

Facing mental illness with care of friends

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Neil Menzies with his painting of St Dymphna

Picture: Paul Dobbyn

NEIL Menzies still remembers his sense of relief about 22 years ago to find Catholic Psychiatric Pastoral Care (CPPC) listed in a Brisbane telephone directory.

"It was as though I was led by the Holy Spirit," he said from his Kangaroo Point apartment located not far from St Vincent's Hospital where he volunteers three days a week.

"I was amazed to find there was actually a Catholic ministry to those people suffering with mental illness.

"Until I found CPPC, I felt like a person who didn't fit in anywhere.

"Then suddenly I found companionship, friendship and a lot of understanding."

He would also find programs enabling him to discover a talent for painting and develop a love for limerick-writing.

These days, he entertains other CPPC members by reciting his limericks during celebrations of St Patrick's Day and the Melbourne Cup.

Neil's battle with mental illness started at 18 when he was admitted to hospital suffering from schizophrenia.

"I hit a real low point and returned to an interest in my Catholic faith," he said.

"I started going to a Brisbane Catholic church ... they were good people but I didn't really fit in with the young ones who were busy with their lives, studying and so on.

"So I left the Church and went back into agnosticism.

"Within a year I'd got back into the workforce, did temporary clerical work in the government and finally landed a job in Parliament House handling politicians' travelling expenses from 1985 to 1987.

"Then the work got too stressful and I had to leave."

By the time Neil was about 25 he had "drifted through about 33 jobs".

Then in 1990 he had a relapse of the illness and not long after discovered CPPC.

"I was about 27 then ... and very confused," he said.

"But bit by bit I started to improve with the support of others.

"There were volunteer carers, who included men and women from religious orders and also the other CPPC members who were suffering from mental illness and could understand something of what I was going through.

"The program also included spiritual activities such as the Friday Mass and paraliturgies."

But for Neil, at that time staying with his parents, life was about to take another dark turn.

"The voices", as he calls them, became unbearable.

"They were with me from when I awoke in the morning to when I went back to sleep at night," he said.

"In May 1996 I went into my bedroom and didn't venture outside until the start of 2001.

"When I finally emerged back into the world, there were new buildings around Brisbane city, there was a new American President, the Sydney Olympics had been and gone.

"I was a great fan of Lady Di and discovered she had been killed."

Fortunately for Neil, CPPC was still running from its base in St Patrick's Church, Fortitude Valley.

When he joined in 1990, the ministry had only been established for about three years.

It had comprised "one big classroom with a few seats outside for those people needing to have a smoke".

CPPC, still believed to be one of the few Catholic ministries of its type in the world, had arisen from the vision of registered mental health nurse Janine De Maria and Fr Jim Smith.

By 2001, not only was CPPC still waiting for Neil and other people with mental illness but had also expanded its programs.

This growth has continued to the present day with pastoral carers around Brisbane now visiting 13 hospitals and nine hostels on a weekly basis and providing a community centre at St Patrick's, Fortitude Valley, from 9.30am-3pm Monday to Friday.

Fr Smith has reported that CPPC helps about 1000 people a week through its ministries.

Neil is very clear about what the ministry continues to do for him and what he does for others there.

"I participate by introducing readers and hymns at our Friday Catholic Companionship Mass," he said.

"It's not easy ... people with mental conditions get anxious about small things.

"Some people are so sick they can only concentrate enough to say a few prayers.

"But I always remember one of Fr Jim's (Smith) homilies where he said such prayers were like the widow's mite.

"My life would be a lot different if it weren't for the centre.

"Instead of volunteering at St Vincent's Hospital, as I have done for the past seven years, I'd be probably watching TV all day, stuff like 'Days of Our Lives'.

"I'd be very unwell and isolated by my mental illness."

Neil also has a message for those with mental illness and others who may not have had much contact with sufferers of the illness.

"One thing I would say is it's estimated two per cent of the population have schizophrenia and bipolar disorder," he said.

"In a city of Brisbane's size that's something like 40,000 people.

"Most of these aren't visible so there must be a lot of people too shy to become involved in places like CPPC.

"It's non-denominational - we have people with no religion and one Muslim man has been coming on and off for many years.

"There's no pressure for people to talk when they come ... the carers are just happy to be with these people and give support."

Neil said, if anything, his interest in the work of CPPC was growing.

"I've built up wonderful friendships here," he said.

"For most people the longer they are involved, the better it gets.

"The place has developed its own traditions over the years.

"We've got the 25th anniversary of the ministry's foundation coming up.

"There will be a celebration Mass on Saturday, May 26, that's St Dymphna's feast day.

"She's the patron saint of those people who have mental illness.

"Everyone is welcome to come along."

Finally, Neil has two items to share from his involvement with Catholic Psychiatric Pastoral Care.

One is a striking portrait of St Dymphna he has painted.

The other is a limerick, one of 10 he did for St Patrick's Day.

It goes like this:

"There was a young lady from Spain/Who everyone said was insane/She sang a sweet song/When they found nothing wrong/After doing a scan of her brain."

For more information on the 10am Mass at St Patrick's on Saturday, May 26, to celebrate CPPC's 25th anniversary contact (07) 3252 5461.