

Heather and Sam's story: reconnecting to family and chasing their dreams



By Kay Ayton, a case worker in the Moorditj Mia Aboriginal Housing First Support Service

When I first met Heather and Sam*, they were living in a homeless camp in the bushland, the same camp as Derek* and Maree. Heather had heard we do good work, so she reached out and we met up at a nearby Aboriginal community hub. She cried the whole way through telling her story —her kids have an 18-year order from the Department of Child Protection (DCP), she can't see them unsupervised until they grow up. She's been living in the bush with Sam (her husband of 20 years) for two and a half years; the kids lived with them in the bush awhile, still going to school, getting teased for living in the bush. Heather and Sam were coming to terms with the idea that rough sleeping might be their whole future, for the rest of their lives; they were losing hope, deteriorating as human beings, losing their *wirrin* (spirit).

"I'm just so sick of living like this, I need a home... I'm so depressed" - Heather

She's been trying to get housed, but she's banned from the Department of Communities office because she gets upset. But she's upset because she needs a roof over her head. She goes to the DCP office and has supervised visits with the kids, and to a local (mainstream-led but very culturally-secure) centre for women's healing and recovery.

She paints and relaxes, yarns with the other ladies there, a close knit, diverse community of *blackfulla*, *wadjela* and CALD ladies, mostly with shared experiences of DV.

Sam is domestically violent; he's stopped hitting in the last few years but the verbal abuse is ongoing. So I asked her first if she's comfortable with me supporting Sam too. I've taken care to make sure he knows he's my client in his own right, I want great things for him too. I feel he really needs healing too; he mentioned he'd like to look into applying for redress (money for when you've been mistreated in the care system).

Other caseworkers might try to break them up, not respect Heather's choices. I practice what I've been taught about harm minimisation, understanding trauma, working with Sam to find better ways.

When I told them we'd found a home, they were just over the moon! I told them 'I'm so happy with you — the only way is up from here! Whatever your goals are, I want to help you achieve them. You're both my mob, you matter to me'. They were happy to take a house anywhere, so they're a bit far from home; but they reckon it's good in its own way, being far away from everyone to heal and come back when they're ready.

When they first moved in, they only had a single mattress they'd shared out in the bush. Starting Over Support (SOS) furnished the place right up — Heather and Sam couldn't believe it! She rang me to say 'can you hear us, we're *djerapin* [happy]! We've got a house with beautiful gum trees, with a washing machine and electricity, I can charge my phone up myself at last!'

(*Name changed)

Sam was so happy to lie down on a comfy sofa instead of a rug on the ground. Those little things people normally take for granted just meant the world. We got a letter from the SOS drivers later on, saying Heather and Sam were respectful and kind, so happy, grateful and excited –it just made their day

Rediscovering hope

Christmas is coming up in a couple of weeks, and Heather's just so thrilled, so full of energy. They haven't done anything for Christmas for the last few years; they had nowhere to do it and it was too depressing without the kids. They were ashamed of rough sleeping, too. Now they've got a home, they feel worthy. They are having their first Christmas next week, going out with their oldest for Christmas lunch. She's over 18, and hasn't really been in touch in recent years; they are just so happy to be reconnecting. They feel like they're starting to belong in the world again.

With a stable place to call home, they're reconnecting to family that's passed. Heather was so close with her dad, and hasn't felt emotionally ready to visit her dad's grave; we're going out together to pay respects in cultural ways, have that spiritual healing time. Same for Sam, who didn't find out his father had passed until years after it happened. I love that they're reconnecting to their family and their roots, making their wirrin strong.

They've got hope now, ideas bubbling up –they're dreaming again. They've never had licenses so we're taking them to study for their L-plates next year. I told them, this house isn't the end. I'm here whenever they need me, to help them find and chase their dreams.

I can tell that on the horizon, they're going to be a success story and live happy lives.

I really care about them, which means I can take care of them –emotionally and spiritually –as they rebuild, reconnect with the past, imagine the future, start having wants and dreams.

Now they're thinking about getting jobs; not long ago they were figuring out where the next meal is coming from. They're blossoming, taking baby steps – encouraged all the way.

Sam wants to stand up for his people, for men like him, to heal from trauma. I've always told him, 'we need more of our men to heal and stand up'. I'm so happy he wants to be a role model.

Building trust has been a big part of this process –the world's let them down. So I've been honest throughout, telling them early on I won't give false hope. 'If I can do it I will; if I can't, I'll tell you.'

Leticia [co-assigned caseworker] and I have always been very authentic about who we are; we all yarn and giggle together, just being people and friendly. I've opened up about my lived experience, what I've overcome to achieve what I have, what's possible. We hug and kiss when we see each other; we respect each other as people.'

Part of that is about empowering them to make choices; I told them let's do the things you like, I don't want to be like Big Brother watching you, I'm not a judgmental person.

Heather and Sam came to the office with some chockies they'd bought for us to say thank you, and they told me that all this time no-one's ever really had positivity in their lives till MM came in and stuck with them.

That's what it's all about –I love doing what I do and being able to change lives for the better.

Maree: recovering from substance abuse, and back with her three children



By Joshua Moody, a case worker in the Moorditj Mia Aboriginal Housing First Support Service

Maree is a single mother of three who had developed substance abuse and lost it all, her kids, her Department of Communities Home and sadly most of all, she lost her way. She had been rough sleeping and couch surfing for three years staying with family when she can. Her kids were being looked after by her Aunty who never gave up hope that Maree would one day get back on her feet and be the good mother and strong independent woman, she knows she can be.

After three years of substance abuse and the homelessness lifestyle she was stuck in, Maree had to make the most important choice of her life, to continue down that path? or to make her way back to her kids? Maree chose her kids and done everything she needed to do to get back into their lives. With a reality check and a strong mind Maree had to get her life back together and overcome her barriers. Coming to terms with her options she realised that she now had a huge debt with Department of Communities and is not even on their waitlist, so her housing chances seemed small.

She decided that she had to get over her drug addiction for a start to restoring her family. Maree looked up Wungening AOD and signed up for six months attending counselling and courses every day and she loved it.

Our Journey Begins

Maree had approached many service providers for housing and family accommodation, but she hadn't been able to find any homelessness support for families, and no-one seemed able to meet her needs. Moorditj Mia (Aboriginal Housing First Support Service) first received Maree's referral from Wungening AOD in May, and I was appointed as her case worker.

After a month of case work and seeing what services are out there, I found Anglicare's family assistance program and called them up – they said they take 10 families at a time and if you get in quick, you might be able to get a spot. So, I headed straight out to Maree and got her to fill out the form, and I brought it straight back to the office and managed to get her onto that tenth spot.

From there it was a waiting game as Maree has been put on a waitlist. To remain on that waitlist, she had to call Anglicare every two weeks to let them know she was still keen. I put it on my calendar to call Maree every two weeks to encourage and remind her that she needed to call them to keep her spot. Two months later, Maree received the phone call from Anglicare saying that there is a three bedroom home available, but she needs to be on the Department of Communities priority waitlist to be accepted into this property.

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I told her don't worry, we will get you on priority, so I did up a support letter and went to Red Dawn Advocacy asked them for one, as well as asking Maree to get her doctor to do one, then I took her into the Midland Department of Communities to apply and inform them of Maree's situation with the Anglicare program. That worked in our favour, because after three hours of filling in forms and waiting in that office they accepted Maree onto priority which gave Anglicare the okay to proceed with her application. I'd also put in an application for Starting Over Support (SOS) to fully furnish the property for Maree for when she moves in.

Welcome home

In mid-October, Maree and her kids moved into a fully furnished three-bedroom home thanks to SOS and Anglicare, and my working from the heart as well. Even though ideally Maree would have liked to live in the Lockridge area with kin, her immediate priority was to be with her children again. She's now been living there for four weeks, and her children moved in immediately and they are loving it.

New challenges

Maree's currently in the process of transitioning from Jobseeker Allowance to Parenting Payment; for the last month she's been supporting a family of three on a single jobseeker's income. She has nothing spare even to feed herself and her children. So now I'm working with her to meet her immediate needs – bringing food hampers to her from Foodbank and Perth Homeless Support Group.

Maree is now substance-free and looking forward to a brighter future, together with her children. The recovery process is difficult, and I'm working closely to support her – she talks to me when she's feeling vulnerable or facing a crisis. When a Job Active Provide wanted her to do job-readiness activities for five hours a day, I was there to help advocate for her.

Towards the future

Wilson is two hours return from Lockridge on public transport, and she plans to return home one day. But she sees her move in a positive way, as something that will enable her to do good for others. Her home is only a few km away from Perth's main Aboriginal-led registered training organisation (RTO), Marr Moorditj, and she intends to complete mental health qualifications there, to support others facing mental health challenges. When she first moved to Wilson, she was vaguely aware that Marr Moorditj existed and was nearby; when I pointed out how close it was, we looked over the course options together and she decided that studying a mental health course would be perfect; after all, the course is designed and delivered by her community, enabling its students to serve their community. She's excited at what seemed like a perfect opportunity to take the next steps in forging her path. She's hoping to start with the next intake in February.

From the beginning of our work together, I felt that Maree was a strong, resilient, and driven woman who was determined to fix her life, and just needed the right supports to get there; a service that would see her not only as an individual, but as a mother with children, and would help her navigate supports that would actually work for her and her family.

Derek's homelessness story: "I used to be nobody, now I am a someone".



By Michael Hansen, a case worker in the Moorditj Mia Aboriginal Housing First Support Service

Derek* had been sleeping on the streets for 8 years when we met. It was my first day on the job doing outreach as a caseworker from Moorditj Mia, and I went together with another caseworker to an area where we knew some of the homeless mob hang out - to reach out, say hello and have a yarn. As soon as they saw us coming, they thought we were police or someone there to move them on or cause them trouble, so they ran. But Derek stopped, looked at me and turned back.

"Something made me stop and turn back and listen" - Derek

Derek didn't have any ID, and he'd approached Centrelink and Communities and they'd just told him no, we can't help you. So he didn't even have the basic income support that every Aussie has the right to; and he wasn't on the housing waitlist either. That meant that getting ID was a top priority, but first, I wanted to get him off the streets and find him a house.

Luckily, we stuck it out together and we didn't take no for an answer, and it turned out it wasn't that hard to turn a no into a yes - with a statutory declaration form, we could get him on the priority housing waitlist. After 8 years of Derek slipping through the cracks, there was finally a way forward - and it's painful to think that it took that long when the fix was so simple.

We've had our ups and downs; when another client from the homeless camp he lives in was housed first, he was really angry with me, but I understood how he felt and I didn't just walk away or say "no, this is too hard", and in the end that brought us closer. Sometimes we look back thinking how different things would've been if he hadn't turned back that day! Now, he's safe in a unit of his own, and he's got ID, and he's on Centrelink. He knows he's got somewhere to turn when he needs it, too.

He's still often over in that spot yarnning with the homeless mob that became his community during those years; actually, they're so important to his life that he made it clear that if there was a housing offer far away from them, he wouldn't be able to take it. So we waited and we found the right home for him, near the people that matter to him.

When Derek first got his ID, he told me that all these years, he'd felt like without being able to prove who he was, he was just no-one, that he didn't matter. Now, with his ID, "I'm a someone". He tells the other homeless mob what a good job I've done, that even when we can't always get the houses sorted, Moorditj Mia aren't the kinds of people who give up on the people we support.

Society made Derek feel like he wasn't valuable; and it's an honour that I can work every day in a job where I can remind people that yes, they're someone. They're our mob, they matter, and I won't stop doing my best to make sure they get seen.

(*Name changed)