

# Chapter 4: The Housing First Response to Rough Sleeping

## Housing First Works: Reflections of Two Housed Rough Sleepers Eight Years On

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Since 2010, Micah Projects has adopted the approach of Housing First in Brisbane. Housing First involves the rapid identification and provision of suitable, long-term housing, coupled with the necessary services that individuals and families require to maintain this housing. This approach harnesses the power of permanent, safe housing to help people recover and heal from the trauma of homelessness. It gives them a safe space in which to address the issues that may be stopping them from living the lives they want.

The *50 Lives 50 Homes* Campaign that began in 2010 and focussed exclusively on housing the 50 most vulnerable people on the streets, and the subsequent *500 Lives 500 Homes Campaign* that ran from April 2014 was driven by Housing First principles and modelled on evidenced United States campaigns. The campaigns involved a collective response by numerous partners to tackle chronic homelessness in Brisbane. Both campaigns centred on knowing by name those who were homeless and what their individual needs were and then matching permanent housing and services to meet those needs.

Two people who were original housed in 2010 from the *50 Lives 50 Homes* Campaign are the focus of this article. Micah Projects, since supporting them into housing, have maintained an ongoing support role with these two individuals. Stories were garnered from them this year to understand their previous journey as rough sleepers, the impact that had on them, their transition into permanent housing, how they have sustained their tenancies and life eight years on. Through interviews with these two individuals, important lessons can be drawn that provide insights into how you can journey

with people so that they can live a more meaningful life.

### A Case Study

This is Robert's story. Robert is a 76-year-old man. Robert is the youngest of five children. He became an apprentice butcher at 14 before beginning work at an abattoir. He got married in his early 20s and was married for ten years. He has four children. His crux is gambling. Robert ruminates:

*'I used to go to the trots every Saturday afternoon with me old man.... 12 years old... that's where I probably got it from... immediately you're short of money and it gets worse and worse...'*

*she [wife] didn't like my gambling, it caused shortage of money all the time... my gambling ruined my marriage... probably led to me being on the streets.'*

Robert explained that gambling ruins many parts of your life.

*'Been trying to beat gambling all my life... it takes a lot of strength of mind to give it away... I still gamble.'*

Before Micah Projects came into contact with Robert, he had been rough sleeping for three years, the last year and a half in a cemetery. Talking to one of the original support workers of Robert they explained that Robert's mood was quite good at the



time, but his health was bad. He hadn't had any healthcare in three years. Robert reflects:

*'Cemetery was a little bit rough especially in the rain.'*

He humbly describes that it wasn't that bad:

*'I grew up in bad times... in 1950s things weren't crash hot... get used to not living well... you do... and I've never complained too much living rough.'*

Through assertive outreach, Street to Home, created a pathway and managed to get Robert housed in 2010 into permanent community housing. They set up mechanisms for him to stay housed and linked him with appropriate services.

Asked to reflect on being housed and how he has maintained it, Robert shared:

*'Life's a hell of a lot better... it's a little rough here sometimes. Best thing to do is keep to yourself and mind your own business.'*

Robert described he has maintained his housing through the systems Street to Home initial set up for him. Robert explains:

*'My rent gets taken out of my pension before I get it... which is good for me... so that's a good thing for me... whatever is left in my pension is to buy food and other things I might need. Centapay is very good for me... stops me from having a lot of problems... I get my rent taken out, so I can't blow it on the gambling... which is an excellent thing for my life and I suppose I've showed a little bit of responsibility by virtue of the fact that I go out to Coles or Woolworths and buy food for the week.'*

Reflecting on Robert's story a few lessons can be drawn which connect strongly with the housing first principles. Robert's addiction has not gone. He is still gambling. With the initial support and mechanisms put in place, Robert has managed to sustain his tenancy for eight years. His gambling addiction is more manageable, evident in that prior to

being housed all of his money was being spent on his addiction compared to now where he is pay his rent, bills and feeding himself. He is now safe, dry and warm, and is self-managing his addiction.

James' story is different, as every story is.

## James' story.

James is a 46-year-old Indigenous man originally from Penrith, NSW. He was kicked out of home at 15 and moved in with a friend's family and did a fitters course and got a job with Qantas at 17. He got married at 18 and had three children. He worked as an engineer for nine years with Qantas.

James described himself as a heavy marijuana smoker and he also grew the stuff. He explained:

*'... wife gave me a choice... that [drugs] or family... so [I] just left. Packed up and went to Queensland... never been before... lived at boarding house... got a job out of Oxley.'*

Drugs, alcohol and the social scene James was in led to James rough sleeping. 'All I was worried about was having a drink', James explained. Due to drinking James slept rough for over ten years. James during this time had a good relationship with Micah Projects but often resisted support for housing. When probed about this he couldn't explain it.

I asked James what it was like living on the streets and he said it was not too bad. But stories emerged that countered this account. James told a deeply personal story of losing a close friend whom he was sleeping rough with who was murdered. He shared:

*'... you got to sleep with one eye open... one eye closed... it's dangerous... you don't trust anyone... don't matter who it is.'*

In 2010 James was housed in permanent community housing after briefly being housed prior. He describes how it transpired, almost joking that Street to Home forced him to be housed. James laughed and said:

*'We were sitting at the small park... van rolled up [Street to Home] ... come on get in... took as over to get sign papers... and then we moved into Moorooka... got the key... you guys [Street to Home] came around and drop off groceries... pots, pans, plates, cups... mad!'*

James has been housed since. Eight years on, four years in one place and four years in another place. James is still a problematic drinker. Micah Projects Homefront Supportive Housing Team supports him as he has a disability. He has also had numerous health scares including having had to have his stomach removed. Through all of this he has been supported by the team and the integrated nursing team at Micah Projects.

When asked about life now James says the streets are hard.

*'I couldn't go back to the streets... not with what I've got (health)... I couldn't handle it.'*

James continues today, now that he's housed, to live a meaningful and dignified life. He is in safe, secure housing with appropriate wrap around services. His addictions are still present, but he is well supported. His support workers are currently readying him for the NDIS and continuing to provide the necessary social and health supports to assist James in maintaining his housing and life.

Both stories from Robert and James share similarities. They both reflect that the causes of their homelessness are rooted in addiction, albeit very different types of addiction. These addictions led to life on the streets. They both describe rough sleeping as difficult, dangerous and unpleasant but also manageable. Their housing through the 50 Lives 50 Homes campaign, using housing first cornerstones has seen them stay in permanent housing with appropriate supports for eight years now. Neither had to be housing ready, they did not have to stop drinking or gambling, they just needed a place to call home and be supported. These are the lessons we can draw from Robert and James. Housing is a right for all and with support you can stay housed and call it home.