need to be looking after my children but I don't think that my parents will ever trust me with my son. I'd like reconnection with my children, I don't get to play with them, take them swimming – all those sorts of things that I'd like to learn to do with them. When I get my department of housing unit I'm going to work as a waitress and then a day or two at

Baptist Community Services which is aged and disabled care and then for two or three hours at Westhaven for mentally challenged people. And then every second Saturday I'll do volunteering at the Japanese Gardens, and then on a Sunday I'll go to church meeting new people hopefully. I've only been here 15 years and I'm not quite a local and it's hard to make friends in Dubbo.

When I went to Grow it was a very good thing because I was able to tell my story, about my mum and dad and about my town life which was absolutely horrendous. I got a lot of old feelings and anger out. And also the lady who taught me that schizophrenia is a mental illness but it's only a label don't let it stop you from being what you want to be. Partners in Recovery's been good. There's someone there to talk to when I'm being troubled and there's things happening in my life. It's always good to be able to chat about what things are going to happen to me.

I used to have this tree and I'd go and sit up against it and it had this kind of spot where my butt used to sit and the grass is all flat. I used to cross my legs and I'd breathe just being complete within the universe. I like to go for walks and hopefully when I get up early enough in the morning I'll be going swimming up at the hospital pool and doing some laps because I just quit smoking and I want to get my lungs working again. Really my dream is to become a yoga teacher to move home to the coast see my kids every holiday. I've got a healthier outlook when I'm on the coast. I've got that clear water and I'm free, just diving into that ocean.



KITT: THE HISTORY OF MY FAMILY 1819 -2015

I love me car. Yeah and I've got another one now. Me cousin's going to spray it. It's going to be turned in with the Bulldogs symbol on the bonnet with the NRL on the doors – the National Rugby League. I've been a fan since I was what. 6 years old.

The church has got history with my family because this whole town has. Me grandmother died this year and I had to bury her on Friday. Yeah saw her all the time. I used to go to her place every Christmas but this will be my first Christmas. She was everything to me. Every time from when I was a kid and somethin' happened, right, from when I was a kid and I needed to talk to her, I could always go to her. And me auntie said to me 'You know now son, the family's history now sits on your shoulders'. Cause my father died in 2000. Your eighth great grandfather as the mayor of this place. All that historic side. My great-grandfather he done the blueprints and built lots in that town. That's between my grandmother and my generations goin' right back to when my eighth great-grandfather was the mayor. So my kids would be I think the ninth generation of this town. There used to be a house behind that park where she lived her other three sisters and her mother - and her father couldn't find work

so he went over to WA and got work there and he used to send the pounds and shillins' to me great-grandmother and that so my great grandmother could feed my grandmother and my aunties and the Public School was where she went to school till she was 14. She left school at 14 and that building used to be a bakery where my grandmother worked. And the very first house you come to – next door behind that hotel was the hospital that my grandmother was born in. You know Ned Kelly? He was really important to my family's history. And I'm gonna tell my kids when I go, the history of this town and what it's got to do with them and then I'm gonna pass the book down to them cause in their hearts this is where they belong.

The Benevolent Society they've got me through a lot of problems. Through me marriage bust-up. But with me grandmother it tore me heart apart. No matter how skilled the staff are here, no matter how much experience, on my side in my boots they will never be able to pick me up again. Know what I mean? But the history of it remains with me through me grandmother. But yeah all I've got left now is the town and I'm holding on to that. To my family this town means the land of the rising sun.



LOVE: I'M A COUNTRY CHICK

I always wanted to be a farmer. All my life I grew up around farms, my grandfather used to be a horseman. I used to go and visit Nan every holiday. And that's something I'd love to have in my generation for the next generation. I just want something to keep going in the family 'cos all our family suffers from depression. I went out to my sister's boyfriend's place 'cos he's got a farm and every time I go out there I feel like I'm at home again but when I'm in town it's like I miss that feeling of just being around people and connecting with the universe.

I was born here. There's a lot of history here for me. Most of it's all bad but I want to start growing into a good memory. Trying to. It's hard but I'll get there. It's all I know and I've got family and friends here. Yeah, I thought well I grew up in country and I thought I'm a chick too so I'll call myself a country chick.

Well with the garden, the veggie garden, I was there when it was first opened and I helped out with growing seeds. I've stopped going for a while now because I'm doing life skills but I still miss going there.

The palm tree; That's my holiday dream. I keep on imagining I'm at the beach. All my life has been growing up around rivers and creeks and dams.

Susan, from The Benevolent Society, she's my inspiration. She understands where I'm coming from. She listens and she knows where I'm coming from. Usually I don't draw close to anyone but with Susan it's a totally different story. I feel connected with her. And the Life Skills group they're there to help you with your goals and they're there to help you if you need anything. We do groups as well like woodwork as well and whatever you feel like doing. Ned – that's another inspiration just by looking at him and because he's into music as much as I am. His personality it's the same as my personality. We've got so much in common. I like a bit of country, a bit of everything.

What I'm getting used to now is that I realise people do care but I'm still finding it hard to accept that.

I'm a fighter - I don't give up so easily. And I'm a caring person too.



MARY: OVERCOMING ISOLATION

I used to breed dogs. That was a big part of my life. I loved it so much. I got that way I didn't leave the house because of my social anxieties. I had a breakdown – I had to sell all my dogs and that's when my marriage started to break down and then my son moved out of home. I went from having to look after my son, my husband, my dogs to having nothing and I just feel so unimportant that way. Yeah that's a big part of my life having someone to care for. I think everyone needs to feel needed and that's my way I think.

So that's the end of the good happy time for me and the start of the sad time. I've moved around a lot over the years and I've lost a lot of family contact. And I no longer have a home of my own. My mum and dad's property where I live at the moment; that's my safety place really. I know I'm always welcome there...It's not so much the place as it's them. And my beautiful horse. He means the world to me. Whenever I'm sad I go for a ride. He's just so in tune with my moods. I've got a real spiritual connection with him.

When I'm in crowds the anxiety just goes sky-high. I was born in the country and raised there. At the same time it's very lonely so it's kind of a double-edged sword a bit. Where I live there's just so much open space. So that means a lot to me – just being able to get out and have nothing but trees and to hear the birds - it's so calming. Once again it's a spiritual connection - it doesn't matter where I go, it's a part of me.

My youngest child – he's the only one I'm still in contact with - so, he's my world. He lives away from me, so I've

got to really struggle with that and try my hardest to make time to go and visit him. My ex-husband is very important in my life, too. If anything upsets me I can ring and we'll talk and he really understands. I know if I got stuck, I'd only have to call and either one of them would come and help me. A lot of people don't have that.

It's just so hard to get help when you reach that low point in your life. I found the hardest thing for me was knowing the services that existed. Getting the information about services out there more is important. And more education for country doctors. I went to my local GP and he turned me away. Pretty much told me that it's normal to feel the way I was. I don't know what would have happened without my daughter. She took me from the doctor to the hospital. This was the start of my road to recovery.

But I think Neami pretty much saved my life. Within the first week I started to see an improvement and when I came out I was just a different person. With Neami you're free to come and go, but they also include you as part of their family. They never, ever look down on you. Now we have our 'super clinic' at the doctor's surgery. I meet with a psychiatrist, a counsellor, dietician, a health nurse – all on the same day and it's really been a great backup to keep me well. It's low-key - not as stressful when you don't have to travel. This has only been formed in the last eight or ten months – it's a trial thing and I think they're starting to extend it to different country areas and I really hope they do because it's an excellent service.



NED: MUSIC, MEMORIES AND SONG

Nature and home and family and friends are very important to me. Especially the old home –with the barbeque area. That’s where we often used to sit in the spring, in the summer and the autumn underneath the Mop Top and the rose garden - special memories - even though it’s in terrible shape, it was once beautiful. Our family went through a really hard period for a few years. We lost three of my family members within three years. We’d often gather out there and have a few drinks of a night to talk over things. That was the gathering place throughout those years. We had a lot of people rally round us which was wonderful. I think that’s the real beauty of small towns.

That’s our old carport and that’s Rocky Mountain in the background and that’s Baldy Mountain. I used to climb them when I was a kid. Rocky first ‘cos it was a smaller peak and then when I got probably to about 14 or so we used to climb Baldy mostly. I think the last time I climbed it I would have been about 19 or 20. I’m a huge sports nut too. I played lots of different things growing up. I can’t play it anymore so I love watching it. I love learning too –books and sort of study-type things, yeah. I love reading. My mind’s very active. My body’s not but my mind is!

My pets are very important. They are wonderful companions. They really are. My dog Toby. Yeah, he’s a really good mate. He’s almost never more than a metre away from me. He sits on the left hand-side of me all the time – wherever I’m sitting. He had a very hard young

life and we didn’t get him till after he’d been nursed back to health - it was just like love at first sight; we’ve been together ever since. My cat, Twinkie, well she’s been a really good mate of mine too.

Outside of family and friends and me pets and that, music’s the next most important thing. I absolutely love classical music. I love good rock music, a bit of jazz, a bit of blues – a little bit. And I really love a lot of world music – particularly the folk music of different areas around the world. I like all instruments. And I love the theory of music too. I’m a guitarist and bass player. I especially love the acoustic guitar. Yeah, the warmth of the sound - it’s just got a beautiful tone. I started when I was in year 10. My sister – she was still alive at the time – said, ‘I’ll lend you my acoustic to get started on it’. And I’m really glad she did ‘cos that’s what got me really interested in the acoustic music scene. That’s what I learned to play on first.

I’m a songwriter so for me that’s nearly always what I write on – from an acoustic guitar. As I get older most of them now are story songs. I think I’ve got roughly around about 200 completed songs. I’ve had mental health issues now for just on 20 years. That experience gives you that emotional weight or something of what you’ve been through. I think it’s helped more than anything. It’s kind of like an outlet for me for my emotions and that sort of thing. That’s what song-writing is for me – when I song-write - first and foremost it’s like therapy really.



POSSUM: TREAT ME WITH RESPECT

My dog, the park, sculptures and trees are in my photos. I like being with nature, swimming in the pool, taking the dog to dog-ercise classes and breathing in the fresh air. I took photos of flowers because they signify new life- new life blossoms. I used to be a freelance photographer, and I get a real sense of satisfaction when I take a good photo.

In the past I would take dogs to dog shows, and go horse-riding. I've always been an outside person, but at the moment my emotional and physical pain makes it hard to get out and be active sometimes. Companionship with my dog is important to me- I love animals. I used to take photos of wild animals in the past. My medications can make me tired and unwell. On bad days I play card games, computer games, read magazines and make puzzles to keep my mind off the pain. On good days I love to go outside.

My experiences of the mental health system have left me very mistrustful. I have experienced shocking things. The system can be very discouraging and unhelpful especially when it focuses only on medications and is not holistic. Being drugged is not the only answer and sometimes the medical system doesn't understand this.

I have been in the mental health system for over half my life. My experiences in hospital have been unhelpful. I have been locked up in closed wards and courtyards, unable to wander in the grounds or to be in nature. It is

a scary place with high fences, padlocks, high security, forced medication, tablets and needles. At times my medication was increased and they didn't even tell me they had upped the dose. I have experienced an invasion of my privacy and been treated without compassion or respect when in the hospital system. It is not a place to help with my recovery- there is nothing to do – it would be helpful to have arts and crafts, to be able to be in nature. Things that help you to feel better. It's time to turn the attitude around.

Although what's good are services like The Benevolent Society- it is how they treat people. They treat me like a human being with kindness and compassion, caring and understanding. They are non-judgemental and they listen with empathy. Workers need compassion, but that's what also makes them vulnerable. Sometimes workers are too hardened by the system and the system becomes a revolving door.

PIR has been able to understand me more holistically and worked out a plan with me- like seeing a psychologist not just a psychiatrist. PIR has been giving me different ideas and been non-judgemental. They understand my trauma and my loss and grief issues. To them I am more than my diagnosis. I would like someone to go out for coffee with. I can feel isolated and have lost trust with people. Mostly I stay in my shell but I am looking forward.



ROCKSTAR: THE REAL STORY ABOUT ME

I was very close to my pop. It's just over a year now since my pop died. I had a bad, rough year last year. He got me out of it. I basically wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. My little sister, I had never seen her since she was one year old. She is going on four in October. And then my Mum moved to Wellington and my eyes just lit up and now I've been seeing her nearly every day. She knows my name, she says, 'Rockstar'.

Mum and my dad have been there non-stop. They've been like a wall. My brother, he goes through a hard time because he thinks that I get everything. So I've told them to back off me – and then they can spend more loving care with him. I want my brother to get equal love because it's only fair. I've been needing care for a very long time and now I don't need as much support from my mum and my dad as I used to. As long as my family stand strong and not just give up. That's the thing.

This is an old clock that has been passed down about 10 times in our family on my grandma's side. I'm really surprised it works. They're heirlooms. This one is Puppy Dog. This is Grandma's. When her first husband died of cancer she had to go with Spot as a partner so they both recovered each other. So when Spot died of cancer as well, she couldn't cope. So I found a look-alike dog which we named Spot. Shadow – I rescued him on the

street at the time I was losing my head. As I rescued him he rescued me. So it was like we were both there for each other.

A lady got me into a program to help me get a job. Breakthrough. She's been everything. She helps me with transition to work and everything like that. This lady, she's at the course. She told me about everything. How she needed her time to build up and then I told her my issues and then we've just been building each other. We're basically just two brick walls. We're just building and building.

I also go to the doctors – they refer me medication but I don't really like that medication. It makes me sleepy and I don't want to sleep. So the toss up between me wanting to take it is a very big struggle. When I take it I go twice as worse. I don't want to get up, I don't want to eat. I don't want to do anything.

I love singing, it helps me cope. It's something I love and enjoy. It helps me cope with all my stress and fear of being bullied. Dad's relatives on his side have got some aboriginal in him so I took a photo of that painting. It just came to me – we're aboriginal but everyone should accept everyone for who they are. Doesn't matter what race, religion or anything, everyone deserves a chance.



SHELL: BEING STRONG

I got my dog, my baby, to pose for me! Her name's Roxy. She's the one I take for walks and talk to. We live out of town and it's a good place. Since I've been out at this place I've been more calm. Before it was just so stressful. There's memories of my kids there and my ex but when I come here I was just a lot calmer. The trees are nice. I just like looking at the landscape and thinking how nice and relaxing. The family I live with is very supportive and it's just good to be out where I don't know people and it's relaxing.

There's communities here in Mudjee that can actually help me. I think if I talk about it, it makes me a bit better 'cos before I couldn't talk about anything. Like they wouldn't talk to me about my boys – I just had to keep it in and always crying but here I can talk to people about it. Here I haven't really got much memories 'cos the boys haven't been here and my ex hadn't been here so it's a lot calmer being in a new place.

I'm getting into everything here, TAFE and The Benevolent Society that's helping me and the doctors here are a lot better. It's bigger, it's got all the services I need and it's a calmer environment. Well TAFE they help me. I've done nearly all the work. So I'm flying through my work. I've learnt a lot since I've been here and that's a good thing.

My job provider she's helping me get a birth certificate so I can get an ID card and she's also helping me with getting the disability pension. And the doctors are helping me with my problems that I've got which is really good and Sarah and Mary's gonna help me with depression and with all the stress I've got and all that – yep – like with losing the kids and with getting a house. I'm trying to get into things to help me get my kids back.

I get to ring them first Friday of every month and I get to send them letters but I don't know how to write kids letters. Last time I seen them was February and that was only for one day. My baby is one now and he probably won't remember me. As long as he remembers our song he should be right 'cos when I seen him that day I sang our song and he settled real quick. My boys are my world and I'll do anything to get them boys back. And if that means trying all new things then do it.

I'm gonna make sure I'm staying on the right track; get all the help I can. I'm moving forward and achieving goals and I'm going to keep going forward until I get my boys back. I'm not gonna take any steps back. I'm just going to keep going. Not gonna let nothin' get me down! Be strong and get there. Thank you for letting' me tell my story.



STEF: NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

That's the main one. That's the Tree of Life. So for years it grew up to half a metre then died. Half a metre. Died. I nurtured it every time - gave water - I felt sorry for it. After 18 years it took off - from then on it just grew, become stronger and stronger. It wanted to live. Something I nurtured each year and each year died and just kept popping up. Well, it looks healthy enough now - emotional, it was - I had to take a picture of it.

And then Father Tony - Unconventional Conventional! People can relate to him no matter what you're going through. He's an incredible man. Didn't judge us in the slightest. Thirty-six years together - Gerry was gay and I was gay too but there wasn't a sexual relationship. Father Tony, yeah took us...and being gay, there was no complaints about it. He treated us like equal. He means a lot - he has a lot of compassion for people.

The chemist. He's like a godfather to me at their Friendly Pharmacy in Mudgee. Looked after me and Gerry since he first opened the place and he's got a heart of gold. Always discusses the medication and made sure I was on top of things. He looks after you like - like a father should. My dad - it's incredible what people done and why I'm unwell; I was bashed from an early age. Oh God! Bash, bash! But this has been going on for 40 years. I go for a holiday every three or four months to...Rehab! Yes well I told 'em that! I said, 'I come here for my holiday!'

And that's Jan with Gerry's...he's just got a stick - that's the Holy Cross OK? But he needs... well it's going to take me a while...I have to save up some money to get

a proper headstone in both names and what we like and the future. No-one ever dies. They might, but they go to heaven. There's a big story about me in heaven that happened in the psychiatric ward nine years ago. I was in a room like this and the door was thick steel so you couldn't go in and out or anything. The nurses and everyone knows and couldn't understand what was happening; there was a lot of miracles happened there.

The Benevolent Society - it's home base for me. There's a cup of tea every time you come too! Brendan and Susan and Jan - they've been a big help with my life and it doesn't go skin-deep - it goes right to the core. They've kept us alive for three years. It's truly wonderful what they do and go beyond the normality to help people out like me and Gerry. These folk get all the love from me, and from Gerry in spirit. They're incredible here. They never turn their back on you. It's God-given. Two words 'God's given'.

The word love - it's a powerful tool. Anyone can use it but to mean it, to experience it, it's a lot more. No man's an island... it's the compassion you get back from everyone else and it outweighs anything. Tell the story - no matter what you've gone through or done the next person listening to you can get through what they're going through. So it makes a difference in their world. People saying, 'Thank you very much for talking to me', that's a lot for me. Well, I would say 'Love one another as much as you want to be loved' and no matter what you're going through, no matter who you talk to, it's important; to lessen the load on your life, dignity, love. OK.



STEPHANIE: A SENSE OF PURPOSE

I was diagnosed with depression when I was 21. I think I've suffered from it all my life and the psychiatrist I saw said that it would come back during periods of upheaval. Well there was a period of upheaval when my marriage ended and then I left a job that I had for over 23 years. It was very stressful. I wasn't able to maintain my mortgage not having a regular well paying job. So rather than lose my house I decided to sell it and move up here from Sydney.

I was applying for jobs – I couldn't get one. I still can't get one. So it's an on-going worry to me because of my animals – to look after them properly. I used to rescue animals when I lived in Sydney and that's why I've still got a number of them – six dogs and seven cats. I've always liked animals. They give me a sense of purpose. I've never been a person that's made friends very easily. Yes, I'm used to being by myself.

I got into financial difficulties. Horrible - it really was. I couldn't afford to pay someone to help me so one of the counsellors I was seeing told me about the Salvation Army. I never thought I'd have to go; never ever. But I had no choice. Finding employment - that'd solve a lot of problems. You just feel worthless.

I like restoring things – that's helped me get through actually. I like seeing something come back from the grave so to speak. I'd given them to a restorer to finish off but not being able to afford to get that done up here I thought I'd have a go at it myself and it wasn't hard. So I started to enjoy it.

I think in the country, provided you've got an interest, I think it's probably a better place to be depressed than the city! You're not expected to keep up appearances. And you can find people that you can relate to. There's a slower pace here. But I think in the country a person with depression can easily fall through the cracks because of the tyranny of distance. The sheer volume of people – like we've only got one doctor here in town and at certain times - you know if you can't get in to see them...

I did attempt suicide last year. I rang a friend of mine who's a grazier 'cos I was worried about the animals. He must have known something was wrong and he came straight in. He called an ambulance and I spent five days in hospital. Peaches stayed on the bed with me the whole time until the ambulance came. The tree in my front yard reminds me of me a little bit. It's still alive but it hasn't improved since I've been here – I think it probably needs to be pruned so that it'll sort of grow up instead of out.

Partners in Recovery have been very good. Louise has been marvellous. She spoke to the RSPCA – one of my cats had cancer on one of his ears and she organised with the RSPCA and I'm paying off part of the amount and they've paid the rest. I'm a bit more positive than I was - things have improved a lot but I still have my days when I get frightened about looking for a job and whether I'd be able to do it. I didn't think I had courage for a long time but I think it's slowly coming back.



SUNSHINE: HOLD MY HAND

I'm originally from Wollongong, I moved to Narromine after finishing university where I obtained a teaching degree. I'd been teaching for 20 Years.

It's almost like this illness has made me throw it away. I have ECT treatment every couple of weeks. I take medication, I ring Dad - I ring him a lot - I just like his soothing voice when I'm unwell. We used to talk crap really, I just liked listening to his voice, he'd know that's what I was ringing for. My family have been a support but they're far away. I'm very grateful that I've got people like PHaMs, they understand my illness.

The very first time I was put into hospital it felt like a jail. I used to dig deep into my hands, the scars I now have are a reminder. It wasn't until I was transferred to Orange hospital that the 'behind the bars' feeling became not as bad. When I was in hospital in a coma one of the nurses brought me a little guardian angel and it had a little card that goes with it. It is with me now.

My dad finally found PHaMs and they basically took my hand and guided me to get to where I am today. They've been a huge, reason why I'm able to be here. When I'm unwell I feel like I'm tied up and they're saying, 'Come. We're going to help you'. I was cared for; I didn't have to do this recovery by myself. There are people there that have a heart, if they didn't have a heart they wouldn't be in their jobs that have kept people like me alive.

When PHaMs accepted me into the program I wouldn't leave the house, they finally encouraged me out for a cup of coffee and it was a very big step. We got used to doing that and I enjoyed going out for a cup of coffee. There was one day about a year ago, I rang my dad and I said 'It's Mental Health Day today, I think I'm going to take myself up to the coffee shop and have a coffee by myself', and I did. I think that makes my dad proud; he still talks about it now.

This whole illness is a journey – it's a road that never really ends but it can get smaller and the pain can get less as you go on. Recovery – it's forever on the road. I'm travelling all the time to get well basically and sometimes it feels like I'm going to tip over, sometimes it is slow, but you know this road is still going. It's not something that can happen overnight and I understand that. I've got to climb a lot of steps and we're getting there. I feel like there is a light but the puzzle pieces are still being put back together.

When I became unwell I thought I lost a lot of my friends because they were frightened; I thought they didn't want to be around for me. I now know I was wrong.

The world's out there ready for me when I get there. It will be different from that small hospital world. It's going to be paradise one day: my children are the reason I'm still here.



TIGER: AT LEAST I'VE GOT THE CAT

Since I were eight ain't got family. Before me brothers died I'd been like looking after them from when I was 5 years old. When me big brother died he ended up giving me that necklace with Jesus and that on it. I ended up putting it over the top of the picture frame where me brothers are. And it's his birthday tomorrow – not too sure how I'm gonna to cope. When they died I never got to go to the funeral because me ex-partner – he burned the house down and he blamed me for it. They ended up putting handcuffs on me in front of me grandmother while she was in a coma. I ended up having a phone call about me brothers passed away.

That's one of Tiger. I saved his life. His mum got hit by a car so I ended up takin' him. I got me spare clothes basket and laid it on the bed, put his blanket in and just lay him there and he's gone to sleep with his toy. When you got no-one at least you've got the cat there. Tiger goes to sleep with me shoes. It's like he's thinking that he's safe because me shoes are there and, 'I'm not by meself. At least I've got Mum's shoes'.

When you get bored you can go down the library and read books or take videos home. But people hurt me bad. I see if I can speak to Louise or Sue and they just sit down

and say what's happening? And like a counsellor just up the road here. Whenever I got any problems just go back and see them. Everywhere else I go even if I go the police station or something they just keep on telling me to get out the door. Like I was hurt 3 times last Thursday night but I never went and told the police. They won't believe me so I never told anyone. I keep meself safe by deadlocking me doors. Then I'll put me lounge suite up the back of the door so no-one'll come in. And when I'm mad I get a piece of paper and write down what's the best thing to do when you're stressed. First is to listen to music and the other one's relaxing in the bubble bath. Go for a walk.

I'm up a few storeys and the roses just grown underneath here and me neighbour he does all the gardens and I've been helping him put all plants in and water. I love being in the garden and I love being with animals.

Dad's birthday's in November. Just don't know how old he is. I sometimes just sit there and talk to him and have candles go around each photo. I just sit there and sing Happy Birthday to him. 'Dad you old bastard: how old are ya? How would I know how old you are?'



TREES: GROWING CONFIDENCE IS LIKE GROWING LEAVES

I love the strength of trees. One day I am going to be strong like that. I've got about three trees in the front of my house. Someone cut them back and he absolutely massacred them. It made me feel really sad you know to see it all cut back. But now I look at it being strength and I'm waiting for the new foliage to come out. It's taken me a long time to get to where I am too so it's sort of like a narrative with the tree.

My PHaMs support worker has taken me to places I've never been before and it's really opening my eyes up and making me happy. Now I am able to get out a lot and learn that I can go to places by myself and be safe: walk by myself, have a picnic or just sit. The Benevolent Society has been really positive. Very supportive. The people are beautiful; they make you feel like part of the family when you walk in. That's nurturing. They have saved my life. We have a wonderful wellness group once a month, it's just where you come and have a chat and 'hello how are you going?' you can leave there feeling good.

I went back to where I used to live a few weeks ago and I was in shock. I was overwhelmed at all the new suburbs, I couldn't find my way around and I lived there for 30 odd years. So where I live now is sort of like the part of Sydney that I first moved to a long time ago. When I returned here after visiting Sydney, I thought I was so glad to be back here. It was a relief. My family are still in Sydney I look forward to going for trips to be with them, I miss my family. But, I also look forward to coming home to my own surroundings. I used to get homesick. But now

this is home. I used to work as a supervisor of concierge in Sydney. It was all about customer service.

I've started meditating again and doing it in nature is nurturing. I can just shed my leaves. When I'm feeling anxious I just sit down by the river, look at the water and it brings me peace. Sometimes I still panic but my anxiety has got better. It took a while to get the medication right. My lounge room is a safe place too. I love to be there. Good memories. I sit there and feel comfortable and see the things I love. Sometimes when I am out I get anxiety- as soon as I walk in the door I feel totally relaxed.

I remember on the Mental Health Day there was a lady who did laugh therapy and there was a whole group of us and it was just so much fun. It was lovely to be around people. I've been to the library and the movies now and I've been to a few coffee shops. My support worker is helping me get back out there. PIR has helped me with this tooth and dental help. That stopped me from going out with people, having a coffee or lunch.

The public park has a track where you can go walking right over the other side of the river. It's lovely. The wetlands are too. I'm having a sense of belonging, I belong out in the nature- I love that- and I love being here. It's very peaceful. So it's a story of recreating being here and discovery of new places. And one day like the tree I will have a lot of foliage – a lot of confidence. The photo voice project has helped me too – I've enjoyed the process and it's helped me to understand more about myself and home.



WEBBY: LIFE WILL GET BETTER

I've had depression for about 15 years. My life really fell apart when my dad passed away four years ago. He was my best mate. I did not want to talk to anybody or see anybody. I still feel the same. I don't want to leave the house or do anything. I just sit in my chair all day and stare out the door. I can talk to some people but not everyone. I am seeing a psych at the moment and I am on tablets for depression. Todd from Partners in Recovery has been coming to see me. He has been a great help to me. He picks me up when I'm feeling down. I need to meet more people like him.

I lived with Dad for 46 years and we did everything together. I don't know if I'll get over missin' him – maybe in years to come, I don't know. I was his carer for - how long? About 20 years I think. Now I need looking after! I'm battlin' to do things. I can't even hardly do me housework you know. I only do one thing and I've gotta sit down. I'm not lazy – it's the mind. I want to be able to do; I want a normal life. When I was young I had heaps of friends - we used to get out and do things. Not now.

Once I sit in the chair I don't want to move. I sit there and just look out the door... I don't like going anywhere. Apart from shopping I don't go anywhere. I just sit at home and do nothing. My nephew's got a garden next door and I'm gonna start helpin' 'cos when I get out I do feel better. It's just getting over that initial hurdle of getting out the door.

I'm seeing a psychiatrist at the moment and I'm on medication for depression. He's from Sydney so he only comes here every couple of months so it'll be another six

months before I see him again. I'm slowly building my life back up. I'm feeling a little bit better now but I haven't fully recovered. It's just hard getting out the house and talking to people, you know. Todd's been comin' around and seein' me and pickin' me up when I'm feelin' down, just by bein' there and talkin' to me – yeah – he's been a great help. He's been there for me. You can talk to him about anything. He makes me feel better 'cos he's a good listener. And Louise and Sue, they've been a good help too. Yeah, they're good people.

I lived in the city. Yeah. A lot more things to do. A lot more people. It's more peaceful living in the country which is good. I like it more peaceful. Yeah. you can do what you want and do your own thing which is good. But people don't seem to talk to you here. I can talk to people alright but they don't seem to want to...they just look at ya and that's it. They don't say nothin'. They just laugh at ya.

Be good to meet different people with the same illness as me. Because you're meetin' people out there hasn't got a mental illness and they don't understand. The workers know because they've been trained. They understand about how we feel and what we go through and stuff like that. So you've gotta be informed. But I keep goin' 'cos it gets better. I reckon life gets better. You live day by day. Might be bad one day, the next day's alright. And the next day's bad and the next day's alright ...but life goes on. I just live with this illness but it could get better I don't know. What I found is life goes on, it does get better. Yeah, you should have hope.



YARN: CREATING RESILIENCE - IT DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN

So many times I felt like that leaf here – squished. Many people they did that to me. You know the tree – like this one keeps going no matter what – even if it's hurt. It's like our life – like my life. See even from here the branch is going down and now is going up. To me it's like the way I keep going. I was down and I was too proud to ask for help but when finally I did ask - like so many ways amazing! But you have to ask.

I don't have anyone here now. I'm thinking to go home but there is pro and con because Australia is good for helping me with my health issues. Community health the people there help you with everything they can. I can say I'm lucky to be here but when I'm talking what I'm missing, it's terrible. I've been here 20 years. I miss my music, I miss my family, I miss my singing. I have a CD to release it's the best thing I ever did because it kept me on track. There's still pain there – still so many things to deal with. And I miss my boy too because my son is back home. It's hard. I've just started again.

TAFE changed my life. Now I finish Certificate Two, Three and I'll finish Certificate Four. I was missing the communication to be able to talk. Still I'm not 100% because I'm saying things around back. I learn more and more. I couldn't tell you how happy I was every day.

It was making my life easier. They got me the support whatever I needed. I still have unfinished business and it's bothering me. But I did a lot about the things. I start to get into meditation and guess what? That mindfulness thing put me into – like I was able to do it and feels so good. But you know it's only us which can do it. And I want to help myself. I get up and do whatever it takes me to do it.

I took a photo of the car key 'cos - like freedom. God I was so happy to have the car back I can't walk very long distances and was very hard. You can't keep appointments; you can't keep things when you don't have a car.

I start to do some volunteer work with Vinnie's. From here it's like new world open up for me. Kind of people they give something back in a way. After the volunteer part I was able to get rid of my pride and to go to the social security and ask for help because I couldn't live. I don't know if I can tell people the way I got through – and I still not over it – it can happen any time but I think I have a few things I can say what happened to me and how I went through and how I changed my life. To give something from what you have.

STORIES OF RECOVERY: RE-AUTHORING LIVES THROUGH IMAGE AND NARRATIVE

I've always been interested in photos - I find taking photos relaxing, especially taking photos of animals or people...and photos of my family... family means the world to me (Charlie).

I've got such a chaotic brain – it's always on the go so it's good to do things...that calm me down a bit. We did an art therapy course – and that was just fantastic! I loved that...one of my favourite things I've done (Ned).

These quotes from two participants in the Stories of Recovery from the Bush research project reflect the widely held belief that engagement with creative arts is beneficial to a person's well-being. According to David Maclagen (2001: 67), the "experience of art-making is in itself...therapeutic". Some of the immediate benefits of creative activity include enhanced brain function and affect regulation, focus, relaxation, and the easing of stress, depression and anxiety (Hass-Cohen and Carr 2008:15). The consequences of creative activity that induces what is akin to a 'meditative' or 'flow' state can be significant for the individual person (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). However, such activity does not require the presence of an 'other'. Indeed, to generate the 'healing' properties associated with the state of 'flow', the artist does not need anyone else at all! The point of departure for the work in this exhibition is its intrinsically social and relational character, even if the subject matter is, for the most part, intensely personal.

Participants in the Stories of Recovery research project underpinning this exhibition attended group workshops where they were given cameras to document what was important and helpful to them in their mental health recovery. Like other visual arts, photography is a means for communicating that which is unspoken or difficult to speak about (Booth and Booth 2003). It can also provide a means for reflecting on previously unexplored aspects of life (McIntyre 2003) and for thinking critically about the social world (Freire 1970). The photovoice method was used in Stories of Recovery as a means for uncovering the silences of people experiencing mental illness who are often seen as 'voiceless'; if seen at all. This method can be empowering. It places the research participant as the expert in analysis of their own life and experience. Using cameras allowed participants to convey visual stories about what was important to them and to communicate in a way that expresses their personal images, thoughts, words and reflections.

It is clear that creative activity of various types was important to the research participants. It appears as a common thread

across many of the participant's photographs and narratives. Such activities provide a means of self-expression and self-care, helping at distressing times. Engagement in the creative arts can also "promote recovery", offsetting the isolating tendencies of mental illness and engendering a sense of agency, confidence and self-worth (Neilson, King and Baker 2015:1). Indeed, for a number of participants, there is a communal dimension to their creative engagement and a level of confidence in their personal expertise and knowledge. This is congruent with the growing 'arts-based' recovery literature demonstrating that participation in the arts contributes to increased social engagement and empowerment of people with mental health needs (Secker et al 2007). Creative activity here provides more than personal gratification; it is a means of identity beyond mental illness and a way of building relationships and social connections.

Themes of connection and belonging are strongly reflected in the photographs and narratives on display in this exhibition. Social and community connection is widely known to be important to recovery and wellbeing. However, there are also many images and stories depicting connections to nature and wild places, animals, personal histories, family and spirituality. Caring for someone or something other than self is also a central theme. Photographs of friends, family, animals or even gardens appear frequently in the exhibition. Similarly, there are many photographs and stories of support people who are important to the participants because they 'understand'. There are also stories of how people contribute to the social fabric through the ups and downs of mental illness. They work, care, volunteer, and share their knowledge and experience. It is very apparent that a wide variety of connections are central to a person's positive identity and feelings of belonging and acceptance.

The exhibition contributors and research project participants have given generously of their experiences of mental health recovery. Sharing personal and often emotive material takes great courage, especially in a context where the researchers were not previously known. Yet, they have provided compelling

photographs and very personal narratives for public viewing. In doing so, the participants claim more than a right to be seen and heard; they are challenging the myths, the stigma and the discrimination surrounding mental illness. Challenging stigma is crucially important. Stigma serves to isolate people and, in turn, social isolation is a key factor in the persistence of complex mental health issues (Perkins and Slade 2012). It is unsurprising that overcoming stigma and promoting social inclusion are central elements of the recovery movement. At the core of its philosophy is a deep respect for the lived experience of people with mental illness and their right to author their own journey; their journey of recovery.

In being a part of this exhibition, and the research project underpinning it, the participants have demonstrated their capacity to be 'artists' – artists re-authoring and re-creating their lives. At the same time, they give us all the opportunity to enter into their everyday stories, to reflect and to be changed by that encounter. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey suggests "the magic of the artist" dwells in their capacity to make "the objects of our common life...poignant and momentous" (1934:118). The work of art is "saturated with story" connected to people and the rhythm of their lives (Dewey 1934:344). In this way, the work of art prompts empathy as it exposes tyranny and suffering. Art bridges different worlds - it "opens new fields of experience and discloses new aspects and qualities in familiar scenes" (Dewey 1934:144). Importantly, the kinds of personal insight and change that arise from art in a relational context have durability, unlike the temporary effects of 'flow' associated with the therapeutic qualities of art (Ulman 1975: 12).

The photographs and narratives in this exhibition fulfil much of what Dewey expected of art and this is all the more remarkable when considered against the background of intersecting challenges confronting the exhibitors. Many of the research participants involved in the Stories of Recovery project had multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities including dual diagnoses, being poor and sometimes challenged in terms of literacy and numeracy. Some were managing their participation in the research around the effects of medication (which may impact short term memory); receiving shock treatment; being in and out of hospital; or experiencing homelessness or other significant traumatic events. The collaborative framework that was established around individuals, supports, carers, families and researchers was no doubt important in sustaining the project. However, the determination and resilience of the participants themselves was the overriding factor enabling them to be a part of a potentially challenging research project that asked for a significant commitment of self.

The Stories of Recovery from the Bush exhibition is the culmination of a unique collaboration between researchers, research participants, service providers and community. It provides a distinctive forum for 'new fields of experience' with the hope of change toward tolerance, acceptance and belonging for people living with mental health issues. The images and narratives on display here are helping to unravel the relationship

between mental illness, self and place. They are challenging stigma and the many myths surrounding mental illness which will be experienced by almost half of the Australian population during their lifetime (ABS 2007). Through their engagement in the research and exhibition, participants have contributed much to our understanding of the relationships, ideas, values and practices that can sustain people with lived experience of severe and persistent mental illness. I hope that visitors to the exhibition and people viewing the images and narratives in this catalogue will be moved to look with their hearts as much as their eyes. The contributing artists deserve no less.

Dr Joy Paton, School of Social Sciences and Psychology,
Western Sydney University, June 2016.

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2007) *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing* <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4326.0>.
- Booth, T. and Booth W. (2003) In the Frame: Photovoice and mothers with learning difficulties, *Disability and Society*, 18(4), 431-442.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*, New York: HarperCollins.
- Dewey, J. (1934) *Art as experience*, New York: Perigee.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Translated by M.B. Ramos, London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Hass-Cohen, N. and Carr, R. eds. (2008) *Art Therapy and Clinical Neuroscience*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- MacLagen, D. (2001) *Psychological Aesthetics: Painting, Feeling and making Sense*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- McIntyre, A. (2003) Through the Eyes of Women: Photovoice and participatory research as tools for reimagining place, *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 10(1), 47-66.
- Neilsen, P., King, R., and Baker, F. (2015) *Creative arts in counselling and mental health*, Los Angeles and London: SAGE.
- Perkins, R. & Slade, M. (2012) Recovery in England: Transforming statutory services? *International Review of Psychiatry*, 24(1), 29-39.
- Secker, J., Spandler, H., Hacking, S., Kent, L., and Shenton, J. (2007) Empowerment and arts participation for people with mental health needs, *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 6(4), 14-23.
- Ulman, E. (1975) 'Art Therapy: Problems of Definition', in E. Ulman and P. Dachinger eds., *Art Therapy in Theory and Practice*, New York: Schocken Books.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge all of the research project participants who have contributed to this exhibition. They have shared generously both of their time and their experiences of mental health recovery. Talking about personal and often emotional experiences takes great courage. However, our participants have done much more than tell their stories to the researchers. They have provided compelling photographs and very personal narratives for public viewing in order to challenge the stigma surrounding mental illness. This deserves the utmost admiration. While no doubt difficult at times, we hope that the participants have also found this an empowering experience. We are deeply grateful for their contribution.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to Bradley Foxlewin, Mental Health Deputy Commissioner (NSW), for opening the exhibition and to the Special Guest Speaker, Dr Catherine Camden Pratt, Snr Lecturer Master of Art Therapy, Western Sydney University.

Our sincere thanks also to Susan Jannese and the team of participants who contributed to the organisation of the exhibition opening and report launch. Similarly, we thank friends, family and loved ones of the participants who have supported them in their recovery journey and in their contribution to the exhibition.

We are also very appreciative of the support extended to the project by Helen Harwood at Fairview Artspace. Helen was supportive of the exhibition proposal from the outset and has been unwavering in her commitment to its realisation. We are extremely grateful for her generosity in accommodating the exhibition and launch of the research project report.

The Stories of Recovery from the Bush project was funded by Marathon Health through the Western NSW Partners in Recovery (PIR) program. The project was conducted under the auspices of The Benevolent Society and the research partner was Western Sydney University.

Dr Joy Paton, Ms Amie Carrington, Professor Debbie Horsfall.



benevolent SOCIETY

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY

