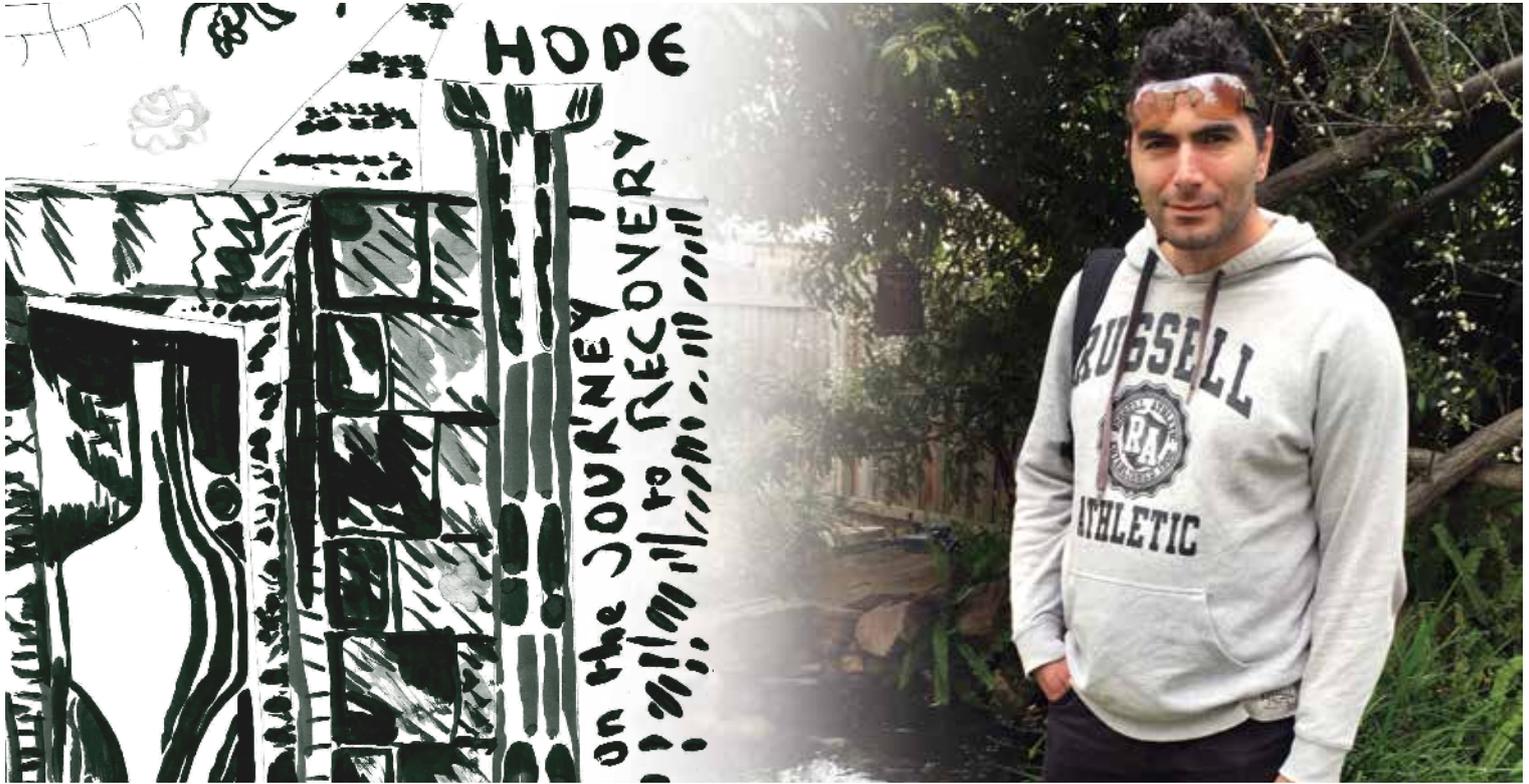


Sharing our stories with you



Above right: Bobby Above left: an artistic interpretation of his story, done by his fellow client and friend, Eve Freedman.

Ch-ch-ch-changes

“I’ve lived in a number of different settings over the past few years. I’ve had to adjust to a lot of changes over that time, but even though it’s sometimes been difficult, with each shift of environment I’ve been moving towards my goal of living more independently.”

Bobby, is no stranger to change. The twists and turns on his road to recovery have been challenging, but each movement took him closer toward regaining his independence. This is his story...

Back in late 2009 I found myself living in an extended care unit at Dandenong Hospital, where I ended up staying for over eighteen months. During that time I received a diagnosis of schizophrenia, which I didn’t really agree with. I found it

hard to cope because I experienced a lot of negative side-effects from the medicine I had to take, it felt like there was a lot of control over me and no freedom, and I felt pushed to join in structured groups which made me feel worse. I was forced to stay there for a long time because they thought my health would improve, but in the end nothing much was changing and I was discharged into a Community Care Unit (CCU) in Bentleigh.

Things improved there and I ended up staying for the next three and a half years. My medication was reduced and I experienced less side-effects. I didn’t have to attend the group programs if I didn’t want to, and I could come and go a bit more freely. An outreach worker from Mind started working with me and he helped me to take the next step to independence by encouraging me to try moving into a Mind Peer Recovery Community (PRC) in Albert Park (Victoria).

I had always lived in the suburbs before, so it took a while to adjust to living in the inner city, but I came to really like it. The shops were close, there were lots of things to do nearby and I had a lot of new experiences. It was hard for me to participate in the group programs to begin with because my migraines were severe and I wasn’t sleeping well. My medications were making me feel slow and drowsy, and I had some admissions to hospital. Things improved when the Alfred Mobile Support and Treatment Service (MSTS) team took over my clinical care. I liked my doctor better and some changes to my medication helped me to feel better. I started to join in more group activities at the PRC when I could.

The structured groups at PRC were better than the ones I’d experienced before. I enjoyed learning about how to navigate mental health services, and I wish my migraines hadn’t made it hard for me to concentrate in the workshops about

Ch-ch-ch-changes (continued)

budgeting! The mindfulness activities didn't work so well for me, but I enjoyed lots of the other activities like cooking group, BBQs, leisure walks and an outing to the National Gallery of Victoria to see the Andy Warhol/Ai Wei Wei exhibition. I had a key worker who could help me one-to-one with the things I needed, and I also got good information about housing and other services that would be available to me when I left the program. The PRC was a good place to try to quit smoking because you had to go outside. I also got linked in with a smoking cessation worker which helped me to reduce my smoking.

Another thing I liked about the Peer Recovery Community was that it felt like there was always someone to speak to. I missed some residents when they left the community, but over time I made some good friendships while I was there. I liked that there were no nurses, and I felt more independent and relaxed without 24 hour staffing. Residents were trusted to manage alright overnight and for most of the weekends.

Recently I moved into a Mind-nominated transitional housing unit back in Bentleigh, so I've been going through another big adjustment. I'm living back in the suburbs again and there's not as much support, but I'm getting used to that. I had to change doctors, psychiatrist and pharmacist, but now it's all organised I'm very happy with my treating team at Monash MSTs. I feel like my psychiatrist believes me more and understands what I'm going through and my new case manager is really good too. It's the best medical team I've had.

I find living in my unit very peaceful. I am close to my family and I'm familiar with the area, though I miss some things about living closer to the city. I can spend some time at my mother's house nearby, but it's good to have my own place to come back to. I've had a few things to work out with my flatmate, but he's easy-going and not hard to get along with. There are some things I miss about living with a group of people like at the PRC, so I need to find other things to get involved with in the community. The rent is affordable, and I'll be able to stay here until I get offered a public housing flat, which might be my next step to independence.

All in all I've been through lots of change over the past few years, and even though things have been hard sometimes, on the whole my situation has improved. I've had some good support along the way, and I'm hopeful that the doorways ahead will keep leading me to better places.

Mind Peer Recovery Communities offer individualised recovery services in a residential setting where people with mental ill-health can be socially included and learn to manage their mental and physical health in a supported environment.

To find out more, visit our website:

www.mindaustralia.org.au/peerrecovery

My declaration of independence

The following is a piece written by former Mind client, Rick Cuthbert.

For as far back as I can remember I had always been profoundly compromised by a tormenting anxiety. By the age of 17, I was frequently binge drinking and using illicit drugs. In the beginning I remember being constantly amazed to find that by using a cocktail of chemicals the anxiety and feelings of isolation could be removed. It was the first time I had ever been able to exhale and relax.

For a number of years life was good, not for a moment did I pause to consider the personal cost that addiction will inevitably bring. This came in the way of spending the majority of my life residing within institutions or becoming involved with a number of various organisations and fellowships, forever in search of a solution. At the age of 55, shortly following another homeless winter, a local crisis accommodation centre linked me in with two outreach workers from Mind Australia.

Before long I was invited to an interview which was followed by an offer of a room at their Peer Recovery Community (PRC) residence in Brunswick (Victoria), which of course I gratefully accepted. From the very beginning of my stay I was met with understanding and empathy. After being particularly supported by the PRC staff I was eventually able to settle in. Then for the first time in my life instead of being told what I should and should not be doing, I was instead given the dignity and empowerment to identify and address the concerns that I myself regarded as intensely debilitating.

Due to the level of compassion and support I was given I now live happily independently. I have a variety of friends and a number of diverse interests. No doubt life is life, not all good and nor is it all bad. For me, I have found the best place to be in somewhere comfortably in the middle. It helps if I keep that in mind!



Brett Curtiss, flickr, 2011

Becoming a mental health peer worker



One day workshop

Ever thought about using your lived experience of mental ill-health and recovery to help others? The role of the peer worker does just that – it enables you to use your unique experience to inform change within mental health services. Mind delivers a one-day workshop designed for people who would like to learn more about using their lived experience in a professional capacity. The workshop (and peer work itself) is for both consumers and carers.

This one-day workshop will provide you with:

information about pathways to training

an understanding of the values, principles and practices that are at the core of peer work

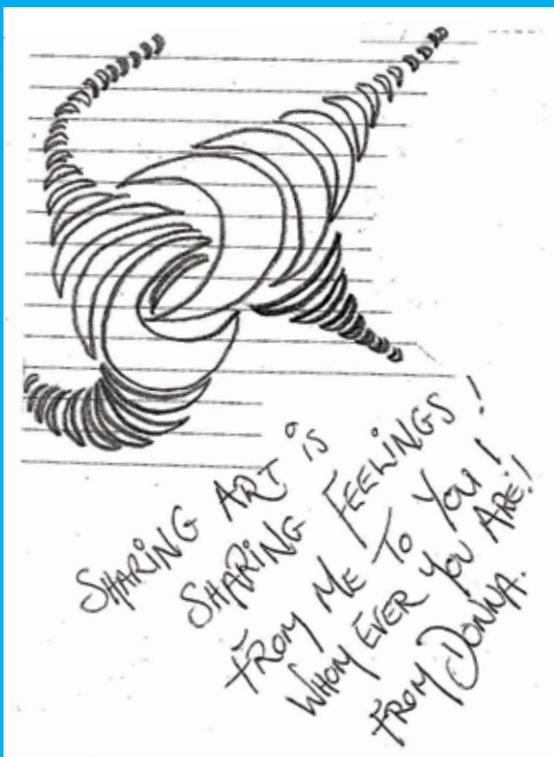
opportunities to engage with people currently employed at Mind in lived experience roles.

Thursday
1 December 2016

For more
information visit:
peersupportvic.org

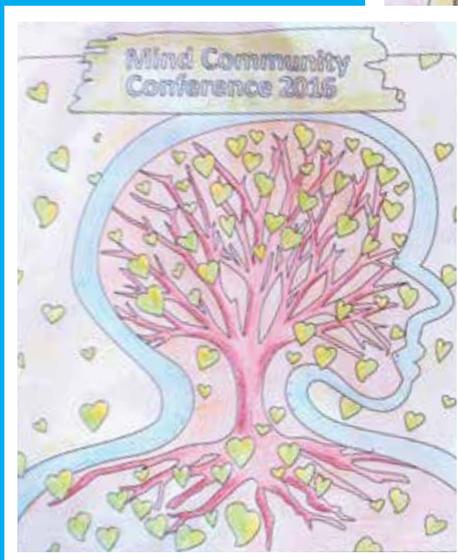
Express yourself

This year at the Victorian Mind Community Conference we held a mindfulness colouring in competition where participants could take a breather, sit down and work on their masterpiece (and win a \$100 Coles Myer gift card in the process!) Check out these beautiful winning entries.

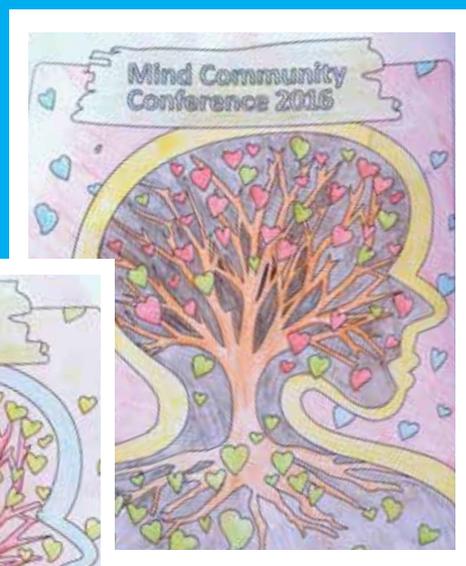


< Artwork by Donna -
Peer Recovery Community

Artwork by Maxine Hickey >



< Artwork by Karen Holden





Monique Vanderhagen



Valerie Mason



Amanda Thiedeman



Kit Riley

Rock into Recovery

Rock into Recovery is a very special festival celebrating the diversity, creativity, ambitions and abilities of Mind clients from all walks of life. Now in its second year, it comprised of a red carpet film festival featuring dozens of client-made films, and an art exhibition across 26 local galleries and cafes showcasing 86 client works (some of which are pictured left). Both were open to the general public and wider community, giving unique insight into what it's like to live with mental ill-health.

Sarah from the Peer Recovery Community in Williamstown (Victoria) participated again this year, contributing a piece of artwork and a collaborative film project that she worked on with two other residents. This year they premiered *My peers, my recovery, my community II* – a sequel to last year's film, following their intersecting journeys of recovery.

She said, "It's so different this year - it's a much happier story for me this year. The video came along at a difficult time last year. It's nice to watch the change in me; just to see it there in front of my face is unreal."

Keep an eye on the Mind website as we hope to release the film series on DVD.
www.mindaustralia.org.au

Mind Ambassadors of Hope join the SANE Speakers program

We are pleased to announce that our Ambassadors of Hope program merged with the SANE Speakers Program on 24 August 2016.

Many of our ambassadors have been part of the program from the beginning and it's through their commitment and loyalty that we have formed an understanding of the important role ambassadors play and how they can make a difference. SANE has a large and well-resourced speakers bank and this merger will create greater opportunities for the ambassadors to share their stories with a wider audience.

We will maintain contact with our ambassadors and continue to work closely with SANE in the future.

Learn more about SANE Speakers at: www.sane.org/support-us/80-speakers

Tree of life: Savannah's story

Savannah has struggled with self-harm, but her specially designed 'tree of life' tattoo serves as a constant reminder that she can get through this journey in life. She says, "It symbolises to me that no matter where you are in life, there's always beauty and growth in everything. It doesn't just remind me of where I've been- it reminds me of where I'm going."



Hello everyone, my name is Savannah. Usually I would start off with what my diagnosis is and my history with mental health (which is a long one). But you know what? I am more than just my diagnosis, and I want people to know that. I am the oldest of seven beautiful kids, whom I love very much. I love reading, tattoos, my favourite colour is aqua and I am extremely close with my grandma and I love having a good laugh with people about almost anything.

Now it's only been a recent realisation that I am more than just 'that girl with borderline personality disorder'. And it had been an extremely hard realisation to come to. And I haven't come to it alone. With the help of Mind Australia staff I have started the journey of becoming independent of my diagnosis.

My mental health journey started when I was about 10. That's when I first began my struggle with self harm. Self harm very much became a part of my identity – a big part. I lost many friends and became 'the crazy girl' at school. My relationship with my family – particularly my mother – became damaged as I was no longer their 'perfect little girl' anymore. And my relationship with myself became even more damaged, because I felt I was constantly letting everyone down. My first admission to a mental health facility came in August 2011. I remember I was terrified, as that was when I was first given the diagnosis of 'borderline'. I was scared because I was given the impression that it was going to be how I see myself for the rest of my life. I was ashamed, I withdrew even more (if that was possible) from family, friends, and again, myself. It's taken six years, many suicide attempts, lengthy hospital admissions and finally living at the Toowoomba Community Care Unit with the support of Queensland Health clinicians and Mind staff to come to terms

with my diagnosis and myself. I now feel that I have a future for myself – which I haven't felt in ten years. I wish to be able to share my story and help others realise they are more than just a diagnosis.

Since my attendance at the South Australian Mind Community Conference (the first time I'd ever been interstate!), I have moved on from the Toowoomba CCU. I can say with absolute certainty that although the last few years have been somewhat difficult, Mind Australia and Queensland Health have provided me with the platform to build my future upon.

I'm currently residing at the Gold Coast, and am loving life. I am happy within myself and am very proud of who I've become as I have fought very hard to become her. Although I recognise that the past will always play a part in who I am, I'm more focused on the future I'm building and what I'm capable of achieving. I've just been accepted onto the Youth Advisory Council for **headspace** which I'm ecstatic about. I cannot wait to be raising awareness and being a voice for mental health.

It's funny, I no longer feel as though I'm on a recovery journey, I feel as though I'm on a life journey.

I acknowledge that the only person who was going to pull me out of the darkness was myself, the CCU were the ones by my side shining the light.

I would like to take this opportunity to appreciate not only the incredible staff and residents at the Toowoomba CCU, but each and every one of you for supporting me, whether it's been through offering me advice, sitting by me and talking to me or even just reading this. Just remember life is precious, and so are you.

Words by Savannah Whieldon, former client of Toowoomba CCU

Contact the editor

If you are a current or former client of Mind and would like to contribute to *Write Mind* or be interviewed please contact Jess Shulman at jessica.shulman@mindaustralia.org.au or write to the address below. Copyright reserved. For permission to reprint please write to the editor.



Supporting mental health recovery

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