

Tony's Story

When Change Is Good

Tony shares his experience as a Peer Worker at an Opiate Substitution Clinic.

When my clinic decided to hire a Peer Worker, the mood was suspicious. Change had always been a bad thing there, something to worry about. I'd started on the program at my clinic way back in the early 1980s. In those days they gave you naloxone (Narcan) and if you hung out badly enough, they would start you on methadone. The clinic was staffed by experts who had your life in their hands. Think Nurse Ratchet in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest".

Speed through to just a few years ago. Though some things had improved, the service still felt punitive and a lot of people felt they were treated like children. Dosing hours were cut shorter as caseworkers and doctors disappeared without notice. Any request was met with eye-rolling and a reminder that you should feel privileged to be dosed there. Ask for a takeaway and get ready to jump through hoops.

We actually were grateful for the service – but we also noticed that nobody expected people on other medical treatments to make a big display of being grateful.

It wasn't that staff were doing a terrible job or were deliberately nasty, because generally people working with marginalised communities have good hearts. It was just that there'd never been any communication between service users and the service, and we had never had a say in things that were central to our lives.

From our point of view, it had just never occurred to anybody to 'take a stand'. Often, we felt like we were pushing it just to be heard.

Things changed when our clinic got together with NUAA to hire a Peer Worker. After the usual process of applications and interviews, I was hired to do the job.

The first thing I had to work out was how to represent the majority. My clinic prioritises people who are at risk in terms of drug use, living arrangements, mental health, transition from jail and so on. Most of our consumers were already dealing with a lot and getting people along to meetings wasn't going to work. Instead, I literally sat in the waiting room and talked to people one at a time or sometimes in small groups to ask about their concerns.

As it happened, we all agreed on the big stuff.

Simple information sharing had an amazing effect on people's lives. The more people learned about our own services and the more information people collected and shared, the more things moved in a positive direction.

We recognised that we had to deal with aggression and tension in the waiting room. This anti-social behaviour had evolved over time and gone unchallenged. To turn it around, we began to own our own space and take pride in change. We decided on waiting room etiquette. Waiting at the clinic became a lot less stressful than it had been and security guard appearances became rarer.

Meanwhile, I worked on building trust of the staff. It was a gradual process.

The next step was to pool information around health improvement and we began to share our experiences of our own clinic, the hospital and the wider health and welfare system. I talked with consumers about how to get the most out of a caseworker and how to iron out misunderstandings with clinic staff. A large part of my job became helping people to access services, including navigating government departments. People got onto Centrelink payments. A few got housing and others found services they needed.

I also shared information around blood borne viruses like HIV, hep B and hep C. NUAA had previously had a hep C worker on site and following in her footsteps I encouraged people to access services attached to the clinic for testing and treatment. Because of the new processes and medications, people were getting cured.

Simple information sharing had an amazing effect on people's lives. The more people learned about our own services and the more information people collected and shared, the more things moved in a positive direction.

With those wins, the culture began to change. People started coming to me. More importantly, they started talking to each other. They began to learn that they did have choices and started to speak up for themselves in a way that got them heard.

I learned to listen, so I could figure out what people really wanted - not what I thought they needed. I learned to listen to all kinds of people and give my help to everyone - whether they were easy-going or not. We all found we had more in common with each other than we thought.

Jade's Story

On Top Of The World, In The Centre Of My Community

Jade works with NUAA as an Aboriginal Peer worker.

I had been using for 16 years and was on the run when I had just had enough.

I gave myself up and the judge sent me to the MERIT Program for 12 weeks. About half way in I thought "I have actually stopped taking drugs! I can really do this!" - I realised I could use the things I was learning even after I left.

When I got out, I started to build a new life. I wanted to keep my mind and body busy. I was getting stronger day-by-day. I needed work and wanted a job I was passionate about.

I've always wanted to do something to help other Koori people, right back from when I was at school. I knew that with my drug-use experience, I could help people going through some of the same things I had.

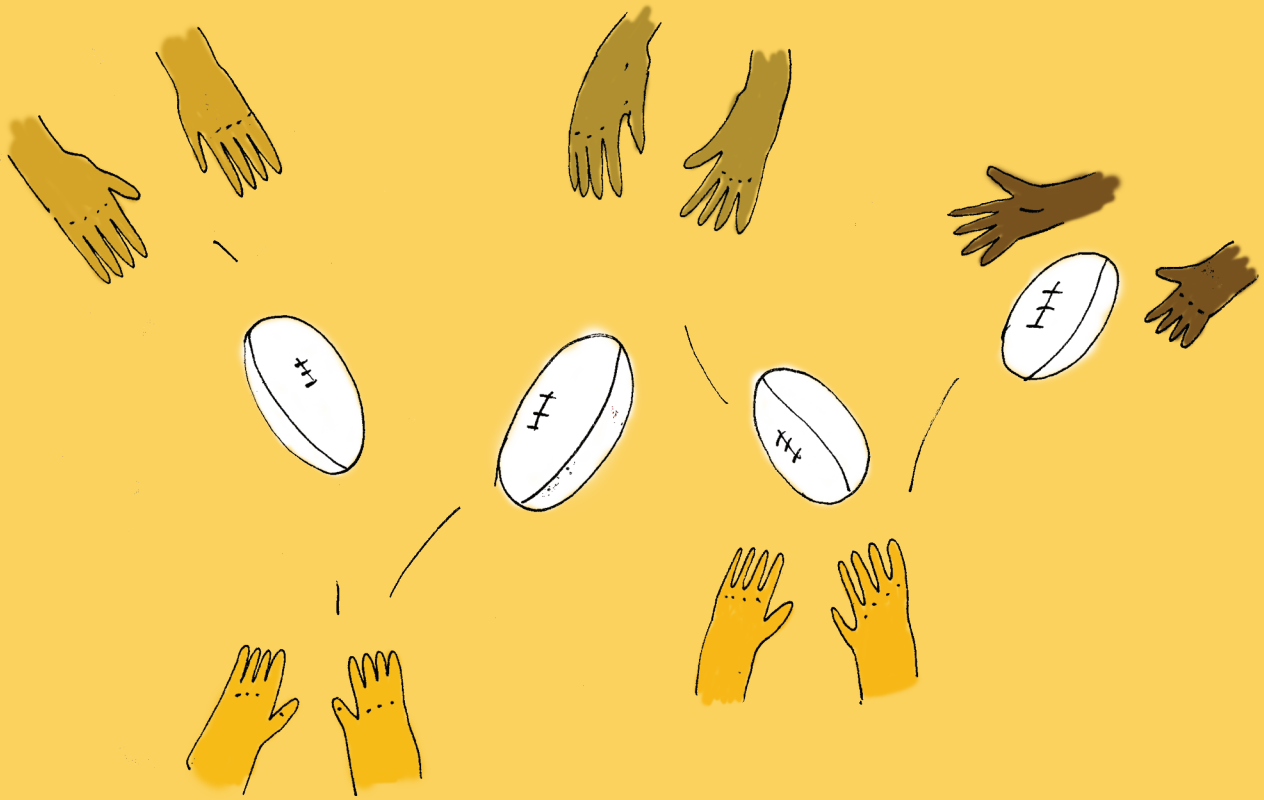
I decided to go to TAFE and get the skills to be of service to my community. I did the Certificate 4 in Community Development and the Certificate 4 in Alcohol and Drugs and finally the Diploma in Alcohol and Drugs. At first, I was really nervous going to the classes. It was hard to come out of my shell and get to know the other students, but I got there. I got some tutoring to help me through the course, because my previous schooling ended at Year 10.

As the course went on, I realised how much I was enjoying learning new skills, meeting new people and bettering myself. I felt on top of the world.

I also learnt from text books and research what I had always felt to be true – that community members know their communities best and have a huge opportunity to change things.

My personal path saw me get fitter – I joined a Koori women's footy team – and I gave up smoking tobacco after being embarrassed by wheezing during training! Playing footy was more important to me than smoking, so I just got the courage to stop. My team played in the Koori Knock Out last year! We didn't win, but we had a great time.

One of the best things to happen to me was getting the position of Aboriginal Peer Support Worker with NUAA, working out of a drug and alcohol service in Western Sydney. I had applied for a similar position earlier but didn't get it. Luckily, that didn't stop me trying. I was thrilled to get this job, it's right up my alley.



Working with people who know me, with whom I share important things, is great. It's amazing what can happen when someone can come into a service and relate to a worker, and the worker can relate to the service user. So much good can happen in that space.

I give out new equipment so people can inject more safely; give them info about avoiding, testing for and treating hep C; advise them about how the system works; share my experience and listen to them. They know they can trust me, that I will treat them with respect and treat their info with the privacy it deserves.

I believe everyone has skills. Some of us have the gift of the gab or the gift of the earn, but whatever it is, we all have something we can use to be of value to our community. Just the power of relating to each other and knowing we are part of a group that gets each other because we have "been there" can be enough.

I am so happy where I am in my life. It's been a lot of work, but I'm living a life that I am passionate about, contributing something valuable, and connected with my family, my people and my community.

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WHAT IS PEERLINK?

Peerlink is a model of peer education that resources and empowers our community in harm reduction, health education, community building and peer-focussed community consultation.

PeerLink has modules and topics that cover a range of important information for the community. Information on hepatitis C and the new treatments, harm reduction, safer using, overdose and naloxone training, stigma and discrimination are just some of the topics covered.

We also invite the community to participate in consultation forums, because wherever NUAA and PeerLink goes, we value the experiences in each community and want to help drive peer-led change. These forums are a chance for the community to speak up and learn that our voices can be a valuable tool.

Peerlink is a workshop developed by people who inject drugs, for people who inject drugs. At NUAA, we strongly acknowledge the expertise of lived experience and support the continuing trend of peer-led advocacy. PeerLink training can help empower you to learn more about the community while gaining knowledge. You can also learn how to keep you and your friends safe through the use of harm reduction tips and tricks

Workshops and forums are run with a strong community-driven empowerment goal: we aim to bring our community together and communicate across our networks the core principles of harm reduction.

We are confidential and understand the need for discretion and respect for privacy. We can make a difference in your life and open avenues that could result in a fantastic, wild journey!

Share your first-hand knowledge

Add to NUAA's knowledge base

**Contribute to the valuable work
that NUAA carries out**

**Make connections with peers
and be an active part of your
community**

**Build your experience and help
prepare for work**

PEER LINK

DO YOU INJECT DRUGS?

COME TO NUAA'S SAFER USING WORKSHOPS



LEARN THE SKILLS YOU NEED TO LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

- PREVENTING, TESTING AND TREATMENT OF BLOOD BORNE VIRUSES – HEP C
- VEIN CARE ● OVERDOSE PREVENTION
- REDUCING BACTERIAL INFECTIONS

FOR USERS
BY USERS

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

Call NUAA on (02) 8354 7300 or FREECALL number 1800 644 413

NUAA
NSW USERS
AND AIDS ASSOCIATION

NUAA is your organisation. We are independent and community based. We aim to advance the health, rights and dignity of people who inject drugs. nuaa.org.au

“Learning about the new treatments available for hep C and what the process was to get tested and treated was really important to me as I’ve lived with hep C for many years. I’m looking forward to being able to finally get rid of it.”

“PeerLink was so informative and such a great, positive experience. Being able to talk about drugs in a confidential and private setting with others has been so helpful.”

Vox Pops

After PeerLink workshops we ask participants what they thought of it. Here’s what a few of them said.

“The hep C messages are great and it’s really useful to learn about safer injecting.”

“It’s about community spirit - It’s great to be a part of the community and to learn how we can be supportive to other drug users.”

“Damn good show - damn fine workshop.”

“I loved the information on harm reduction and how to be safe while still having fun.”

“I felt really connected and the facilitators were warm and knowledgeable. They’ve been through some of the same experiences I’ve had over the years and the fact that we were all there to talk about our drug use and not be down about it really drove me to look at my life in a better way. “

“Once we had introduced ourselves, the facilitators told us about their own personal drug use. It really opened up the conversation and we felt we could start telling our stories- it was fascinating to listen to others talk about their drug use.”

“There’s so much information, and the facilitators really went out of their way to make everyone feel like they belonged. “

“Sharing our stories about stigma and discrimination and learning about how stigma affects the community was really important.”

“I’ve not been injecting drugs for a very long time, but I learnt so much. I had no idea about hep C before I went to PeerLink.”

“Community looking after the community!”

WHAT IS PEERLINK?

Kendra's Story

It Started With PeerLink

Kendra was introduced to NUAA through a PeerLink workshop and hasn't looked back!

I heard about PeerLink when I was picking up fits at my local Community Centre in South Western Sydney. The worker there is someone I respect, so I paid attention when he introduced me to a NUAA worker who invited me to a PeerLink workshop. It went for two days and I attended both days, as well as an add-on hep C session led by a Hepatitis NSW worker.

To be honest, I didn't have any high-minded vision when I agreed to attend. The workshop only took up part of each day and there was a cash incentive that was easy money I didn't have to hassle for. At the time I was running a habit and it was use or be sick, so the money really meant a lot to me.

I did think PeerLink sounded interesting. I'm a person who likes being stimulated and I had been at a loose end too long. I really looked forward to getting a brain zap! I was also a bit intrigued by the idea of being in a group of people who inject drugs getting tips on safer using from other people who inject drugs.

I got a lot more out of PeerLink than I ever imagined I would. To start with, I felt a real bond with Andy, one of the PeerLink workers. We had a lot in common – we both played the piano for example - and we just kind of connected. Because of that, I really paid attention and he has had a big influence on me.

When you have been using as long as I have, you can get really slack. The workshop gave me heaps of reminders and tips to keep me safer. For example, I now wash my hands before preparing my drugs every time, I use swabs and I always drink water before I inject (it really does work to plump up your veins!). I also had got very lazy about proper filtering and at the workshop I learned to use different filters. I had never even seen a wheel filter before and I was really impressed by how much crap they got rid of from a pill, patch or methadone mix.

I also really liked connecting with the people there. I had got pretty isolated but I felt comfortable enough to contribute to the discussion.

In the workshop I was just thinking about my own drug use. But when the NUAA workers encouraged me to join NUAA's volunteer program, it felt like it fit in with my work history caring for people in aged care and child care.

To be honest, I didn't have any high-minded vision


I went along to NUAA's NSP to have a look. I didn't even know what an "NSP" was before that! I learned that it means "Needle and Syringe Program" and it's the place we get our fits from. My local is tiny with not much variety of equipment so I was blown away by NUAA's NSP. It has all this amazing stuff – different brands and types and sizes. After meeting some of the other lovely peer volunteers, I decided the PPP was for me. I've loved all the training and have got comfortable talking with people. I enjoy sharing my experience and the knowledge I've learned.

On a personal level, I've become a lot safer in my using and 4 months ago I got on methadone. I'm over 50 and I just felt too old to be dealing with daily illicit drug use. I was over the burden of getting the money, breaking the law, always hassling, starting every day sick.

My local public methadone clinic didn't have any spots but the new me felt empowered to press and I eventually got a referral from them. The clinic I was referred to saw me straight away and I started on methadone the next day. After a period of stabilisation, I moved my dosing to a chemist round the corner from me and the freedom of that is fantastic.

I can't believe how my life has changed for the better since I don't have to deal with daily illicit drug use. The workers at NUAA helped answer a lot of the questions and reservations I had about opiate replacement treatment, gave me the info about how to get help and helped build my confidence so I could put my case forward to my local clinic.

Because I am now in a community of people who use drugs, my life has changed for the better. I have access to information to be healthier and happier, I have purpose and ambition and my self esteem and confidence have grown. And it all started with PeerLink.



**WHAT IS
THE PEER
PARTICIPATION
PROGRAM?**

There are many ways you can get involved with NUAA and ensure that your voice is heard. One of NUAA's most successful programs is the Peer Participation Program (PPP). It's a great way for people who support NUAA to become active in the organisation through volunteer work.

The PPP has been going for over 8 years. Our peers make our Needle and Syringe Program the leading service in NSW by providing respectful and friendly information and equipment. Over the past year our Peer Participants have donated over 3 000 hours to the community, helped dispense close to 400,000 pieces of equipment and assisted with over 1000 referrals. Our peers also work in the office, pack our magazines, help with training and represent us at all sorts of events and meetings. The fabulous PPPs even proudly marched for NUAA in Mardi Gras this year!

NUAA recognises that volunteers are often the glue that hold communities together. Volunteering allows people to connect with their community and making it a better place for everyone. Even helping out with the smallest of tasks can make a real difference in the lives of people NUAA assists. Volunteering isn't only about giving, volunteering also benefits the volunteer. Giving your time as a volunteer helps you make new friends, expands your network, expands your work skills and it also boosts your social skills.

Our participants are provided with extensive training, guidance and support. NUAA will support each individual participant with opportunities to access further training and support and assist them meet their full potential.

Our reputation is reflected in our relationships with Centrelink, with which we are a recognised volunteer organisation and with Revenue NSW, with which we are registered as a Work and Development Order sponsor.

The PPP is open to anyone interested in volunteering with a history of lived experience of injecting drug use, who is interested in harm reduction, peer education and front-line service delivery.

Share your first-hand knowledge

Add to NUAA's knowledge base

**Contribute to the valuable work
that NUAA carries out**

**Make connections with peers
and be an active part of your
community**

**Build your experience and help
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PEER PARTICIPATION PROGRAM

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Who Can Join?

If you want to be part of a team and are passionate about harm reduction then the Peer Participation Program might be right for you.

We're looking for peers who have gained an understanding of the various issues that affect people who use and inject drugs through lived experience.

How can I join?

Call NUAA and speak to Lucy at NUAA on **8354 7300** or email **Lucyp@nuaa.org.au**, download an application from www.nuaa.org.au or visit the NUAA NSP.

Verity's Story

Transformed

Verity tells us how being a volunteer at NUAA gave her a new career path

Becoming part of the PPP was about me finding work that was a bit more worthwhile.

I had worked in the hospitality industry as a waitress and barmaid all my life. In my late 30s, I realised that I have to work for the rest of my life. Getting up and going to work for money alone can be soul destroying over the long term, so I didn't want to do the work I was doing forever. I wanted to do something with purpose and meaning, something I found fulfilling. I thought about what skills I had. I'm good with people, so I thought community work might be something I was good at that would also be rewarding.

I started at NUAA because it was a place where I didn't worry about how people would judge me if they knew I injected drugs. This was a safe place to come; they're my people. I felt accepted here.

I saw the PPP as a stepping stone, a way of getting confidence to becoming a community worker or a health worker. I wanted to know that it suited me, and volunteering was a good way of getting experience and gauging whether I could actually work in this sector.

At first, I questioned if I could do it. I was triggered in the NSP and scored after work every time. But after a while, it became less intense. Gradually I got past it. I don't know when exactly the change came, but now I can handle equipment and talk to people who have just scored or have people on the nod hanging on the NSP couch without being triggered. I just got used to it.

After I realised I really liked doing this kind of work, I started a TAFE course and did a Certificate IV in Community Work. I continued to volunteer and get experience in the field.

I've been able to get paid work doing what I want to do, and I am now one of the key workers in the NSP. For me, joining the PPP was a transformation.

**I didn't
have to
worry about
negative
judgement**

Harry's Story

Out of The Fire

Harry joined the PPP to be among like-minded people and get out of his head

About 15 years ago, I went to long term rehab as an alternative to jail. Although rehab doesn't work for many people, it did for me. I managed to stay off gear for about 12 years, although I drank a lot, mostly because of the sort of work I was doing at the time as a specialist in the building trade. Even when I had raging heroin habits, I always worked. I have a lot of skills and have mastered three different trades.

The only reason things changed was that 5 years ago, I was in a house fire and received extensive burns over my body. That has taken a long time to heal and left me unable to work at my trades. Once my skin healed, I tried to go back to work, but pain and issues like an inability to sweat or tolerate heat made it impossible. I was also left coping with an opiate dependency from pain management, not to mention a serious case of self-pity.

After the fire, I really hated the world. I don't like my dark side and I was indulging in a few fantasies I wanted to knock on the head.

I was in the doldrums and not only taking prescribed opiates but flirting with illicit drugs when I went to the NUAA NSP to grab some equipment one day. I started talking to the people working there and I realised I was among like-minded individuals.

I found out that some were volunteers and I realised that volunteering at NUAA was my best opportunity to get off my arse, stop feeling sorry for myself and do something positive for myself and others. I felt I had skills I could share. I knew I was good with people and I had the knowledge to point them in

the right direction for different services. Not only had I used various organisations, I had counselled people in rehab and was told I was good at it. Volunteering at NUAA allowed me to do something with what felt like the last thing left that I'm good at.

I also volunteered because I needed to get out of my head and reach out to people. I wanted to establish some relationships and make some friends.

It's the little things that make it worthwhile for me. Like before shifts in summer, I'd buy a box of cheap ice blocks and give them out to people that came in to the NSP. It would make people happy and helped me connect with them.

Working at NUAA has helped me in a lot of ways. Not only has it brought great people into my life, it has given me personal access to information that has helped me be safer and healthier. I've learned a lot. Volunteering has also led to a little bit of paid work from time to time, and that has worked wonders in helping me keep my head up.

Volunteering at NUAA was my best opportunity to stop feeling sorry for myself.

Anna's Story

A New Lease on Life

Anna tells how the PPP helped her take control of her life.

Volunteering at NUAA has really become a platform for me to grow and gain greater self-esteem. I've been given a new lease on life.

I wasn't able to work mentally or physically for about four or five years after a major assault. Then I was living with someone who was volunteering at NUAA and she suggested I should do it. She has no idea what she did for me. It changed my life.

I've really grown. A little bit of discipline, in terms of having to turn up and do what I said I would, having a commitment, engaging in learning something new, communicating with work colleagues and service users – I needed it all and it woke me up. It just sparked a side of me I hadn't tapped into for a long time. I let go of feeling down and took control of my life.

I love it. I love the community. I love the education. I love the acceptance and respect. I love working with people like me.

The confidence I found really made me get my shit together and motivated me to want more for myself. As a result, I ended up getting my housing sorted. I started swimming again and started studying. What a kick start! It's led to lots of new skills because I have been able to attend great training courses and get good on-the-job feedback. I also learned important things like how to set boundaries, how to be professional and how to negotiate the health system. That has led to some paid work, which has been fantastic.

Volunteering at NUAA really focused me. I've got a passion for life back. I have a whole new outlook because I learned that all my experience is valuable and useful, that I have a lot to offer, and that I am good enough, just as I am.



Audrey's Story

No Longer Ashamed

Audrey found that volunteering at NUAA gave her a whole new relationship with her drug use.

I heard that the NUAA NSP had people working there who had experience using with drugs and were allowed to talk about it with people coming in to get equipment. I very much wanted to see what a service like that was like. It sounded interesting: a place where I might actually learn new things about safer intravenous drug use, and where I might meet people I would want to know.

It was everything I hoped it would be, and I found out that I could be a part of it too. I joined the PPP and I haven't looked back. I'm Aboriginal and I really love helping people in my community.

I love working for NUAA because it gets me out of bed in the mornings doing something positive and dealing with my depression. I'm learning to interact with other people and I'm not as shy as I was. I'm opening up more, stepping out in the big world.

The other thing that has changed is that I'm not scared to tell people I'm an IV user any more. I used to have such a deep shame about my drug use but working at NUAA has turned that around. I've got a whole new awareness. It's partly that my experience with drugs is something I can use to help other people be safer and healthier. It's also about not buying into the way drug users are stereotyped. Now I'm no longer ashamed and I tell others not to be ashamed. I realise all the skills and good qualities I've got and I get to use those things to help others. Working as a NUAA volunteer is good for my self-esteem.

Thanks to NUAA for the opportunity, for letting me be me!

**I've got a
whole new
awareness.**

Brad's Story

Making a Difference

Brad tells how he feels that being a PPP has given him what he has been searching for - the way to make a difference.

I really wanted to make a positive difference in the world and I thought joining the police force would give me that chance. It took me about 6 months to realise that I wouldn't be saving the world - it was a gradual wake-up, but once I had arrested the same person for the same crime day after day, I got the message. The legal system was not the useful tool for fixing society's problems that I had naively believed it was.

I was paid very badly to do the job I now hated and was hated by a large section of the community (I learned that cops are either loved or hated – there's no middle ground). Every day I put on the uniform, I was making myself a target. That became clear when the AFP Assistant Commissioner, Colin Winchester, was shot dead in his driveway. After 3 years on the force, I resigned.

I went to London to work in the media in the sort of job where I took people to lunch and got home at 3am, trashed. I ended up with huge dependencies on coke and alcohol. After putting my house and significant income up my nose, I realised I had to either go to rehab or go home. So I got on a plane back to Australia. I got another media job in Sydney and managed to stop snorting cocaine – by injecting ice.

I found out about NUAA when I went to the NSP with friends to pick up fits. I could tell the difference from other NSPs straight away.

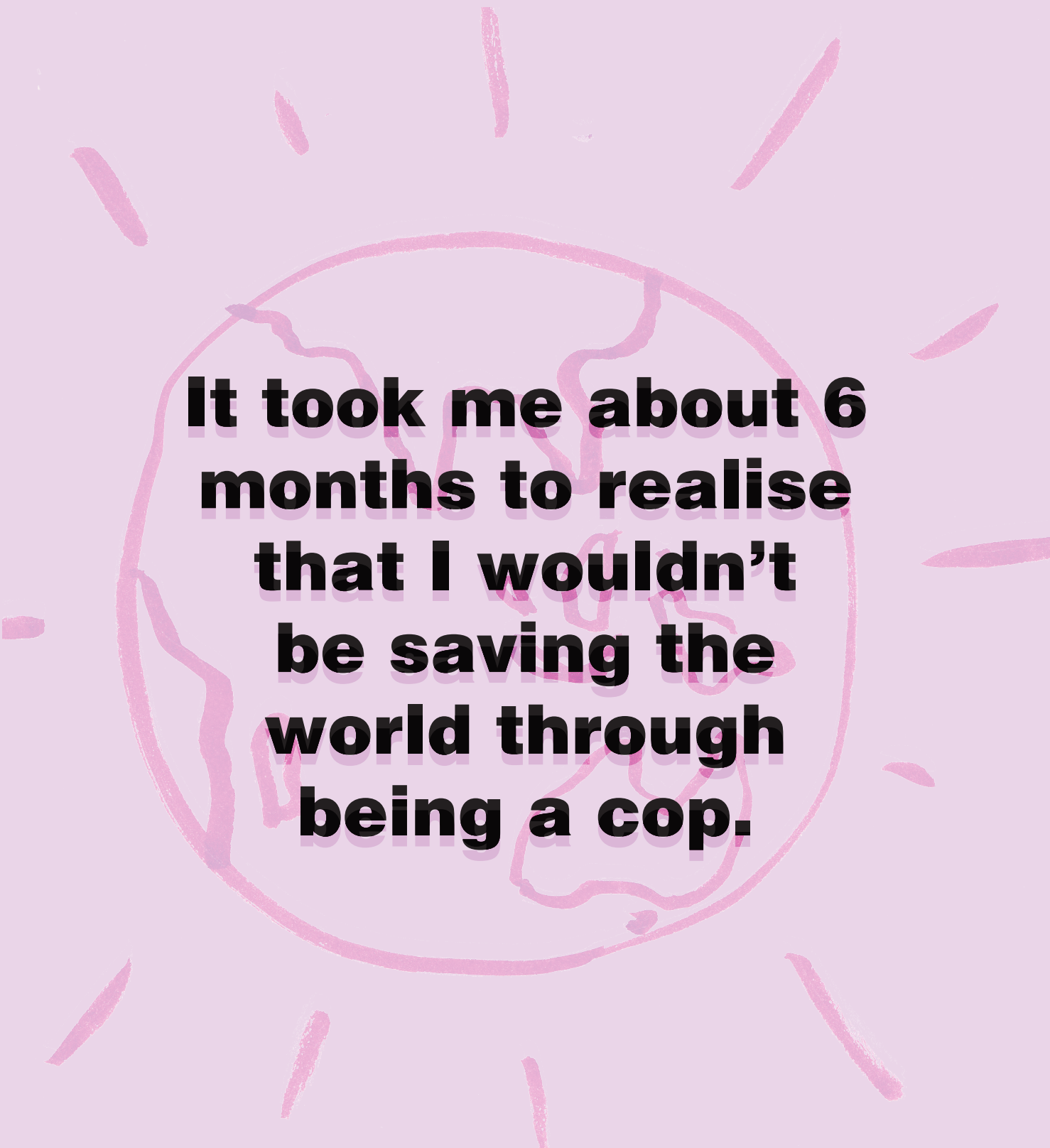
Instead of looking down their noses at me, the workers were friendly and welcoming. I didn't feel like a "client". The equipment was set up as self-serve; I was treated like an adult with a choice, rather than the greedy petulant child so many services seem to think we are. For the first time ever, I didn't feel uncomfortable about my drug use or getting equipment.

When I found out that some of the people there were volunteers, I decided I wanted to do that. I put my name down for the Peer Participation Program. That was 3 years ago.

I enjoy working as a peer at NUAA. Every time I help someone, by showing them a new technique or giving them clean equipment, I get something back instantly.

When I was sent to detox by the courts a while back, I was talking to a worker about NUAA. I pointed out that we did different things – at the NUAA NSP, we support people to take drugs safely, whereas the detox was all about getting off drugs. He replied that he felt we were doing the same thing – that it was all about helping people make a fully informed decision about their health. I really liked that.

That "making a difference" thing I wanted back when I was 21? I really feel I understand that now. Every day at NUAA that I volunteer, that I step up as part of the peer community, I feel that I'm doing something really important for my people. I've finally found where I belong and what makes me feel good about myself.

A large, hand-drawn sun in a light pink color. The sun has a circular body with a wavy, scribbled interior. It is surrounded by several short, straight lines of varying lengths representing rays. The entire sun is centered on the page.

**It took me about 6
months to realise
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being a cop.**

Tabatha's Story

Finding My Family

Tabatha has found acceptance and self-esteem as a NUAA PPP.

I want to tell you my story because I want to explain why being part of the NUAA family means so much to me. Why the acceptance and care I get at NUAA is so important. Why every time I come out of jail, the first place I go is NUAA.

When I was born, my mum abandoned me. I was told I had been conceived in violence and my mother believed that, as a male, I would turn out violently abusive like my father. My grandmother eventually agreed to take me in. Sadly, she died not long after.

My dad's brother and his wife had recently lost a child and they took me to live with them. However, my new "mother" was very depressed and abused me, chaining me up with the dog under the house most of the day. When I was 4, my uncle discovered the extent of the abuse and took me to stay with my great aunt. She got me speech therapy as I was unable to talk and was generally unresponsive.

At 5, I started primary school. I was sexually abused, 3 times a day, by the groundsman. When I was 11, I noticed him taking other young children into his shed and I spoke up. I was expelled for my trouble.

On weekends, my cousins molested me. There were about half a dozen of them involved, the oldest 32 and the youngest 15. I was 7 when one of them was found trying to anally penetrate me.

At 13, I came home from school to find my great aunt in tears, saying I was about to meet my mother, father and sister. These were total strangers to me, but I went to live with them.

My mother made a show of caring for me, the prodigal son, but it wasn't long before she began bashing me. I ran away and was put in a foster home. I was sexually abused by the foster "father". He imprisoned and raped me. I eventually managed to escape by smashing the window and cutting the zip ties he'd used on my wrists.

When I was 14, I started sleeping with adults by choice. I wanted to use condoms but found that many men will do anything to bareback, like putting a condom on then slipping it off when I wasn't looking. By 15, I was HIV positive.

All this abuse really fucked me up. From 15, I drank on a daily basis. At 24, I began using amphetamines and at 30 I tried heroin.

It is an amazing feeling to be accepted for who I am.

When I found opiates, I finally got some peace in my brain. I find heroin helps me forget for a while. For me, using alcohol and drugs is not about fun, but trying to cover up pain, anxiety and depression. I've tried anti-depressants, but they don't work. My depression is not about chemical imbalance, but lived trauma.

I have deliberately tried to take my life 11 times with benzos and heroin. The last time I overdosed, I took about 200 Valium and a gram of gear in a park in the middle of nowhere. I was found by a dog. The dog's owner found me slumped behind the tree with the needle in my arm. He rushed me to the hospital and saved my life. I gave up after that. It seems like I'm just not allowed to go.

I've been to heaps of psychiatrists and councillors, and most feel too unqualified to help. One psychologist went too far, too quickly and I just crumbled and attempted suicide twice in 3 days. They put me in a psych hospital for 2 months.

I changed over to living as a girl at 14. I was living in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley with an amazing peer group of transgender women. I was too young to be prescribed hormones, so with the help of my peer group, I got them on the black market.

I have felt female since my earliest memory. Back then, transgenderism was swept under the carpet, it wasn't spoken of. It was considered a lifestyle choice and a crime against God. These days, we have the benefit of research which has shown that it is biological. Being transgender is a hard life but

compared to what I went through as a child, the change over was a piece of cake.

I have worked as a sex worker for many years. Apart from the fact that it's well paid work I'm good at, I've found it impossible to get other work with my limited education and the anxiety and depression I suffer. It also doesn't help that I've been in and out of jail, mostly for drug-related offences. Stigma and discrimination have limited my work choices. When I joined NUAA as a PPP, it was the first "straight" job I'd ever done.

I made a decision not to let my anger and hate out. I try to be strong, loving and supportive – a happy and caring person – and that's how my friends at NUAA see me. It's wonderful to have a community that cares about me. They know I've had some bad experiences, but they treat me with kindness and love and don't judge. Every now and then I lose it, but we always get past it together. They tell me I am beautiful and that I deserve good things.

My self-esteem has really grown since I have been a PPP. It's an amazing feeling to be valued for my experiences and what I know, and accepted for who I am. It has always been my peers who have helped me, taught me how to be safer and healthier and supported me through transition, jail and other experiences. Now I want to give something back.

WHAT IS THE HEPATITIS C BUDDY PROGRAM?

The aims of the NUAA Buddy Program is to generate interest in the community of people who use drugs in getting tested and treated for hepatitis C and to provide tailored peer to assist with navigating the health system. The program also supports hepatitis B testing and vaccination.

NUAA Buddies are familiar with how hard it can be to access health services and provide support so that buddies can find a way to get tested and treated in the way that suits them best. There are many barriers to getting health care - the NUAA Buddy Program works because we understand the challenges and know how to work with them or around them.

Read the stories in this section and if you'd like to get support to access hep C treatment, give NUAA a call and we'll try to link you up with a Buddy. At the moment the program is up and running in our needle and syringe program in Sydney but we will be looking for buddies statewide so give us a call if you're interested.

If you have been through the system and have overcome difficulties to complete hep B testing or vaccination or hep C testing or treatment you should think about becoming a NUAA Buddy yourself and pass it on!

INTERESTED IN HEP C TREATMENT?

NUAA's **new** **BUDDY PROGRAM** can help **YOU!**



STIGMA-FREE PRACTICAL HELP AND SUPPORT

- information • advice • referrals
- appointment reminders • understanding 'one on one'

Find out how the **BUDDY PROGRAM** can help you, visit NUAAs NSP 385 Crown St (corner Albion St) Surry Hills, 8am to 8pm Mon-Fri or the **LIVER CLINIC** on Thursdays 2pm to 4pm. Ph (02) 8354 7343.

Or call the NUAAs office on (02) 8354 7300 or 1800 644 413.

NUAA
NSW USERS
AND AIDS ASSOCIATION

NUAA is your organisation. We are independent and community based. We aim to advance the health, rights and dignity of people who inject drugs. nuaa.org.au

Sara and Serena's Story

The Two of Us

Sara is a NUAA Buddy who supported Serena in her hep C treatment.

Sara

I really love working for NUAA and being involved in the Buddy Program is fantastic. I can work one-on-one with people and with the new medications, I see the rewards in just a few short months when there is another fabulous person in our community who is hepatitis free. You don't get a better pay off than seeing someone you have grown to care about get healthier and happier.

Until I began volunteering in NUAA's Peer Participation Program 4 years ago, I didn't understand the value and importance of my own lived experience. But gradually I learned how useful a conversation between peers can be.

Today, the fact that I have something to offer makes me feel not only empowered and boosts my self-worth, it makes me feel excited. It is wonderful to be part of a peer relationship because in that space there is trust and respect. My fellow peers tell me they are so much happier to share honestly and open up to me than to clinicians or case workers who are not people who use drugs. We can tell each other what is really wrong because we know we will get respect and problem-solving not discrimination and more barriers.

The rewards I get from sharing my knowledge and story are unbelievable. It is a real pleasure to be able to give back to the community that has helped me so much. I also welcome the respect that I never imagined Peer Workers would get from the medical

profession. Doctors, counsellors, nurses and researchers have all blown me away by wanting a professional relationship and respecting the work I do. As we Peer Workers prove ourselves, the respect from the rest of the Alcohol and Other Drugs sector grows.

I am not only a peer in terms of my experience as an injecting drug user, I am also a hepatitis C peer. I contracted hep C and completed hep C treatment so I know all about it from a personal angle.

Throughout my life, I have learned to juggle the medical system, the judicial system, Centrelink, housing and drug treatment services. The more I felt judged, the more fired up I got to make a change. I love helping people navigate systems and get the services they need.

Helping Serena has been such a pleasure. I found we had a lot of experiences in common so I really understood what she was going through. I was able to help her overcome her fear and concern about how doctors and nurses might treat her and to turn things around so she got some positive experiences of the medical profession.

My world has opened up to so many more opportunities by just sharing my story and knowledge of life with others. Best of all, I have learned not to be ashamed of my experiences, but to stand up and be proud to be a part of the community of people who use drugs.

Serena

There is no way I would have started the new hep C treatment and cleared the virus without the encouragement and sensitivity that my hep C Support Buddy Sara gave me. I spent a long time in denial and procrastinating about my hep C and I was glad to get the (gentle!) push from Sara to get it all dealt with!

A lot of my reluctance to deal with my health has come from my life experience. It's so hard moving from one violent man to another, not having my own roof over my head and living with alcohol and ice dependencies and all sorts of disappointments. You just have too much to deal with to take on anything else, it all seems too hard. I really needed someone to support me. I would never have got there on my own.

I was scared because at first I was told I had severe cirrhosis. Then I was locked up again so I could avoid thinking about it for a while. When I came out, I continued to avoid doctors and nurses because they were always rude to me and judged me. I just found it too painful and it was too hard to push myself forward in the face of that kind of discrimination.

Then with my Hep C Buddy's help, I was able to focus enough to get retested and start treatment. She understood why it was a big deal and was with me every step of the way. I was also assisted along the way with some financial incentives to make things easier and help get me to appointments.

The treatment was so much easier than I thought. I was just on 1 pill a day for only 2 months. I had no side effects at all and now I have freedom from hep C. And as it turned out, I never had cirrhosis – it had been a misdiagnosis. WOW.

The feeling of inclusiveness and community from fellow peers and volunteers and the trust that is shared so that I could open up was sooo cool! I learnt heaps too about staying healthier in the future.

Now I've tackled this, I know I can take on other things that need my attention. I'm now readier and more confident to face the challenges ahead.

We can tell each other what is really wrong

She understood why it was a big deal

WHAT IS THE NUAA WOMEN'S WELLBEING GROUP?

What is a Peer Discussion Group?

A peer discussion group is people who have something core in common – in our case drug use – who meet regularly to discuss a particular topic – for example grief or violence - in an atmosphere of respect, understanding and confidentiality.

What is the NUAA Women's Wellbeing Group?

It's a group of women who lived experience of drug use with issues they'd like to discuss in a safe environment, including an experience of difficult and/or abusive relationships.

We women who take drugs can find ourselves in some vulnerable situations. Most of us can easily remember a time where someone has blackmailed us with our drug use – using it to threaten or control us. Some of us have been taken advantage of because our boundaries have changed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Some of us have found ourselves living with domestic violence and have had trouble leaving because of the tensions involved in using relationships.

NUAA started the Women's Wellbeing Group to help women who use drugs to avoid some common pitfalls and improve our relationships.

In the group, women learn about types of abuse, the cycle of violence, healthy boundaries, communication skills, interpersonal effectiveness, and mindfulness.

The groups are "open", meaning that women can join at any time and attend as many or as few meetings as they like. Women are encouraged to come along each week but aren't required to do so. NUAA is open to working in different ways with whoever turns up and how much each person wants to commit and participate.

The group is managed by qualified NUAA peers who have lived experience relevant to their role.

How Can I Get Involved?

To find out more about the group, call NUAA's main office in Sydney on **8354 7300 (or toll-free 1800 644 412 if you live in the country)** and ask to talk to someone about the Women's Wellbeing Group or email melaniej@nuaa.org.au or sallyc@nuaa.org.au