



From: Alison Earls via CommunityRun
Sent: Sunday, 28 February 2016 2:24 PM
Subject: The Barrett Centre ... More to the Story

As the Commission of Inquiry continues and media reports give you punchy grabs about politicians, I feel compelled to tell you all a story. A true story. About a place I discovered a few years ago. I knew nothing about it. I knew that The Park at Wacol was a mental health facility. And an extensive one at that. As a child growing up in Brisbane there was an intimidating sense around references to it. So when I set out to visit the Barrett Adolescent Centre at Wacol on the 10th of May 2013, although I had an open mind, I admit I was prepared for high security, zealous regulation and even a daunting environment. Here's what I found ...

Through the roadworks and the quiet buildings, I followed the directions. On vast green ovals, there were kangaroos grazing and close by, some golf enthusiasts took refuge from the weekday bustle to test their skill on the fairways. On the edge of the grounds, I found it. The lowset buildings weren't brand new but they weren't scary. The school looked like ... a small school – with windows hung with artwork and project material and a pleasant buzz of activity as I walked inside. I was greeted like an old friend by the staff – I didn't know who was who in the hierarchy (if there was one) because each person was as jovial with each other as they were with me. I was introduced to many broad smiles, immersed in friendly banter and then someone said with a wry smile, "Here they come". Along a path from another building (that I was later to find out was "the ward") came a cluster of teenagers. Being teenagers. Some cajoling and smirking, some tending to adjustment of hairstyles or fashion, some full of chatter and some with faces that were paler and quiet. They walked as if they were mostly glad to be heading in that direction. They walked as if they were coming to visit some mates. There were bubbly moods and matter-of-fact moods and a few wary moods. They were teenagers.

When we went into a classroom and began a discussion, though, I discovered that they were more than teenagers. They were people with something that I had never had at that age. They understood pain. And challenge. And real dread. And disappointment. They had a wisdom that comes from surviving all of those things. The view of life as easy or trivial was long gone – unlike those of us that have the luxury of holding onto that simplicity until well into adulthood. And because those young people had experienced so much – and such extremes – and they had done those things alone and together, they were bonded with each other. And because their teachers understood all that so well, they could harness unique – and sometimes subtle – opportunities to enhance learning. Real learning. About how to live. How to cope. How to navigate the rollercoaster when it plummets and make the most of the view when it ascends. We talked about fears. We talked about role models. We talked about challenges. And just before the most delicious morning tea I've ever eaten in a school, a staff member's dog

dropped in to visit. He was hugged, his aroma was appraised (some able to see through the superficial while others were a little more judgmental) and then he settled in a comfortable corner with a human friend in need of some quiet canine companionship. And then those young people taught me a lesson. In courage. In maturity. In humility. They thanked me. For starting a petition. They sat there with *their* achievements and they thanked *me*. Some might have been overwhelmed with the anxiety that had weighed them down for years, some couldn't hide their distress at the recent changes that swirled around them (familiar nursing staff having to leave, uncertainty over the future of their treatment), but they were grateful and interested and they expressed it. And I was overwhelmed. Because, for all the experiences they'd collectively endured, none of them could comprehend why people who didn't know them cared about them. Would want to support them. That was heartbreaking. To see that their trauma had inhibited the self-worth that each one of them deserved. Of course we care about them! They are all vital human beings. With potential. With hopes and aspirations and ideas and passions. And with a burden any one of us could have been handed but just happened not to be if we were lucky. I tried to explain that they didn't have to be grateful. That those who'd found themselves in less challenging circumstances were obligated to support those who'd been dealt a different hand. Like trying to balance a scale. But I was as clumsy with my words then as I am now.

So we left the talking and went outside to make fruit salad or clamber around trees or sit with familiar people who could give comfort and stability when the world might feel as if it was crumbling all around.

When I left, I knew then that we could never leave that community. We could never abandon them. Because any time or energy we could spend on them would be time or energy well spent.

I should add that I'm not naïve. I'm not ignorant of the emotions that can rage inside those walls, perhaps in those gardens. I'm not blind to the physical harm that can be inflicted by the turmoil of intense fear, self-loathing, and nightmarish thoughts that are not part of a person's true identity when they're afflicted with mental ill-health or scarred by trauma. Or both. What those young people have endured can make teenagers wise beyond their years in some ways and as bereft and vulnerable as a lost child in others. And that spectrum of experiences and thoughts and feelings would be a vicious cocktail inside any of us.

So if some people have found a way to help those young people heal and grow towards lives with stability and hope, we have to give them every opportunity to do that.

And you have all done that. You've shown you care. You've supported that community and those people. And I know they're incredibly grateful.

So after a week where [one person talked about a "violent and very, very difficult place" with "all the hallmarks of institutional neglect"](#), I thought I'd tell you that story. (Because, as all health professionals know, you should always get a second opinion.)

My thanks always,

Alison