



## **Trials and Triumphs: The Opening of Lorikeet Clubhouse in Perth, Australia**

by Dave MacDonald, Director, Pathways Clubhouse, Richmond, B.C., Canada

I come from Pathways Clubhouse which is in Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. After working at Pathways for around six years, I was given the incredible opportunity to go to Perth Australia for one year to assist them in opening a clubhouse. When the offer came, one might have expected that I would have been ready to jump on the next plane, but I had many other things to consider. The fact is that the very reason why I was asked to go was because Pathways is such a good clubhouse, and the reason it is such a good clubhouse is because of the true relationships that we have with each other. To leave behind these supports and friends, who made Pathways become what it is was, was scary. But still, this was an opportunity of a lifetime.

Four years prior to my being invited to Perth, a group of concerned parents of kids with schizophrenia got together and formed the Schizophrenia Fellowship of Western Australia. They were concerned about the overall lack of mental health services available, and the quality of what was available. They were looking for an alternative that was not hospital- based. After much research, a group of these parents went to Melbourne and visited Bromham Place, the first clubhouse in Australia. That was it. They had found what they were looking for.

After a lot of fundraising activity, they were finally successful in getting funding from the Health Department, and they were ready to proceed. While at Bromham Place, they had been strongly encouraged to hire someone experienced in operating a clubhouse, at least for the "start-up" phase of the clubhouse. That's where I came in.

Arriving in Australia, I quickly realized that being experienced in clubhouse did not mean that my job would be easy. In fact just plain, everyday living and speaking became a challenge. We may speak the same language but our words have different meanings. Our cookies are their biscuits; our hamburger is their mince; our ketchup is their tomato sauce. We eat candies and they eat lollies. We drink pop and they drink cool drink. The list is endless. And they drive on the wrong side of the street. They have backwards light switches, toilets which are too big, weather that is too hot, only five TV stations, and an extremely funny way of talking.

Regarding my actual job, there were several immediate dilemmas with which I had to contend.

1. The clubhouse building was located on hospital grounds.



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2. Although they had secured funding for staff and operating costs, there was no money for furniture, equipment, or Transitional Employment.
3. The Board of Directors had been working for four years to get a clubhouse, yet had no idea how a clubhouse should operate, had never heard of the Clubhouse Standards, and some of the Board members wanted something "in return" for all their hard work.
4. We were the only clubhouse in Western Australia, thousands of miles from any other clubhouse.
5. People with mental illness had no rights to speak of, no real advocacy group, and treatment was traditional, hierarchical, and medically-based. A clubhouse would have to do a lot of work on the "soil" before it would be able to put down roots which would eventually support a flourishing clubhouse community.
6. There was concern in the community that we were creating another "Americanized project," and that I, a foreigner, was taking away an Australian's job.

The clubhouse building was an old Occupational Therapy building on the grounds of the hospital, and it required much work. When we started the renovations, we had to deal with several builders, and through these contacts I soon learned that "Perth time" was quite different from the time I was used to. For instance, when they said they would be there in an hour but did not show up, that meant that they would probably arrive in three hours. If they did not show or ring in three hours, that meant they would likely show the next morning. If the next day they did not show up, that meant we could surely expect them later on in the week. When I first arrived, we planned on opening in a month, but in reality it took three months because I had not understood the nuances of "Perth time."

Our clubhouse finally did open, but there were many more many surprises for which I was not prepared. We had the basic "3 Cs" of cooking, cleaning and communications. But quickly more Cs began to develop. We had those normal growing pains of chaos, confusion, and sometimes catastrophe. But we also became a community, comrades, and a growing culture. As we developed, though, it became very clear that we had a tremendous amount of work to do in order to begin to meet the daunting needs of our members, which were not being addressed anywhere else. Our belief was that our members required and deserved to have their needs met, and so Lorikeet Clubhouse quickly became a resource hub.

For example, housing in Western Australia is a nightmare. The majority of our members either lived in run down apartments or in hostels which housed between 50 and 100 people. Our members decided to create a housing committee which would work toward housing members, not the way the governing bodies believed they should be housed, but the way we believed they had a right to live. At the present time, this committee is in the process of establishing cooperative housing.



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We realized that we needed to become the resource hub for legal advocacy for clubhouse members. We found that there was no system in place to protect the legal rights of people with mental illness in Western Australia. For instance, there were allegations by some of our members that they had been raped by hospital staff while in hospital, and that the only advocates available for them, were hospital staff. So Lorikeet Clubhouse has set up an advocacy committee that is addressing not what our legal rights *are* but what they *should be*, and how we can go about changing them. Also, we developed a relationship with a sympathetic lawyer, who comes to the clubhouse every two weeks, free of charge, to assist members with any legal issues.

We were very concerned that members had no say in any mental health reforms. As we had worked hard to develop good relationships with people in the media, they were now invested in assisting us with this issue. When the Minister of Health appointed a task force, to consist of professionals, caregivers, and consumers to address the issues of mental health reform, we were delighted. When we discovered, however, that the task force in reality consisted almost entirely of psychiatrists, with *no* consumers, we called our friends in the media. Eventually, a Lorikeet member was invited to sit on the task force.

By the end of my year at Lorikeet, most of our toughest obstacles had been overcome. People in Perth were no longer suspicious or unsure of us, and we enjoyed great community support. After nine months of operation, 150 people had already become members of Lorikeet Clubhouse. The clubhouse was located on hospital grounds, but access was free and we were close to a train station. But we were delighted when land was donated to us, to build our own clubhouse, which we were to get after being operational for two years and completing our evaluation.

Although we had many triumphs, there were also many trials and many of them we due to my own mistakes. I believe if I had to do it all over again, I would probably use some of the following guidelines:

1. **BEFORE OPENING A CLUBHOUSE, BE A CLUBHOUSE:** Members must be involved in all aspects of the clubhouse, even before opening day: hiring staff, purchasing furniture, renovations, etc. This is vital if we want members to have true ownership in the clubhouse.
2. **DO NOT SETTLE FOR SECOND BEST:** Do not accept donations for your clubhouse if the quality of the donation is substandard. Once again, who would want to have ownership in something if they are not proud of it? We had some board members who attempted to donate some furniture and office equipment, but what they wanted to donate were items they would not use themselves. By holding out, we eventually were able to receive cash donations to purchase the things we wanted, and the rest was purchased through creative book keeping.
3. **COLLEAGUE TRAINING:** Just because the director is trained and well experienced in the Clubhouse Model, do not think the other members and staff



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will understand the model through osmosis. They need to have the actual hands-on experience of a good clubhouse, not what the director tells them a good clubhouse should be like. The skills and personalities in each clubhouse differ from other clubhouses, so each clubhouse will have its unique character. We had the good fortune of receiving Colleague Training at Bromham Place in Melbourne. Lorikeet Clubhouse does not operate the same as Bromham Place, nor is it the same as Pathways Clubhouse. What is common, though, is the reason we do what we do in every clubhouse.

4. **FUNCTIONS:** Ensure that the clubhouse is there to address the needs of the members and the program, not the needs of the funders. Sometimes we may have things in our contract that contradict what the clubhouse should be doing. Once open and operating, it does not take much to justify not following through with the funders' requests, whether they are consistent with clubhouse philosophy or not. Each clubhouse operates somewhat differently, even though we follow the same standards. We have to be certain, though, that the work that is done in the clubhouse facilitates the operation of the program, while at the same time enhancing the members' work skills.
5. **RELATIONSHIPS:** Strong and positive relationships between members and staff are important, and can be achieved if everyone is involved at the very beginning stages. But for a new Clubhouse, it is also crucial to have good relationships with the Board of Directors, funders, mental health services, neighbours, and media. The beginning days are critical and tiresome, but with support from these other groups, the opportunity for success increases.
6. **MONEY:** If you don't have it, get it. Once again, do not always put the burden on your own shoulders. That is why you have a Board of Directors, and is a good reason for developing all of the positive relationships mentioned above.
7. **USE THE CLUBHOUSE NETWORK:** It is amazing how a person forgets the bad times and only remembers the good. Although it is not vivid in my memory, there were a few times I was ready to pack my bags and go home. But I had the fortune of having a long distance friend called Kim who worked at Bromham Place in Melbourne who has survived the opening of the first Clubhouse in Australia. I also had my best friends back home at Pathways, with whom I spoke on a regular basis. Sometimes after hearing some of their problems, mine were not so bad.

I believe that the trials of opening Lorikeet Clubhouse in Perth are very similar to the difficulties that have occurred, and will continue to occur, in clubhouses all over the world. We all have to deal with the prejudices of our society and the barriers created by our mental health system. But I also believe that the Clubhouse Model is a powerful antidote to this dehumanizing stigma, and is capable of working no matter where it is. It does not *protect* us from society's prejudices, but *prepares* us to meet those challenges. The clubhouse does not dwell on the trials nor ignore them, but, instead, celebrates and grows from the many triumphs.