



The Women's House

Evaluative Report of the Maleny Temporary House for Women and Children

Maleny Neighbourhood Centre

March 2020



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Acknowledgements

We pay our respects to the First Nation peoples of this country and surrounding lands – to both the Jinbara and the Kabi Kabi people; to their elders past, present and future; to their ancestors; to the land that supports us; to the rivers, mountains, forests and earth; to the elements and seasons; and to the animal and plant kingdoms that share it with us.

We would like to thank the participants who courageously shared their personal stories of homelessness, transiency and experiences of staying in the house. Thank you for your insight, suggestions and help to raise awareness of this issue, so that our community can continue to work towards solutions.

We would like to thank all the donors who have given financial or in-kind contributions, and to the volunteers who have given their time and skills.

Without you, this project is not possible.

“When we go walk-about, wherever we go is home.”

—Kabi Kabi woman & emerging elder, Dinnawhan

Foreword

It is easy to walk past “The Women’s House” in Maleny and not know that this attractive and seemingly ordinary house in an ordinary street provides an essential service for women who are struggling to find a home.

Like all towns, in Maleny there are vulnerable women and children experiencing difficulties with housing or homelessness. Over the last few decades, rising living costs and rental competition on the range have created a need for help, and behind the affluent and buzzing Maple Street, the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre (MNC) daily receives visitors who are experiencing hardship.

The centre helps in many ways, providing Emergency Relief groceries, laundry and shower facilities, access to social services and often just a cuppa and a chat. But MNC volunteers and staff have long known that something critical was missing – the provision of local, affordable, temporary accommodation. And although both men and women require assistance for homelessness, it was felt that the women and children had a more urgent need as they are more vulnerable to harm.

In true Maleny fashion, solutions arose from within the community. In late 2017, the MNC and concerned locals held a meeting to discuss ways to meet this housing need, and a steering committee was formed at MNC. Community support was sought and \$15,000 of donations was offered by local people, businesses and organisations. In 2018, a three-bedroom house was bought by a local benefactor and offered to MNC at below-market rent.

A flurry of activity followed, as policies, procedures and tenancy leases were organised for a 12-month pilot program. On the 9th December 2018, the first three tenants moved into the house.

Just as the tenants were beginning new journeys, so began a learning curve for MNC, as challenges had to be met and the day-to-day operations were tested and refined under the guidance of the steering committee.

This evaluative report is a formal assessment of the pilot program of the Women’s House, helping to ensure efficacy and viability, and to provide recommendations for improvement. But like all human endeavour, it is also a story containing personal struggles and triumphs. It is a story with many characters whose lives intersect and affect each other. It is a story about how we all need each other to live thriving, happy, healthy lives.

Since the opening in December 2018, the house has provided safe and stable accommodation for 14 women and 11 children. This is indeed something to be proud of.

It has been my honour to be a small part of this process and to provide this report to assist the longevity of the Women’s House and other accommodation solutions that may arise in the future.

Louisa D Pearce

PART 1: HOMELESSNESS

THE NATIONAL ISSUE

Sociologists have long known that homelessness acts as a significant barrier to health and wellbeing, and is implicated in many other social dilemmas, such as domestic violence, crime, unemployment, poverty and ill-health. Indeed, without a home it is hard to make a happy and fruitful life.

“Home” can be a place—a piece of land, an area of country or a community with spiritual and cultural significance. Equally, “home” can be a dwelling which is secure and comfortable. Ideally, people can have access to both. Yet a growing number of Australians are “homeless”, without a stable or safe place to rest at night or a functional base from which to fulfil their everyday commitments. This includes people who are staying with friends (“couch-surfing”), living in tents, campervans, crisis shelters or in overcrowded situations.

Housing stress and homelessness in Australia has significantly increased over the last few decades, with more people in poverty due to a nexus of social and economic stressors, such as neglect of social housing infrastructure, increasing housing and rental prices, stagnant Newstart Allowance benefits, and the transfer of many single parents and people with disabilities to Newstart Allowance.¹

While this report focuses on the lives of nine women, it behoves the reader to keep the big picture in mind, to know that these women are part of a pressing social-economic problem in Australia that can affect anyone, and is growing ever more urgent. Some recent figures include:

- 3.24 million Australians (13.6% of the population) are estimated to be living below the poverty line², and 774,000 of them are children under the age of 15.³
- The poverty line for a single adult is \$457 per week.⁴
- The Newstart Allowance rate is \$300 per week (\$600 per fortnight) for a single person with no children, while the Disability Support Pension is \$425 per week (\$850 per fortnight).⁵
- 43% of people on Newstart Allowance are classified as “people with partial capacity to work” – this means they experience physical or mental health disabilities and therefore cannot secure full-time employment, while being simultaneously unable to access the higher rate of the Disability Support Pension.⁶
- Housing costs in Australia have risen by an average of 4% a year from 2007 to 2017; this rise has unequally affected those on lower incomes, rising by 42% in the ten-year period for low income earners, compared to 15% for middle income-earners.⁷
- According to the National Rental Affordability Index (RAI), “housing stress” is defined as a household that use more than 30% of their income on rent or mortgage repayments. Their most recent data shows that low income households are most at risk, with 44% of such households currently in housing stress; this figure increases every year – for example, it was 35% in 2008.⁸
- Single pensioners are facing “severely unaffordable” and “extremely unaffordable” rents in cities where between 50% and 90% of income is spent on rent for a one-bedroom unit. In regional areas, single pensioners face “unaffordable” rents (50% of their income used for rent).⁹

- About 80,000 single mothers with low incomes are paying between 40% - 70% of their income on rent, therefore experiencing moderate to severe housing stress.¹⁰
- Studies are showing that women are the fastest growing demographic facing homelessness, especially single mothers and women over 55 years of age. In the 5 years between the 2016 census and 2011 census, there was a 31% increase in women who were homeless.¹¹
- People experiencing serious mental health conditions have an 89% increased likelihood of financial hardship within one year of onset, and a 39% increased likelihood of being forced to move within one year of onset.¹²

THE LOCAL ISSUE

Homelessness rates are “guess-work” to a degree because there are people who either do not present to services or do not identify as homeless (instead viewing themselves as transitory, camping or living with friends, for example). As well, homelessness rates in Maleny and surrounds are even harder to gauge, given that local homeless people may move away to find cheaper rents and warmer climes on the Sunshine Coast, for example.

We do know that in recent years, the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre has annually provided emergency relief services for up to 80 people who identified as homeless.¹³ And in 2017, Maleny’s Compassionate Housing Affordability Solutions Maleny (CHASM) conducted a survey of 78 Maleny locals to assess housing stress in the area. 60% of respondents were renting, and of those experiencing housing stress, high rents were cited as the primary reason for this stress (61%), with loss of income, ill health and relationship break-ups also significantly cited. 20% of respondents were single mothers.¹⁴

The National Rental Affordability Index (RAI) shows that the Sunshine Coast and its hinterland, though considered a part of regional Queensland in the RAI analysis, are generally Moderately to Severely Unaffordable areas and therefore on a par with Greater Brisbane.¹⁵ The contributing factors to the costs of local housing are identified by *QShelter* were population growth and a shortage of social housing, which tends to be reserved only for those with very high needs.¹⁶

In tourist areas like the Sunshine Coast and its hinterland, it is possible that the short-term letting platforms like Airbnb are negatively impacting the private rental market, as they have in other parts of the world. In a study in Sydney, the authors found a significant negative impact on vacancy rates and rental prices, citing the number of listings on Airbnb for entire homes was about five times the number of rental vacancies.^{17 18} Their study was corroborated by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, who compared bond lodgement rates and levels of property vacancy to conclude that short-term letting is removing properties from the long-term rental market in tourist areas, thereby contributing to increasing unaffordability.¹⁹ High-tourist areas like Byron Bay have seen a dwindling of private rentals, with locals being forced out over the holiday seasons.²⁰ Conversely, another study of the same area conducted by the NSW tenants Association found that rental vacancy rates had not changed significantly since Airbnb penetrated the market.

Although the impact of Airbnb is both inconclusive and contentious, two participants in this study were directly affected by the Airbnb markets, which were favoured by home-owners as a means to create income.

PART 2: OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW

2.1. A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S HOUSE

To address the need for affordable accommodation in Maleny, with a focus on single women and children, the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre (MNC) created a 12-month pilot program to provide temporary accommodation for single women and children in Maleny who were homeless or living in unstable, unsafe housing.

Officially known as the Temporary House for Women and Children in Maleny, it is commonly referred to as "The Women's House". A short historical timeline is as follows:

PERIOD	HAPPENINGS
September - November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• MNC holds a community meeting to discuss local ways to meet the need.• MNC steering committee is formed.
December 2017 - March 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community support is sought and \$15,000 of donations offered by local people, businesses and organisations.
April - November 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A 3-bedroom house is offered by a benefactor to MNC at below-market rent.• Policies, procedures and tenancy leases are organised for a 12-month pilot program.
December 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The first tenants move into the house on short-term tenancies (up to 3 months), with one permanent tenant to look after the house.
March 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Support Worker is recruited from MNC volunteers to support tenants, improve assessment, and address operational challenges.• New furniture and household goods are provided for the house.• Model is changed so that all tenants have temporary leases.
July 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social Work student is engaged to evaluate the project.• Tenants are invited to share their stories and photographic artwork for the dual purposes of evaluating the house and raising awareness.
November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interim Report is provided to steering committee.• Committee and MNC Board approve to continue the project in 2020, as part of its core services.
January 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• MNC is successful in receiving a Dignity First Funding grant from Queensland Housing to assist with relocation costs for the tenants and help with buying essential items, like whitegoods and linen.
February 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• After 15 months of operation, a total of 14 women and 11 children have been provided with accommodation.
March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Function is held to share report findings and exhibit stories and photographs from the tenants.

2.2. PHOTOS OF THE HOUSE



Living area



Kitchen



Sunroom



Dining area



Courtyard



Bathroom 1



Bedroom



Bedroom



Bedroom

2.3. AIMS OF THE PROJECT

1. To provide temporary accommodation in Maleny for women and children from Maleny and surrounding areas who are either homeless or living in unstable, overcrowded, inappropriate, unaffordable or insecure accommodation, and who require longer, appropriate and physically secure housing.

2.4. EXCLUSIONS

The Women's House is not:

1. A refuge or shelter for women fleeing domestic violence;
2. A mental health support facility;
3. A drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility.

2.5. GOVERNANCE

The Women's House is governed by the MNC Management Committee, who is responsible for the overall running of the house.

A Steering Group for the house reports to the MNC Management Committee on a monthly basis. The Steering Group is chaired by a volunteer Support Worker, and is comprised of people within the community who have an interest and skill-set to oversee the house.

Day to day operations are managed by the MNC Team - a team of MNC volunteers led by a Support Worker. The MNC team assesses applications, supports tenants in numerous ways, and assists with management of the property.

2.6. PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS

Community partners

Community partners assist with daily operations in two main ways: 1) providing services to the tenants, such as counselling, housing assistance and advocacy, and emergency relief; 2) providing either funding or in-kind donations to off-set expenditure, such as gardening or maintenance.

Financial partners

The list of financial partners continues to grow, and includes the IGA (our foundation financial partner) and other local businesses, service clubs, churches, community services and private benefactors.

Service providers

The MNC has formed strong networks with local housing services such as Coast to Bay housing, Queensland Housing and St Vincent de Pauls, and a range of auxiliary services such as the local police, Salvation Army, Anglicare Family Support, Suncoast Legal, to name a few.

2.7. FUNDING

The Women's House is funded in the following ways:

1. In-kind funding provided by the property owner, who leases the house at 55-60% market rental value (approx. \$12,000 per annum).
2. Rental income from tenants – the rental amount is negotiated according to financial circumstances of the tenant, with a current range from \$60/week to \$200/week.
3. Donations of money from local community organisations and individual donors
4. Donations of goods and household supplies (such as weekly boxes of veggies)
5. In-kind services (e.g. gardening, counselling, maintenance)
6. Volunteer time for the Steering Group and MNC Team
7. 10-30 hours/week of time volunteered by Support Worker/s.
8. Dignity First Funding grant (see below)

2.7.1. Donations

The IGA acted as our foundation financial partner; since then there are many individuals, local businesses and community organisations that have given money and services to this project. Everything from lawn-mowing to cash money is needed to keep the house running. The house would not have been possible without each and every offering.

An estimated \$17,700 in cash donations is required annually. All donations are tax-deductible.

2.7.2. Grants

Dignity First Funding

In late 2019, MNC was successful in its application for the Dignity First Funding by Queensland Housing. This funding supports tenants who are moving into permanent housing, with money available to purchase essential household items (e.g. white goods, linen, kitchen items) and removal/delivery costs.

"Splashes of Red and Black"

It's hard enough being a single mum with a small baby, let alone being homeless. Few of us can imagine the impact this could have on such an important time in a mother and her child's life.

Dignity First Funding provides items of need and comfort that most people take for granted yet are missing in the lives of people who have been homeless and can make a huge difference to someone's wellbeing and happiness. When the MNC received the grant money in January 2020, the first lady we were able to help was a young mum and her baby. Delivered to their new home were all the bits and pieces they needed, including a washing machine, fridge and linen. Our young mum especially liked the colours red and black, and so she was delighted when our Support Worker managed to buy new linen with red and black patterns. She wrote to us:

"Me and bubba are SO HAPPY in our new little place... I've got my little splashes of red and black around and couldn't be happier! THANK YOU SO MUCH! The fridge looks so good in my new little kitchen too."

2.8. ANNUAL OPERATIONAL COSTS

Original expenditure estimates – calculated by Steering Committee before the pilot was started in early December 2018

Rent approximately:	\$23,400 (full market rent for 3-brm house - \$450 per week)
Yard maintenance:	\$3,120 (\$60 per week)
Water:	\$1,000 (\$250 per quarter)
Power:	\$2,400 (\$600 per quarter)
Internet/phone:	\$1,200 (\$100 per month)
Insurance:	\$2,500 (service insurance)
House expenses:	\$1,000 (furniture, linen, kitchen – assumes in kind donations)
Administration:	\$5,193 (15% - administering of books, collecting rent, etc)
Total:	\$39,813

Estimated annual expenditure after 12 months of operation of the pilot project – early December 2018-end November 2019¹

Rent:	\$23,400 (market rent before rent reduction)
Yard maintenance:	\$2,600 (before in-kind contribution)
Gas and electricity:	\$1,500
Water:	\$1,000
House expenses:	\$2,500 (furniture, linen, kitchen – assumes in kind donations)
Internet/phone:	\$1,200 (\$100 per month)
Volunteer support worker:	\$5,200 (\$100 p/w travel, internet, phone and printing)
Insurance:	\$2,000
Administration:	\$5,910 (before exemption by MNC)
Total:	\$45,310

Estimated annual income (cash and in-kind) for the period December 2019-November 2020

Rent reduction:	\$9,100 (discount contribution by landlord)
Yard maintenance:	\$2,600 (in-kind donation by Maleny APEX)
Rent paid by residents:	\$10,000 (an average of \$200 per week for whole house)
Administration:	\$5,910 (contributed gratis by MNC)
Total projected income:	\$27,610

Projected annual amount in cash needing to be raised through community donations in the period December 2019-November 2020

Total: \$17,700

1. The estimated annual expenditure assumes that The Women's House is managed on a day-to-day basis on behalf of the MNC by a MNC volunteer Support Worker who is part of a small volunteer MNC Women's House Team. The Support Worker is paid a small allowance as a contribution to travel, phone, internet and printing costs incurred in carrying out the volunteer Support Worker role.

2.9. OPERATIONAL PROCESSES

2.9.1. Head lessee responsibilities

The property is let under a head-leasing arrangement, whereby the legal entity of MNC, as the head lessee, takes responsibility for:

- Tenant application process
- Making sure the property is well maintained
- Paying the rent on time

MNC then sub-lets the rooms to tenants, and agrees to provide:

- Furnishings, linen, crockery, cutlery
- Shared grocery items such as laundry powder and toilet rolls
- Utilities (electricity, water and gas)
- Coordination of repairs and maintenance, in collaboration with the owner
- Help with conflict resolution between tenants
- Support for tenants to find housing and accommodation

2.9.2. Tenant responsibilities

Tenants are asked to enter into a tenancy contract with MNC, whereby they agree to:

- Pay a weekly sum of rent (negotiated according to the person's income)
- Report all damage and/or maintenance issues to MNC.
- Refrain from using illicit drugs or alcohol at the property.
- Refrain from allowing men on the premises (house or grounds) other than contractors or MNC staff who have been engaged to quote for or undertake repairs and obtained permission from MNC.
- Refrain from smoking in the house or on the verandah. Tenants who smoke must use either the carport area or street.
- Refrain from having visitors stay overnight (with the exception of tenant's children on a custody visit).
- Keep their own spaces clean and tidy and also contribute to keeping the shared spaces clean and tidy with a thorough clean of the kitchen and bathrooms weekly.
- Consume food in the eating areas only and not in bedrooms.

2.9.3. Operational Framework 1: First three months

Initially known as the Shared House Project Maleny, in the early stages of operation, the 3-bedroom house was designed to accommodate a Head Tenant and two other tenants who would be offered a room for 3 months. The aim of this arrangement was to have a supportive person (the Head Tenant) available at the house to oversee day-to-day issues, and make sure the other tenants felt welcome and comfortable. In exchange, the Head Tenant would be offered a reduction in rent.

Challenges that emerged over those first months are summarised as follows:

- Broad screening criteria for tenants that did not adequately capture issues of domestic violence, substance abuse and significant mental or physical health challenges. Tenants with these complex stories were found to need more support and/or security than MNC services were able to offer.
- Breakdown of relationship between the tenants over alleged breaching of house-rules.
- Conflict arising between tenants over household arrangements, such as sharing food, shopping for basic items, cleaning duties, and linen supplies.

2.9.4. Operational Framework 2: Changes made

A volunteer support worker with prior experience working in community mental health was engaged to review the operational processes. Her suggestions that were adopted included:

1. Assessment process

- Stricter criteria to exclude women who are: 1) fleeing domestic violence; 2) experiencing substance use/withdrawal; or 3) have complex physical and mental health conditions that meant they cannot live independently.
- Revised assessment form that screens for risks (as above) and provides additional information about the social and financial circumstances of the client and support services they are currently linked with.
- Health risk assessments and plans, with attention to both physical and mental health needs
- *Obtain and Release of Information* forms, to improve MNC's ability to refer tenant to housing and other support services.

2. Household management

- The Head Tenant arrangement was replaced with the temporary accommodation for all tenants (up to three women at a time).
- House rules in printable format were provided to all tenants.
- Different coloured linen was designated for each room
- MNC to provide shared household items, such as cleaning detergents and toilet rolls.
- Dedicated shelf space in the kitchen for each tenant

3. Support service – housing

- Provision of general information about housing options and application processes (located in a folder at the house)
- Individualised support and information provided by MNC volunteer support worker, such as:
 - Applications for rental bond and 4 weeks' rent through Queensland Housing's Rent Connect
 - Applications for NRAS (National Rental Affordability Scheme)
 - Support letters are supplied to both tenant and relevant housing organisations to assist with securing suitable rental properties.
 - Advocacy to other support / housing organisations for tenants
 - Practical assistance with moving (e.g. transport, furnishings, NILS loans)

4. Support services – other

- Orientation to services in the local town and at MNC, such as the weekly Community Lunch, Centrelink, etc.
- Conflict mediation between tenants
- Informal supportive counselling from the MNC volunteer support worker
- Formal short-term counselling available at MNC for tenants upon request (and subject to availability of volunteer counsellors).

2.9.5. Volunteer Support Worker role

The support worker role has evolved as a result of the professional skill-set of a MNC volunteer, who typically volunteers 10-20 hours per week of her time, and sometimes up to 30 hours. The hours are made up of approximately 6 hours/week (one day) on-site (at MNC/at the house), and the rest at either home or attending house-related appointments.

In this time, the MNC Volunteer Support Worker fulfils the following tasks:

- Assessment and intake of new tenants
- Orientation for new tenants
- Individualised support, referral and advocacy for tenants to housing and other services
- Attending networking events, such as the Sunshine Coast Housing and Homeless Network held monthly in Nambour
- Writing support and referral letters for tenants
- Addressing concerns from tenants, and providing conflict mediation between tenants
- Informal support counselling for tenants, as needed
- Coordination of maintenance and repairs with the owner, tenants and tradespeople
- Stocking the house with shared supplies (e.g. furnishings, cleaning supplies, veggie box)
- Room/property inspections after tenants have left
- Light cleaning duties, if required after tenants have left
- Helping tenants to move in and out of the house (providing transport, organising furnishings or other items)
- Replying to email or phone contact from tenants
- Administrative tasks
- Attending steering group meetings

2.9.6. Operational challenges

The challenges as perceived by the tenants are outlined below, in **Part 3: Evaluation**. From the perspective of MNC, there have also been some challenges, noted here:

- Damage to furniture and fittings provided by MNC, and because MNC does not take a bond from tenants, repairs or replacement must be paid for by MNC.
- A few tenants have left the rooms and living areas very dirty, placing undue cleaning duties on MNC and the volunteer Support Worker.
- A few tenants have breached house-rules; i.e. drinking alcohol in the house, smoking on the veranda, and inviting men into the house.
- A few tenants have reported problems with a local boarding-house accommodation for men, such as overhearing arguments, witnessing drinking/drug-related behaviours, and unwanted interactions with these tenants.
- When faced with problems in the house, tenants were asked to call the designated MNC mobile number but instead they tended to call the volunteer Support Worker, sometimes out-of-hours and sometimes in excess. (Note: the designated mobile has recently been removed and for the moment, tenants are given the Support Worker's number for 24/7 emergency contact, and otherwise between 9am -3pm weekdays).
- Tradespeople requiring access to the house at irregular times and not always in alignment with the volunteer Support Worker's hours. (Note: this has been mitigated by asking the tradespeople to schedule times directly with the Support Worker. As well, a new volunteer has recently been engaged to help with this).

2.10. THE TENANTS: A SNAPSHOT

The following table shows tenants that have stayed for the period of December 2018 to March 2020

	AGE	CHILD	RENT PAID/WEEK	CIRCUMSTANCES	REFERRED	DURATION OF STAY	OUTCOME
1.	35	nil		Living in a tent in the local showgrounds	Maleny Neighbourhood Centre Emergency Relief	6 weeks	Went to live with friends
2.	54	nil	\$60	Living in her car for one month prior	Caloundra Community Centre	2 months	Moved into her own purchased house in Caloundra
3.	28	2 (4 and 5 year--olds)	\$100	Staying at a friend's house but the relationship broke down	Maleny Neighbourhood Centre Emergency Relief	4 months	Found transition housing (12-24 months) through St Vincents De Paul, located in Maroochydore
4.	61	nil	\$150	Living in a friend's garage	Maleny Neighbourhood Centre Emergency Relief	3 months	Found permanent social housing (1 bedroom unit) in Brisbane
5.	36	1 (5 years old)	\$100	Living in her car	Atrium	2 months	Found transitional housing (12-24 months) in Nambour
6.	43	nil	\$200	Staying at Maleny Hotel, had moved to the area 2-3 months prior from interstate	Maleny Hotel owners	6 weeks	Found shared accommodation in a private rental in Maleny
7.	49	nil	\$150	Living in her car	Caloundra Community Centre	7 months	Went to live with a friend in Caloundra
8.	28	3 (8, 5 and 2 years old)	\$150	Staying at a motel that she could no longer afford	Nambour Community Centre	2 months	NRAS housing in Nambour
9.	35	5 month old baby	\$180	Staying at emergency shelter	Maybanke Emergency Housing Redlands	10 weeks	NRAS housing unit on Sunshine Coast

CLIENT	AGE	CHILD	RENT PAID/WEEK	CIRCUMSTANCES	REFERRED	DURATION OF STAY	OUTCOME
10.	32	nil	\$150	Had been staying at local mental health clinic	Palladium Private Retreat	8 weeks	Went to live in shared house in northern NSW
11.	45	nil	\$150	Living in her car / staying in hotels – was escaping bushfires	Emergency Relief at Maleny Neighbourhood Centre	3 weeks	Found private rental accommodation in Maleny
12.	20	1 (6 years old)	\$160	Couch-surfing	SVDP Young Mums Program	2 weeks	Found private rental accommodation in Landsborough
13.	37	2 (14 year-old and 3-year-old)	\$220	Unstable accommodation with ex-partner	Emergency Relief at Maleny Neighbourhood Centre	current	Currently applying for head lease properties through local real estate agent
14.	26	1 (6-year-old)	\$150	Living in her car	Via Sunshine Coast Council service delivery profile	current	Linked to SVDP Young Mums Program for housing assistance

PART 3: EVALUATION

The evaluation within this document consists of the following key components:

1. Overview:	Overview of aims, logistics and operation of The Women's House
2. Feedback and stories	Collecting and collating feedback and stories from tenants and at-risk women in the community using photovoice and/or interviews.
3. Analysis	Analysis of need and current viability
4. Recommendations	Recommendations for future sustainability of the project

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1.1. Participants

There were a total of 9 participants from two groups:

1. House tenants, previous and current (6 participants)
2. Women in the local community (non-tenants) who have recent or current experience of homelessness (3 participants)

Data was also gathered from the feedback forms of the tenants who had left the house (7 respondents).

3.1.2 Recruitment

House tenants were recruited directly by the researcher and invited to participate, while non-tenants were recruited via "snowball" method (word of mouth), and advertising through MNC channels (news-letter, posters, local noticeboards, etc).

3.1.3 Methodology

This evaluation used a mixed method design of:

1. Feedback and stories from tenants and other women experiencing homelessness in Maleny, using informal and semi-structured interviews.
2. Photovoice
3. Ethnographic data, acquired from observations and conversations about the issue, as recorded by the researcher.

3.1.4 What is photovoice?

Photovoice is a qualitative, participatory research method which reflects the views and realities of participants through photography and written captions. These stories can be shared with the community as a powerful form of story-telling and emancipatory social action.

In this study, participants were invited to attend four 2-hour photovoice workshops, designed to provide basic instruction to participants on the art of photography, encourage discussion and exploration of research themes among participants, and provide a therapeutic space of peer support based on mutual experience.

Three participants engaged in the photovoice workshops.

3.1.5 Ethics: consent, confidentiality and risks

The stigmatising and traumatic nature of homelessness was recognised in the research design, with careful consideration given to:

- The emotional wellbeing of participants who were sharing personal stories that involved trauma and strong emotions;
- Maintaining confidentiality, especially in a small town

(NOTE: a comprehensive table of risks and mitigations is available in the Evaluation Plan, 15th September 2019)

This evaluation used a “consent-as-process” approach (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002) which included:

1. Provision of information to participants about purpose of the research, data storage, dissemination and confidentiality.
2. Signed consent forms
3. Invited verbal consent at critical stages of the participation
4. Right to withdraw consent at any stage

Data storage, privacy and confidentiality is maintained in accordance with MNC Privacy and Confidentiality Policy, which adheres to Queensland Standards for Community Services (Standard 4 Confidentiality and Privacy); Freedom of Information Act 1986 and Privacy Act 1998.

Data (transcripts and other written material) will be held securely by MNC for 5 years, and thereafter be destroyed. Audio recordings of interviews are destroyed after transcripts are complete.

Participants have been de-identified in written reports and publications.

3.1.6 Theoretical approach

This evaluation uses the following theories and approaches:

1. Trauma-informed care and practice – in recognising that the participants may have experienced complex trauma in relation to their experiences of homelessness, the wellbeing and safety of the participants was considered a priority in all interactions. This included the ceding of power to participants where possible, being transparent and honest about the study, providing choice and control, and creating safe spaces in which to tell stories.

2. Anti-oppressive and feminist theory – recognising that research itself is an instrument of power and that participants have likely experienced forms of oppression in society, including oppression of feminine in practical and psychological ways. This research aimed to address oppression by minimising power imbalances in the research practice and allowing participants the opportunity to control the narrative.

3. Bottom-up community development - is vital to create a “culture of human rights” (Ife, 2009). Legislative and policy change will only take us so far; it is the everyday actions of citizens within communities that create lasting change. Participatory research such as photovoice has a ripple effect that begins with the individual participant and then spreads out to ever widening circles of influence, from family and personal social networks, to local communities, to organisations and workplaces, and finally to governing bodies.

PART 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 LIMITATIONS

It is worth noting upfront some limitations within the qualitative study design:

1. The views provided are from the women who resided in the house at different times over the course of a year – in that year, the house operations changed to rectify problems and improve things. A description of these changes over time is provided in **Part 2: Operational Overview**.
2. The focus of the study was on the views of the women (tenants and homeless women) and not on the views of the MNC (staff and volunteers). However, the views of the latter were recorded from meetings and through ethnographic observation, and are incorporated where possible.
3. Interviews and conversations were mostly participant-directed; therefore, if something was not spoken of (e.g. domestic violence), this does not mean it did not feature in the person's story.
4. Interviews ranged from the highly personal, in-depth interview where participants shared in detail, to ad-hoc, less personal conversations conducted in public spaces.
5. Not all the tenants/ex-tenants were available to interview – some declined the invitation, some had moved on or were busy.
6. None of the tenants with children were available for interviewing

4.2 KEY FINDINGS

The following are the key findings. A more detailed analysis is provided below in **4.4. Feedback Forms** and **4.5 Narrative Data**.

KEY FINDING 1: There is a need for temporary accommodation in the community

Given the negative impact of homelessness on the women's health and wellbeing prior to staying at the house, and given the positive feedback from tenants, the house clearly provides a vital 'stepping stone' in the journey to secure housing. The outcomes were largely positive, with 9 out of 12 women (those who left that house at the time of writing) finding permanent accommodation. Apart from short, discretionary times, the house has rarely been vacant.

KEY FINDING 2: 'Community' includes Maleny, hinterland and Sunshine Coast

Referrals have come from neighbourhood centres and social services across the hinterland and Sunshine Coast (e.g. Nambour and Caloundra). And while The Women's House prioritises women who are local to Maleny, it is not practical to limit eligibility because homeless women travel far and wide to find safe places to sleep, comfortable weather and services they need.

Importantly, accepting referrals from social services in the surrounding areas has a direct benefit for the Women's House, as it creates strong networks with housing services and other community partners who can then assist our tenants to find stable accommodation or meet other needs.

KEY FINDING 3: The Women's House is mostly meeting the women's needs

All of the participants expressed gratitude for the house and said it met their expectations. Gratitude was especially given for the Support Worker's help and for the little touches that made them feel cared for, such as the nice furnishings, the weekly fruit and veggie box, and the provision of household supplies. House-rules are considered appropriate, even if not always adhered to. The support from the volunteer Support Worker is a critical element of success in helping the women.

KEY FINDING 4: Housing and practical support for the tenants is essential

All of the tenants expressed difficulties with stress during their tenancies, having come from traumatic circumstances and being without resources and support networks to help them. They needed varying levels of support to find housing, ranging from provision of information and referral letters to assistance with applications and intensive advocacy to housing services. Other practical support examples included included moving belongings and taking a tenant to hospital when she was sick.

KEY FINDING 5: The greatest challenge is house-sharing and conflict between tenants

The women found it difficult to share with strangers, particularly when feeling vulnerable and stressed after a period of homelessness. They acknowledged the role of trauma, domestic violence and mental health issues in these difficulties. Problems arose such as: 1) over-sharing stories with each other; 2) isolating (staying in their rooms) due to fear or mistrust; 3) isolating due to feeling uncomfortable in each other's company; 4) feeling that the presence of young children was adversely affecting mental health; 5) feeling that age differences were counter-therapeutic, and 6) arguments over domestic issues (such as using the washing machine late at night or moving furniture around). Mediation of such problems proved challenging as MNC volunteers and staff tried to strike a balance between helping the tenants versus expecting the tenants to resolve their own conflicts.

KEY FINDING 6: There is a need for more emotional support to be provided to the women

Although the women understood that the house required them to "live independently", it was clear that the preceding circumstances to tenancy took an enormous emotional and psychological toll on them; this trauma was then amplified by sharing a house with strangers who also were dealing with trauma. Further stress was added when domestic disagreements arose. The women wanted more emotional support to be available, such as formal and informal counselling, and supportive group activities, like basket-weaving, art or picnics in the park. These supports would potentially assist in bonding and group cohesion, and in alleviating some of the tensions in the house.

KEY FINDING 7: The location of the house is somewhat problematic

The Women's House is in the locale of a house that caters for homeless men; while this was not an issue for all tenants, for some it created significant problems. There were verified and unverified reports of inappropriate behaviour and interactions with the men (for example, men being invited into the house). Some women felt it posed a safety risk, especially to children. Mitigating such risks need to be considered (see **4.3 Recommendations** below).

KEY FINDING 8: Successful operation is dependent on professional skillsets and significant time capacity

Running The Women's House entails an array of complex tasks which require a high level skillset, such as 1) assessment and intake of tenants; 2) housing advocacy and referral; 3) counselling and mediation; and 4) property management and book-keeping. In the housing sector, such skillsets are professionally acquired and include communication and networking, project management, trauma-informed care and practice, and a broad understanding of homelessness, mental health, family violence, parenting and other social issues. While it is not essential that The Women's House utilises paid support workers, it is essential that the volunteers have the adequate skillset between them, whether acquired from their professional backgrounds or through training at MNC.

As well, the volunteer hours needed to run the house and support the women are significant; as an indicator, the volunteer Support Worker may work up to 30 hours a week, depending on the needs of the tenants, while the steering group also work many uncounted hours.

KEY FINDING 9: The current funding model is working, albeit with vulnerabilities

While it is beyond the scope of this research to assess the financial model for The Women's House, it is important to note in this report that the first year of operations has proven that the house can be run solely from rent, donations, in-kind support and volunteer work. And while it takes much time and energy to raise the necessary funds, this kind of funding allows for flexibility and independence, and arguably aligns better with the spirit of the community than a government-funded program might.

At the same time, there are vulnerabilities with the current model, namely; 1) funding depends on ongoing support from current donors and volunteers; 2) an annual shortfall of approximately \$17,700 is needed from further donations or other sources; 3) MNC can incur costs for cleaning and repairs given that there is no bond from tenants.

4.3 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the key recommendations, based on synthesis of the findings. They are grouped into short-term and long-term recommendations.

4.3.1 Short-term recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: Continuation of service

Based on the successful outcomes for most of the tenants, it is recommended that The Women's House continue to operate as a core service of the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre (MNC), providing temporary accommodation to women and children in the local area and surrounds. Furthermore, it is recommended that the service continues to use the current operational framework, while building resiliency and sustainability with the suggestions below.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Expand the capacity of the support worker role/team

Given that the support worker role is so integral to the functioning of the house and the outcomes for the tenants, it is essential that MNC consider ways to strengthen and expand the support team. This is to further assist the tenants and also to protect the MNC volunteers from burn-out and to address potential gaps should volunteers need to take a break.

While any recommendations would need to be modified to suit the availability and skillset of the volunteers, a general suggestion is to divide the Support Worker role into several roles, with a team of volunteers (4-8 people) managing different aspects and thereby 'spreading the load'. These roles could be shared on a roster system to accommodate the volunteers' holiday or other commitments.

Different roles might be:

1. **Assessment and intake:** interviewing the women, assessing their eligibility and needs, filling in tenancy paperwork and designing a collaborative support plan.
2. **Housing support:** providing information, helping with referrals and filling in forms, advocating to housing services, and attending networking meetings.
3. **Emotional support:** counselling, both formal and informal, group activity programs and conflict mediation
4. **Property management:** managing leases and rental payments, repair requests, inspections, cleaning, replacing linen or broken items, providing weekly household supplies, and cleaning duties if required.

RECOMMENDATION 3: dedicated MNC mobile phone for communicating with tenants

In keeping with recommendation 2, it is suggested that a dedicated MNC mobile phone be provided for the house which is held by one person on a roster system – this person can then field after-hours calls for emergencies, property maintenance, etc.

RECOMMENDATION 4: specialised volunteer training

Also in keeping with recommendation 2, while the current team of volunteers do have the professional skillsets needed, it is suggested that for the sustainability of the service that if future volunteers have gaps in skillset or knowledge, basic training be provided so that the team members feel confident to help the tenants. For example, this may include training in:

1. Housing sector knowledge
2. Trauma-informed care
3. Mental health first aid (already provided by MNC)
4. Family violence and child protection.
5. Confidentiality and privacy (already provided by MNC)
6. Record-keeping processes for the house

RECOMMENDATION 5: Group activities and community meetings

In order to foster bonding and harmony amongst the tenants, as well as provide emotional support, a weekly group activity could be run by a volunteer. Some suggestions by the women included: basket-weaving and crafts, arts, picnics in the park, cooking or BBQ nights. For the same reason, a weekly community meeting is a chance for the Support Worker to share news and information about the house, to hear feedback from tenants, and to iron out difficulties between tenants.

RECOMMENDATION 6: House guidebook

There is already a folder in the house which contains a single page of house-rules and additional information about housing and the local community. However, such a book could be further utilised to foster a positive and harmonious 'house culture' and respect of the rules, by including the following sections:

1. A welcome page, including validating how the woman might be feeling (exhausted, stressed, etc)
2. The history and purpose of the house, and how it is funded by donations
3. What to do if you have problems – emotional or practical
4. The expectations and rules, and the reasons why the rules are in place
5. Policy on length of stay and the reasoning behind this
6. Grievance process
7. Expectations at the time of vacating (cleaning, etc)
8. Some stories from past tenants to inspire hope

RECOMMENDATION 7: Policy on length of stay

It is recommended that tenants be encouraged to stay no longer than three months, and they be expected to accept housing offers that arise, even if not wholly ideal for them. This is for three key reasons:

1. To protect the integrity of the agreement between tenants and MNC, and to honour the purpose of the house
2. To allow for other tenants to use the rooms
3. To discourage patterns of dependence or helplessness that can emerge during a long-term stay

RECOMMENDATION 8: Cleaning bond

Given that several tenants have left their rooms and living areas in a very dirty condition, it is recommended that tenants are asked to provide a cleaning bond (amount negotiated, but suggest \$100), which will allow MNC to bring in a professional cleaner if needed, and will encourage tenants to leave the house clean. If the tenants cannot provide the bond money, then this money could be accrued as part of their weekly rent.

RECOMMENDATION 9: Develop a Memorandum of Understanding with the men's house

It is recommended that MNC develop a Memorandum of Understanding with the operators of the local men's house to set expectations of behaviour for both houses and the interaction between them.

RECOMMENDATION 10: Create more comprehensive feedback forms

The current feedback form has one quantitative question but the scale is unspecific (1-9), while the qualitative questions are good but there is a risk that the person will leave vague answers that do not tell MNC much about the service.

In order to support ongoing evaluation of The Women's House, a more comprehensive feedback form could be created to capture demographical information (such as the length of time the tenant was homeless prior to tenancy, and the length of stay in the house). Ordinal scales (e.g. a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") could better capture tenant satisfaction and quality of service, for example:

- I felt welcome at the house upon arrival
- I felt supported to find housing
- I felt supported when I had problems
- I felt emotionally supported
- The house was comfortable to live in overall
- The kitchen was adequately equipped
- The stay met my expectations

4.3.2 Long-term recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 11: Create a secondary dwelling for families

If a second house could be found, then one could be used for single women and one for mothers and their children, which would eliminate some sources of tension and conflict currently experienced in the house.

RECOMMENDATION 12: Funding and grants

In the future, it may be possible to secure long-term partnerships with donors and to apply for further grants, based on the recent success in securing the Dignity First grant from Queensland Housing. It may also be possible to seek government funding, if this is found to align with MNC values and long-term vision.

4.4 FEEDBACK FORMS

Every tenant is provided with a feedback form at the end of their tenancy. To date, 7 responses have been collected, and are summarised as follows:

QUESTIONS		RESPONSES
1	Did your stay meet your expectations? 1 = yes, totally / 9 = not at all	4 responses = "1" 2 response = "2" 1 response = "3"
2	In a few words, describe your experience:	<i>Overall experience was pleasant, minus a few hiccups. Since has been sorted. Thankful for the support of the housing project.</i> <i>Restful, private, homely and clean.</i> <i>Good, all needed facilities available.</i> <i>Feel very blessed and grateful for your generosity.</i> <i>It was amazing, beautiful help and nice ladies.</i> <i>I am extremely grateful for the support</i> <i>It has been wonderful for me and my little infant son in transition... acted as the perfect stepping stone I most needed in securing long-term accommodation.</i>
3	If you change anything about the house, what would it be?	<i>Make it feel more like a home, in a way that everybody who stays doesn't feel fear or feel uncomfortable that this house project is made for public community knowledge.</i> <i>As it was a very new project I think the concept is amazing and so needed.</i> <i>Safer locks on the room door.</i> <i>Condensation on roof from shower steam.</i> <i>Nothing.</i> <i>Nothing.</i> <i>Linda (the main social worker) should be paid! She goes above and beyond and has been a catalyst in helping me; e.g. got funding to get me a new fridge and washing machine for my new place. I wouldn't have otherwise been</i>

		<i>able to get it.</i>
		<i>More homeless accommodation is needed</i>
4	What was your favourite aspect of the house project?	<i>The wonderful and kind support that the MNC provides to such a close-knit community. Nooreen and Linda were fantastic and generous to my family throughout this transition.</i>
		<i>The helpful people running it - very welcoming and it made me feel at home.</i>
		<i>Friendly.</i>
		<i>My house-mate and my free space.</i>
		<i>Everything, helped me get back on my feet.</i>
		<i>Personalised support and reassurance from the support worker, as well as the weekly donations of fruit and veg were very helpful. Also the spa bath and air-conditioning have been HEAVEN!</i>
		<i>Maleny is a lovely, creative town</i>
5	Have you been able to find suitable accommodation locally? If not, what were the reasons?	<i>Yes, although not locally. Reason being due to increase in rental prices vs affordability.</i>
		<i>My home situation has been a little bit different to others and I am sure that very much across the board. You could never tell when it could be you!</i>
		<i>Yes [note: tenant may have gone to coast?]</i>
		<i>Yes, in Maleny - thank you sooo much!</i>
		<i>No - because my kids go to Nambour State School!</i>
		<i>NO – I have secured an NRAS property in the Caloundra area. There's no suitable or affordable rentals for me in the Maleny area and this area is a bit too far out of the way for my two elder sons for visiting me.</i>
		<i>New accommodation is in Caloundra, due to public transport reasons</i>

4.5 NARRATIVE DATA: CONVERSATIONS AND INTERVIEWS

Four semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, as well as various informal conversations with participants. Interviews were transcribed, while informal conversations were recorded ethnographically. Data was coded under the following broad categories:

1. Preceding circumstances to homelessness
2. Experience of being homeless
3. Tenancy in the house – experience and recommendations
4. Post-homelessness
5. Messages for the community

4.5.1. Preceding circumstances

Homelessness, like any complex circumstance, does not come out of nowhere, nor can it be ascribed to a single cause. There are nearly always multiple stressors which contribute to the eventual act of leaving a home with a few possessions and no clear plan. When asked to describe the preceding circumstances (“what happened before you were homeless”), the women spoke about the following key themes.

a) Marriage dissolution / separation

Four of the women mentioned separating from their marriage spouses as being a catalyst for their eventual homelessness; the separation had put them in precarious financial situations in which they were trying to raise children as sole parents with very little income. Two of these women cited domestic violence as the reason for leaving the marriage.

b) Financial stress and lack of employment

Six of the women identified financial hardship. Out of these, four relied on benefits (either the Disability Support Pension or Newstart Allowance), one participant was on Workcover, and one participant made a sporadic income from buying and selling properties. None of the women had reliable employment or income streams, for reasons that included marriage separation, being sole parents, or living with a physical disability or mental health issues.

c) Housing affordability

Two women saw housing affordability on the range as the main reason for their homelessness; both women had grown up in the area and had children at the local schools. They had seen the gentrification of Maleny, including the increase in Airbnb properties, and felt they had been out-priced from their own native town and land. Both women expressed anger at “wealthy people” and the short-term letting economy that was potentially impacting the lower income community. As she put it:

The issue I see constantly and the issue I faced was that the price range [of Maleny accommodation] was astronomical.

And another participant explained:

So I was a separated parent on a sole income and the place that I was living in was being sold out from underneath me and turned into an Airbnb... I [was] eking an existence, with hungry times where there wasn't enough money for food. However, still, there I was... I was out and there was an Airbnb. So this is where the seeds of contempt [began] that people could do that ...

d) Mental and physical health

Five of the women spoke of mental health issues and three spoke of physical health issues that had existed prior to their homelessness. These health issues acted as significant barriers to gaining reliable employment and securing accommodation.

The mental health issues stemmed from previous traumas, including workplace assault, workplace bullying, domestic violence, and childhood trauma. One participant said her mental health condition made looking for work impossible, even though she was expected to do so whilst on Newstart Allowance. Another participant described it thus:

I don't like the word but I use it because it's what people know... I had PTSD, childhood trauma, trauma from my marriage, domestic violence... So my emotional state can tend to be vulnerable and with stress it's not very good...

Following a workplace assault three years prior, one participant had suffered both physical and psychological trauma. Crippling depression, suicidal thoughts and social anxiety led her to completely isolate herself and to put on 45 kilos. Making a new start was literally a matter of life or death for her:

So I got to the point where I was doing everything... that I'm supposed to do, but it just didn't get any better... And then I just thought about [suicide] like I'd almost done before and that's when I realised I didn't want to do that. So I was like, "Oh my God, I can't stay here". Even though I loved my little house, it became my torture chamber... I was like a prisoner in my own home...

e) Safety

Three of the women became homeless due to feeling unsafe. Lisa's history of trauma meant she didn't feel safe without a locked door to her dwelling; therefore, when her interim Airbnb accommodation could not provide locks on the doors, she fled. One participant was living with a male house-mate whom she feared had intent to harm her, while another participant found herself living in an isolated area next to a male neighbour who seemed dangerous. Both decided to risk homelessness rather than risk their lives.

4.5.1. Experience of being homeless

At some stage, most of the participants reached a defining moment when they became homeless and life became dramatically harder. For these women, homelessness was a traumatic experience in itself which impacted their ability to function, let alone thrive. At the same time, two participants did not describe homelessness in negative terms; instead they emphasised the positive aspects of freedom and connection to the land. Furthermore, all of the women were able to cite something helpful or beneficial that emerged from their experience.

a) Lack of family/support networks

Five women mentioned a lack of family support – this was due to a range of reasons: 1) estrangement from family; 2) not feeling emotionally safe with family; 3) geographical distance from family; 4) shame or pride.

Debra shared that she did not tell a soul about her homelessness, not even her friends, parents or children, due to her sense of shame and pride:

[Being alone] is one of the hardest things. And you're still alone and you still have your disabilities of anxiety and depression in this busy world. You're still doing it on your own. There's not really any support there unless you have family support, you pretty much having to cope the way you can.

Conversely, Elsa accepted short-term help from friends and family, such as staying in their homes or garages, but she couldn't find long-term solutions with them. As she put it:

Some of my friends got angry coz my kids can't help me. But they can't help me!

One participant had to make the heart-breaking decision to relinquish care of her child during her two-year period of homelessness:

Because I'm co-parenting, and because I care for my son to not be dragged through transient situations, because I didn't want him in the car or in a spare room and stuff like that, I left him in the care of his father. And so added to the whole picture of things spinning around in my messy head was what a failure I was of a mother ...

Another participant had a cat which she identified as her only family, and which she had to be separated from until she found permanent accommodation.

b) Mental health

Five of the women described how their mental health radically declined during their homelessness. Only one was linked into adequate mental health support; the others suffered with little help. When Debra tried to reach out to the hospital, she was turned away:

I remember ringing, trying to get into the hospital for a few days but I couldn't get in because I wasn't acute enough.... unless you've got a disability or you can prove that you've done something wrong or bad, it's very hard to get any help in that respect.

One participant accessed a mental health plan from her GP, but didn't find the process or the counselling support to be helpful. She spoke of 3-4 week waiting times and the pain of having to tell her story over again through her feelings of shame:

I did also go to the doctor so I could get free mental health support, and that process was ... somewhat gruelling. I found that was humiliating, very difficult. But that's just me being a proud person. I don't know if that's a barrier for lots of people asking for help. And it's no discredit to the people I saw as counsellors, but ... I felt like the people who I saw weren't actually good enough to really help me. They were as good as someone to talk to which does help, but none of them helped me to be able to break the cycle I was in.

This same participant shared this poignant story to give insight into the self-perpetuating cycle of homelessness, poverty, unemployment and mental health issues:

If there was a bottom line of why I was in that situation, it's because even though I was looking for places to live, I couldn't afford them, and the reason I couldn't afford them was because I couldn't find work, and whenever I made great connections or someone said "this person is looking for someone", I would take the steps, I would go to the interview, but because I was in such a shabby state of mental health, I wouldn't get it. And that was a vicious cycle which just kept going. I felt like an absolute loser: "How come I can't just get a job in a shop?" you know? It was the mental health factor that was keeping me there really.

You know, this one particular job that I thought I might have had, there was two employers. And I went and met one employer and I managed to meet them on a good day, and I had it all together and it was all great, it was all lined up and was all going to happen, and they wanted me to meet the other part of the employment team. And I met that person on a day when I had trouble getting myself you know, it was a day when I wouldn't normally have gone outside if I didn't have to. And she didn't want me. And fair enough—she wants happy people to sell the things in her shop (laughs). But I still see her on the street ... I've gotten over feeling angry at her but I have often wanted to just go up to her and say, "Hey did you have any idea of the story that was behind my life?" Somehow for my own dignity, to explain myself....

c) Physical health and diet

Five of the women had physical health issues that burdened them at the time of being homeless. One participant is in her seventies—she had an arm injury which limited her capacity to drive her vehicle and increased her risk of falling. Another participant contracted the flu, which in turn pushed her to seek help at a neighbourhood centre. Yet another participant contracted pneumonia from which she believes she nearly died, and which took two months of recovery. She knows her immune system was compromised but also feels that the illness was reflective of her unfelt and accumulated grief.

One participant linked her physical issues to emotions; she has ongoing back pain which at times is so debilitating that she can't walk and has to go to hospital. She said that it happens when she is "feeling unsupported".

Three of the women emphasised unhealthy diets whilst homeless; one participant had to be very careful what she ate, yet fresh, wholesome food was difficult to come by:

I'm vegan as well. And it's really hard to [eat]... it's not fresh, healthy food. So I found that difficult. And I also have health problems with my gut... I have to be very careful with my diet for health reasons. And when I do get stressed and anxious, my stomach does play up even more, and it's scary for me because I don't want to end up in emergency surgery again. It's frightening.

Another participant corroborated this point:

You've got no way of preparing it, so you end up buying fast-food, so your health is affected. My diet changed because I was constantly on the move. I wasn't able to have fresh stuff as much, so there was a lot more junk involved or pre-made food.

d) Safety

Four of the women spoke about safety concerns. For one participant, it was a significant issue because of her trauma history of being assaulted. Whilst homeless, she was considering buying a car to live in, but had this to say about the idea:

I personally don't know whether I would feel safe enough. Because of my past experience, I'd just be petrified of a night. Especially with some of the stories [a friend] was telling me about living in her car. Like someone even offered her money for sex. Do you know what I mean? Sometimes I just hear a gumnut drop and I'll have a panic attack. That's how bad I used to be. And being a woman on your own, people see you as an easy target.

Another participant who did sleep in her car expressed similar fears for her safety:

I went to stay at a caravan park but they wouldn't let me because they knew I'd be sleeping in my car. A few times I slept in the street, like behind the pool, but it's just very unsafe. You never really slept, you're always on guard...and mine wasn't a van that was covered in or anything, mine was a [wagon] you could see straight into it. It wouldn't be hard for someone to break into it ...

One participant who had experienced transiency for many years had reconciled the issue of safety and spoke about it in philosophical terms; how she had liberated herself from years of programmed fear instilled from her cultural upbringing and her father's teaching that "it's a cruel world". She explained how her experiences "on the road" had challenged her to confront these fears, to the point where she now trusted being alone in nature, and had come to embrace her freedom and personal power.

e) Accessing housing services

Five of the women gave comment about trying to access housing services whilst homeless. One participant expressed anger about the government's rhetoric of providing safe and affordable housing for all, while in reality she was excluded from the "high needs" category and was therefore on the bottom of waiting lists.

Two participants (neither of whom should have been on the "bottom of the list" due to having young children in their care) reflected a similar hopelessness regards social housing. They had been told of long waiting lists (4-7 years) for housing. Jane felt the process of enquiry was disheartening and degrading:

The Department of Housing have a wait list that's like, four years... And every time I spoke to somebody they said just "Forget it - you can put yourself on the list but it won't help you right now". So I had three or four negative experiences with the government department ... it is so interesting the prejudices that you encounter... this prejudice that I'm just some kind of no-hoper who thinks that the world should offer them something and who thinks it's somebody else's role to provide me with housing.

One participant who was in her seventies and had physical health issues was offered social housing in a local residential facility – she lived there for a short period but felt trapped and miserable. She liked many aspects of her transient life and felt what she was losing more than she was gaining:

Elsa had a positive experience: she said that with the help of the Support Worker at the Women's House, her housing application process was smooth and she found accommodation quickly.

f) Other services

The women spoke about the difficulty of meeting their everyday needs, such as accessing wi-fi and tap water. Ann was frustrated about the price of simple things that she felt should be free, like water. She had been asked to pay money to fill up her water containers and finding "free taps" in the community was a challenge. She praised the Maleny Library - especially the power-points at the picnic tables at Tesch's Park. These simple facilities she would like to see more of.¹

Jane also praised the library and community of people that often gathered in the park, providing social, emotional and practical support to the "invisible" homeless community of Maleny:

That public library supports so many people. It is one of the greatest assets to this community, that library and the staff there. They're very supportive, they're very non-judgmental... so many homeless people of this town rely on that library for the wi-fi, and for the information that's in there, and for the seats and the shade and the tap and the plug... and the smiley people in there...

There was a crowd of people always hanging out at the library, you know there's homeless folk part of that crowd, and some other people who... to be honest I don't really know where they live, but I know the reason that they're there is because they're taking care of those people. They just

¹ Note: the power-points have since been removed.

come and hang out there and they're taking care of the people in the town. Notable local Indigenous people are part of that. Just taking care of the people who are there.

I'd love if people could see that, and take a leaf out of their book, you know. There's a whole lot of unpaid community work that gets done by good people.

g) Expenses

Three of the women talked about how hard it was to survive financially; they explained there were burdensome expenses, such as petrol and food, which particularly had an impact. As Jane succinctly put it:

There's nothing cheap about living out of a car, because you have nothing to be able to store cheap food, make food at home, like it's just a cycle like that. And even to try and eat healthy food, to keep yourself in good condition, it's really expensive. And if you need to buy it from the shop every day, you can't.

Elsa had a similar sentiment:

I'm going everywhere, buying groceries, and then I had to leave my friend's place urgently, so I leave all my groceries behind, and then I've got to go and buy a new batch of groceries... you're just in and out of your car...

h) Possessions

Three of the women spoke of the logistical difficulties with regards to possessions. Lisa had no car and so everything she owned was in "three boxes and a suitcase". Even this was too much to carry on her own:

I was already thinking... where can I dump my stuff... maybe I'm gonna have to get rid of it, and just have my backpack.

Another participant, who spent two years homeless, recalled the emotional hardship of not being able to have possessions that many take for granted:

I spent a lot of time in second-hand shops looking for the things that I would need - if there was a pair of shoes or whatever it was, because that was definitely as far as I could go in terms of being able to afford things. But there were whole sections of the opp shop that were unavailable to me because they contained the furniture, and the bedding, and the decorations, and the dress-up clothes, and the 'whatever'...

As well, there was emotional attachment to possessions that were important –or even critical – to survival:

My car, when I had to let go of my car because it fell apart, that was hard to let go of. I didn't even realise until I handed it over and I walked away from the place I sold it to \$100. I just fell to pieces,

like a friend of mine had just died. Coz the backseat of my car was really comfortable to sleep in and I felt such security with that back seat because I knew that I could sleep there, I could get a good nights' sleep there.

i) Positive aspects

Seven of the women spoke about positive aspects of homelessness or transiency. For some, these positives far outweighed the negatives, whereas for others, they were a “silver lining” on an otherwise gloomy time.

Elsa spoke about a spiritual catharsis, whereby she was deeply transformed:

It's very stressful, a lot of tears. But I've learned a lot in some ways and I'm grateful to the experience in some ways because it's cathartic for me spiritually. I've had to do a lot of work on myself but it's not just that, it's a whole process. For a woman who's on her own and being vulnerable, security is an issue, there are practical issues, but spiritually it shifted me a lot, in a good way. That doesn't mean it wasn't hard and isn't hard (laughs). In some sense I've been spiritual all my life. In surviving as a single parent, a lot of that energy in surviving takes away from the spiritual, if you get lost down that track. And I got lost down that track, so I'm actually really grateful that I've been brought back to my centre more. So there has to be an upside to everything.

Similarly, Lisa shared how the experience had taught her to follow her inner guidance, to stay positive, and to know that everything works out in the end:

I work hard, I do work hard every day. And I try and challenge myself. You can be in paradise and make it a prison... if that's where your mind takes you. Or you could be in prison and be free. I know you can do amazing things with your mind if you set your mind to it. I just feel really blessed and lucky that the universe was looking out for me, and I'm actually listening. I know when I do listen to myself, that doors do open. So that's the thing I'm learning about myself.

Another gift or insight that was described by two participants was developing compassion and empathy for other people, which had grown from their own experiences of hardship. As Jane explains:

In a larger, long-term perspective, I was aware of it at the time and it's still there and will continue to be there forever... it was the amount of compassion I gained for people in any circumstance. That you can just not know what's going on in the background of someone's life to explain why they are or where they are. That was a really huge gift that came out of it, a gift of insight.

The personal deepening of compassion was linked also to having witnessed the compassion of the community in action. Three participants spoke of the goodwill within the community, and how this had affected them.

It has taught me to know what's around for women. Say for instance, when I was at the motel, you've gotta feed the laundry money to wash your clothes, but then I found out about Orange

Laundry that went to the Caloundra Community Centre once a week... so you go there and meet all different types of people, and woman are actually living in their vans. You can tell there's just so many different people. So now I can now recommend this Orange Laundry... a fantastic group of people, volunteers, and people can go there and have a cup of tea and have a chat.

And Jane:

The other great thing was meeting all the homeless people (laughs). Because after a while you're parking in the same car park, you're going to the same public toilets, you're going to the library, you're going to the same places and the same people are there, and there started to be this kind of like, community.

And Lisa:

People in this community seem to be more open to helping people. And they do see people and they do say hello to you in the streets, and that really struck me.

j) Positive aspects: Freedom

Four of the women challenged society's conservative definitions of home and saw within their experience of homelessness a space for potential personal liberation from the constraints of social norms. One participant was a First Nations woman who alluded to the gift of freedom that comes from transiency when compared to the whitefella's constraining idea of homes made of "rectangles" and "squares" in which she didn't feel comfortable. She preferred instead to be outside in the space and fresh air, and she described the land as being home:

When we go walk-about, wherever we go is home.

Her insights were shared by Ann, who had chosen her transient freedom over being "stuck" as she saw it. She described deeply moving moments when she had connected with nature and the land, and summarised this by saying:

All my magic moments have been in the wild. Something happens in the park, it's exhilarating. There's paradise wherever you go, if you look for it. These experiences I've had; you can't buy that. I could have lived in suburbia but I would have gone mad.

In the women's narratives, there was a coupling of the concept of "home" with the concept of "the system", as though the two were frustratingly entangled. To greater or lesser degrees, there was tension between the participants' desire for shelter and comfort of some sort, versus the desire to be free from the binds of a system which many disapproved of. Jane expressed it thus:

I totally would not take on this experience for this, but it was great to feel just a little bit outside of the system (laughs) ... like "Hey I'm outside the system, I'm not playing your game!" You know, the rat race game. I don't love the rat race. I don't love the game that is around here, the social economic game...

Jane's "rat race game" captures the moral difficulties faced by the women when trying to function in a capitalist system that one could argue is inherently oppressive to certain groups of people, such as women or First Nations people. To restore her personal power in the face of inequity, Jane was able to find a wholly new insight into what "home" could mean – a place within oneself which can never be lost, taken away or stolen:

And the other thing is, in order not to just completely fall apart, I did really have to learn to focus on my sense of 'home' in myself, because if there's nothing else to hang 'home' on....

Likewise, two participants (one a First Nation woman) claimed their sovereignty and "right to be at home" through their lifetime's connection to country. For example, Ann knew where the local "food trees" were and just like the seedling she had donated to the local park many years ago that had since grown into a mighty tree, her roots went deeply and unshakeably into the land.

k) Identity, judgment and stigma

Six of the women spoke about challenges to their identity and worth; these challenges came from within (internalised self-judgment) and from others. Along with losing a place to call home, the women often lost work and jobs, ability to contribute, and even caring duties for their children. This resulted in loss of self-esteem and self-confidence.

Before her experience of homelessness, one participant had derived her self-esteem from employment. But after a workplace assault left her unemployed, dealing with physical and mental trauma, her self-esteem tumbled:

I've never not worked. And I was a single parent before I studied. It's very important to me personally, as well as to teach my son. I don't want to just sit at home and do nothing. And that's why ... I spiralled into some crazy depression. Because I just didn't have any value in myself because I wasn't contributing anymore. I wanted to work. I even tried to go back early but that just traumatised me even more. So for me, to have not even a job is really ... uncomfortable to admit to people. I am actually doing a job; it's just not valued or named. I'm looking after myself. Everything I'm doing is for me and my future, because if I don't, I won't have a future. I'm getting myself well, I'm becoming a better member of society, I can start working, and contributing... but I'm also contributing anyway, by showing people, "this is life and this is what you can do". That's what I keep telling myself.

Another participant spoke of losing her creativity and her confidence:

I'm a creative type and in recent years had taken up painting but my artistic juices have shrivelled up. I mean, I've still got stuff that I can't find, still got stuff in storage. I didn't do any art for 2 years... I lived in a friend's backyard in a tent for six weeks ... it's all about surviving rather than connecting and thriving. I'm a nature person and a people person, and when you're homeless, you disconnect from that as well because it's all survival and there's fear involved. It was really, really hard... it basically broke me.

Being in “survival mode” had many negative impacts on the women. One participant reflected on how it had changed her because she didn’t have the energy to be nice to people all the time, and that was distressing to her. This view was echoed by another participant, who found it hard to keep up an external façade of “functionality” while being in a chronic state of crisis. She noted that when she stayed in other people’s homes, she felt the social pressure to “be good and nice” yet this niceness was sometimes at the cost of expressing her authentic and “messy” feelings. She experienced similar pressures when working casually as a teacher and performer:

The only things I had running in my life to be able to make some money were things which ... were in a public place [teaching and performing]. I had enough ability to mostly contain my inner world, to be able to pull those things off and make it look like to the rest of the world that my life was okay, because you need to be able to do that to do those things, so I did a very marvellous job of everybody thinking that everything was okay, but feeling completely voiceless. Everything wasn't okay.

Four of the women spoke of the anger they felt over the injustice of homelessness, and often this emotion was expressed hand in hand with feelings of powerlessness, self-judgment and shame. Two women who were born in the area felt anger at the socio-economic inequities that had displaced them; one participant candidly expressed how it felt to be born in a town in which she now felt ostracised:

*After about 18 months of being in and out of peoples' lounge rooms and spare rooms and gardens and tents and cars, I found myself walking down the main street of Maleny and seeing all these beautiful people who have really comfortable, lovely, rewarding, beautiful lives ... the ones that have happy marriages and healthy children who go to the lovely school and they have promising careers and they have enough money, and all this kind of thing, and who are my friends, and I found myself just seething with hatred at these people, because they had what I didn't have... [Being born here is] always really vivid in my mind, and contributes to the sense of kind of resentment ... of like “who the **** are you people?” I'm born here, how come I can't live here? Like I was raised in this society, and somehow I'm an outcast. An invisible outcast.*

This participant also referred to the “empty houses” she saw on her travels around the hinterland and coast, and how this affected her:

Empty houses ... driving along the road, every house I passed was not my house. I was like “Could I live in that house? How come I don't live in that house? And if there's nobody living in that house, how come there's no one living in that house, and why can't I live in that house?” And you know it's very sort of child-like and simplistic, but from a perspective of just knowing that there really isn't anything particularly wrong with me - I have so many skills, abilities, friends, I'm a normal-ish kind of person with a bit of a mental health issue and maybe a bit eccentric, but I'm not that far out there. How come? I'm a member of this society, I grew up here. Why is that house empty and I'm not in it?

The theme of feeling invisible was identified by three of the women. Like the theme of anger, it went hand-in-hand with feelings of shame. One participant did not tell anyone about her homelessness, except for the local neighbourhood house that eventually assisted her. Another participant spoke of her own feelings about people who are homeless:

I used to always try and acknowledge [homeless people] when I saw them, because I know what it's like when people don't see you even though you're there. Even though sometimes you do want to be invisible because it is embarrassing to be like that, you want to be seen at the same time. It's just your circumstances that make you embarrassed but you're still a human being with feelings who's not getting any attention from anyone... I try and see people to really see people because so many people don't.

And Jane expressed it using a metaphor of the “invisible cage” that impeded her freedom to participate in life:

During the whole experience I felt so voiceless and unseen. And that whole experience was earth-shatteringly, massively stressful and traumatic, and to be invisible in that kind of desperate condition and feel voiceless was horrible. If it were an image, it's this kind of invisible cage, an invisible cage that I moved around the world in, with all these interlocking panes of glass which has some aspect that is an unspoken one, and an unrecognised one, and it's a block that says “I can't do it, I can't...”

Three of the women spoke of feeling judged by others – whether by friends, family or people they knew, or by a sense of condemnation from greater society. One participant referred to people’s moral judgments about “handouts” that she encountered:

‘If you're poor, be thankful for what you get' ... And I mean, I am grateful but there's a matter of dignity involved, there's a matter of being criticised or looked up on differently because you're in a different situation. And you're judged. Yeah, I've encountered some rather serious judgment when I was homeless... people who look at you and blame you. And some people are against handouts and helping and people think “shut up and take what you can get”.

Another participant reflected on the misunderstanding that people have about homelessness, thinking it is a simple issue to fix and therefore judging her for “failing” to fix it.

It's hard for people. You can apply it to any situation; when someone doesn't understand what you're going through. On the outside they're like, “why don't you just get a job?” or whatever it is. You tell that person your sad story that hasn't changed several times and they don't want to hear it anymore, or even if they don't say it, they start to give you, you know, silent judgment. I didn't feel like I had anywhere to go to be able to share it.

Among the women that spoke about judgement and stigma, their challenges were greatly compounded by their isolation and shame. This was captured poignantly by this image, given by one participant:

I do wish I'd taken a photo of my car... you know, everything that one could possibly need was pared down to the absolute minimum. It looks pretty ugly, right, so then there's the blanket that goes across so no one can see what's underneath that, right. And then there's the shame if you forget to put the blanket there... the shame...

4.5.3. Tenancy in the house

At the time of interviewing, six of the women were/had been tenants of the house. They gave detailed feedback about their experiences, which has been presented as themes below.

Note: The women resided in the house at different times over the course of a year – in that year, the house operations changed to rectify problems and improve things. These changes can be roughly divided into Framework 1 (1-3 months) and Framework 2 (3-12 months). Where it feels relevant, the Framework period is denoted.

a) Gratitude

If we look at the feedback forms, it is clear that overall the women appreciated the house and the support from MNC. The brief written comments (tabled above in the section **4.4. Feedback Forms**) were then corroborated in the interviews. As Debra said:

I do think that the house was my saviour at the time. I don't know what would have happened... I would have tipped over the edge into something more ... whether I would have gone banging on the hospital door to get in because I needed somewhere safe to stay...

And Lisa:

So that's my thing with being at the house. I'm so grateful, it just made me feel like I could finally breathe. And actually rest. It gives you faith in humanity again. That people actually do give a shit about you, even though you're nobody to them. And you know it's genuine, it's not put on. That's what makes a difference – it's real, it's not pretend. It's not pity, that's what it is, it's not pity. I just felt really grateful.

b) The house – practical and aesthetic impressions

Three of the women mentioned the ambient feel of the house and its furnishings and décor (new furniture was implemented at the start of Framework 2). Two participants praised the ambiance, with Lisa commenting:

When I got to the house, I was like, "are you for real?" It's such a beautiful house. I thought it was going to be this run-down, beaten house... because I have lived in places like that as a child, so I didn't think it was gonna be so beautiful, so beautifully presented. You have this expectation of what you think it's gonna be... you feel like shit... so you wouldn't expect it to be like that.

Another participant (who was present during Framework 2) did not feel it was homely enough, and commented:

[The house] has still got a certain amount of stiffness about it, a formality. You've got your rules pasted up everywhere, and everyone has it in their bedrooms. It needs to be where you can come and... (she breathes deeply).

There were also some practical problems that were noted in the interviews:

1. The house was cold in winter
2. The house is noisy, and especially the “ensuite bedroom” which is near the kitchen and the washing machine and tumble-dryer (the participant who made this comment had to wear ear-plugs.
3. It can feel crowded, especially when there are children present (see **d) Sharing with Strangers**)

c) Location

Three of the women shared concerns about the house location being in the locale of a temporary house for men; they all felt it posed a safety risk, especially to children. One participant said she heard/witnessed inappropriate conversations and behaviour fuelled by alcohol and/or drugs, and some women reported interactions with the men (conversations) which concerned them.

One participant felt that the house location in town and the parking arrangements (visible from the street) made it unsafe for women and children escaping domestic violence.

(It is worth noting that The Women’s House is not intended to be a refuge for women in these situations; however, there have been tenants who have histories of domestic violence, or who have not disclosed domestic violence, therefore it remains a risk – see **4.3 Recommendations**)

d) Sharing with strangers

Three of the women reflected on the difficulties of sharing with strangers, particularly when feeling vulnerable and stressed after a period of homelessness. These women acknowledged the role of trauma in these difficulties –indeed, four of the participants had histories of abuse or domestic violence or other significant trauma, and their mental health had been further compromised by the experience of homelessness. This in turn made living with strangers more challenging. Debra contextualised her house-mates’ behaviour:

With the ladies in the house, I was very fortunate I think, maybe I was a bit more mature and can see that other people have bigger problems than my own or different problems. I could see that because I've been through a lot in my lifetime, a lot of different types of problems that I've had to grow up with... So I could go, “Alright, just because she’s being that way doesn't mean that she doesn't like you and shouldn't be acting that way - it's just how she's coping, and she obviously needs someone to speak to, she needs something to help her through that.”

And Lisa expressed it this way:

You know shit's happened in everybody's lives, and sometimes you know people are reacting because of that, and then there are other people who don't realise that, and they think someone's attacking them. Or they're taking it personally. Or sometimes it is personal because they're pissed off because of everything's that's happened to them, and I totally get that as well. That's why I say, just putting so many people with trauma together – phew!

From this dynamic of “putting people with trauma together”, problems arose such as:

- 1) Over-sharing stories with each other to the point where a person felt triggered or uncomfortable;
- 2) Isolating (staying in their rooms) due to fear or mistrust of each other.
- 3) Isolating due to feeling uncomfortable in each other's company

One participant spoke about feeling on edge or vigilant. This was in part because of stories she had been told about the other tenants, which caused her to worry about trusting them:

I take a long time to relax naturally, so being in a foreign place with foreign people... even though I was so grateful... you're just waiting, [thinking] “is it safe in here?”, you know, all the different noises, different people....

... It's weird living with strangers. I don't think people realise how uncomfortable it can be, even though you're grateful too to be there, you're uncomfortable.

Two of the women mentioned the house should ideally have more spaces/areas to chill out in, away from each other (for example, a second lounge).

And for similar reasons, four of the women mentioned that having separate houses, one for single women and another for women with children, would be better:

It was really uncomfortable... because they took over the house and [I] just stayed in my room and quickly went out and cooked and then went back to my room... When it's a family... you feel like you're encroaching on them, especially when there're more than one... you probably feel a bit more equal when there's one-on-one. You feel like you're intruding on their family time while they're watching kids' shows. I crept around, even when you're cooking in the kitchen, I tried to be really quiet, respectful and courteous...

Three of the single participants felt that having children around adversely affected their mental health. One participant who shared the house with a family said she had a marked increase in her trauma symptoms during this time, and she commented that putting older women in with young mums and their kids was counter-therapeutic for the older women. This view was corroborated by Elsa, who said:

It's not a quiet space, the floorboards, the echoing... there's nothing to absorb the noise. I don't think that house is suitable unless you have it available for all singles or all people with kids.

Lisa noted that some of the tensions in the house were relieved by having locks on the bedrooms doors, even though it was also inconvenient:

You're very vigilant in the house, locking your door... I even did that when I had my shower – I'd lock my door so nobody could go into my room... just in case. It gives you a sense of security, knowing that your stuff is safe as well. So you need the locks.

One participant felt that there should also be locks on the kitchen cupboards, with separate cupboards and fridges for each tenant, given that “you will get people in there who will steal”, she said.

Conflict between tenants was identified by all six participants. The issues ranged from fairly “minor” issues (such as washing machines being used late at night or furniture being moved), to more serious breaches of house-rules (such as the allegation that a man had been allowed in the house). Mediation of such problems proved challenging as MNC staff tried to strike a balance between helping the tenants versus expecting the tenants to resolve their own conflicts.

In one instance, a participant who was distressed about the behaviour of another tenant sought help at MNC but felt let down when she was told that MNC did not “provide counselling” and was directed to call Lifeline instead (note: the notion of counselling is considered more in **e) Emotional support in the house**). She is critical of this response because the incident related to the house, and as such was part of MNC's duty of care:

[MNC management] said we're not here to counsel but I really think there needs to be something set in place for the women. Everyone's coming from a crisis. And then you dump everyone into this pot and expect everyone to get along... It just doesn't make sense. You put a number of stressed, vulnerable, damaged, traumatised women into a soup-pot and expect it all to go well, it's not.

Her view was corroborated by the suggestion of another tenant:

They need a support worker who is actually not a volunteer, whether they come in two hours a week or ... I mean, poor [volunteer Support Worker], she is there to oversee things but it's not up to her to try and solve the problems with the people in the house.

There were three women that cited benefits of sharing with others. Lisa noted the friendship that developed between her and another tenant, while Debra saw sharing a house as a strength, providing companionship for the women. And a third participant could see potential for women to learn skills in house-sharing that might help them in the long-run:

If you get women to share, they become more confident and can perhaps go on to share a house.

This same tenant recommended having a weekly, informal get-together, like cooking a shared meal or a BBQ, so that tenants could bond with each other and allow friendships to develop. Another participant also mentioned shared activities, though more as a means to supporting mental health.

e) Emotional support in the house

Three of the women talked about the need for some kind of emotional support to be available, such as formal and informal counselling, and/or supportive group activities, like basket-weaving or picnics in the park. Although these women understood that the house required them to be “able to live independently”, they also pointed out the reality that tenants are invariably traumatised and in need of support. Elsa explained how it felt to arrive at the house:

When you land, the shit hits the fan emotionally. It's like hitting a wall. You're in survival mode and then “boom!” You land.... it's happened to me before. I really crashed and burned because I'm so exhausted and overwhelmed, and you've never had the time to process how yuck everything was.

Lisa distinguished between the conversations between tenants versus formal support:

I think the house does need [therapy support]. That do need to have someone on call... because some of the conversations, I don't want to be having those conversations with those people... you're only a person going through this experience as well, and it's just too much.

The women advocated an individualised approach that could be formal if the person needed that (e.g. a set appointment time with a counsellor) or informal (e.g. a spontaneous phone chat). One participant articulated the difficulties in expecting the women to be fully independent:

[You need to] talk to someone about your shit... just vent. Even though they're not sitting in a corner rocking and need to go to hospital, you still need that emotional support. Because there are huge things that people are going through, and sometimes things flare up or get tricky because you've just come out of something. [There were times when] it would have been nice to just have a chat. And with someone that you don't have to explain, “Oh I'm staying in this house... and this is how it works”. And you know it's gonna be confidential. And you might be able to say something about the other housemates but they're not gonna take it on board, they know you need to get it out and they're not gonna read too much into it.

I know that place is not supposed to be like that. You're supposed to be quite independent and together... but then that's thing, you are, but there's still whatever trauma or issue, and you can't ignore that. I totally get it if someone has a very obvious mental health issue, I can understand you wouldn't put them in the [house]... but sometimes you don't know until you get the person in there, how much trauma or how damaged they are. There's massive amounts of trauma. It's not just the last thing that happened to them... there's all the other stuff beforehand. It comes up, unfortunately.

Her views were echoed by another participant:

[The volunteer Support Worker] would come on Wednesday or Thursday or whatever it was but you don't have your issues just on one day. I think if they're going to have a support house for women then they need to have some emotional support as well.

It's almost too clinical. "Okay, here's your house, here's your place, go and sort yourselves out". I mean, it's great that we have the guidance of Rent Connect and when Centrelink's available but there's still a certain amount of effort you have to put into doing it and when you're depressed or exhausted, completely drained, even that's a huge effort. So I think there has to be more connection, personal connection to the tenants.

Aside from counselling, there were other suggestions made for group activities that would be relaxing, grounding and socially bonding; these included picnics, BBQs, basket-weaving, pottery, art therapy and pet therapy. As Elsa candidly pointed out:

You need to have some fun and when you've been broke or you're depressed, you haven't got the confidence to go out, you don't know what to do, you're confused, lost, your confidence is in the toilet. The old sit-around-have-a-cuppa, talk... or art therapy is very good and also very cathartic.

f) Practical support in the house

Three of the women mentioned practical supports that the house provided, such as housing referrals and advocacy. One participant was grateful for the help with filling in forms and linking her into much-needed resources:

*(The volunteer support worker] was good too in terms of resources, like when she connected me to St Vinnies in Nambour, like, that was amazing, because ... when I'm under stress, I can't concentrate. Because I've done life so much on my own, and I've always been the doer, so inwardly I've imploded and gone ****, I need someone to take care of me. So it was really good that Linda was there as that. And then like, I was dreading filling out forms and [the support worker] from Vinnies did the whole forms for the housing. And I mean, I'm in here just a couple of months after it all happens, and some people are on a waiting list for years, so... this was my option. But see I wouldn't have known... you need guidance when you're under stress and confused and emotionally battered and exhausted. It's exhausting! Being homeless is exhausting!*

Debra mentioned the importance of the neighbourhood centre; she felt that linking the women to activities and volunteer opportunities could help boost confidence. On a similar note, Lisa noted that the women's confidence was typically low after being homeless, and that providing help with simple things like cooking would be motivating; she explained that it is hard to look after yourself with basic things like meal preparation when you are in a state of trauma and /or recovery.

It was also the little things that brought joy and solace that were mentioned. After two years of homelessness, Elsa was grateful for the provision of household basics, like cleaning supplies and toilet paper, and she commented that it was nice that the volunteer support worker had understood that the women would not have much money. Lisa also was grateful for the little things:

Oh, [the fruit box] is just like amazing... it gives you faith in humanity again. That people actually do give a shit about you, even though you're nobody to them. And you know it's genuine, it's not put on. That's what makes a difference – it's real, it's not pretend. It's not pity, that's what it is, it's not pity. I just felt really grateful.

Lisa also saw value in supporting the women to venture into the community – she suggested providing a list of “what’s on around town”, such as the Sunday markets; she felt this would be a normalising touch:

Then that way they are not being treated like someone in crisis, or as a victim... it's like, okay, they're seeing me not just as this person in crisis who needs their help, but oh, yeah, they're seeing me, just me. Coz that's all everybody wants, is just to be seen. That's what it comes down to.

g) Operational policies

The operational policies of The Women’s House have evolved over the course of the 12-month pilot program; these include the assessment process, the guidelines that the women agree to, and the day-to-day management of the house.

Two of the women mentioned the guidelines; one participant felt the rules and boundaries helped sustain a healing atmosphere and motivated tenants to improve their lives:

Having no alcohol or friends over, having those rules in place are very good I think. They do need the rules to show that this is a healing house and a ‘moving forward’ house. This is not a house where you going to be stuck in a rut for the next 10 or 20 years and you shouldn't try and exceed or you shouldn't try and go forward.

The other participant who mentioned the rules wanted a change to allow male relatives to visit on occasion, as she had children who were adult males and she would have liked to have cooked for them. Cooking for family was important to this participant and it had been something she had greatly missed whilst being homeless.

Three participants felt that the model of the ‘head tenant’ as a permanent resident (which had been used in Framework 1) would be beneficial if it was the “right person”. One participant defined this as being professional, qualified and willing to forego visits from their own family and friends. The other participant felt the ideal person would be able to role-model kindness and wisdom:

I think that could be a great thing to put someone in there who's a nurturer. Even a grandmotherly type, no ego. Someone who embraces you and loves you and sorts out the squabbles.

Privacy was mentioned by one participant, who had concerns about the lack of confidentiality sometimes displayed at the neighbourhood centre, when volunteers or staff might talk about tenants (or any clients) in public spaces, like corridors. She also said the address of the house had been disclosed on social media; she suggested that training on privacy would be helpful.

Lastly, one participant said there was an occasion when a tradesman turned up unannounced which frightened her, due to her assault history. She advocated a stricter notification system so as to avoid this scenario for other tenants.

4.5.4. After homelessness

At the time of writing, five out of nine women went on to find permanent housing. Three of these women made comment about life after their experience of homelessness and the complexities of adjusting. The idea of needing time to “recover” from their experiences was prevalent for two women, each of whom had spent two years homeless. Their views were echoed by the aforementioned comments made by the tenants of the temporary house (section above).

Through social housing, one participant was provided with a one-bedroom unit in inner city Brisbane. She felt alone in the new neighbourhood, far from the social networks she had created whilst living in Maleny:

It's just hard because of my actual familial circumstances, I don't have any family, and now I'm in a new place I don't have any friends. And I don't have anything to do. Like if I was out in Maleny, I'd be veggie gardening, I'd be busy during the day, I'd be in contact with the earth, I loved walking down the street, you get to know people, you're supporting local business, it's a little community.

She expressed ambivalence, on the one hand feeling grateful for her home yet also feeling powerless and without choice:

I'm feeling very much trapped because I had to take this [social housing]. Basically my life has changed and I have to do a lot of soul-searching. I'm confused about what to do with myself. Coz it's not what I would have chosen. I'm grateful. I'm settled, but I'm not settled. I haven't created this as my space yet. I am a social person and I have lived with other people, and I like being around people... So I feel at a loss being on my own. So that's a real challenge. So I can't foresee myself staying here. You know, I'm an earth mother too... I love the land, and veggie gardens... So it's really hard to reframe the whole thing. But I have to, in order to stay above the sinking line. I'm not a pessimist; I'm just looking at the realities of everything. I mean, I am struggling a bit. I didn't have an option to refuse this place. But like I said, I have to reframe it and be grateful for it, coz what would have been my other options? But then there are always options - there's gotta be options.

Three months after the interview, she had settled in more and said she felt happier. For this participant, her spiritual practice and insight had provided her with a sense of inner peace and ability to work through the trauma of her homelessness experience. She explained it thus:

It was part of the process I needed to go through. It was humbling. You can only grow when you're humble.

Another participant who had found permanent housing described her difficulties post-homelessness; she felt this period was just as challenging as homelessness itself, but in a different way, as she struggled to pay the rent while dealing with the emotional fall-out from her experience:

Firstly there was “the fall apart” [period]. Because everything that had to be held together could now be falling apart in privacy, and that wasn't small. But the “fall apart” was concurrent with the need to pay the rent... The “fall apart” with the simultaneous requirement to be the sole householder and make a functional economic situation work... To make it all work. And to fill it with the things that you need to live in a house, with nothing - try that, at Maleny op shop prices! So that need to go out there and get a job was even greater whilst falling apart. It was almost as hard-core if not more. No, not more... it's just a different, next thing, and it's not over yet, I'm still recovering from it.

This participant noted that some of the critical supports that people had offered her whilst homeless – both psychological and practical - were withdrawn once she had a home:

So there's this other little part ... now I have a home everyone can stop worrying. So I did have all this marvellous support before, but it's now like, I've got home so it's all sorted, and it isn't all sorted...

She described too the slow process of acclimatising to having a home and all that a home entails, such as owning possessions. She explained how difficult it was to allow herself to settle in with a sense of trust and faith that she could actually stay in this home:

Everyday there's still little things that unravel ... it takes courage to let free the little tender yearnings that want to propagate plants. I was so used to, in so many aspects, not going there with different yearnings that relate to home; not going there with acquiring a nice something or other to put in your home, or not going there with getting this cheap bulk food so you could have it for later, or not going there with having a plant because there was nowhere to put it.

Now I have a plant and it looks like I could propagate it, and so ... Do I dare to let myself have that joy? Is it safe for me to trust that I will be here long enough to do that? I still have that thought. I still have my stuff in suitcases. I haven't let go of the boxes. I've still got my stuff ready so that I can zip it up and I will be out of there in half a day if I had to. Because I still feel like that's a real possibility, because I'm still like week to week, how the hell am I going to pay the rent? And I'm managing and it does seem to be looking up, however it doesn't feel certain at all... There's this real thing about what I'm allowed to be, and how I'm allowed to be, and how much I'm allowed to enjoy having a home ...

A third participant was interviewed after she had settled into her new home; this participant was feeling called to help homeless women in the community and to find a job in the community sector as a support worker. She recognised that her life experience was indeed valuable in this regard:

I was thinking I would like to go into that peer support for women as well, because sometimes it's not all about your books in your education and the university degrees you've got, it's just about how you look at things and how you can help things to move forward.

4.5.5. Messages and ideas for the community

a) Awareness-raising

Six of the women had messages and/or ideas for the local community that would improve the situation for homeless people in general. Overall there was a common theme of wanting laypeople to know the problem of homelessness and poverty exists, despite it being so invisible, and to be able to empathise with that problem:

It is invisible.... There's lots of people I looked at and thought very possibly [they were homeless], but how the hell would you ever know? The only thing that made me suspect those people was the way that they carried themselves in the world, like with this sense of ... being so survival-focused about the very basics of "next meal", "next drink of water"... I can see the people in the supermarket, who are going, "Geez, I'd love to give my kids those vegetables but I'm gonna go and buy that other [thing]..." I've seen people watch me do this, look longingly at the packet of \$8.00 strawberries... just pick it up, think about it, put it down, walk on ...

Another participant put it simply:

The message should go Australia-wide: it could happen to anybody, things change all the time.

And one participant came up with a campaign idea:

Because I have an activist leaning, I had this idea that I wanted to have a house-warming party, a collective house-warming party in the park for all of the homeless folk, just purely as awareness-raising of the fact that we didn't friggin' have houses! Not that it be an angry thing, but it's just a demonstration. It's like, "Heh, this is all the people here". And you know it would actually be a party, maybe it could be supported by local businesses.

Closely connected to the raising of awareness was helping laypeople understand homelessness in its complexity, so to transcend damaging stereotypes and judgment. As Debra said:

I think a lot of people maybe aren't realising, a lot of the women that go [to the Women's House] are not drug dependent and they're not on alcohol, they're not spending their money on frivolous things... We don't want to be in that situation, we know we can do better, we're striving to get there and there's just that little stumbling block that we need help with.

One of these complexities was trauma and mental health issues, and how this impacts a person's ability to "simply" find a home or a job.

[Anxiety and depression] is not just something that goes away because you've got a new car or a house or.... it doesn't go away. I still have my ups and downs, and I will all through my life and that's there... it's a disability. And I think it's harder to get work, you don't want to bring it up in an interview because you know you won't even get a foot in the door. So I think there's gotta be more work around helping males and females who have these things happen in their lives.

b) More shelters and more rentals

There were practical suggestions too. Ann conceived of safe boarding houses where she could spend time in between her trips, along with places that could be provided for transient people where comforts such as shelter, showers and taps could be easily accessed. Another participant had heard of empty shopping malls and other structures being converted for this purpose.

Three of the women wanted the inequities of the housing market to be confronted and resolved. For Roberta, the solution lay in the provision of more social housing. For Debra and Jane, it was more about making properties available for rent. Debra had noticed on her travels that there were many “abandoned shacks” and disused spaces that surely could provide shelter for people, and that there may be people in the community who would benefit from having someone else around, such as elderly people who needed care. She thought there may be a way to connect these people.

Two participants cited the expansion of AirBnB accommodation in the hinterland as being partly responsible for the lack of affordable housing, and felt this could be rectified:

Someone wrote a really good article about how Maleny has a shortage of rentals which has come out of the fact that everyone's turned their rentals into AirBnB's and there's something like 200 or more AirBnB's that would have previously been private rentals, and that sucks. I think as a community that could be a really big thing. Maybe it's a national thing, maybe it's on a larger scale that we need to put more rentals on the market because homelessness is also because you can't get anything or you can't get something affordable because people are being too greedy.

The message of sharing the wealth was also articulated in this way:

I guess I have a message for the wealthy people who are living comfortably. I would like them to be aware that there are a lot of people who had the same aspirations to community and lifestyle as them who are really struggling to be here, and that they could help them, help them by making their properties available for rent that's a very simple thing.

PHOTOVOICE

These photos have been taken by the participants, unless others stated. A few of the women gave me images which I then took photos for on their behalf. I wish to thank them for allowing them to be shared.



It's really difficult having to carry everything you own everywhere, as I have a bad shoulder from a previous work injury from years ago. It's takes a huge toll on my body physically as well as emotionally, with people looking at you as a homeless person.



Broken, Lost & Alone.

Lost and alone in this crazy world

Where do I fit into the broken pieces of this world ? Where can I open & keep my head and heart safe....I don't know??



Somewhere to Call My Own

If only I had my own address! It makes it hard to apply for jobs & other accommodation without a fixed address.



Where is Home??

Always on the road trying to find somewhere to call Home."



The IGA community board. I go there regularly to know what's going on in the community. And if there are rooms available, or a car... but you've gotta go regularly and daily, because I almost got a car but one guy beat me to it. Like things go quickly. But then I suppose if it's meant to be, its meant to be.

**photo taken by researcher*



Blinded in Uncertainty

Even in short term accommodation you don't feel truly safe.

As you never know who your next housemate might be?

Will we get along?

Will they accept me?

Will someone come into your room if I'm out?

Will this locked door keep me safe??



Ann is concerned about the price of simple things that should be free, like water. She has been asked to pay money to fill up her water containers and finding "free taps" like this one in the park, is difficult.



The tree in the local park that Ann donated as a seedling – she has her roots deep in this land.

**photo taken by researcher*



"We all need homes" is Ann's message. In her chalk drawing, she draws symbols of home: a dolls house, a nesting box for a bird and a kennel for a dog.



Cooking... You miss cooking for friends and loved ones. Or even a normal meal



Ann dreams of places for nomadic people like her, where comforts can be easily accessed at sporadic times. Walking through town, she notices how the council spends money on bus shelters and playgrounds, and muses that it would be just as easy to make some shelters for transient people to use.



"That public library supports so many people. It is one of the greatest assets to this community, that library and the staff there. They're very supportive, they're very non-judgmental, and so many ... I tell you, the homeless people of this town rely on that library for the wifi, and for the information that's in there, and for the seats and the shade and the tap and the plug... and the smiley people in there..."

*photo taken by researcher

Everyday there's still little things that unravel ... it takes courage to let free the little tender yearnings that want to propagate plants. I was so used to not going there with different yearnings that relate to home... not going there with having a plant because there was nowhere to put it.

*photo taken by researcher

FIVE STORIES

The following stories of five participants are written from the researcher's perspective, providing a deeper context and meaning to compliment the data findings. The stories and photos are also published separately, in *The Women's House: Stories of Homelessness and Home in One Small Town*

LISA: Following her intuition

When I meet with Lisa for our interview, she tells me that our meeting is a “lesson in asserting herself” to leave her house, to come to a community space and tell her story. We meet in the garden, sheltered under trees; appropriate for Lisa as she is so connected to nature. She dreams of living sustainably, with permaculture principles in a like-minded community.

A year earlier, Lisa chose Maleny for a fresh start. As she drove through the hills into the township or the first time, she knew she was in the right place. She was leaving behind another life in another state. She was a long way from “home” but admits that this old home had been her “torture chamber”.

Following a workplace assault three years prior, Lisa had suffered both physical and psychological trauma. Crippling depression and social anxiety led her to completely isolate herself. She describes herself as being a “prisoner in her own home”, grappling with increasing suicidal thoughts and feelings. Making a new start was literally a matter of life or death for Lisa.

Lisa has a knack of combining intuitive wisdom with practical, hard work. She arranged for a two-month stay at a mental health clinic, where she learnt many coping strategies to help herself. But as mental health professionals know, it can take years to heal from trauma, so when Lisa left, she was still emotionally vulnerable. She booked some short-term accommodation but the lodging didn't have locks on the doors – for Lisa, this created too much anxiety to bear. Not feeling safe, she left and booked a room in a motel.

It was at the motel that Lisa learnt about the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre, and within a few hours she was connected to the Support Worker who was able to offer her a room at the temporary house. Lisa describes the chain of events as being magical and “meant to be”:

“I felt so honoured and privileged... it made me feel like I could finally breathe. And actually rest. I feel really blessed and lucky that the universe was looking out for me, and I'm actually listening. I know when listen to myself, that doors do open. So that's the thing I'm learning about myself.”

Lisa is shy about calling herself homeless, explaining it was only for a short period and that she had some money to use if she needed it. I reflect that it could be better to help someone before they entirely “slip through the cracks”; Lisa concedes that this is exactly what the house gave her. She had been thinking of buying a car and sleeping in it, but wonders how she would have managed that, given her anxiety. As she puts it:

“I personally don't know whether I would feel safe enough. Because of my past experience, I'd just be petrified of a night. Sometimes I just hear a gumnut drop and I'll have a panic attack. And being a woman on your own, people see you as an easy target.”

Thankfully, Lisa never had to sleep in her car – she is now living in permanent accommodation in the area and is creating the dream life she wants. We talk about the growth and learning that came from her experience, and Lisa shares her hard-won wisdom:

“I work hard, I do work hard every day. And I try and challenge myself. You can be in paradise and make it a prison... if that’s where your mind takes you. Or you could be in prison and be free, I know you can do amazing things with your mind if you set your mind to it.”

ELSA: Spiritual Catharsis

Elsa is a graceful, softly-spoken woman in an age demographic that is getting more media attention these days: the “over 55s”. Sitting in her newly accommodated unit in Brisbane suburbia, Elsa describes the long journey that brought her here, and the profound affect it’s had on her life.

Like many women, Elsa can trace the path to homelessness to her divorce a decade earlier, when she “came out with nothing” and had to raise four children on her own. When the kids left home, Elsa was unable to pay the rent of the large house on her own. Down-sizing efforts were futile – Elsa could find scant accommodation in the hinterland that a single woman on a Disability Support Pension could afford.

She found herself drifting, staying with friends, sleeping in garages, gardens and sometimes in her car. Weeks turned into months, and then into years. In all, Elsa spent two years surviving this way. She describes this time of her life as exhausting, a time when she lost her confidence, creativity and identity:

“I’m a creative type but my artistic juices have shrivelled up. I didn’t do any art for 2 years... I lived in a friend’s backyard in a tent for six weeks ... it’s all about surviving rather than connecting and thriving. I’m a nature person and a people person, and when you’re homeless, you disconnect from that as well because it’s all survival and there’s fear involved. It was really, really hard... it basically broke me.”

As Elsa tells me her story, she serves me salad and falafel wraps. She likes to be healthy and to look after herself but her health had suffered whilst being homeless, as she could no longer prepare fresh, wholesome food. She described the expensive living costs of food, groceries and fuel. And she spoke of intangible challenges, like judgment and stigma:

I’ve encountered some rather serious judgment when I was homeless... people who look at you and blame you. And some people are against handouts and helping and people think “shut up and take what you can get”.

Despite living through a suffering which few could imagine, it is Elsa’s strength and dignity which strike me. I ask if she has gained anything from her experiences, and she is emphatic:

“I’ve learned a lot in some ways and I’m grateful to the experience in some ways because it’s cathartic for me spiritually. I’ve had to do a lot of work on myself but it’s not just that, it’s a whole process... For a woman who’s on her own and being vulnerable, security is an issue... there are practical issues... but spiritually, it shifted me a lot, in a good way... I’m actually really grateful that I’ve been brought back to my centre more.”

For Elsa, that centre is her spirituality. As she looks around her new abode—the social housing unit she has been provided with—she has mixed feelings; she hasn't really settled in and she doesn't want to live in the city. She feels isolated and unhappy. Yet she brings herself back to gratitude. She was thankful for The Women's House and for all the support she was given there to find this unit, and to find her way out of homelessness. It's a stepping stone, we agree.

A few months later, when I update Elsa about the project, she is in a happier state of mind. She has continued with her spiritual practices, finding ways to be present and at peace. She reflects on how much she has grown from her experience of homelessness, as she says:

"It was part of the process I needed to go through. It was humbling. You can only grow when you're humble."

ANN: Freedom on the land

In a small, unnamed park in a back street of Maleny, there is a magnificent tree providing shade to people and shelter to wildlife with its broad branches and dense foliage. Walking through this park one day with Ann, she tells me how she had donated that tree as a seedling for the park. Ann is now in her 70's. She tells me too of the Davidson's plum trees that line the small creek nearby – forest food that only a few locals know about.

Ann and I discuss how when a person is transient, they come to know the land in ways other people don't.

Ann has not been a tenant of The Women's House yet she has much to teach me about "homelessness". Although Ann has no fixed address, I hesitate to say she is homeless. Social services and disconnected government departments would classify her as such, but the word "homeless" fails when home is the land. Much like the words "place" and "country", there is an implication of something much deeper, something cultural and spiritual that transcends the definition of "four walls and a roof".

Ann lives in a van, travelling between various base camps and towns in this area that she has called home for as long as the tree has been growing. A true free spirit, she describes how she broke away from years of programmed fear that was instilled from her cultural upbringing and her father's teaching that "it's a cruel world".

She recalls a time when she was too frightened to go into a pub or restaurant by herself. She sees many women now who are afraid of life – and especially afraid of nature and of travelling or camping alone. However, a series of major mid-life changes in her 50's propelled her into a life on the road, where she gradually learnt to embrace her freedom and personal power, and to trust the land to protect her and share its secrets.

"All my magic moments have been in the wild. Something happens in the park, it's exhilarating. There's paradise wherever you go, if you look for it."

But there are challenges too. She feels upset about the price of simple things that should be free, like water. She has been asked to pay money to fill up her water containers and finding "free taps" is difficult. She dreams of places for nomadic people like her, where these comforts can be easily accessed

at sporadic times. Walking through town with Ann, she notices how the council spends money on bus shelters and playground equipment, and muses that it would be just as easy to make some shelters for transient people to use.

With her cheeky sense of humour and child-like wisdom, Ann seems resigned to seeing the world differently to others. Social services have tried to put her into permanent housing but she felt stuck and miserable in these places. She wants her freedom and connection to country; it's simply too valuable to give up: "These experiences I've had; you can't buy that. I could have lived in suburbia but I would have gone mad", she explains.

Ann's housing solution is for a safe, temporary boarding house in the area. A "come-and-go-as-you-please" type of place. Something that helps people but doesn't keep them stuck.

DEBRA: Resourceful resiliency

There are stereotypes of homelessness that conjure visions of extreme poverty, extreme ill-health or extreme ill-fortune. But in Australia today, with living costs and housing deficits, it is relatively easy to fall into the category of "homeless" without being extremely *anything*. It can happen simply because of timing, like it did to Debra.

When we met for a chat at a local library and Debra's story unfolded, I found myself admiring her resourcefulness and resiliency to survive as an independent woman through some tough life challenges. Now in her fifties, Debra had escaped domestic violence and raised three children on her own. She had no family to rely on and lived with chronic anxiety and depression, which had made it all but impossible to get and keep employment.

So Debra had industriously created an income by buying, renovating and selling houses. As home-owners and investors know, the timing of sales is critical and it can be easy for all of your money to be tied up with the banks. This is exactly what happened to Debra, leaving her penniless and homeless as she waited for settlement dates and other legalities.

Debra had tried to plug the gap with short-term shared accommodation but the arrangement fell through when she did not feel safe with her male house-mate. This theme of safety is common for women. Homelessness is not something you plan – it can easily happen when fleeing accommodation in fear. Yet as Debra discovered, sleeping in her car provided little refuge:

I went to stay at a caravan park but they wouldn't let me because they knew I'd be sleeping in my car. A few times I slept in the street, like behind the pool, but it's just very unsafe. You never really slept, you're always on guard...and my vehicle wasn't a van that was covered in or anything, mine was a [wagon] you could see straight into. It wouldn't be hard for someone to break into it.

Debra spent four weeks living this way, and in this time her mental and physical health declined significantly. She tried to seek help at the local hospital but was turned away for not being "acutely ill". Debra says she wasn't suicidal but was despairing. A bout of flu pushed her to then seek help at a local neighbourhood centre, where she was guided to the temporary house in Maleny.

"I do think that the house was my saviour at the time. I don't know what would have happened... I would have tipped over the edge ... whether I would have gone banging on the hospital door to get in because I needed somewhere safe to stay..."

The house gave Debra much-needed safety as she waited for her new house to be available and for her funds to come through.

Months later, as she settles into her new life, she reflects on the damaging stereotypes about homeless people. She herself had felt stigmatised and had told no one about her circumstances, other than the neighbourhood centre. She has compassion for people going through hard times and is motivated to now help others.

"I think a lot of people don't realise that a lot of the woman that go to the house are not drug dependent and they're not on alcohol, they're not spending their money on frivolous things... We don't want to be in that situation, we know we can do better, we're striving to get there and there's just that little stumbling block that we need help with."

JANE: The Invisible Cage

When I talk to Jane she is six months out of homelessness, having found a place to rent in the local area. The strain of two years of couch-surfing and living in tents or cars is still visible as she tells her story. She admits she is far from recovered and she hopes that voicing her story will help her and others:

"I have felt really strongly that I want that story to be out, and not just for me. During the whole experience I felt so voiceless and unseen. And that whole experience was earth-shatteringly, massively stressful and traumatic, and to be invisible in that kind of desperate condition and feel voiceless was horrible."

The theme of "invisibility" runs like a delicate but essential thread through Jane's story, echoing what other women have told me. Jane goes so far as to describe the experience as "an invisible cage" which others could not see, and which prevented her from participating in life and expressing herself. As much as she wanted help, she found it difficult to share her troubles, even to friends and family:

"It's hard for people. You can apply it to any situation; when someone doesn't understand what you're going through. On the outside they're like, "why don't you just get a job?" You tell that person your sad story several times and they don't want to hear it anymore, or even if they don't say it, they start to give you silent judgment. I didn't feel like I had anywhere to go to share it."

The silent judgment of others was compounded by Jane's own sense of failure and self-blame over the circumstances that led to her homelessness, even though such circumstances can easily happen to anyone – especially to sole parents on low incomes. Jane had already been struggling to maintain a private rental and was going without food at times to pay the rent, before the owners decided to turn the dwelling into an Airbnb. Becoming homeless, things quickly went from bad to worse. Her freelance employment required her to present well to people, yet her mental health was crumbling after years of trauma. Most painful of all was that Jane had to relinquish care of her child during her time of homelessness:

"And so added to the whole picture of things spinning around in my messy head was what a failure I was of a mother ... that plummeted me into a nasty mental state, and from there I had trouble finding work."

She describes this as a "vicious cycle" which few people understand or appreciate. This period also sowed her seeds of contempt for the social-economic system, or the "rat race game" as she calls it, that forces people into poverty. Jane was born in this area and has lived here her whole life, yet she feels she has been pushed out of her own land because of rising prices and affluent newcomers. Whenever she drove past an empty house, she found herself wondering with a child-like sense of injustice, "Why is that house empty and I'm not in it?" Jane shares her anger with candid honesty when she says:

"After about 18 months of being in and out of peoples' lounge rooms and spare rooms and gardens and tents and cars, I found myself walking down the main street of Maleny and seeing all these beautiful people who have really comfortable, lovely, rewarding, beautiful lives ... the ones that have happy marriages and healthy children who go to the lovely school and they have promising careers and they have enough money, and I found myself just seething with hatred at these people, because they had what I didn't have... I'm born here, how come I can't live here? I was raised in this society, and somehow I'm an outcast. An invisible outcast."

Jane's struggle to find a home in her native land eventually paid off when she found a private rental. But she feels far from secure and, as she vividly describes, moving into a home after being homeless does not bring the relief one might imagine, as suddenly there are new pressures – pressures to pay rent on low income and pressure to fill the house with all the things you need. As well, there is an emotional collapse that accompanies post-homelessness, a view that was shared by all the women I spoke to. Jane called this the "fall apart" stage:

"Because everything that had to be held together could now fall apart in privacy, and that wasn't small. But the 'fall apart' was concurrent with the need to pay the rent... Falling apart with the simultaneous requirement to be the sole householder and make a functional economic situation work..."

Jane says recovery from the experience is slow. Homelessness necessitated the shutting down of aspirations, dreams, desires and creativity, so that basic survival needs could be met, and re-connecting with a sense of joy and safety has not happened automatically. As Jane puts it:

"Every day there's little things that unravel ... it takes courage to let free the little, tender yearnings that want to propagate plants. I was so used to 'not going there' with different yearnings that relate to home; not going there with acquiring a nice something or other to put in your home, or not going there with getting this cheap bulk food so you could have it for later, or not going there with having a plant because there was nowhere to put it. Now I have a plant and it looks like I could propagate it, and so ... Do I dare to let myself have that joy? Is it safe for me to trust that I will be here long enough to do that?"

I still have that thought. I still have my stuff in suitcases. I haven't let go of the boxes. I've still got my stuff ready so that I can zip it up and I will be out of there in half a day if I had to. There's this real thing about what I'm allowed to be, and how I'm allowed to be, and how much I'm allowed to enjoy having a home ... I think it comes from all these things that people take for granted about being in the world, they were just sort of shut down."

Like Jane's tender yearnings for homely things that she is slowly allowing to grow, she also reveals the tender gifts that came from the experience of homelessness. She is thankful for the deepening of connections with loved ones and friends, and for meeting the "homeless people" that seem invisible yet are there, even in towns like Maleny. She praises places like the library, which provide essential services and a non-judgmental welcome. She has found compassion for people from all walks of life and a sense of "home within" that can never be lost.

Given that Jane felt so voiceless during her experience, it seems apt to ask her what message she would like to give to the people of her community. She says:

"I guess I have a message for the wealthy people who are living comfortably. I would like them to be aware that there are a lot of people who have the same aspirations to community and lifestyle as them who are really struggling to be here, and that they could help them... help them by making their properties available for rent - that's a very simple thing."

AFTERWORD

If this research can teach us anything, it's that homelessness defies stereotypes. The stories and perspectives of each of the women are unique. It takes courage to live through an experience that others may judge, especially when that experience is created from a complex tangle of problems and inequities, and is not a personal choice. We can learn so much from these women; reading their stories can open the heart, allowing us to connect as human beings and inviting deeper understanding and kindness for each other.

If this report has inspired you or raised awareness of this issue, then its purpose is fulfilled.

While the social causes of homelessness are complex and overwhelming, in small towns like Maleny, we have opportunities to truly help.

We are all in this together.

Want to know more?

This report is accompanied by a resource of the women's stories and voices, entitled *The Women's House: Stories of Homelessness and Hope in One Small Town*. Please contact the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre for a copy of this report or the resource.

The author can also be contacted at louisa@louisadpearce.com.au

Want to help?

The Women's House does not receive any government funding and relies solely on donations of money, in-kind support or volunteer time. If you wish to give any or all of these gifts to this project, please contact:

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THANK YOU

I would personally like to thank the people at MNC who helped me complete the report in so many ways, from providing encouragement, to sharing information, to reviewing the text with tight deadlines: Nooreen, Jann, Nancy, Sue, Linda, Margi, Barry, Dinnawhan, the steering group and the MNC management team. Thanks to my supervisor at Flinders, Jesse. Thanks to Lyndal and Charlotte for brightening my days. Thanks to each and every participant who spoke to me about their experiences. And lastly, thanks to the group of kind and generous "vollies" who made my placement a joy.

Louisa

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FOOTNOTES

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