



# 4 flats

BROSNIAN \* CENTRE

*Time and again the offer was made: “There is a place for you here, if you want it.”*

**MANY** came and found care and support, often for the first time in their lives. Some came but left without warning – slipping away not wanting to talk to anyone about their decision. If they talked, they might have to think about why they were leaving. Hopes of making a new start often drew them away - a flat with friends, a car, maybe a job, the things they hoped would make a normal life. But with no experience of how that could be achieved, the harsh reality often brought disappointment and failed hopes. They were always welcomed back to try again.

This was how Four Flats began. A large Victorian home, owned by the Jesuits, in Power Street Hawthorn, was opened as a hostel in 1977 for young people released from custody. The name was chosen because the old home had been divided into four separate flats. Not very imaginative, but with no suggestion of its connection with

a religious order it did not discourage young people from coming to live there. Nor did it draw the attention of the neighbourhood that this was where ‘offenders’ lived.

One flat was shared by the two Jesuits who lived in the hostel, Peter Norden and Paul Callil. The other three were for the residents, young people released from custody in need of somewhere to live. Alex Firmager and Sue Ellis came to work with the Jesuits in providing a supportive home for the residents. Alex had worked at Langi Kal Kal Youth Training Centre and Peter Norden noticed the care and patience he showed in his work with the boys there. He invited Alex to come and work at Four Flats. A few months later Sue joined the team with the challenging task of helping the boys find work.

The first residents arrived from Malmesbury on January 9th 1977. Within a short time eight young men were living there. Some stayed several months, some left as soon as they saw an opportunity elsewhere. When the time came to leave, some found it very hard.

Arriving home drunk after a night on the town one evening, ‘Graham’ wept and shouted in anger, frustration and

rage at the pain and rejection of his childhood. Alex sat with him and listened. These moments were sometimes fleeting. The young people at Four Flats often fled from the support they so desperately wanted.

'George' had never felt secure with his family where he had been subjected to physical and sexual abuse. 'Mick' had been in Pentridge where he had lived in fear. He had learned to be wary of everyone and to keep to himself. Finding purpose and fulfilment where there had been none before was hard. There was the risk that they might try and not succeed, be disappointed and be left wondering if they might ever break the patterns that constrained their lives.

Jobs were scarce for young people yet the staff kept finding work for the boys. It proved even harder to keep them working. A night on the town often had more appeal than the discipline of an early night in bed. Sometimes when this extended into the early hours of the morning, staff would drive around looking for the boys in the likely haunts of inner Melbourne. The residents would be brought home, perhaps drunk, to the safety of Four Flats. These young

people were accepted in all their mess and difficulty, in their anger, frustration and grief at the course their lives had taken and in the choices they made.

There was little point in restricting the residents with unnecessary rules. They had to find their way in this brief time of care and support before they had to move on. Alex and Sue, along with resident Jesuits, Peter Norden and Paul Callil in the first year, and Pat Mullins in the second year, modelled the behaviour they hoped the young men would learn themselves – respect, patience, co-operation. The things learnt in families. But these young men came from families broken by alcohol, mental illness, poverty, isolation and lack of hope.

The staff visited many of their families and tried to bridge the gulf that had developed over many years. Sometimes the challenge proved too great where the hurt, rejection and sense of failure had filled the spaces where love and care should have been. The chaos of their earlier experiences spilled into their lives.

Towards the end of 1977 a tragic event occurred which profoundly affected not only the residents and staff at the hostel but caused enormous pain beyond Four Flats. One of the residents, Carl, had been sent to the home of a Hawthorn resident to wash down her kitchen walls. This was part of an effort to provide employment opportunities for the residents.

When Carl returned to Four Flats that evening, staff noticed his clothes were blood stained. Shortly after, the police arrived and Carl was taken away and later charged with the murder and rape of the woman in whose home he had been working. The crime was reported in page one headlines in The Sun and the victim's family expressed their deep distress and horror. This violent incident shocked and profoundly disturbed staff and residents at the hostel.

Paul Callil remembered that, in their distress, staff struggled to remain focused and to continue the daily routine. The Four Flats staff had been well aware that their work was not well understood by the wider community but their belief in the importance of caring for the most

rejected had sustained them. This terrible event shook their confidence and forced them to face the harsh and shattering reality of working with traumatised young people.

With wide media coverage, Peter Norden faced a challenging interview on the television program, *A Current Affair*. In the face of this critical publicity, he realised there was a risk that the Minister for Social Welfare could withdraw departmental support and force the hostel to close. Peter Norden met with key politicians and secured support for Four Flats.

In reflecting back at the end of 1978, Peter Norden summed up these difficult times.

**The experience of working at Four Flats has been mixed – one filled with a lot of pain, hurt, suffering, which I wouldn't have really wanted, but it came. Sharing that suffering with the young people was a rich experience. There were also happy times, successful times. But the experience of struggling and uncertainty also stays in my mind. It was an experience of**

**identifying with people who have been rejected – on all sorts of levels – sometimes a personal level – face to face, sometimes publicly. As a result of that identification and association we too have been rejected and criticised. At the same time it has given us a sense of purpose and meaning.**

The terrible events of September 1977 were to increase the resolve of Four Flats staff to keep working with this group of troubled young men. But that effort took up a great deal of energy, leaving little time to support others who could not get a room at the hostel. At the end of the second year Peter Norden left to study theology in preparation for his ordination and David Murray became the new Director. Towards the end of 1981, after four years at Hawthorn, it was decided that more could be achieved by closing the hostel. Four Flats set up an office in Cambridge Street Collingwood and accommodation for the young people was arranged in nearby suburbs. This way many more young people could be supported.

Andy Walsh, one of the new staff to work at Collingwood, remembers the confidence of those early days.

**We were housed in a very small building at 1 Cambridge Street, sparse in resources, a couple of filing cabinets and a Ford Laser motorcar. But that didn't matter. A small team could do anything and these young people stretched all of us, professionally and personally. But we were respected across the state at Youth Training Centres because they knew how difficult it was to hang in with this group of offenders.**

It was a precarious existence. Funding was provided by the Social Welfare Department and David Murray remembers many times when there was not enough money to pay salaries. He would go into the city and plead his case, returning with the good news that, for another week, all would get paid. This was a time before tenders and service agreements. The criteria for accepting residents at Four Flats were very simple. The least they had in every dimension the more likely they were to be selected for support.

Fr John Brosnan retired as chaplain to Pentridge prison in 1985, a position he held for thirty years. Brosie, as he was affectionately known, had been worried about the fate of young men sent to Pentridge. He knew how hard it was for them inside, but he knew it was even harder when they were released. He too saw many return to custody again and again. It was Brosie's words which continue to inspire the work today.

*There are three things needed by people upon their release from prison:*

*A place to live that is decent  
A job that they can handle  
And friendship,  
and the hardest to provide is  
friendship.*

In 1987 Four Flats was given a new name, Brosnan Centre, in honour of the man who had been a constant support to prisoners locked away behind the bluestone walls of Pentridge.

It was soon evident that the little office in Cambridge Street Collingwood was just too small. A larger building was purchased in Sydney Road Brunswick and soon

after Bernie Geary became the Director. As a small agency, the focus was on simple ways of helping young people manage from one day to the next. He remembers that it was chaotic and unpredictable but there was a closeness between staff and young people.

*A lot of the kids probably thought that the Brosnan Centre was their family. I don't think that was a good thing in retrospect. At the time we thought it was, but in hindsight we were not their family at all.*

The structure was simple. Bernie Geary remembers that as the Director he had a caseload of eight to ten young people.

*Everybody had a case list. Work was less complicated in those days. I went to D Division at Pentridge for about five hours every Friday to see who was in prison, who was moving on. It was a lot simpler.*

In time, helping young people reconnect with their families, however difficult those relationships had been,

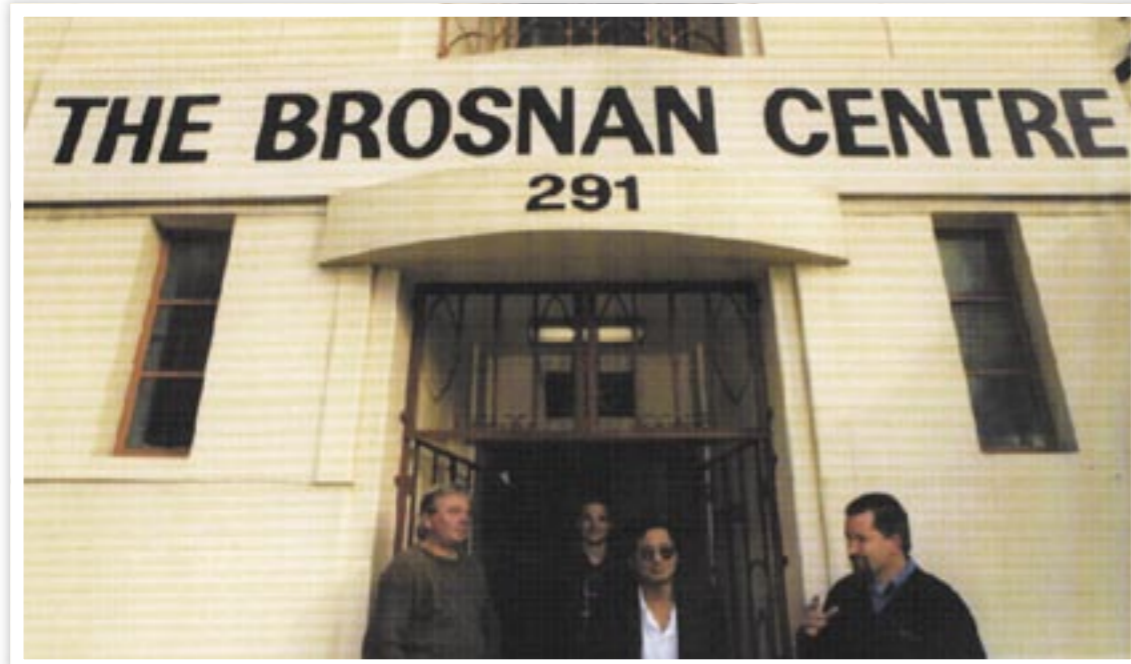
came to be seen as important. The 1980s saw the arrival of hard drugs on the streets of Melbourne and many young people were dying. Each death of 'one of their own' rocked the tight knit band at the Brosnan Centre. There were too many funerals. The going was hard.

Release from custody, so long hoped for, could be terrifying when it finally came. Having nowhere to sleep could be too much to bear on the first night out. Many looked all too quickly for ways to return back to the 'security' of prison. In 1987 a rooming house opened in Nicholson Street Carlton to provide short-term accommodation. It gave a few months of certainty until something more permanent could be found.

Over time the ways of helping have changed. There are now specialised professional services for the many problems faced by these young people. This has created many more possibilities for those seeking a new way of living. But there are still many challenges to be faced.

*These young people were accepted in all their mess and difficulty...*





Pat Mullins SJ, Alex Firmager, Sue Ellis and Peter Norden SJ  
outside Four Flats in Hawthorn



**SEVEN MANAGERS OF THE BROSNAN CENTRE WITH THE FR BROSNAN MEMORIAL**  
(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT): Tony Hayes (1999-2001), Mark Griffiths (1983-1988),  
David Murray (1979-1983), Paul Newland (1993-1998), Bernie Geary (1988-1992),  
Fr Peter Norden (1977-1978), Peter Coghlan (2001-2007)

*These young people were accepted in all their mess and difficulty, in their anger, frustration and grief at the course their lives had taken and in the choices they made.*

“

The least they had in every dimension the more likely they were to be selected for support.

”

