



COMMUNITIES

Being short of the basic essentials of life, including food and shelter, has long been the recognised face of poverty and disadvantage. The series of studies of the distribution of disadvantage throughout Australia undertaken by Jesuit Social Services has revealed the all-encompassing nature of poverty and its web-like character. The findings have illustrated that disadvantages tend to concentrate among the same people and their effects on health are cumulative. The children born to poorer families incur more ill-health, are more likely to drop out of school and more likely to become mentally ill. They are more likely to be unemployed. They are more likely to get chronic illnesses and die at an early age. These different strands of disadvantage frequently inter-lock. Poverty diminishes the quality of a person's life across all these dimensions.

—Tony Vinson

AT THE time Cathy Guinness came to work for Jesuit Social Services, a 'whole-of-neighbourhood' approach to tackling poverty and disadvantage was being launched. It was now understood that poverty affects whole communities, not just individuals.

Old ways of 'managing' disadvantage were being replaced by a respect for people in need and an understanding that this was *their* community and they wanted to be a part of making it change for the better.

Cathy remembers how hard it was to break new ground and take risks.

It was challenging because our organisation was moving into a new sort of work and up to this time, Jesuit Social Services had been focused in a different way. I was breaking new ground for the organisation and it was a terrific challenge for me. I had come to work within an organisation whose reputation for standing up for human rights was legendary.

I had to make mistakes and deal with them. I was in the front line, at the community level, working with new cultural groups and new languages. Jesuit Social Services expected me to take risks. I felt part of a bigger enterprise which could bring about changes in government policy as well as run programs at the front end of disadvantage.

The work broadened from Richmond to include the housing estates at Collingwood and then Fitzroy. In 2001 the program took the name *Communities Together*.

Cathy sees her work as an act of faith.

I believe that communities have within themselves the understanding of what needs to be done and that they are the best people to do it. I have got a great passion for community and for the energy that is within the idea of community. I have seen it over and over that each community can be helped to find the things that they are really interested in themselves and really want to get changed. If people with leadership and energy from within those communities become engaged, huge change can come about. The workers may come and go but the community is always there.

High-rise housing estates are richly diverse. *Communities Together* supports people to express their different cultures in ways which connect them to others. The issues that worry residents are diverse. Security, opportunities for connection, opportunities to influence decisions about their quality of life are just a few of their concerns.

The African Program at the Flemington housing estate was inspired by the work being done by Jesuit Social Services within another migrant community. Son Nguyen and Kim Nguyen had been working at the Vietnamese Welfare Resource Centre, on the Flemington housing estate for a long time. More recently it became the home of many of the African people who fled war and unrest in their homelands. Abdul Rachman Ozman, a leader in the Somali Community, came to Son for advice. He recognised that the support the Vietnamese community was receiving was just what his people needed. A dialogue began with Jesuit Social Services, and so the African Program started in 2004. Cathy Guinness recalls the beginning,

It was a huge adventure. There is a great energy within the idea and the reality of community.

The African Program is alive with that energy. There are possibilities created through listening to and supporting communities, through being open to new challenges.

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