

Gethsemane Community Inc

Sr Myree Harris RSJ

The community was begun in 1990, when Myree Harris RSJ took over what had been a St Francis House at Stanmore, one of a group run by Pauline FitzWalter sgs. Initially, there was a large and itinerant group of men and women living there. After six months, the group was evicted, since there was no lease in place. A much better house was found for rent on Enmore Road Marrickville and the community, now smaller and more stable, lived there for nine and a half years. At that point, their application for disability funding from the Department of Housing was successful. A six-bedroom house at 5 Oxford Street, Petersham was bought for the community in 1999 and renovated. In May, Gethsemane Community moved in. The Office of Community Housing now owns the property and Churches Community Housing Ltd manages the lease. There are no employees. All assistance is voluntary. A Board meets every six weeks and accounts are audited. Gethsemane Community Inc is a registered charity with permission to fundraise and a Public Benevolent Institution.

There are five separate tenancies, as each resident has a tenancy agreement with CCHL. All residents pay rent to OCH through CCHL and each contribute \$60 weekly for all services. Obviously, this does not pay the bills, but it allows people to save so they can become independent. Residents have mental illness, usually schizophrenia and have case managers and GPs and are on medication.

The focus is on developing living skills, so that residents have a choice of living independently. Everyone is expected to look after his/her own room and laundry, and to help with cooking, keeping the place clean and caring for the pets; currently a dog and three cats. The group lives as a community, sharing the evening meal, celebrating birthdays and special events.



About forty people have been through the community since 1990. Five have died and Gethsemane buried three of them. There is little family contact as a general rule, and even if there is, most don't cover funeral expenses. About ten former residents are living independently. Some are now in aged care. Some have gone back to boarding houses or hostels. At least one is on the streets, when not in a homeless shelter. Those who want to do so, stay in touch with the community and are welcome back for meals and celebrations. In crisis, they can always call on the community for assistance.

The community provides outreach to residents of licensed boarding houses for people with disabilities. During the year, used clothing, blankets and food are shared with anyone in need. Grants from the Newman's Own Foundation and Mary MacKillop Foundation have been used to buy shoes for residents of boarding houses. Requests have been passed on to St Vincent de Paul Society for blankets and winter parkas.

At Christmas, Gethsemane organizes a major project to provide personalised gifts for 743 people in 16 boarding houses, 19 aged care facilities to which boarding house people have gone, as well as people in five group homes and some living independently. There is also a process that enables interested people to send Christmas cards to those who are socially isolated. Hampers of festive food and hams are delivered to ten boarding houses. There is open house at Gethsemane Community for lunch on Christmas day.

