
CRUCIAL TIMES

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EDITORIAL

In this edition of **CRUCIAL TIMES**, contributors continue an exploration of community services and their role in supporting and building community life. Some reflections from the CRU Conference also appear and we are indebted to the many presenters and participants who shared their stories, their work, their presence, and their spirit to make it a truly renewing and memorable event. The Conference was a wonderful celebration of what people have been doing to improve the possibilities for people with disabilities to live ordinary lives in the community. The Conference was also timely, given the opportunities that now exist in Queensland for influencing and shaping the disability sector in this State.

While many people have been supported to have a better life in the community, most people are still without the supports they need. Many others are being abandoned to institutional care in nursing homes and other aged-care facilities, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and institutionalised group-living in the community. Much of the 1990s has been a struggle to uphold positive expectations about the place of people with disabilities in Queensland, and in the defence of gains made during the 1980s. Predominantly, recent debates have been driven by market welfare reforms, the introduction of awards, increasing emphasis on occupational health and safety, and concerns about legal liability and duty of care. There have also been regressive policy changes, especially around the question of institutional care. In addition, models of service delivery, emanating from Victoria and other states, have been

presented as "state of the art" without any critical analysis. Any attempts to critically look at what is really needed, or to have policy and practice based on positive values about people with disabilities and their families have been considered out-of-touch with modern trends and constraints.

What a joy it was then, to gather over three hundred people at the CRU Conference and to openly reflect on the stories and struggles of the last ten years, from a clear framework of valuing people with disabilities and their families. Throughout the presentations, it was constantly demonstrated that good things come from good people, and that positive outcomes require the right moral strategies as well as the right technical strategies; one without the other cannot deliver. It was also clear that we have such an asset in the many people who are striving to make tangible advances and ensure that the voice and the place of people with disabilities remain at the heart of our struggle for community life.

Along with this important asset, commitments by the present Queensland Government and the Minister are welcome and timely. Substantial increases in funding for unmet needs, and the promise of a Disability Services Agency to provide strategic leadership in political, policy and practical solutions, all provide an unprecedented opportunity to focus our collective efforts and influence the possibilities for people with disabilities over the years to come. It is a precious opportunity that needs to be approached with seriousness, wisdom, openness and hopefulness. ■

Anne Cross

CRU's MISSION STATEMENT

- To challenge ideas and practices which limit the lives of people with disabilities.
- To inspire and encourage individuals and organisations to pursue better lives for people with disabilities.

From the President

In the year that we have celebrated our tenth anniversary, I would like to present some "snapshots" from our first decade. These were part of the CRU presentation at the Conference.

The story of Community Resource Unit is like so many other stories. It is one of ideas and dreams that people with disabilities will be seen and treated with the dignity and respect that all human beings deserve, welcomed into communities of people, and accorded the opportunities available in our community. It is also one of people dealing with their "winter of discontent" through the realisation that change can produce good and bad. It is a story of awakening many people to heartlessness and pain, and inviting them to walk with those who are hurting, and inevitably to share in the hurt. It is also one of powerful ideas, of learning how to discern what helps and what causes more pain, what to embrace, and what to reject. It is a story of struggling with the potential and limits of formal services, and with the potential and limits

of informal supports. It is a story of individual lives, families, small projects, large projects, state-wide strategies, and national and international networks. It is also a story of the opportunities that exist - a precious chance to invest in positive expectations and a movement for change.

Even in its embryonic stages, CRU made some very strong statements about fundamental issues relating to people with disabilities, their families, and service systems. Some key themes are evident in notes from planning sessions in our early days:

If a movement for positive change is to be strengthened, then major emphasis must be placed on the development of individuals and their engagement in a commitment to a valued life for people with disabilities.....Leadership development is critical so that opportunities can be maximised in favour of vulnerable people.....There needs to be a major emphasis on safeguards, especially the development of independent advocacy.....We need to safeguard our own work, and when working with agencies, ensure that we have access to all levels of the agency including committee, service recipients, and families.....The importance of the development of new services and the re-development of existing services so that we continue to struggle with practical schemes that embody positive principles.....CRU affirms its determination to position itself to have its key alliances with families, people with disabilities, and those working for positive change.

Along with these snapshots, let me share some significant facts and figures from the first decade of CRU's work:

- Over 15,000 registrants have attended CRU workshop programs in the past ten years
- CRU has worked with, or had contact with, over 200 agencies throughout Queensland
- **CRUCIAL TIMES** is distributed to over 1700 readers.

While ten years isn't a long time, CRU has shown that it is possible to influence what happens. We look forward to the coming years. ■

Mike Duggan

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Can Small Services Endure: Taking Action for the Long Term

In the last edition of CRUCIAL TIMES, Ross Womersley was asked the question, "Under what circumstances might small agencies last?" and he identified some significant factors. In this edition, Ross goes on to suggest further important factors that might lead to small agencies having an enduring role in the community.

One of the most powerful strategies that small agencies can employ in order to protect and nurture their efforts is to stay deeply relevant to the needs of the people they serve, and highly committed to them. In this way they will always have a purpose, and an electorate of people who will stand with them and say that what they are doing is important and helpful. They can also use this electorate or support-base to help them determine whether or not it is wise to undertake a particular development or project in the agency.

Beyond having a very good understanding of the people they are serving, small agencies that are most likely to flourish will be those with a well developed, positive vision about what a decent or good life would look like for each of the people they serve. Having a positive vision about what is needed will invigorate the efforts of the people in and around the agency. Bearing this vision in mind will help people feel a sense of unity and enable them to remain focused through times of struggle.

Inevitably, the strength of an agency will be firmly linked to the values and commitment of the workers that it recruits. The greater the number of workers recruited by the agency, who positively value the people they serve and have deep commitments to them, the greater will be the potential leadership available from within the agency.

In addition to seeking to build the leadership available from within the agency, small agencies will need to constantly find ways to assist others to understand the importance of what they do, and in this way, to extend the number of friends they have. Building good relationships should be central to all that a small agency does, whether this is around an individual person or at the agency level. Good friends are always a great asset and especially so when you are vulnerable. Good friends are particularly helpful if you happen to have friends who will advocate for your interests and who might also be well-connected and more powerful than you.

Small agencies that are intent on lasting will need to invest their energy in broadening the base from which they obtain their financial resources. This is for at least two reasons. Firstly, the reliance on a single source of income places an organisation in jeopardy if that source of income dries up. Secondly, funding from almost all government sources is increasingly tied to particular programs, and to specifically targeted outcomes which inevitably means the use of funding becoming more constrained. Opportunities to use funds for engaging in activities that are not specifically required under service agreements will diminish, even where these activities have a core relationship to the funded activity. Small agencies that manage to broaden their support and establish multiple sources of income will be much more likely to retain a degree of independence, and to endure.

Similarly, staying connected to other people who have a positive vision, and to other small agencies that are interested in being helpful to the people they serve will also be a great asset for survival. There are many potential benefits in building these types of allegiances. One such benefit arises from small agencies organising to take collective action on issues of mutual concern. This can give added emphasis to the issue at stake and can be highly protective in preventing individuals or a single small agency from being identified as "troublemakers". Furthermore, lobbying efforts which are supported by a number of small agencies and many individuals can actually be more powerful than the lobbying efforts of only a few large services.

When used wisely, staying connected to other like-minded individuals and groups can have many other benefits. Exposing your agency, and yourself, to friendly examination and critique will help keep the agency fresh and properly oriented and might even prevent it from being seduced into doing something that, in the long run, was not actually going to be helpful to the people served. Because no agency is ever perfect (or at least, not perfect for

long), acknowledging the limits of what any one agency can do becomes a vital strategy for survival in a context where there is so much that still needs to be done. It also invites a degree of honest humility and realistic examination of an agency's actual capacity to make a difference in people's lives.

Similarly, any agency that sets out by recognising it is not perfect will naturally want to build in all kinds of means by which it can keep track of its imperfections. It follows that if you know where your imperfections are, you will know exactly those things you need to be working out, and how you are going to do a better job. Indeed, for a small agency, working on your own trouble spots can build respect and can become a powerful defence against unfriendly critique and outright attack.

Another possible response enabling small agencies to last could be a preparedness to make a decision to close the agency, in circumstances where the agency is asked to modify an existing function or to commence a new function that is known will not be helpful to the people served. While this may seem a paradox, the agency might do this for two reasons. The first is that no agency with a deep commitment to the people it serves would ever want to engage in activities that it knows will not be to the ultimate good of the people it assists.

“Building good relationships should be central to all that a small agency does.”

The second reason is that this type of thinking is so rare that it would come as a great shock to most funding bodies. A small agency with a strong supporting base and well-connected allies publicly stating that they were anticipating having to refuse funding because the strings attached to it were too unpalatable would create enormous publicity. Such an action would be unusual, and any funding body that maintained pressure on the agency to continue doing things that should not be done, would face a major confrontation and the funding body might be forced to back down.

Imagine what the publicity would be like if a coalition of individuals and small agencies collectively took a position to demand an alteration to the conditions of funding, or even to reject a funding offer on such grounds. *Be careful, we might start thinking we can change the world!* ■

The Link Between “Small” And “Good”

Joe Osburn has worked in small and large human services for thirty-five years and has been involved in the evaluation of hundreds of services in many different places. He has found that good services invariably have certain attributes, and that smallness is one of these. Joe lives in the United States and has written of the time he spent in Australia working for a small agency in Brisbane. Joe goes on to link this experience to some general points about human services.

In work that spans over thirty-five years, one of the best small services I have seen anywhere is Lifestyle Options Inc (LOI), an accommodation support service in Brisbane that I became associated with a couple of years ago. At that time LOI was engaged in a lengthy self-study process and wanted someone who was an “outsider” as its interim co-ordinator. I met this qualification about as well as anyone could, coming as I do from Indiana in the United States, fourteen thousand miles outside of Australia. I was unbelievably fortunate to be hired and to work at LOI for six months, an extraordinary experience in which I feel I was the main beneficiary. To me, LOI illustrates “the goodness of smallness” because it has many attributes that large (or even simply larger) human services would find almost impossible to acquire. I have described some of these attributes below.

Almost the entire LOI organisation consists of only about twenty people. LOI started out small and, more importantly, has never become bigger, nor has it sought to become bigger. It purposely has kept itself small in spite of the pressures of frequent requests to serve additional people.

People who use the service suffer no ambivalence about their place or status in the organisation. They know they will be heard. LOI is owned and operated by the people who use its services. LOI is theirs; they are charter members. They are few in number, not one among many, nor are they part of some general target class of clientele. This arrangement avoids a large cluster of problems. For instance, there is no need for LOI to rationalise about what a good organisation it is, or to puff itself up by rhetoric. Also, since there is no in-built provider/client dichotomy, many conflicts of interest simply do not exist, and an underlying ideological unity prevails. These exceptional advantages can probably only be sustained by smallness.

Another important feature of LOI, resulting from the above, is that every person who uses the service contributes to the organisation materially and otherwise in very direct, practical ways. The service itself, and everyone involved, benefits immeasurably from this interchange of ideas, time, money, energy, talents, experiences, insights, criticisms, hopes and dreams. All of these contributions are welcomed; they are needed, requested and used.

Another fundamentally important dimension of rendering good service is the quality of relationships among the people involved. I think good relationships are more likely to thrive in small services. Even if a service is narrowly defined and relatively simple to render, the served person's need for it is often engendered by overriding realities (such as impairment) that impinge on everything in the person's life every day for as long as the person lives. This is why good service relationships anywhere require a certain level of intensity, fidelity, and commitment. Furthermore, many human service relationships take on a totally different cast with the passage of time, eventually becoming as important to the people involved as the service itself, or possibly more so. (This tendency is well-documented by the familial or communal quality that often prevails in small agencies serving the same people over a long period of time.) Such an important service dimension can only be carried out with a small number of people.

I think of LOI as a "communal" organisation for many reasons. To begin with, it is almost totally comprised of, by, and for a group of specific individual people who have shared many things. All are part of a compact that sustains LOI through the pooling of individual resources. Beyond that, they know each other. This sounds simple and unimportant, but it is not. It is quite rare. The people of LOI, generally speaking, care about one another, and most even genuinely like one another. Some have formed very deep friendships. They have, to some extent, been part of one another's lives for a long time. Many of them get together often, outside of LOI. For example, some members vacation together, visit one another's homes, share meals, socialise, remember one another's birthdays and exchange gifts. They typically provide mutual support, encouragement, and consolation to one another. Beyond all these informal personal interconnections, LOI itself, as an organisation, provides many "intramural" opportunities for members to come together for both business and fun. For example, there are all kinds of meetings as well as general forums, occasional parties, dinners, and other celebrations, all of which are real and useful elements of LOI's communal life.

Some LOI members may not be entirely comfortable with my characterisation of their organisation as a communality, and it is true that a few people remain aloof, and keep LOI in a very narrowly

defined place in their overall lives. However, their rejection of LOI's communality negates neither its existence nor their role in sustaining it, nor for that matter, their own opportunity to take part in it whenever and however they want. LOI is far more than a corporate entity. Its real spirit resides in communality, which I think will continue to flourish even if the corporate entity itself does not.

Having described the things I know about one particular small service, I would like to make five points in general about small human services and good human services, and the links between the two.

Firstly, I have worked in both small and large services and I can say that small is better. Secondly, let me be clear that human services being "small" and "good" are not absolutely linked, but they are highly correlated. Just because a human service is small does not mean it is necessarily a good service, but rather that it has a better chance of being so. Being small is a facilitator rather than a guarantor; where you find one, you usually find the other. I have seen very few good human services that are not small.

Thirdly, one of the reasons that "small" and "good" are found to be so interlinked in human services relates to a well-documented fact about organisational dynamics, which is that human services, and indeed all formal organisations, are almost always better in the beginning when they are small, and almost always become worse after that.

Fourthly, besides organisational dynamics, other more transcendent societal dynamics weigh heavily against formal services. These would take another article to explain, but here I will say only that there are so many powerful disincentives to smallness that small services in general are in for a very hard time. Some have already ceased to exist and others are scrambling to survive by becoming bigger. I know of some services, however, that are determined to stay small (and good) and I believe these very ideals are what will enable them to do so.

Fifthly, large services seem unable to escape the distortions of formalism: depersonalisation, rigidification and bureaucratism. Small services seem able to escape these distortions, and the implication is that small formal services can still be quite informal in nature.

During the time I worked at LOI, I came to know the spirit of the organisation, and have immense respect and admiration for its people. Some will remain my friends for life, though we now live thousands of miles apart. They made me feel completely welcome, treating me with a degree of kindness, patience, and forbearance that I took to be characteristic of Aussies, and will never forget. ■

A Worker's Role in Supporting Relationships

Debbie Allum, is the Co-ordinator of Into Rec – Integration through Recreation, a small Townsville agency. Debbie describes some of the ways in which a community-based agency might help to create and sustain relationships, and some barriers that can arise.

People working in human services are often enthusiastic and compassionate, but these very qualities can sometimes be a barrier to the development of relationships between people with a disability and other people in the community. We should be aware of competing interests: the needs and motivations of the worker (such as the need to achieve and be respected) and the needs of the person for whom we're providing a service. Sometimes an imbalance of these needs can lead to a worker taking on a role that is too prominent in the life of a person with a disability. A dependency grows, and the involvement of other people in the community can be slowly squeezed out.

The aim of Into Rec is to assist individual people with a disability to join in community recreational groups of their choice as a means of developing friendships and finding ways by which they can contribute to the group. Support workers take on a facilitator's role by encouraging, introducing, linking, and standing back. In standing back and becoming a "wallflower", the worker encourages the people in the recreational group to focus on the person being introduced to the group, and not on the worker. Being a facilitator often means leading-from-behind, not

stepping in to "fix" things, and definitely means letting-go. Sometimes workers might try to over-protect a person from mistakes, awkward silences, or rejection. In trying to save the day, we can inhibit a person from problem-solving for themselves, or others from lending a hand.

Part of letting-go is to trust that people in the community want to be involved, and that the person with the disability can make significant and valued contributions. We may actually deprive the community when we inhibit diverse experiences. For example, when problems arise it is often easier to surround ourselves with like-minded people than to discuss or disagree with another point of view. But taking the easy way is not always the most fulfilling way to live. We need to encourage people in the community to share these experiences and allow them to happen.

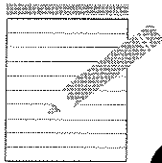
In order to encourage quality of experiences and meaningful participation in the community, agencies sometimes need to "work harder to do less". In other words, we need to be wallflowers who assist people to make their own decisions, to make their own mistakes and to learn from them, and to be accepted for their own contributions to the community. ■

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Creating a Training Culture at a Local Level

In various Queensland regions some organisations have found numerous ways of meeting local training needs. One example is the Community Training Network of Rockhampton whose strategy was the focus of a presentation by Judith Hose at the CRU Conference.

Julie Simpson, of Maryborough, describes another training initiative developed by the local disability sector. Julie believes that one of the reasons why small non-government disability organisations are vulnerable, is that they do not have the financial capacity or infrastructure to plan for the training and development of their personnel, and that this in turn reduces their ability to respond to human resource management issues.

Fraser Coast Quality Lifestyles Agency is a non-profit organisation, driven by people with disabilities and family members. In 1997 the agency approached other non-government service providers in Maryborough and Hervey Bay, along with Disability Operations and Service Development and Planning (both of which are part of the Department of Families, Youth & Community Care), with the suggestion that a community training strategy be developed. The response was positive, and a group came together to agree on objectives and to plan strategies for meeting those objectives.

The main objectives of the group are to provide training that is consistent, ongoing, and readily available to all disability agencies in the area. Additionally, it must be done in ways that meet the needs of consumers, service providers and personnel in a relevant and practical manner, and in ways that are cost effective. It must also utilise the skills of suitably experienced people in the region, including people with disabilities and their families. It should also enable the professional development of service personnel and encourage career paths in the sector. Importantly, it should facilitate people with disabilities, family members, and service personnel to gain and exchange skills, and to participate in training together. Training should also focus on service providers meeting such legislative requirements as Workplace Health and Safety.

The group identified and prioritised the topics to be presented and a training calendar was planned for 1998 with a training day scheduled for the third Wednesday of each month. Facilitators for these training sessions are drawn from participating agencies and the community, all of whom contribute their time. These include service managers, therapists, personnel with considerable experience in the sector, people with disabilities, family members, and advocates.

The training program has been successful, with a minimum of twenty-two participants for each session,

and an emergence of a "culture of consumer influence". A further indication of success has been the development of a "learning ethic" among participants as well as a strong sense of all stakeholders feeling that they are appreciated.

The group has also extended its range of strategies. For example, Disability Operations (Department of Families, Youth & Community Care) approached Quality Lifestyles to co-ordinate the provision of pre-service training for their staff. This arrangement also provided opportunities for non-government organisations to participate in the training at no cost. The partnership has now developed into a more formal alliance. As part of the contract, Quality Lifestyles is responsible for consultation with stakeholders, the development of training strategies, and for helping to facilitate the advancement of the partnership between the government and non-government sector. It is becoming clear that the exchange of information between government and non-government personnel is proving beneficial to the sector as a whole.

In all training, the emphasis is on person-centered support for people with disabilities, and the recognition that leadership by families is integral to the achievement of objectives. People with disabilities and family members participate as students and tutors, and also organise the facilitation of training sessions.

A strong focus is placed on the sharing of strengths so that all stakeholders feel valued. For example: service recipients provide leadership; service personnel feel appreciated by their employers and the people they serve; and government and non-government service providers and service recipients collaborate in ways that increase the effectiveness and capacity of each.

In summary, the emphasis for meeting the training needs of agencies in our region is on contribution and partnership, and these are proving to be an extremely effective combination. ■

Reflections from the Gathering Conference

In July this year, over three hundred people from across Australia gathered for three days at Griffith University for what has been reported to be one of the most significant conferences in Australia. It was called "Gathering the Wisdom, Enriching the Spirit, Embracing the Future". Among this group of enthusiastic people were many people with a disability, family members, service providers, and others who strive to make it possible for people with a disability to participate in community life.

Key speakers from throughout Queensland and invited presenters from Canada, United States, Perth and Sydney were asked to consider the past ten years, to identify the opportunities of the present, and to define and shape a vision for the next decade. There were many "golden moments" during the Conference - ones that filled participants with insight, richness and renewal. Five participants have written their reflections.

► **Glenys Mann**

reflects on the Conference as a parent and member of a community support group.

Ten years ago, when CRU was formed and there were many critical issues arising for people with disabilities, my first baby was born. The world of disability was, as yet, unknown territory. Little did I know that five years and two children later, I would have to work out the best way to cross that terrain while encountering all the practical, emotional, and philosophical struggles which that journey entails. As the mother of a boy with Down syndrome, and as an active member of a community support group, my life has grown, of late, to focus on the issues that arise for an individual and their family when that person is classified as disabled. The challenges that go along with taking such a focus frequently shift from being uplifting and strengthening, to being overwhelming and disheartening. As a parent and as a committee member, I often find myself in need of information, support, and some positive-thinking.

When the CRU Conference came around it seemed important to overcome the usual obstacles of rearranging the family's routine and finding babysitters. I loved the sound of the Conference... Wisdom... Nurturing... Sharing... They were definitely what I needed, and yes, Celebration and Enrichment too.

With the introduction and welcome to the Conference expressed in a song about children and stars and dreams and hopes, I knew this would be

quite an experience. In spite of being in a large lecture theatre with many people, there was a sense of "talking together" rather than of being "talked at" as well as a feeling of genuine care and commitment, even from people who would have been forgiven for running out of energy long ago. Throughout each presentation I felt a sense of the value of the spirit. While some presentations were in the form of personal stories, and others took a group perspective or spoke more broadly of life in general, what was common to all presenters was the depth of the qualities they brought to their situations. They all demonstrated courage and determination, commitment and energy, creativity and humour. I found it very moving that so many individuals felt able to relate their personal stories, and share their hurts and losses as well as their triumphs. They seemed to touch on the essence of what it is to struggle for a better life for all of us.

It was also valuable for me to hear the history of CRU and to learn some of the things that have happened for people with disabilities over the last ten years. Feeling very new to the issues, it was helpful to get a sense of continuity and of the interdependency that exists between one action and the next. Hearing this history and realising the size of the tasks that people have faced, left me feeling quite small and inadequate, while at the same time

inspired and positive about what individuals manage to achieve.

Thinking back, it just felt good to be there. It felt like a small retreat from the world so that I could focus on what direction I want to take as a parent and as part of a group. In both roles I felt reassured to be part of a larger community of people and felt better informed through the sharing of other

people's experiences. For those three days, anything seemed possible. And now, even though I'm back to juggling meetings and children, having too much to do with never enough time, I feel that perhaps I, too, can be one of the small dots that make up the big picture. I may not be able to see it clearly now but I would like to think that my tiny splash of colour will be there when it all finally comes into focus. ■

► **Sandra Kalms**

who is a board member of Citizen Advocacy NSW Association, reflects on the power of storytelling.

It sometimes feels that the situation for many people with disabilities, especially in New South Wales, is becoming worse and that the gains made in the last two decades are being eroded. There have been many distractions from the real issues and those who are most vulnerable are paying the price. The CRU Conference gave me an opportunity to learn, to hope once again, and to focus on what is important in people's lives.

Through the many stories that were told at the Conference I was reminded of the power of storytelling. During August of this year the Citizen Advocacy NSW Association held a series of learning events facilitated by Zana Lutfiyya for boards and staff of Citizen Advocacy Programmes in NSW. The most powerful moments of the events came when coordinators told stories of advocate actions. These stories did not all have happy endings, and some did not have endings at all, yet they inspired us and gave us even more reason to trust the actions of ordinary community members. In a similar way, stories told at the CRU Conference often spoke of many years of struggle. Some struggles continue and others have just begun but they all conveyed hope and encouragement. The honesty of the personal stories humbled me.

Mike Duggan spoke about the need for relationships and intimacy in the lives of all of us, reminding us that people with a disability don't want a service, they want a life. I see this clearly in my own work of supporting friendships between ordinary community members and people who are living in a large institution. Since the Conference my eyes have been opened to the barriers that prevent people living in a large institution from meeting others, making friends or sustaining relationships. Focusing on what is really important in people's lives has enabled me to see beyond the facade of services.

One of the presenters, Julie Cosgrove, spoke about the reality of large human services driving out informal, freely-given supports. I now wonder how many ordinary people drive past the institution each day and think that because a service is looking after the residents, their lives are satisfying. What people need most is love, affection and relationships and these are the very things that the service discourages. But there is hope - Bob Lee's presentation reminded us that there will always be those who are prepared to take an interest in the lives of other people.

I have also been reflecting on a question posed at the Conference: Is there only a place in our communities when our communities are OK? When speaking with people about the inclusion of people with disabilities in our communities, I am often told frightening stories of abuse and neglect of individuals in the community. Having the opportunity at the Conference to hear stories of people living inclusive lives in the community has increased my belief that it is only by the inclusion of people with disabilities in our communities that our communities will become stronger. Being able to relate these stories of inclusion helps to give a more positive perspective to people who hold fearful and negative images of the community.

At the end of the Conference Veronica Brady spoke about "keeping the fire going". For me, a big part of keeping that fire going is remembering and retelling the stories of the people who had the courage to act and to make change. The spirit of the CRU Conference enabled many lights to shine as beacons of hope.

I was reminded of the words of Nelson Mandela who, in his inaugural speech, said that as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same, and as we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others. ■

► *Jim Byrne*

is an active member of the Rockhampton community. As the President of Access Recreation, Jim attended the Conference in July and writes some of his reflections.

The CRU Conference placed a strong emphasis on the need for renewal. For some, renewal might take the form of a holiday or a break from this particular field of work, but for me, renewal came from being at the CRU Conference and hearing the inspirational stories of others. Their legacy is one of hope for the future of people with disabilities.

When Nicola Schaefer and Carolyn Friend spoke about their daughters' lives, I was reminded of the members of one of the local organisations where I do voluntary work, the Rockhampton and District Blind Club. This work has given me a great deal of insight into the need of people to be socially active.

Although there is a wide gap between the ages of our Association members and the daughters of Nicola and Carolyn, they still yearn

for independence and freedom of choice. The majority of members are aged over seventy, several of them have multiple disabilities, and some feel that they are completely useless. It takes a lot of support to convince them that they have an important role in the community, because the trend for society is to discard the elderly by placing them in institutions or to leave them to their own devices.

I sometimes reflect on the words of Don Grimes, who was the first speaker at the Conference. He said that people with disabilities do not so much have special needs but have the same needs as ordinary people, however, they do experience special difficulties in having those ordinary needs met. ■

► *Lisa Wilson*

from Lifestyle Support Service in Dalby was one of three staff members who attended the Conference and found that they were "not alone" in two important ways.

Ours is a small accommodation support service in Dalby, two hundred kilometres west of Brisbane. Since the implementation of the SACS Award and an increase in demand for service provision, we are struggling to maintain the high quality of our service. For some time staff have been feeling vulnerable, isolated, defeated, and unsure of their direction. An opportunity to attend the CRU Conference seemed to offer a welcome relief from these feelings and fortunately, our service was willing to send all three staff members who were keen to attend.

The Conference gave us a chance to see that we are not alone, and are not the only ones struggling, feeling stressed, or whose efforts are sometimes in vain. It also made us realise how passionate we remain about our goals and the dreams we hold for the future of the people who use our service.

We also experienced the pleasure of meeting kindred-spirits who have similar goals for people with disabilities in our area. This might not seem particularly amazing at such an event, except that we had travelled over two hundred kilometres to realise that a staff member from another service in Dalby, which is provided by our own organisation, was one of those kindred-spirits yet we had never had the chance to get to know each other before! ■

► *Wendy O'Meara*

writes her reflections from the Pilbara, a remote region of Western Australia.

This was a Conference that nobody could have prepared me for. Throughout the three days I heard stories that transported me through an array of emotions. I heard stories of courage and determination, hope and despair. I learnt of the positive impact made by small local agencies on the lives of people with disabilities and their families. I was reminded of the importance of relationship building, networking, training and development, engaging in community building, and the development and support of leadership.

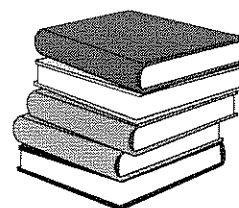
I saw the effect of the time that CRU has invested in these activities: the existence of a community that is comprised of individuals and small agencies who are committed to influencing change in ways that produce positive outcomes for people with disabilities and their families. I wished that many others from the Pilbara had been able to attend the Conference and witness the energy, strength, and unity of voice that was present at the Conference.

The Pilbara, for those unfamiliar with the region, is one of the largest of Western Australia's statistical and planning regions. It is comprised of four local authority areas, covering over five hundred and twenty thousand square kilometres.

The majority of the population lives in the western third of the region. The eastern two-thirds is largely comprised of desert, inhabited by traditional Aborigines. The region is characterised by transience, diversity of population, and geographical isolation. All of these factors strongly impact upon the lives of people with disabilities and their families who live within its borders. But if these factors are offered as reasons why small community managed agencies will not survive in the region, the capacity to develop responses that reflect the local culture and make a positive contribution at a community level will be lost. For me, the value of small agencies sharing a common vision goes unattested. For those of us in the Pilbara who share this belief, the challenge lies in providing appropriate supports for these small groups to enable their vision, energy and commitment to be sustained. At no time is this more important than in the current economic climate.

What I witnessed at the CRU Conference reminded me not only of the importance of small agencies, but also of the benefit of people coming together and telling their stories. ■

CONFERENCE PAPERS



We are delighted to announce that the Conference Papers will be published in book form and will be available for sale from CRU early in 1999. Michael Kendrick, in his foreword to the book, writes:

"The reader will be entreated to a level of perceptiveness, rigour of thought and unafraid naming of issues.... This event distinguishes itself with its freshness, intellectuality, moral depth and the powerfully acute centrality of the voices of people with disabilities and those who love them. This was an event for people who take things seriously and whose words and actions are not merely utterances but promises that, once spoken, are to be honored whatever the price. The beauty of the event was not solely in the words of the speakers but even more in the purity, integrity and authenticity of the hearts and lives of those who attended."

Further details of this publication will be available in the next edition of CRUCIAL TIMES

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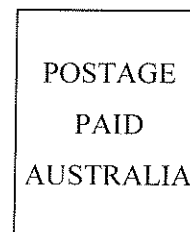
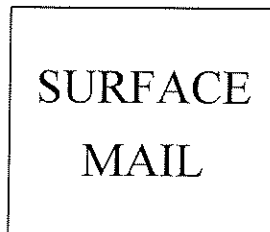
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