



connexions

I felt I was really seeking out those who needed it most, some of the most isolated, depressed and distressed young people in our community. It was a humbling experience to see how resilient they often were.

JULIE WILSON had years of experience working with young people with a history of offending at Malmsbury Youth Training Centre and then at Brosnan Centre. When she went to work at Connexions in 1996 she understood what it meant to work with isolated young people. This work was established to support young people who fell between the cracks into homelessness, drug misuse and mental illness.

In the early years at Connexions, the staff spent much of their time visiting young people where they were living. Julie went to Fitzroy into the decrepit rooming houses that offered a bed and a little more privacy and sometimes more security than could be found on the streets. From a door that fronted on to Gertrude Street, a passageway would lead to back lanes and doorways, into two storeyed terraces with rooms off at all angles.

Julie also went to the places where these people would go for sustenance. Soup kitchens and food vans in the inner suburbs. Places like Footscray, North Melbourne, Collingwood and Fitzroy. These were the points where those who slept under cardboard came for a daily feed and, just as importantly, some social interaction with someone who showed a personal interest.

In 1995 at least half of those people in Australia who had a serious mental illness were not receiving any treatment from mental health services and many young people who had problems with substance misuse received no support from drug and alcohol treatment services. Those with both a mental illness and a substance misuse problem were in a void. The work done with young people at Brosnan Centre had shown that there were many young people who had a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance misuse problems. Their needs were beyond the resources of Brosnan Centre. When Jesuit Social Services was formed, this very pressing need was seen as a priority and so Connexions began.

Linda Moran works at Connexions now. She also worked with offenders in the early 1980s at Four Flats. She talks about her work.

I was drawn to the Jesuits because of my values. It's a feeling, it's an emotional experience for me working here and I was passionate about the young people then and I am still very passionate about the young people that I work with now.

Connexions has changed the way it works. There are more assessments, reports and planning meetings. But this has not changed what lies at the heart of this work. Linda sees this as being about relationship. She believes the young people she works with are resilient and being totally respectful is central to the way she works.

It doesn't mean that you have to always like them or their behaviour necessarily, but you can still see beyond all their behaviours to who they absolutely are and I think to understand that you also have to understand a lot more about yourself. I have learnt through all the relationships I have had with all the young people and families at different times. It's a heart experience. It's about sitting in a room with someone and quietly connecting.

Over eleven years the work has changed. Julie reflected on her years at Jesuit Social Services and what that means for those working today.

Perhaps the most important things we can offer are a presence, a respect for the right to be individual and self determining; to listen and to encourage, to offer support and to be caring, to find something genuinely likeable in the other person, so that person can feel likeable; to give of yourself without pushing yourself onto another person. I have always felt that if I can show respect to someone, then that person can come to respect themselves; if they come to respect me, then that can widen to respect for others more generally.

“Some of the most isolated, depressed and distressed young people in the community.”

