



Befriend

Hidden Lifelines

The everyday connections that help
us meet an uncertain future

A report on the Resilient
Together Project exploring
community connectedness,
disasters and resilience -
August 2026



*Ngaala kaaditj Noongar moort keyen
kaadak nidjar boodjar*

These insights and stories were gathered on the traditional lands of the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation, where connection to community and care for Country have been carefully nurtured for thousands of years. Their enduring knowledge and practices remind us that resilience is deeply connected to our relationship with the land and with one another.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to Australian life.

We acknowledge that the sovereignty of this Nation was never ceded and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

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Those friendships have become real mutual support. Sometimes I can't get out of bed because I have MS and Crohn's Disease. Some days I'm in bed for three days. When I was very sick with a migraine and had been in bed for five days, Gayatri quietly came to my house, did the housework and checked on me. I didn't even know she'd been there until my daughter told me. I hadn't asked. She just turned up.





Executive Summary

Resilient Together was a two-year community building project by Befriend, exploring how stronger community connectedness can contribute to resilience. Funded through the National Disaster Risk Reduction Grant Program, the project ran from July 2024 to June 2026 across Wanneroo and Rockingham, Western Australia.

One of our earliest learnings was that disaster preparedness is difficult to engage people in when it feels distant from everyday life. Rather than creating new groups specifically for disaster resilience, we found greater potential in the social structures already around us—friendship groups, sporting clubs, schools, workplaces, community groups and other local contexts. Our focus shifted from building something new to nurturing and activating the village that is already there.

Our community research and covaluation work identified six interconnected elements of connectedness and resilience:

- Welcoming, inclusive environments
- Meaningful relationships built through invitation
- Relationships as channels for mutual support
- Reciprocity as the basis of that support
- Shared responsibility for sustainable communities
- Inner strength and personal agency

Together, these findings point to a simple but significant insight: resilience is inherently bound up in the strength of our interdependence. We are better equipped to navigate difficult circumstances when we have relationships we can depend on—and when we know how to give, receive and activate support. Furthermore, there are ways that this kind of ‘village culture’ can be intentionally cultivated and grown.

The project also clarified Befriend’s unique value and contributions to the disaster resilience ecosystem. While other organisations bring expertise in emergency management, our unique contribution is to nurture the conditions in which connection, reciprocity and mutual support can grow.

Executive Summary

The work leaves us with three areas to keep exploring: supporting existing community contexts to strengthen dynamics of mutual support; growing cultures of shared leadership and reciprocity; and continuing to explore community building's role in place-based disaster resilience.

We hope this report makes a meaningful contribution to the ways in which we think about disaster resilience, the power of community, and the work we can be doing to ensure that we're all living in communities in which people can truly depend on each other, through whatever life brings.



What's the relationship between a craft group and a bushfire?

Could making friends actually be one of the most significant things we could do to strengthen our resilience?

When we think about the value and importance of friendship in our lives, we might not immediately draw connections to significant disasters like bushfires. We're probably more likely to think about friendship as a 'nice-to-have,' something that gives us people to hang out and chat with, something that gives us fun activities and events shared with others, something that gives us a light-hearted part of our life where we joke, laugh and play together. But thinking in this way, could we be underestimating and undervaluing one of the greatest assets of the human experience?

For 16 years, we've been developing Befriend, a non-profit community building organisation that's helping to nurture and grow more inclusive, connected communities (or, to put it a little more poetically, we're helping to tend to the soil from which friendships grow). Since our earliest days, our organisation has held a deep understanding and appreciation for the power of friendship in living a good life—It is our friendships that bring meaning and joy, a sense of purpose, improved physical and mental health and longevity, self-worth and personal confidence, feelings of inclusion and belonging—and for our communities, our friendships grow into networks of relationships that increase our sense of safety and security, nurture our care and compassion for one another, and create vibrancy in the shared experiences of community life.

Over time, as we've gone deeper into our community building work, we've been hearing more and more about how people's newly formed friendships and relationships are creating value far beyond joyful companionship. We've been hearing that these relationships are acting as a vital source of mutual support—people helping each other in daily life through small acts of assistance, sharing information & advice, and providing practical and emotional support through tough times. And this grows beyond the 1:1 level—the social groups that have formed through our community building networks are acting as a context for people to self-organise, rally as a group, and leverage broader support through their extended social networks in the face of personal and community challenges.

These relationships of mutual care and support are vital for all of us, but particularly so for people who experience vulnerabilities associated with age, disability, health, isolation, financial stress, housing insecurity, parenting strain, separation, grief and loss, redundancy, migration, social exclusion, and other circumstances. For many individuals

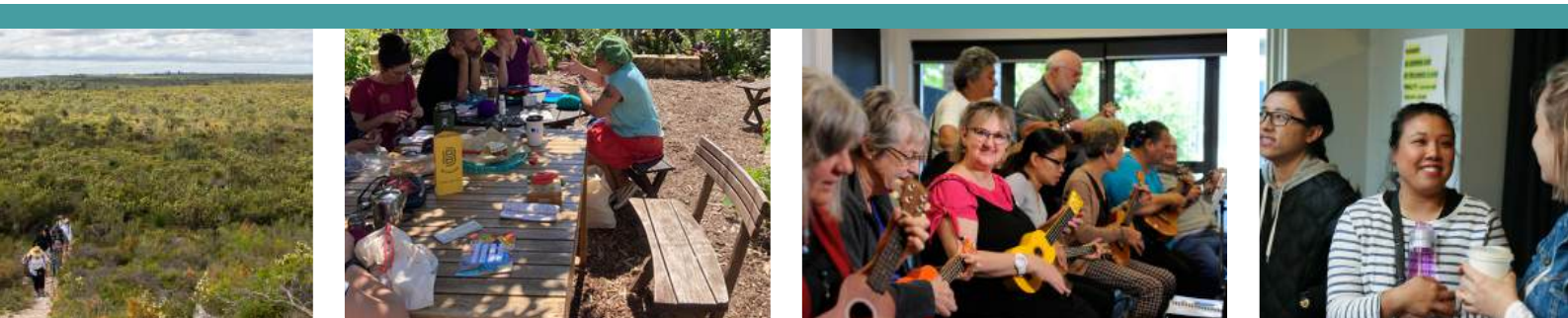
and families, it is the freely-given friendship of others that is the most vital lifeline, offering us safety, shelter and security, practical and emotional support, kind companionship, affirmations of our worth and dignity, and a sense of hope. While vulnerability certainly isn't evenly distributed, it's easy to forget that we all experience vulnerability in different ways, shapes and forms, at different times throughout our lives. Ultimately, we all need each other.

Perhaps one of the greatest shared vulnerabilities we all face today is our changing climate. Significant climate-related events like bushfires are increasing in their frequency and severity, locally and globally. There is a growing body of international evidence that demonstrates that our organisation's perspectives on the importance of community connectedness for resilience is far more than local and anecdotal. World-renowned research by Daniel Aldrich and others is now creating a compelling case for governments and communities to see 'social capital' as a vital part of the disaster resilience investment picture. Aldrich's research in disaster-affected communities across the USA, Japan, India, Thailand, New Zealand and West Africa is showing that the strength of connections within a community is critical for the community's collective capacity to respond, adapt and recover in the face of significant disasters.

What is often missing from the conversation about disaster resilience is some explicit acknowledgement that humans have directly contributed to the mess we're in, through the many complex and interwoven choices that we've built our society on. Beyond disaster risk mitigation and adaptation to the current/emerging context, we also need to be finding ways to transform our current ways of living, breaking the cycles that are perpetuating and accelerating our current suffering. As Nora Bateson explains, submergence precedes emergence, so how might we tend to our submerging future? These possibilities will depend on our capacity to work together, to trust in one another, listen deeply, acknowledge our part in this mess, shift our perceptions, dream wildly, experiment creatively, act boldly, organise, and reshape life as we know it, together.

Maybe a craft group isn't the craziest place to begin, after all.

Nick Maisey, Befriend CEO





Broader Context: Where We Stand

In this project, we have taken to heart the empirically well-established fact that social capital is the key variable in how well communities prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters. Social capital is the strength and extent of trusting, collaborative relationships within a society. Although difficult to define and measure, social capital refers to the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, including marginalised at-risk groups.

Social capital seems to be falling within our communities. Massive inequality in wealth, housing and food insecurity and mental illness engulf increasing numbers of people in trauma, struggle and pain. A recent article in *The Guardian* (June 2026) reports that Australia's 178 billionaires are \$25.7 billion richer than last year—the increase was \$50,000 a minute!—as 3.7 million live in poverty, including 750,000 children under 15. As Oxfam's Jennifer Tierney says, "There is something fundamentally wrong with a system where extreme wealth keeps skyrocketing while so many people are struggling to afford the basics, and governments claim there is not enough money for housing, healthcare, climate action and essential services."

People must be highly resilient to survive, especially in turbulent times. Resilience is an aspect of adaptation, and all life forms are innately adaptive. A local example: Hundreds of people experiencing homelessness, including children, living in tents blown away during recent storms on the Rockingham foreshore survived. Meanwhile many state-owned buildings lie empty nearby.

The term 'natural disaster', based on the separation of humans and nature, implies—falsely—that human activity is not a major contributor to disaster. But once we accept that humans are nature, natural disaster has a very different meaning. As renowned anthropologist David Graeber says, "The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently."

The polycrisis is symptomatic of societal sickness. At Befriend and within our Resilient Together project, we believe we must treat not only wounds, such as disasters and disaster risk, but the thinking behind the world that caused the wounds. We believe, in the words of the eminent Palestinian mental health professional Dr. Samah Jabr, "Resilience is not just survival; it is the refusal to be dehumanised." Our resilience work at Befriend is towards retaining or reclaiming our humanity.

Disasters bring out the best in people, despite the lack of social capital in normal, non-disastrous times. People put their own lives at risk to save others. They happily provide food, clothing and shelter. Often, as Rebecca Solnit discovered, a paradise can be built in hell, which is enormously encouraging: "The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp..."

...of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise now arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act in another way."

If there is a radiance in pain and resilience, even in the worst kinds of disasters—including massive bushfires and floods, fascism and genocide—there is hope. In our global village there are global reverberations of historical and current trauma that we can't avoid and ignore at our peril. There's hope for individuals and groups, some of whom, supported by our work, are better able to survive or even flourish. There is hope for human and non-human life, even if this civilisation collapses and is followed by a new one.

Peter le Breton, Thinking Partner





Resilient Together: Project Overview

Emboldened by our changing local and global context, in 2023, our team at Befriend started having more explicit conversations about the possible role and contributions that our organisation could make within the context of disaster resilience. Our conversations through our community building networks affirmed to us that our work is nurturing the essential conditions from which people are developing vital relationships of mutual care and support. Our conversations with those working in the emergency management field were warmly welcomed. We were struck by a wave of encouragement from the sector for Befriend to bring our unique community building approaches into this context.

Informed by collaborative conversations with community members, government, researchers and emergency management services, we developed a funding application for Resilient Together, a two year project focused on translating, adapting and testing our place-based community building approaches, with the aim of strengthening community connectedness and resilience in the face of bushfires and other significant disasters. This application was successful, and the project began in July 2024.

As an organisation, this project has been our first foray into the disaster resilience context, and as such, has created an invaluable opportunity for organisational learning.

Key areas of curiosity for our team have included:

Impact

Anecdotal evidence has indicated that Befriend's community building approaches strengthen community connectedness and resilience, but if we research this more explicitly and deeply, what might we learn? What does increased connectedness and resilience actually look like in people's lives?

Approaches

We have a long history of supporting community members to initiate, develop and grow inclusive social groups that bring people together around shared interests. In recent years, our work has been evolving through community learning experiences that strengthen the confidence to connect, and inspire new and diverse forms of community-led connecting initiatives. Stepping into the disaster resilience context, what might our work look like in practice? Where could we play to our strengths, and where might we need to adapt?

Tone

Our community building invitations have historically had a very warm, light-hearted, playful tone. This has been one of the real strengths of our approach, helping people to

feel welcome and encouraged to engage. But would this same tone still be appropriate within the context of a project about disasters? How might we need to reshape and adapt our approaches to language, communication and engagement to leverage our unique strengths and hold integrity with our essence, while being sensitive to the contexts of this work?

Team

As the famous systems change quote from Bill O'Brien goes, "the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor." Stepping into this new context of work was a brave, bold new challenge for us as a team. What fears, internal obstacles and challenging dynamics would this surface within and between us? What would be the place within this work for our personal lived experiences of community connectedness, 'troubled times' and resilience? How would we honour and support each other, and adapt together over the course of a complex, ambiguous two-year endeavour?

This report is the story of this two-year journey. It includes our broader contextual learning about community connectedness and disaster resilience, the community building approaches we've developed, tested and adapted iteratively over the project period, data and stories from our evaluation and research of this work, reflections from our team, and perspectives on future possibilities for the continual unfolding of this work.

Note: Images in this report are sourced from Befriend's broader community building networks; not all images are from experiences associated with this particular project.



Resilient Together - Project Overview

Resilient Together is a community building project focused on building the community connectedness and resilience of community members and at-risk community groups. Funded by the WA Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the Australian Government through the National Disaster Risk Reduction Grant Program, the project is a two-year venture from 1/7/2024 - 30/6/2026.

This funding program invests in “efforts to proactively reduce disaster risk in order to minimise the loss and suffering caused by disasters.”

There are 4 broad priority areas for investment that are laid out in the NDRR Framework, as well as 12 WA State priority action areas. The specific priority areas that this proposed project was identified as aligning with included:



Understand disaster risk - Improve public awareness and engagement on disaster risks and impacts



Community-focused resilience - Reducing disaster risk by building communities that can support each other and work together to understand and minimise risk from natural disasters



Vulnerable / At-risk persons and communities - Improve natural disaster risk reduction for vulnerable/at-risk persons and communities



Fostering individual responsibility - Increasing individual understanding of responsibility with regards to natural disaster risk, and consequently improve risk reduction on the individual level



Innovation, research and design - Supporting innovative thinking in disaster risk reduction activities



The geographic scope of the project was initially focused within the City of Wanneroo. The main reasons for this choice included:

- (i) Befriend having a **pre-existing community building network** based in this locality, enabling us to leverage existing local relationships & networks
- (ii) The **risk of bushfires** for residents living in this area on the urban fringe
- (iii) Recent experiences in which we saw firsthand that some of the people we are connected with locally in **Banksia Grove were 'at risk'** and relying upon each other for assistance in a bushfire evacuation

Mid-way through the two-year project, the geographical scope was extended to include Rockingham as an additional locality for project activities. This decision was influenced by several factors including (i) two of the project team members being based in Rockingham and growing strong networks locally, (ii) a supportive LGA response from the City of Rockingham, and (iii) increased project learnings through testing approaches in multiple localities.

The project activities consisted of a diverse range of place-based, multi-stakeholder connection, engagement and mutual learning experiences. These included:

- **Community interviews** with people from diverse backgrounds (including at-risk groups) to understand people's experiences of community connectedness, mutual support relationships, and resilience
- **Community workshops and events** that facilitated connections and mutual learning through storytelling, lived experience writing and other narrative practice methods
- **'Vital Village' events** using Warm Data Lab and shared storytelling approaches, nurturing relationships between diverse stakeholders, sensitising perception of complexity, and facilitating the flow of mutual learning between stakeholders
- **Community weaving** through local schools, sporting clubs, childcare centres, business associations and community groups, facilitating connections and supporting the emergence of new community-led initiatives that strengthen mutual support relationships
- **Supporting community volunteers** to initiate, develop and host inclusive social groups that connect people from diverse backgrounds, including people at higher risk of social isolation

- **Connection and engagement at larger community events** and disaster preparedness forums
- **Design, development and hosting of a 12-week cohort-based program** for community-minded individuals interested in creating, developing and bringing to life a community-led contribution to strengthening community resilience

The intention was not to develop a ‘perfect model’ of how to strengthen resilience through community-building; rather, a rich variety of approaches were explored to increase and expand the scope of learning.

The project team was composed of five core team members, with diverse backgrounds and lived experiences spanning community engagement, social enterprise development, community storytelling, adult education, systems thinking, facilitation, partnership development, service design, innovation program development, evaluation, and project stewardship. This project team was nested within Befriend’s supportive organisational environment, connecting with and orbited by other team members who supported the project’s community building approaches, communications and promotional content, team support, financial management, governance and reporting. The project team worked together through seasonal cycles of enquiry, co-design, testing, evaluation and learning - with key insights informing adaptations to project activities over successive seasonal cycles.

Alongside the project team, Merel van Koekenberg, a researcher from the Netherlands undertaking her community development Masters research thesis focused her research enquiry and analysis on this project. Through deep community immersion and firsthand participation and observation, the researcher developed warm relationships with community members who participated in Befriend-affiliated activities, and undertook interviews and focus group conversations to explore people’s lived experiences of community connectedness, mutual support relationships and resilience. A thematic analysis of the research data was undertaken, highlighting key impacts, insights and possible future implications. This research project provides a body of supportive evidence that complements the description and evaluation of this project.

The project activities, approach, outcomes and stories are described in further detail in the following sections.



I love helping other people. When you're doing well, I'm doing well.

I am also learning that you cannot always give. You have to receive. It is a two-way street. Other people like to give too, and you have to let them give who they are.



Project Activities & Experiences

Resilient Together utilised an adaptive project approach, recognising that strengthening community resilience is complex, relational work and that the most effective pathways cannot be determined in advance. Rather than implementing a fixed set of pre-determined activities, the project worked towards clear overarching outcomes while allowing activities to emerge and evolve in response to insights, relationships and experiences in the local context. This approach was vital for honouring the project's community-led focus, enabling us to learn alongside community, respond to what was meaningful and useful to people, develop and test practical responses that drew upon our team's unique gifts and expertise, and progressively shape our approach over time.

Several core streams of project activity emerged over the course of the two-year period. Some of these activities tested a tangible structure for initial/early community engagement, while other activities created pathways for deepening engagement from a base of pre-existing relationship. Some of the activities were anticipated, while others were responsive to what emerged from community conversations. The different streams of activity were often running concurrently, with community members moving through and between activity streams. For ease of understanding, they are described below as discrete streams of activity.

Community Weaving

Recognising that each community has existing assets and strengths, one of the key streams of project activity was focused on engaging with existing community contexts to strengthen the culture of mutual support through existing networks. The project's Neighbourhood Connector had a strong community engagement presence in Wanneroo throughout the project period, connecting with community leaders in settings including sporting clubs, childcare centres, schools, community service groups, a small business network and an aged care setting. In each setting, the project's Neighbourhood Connector worked closely with community staff and volunteers to explore possibilities for growing and strengthening relationships of mutual support within their local context.

Consistent with the community-led approach inherent throughout all project activities, the Community Weaving activity utilised conversational approaches that supported community members to reflect on their experiences of community connectedness, mutual support and resilience, express their hopes and ideas for strengthening mutual support, and take practical steps to bring these ideas to life. A series of community-led initiatives emerged, all of which were practical, locally owned and embedded within existing community contexts. These included a gumboot swap through winter at a childcare centre, bookshelves in the childcare reception for a literacy initiative for First...

Project Activities & Experiences

...Nations families, bench installations at sporting clubs to encourage wellbeing conversations between men, resource-sharing libraries, and exchange stations for clothing and equipment.

Beyond these practical micro-projects, the Community Weaving conversations proactively and consistently sowed seeds for a more supportive culture within these existing local contexts, resulting in stronger relationships and increased levels of practical, informational and emotional support in day-to-day life flowing through these local contexts.



Vital Village Voices

Vital Village Voices was an initial series of mutual learning conversations exploring community connectedness, mutual support and relational resilience. Bringing together emergency management professionals, disability advocates, community leaders and local residents from diverse backgrounds, the 6-session series created a unique opportunity for learning from diverse perspectives and lived experiences. Grounded in the Warm Data Lab format (Nora Bateson), these participatory, story-based gatherings created an environment where people could reflect on their lives, values, and the everyday connections that strengthen personal preparedness and collective resilience.

These sessions reached community members who weren't otherwise engaged in traditional emergency preparedness activities, and supported a shift in how preparedness is understood — beyond logistics and individual plans to a relational, community-led practice grounded in everyday acts of connection and care. They also sparked practical, self-determined intentions, including neighbour BBQs, morning tea invitations, and new ways to reach out and check in on one another. Importantly, these events created a stimulating context from which actions were identified and carried forward by community, for community.

Vital Village Stories

Following the initial Vital Village Voices series in Wanneroo, a subsequent 4-part event series in Rockingham utilised traditional tales told by traditional storytellers as a way to help open up conversations and story-sharing between community members, over a shared community dinner. A tale would be told, followed by a facilitated process in which participants would explore key learning questions in small groups, drawing upon their own lived experiences. Emergency preparedness tote bags were also provided.

The storytelling format was tested as a means of providing a more accessible pathway into conversations about community connectedness and resilience, particularly for people with diverse educational backgrounds, language backgrounds, and people with neurodiversity and other forms of disability. Grounded on the premise that everyone has a story and everyone can listen, the format offered a creative, accessible approach to mutual learning and solidarity.

Like the Vital Village Voices events, the Stories series refrained from prescribing pre-determined actions, and instead created a context from which people had the opportunity to reflect on their lives and situation, gain fresh perspectives, and self-determine actions that they could carry forward that would be personally-meaningful.

Carrying forward the effectiveness of the story-based approach, a new writing circle, The Listening Well, was established, with fortnightly hosted sessions creating the opportunity for engaged community members to write personal passages in response to resilience-based themes, share stories and perspectives, and strengthen connections and insights.



The Possibility Fellowship

Building upon the foundation established through the lighter, larger Vital Village event series, the project team hosted a small cohort intensive development program over 12 weeks. This program leveraged Befriend's experience and resources from other past projects, with program content adapted with an explicit focus on community resilience. Functioning like an incubator program for community-led projects, a cohort of 16 community members were supported to connect more deeply to their unique gifts, enhance their perception of complexity, and self-initiate new forms of action to strengthen connectedness, mutual support and resilience within their families, neighbourhoods and community groups.

Befriending Within

Alongside the above-mentioned project activities which were resourced through funding for the Resilient Together project, the project team were able to leverage access to other community learning activities within Befriend's broader organisational program, increasing the range of opportunities available to people who connected through Resilient Together. One noteworthy learning opportunity was the Befriending Within course, run through Befriend's Open Communities project (funded by Dept Health, Disability & Ageing), which several Resilient Together project participants accessed concurrently to their participation in other project activities.

Befriending Within is a ten-week short course learning the practice of Focusing, an embodied listening practice developed by Eugene Gendlin. Through the course, participants enhance their capacity to identify and describe their felt sense of a complex challenge or situation. This capability enables people to stay steady under pressure, sit alongside others who are processing complex experiences of distress, restrain knee-jerk reactions, and act with clarity and intention. Participants also engage in a peer companioning process, practising deep listening skills with a community of peers who can support each other through all kinds of challenges and crises.

As noted previously, the project didn't intend to develop a 'perfect model' of how to strengthen resilience through community building; rather, this rich variety of co-occurring streams of activity were explored to increase and expand the scope of learning, and make a meaningful contribution to the intended outcomes. The effectiveness of these different activities can be seen in the project outcomes and ripples, described in the next section.

“

The way in is to acknowledge that people are living through large challenges right now that aren't a bushfire - and that there is a real relatedness between those everyday difficulties and what someone would need in the event of a fire - people they can depend on...





Outcomes, Ripples & Insights

Qualitative research and evaluation methods were used throughout the project period to explore the ways in which people's Befriend-affiliated experiences were contributing to changes in their levels of community connectedness and resilience. The research sought to explore and describe how community members, including those who are socially more vulnerable, experience community connectedness and resilience, and to examine how Befriend-affiliated activities have contributed to enhancing this. The research investigated how relationships formed through these activities act as a source of mutual support in daily life, and what has helped these relationships to grow and take on 'a life of their own' beyond organised activities.

Nineteen people were interviewed across 15 interviews (which included several groups of 2 or 3, describing the experiences of their relationships with each other). Participants were recruited from across the varied range of activities, including those with longer-standing connection with Befriend-affiliated activities through the Befriend Social Network, as well as those actively involved in new resilience-focused activities developed through the Resilient Together project. Participants were experiencing a complex and often co-occurring range of vulnerabilities including social isolation and loneliness, being new to the area, ageing, living alone, bereavement, separation, parenting young children, living with dementia, mental ill-health, chronic health issues, neurodiversity, disability, financial insecurity, housing insecurity, culture and language diversity, strained or fractured family relationships, and grief and loss. The interviews were transcribed, thematically analysed, and shaped into Stories of Change in the participants' own words, informed by the Most-Significant-Change approach. A selection of the stories is included as an appendix to this report.

Six core themes were identified through the thematic analysis:

- **A welcoming, inclusive environment**
- **Growing meaningful relationships through invitational behaviour**
- **Relationships as the channel for mutual support**
- **Reciprocity as the core process of mutual support**
- **Reciprocity as shared responsibility for sustainability**
- **Inner strength and personal agency**

This section describes these core themes, drawing upon direct quotes from participants to illustrate and evidence these changes.

Theme 1: A welcoming, inclusive environment

All of the participants described important qualities within the social environments of the groups, learning experiences and activities in which they'd participated, which they believed created essential conditions for giving rise to new and supportive relationships. These environmental characteristics were described as welcoming, inclusive, accepting, non-judgemental, supportive and compassionate.

Several participants described how these qualities were evident right from the beginning of their experience attending a group:



From day one, everybody was welcoming. They attended to you. "Are you alright sitting there? Would you like to play this game?" Offering coffee and so forth. That's how it was from day one. They really embrace people that come into the group.

Stu

At the card club, they were so welcoming from the minute I arrived.

Nanette

The first time I went to ukulele, I had never played and did not know anything. One of the women pulled me aside and showed me four notes. She made it easier for me to come back. It did not matter that I could not play yet. I could still belong.

Ana

These characteristics are grounded in Befriend's organisational values, which participants recognised as permeating throughout the broader network:



Befriend offers such a wide variety of activities. It is a great and easy way for people to get involved in the community. In the yoga class, it is all about inclusivity, sharing and inviting other people in.

Ana

A participant who volunteers as a Host of one of these social groups described an example of the proactivity that she demonstrates in creating inclusive environments, adapting the activities in response to participants' needs and preferences.



Lylla stopped coming because she suffers from depression very bad. We visited her and invited her back. She said she did not want to play the games everybody else was playing, so we changed things around and brought back other games. Somebody had to tell me, and I thought, actually, you are right. I have to change.

Miriam

These same qualities were also noted as being present within the community resilience learning experiences people participated in.



It felt like a whole bunch of amazing professional people, and I felt like a pleb off the street. But it was so welcoming. Every person was received, regardless of status. I did have value, no matter what.

Nysh

The non-judgmental approach was the most beautiful thing I took away. People could express themselves without fear, without judgment, without evaluation. There was no pushing an agenda. The best thing was that people could be seen and heard and listened to, and possibly helped—even if nobody offered them any advice, just to be listened to.

Roger

As described in the previous section, the Community Weaving stream of work extended the community capacity-building activity into other local community contexts, including sporting clubs, childcare centres, schools and local businesses. The community leaders from these contexts also described these same characteristics as being integral within the social environments they are working to create.

Two women in the early stages of establishing a social enterprise community cafe described their aspirations, and how they contrast with the dominant culture.



There is a big coffee culture here that is very transactional. Go to the counter, order, sit down, have your coffee. We want to change that and make it more conversational... We want to look after people and make them feel welcome. As soon as someone comes to the window, we ask, “How are you? How has your day been? What’s your name? Who are you?” That sort of thing. We want to get to know them in that short window when we see them. A big part of our approach is remembering the small details and names and making sure people feel seen.

Jody

The President of a local sporting club who engaged with the project’s activities described the compassionate ‘reaching in’ culture that they’ve attempted to foster within the club.



Sometimes you see signs. Somebody might be acting more irrational, aggressive or argumentative, and that’s not their natural side. If you see it a few times, most people will tap them on the shoulder and check in. If you check in a couple of times and they feel that support, they’re probably going to open up.

Paul

Across the diverse contexts, the proactive nurturing of social environments that are welcoming, inclusive, accepting, non-judgemental, compassionate and supportive, was consistently described as being part of the integral conditions for the development of mutual support relationships.



Theme 2: Growing Meaningful Relationships through Invitational Behaviour

Across the interviews, participants described how their involvement in these social contexts had led to the development of meaningful, sustained relationships. For many people, these friends have become an integral part of their lives.



It was my 80th birthday in January, and I had a small party. There were over 70 people there. Most of them were from the club.

Stu

Most of my close friends are people I met through Befriend.

Ana

Several participants commented on how these relationships are lived beyond the context of the original organised activity, and would be self-sustaining even if the original social context wound up.



If the group stopped, we'd still keep in contact. I'd say at least a third of them we'd still keep in contact...

Stu

There are no conditions on our friendship. If Yarnies stopped, it wouldn't matter. We would continue. It's not dependent on Yarnies anymore.

Caris

Many of the participants gave detailed descriptions of how relationships had developed 'one invitation at a time.' This 'invitational behaviour' often started as small acts of vulnerability or generosity, and snowballed as the relationship developed.



Afterwards I said to Sash, “We should invite Charmaine to our Sunday catch-up.” So we did. Then Charmaine started coming to the Sunday catch-up, and that is how the connections started spreading outside the group.

Manju

I knew a couple of friends from the crochet group who were both new to the area, so I asked if they wanted to come out for coffee. Then another friend invited herself, and she had a couple of friends, and now we meet once a week for coffee at different places. It's quite fluid. From there we started a Mahjong group as well, and every now and then we go out for dinner.

Mo

For some participants, this was directly connected to the co-organising of activities from the original context, and evidenced how the conditions are triggering forms of self-organising.



Probably twelve months ago, Miriam and Pepe were going on holiday, so they wanted somebody to open and close the unit. I volunteered. From that, we became closer. We've been around to their house several times.

Stu

At Christmas, when the card club was closed, Nanya put a message on WhatsApp asking whether anyone wanted to play cards. I replied, and so did another lady. I felt we became a little closer through doing that.

Nanette

... people connect with other people. A few of them now have their own little gatherings together. There was one month we couldn't have Yarnies. They went and had their own. They said, “What do you mean, we're not going to have a Christmas one?” So they organised their own.

Caris

People also use the WhatsApp group to organise things beyond the activity. Someone might say, “I'm going to the movies today. Who wants to come?” In the ukulele group, someone might say, “I'm going to the beach. Who wants to go?” Befriend gives you a way to organise people getting together more easily. It becomes more than the one activity.

Ana

Some participants described how this invitational behaviour has become instilled as a personal practice, carried forward into community:



My husband and I also became friends with a person sleeping rough in our neighbourhood. We decided to accept him as he is and invited him to our house for tea. He comes by and chats with us, and we know that he is okay. There are other people who keep an eye on him too. Oddly enough, we have made friendships through him, just by wanting to keep tabs on him. That is what Befriend engenders. Befriend has broadened my idea of who I would let into my world.

Ana

The significant presence of 'extending the invitation' could be viewed as a behavioural expression of the welcoming, inclusive social environment, showing how these values and attitudes can be expressed as behaviours that make a significant contribution to developing mutual support relationships.



Theme 3: Relationships as the Channel for Mutual Support

One of our core assumptions is that these relationships were developing a life of their own beyond organised activity, and acting as a vital source of informal mutual support in people's lives. The research and evaluation activities yielded significant evidence in support of this assumption, with participants sharing rich descriptions of the ways in which informal support was flowing between people.



We look after each other. If somebody needs a lift, people pick them up. If somebody is unwell, people visit. If somebody needs to talk, there is someone there.

Miriam

There's a lady that has been in and out of hospital through hips and knees. The support has always been there. It's always, "Do you need anything? Can we come and visit? Do you need help when you get home?" The support is there if you need it.

Stu

If something really serious happened, I know I could ring either of these girls... That has evolved too. When we first met, we probably would have been reluctant to call each other or feel like we were disturbing each other. Now we feel okay to ring at any time.

Charmaine

Many participants shared active examples of practical support, which was often associated with vulnerabilities linked to age, health, disability or circumstance. This varied from cooking meals and offering transport assistance, to assistance with housework, moving, looking after animals, acquiring supplies, and even the provision of housing.



Those friendships have become real mutual support. Sometimes I can't get out of bed because I have MS and Crohn's Disease. Some days I'm in bed for three days. When I was very sick with a migraine and had been in bed for five days, Gayatri quietly came to my house, did the housework and checked on me. I didn't even know she'd been there until my daughter told me. I hadn't asked. She just turned up.

Kym

If a family member has passed away, people step in. They look after animals or houses. If someone needs furniture, another person has furniture to pass on. If somebody needs a trade, you can normally find someone who can help without massive costs. We've even found a room when somebody has gone homeless for a period of time.

Paul

When she had a home inspection by her agent, I offered to help clean so that she would pass the inspection, as her health prevented her from doing some things. This became a regular thing at the three-monthly inspections. I would help her lift and move things, clean windows, dust blinds and clean throughout.

Keiko

During the Possibility Fellowship, I became homeless. I'd signed a lease and just settled after moving, and then someone abused me in my own home... I was feeling really lost within. But I felt I could show up, and there were people in that space I'd connected with. I was invited to stay with another Fellowship participant, and one of the facilitators offered me a few nights at their place if I needed them. I managed to find welcoming spaces to land while I worked out what I needed.

Nysh

In addition to (and often interwoven with) these forms of practical support was significant evidence of forms of emotional support; offering a listening ear, holding a non-judgemental safe space for intimate sharing, and offering warmth and encouragement to navigate one's way forward.



If I am having a difficult time, there are people from Befriend I can call and say, "I am feeling insecure," or, "I am feeling whatever." We can talk about it and usually laugh about it. Those are things you do not share with everyone.

Ana



One day she asked how I was, and I told her I hadn't been very good and couldn't get out of bed. When we left, she spoke to me in the car park and tried to help me think about ways to get out more. It made me feel that someone actually cared for me and about my health. It was quite touching that she would take the time to speak with me and try to help me out of the way I had been feeling.

Nanette

Once we knew we could talk about problems without being judged, that's what brought us closer together. No judgement, just listening.

Kym

One participant described how this emotional support also comes indirectly through non-judgemental companionship:



Sometimes support is not even talking about the problem. If I'm feeling down, I would rather catch up with somebody and do something fun than sit at home and go over it again and again. I'm getting the company and the support I need just by being with them.

Manju

The sporting club context was seen to be a significant source of mental and emotional support, especially for men:



A lot of the support begins with a conversation while you're watching a game. "Are you alright? How are things going?" Then people open up. They might say they've separated, they're not seeing their kids, something has happened because they've gone FIFO, or they're struggling with grief or mental health. A lot of people don't want to see counsellors. They don't want to talk to family. But they might have a quiet conversation with somebody they know they can trust.

Paul

You also know you're never the only person who has been through something. It might be miscarriage, separation, grief or mental health. There will be another person in the club who has experienced something similar. If somebody is really doing it tough, you can tap another person on the shoulder because you know they'll be empathetic and supportive without trying to solve everything.

Paul

The sporting club context also provided a compelling case for how a mutual support culture can scale within local communities:



There are 850 players, 1,700 parents, then grandparents and friends of friends. There's normally somebody who knows somebody who can help. That's the beauty of clubs.

Paul

As one of the participants summed up, this becomes a generative process as a mutual support culture grows through networks:



One good relationship can create so many others.

Ana

Throughout all of the interviews, there were clear examples of relationships acting as vital sources of mutual support - from practical assistance to emotional support, information, guidance and companionship. These stories create a rich and compelling picture for how significant mutual support relationships are in helping people to navigate life challenges. Exercising this 'social muscle' through regular practice in navigating life's daily ups and downs is a critical form of preparedness for significant disasters. People know that they have others that they can depend on, and who depend on them, regardless of what life brings - and they are regularly practicing the act of activating that support.



Theme 4: Reciprocity as the Core Process of Mutual Support

Through the research, we probed into the social processes within these relationships, to describe and better understand the dynamics that give rise to mutual support. Reciprocity emerged as a clear theme, with participants describing the inherent mutuality in experiences of 'giving and receiving'.



If you extend kindness to each other and it is returned, you realise this person is not just here for the take. A friend gives and takes.

Jo

As some of the participants described, this reciprocity often emerged early on in relationships within these environments, through seemingly small gestures to reciprocate a kindness:



I once mentioned that, because of arthritis, I found it difficult to find rings that fitted my hands. The next week she brought me a ring with an opening at the back and said I was welcome to have it. I felt very grateful that she would give me something that was hers. It was really nice of her. I gave her a gourmet honey pot in return as a little thank you.

Nanette

She volunteered at an op shop and offered to get me jeans <for my craft> that the shop could not sell and would otherwise have gone to landfill. She was pleased they would get a new life. I took her small gifts in return, which often became a cooked meal and groceries.

Keiko

The support goes both ways. I have taken a Befriend friend to the doctor. I have helped someone move. I have had friends over for dinner. Sometimes someone just needs somebody to talk to, and you make the time and say, "Tell me all about it"... I love helping other people. When you're doing well, I'm doing well.

Ana

Within the group contexts, the participants described how this process of reciprocity extends out beyond the individual level to influence the culture and dynamics of the group as a whole. For some of these groups, the shared social interest takes on a higher level purpose through being of service to the broader community in both organised and informal ways. For many of the participants, it extends even further as a pattern of behaviour that people carry into their neighbourhoods.



We help each other in small ways. One of the blokes gave me advice on plants. We helped a man who was homeless settle into a home, and listened to him. Two of the blokes are sick with cancer, so one of us went to visit a man with terminal cancer in his home. Another men's group nearby helps elderly people move house—community service, which to me is Befriend in action. I'd love to see our group do service projects too. Not for kudos, just to be supportive of the wider community.

Roger

The reason we keep growing is, I think, we all have the same need to help. It doesn't matter how small it is that you contribute, you're helping. I've had people call me and say, "I've got some blankets and I've finished them, can I drop them off?" They've never even been to a meeting. They just make things and drop them at my doorstep. It's that need to do good.

Caris



It is happening in the neighbourhood now too. If somebody needs to get rid of their cucumbers, and I have apples or lemons, there will be a swap. He goes fishing, we're getting our fish from him. I have passionfruit, I give him some passionfruit. That is how it works. There's a young couple who just had their first baby. I went over and cooked a lasagne and brought it to them, just to say, "Here, so you don't have to cook." We have been helping each other, and others are helping too, bringing some stuff over or offering babysitting and things like that.

Miriam

While seemingly simple, reciprocity isn't always easy in practice. Several participants commented on the personal challenges in asking for or receiving the generosity of support from others, with some inferences to our broader societal culture value of independence over inter-dependence. Some of the participants described this willingness to both give and receive as being a fundamental social learning.



I internalise a lot because I don't like to burden other people with my problems. It seems to be that I am always trying to prove I am independent.

Nanette

Asking was the hard part. I had to sit with actually asking the community for help and support. I've asked before, when I've been desperate, and had people say no, and taken it personally, like they were rejecting me. But I've been able to realise it isn't a rejection of me—they just don't have the capacity right now. So I could ask. And I could receive whatever was offered. And there were offers, from left, right and centre.

Nysh

I am also learning that you cannot always give. You have to receive. It is a two-way street. Other people like to give too, and you have to let them give who they are.

Ana

The many varied and rich descriptions of mutual support relationships in action has deepened our understanding of reciprocity as the core process at the heart of these kinds of relationships, the significant ways in which this dynamic can ripple outwards through groups and into the broader community, and also the cultural challenges we face in embracing this way of living, with the dominant societal orientation towards independence. But broader cultural change can often grow from seemingly small and unexpected places, and the data shows how the organic processes being nurtured within these community contexts offers hope for the kind of culture we yearn for. As one of the participants summed up, what might appear to be a seemingly simple social-interest group on the surface has actually becoming a breeding ground for community spirit.



It's more than just a crochet group. It's like a sharing community. Sort of like a village.

Mo



Theme 5: Reciprocity as Shared Responsibility for Sustainability

Sustainability has been an interesting theme to enquire into through this research. Several of the stories revealed that groups with an approach of shared ownership, who share the responsibility and contributions needed to keep a group viable, are much more likely to weather 'system shocks' and self-sustain into the future. Several of the volunteer community organisers described critical points in their learning journey that had facilitated the transition from 'leader-led' to 'shared responsibility,' and that this shift had been necessary in order for their groups to survive. Often, this starts with a single co-host sharing some of the load, but is ultimately most sustainable when there is a culture of shared ownership and active contribution within the whole group.



There was a time when the group nearly closed. Before, I baked, I cooked, and Pepe and I set up and cleaned everything. People came, played, said thank you and left. It became too much. Before Christmas, I had enough. Pepe and I announced that we were looking for somebody else to take over. A few people cried. They said, "Please don't."...The group said, "We're all helping. Don't close." So I said, "Okay. New rules." I don't bake and cook anymore. People bring a plate to share. Everybody helps set up and pack away. Even putting away your own chair or bringing a game back to the cupboard helps. It is not relying on one or two people anymore. Everybody chips in. That was the change, and now we can keep going.

Miriam

By me stepping in, it saved their group. Unless somebody stepped in, Caris would have had to call it quits.

Dee



The group as a whole has really taken ownership of Yarnies. It used to be just the two of us fetching and carrying tables and benches and everything. Now people come half an hour earlier and help us set up. They help us pack down again. I used to do all the deliveries to the places we donated to. I would take a day off work and deliver everything. This last Yarnies, I had nothing to deliver. Everybody said, "I'll take that. I'll take that."

Caris

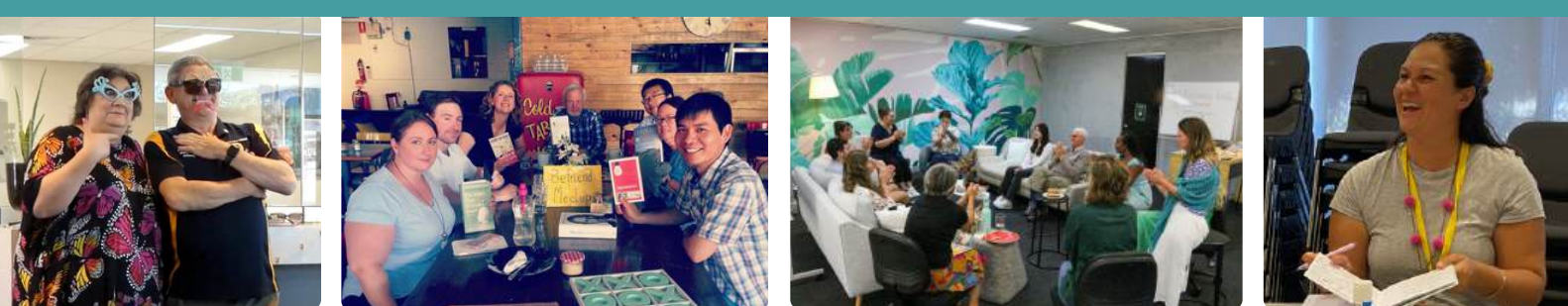
One participant described that she'd had a mindset of shared responsibility from the outset, and how this had been integral to the development of a healthy, sustainable group.



I didn't want anyone to think I was the owner. I wanted us all to grow together and become active agents, for ourselves and for the community.

Zarah

Applying the lens of reciprocity to these situations, it's possible to view these examples of shared responsibility as another expression of reciprocity. Hence, this insight could suggest that investing in reciprocity dynamics fosters both impact and sustainability within community-led contexts. These perspectives offer valuable insight for informing effective sustainability strategies for community-led groups and networks.



Theme 6: Inner Strength and Personal Agency

As the above themes have described, Befriend's community building activities have demonstrated effectiveness in growing mutual support networks that strengthen community connectedness and resilience. To complement these community building activities, some of the newer community resilience learning experiences developed and tested through this project were seen to give rise to a pattern of outcomes that we have described here as inner strength and personal agency.

Participants described internal changes in feeling more capable and better resourced to be able to face life's emergencies when they happen.



Befriending Within was like finding friends, finding advisors inside me. It changed how I meet hard times.

Zarah

For one of the participants, this was tested in real-time, as she lived through a period in which global conflict events in her country of origin were having a real and significant impact on her community. She offered a powerful description of the crisis she was facing through this time, and her increased capacities for personal resilience.



Before doing this course, I'd be crushed and in excruciating pain, alone, after each lost life. Now I feel like a severely wounded person who has just been treated in the emergency department and will soon be discharged to rest and recover at home.

Zarah

Associated with this enhanced inner strength was a sense of increased personal agency.



I feel more empowered—not from an external source, but from within. I have discovered more power in me. My first responder is myself, and then I think about who to reach out to.

Zarah

I think the best thing that can prepare you for any unexpected situation is that inner strength and trust—to know the external situation is temporary. It's not the end of the world, and even if it is, what can you do about it? The right people and circumstances will step up, if you step up. Someone or something will support you, if you'll support yourself in finding it.

Nysh

These reflections validated the meaningful contribution made by the newer personal development experiences that were explicitly focused on personal resilience, as a valuable complement to the more socially-focused network-building activities.





When you're doing well, I'm doing well.

Ana's story of how new friendships have deepened into relationships of mutual support and a spirit of care that's rippling into an interdependent way of life

I came into contact with Befriend shortly after I moved here. I saw some women walking, and I knew I needed to make friends quickly. I just walked up to them and said, "Are you a walking group?" They said yes and told me they were with Befriend. That was my introduction.

Since then, I have become a Host. I host a yoga class on Saturday mornings, and I have also been involved in walking and ukulele groups.

I'm 69, I don't have children, and my grandchildren don't live here. I have moved around a lot, so I know that when you arrive somewhere new, you need to get involved right away.

I decided it was going to be my year of yes. I was going to say no to nothing.

Befriend offers such a wide variety of activities. It is a great and easy way for people to get involved in the community. In the yoga class, it is all about inclusivity, sharing and inviting other people in. The students suggested going out for coffee together, but some people could not afford that. They said, "Why don't we just have coffee or tea here?" because the place where we meet has a kitchen. That meant everybody could participate and give input into making a community.

People also use the WhatsApp group to organise things beyond the activity. Someone might say, "I'm going to the movies today. Who wants to come?" In the ukulele group, someone might say, "I'm going to the beach. Who wants to go?" Befriend gives you a way to organise people getting together more easily. It becomes more than the one activity.

Some people remain people you talk to about how their day is going. With others, you become closer friends. That takes time and effort. Sometimes it begins with a shared interest, like going to the beach or for a walk. Sometimes it is a shared heartache. You are having some difficulty, so you listen to that person and they listen to you.

Befriend has helped me to initiate things. That is difficult for me because I am really very shy. Otherwise, I would just sit back, and that does not make friends. It has pushed my boundaries. Now I have friends I can call and say, "I feel like going for a drive," or, "I need to go to Bunnings. Do you want to come with me?" It is much more spontaneous now. I feel safe enough to offer that opportunity, and even if they say no, it is okay.

Coming from another country, I also had to learn how people communicate here. I thought Australians were just Americans with a different accent. No. Nothing like that. People I met through Befriend helped me understand Australia and Australians. They did not mind if I asked them to spell something because I did not understand what they were saying. People here have welcomed me with open arms and open hearts.

Most of my close friends are people I met through Befriend. We share a belief in accepting all and rejecting none, and that being connected is important for your mental and physical health.

I find it easier to make friends through Befriend because half the work is already done.

If I am having a difficult time, there are people from Befriend I can call and say, "I am feeling insecure," or, "I am feeling whatever." We can talk about it and usually laugh about it. Those are things you do not share with everyone.

I feel safe because people have a people-first value. Everyone has a right to speak. People have a voice and can share who they are in a safe space.

There are several people I have met through Befriend who I could share a difficult situation with, and I have. Something difficult is not as difficult when you share it with someone.

The support goes both ways. I have taken a Befriend friend to the doctor. I have helped someone move. I have had friends over for dinner. Sometimes someone just needs somebody to talk to, and you make the time and say, "Tell me all about it."

I love helping other people. When you're doing well, I'm doing well.

I am also learning that you cannot always give. You have to receive. It is a two-way street. Other people like to give too, and you have to let them give who they are.

My husband and I also became friends with a person sleeping rough in our neighbourhood. We decided to accept him as he is and invited him to our house for tea. He comes by and chats with us, and we know that he is okay. There are other people

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who keep an eye on him too. Oddly enough, we have made friendships through him, just by wanting to keep tabs on him. That is what Befriend engenders. Befriend has broadened my idea of who I would let into my world.

The people I met through Befriend are the people I would call in a difficult situation. I try to have a network of support. It is important. It might take me a little while to work up the courage to say something, but it is better out. Most people have gone through something similar.

The friendships I have made will keep growing, but you have to take the time. You have to call, initiate and spend time together. There is a mutual understanding that the relationship is important.

One good relationship can create so many others.

When most people go to a Befriend activity, they want to make friends. They are motivated to connect. That makes it easier. The first time I went to ukulele, I had never played and did not know anything. One of the women pulled me aside and showed me four notes. She made it easier for me to come back. It did not matter that I could not play yet. I could still belong. That is what Befriend does. It helps connect people who have a strength and a curiosity, and then helps them develop along the way.

My advice is: be you, because we need you. Find out what creates that fire within you. Explore what you really enjoy doing. We need all of us together. Don't be afraid.

- Ana (pseudonym)





If I needed anything, I wouldn't hesitate asking her. And I know she would do it. It's not something you discuss. You just know.

From a Group to a Village - how a social knitting group has grown a community of friendship, mutual support and service to community

Caris: I wanted to start a group for ladies to create knitted or crocheted items to give to people experiencing homelessness, or the elderly. I didn't quite know how to go about it. After the first or second attempt at advertising it on Facebook, the Community Builder from Befriend contacted me and told me what Befriend was all about and how they could help me.

I had serious health issues in 2020. I had a heart attack, which I got through miraculously. Exactly a year later I was diagnosed with breast cancer, but that didn't work out too badly either. I sort of felt as if I got lucky and I needed to give back somehow to the universe. I thought, I could probably make scarves for the homeless. Then I realised I would probably never finish a scarf in my lifetime because I couldn't knit to start with. I thought, if I feel like that, there must be other people like me that feel like that as well. One individual can't really make much of a difference, but as a group you could maybe make somewhat of a difference.

I'm also very introverted, so getting a lot of people together and telling them why I wanted to do it was quite a challenge. But I did it. And it has grown from there.

Dee: I moved here from Sydney four years ago. All of my friends, all of my family were on the other side of the country. I knew that if I didn't get out and meet people, I wouldn't meet anyone. I don't have children at school, I work from home, I'm in a new city and I know nobody. So I was looking for local groups, and Yarnies was the first group I went to. You just go and find out if they are my people or not.

They were my stepping block, really. From there I met this person, and this person went to that group, and I thought, I'll go to that group. I grew from there. Now I have a network of people. Yarnies was the starting point. Then I got involved in the community garden, the beach walks, and we formed a swimming group. We went camping and had potlucks. The Befriend groups are how I got my foot into the community.

I'm living a bigger and fuller life here than I was in Sydney, and I lived there my entire

life. It is fuller, but it's doing things that are really enjoyable. It's not things I have to do. It's things I want to do.

Caris: Once Yarnies started, I noticed it was always the same core group coming back. I realised they were forming a social group where they had connection. There are a lot of people out there that don't have social interaction regularly. Yarnies became one of their points of connection to other people.

Dee: As much as Yarnies does well donating items, the winning part is actually the friendships and connections for the people attending. That's far more important. People say, "I am so thankful for this group." It's no pressure. Make something or don't make something. No one cares.

Caris: Everything is supplied. They don't have to spend a cent to make something and donate. If you just want to come for the social connection, that's fine as well. Nobody is going to ask, "What are you making? When are you going to make it?"

Dee: Just turn up. If you want to learn something, we can give you several people who will teach you.

Caris: The reason we keep growing is, I think, we all have the same need to help. It doesn't matter how small it is that you contribute, you're helping. I've had people call me and say, "I've got some blankets and I've finished them, can I drop them off?" They've never even been to a meeting. They just make things and drop them at my doorstep. It's that need to do good.

Dee: And people connect with other people. A few of them now have their own little gatherings together. There was one month we couldn't have Yarnies. They went and had their own. They said, "What do you mean, we're not going to have a Christmas one?" So they organised their own.

Caris: The group as a whole has really taken ownership of Yarnies. It used to be just the two of us fetching and carrying tables and benches. Now people come half an hour earlier and help us set up. They help us pack down again. I used to do all the deliveries to the places we donated to. I would take a day off work and deliver everything. This last Yarnies, I had nothing to deliver. Everybody said, "I'll take that. I'll take that."

Dee: Marla said how proud it made her feel to be a Yarnie and deliver the things because the charities were so happy to receive them. It made her feel good. We've had people make poppies that are now on display at Government House. It's this little thing they made at home in front of the television, and now they can tell their family, "I did that." That's really nice.

Caris: My friendship with Dee really grew as she became more involved in Yarnies. We started walking together twice a week. We made things together for the group. We just seem to fit into each other and around each other.

Dee: We think similarly about stuff. We can laugh at the same things. We have the same sense of humour. We introduced our husbands as well. The four of us went out together, and eventually the two of them started a Blokes Breakfast. We've got the husbands sorted.

Caris: Dee and I don't see each other every day. When the weather is good, we walk twice a week and have an hour walk and a lot of talking. Maybe over a weekend we go out with the boys. But I know I can depend on her.

Dee: Absolutely. If I needed anything, I wouldn't hesitate asking her to do anything. And I know she would do it. It's not something you discuss. You just know.

Caris: It is just assumed that you are there for each other. There are no conditions on our friendship. If Yarnies stopped, it wouldn't matter. We would continue. It's not dependent on Yarnies anymore.

There was a time when that support became really important. My husband had a stroke. He used to do all our financial stuff. He handled the bank accounts, paid the mortgage, made sure the insurance was paid. I never knew how much was in the bank because I didn't need to know. Then suddenly he lost all of <that ability>. He couldn't do it. He didn't even know how to get into the banking app from one moment to the next. I had to learn how to do all of that. There was so much stress on me at the time. It was huge. It was overwhelming.

At the same time, Yarnies had grown and my whole workroom was packed to the rafters with bins of donated yarn. I couldn't get in there to do anything. It was starting to affect my mental health. I became claustrophobic. I said, "I can't do this anymore. It's getting too big. I need help."

Dee: She put a call out saying, "I need help with the storage. I just need some help." I had the space and the opportunity, so I said, "I'll do it." I got value from the group. It made no difference to me. I had a spare room in my house. I could store it. For me, it wasn't some big knight-in-shining-armour thing.

Caris: But it meant a lot. It meant a lot. I needed to get that space back to get my headspace back.

Dee: There were so many other things happening in Caris's life that couldn't be solved.

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This was something that could be solved. So I thought, if I do this, it's one thing I've done. At the next Yarnies, I had so many people come up and thank me. By me stepping in, it saved their group. Unless somebody stepped in, Caris would have had to call it quits. People were saying, "Thank you for doing that, because I love coming to this group." That showed me how much it meant to other people.

Caris: Dee stepped in when I was ready to give up Yarnies. I was relieved. And I know when Dee needs me, I'll be there. She knows that. If she called me in the middle of the night and said, "Come and help with this," I would go.

There are lots of little examples of people helping each other too. An older lady once came to us and said she needed a red beanie. I said, "I can't give you one, but I can give you somebody who can make you one." I knew that if I called GeeGee, she would do it. I called GeeGee. She made one and took it to the lady's house. That is how it works.

Dee: There are also people who have anxiety and just need someone to help them take that first step. I had breakfast with a group of ladies and one woman turned up who had crippling anxiety. She said, "This is not who I am. For me to turn up today is really big..."

She used to be involved with the community garden, so I said, "The garden is on Saturday. Do you want to come?" She said, "I just get to the front door and then I don't go." I said, "I'll send you a reminder. Come and sit with me. Spend an hour. If you really hate it, go home." She turned up and had a great time. Sometimes it's just having somebody there.

- Caris and Dee (pseudonyms)





“Real support in difficult times”

Charmaine, Jo and Manju’s story of friendship, companionship and support through life’s changing seasons

Charmaine: I joined Portofinos about three months ago. For me it was definitely boredom. Sitting at home all the time, nothing to do when you're not working. That's what made me look out for activities. I saw Portofinos and thought, yeah, give it a shot.

Jo: For me, I wanted to meet other people, socialise and stay active and alive. Once your kids are independent of you there is a big void, and you have to fill that hole somewhere. Manju: I retired a couple of years ago, early, and I was just really bored. You think retirement would be fun. It's not.

My daughter and I used to be really close and do everything together. Then she met her boyfriend and he became her whole world. Suddenly I thought, I'm not working anymore, my daughter doesn't want to do anything with me anymore, I haven't got a partner. It felt really lonely.

Before, my daughter needed me for all sorts of things. I was needed a lot. Then suddenly nobody needs me and there's nothing to fill in my days. Everything felt a bit pointless, so I realised I had to seek out other company and do other things.

Jo: Portofinos is relaxed. You don't have to do anything. You can chat to people around the table, so it makes it much more comfortable and easier to get to know people.

Charmaine: There's a big variety of people. Some people you really connect with well and others are not for me. You can pick and choose who you want to chat with. I still remember my first day. It was just pure luck. I sat next to Manju and Sue. It was automatic chat. Whether it was about the fly over there or how nice the coffee was, whatever. They just spoke like I talk. We laughed. It was a really nice feeling. It was good and normal.

Manju: I remember that day. Afterwards I said to Sash, “We should invite Charmaine to our Sunday catch-up.” So we did. Then Charmaine started coming to the Sunday catch-up, and that is how the connections started spreading outside the group.

Jo: I think friendships just develop as you get to know each other deeper. You start talking about more personal things, your kids, your feelings. When a friendship is new, you're hesitant because you don't want someone to think you're a bit crazy. But as it grows, you feel that trust. You know you can say something and it's going to stay with that person. Or that person is going to give you their genuine advice. It either grows or it stays as an acquaintance.

Manju: The more frequently you see somebody, the more you hear their opinions, their values and their morals. Over time you realise, this is somebody I would like to have in my life. You resonate with how they think and feel.

Jo: It also comes down to care and kindness. If you extend kindness to each other and it is returned, you realise this person is not just here for the take. A friend gives and takes.

Charmaine: It's nice to have people in your life that you know you can trust. If you want to rant or get something out, you know you can say it and you're not going to be judged. They're just there for you.

One of the best things that happened for me through meeting Jo was that I got volunteering work at the courthouse. That never would have happened if it wasn't for Jo. I absolutely love it. I treat the people there like they're my best friends. You just hope that it makes them feel at ease and happy, and that makes you feel really good. It makes me feel useful.

Jo: Volunteering gives you that sense of worthiness. When you've got nothing to do and you're not occupied, you can start feeling sorry for yourself. Then you get lonely and depression can set in. You want to avoid all that.

Manju: The friendship has also opened up all these other things we do together. Tomorrow Jo and I are going on a tour of Optus Stadium. We go to movies. We went to a festival. We've gone to Guildford for dinner. If we hear about something, we say, "Do you want to go to that?" Whoever wants to go, goes. It has given us company to do things we probably wouldn't do on our own. Things you might do with a partner, if you had a partner. It becomes a bit like family.

There has also been real support in difficult times. I have had a lot going on with my daughter. Because it was always just the two of us, it has been really hard as she has become more independent and pulled away.

Jo: I've seen Manju really upset about it. Sometimes you need somebody outside the situation to say, "It's okay. This is what happens with mothers and daughters at that age. She is finding her independence, and you are finding it hard to let go." When you are the

person in the middle of it, you can't always see what is happening. Sometimes another person can help you step back and see it differently.

Manju: They both give me different perspectives. I'm not somebody who puts my worries out there to everybody. But they pick up when something is wrong.

Jo: We can tell. You wear it. If a friend is in need, a friend is in need.

Charmaine: If something really serious happened, I know I could ring either of these girls.

Manju: That has evolved too. When we first met, we probably would have been reluctant to call each other or feel like we were disturbing each other. Now we feel okay to ring at any time. Charmaine comes over and watches movies here. Sometimes support is not even talking about the problem. If I'm feeling down, I would rather catch up with somebody and do something fun than sit at home and go over it again and again. I'm getting the company and the support I need just by being with them. The worst thing for me is to stay home alone and keep going over everything.

Manju: I've been on my own for nearly 24 years. My parents have passed away. I have one brother in Sydney who I don't even know where he is, and another brother here who has an intellectual disability. I'm a bit of an orphan. We also migrated here from England when I was 13. I left all my close friends and family behind. It went from a lot to nothing. It was like uprooting a tree and chucking it into a desert. So having people around me now matters.

Jo: I came here from Canberra and over time most of those old friendships disappeared as people's lives changed. People you thought would be in your life forever move on. That's why new friendships matter.

Manju: Portofinos has given me new friends and a place to make contact with new people and see where it goes from there. It's not just the coffee group that is important. It is making friendships that last outside the coffee group. What I really like is that if somebody new comes in and is sitting on their own, people go and sit next to them. I've been to groups where nobody spoke to me, and it was one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my life. Portofinos isn't like that.

Jo: Inclusion is a big thing. People like to be included.

Charmaine: And be who you are. Don't pretend to be something else. If you want to create good friendships, people need to know you.



I managed to find welcoming spaces to land while I worked out what I needed...

Finding Strength to Navigate the Unexpected - how inner resilience, a supportive community and the willingness to welcome in the assistance of others helped Nysh navigate through the brink of homelessness

I saw the ad for the Possibility Fellowship in 2022 and I followed that gut instinct: just do it. If I get in my head and try to think about it analytically, it says, I'm not smart enough for this...but if I stay in the intuition, it's just: do it. So I did.

It felt like a whole bunch of amazing professional people, and I felt like a pleb off the street. But it was so welcoming. Every person was received, regardless of status. I did have value, no matter what.

I'd spent my whole life masking and faking it. Counting things to self-soothe. Pre-thinking every conversation so I'd know how to act. By the time the Fellowship came round it had all accumulated, and I just didn't have the capacity to mask any more. So I showed up as I was, even the weeks I felt completely wrecked, even when I was terrified I was going to cry. And it was okay. I had to be there, for myself.

That's been the whole journey, really. From the inaugural Fellowship I turned up raw and struggling every single time, and I kept turning up, and slowly I started doing more things. There's been a fair bit of it over the years—two Fellowships, the Focusing course (Befriending Within), the writing space (The Listening Well) that makes me actually pick up a pen.

When I was younger I never shared, because I thought I was dumb and the answer would be wrong. So to be somewhere there is nothing wrong, and to be brave enough to say those innermost words out loud and be witnessed—my heart is pounding, but I just have to do it, because it's part of the process. Your voice matters, and if you have a space, you come to know that.

Then during this last Possibility Fellowship, I became homeless.

I'd signed a lease and just settled after moving, and then someone abused me in my own home. There was one week I showed up thinking, I don't even know what I'm doing here, but I'm here. Feeling really lost within.

But I could show up, and there were people in that space I'd connected with. I was invited to stay with another Fellowship participant. One of the facilitators offered me a few nights at their place if I needed them. I managed to find welcoming spaces to land while I worked out what I needed.

Asking was the hard part. I had to sit with actually asking the community for help and support. I've asked before, when I've been desperate, and had people say no, and taken it personally, like they were rejecting me. But I've been able to realise it isn't a rejection of me—they just don't have the capacity right now. So I could ask. And I could receive whatever was offered. And there were offers, from left, right and centre.

Compared to the first time I came <to the Fellowship>, when I was all over the shop, this time I had more capacity to deal with it. To be present with it.

A lot of that came from the Focusing. It gave space to what's actually present—to drop deeper into the layers instead of being up in my mind about things, and to let it be witnessed exactly as it was, without judgement. It shifted the language for me. Instead of I'm angry, or I'm sad, it's there's something in me feeling angry, or I'm noticing sadness. It shifts from the heaviness of being that to holding that. Here's a little ball of it. It might be here, or even out here, but it's not all of me.

I used to get depressed and go on autopilot. A bottomless pit, walls straight up, too deep to fathom a way out. But by giving presence to what's there, suddenly the pit isn't vertical. It's got angles. And eventually you can just walk out.

I can't control what's out there, but with awareness I can bring up those strengths from within. It's given huge strength for this time right now.

And that's what let me choose instead of react. I have the capacity now to think logically and make a good decision that suits, instead of making a rash decision and jumping around the place again. So rather than the pressure of trying to find somewhere that met everyone's needs, I decided to do dog-sitting and house-sitting for a while. Now I've got a long-term, three-month house-sit, and that takes the pressure off.

In the technicalities of the word, yes, I'm homeless. But how can you put a positive spin on it? I'm in transition.

I think the best thing that can prepare you for any unexpected situation is that inner strength and trust—to know the external situation is temporary. It's not the end of the world, and even if it is, what can you do about it? There's no need to worry about the things beyond your control. The right people and circumstances will step up, if you step up. Someone or something will support you, if you'll support yourself in finding it.

Community Stories

Right now I'm not offering much, but I will be. Being seen authentically, having the space and freedom to be me, rediscovering the truth buried underneath the stories and the experiences—from there I can create group experiences to recreate that for my community. I used to run walking meditation groups and I offered them free, because that makes me commit to doing it myself as well. Everything's better in groups. I've got one coming up, and a day retreat planned with friends. I've taken my healing work to festivals and gatherings too. Just taking a little taste of that magic and medicine into other spaces.

I feel almost ready to step into that leadership part of myself. Before, I'd worry about whether people would come, and what type, and whether I had the capacity. Now I know I have the right capacity.

I brought a friend along <to the Fellowship> because I'd told her about it. It's such a gem that half of me wants to keep it all for myself, and the other half wants to share it with everybody. It should be in schools. It should be in universities. In fact, it would benefit all of humanity.

And there's such care in that group. We always keep a spare chair for all the souls who aren't there, holding them with us in one way or another.

When I sense the whole of it now, I get this image of a cross between an armadillo and a turtle. I used to be balled up and hiding. Now I roll around and have fun. I've still got my shell, but I can roll to places, land wherever I land, and be there.

One image I hold is the lotus flower. It grows in the mud and the darkness and the deep, deep depths, but it rises to face the sun and float on the water. That has been my journey.

- Nysh (pseudonym)





We tell everyone what we are trying to create. We show people the plans and talk about what we want it to become. Then people say, "I can help with that."

True Hospitality - the emergence of a new local cafe that is placing community connection at the heart

Jody: We met working together at a beachfront café.

Mae: We always really got on at work. I always liked it when Jody was on shift. I was like, "Oh yes, Jody's on the shift." It was like a sense of relief.

Jody: Vice versa. I was like, "Tonight's going to be fun."

Mae: We were slogging our guts out on the coffee machine and we were like, "Let's do something different." I'm dairy free, and I noticed there was nothing dairy free around here. I said, "Let's do this, Jody. Let's get together and do our own thing."

Jody: We started with an online delivery business, baking treats at home, packaging them and driving around delivering them. We found a lot of people near the city were buying, so it wasn't really worth it with the long drives. We wanted a physical shopfront.

We hired the room at Oldham Park clubrooms. Iain <Community Builder> got wind of what we were doing, came down and introduced himself.

Some of the days the room was already booked by Befriend groups. We reached out to those groups to see if they would benefit from having us there as well. We could do the cakes and coffees out of the kiosk without using the room. The games group met there on Thursday mornings. We met with them and thought we would benefit each other. Iain helped make that introduction.

Mae: We would hang out with them and join in some of their activities.

Jody: We started opening on Thursdays as well. It worked really well for the community.

Iain also introduced us to Paul at the football club. They invited us to collaborate on a six or eight-week soccer program. We would have the café open in Yanchep, close at 1:30, pack the car and drive down to Mindarie for the evening.

Mae: It got so busy. So busy!

Jody: That became part of our journey. We started at Oldham Park one day a week, then the football club asked us to open on Sundays. Then Tuesday became available, then Thursday, and it grew from there.

Later, we needed a commercial kitchen so we could make savoury food. We looked at food trucks, but they were all standard boxes with no character. My husband found a bus on Facebook Marketplace that had already been fitted out as a café.

It was white, with palm-tree stickers and coloured film all over the windows. But we could see what it could become. Now the bus is our café.

It is such a cosy space inside, with about 15 seats. Customers start talking to each other. Strangers talk about their dogs, their babies, whatever is happening. That is really special. We put card games in there too. People bring them out and play.

It does not feel like an average café. It feels like a community hub.

Mae: People deep down want to connect. You just need to create the space to do it. If you create a feel-good, happy place, I think it naturally happens. It starts with the heart of the place and then spreads out. It has a knock-on effect.

Jody: We both love people. We want to look after people and make them feel welcome. As soon as someone comes to the window, we ask, "How are you? How has your day been? What's your name? Who are you?" We want to get to know them in that short window when we see them. A big part of our brand is remembering the small details and names and making sure people feel seen.

Mae: It is because we are so open and friendly. When you are nice, you bring nice. It creates this vibe.

Jody: There is a big coffee culture here that is very transactional. Go to the counter, order, sit down, have your coffee. We want to change that and make it more conversational.

Mae: Come, stay, chat, chill.

Jody: We have heard people say you should not make the chairs too comfortable because customers will stay too long and it is bad for business. That is not what we are creating. We will put out more chairs. If someone stays for two hours, it means they are comfortable and happy. Perfect.

Our chef Abby suggested organising a casual girls' catch-up, just an opportunity for people to connect and make friends in the area. There was one girl sitting inside on her own while the group was outside. I wondered whether she had come for the meetup but was holding back, so I went over and asked. She was not there for the group, but she mentioned the area she lived in. I knew one of the other women was from the same area, so I offered to introduce them. She went straight into the conversation and sat down with the group.

Mae: You saw it working straight away. She was on her own, then she was sitting with the girls, chatting. It was like, "Oh yeah, cool."

Jody: Another connection grew through Rachel, who used to come to Oldham Park. She started a mums' walking group. They would go for a 40-minute stroll with their prams and then come to us for coffee and cakes.

Mae: It started with three or four mums, then it grew to about 20. Some stayed afterwards because they had made friends. They started doing their own things together.

Jody: They had a Facebook group too. Someone would post that they were new to the area, had just had a baby and were nervous about coming. Other mums would reply, "Come and meet me. This is my name." Then we would see new faces joining.

The group kept going even after we left Oldham Park. It became something that could continue beyond us.

We also have two regular customers, Catherine and Sarah. Catherine was going to Bali for a wedding and needed someone to care for her two anxious dogs. The kennels had no space. I remembered Sarah had said she did dog sitting, so I connected them and passed on her email.

It is joining up people's skills and the ways they can help each other.

Mae: And people help us too. Bloody hell!

Jody: The local Men's Shed built the bench seating inside the bus. They are also building

a big platform step for our serving window. Jeremy, Mae's partner, renovated nearly the whole bus.

One of our customers came down and said, "If you ever need help, I can get my boyfriend involved."

Mae: She said he would build us a sandpit. I was like, "Wow. Thank you."

Jody: Another customer offered to let us use her address when we needed somewhere for the bus. People have been so supportive.

Mae: We tell everyone what we are trying to create. We show people the plans and talk about what we want it to become. Then people say, "I can help with that."

Jody: We cannot wait to create a play area so mums can come and relax. We think about them more than the profits. We want mums to be able to sit and have a coffee without constantly worrying about their children. We want to create more events, catch-ups and meetups.

Mae: Up here, we are so lacking. We desperately want to start creating a vibe in this area. Events, catch-ups, meetups. Just community, community, community.

Jody: We want to create the heart and soul of Yanchep. We collaborated with a local church on a free family fun day. They had originally planned to hold it at Oldham Park, but when we moved into the bus, they followed us to the new location. About 900 people came through. There was an animal farm, sport, a barbecue and activities for families, all free. That event would not have happened in the same way without the café and the connections around it.

Mae: Bringing that many people together was amazing. It brings us so much joy. I have had tears of joy, and I have never had that before. You look around and think, "Wow, we have done this. We created this place where people come."

Jody: Authenticity is a big part of creating strong connections. Be 100 per cent yourself and do not try to be something you are not. You have to be open. You do not have to be an extrovert. Some people will build community through one-on-one conversations or small groups. It is about being genuine. And it is slow. Do not rush anything. Anything good and worth doing is snail's pace.

Mae: You have to let go and say, "Okay, this is going to do what it is going to do." You stay consistent and ride the little wave.

Community Stories

Jody: Adult friendships take longer.

Children can play together for hours and not even know each other's names. Adults are more closed and hesitant to step out and make friends.

But every touchpoint you have with someone builds that connection stronger. That is what we are trying to create—not just a place where people buy coffee, but a place where people feel seen, stay, talk, make friends and help each other.

- Jody and Mae, Bridget's House





A lot of people don't want to see counsellors. They don't want to talk to family. But they might have a quiet conversation with somebody they know they can trust.

More than a Football Club - how a local club has grown as a community network of trust, care and mutual support

I set up the football club about 11 years ago with a neighbour at the time. My background in England was in local government and club development, in that sport and club development space. I suppose you just want good environments that children, families and community can all link into.

At the start, we had four teams. Now we have 54 teams.

My kids have all come through the club, so it has been more than just attend and leave. Football and sport bring such wider things than just the playing side. It's massive for mental health and massive for social connection, from five years old to 55.

A lot of people here have moved over from England, New Zealand, South Africa or somewhere else. You're pulling away from family and community and everything you had, into a new setup. Everybody's buying new houses, finding new schools and trying to create a positive environment for their kids and family.

Sport is the easiest connection. If your kids are playing, or you're playing, you've got something straight away that you can do.

Over time, people become much closer. There are people who met on the first day of registration or training and knew nothing about each other. Now they go on holidays together as families, work together as business colleagues and run teams together. They found a connection through their child or family and took it on from there.

There's probably 10 or 15 of the blokes and women I'll go out socially with. There's five or ten who are closer because we've been in the club for five or six years and have similar beliefs and approaches.

The beliefs are important. We're bringing up young men at the end of the day. I've

always wanted coaches to look like role models because there might be all kinds of things going on in the kids' lives and families. If we can be positive and connect to them, that's great.

There are a lot of stories in the club. We've had families going through real financial stress. If there's a financial barrier, you find a way to have the child on a payment plan. If people are going through really tough things, you support them by not paying fees.

Parents financially and mentally are struggling, especially post-COVID. People are away from home, changing lives and trying to manage everything. A lot of people need the distraction that a sporting activity gives them.

We've had people go through cancer. We've had breakups and separations. We've had car crashes and young kids who played for the club sadly pass away through accidents. Those players might take a little bit of time out and then come back in. You want them to still have a passion for what they're doing, but they've gone through far more horrible things than just playing football.

We've had kids on child protection orders who have been removed from their families because of what has gone on. You just want to see them playing as much as possible and mixing with their own age, because that's their release.

It is the same for the blokes. We added the over-35s and over-45s because socially that's good for men. If they're coaching juniors in the morning, they still need something for themselves. Just being in the dressing rooms or around a pitch, that banter and support is needed for their own mental health.

There have been coaches struggling with mental health. Some have checked themselves into different places. Some have lost their kids because of actions they made. You try to get them in front of the right people professionally, not just me, and keep checking in.

A lot of the support begins with a conversation while you're watching a game. "Are you alright? How are things going?" Then people open up. They might say they've separated, they're not seeing their kids, something has happened because they've gone FIFO, or they're struggling with grief or mental health.

A lot of people don't want to see counsellors. They don't want to talk to family. But they might have a quiet conversation with somebody they know they can trust. They know it's not going to become Chinese whispers or get put on Facebook.

Sometimes you see signs. Somebody might be acting more irrational, aggressive or

argumentative, and that's not their natural side. If you see it a few times, most people will tap them on the shoulder and check in. If you check in a couple of times and they feel that support, they're probably going to open up.

Sometimes they want professional support. Sometimes they just fancy a beer and a couple of conversations. Sometimes we all just need someone to listen. If the other person says it out loud, they feel a lot better. They might solve their own problem just by talking it through. You can stand for 90 minutes at the side of a football game and literally listen to somebody.

You also know you're never the only person who has been through something. It might be miscarriage, separation, grief or mental health. There will be another person in the club who has experienced something similar. If somebody is really doing it tough, you can tap another person on the shoulder because you know they'll be empathetic and supportive without trying to solve everything.

The club has every type of person—a plumber, electrician, bricklayer, family lawyer, financial counsellor, people in child protection and social services. People have joined the club with a professional background and given their time for free, just to have a quiet conversation with someone.

If a family member has passed away, people step in. They look after animals or houses. If someone needs furniture, another person has furniture to pass on. If somebody needs a trade, you can normally find someone who can help without massive costs. We've even found a room when somebody has gone homeless for a period of time.

There are 850 players, 1,700 parents, then grandparents and friends of friends. There's normally somebody who knows somebody who can help. That's the beauty of clubs.

I've drawn on that support personally too. I've been through divorce and separation. There was somebody in the club who was a family lawyer, so I reached out. There was also a time when an assistant coach was very aggressive towards his partner and there were visible bruises. I reached out to people I knew in child protection and social services for guidance and advice about the next steps. As a coach, you're not there to solve it, but you need to be aware because the children are going to see what their parents are going through.

You draw on people you trust, their knowledge and their guidance.

I think the support is mutual. Most people have probably found advice or information from somebody within the club that has helped them individually. It is not just the social

side. It is the culture, the interaction and the positive environment that make people want to stay. People trust you when you come through with your word. Even if it's just, "Let's have a drink," or, "Let's have a conversation." If you start to trust somebody, you believe they'll be there if you really need them further down the line.

The club has enriched my life too. When you come from the other side of the world, you're looking for a connection and something local in the community. My children have made long-term friends through the football club. If we've introduced that, then that's positive for me.

Now when I go to the park, the beach, for a meal or a drink, I normally meet people I know through the club. Some of the kids are now 18, 19 or 20. They want to buy you a beer, have a chat and tell you about their apprenticeship or their work. If you've been able to guide them in a positive way, that's a positive for us.

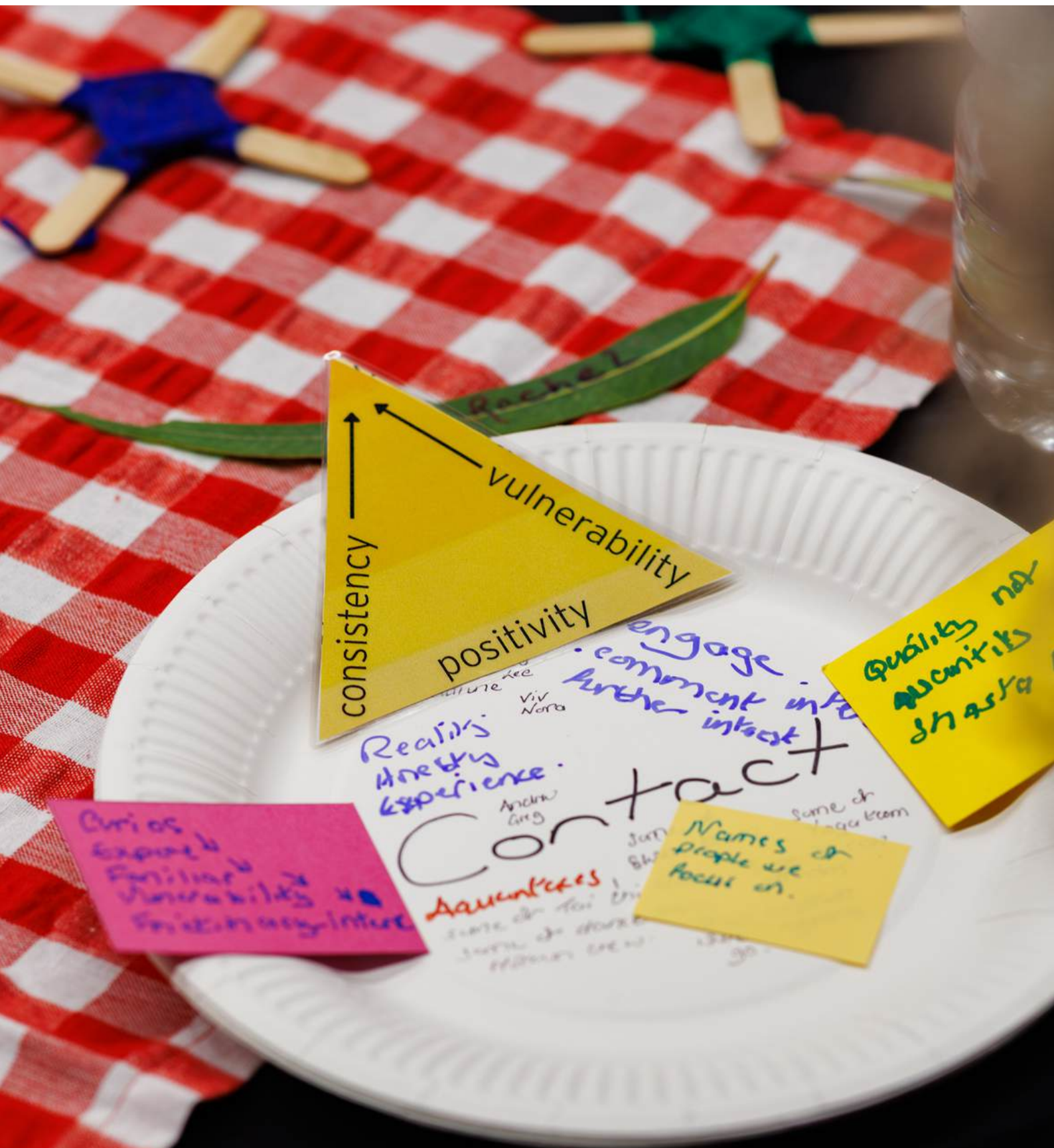
We started small—four or five people with the same mentality, trying to do the right things and bring people on the journey. Then it multiplies and multiplies and multiplies. Little things are big things in the bigger picture.

Start small. Little wins. Little conversations.

Think about the community outcomes. What is the community benefit? How does this support people? That is how we went from four teams to 54 teams. You create the environment, give people time, and try to do the right thing for the wider community.

- Paul





I started asking two questions: If you got bad news today, who are the two people you would call? And which two people would you want checking in on you, proactively, if things got hard? Do they know? Have you asked them? And if not, why not?



Project Team Learnings & Perspectives

Nested at the heart of this project has been a significant journey of organisational and personal learning. As the earlier context described, this project was Befriend's first foray into the disaster resilience context, and has offered our team a rich ground for learning and growth. In the closing stages of the project period, we undertook a round of reflective interviews with the project team. This section draws upon insights and quotes from those conversations, and is an attempt to describe some of the key learnings and perspective-shifts that arose for our team through this work.

In search of our unique contribution

Through the early period of the project, we experienced a lingering cloud that felt a little bit like a form of imposter syndrome. We held a shared belief that we had a unique and valuable contribution to offer this project and the broader disaster resilience ecosystem - we just weren't sure exactly what that might look like in practice. We felt honoured to have had the support of the funding body and other ecosystem partners in bringing this project to fruition, and felt a duty to use this opportunity to make a truly meaningful difference. The shadow side of this exciting new undertaking was the sense of pressure and expectation we put on ourselves.



Six months in, I still felt ill-equipped. My colleagues reminded me that we weren't chosen for our expertise in bushfire preparation and recovery, but for our understanding of how to nurture connection. Even so, the immensity of the task often left me feeling small, like a bird in a storm.

Through this early period of discovery, we were seeking to explore and understand how our unique approaches to community building would be meaningfully translated and applied to the disaster resilience context in a way that held integrity with the core objectives of the NDRR funding, while staying true to our organisational essence. This was an important tension for us to hold and honour throughout the project, ensuring we didn't unintentionally fall out of alignment with either context. This challenge was amplified by the indirect, seemingly intangible quality of community building work, contrasted with the direct, concreteness of more traditional bushfire preparedness planning activities.



I often felt like we weren't doing enough - that we needed more focused activities related to what we originally envisioned the project would offer. But perhaps this community-tending work will often feel like it isn't enough.

A meaningful way into community engagement

Whenever we get stuck in our heads, a helpful way forward usually involves getting out and talking to people. So in the early months of the project, we spent a lot of time having conversations with people to explore their experiences and perspectives of disasters, community connectedness and resilience. We saw pretty quickly that an invitation to have a conversation about bushfire preparedness was a tough ask! For starters, the topic conjures feelings of fear and apprehension for many, and secondly, most people are feeling too stretched with the demands of day-to-day life to feel able to prioritise any time and energy on a possible future event that is uncertain and unknown. This was vital learning that ultimately played a significant role in shaping our engagement approach. In order to “meet people where they’re at,” we gave ourselves permission to broaden our definition of “disaster” to include any of the significant daily “disasters” people might be living through right now - from housing insecurity to parenting stress, ageing, family breakdown, chronic ill-health or grief and loss - knowing that the same fundamental logic would apply. As one team member described it:

“

The way in is to acknowledge that people are living through large challenges right now that aren't a bushfire - and that there is a real relatedness between those everyday difficulties and what someone would need in the event of a fire - people they can depend on...

While we continued to hold onto the language of “bushfires,” “disasters,” and “preparedness,” we also expanded our vocabulary to include phrases such as “tough times” and “life’s big challenges,” connecting to motivations and needs that felt more real, pressing and urgent for people, knowing that the value of relational resilience would be inherently transcontextual.



The possibility of 'the village'

The early season of community engagement conversations validated the need and desire of people to belong to welcoming, inclusive social groups and networks within their community that would offer a context for developing the kinds of mutual support relationships that people could depend on in the event of bushfires and other “tough times.” The core insight was that as communities, we’ve developed a reliance on formal services, and fallen out of practice with the ways of supporting each other.



It's not that people don't want to support each other; it's that we don't always know how anymore. We've outsourced so much of what communities used to do themselves - and those formal systems matter - but they're stretched thin.

We found ourselves talking about how, now, there is a service for everything. For our elders, a service. For financial hardship, a service. For housing, food, clothing—a service. So the default question has become: what's the service that can meet that need? Whereas not that long ago in human history, our default was—how can we meet that together? That shift in perception shifts the emphasis from services and how to change them, to being human beings thinking about how we live together.

We found ourselves talking a lot about the idea of the ‘village.’ In our local context, this term seemed to have a lot of resonance with community, conjuring associations of connectedness, support, vibrancy and solidarity. An early concept that we prototyped and tested was the concept of ‘Vital Village Groups,’ a new model for establishing and growing community-led groups that would act as a primary context for developing relationships and processes of mutual support, that would be active in supporting people through life’s daily ups and downs, and hence be primed and ready to go in the event of a bushfire or other significant disaster.



We'll all have seasons that exceed what a household can carry alone. That's when the village becomes vital. But the village has to be nurtured in the good times, so that it's there for us when the big events happen.

While there was a lot of enthusiasm for this concept, the early prototype-testing showed us quickly that the community in general did not have energy for creating new

contexts specifically for the purposes of mutual support. Through these testing conversations, we heard people describe social contexts that they were already a part of - friendship groups, family groups, sporting clubs, workplaces - that met some of these day-to-day needs (to varying degrees). And for those with weaker networks who weren't part of existing social groups, the motivation was more socially-focused than support-focused. The possibility of starting up a new support group model wasn't where the river was flowing.

Work with the assets and strengths already there

As we looked more closely at the existing social contexts in communities, our perspective started to shift. One team member described this moment of insight:



The president of the football club told me he was packing up one night and saw a dad whose kids had left the club, sitting on a bench, looking troubled. He sat down and asked if he was okay, and stayed forty-five minutes, listening to everything overwhelming him. And I thought: yes - That is the culture, and the seeds of it are already there. Our job is to make it more common and more visible—rather than what it usually is, where we bring our kids down, say hi, and never really engage further.

This experience was one of several that helped to catalyse this subtle yet important shift, from new groups, to cultural tending:



We had called them Vital Village 'Groups.' But those groups already exist; we can work with social groups, clubs and associations that are already there. What if we talked about nurturing a village culture instead?

We don't have to build something new from scratch. The village is already here—it's just been sleeping. All we need to do is wake it up.

Finding our rhythm nurturing contexts for connection

Through time and experience, we began to really find our stride. In some ways, we felt like we'd come full circle, and returned home to a newfound understanding and appreciation for the core processes of our work, ways of working that we'd known all along, that could make a valuable contribution to community resilience. Befriend's essence of nurturing contexts for connection was something we could bring across multiple contexts - from new social groups to existing clubs, associations, schools and businesses, to new community learning experiences. This affirmation of our gifts was experienced at both the individual and team levels.



It became more and more apparent that we each needed to show up as ourselves and do what we were best at.

The gift I have is holding spaces where people can be vulnerable with each other. Learning to do this came out of my own wound: I spent the first forty years of my life never quite feeling I belonged anywhere, and I know exactly what it is worth to find a room where you do.

Many people tell us they have never before experienced anything like our gatherings —places where they feel seen, heard, safe, accepted, and able to turn up authentically even when they're feeling terrible or hopeless. They describe their experience as joyful, that they feel they belong and are valued rather than judged or advised.

This pattern in our work nurtures the social environment in ways that open up new possibilities, and as described in the previous section, it is these conditions that are the grounds from which relationships of mutual support and reciprocity arise.

For one of our team members, it was insightful seeing how our gifts could be brought into existing community contexts, like this experience working with the staff from a childcare centre to explore themes of hardship and mutual support, in which his gifts quickly helped people to open up and connect in a deeper way:

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I ran a session for them one evening at their staff development meeting - more activity than presentation - and cooked a big chicken curry so everyone would stay and eat. The warm-up was simply: in a few words, or a couple of emojis, tell us how you're arriving. Two opened up within minutes. One had had family visiting for four weeks, the first time in years, and they'd flown home that morning; she just felt really emotional. Another said she was stressed, and I assumed she meant the toddlers. No, she said—that's the easy bit. Her partner had crashed his work ute that day. Someone got up and gave her a cuddle. It's amazing what that first conversation does. It's most striking with men, who often don't open up—but when you create a space that feels safe, people really lean into it.

We also became more practiced at integrating resilience-focused thinking into our community building conversations. The orientation was always towards finding a way to make this real, personal, relevant and accessible. One team member described his conversational approach:

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I started asking two questions: If you got bad news today, who are the two people you would call? And which two people would you want checking in on you, proactively, if things got hard? Do they know? Have you asked them? And if not, why not? - Those are relational resilience questions.



Living the work in a way that became deeply personal

We knew coming into this project that our team had personal lived experiences that gave us a deeper understanding and empathy for the experiences of disconnection and hardship that many community members are experiencing. Yet, we didn't quite appreciate just how personal this project would become for us.



I'd have agreed beforehand that people shape their work and their work shapes them. I hadn't appreciated how strongly that operates. It felt very personal, for all of us.

Early in the project, one team member experienced a humbling moment when a bushfire scare close to home highlighted the vulnerabilities in his own local neighbourhood, shining a light on the shallow depth of his own neighbourly connections.



I hadn't spoken to anyone I live next to. Not during it, not the day after, not in the week that followed. I'd seen people, chatted briefly about my son. We just never got to the deeper level of: "how did you feel about Saturday, and did you have anyone?" So, we know each other, but we just don't know each other well enough.

We had a strong, unspoken-yet-shared understanding that in order to be in integrity with this work, it was essential for us to tend to the dynamics of mutual support within our own communities and social networks. One team member summed it up neatly:



These benefits apply to us as well as to those we work with. If we seek transformational change, we need to look after ourselves and our relationships.

We saw ourselves becoming increasingly more aware and attentive to the everyday needs of those around us, and exercising our own responsibility and agency for participating in processes of mutual support. But, being employees on this project didn't make us any more 'expert' than others. Like those who participated in the project's activities, we were living our own (often humbling) learnings of mutual support, reciprocity, and the factors that make that challenging.

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Over the two years of this project, I've had a sister with a first baby, neighbours with two boys under two, a colleague with a premature baby, and several friends with young families. I started batch cooking—dropping meals round at weekends, one thing they wouldn't have to think about... At one point I was cooking for four to six households on top of my own. I didn't notice what it was costing me until a couple of those families were away and I had a week off. I was so grateful for it. I was exhausted.

We've been conditioned to believe that asking for help is weakness, because independence is what our culture values. That is steeped in our media, our stories, our economy—so much so that after sixteen years of this work I am still having to decondition from it myself. Which is hard, when you can't get outside it.

...it reminded me that we need the courage to ask. Two months later I had a bad flu for a fortnight, and would normally have pushed through. Instead I asked my mum to cook for me, because she would love the chance to contribute and it would genuinely help. Asking is an invitation for someone's gifts—an invitation for them as much as for us.

Lilla Watson—an indigenous artist, academic and activist—makes a distinction I keep returning to. "Helping" carries overtones of patronising and othering: we are the helpers, they are the needy. Rather than helping, we need to work together because, as she says, your liberation is tied up with mine.

While the two-year term of this project winds to a close, the life of this work lives on within us, within our team, and within our relationships.





“Asking was the hard part. I had to sit with actually asking the community for help and support... and there were offers, from left, right and centre.”



Closing (and opening again)

As the sun sets on Resilient Together, it's a moment for us to take stock of all the ground we've walked, all of the people we've met, all of the experiences we've shared together, and all that we've learned from each other.

We came into this project with a mix of excitement, trepidation, curiosity and deep care. We had our own existential questions that we grappled with through the course of this learning journey. We listened to community, created and tested a lot of different approaches to strengthening connections and resilience, and came full circle to affirm the core gifts we bring to nurturing contexts for connection that give rise to the kinds of mutual support relationships and possibilities that are vital for our shared future.

We were truly moved and humbled by the stories people shared with us, which far exceeded our wildest hopes. Throughout all of the interviews we undertook as part of the community research, there were clear and powerful examples of relationships acting as vital sources of mutual support - from practical assistance to emotional support, information, guidance and companionship. These stories create a rich and compelling picture for how significant mutual support relationships are in helping people to navigate life challenges. Exercising this 'social muscle' through regular practice in navigating life's daily ups and downs is a critical form of preparedness for significant disasters. People know that they have others that they can depend on, and who depend on them, regardless of what life brings - and they are regularly practicing the act of activating that support, in reciprocity.

We saw our work grow into new contexts - from social groups to sporting clubs, childcare centres, social enterprise cafes, business associations, schools and rec centres. We've deepened our appreciation for these many varied and diverse social structures within communities that have the potential to become active nodes of mutual support networks. We've learned that we have unique gifts that can help people within these contexts practice the art of relating in ways that welcome in more openness and vulnerability, so that our humanness and deep care for one another can shine through.

We're still holding many threads that we intend to keep following.

We want to keep exploring ways to help convenors of existing contexts - from sporting clubs to schools and workplaces - to access a clear and supportive approach to activating and amplifying mutual support dynamics within their networks.

Closing (and opening again)

For the many incredible social group Hosts in our network (and beyond), we want to keep finding ways to grow a culture of shared leadership through reciprocity in groups, to enrich people's experiences and facilitate a sustainable sharing of the load.

For future place-based disaster resilience projects, we have a renewed confidence in the strength of our community building approaches, balanced with an insatiable appetite for continual learning and exploration.

The future story of our communities is still unwritten.

As one of our teammates expressed:



What opens up from here? That's a huge question, because the future is unpredictable and anything is possible. I can see, within me and within others in Befriend, lots of seedlings, and seeds that might emerge and grow when ready. Life is complex, interdependent, organic processes. Change is continuous, but transformative change is rare, a consequence of innumerable seen and unseen processes over time. We like to remind ourselves that we are ancestors to future generations, who hopefully will look back on us with thanks for leaving the world in better shape for them than it was for us. We wonder what our great grandchildren will think of us.

May we continue to find our way, **resilient together.**





The connections we build in ordinary times become lifelines in extraordinary ones

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