

Caretakers Cottage - “Going Home Staying Home” – Launch

Opening address by Caretakers CEO, Laurie Matthews

Welcome to Country

Before we begin the proceedings and behalf of all those present, I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet; the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation. It is upon their ancestral lands that Caretakers Cottage stands. Similarly, I would also like to pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for this place.

The significance of welcome to country to Caretakers Cottage will become more evident as we proceed as we are not only working on this land we are growing our capacity to support the people of this land.

Welcome Minister for Community Services the Hon Brad Hazzard, Attorney General and Member for Vaucluse the Hon Gabriele Upton, Mayor of Waverly Sally Betts... Rabbis Dovid Slavin and Mendel Kastel – I am not going through the guest list except to say you are all important to us whether you are from a Government Department, a resident of our programs, partner agencies or interested members of the community, welcome and enjoy your time with us this afternoon. – There are a few departmental staff who are a bit nervous at this stage, don't worry, there won't be any “ministerials.”

Going Home Staying Home

I have invited you here today to help us celebrate what I believe to be a significant achievement in that Caretakers Cottage in conjunction with our partners, the Ted Noffs Foundation represented today by Mark Ferry, Leki and Wes, not only successfully tendered for the multi-purpose youth homelessness package of the Going Home Staying Home reform but we have fully implemented the new aspects of this reform along with the old elements of our package.

We look to the area between the Sydney Harbour and La Perouse and assume responsibility for youth homelessness in this area and do this by providing a 7 bed crisis refuge for 12 to 17 year olds in Bondi whilst Ted Noffs provide a further 4 crisis beds with the added focus of drug & alcohol and lifestyle issues. Kate and her team at Options have grown their program from 16 beds to currently 52 in transitional housing positions, while Leki and his team have developed our early intervention approach through schools and local community access. All aspects of the program are fully functional and will all surpass our target figures as set down in the tender.

I am proud of this achievement and further I am pleased to say that we managed to maintain an under 16's response that was not included in the original tender. To this end I must thank Nigel from St Laurence House for securing SSF and continuing their medium term housing service in Kingsford. They are using one of our transitional houses – an easy sacrifice to make as it is critical that we have placement opportunities for young people under 16 who are not in the Out Of Home Care system. – Caretakers will be submitting for additional funding under the upcoming YHAP round as it is vital to enable us to continue providing the level of care currently on offer.

Caring for Kids

That brings me to the central nature of Caretakers Cottage and its programs. Every young person in our care is here because something has gone dramatically wrong in their family, be it family breakdown or a lack of protection. It is a parent's responsibility to raise their kids to a point of autonomy, however, too many lack the capacity to work through their issues. While we talk of the virtues of foster care and the approximation of family support, the young people who come to Caretakers need that same nurture and support as those young people living at home with mum and dad. They need reassurance and encouragement, direction and boundaries, they need to be valued.

To that end we work very hard to normalise kids' lives by getting them back to school, we still have Key College and POEM, both special school environments who appreciate our clients' individual needs. Our good friends at Our Big Kitchen, Rabbi Slavin and George create opportunities for young people to gain work experience in hospitality and of course some gain employment. We engage in casework that addresses the reason families have broken down and where possible seek to rebuild families so that they can function again. We are so grateful for the counselling support provided through POW adolescent team, Ian Johnson, Dee Vine here on our team and Aiki Filis.

When I see a new client come through the front door the most common reaction is that of bewilderment. – "Is this place going to be nice?" "Will the other residents be my friend or will they take me down?" – The prevailing look of apprehension on their faces is "who cares for me?"

Issues Facing our Young People

The big issues face by our clients generally include mental health trauma resulting from abuse and abandonment, deficits including learning disabilities and an array of disorders including Asperger's and ADHD. Whatever the situation our role is to assist our clients to realise their potential so we look to securing stable long term accommodation preferably back within their functioning family or if they are exceptionally lucky in a program like St Laurence House or Lillian's. However, as has been recently

highlighted on “Struggle Street,”¹ people from the most dysfunctional families want to know who loves them and cares for them. A big part of our role is to foster the best possible relationship with family while ensuring their safety.

I could talk endlessly about the obstacles that confront our clients and staff but I am going to make an assumption here that you have a fair idea of the issues that challenge our clients so I am going to give you some reason to celebrate our homeless response. Caretakers and its many programs have become the significant factor in so many young people’s lives in way that will surprise you. On a daily basis our team experience the reluctance of clients make that next move even if it is on a pathway to greater independence and I suppose that is reassuring for youth workers to realise that they have been providing a safe and secure environment that young people value.

Similarly my phone rings at least twice a week from someone who was a resident 20 year ago as they have seen our Facebook page or just want to know if John Van Keppel or Sue Harris are still here. Once again significant workers who filled an important place in their hearts. We also have shopkeepers in Bondi Junction making \$500 donations because they spent a few nights at Caretakers in their youth and have made a success of their lives and want to give back. That is how we know we have done a good job, and continued funding from government of course helps with that perception.

Our Indigenous Children

I mentioned earlier that the indigenous connections of this place will play a larger part in my speech so let me expand on the theme. Not only do we have a continual stream of young Gadigal kids through our doors we also have our fair share of Yuin, Dharawal, Darug and Worimi kids who end up in Sydney in need of support. Once again I can tell fantastic stories like that of our star artist Karlie who having completed her HSC is now off doing Social work at UNSW, and Krystal, who became a bit of a media star last year, is now settled down with her son in Campbelltown and doing her second welfare course at TAFE.

Not everyone who comes through our programs fares well and I think of our indigenous kids who as 12 and 13 year olds are ending up in Juvenile Justice Facilities because there are no funded services that can come to grips with the social and cultural degradation that turns out a 13 year old ice user. Plenty of attempts have been made over the years and good programs such as Tribal Warrior and WEAVE provide mentoring and engagement programs, however, Shane and I are sure we need a well-funded residential program that has the capacity to intervene in families and address the

¹ “Struggle Street” is a three-part Australian reality television documentary series that aired on SBS One in May 2015.

overcrowding, drug abuse and criminality that pervades so many of our clients families. Kids still cling to their families no matter how dysfunctional they are so I doubt that much will change until we have the programs that will directly intervene. We would love to talk further with our distinguished guests on this topic.

Is this government responsibility? Well, probably not. However, the consequences of not responding well is further dysfunction and greater social and dollar costs down the track? I think it is great that we pay our taxes to enable government to respond on a state-wide level to address the greater good. And while I am on the subject of taxes, I am concerned that the future growth of housing stocks is being outsourced to the Community Housing Providers, there has been no growth in the SAAP, SHS, GSHS sector since the Capital Assistance Program disappeared years ago, and I suggest that whilst housing prices are having such an adverse impact on those at the bottom end of the housing market that the State government commit a guaranteed 2% of stamp duty to cover future growth needs in this homelessness sector. What a legacy for a government to create!

Closing

So in closing I must acknowledge the support of Minister Upton in bringing some fairness back to the GSHS program and encourage Minister Hazzard to maintain this course. In listening to Minister Hazzard a fortnight ago talk enthusiastically about his past role as Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, I detect a friendly ear and as we develop an indigenous kids response. Expect us to come knocking soon. To our partners and incredible staff, I thank you for your continued commitment and passion for our great young clients.

A* who will be speaking to you soon was a resident at Caretakers whilst doing her HSC last year, she is now studying law at UTS and will become a UN human rights lawyer in time. Last night I learned that she had won a scholarship to attend the 2016 Women's Deliver Conference in Copenhagen. We are very proud of Alice's achievements and I mention this not to embarrass her but to highlight that the young people with whom we work can and do achieve great things.

Thank you.