

To create a brighter future
for our homeless youth,
we need to look to their past



The photos in this document are from the Home Is Where My Heart Is exhibition 2009:

a collection of images of what home means to a group of young people who have experienced, or who are homeless.



Image by Serena
Mentor: Teneil Kable



Image by Rose'e
Mentor: Seng Mah



Image by Dean
Mentor: Daniel Nevin



Image by Isayas
Mentor: James Campbell

The Planning Idol brief: "Every night 32,000 people under the age of 24 are homeless. Show us your strategic thinking on how you'd position the issue and use communication to address youth homelessness in Australia."

SYNOPSIS

A visit to a crisis house and interviews with these homeless youth and the people who work with them uncovered an important insight: we fail to accept responsibility for our homeless youth due to a common misperception that somehow it's their fault. While the government and NGOs are working to solve the problem, the wider community is reluctant to care. However, at the end of the day the issue will never be resolved unless we accept responsibility and vow to end youth homelessness as a community. Asking a broad range of people to get behind a complex issue such as this is not an easy task. An online activation strategy is proposed which allows people to commit their support to the cause through one easy step, following which they will be encouraged to take further action. People, however, will not be motivated to join the movement against youth homelessness unless they are given the opportunity to understand who these young people are. This strategy is based on eliciting empathy for these young people by bringing to light the past that they have had to endure.



AN ONGOING PROBLEM – WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The problem that needs to be addressed is complacency. The issue of youth homelessness is talked about and acted upon by a small group of people, while the rest of us choose to ignore it. I set out to find out why this is so and what can be done to bring the issue to the front of people's minds, make them care and mobilise them to do something about it.

RELUCTANT TO CARE

Imagine how you would feel if you discovered that the entire population of Alice Springs had been left homeless overnight. Would you want to help? The number of 12-24 year old Australians homeless every night exceeds the population of Alice Springs, and yet we still turn a blind eye. Why are we so reluctant to care?

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

Most of the 32,000 homeless youth aged between 12 and 24 are invisible to us. While they may not be roofless, they are still homeless because they may be couch surfing or living in other unstable situations.¹ If we don't see them on our streets, it is easy for us to turn a blind eye to the issue.

SOME ALARMING MISPERCEPTIONS

In 2006, research found that, "most people still believe that the typical homeless person is a man over 40 with a drug and alcohol problem. The reality is that young people make up about a third of all people experiencing homelessness."²

To understand more, I talked to people who work with homeless youth and discovered an even bigger misperception.

"People in the community assume young homeless people are runaway brats when they are actually escaping abusive and unsafe environments," Lisa Laschon, Youth Affairs Council Western Australia.

Key Insight: We are reluctant to take responsibility for our homeless youth because we somehow believe it must be their fault.

IT'S OUR RESPONSIBILITY

The Rudd government has vowed to halve homelessness by 2020, there are 1,500 homeless assistance services across Australia³ and a number of organisations are working to raise money and awareness for the cause.

However, the average person still doesn't seem to care, as was uncovered by a discussion with Julie Waylen from the Department for Child Protection in WA.

"Whenever the government puts in a proposal to build housing facilities for these young people, residents in the local area object out of fear that it will increase crime and traffic, and reduce property values."

It's not just the support of local residents that is needed; it's the support of teachers, other young people and their parents, employers and real estate agents, to help them stabilise their lives and prevent a life-long battle with homelessness. Communication can play a pivotal role in engendering such support.



Image by Louise
Mentor: Mathew Reed



Image by Matt
Mentor: Mathew Reed



HOW COMMUNICATIONS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE – WHERE COULD WE BE?

CREATING A MOVEMENT

Currently we blame the young person, their parents or the government for the prevalence of youth homelessness. There is a perception that 'it's nothing to do with me'.

Presently there is no easy way for people to help. We need to provide a means of mobilising people into action.

Our communications objectives are therefore:

1. Create an attitudinal shift whereby youth homelessness is seen more as a problem of society, not of the child.
2. The average person's support network is around 20 people.⁴ If we halve this and try to attract the support of 10 people per youth, our goal should be to drive 'registrations' from 320,000 people wanting to join the movement.

CREATING EMPATHY IN OUR AUDIENCE – HOW DO WE GET THERE?

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING

To date, efforts to bring attention to the issue of youth homelessness, such as through the Oasis' '32,000 to go' campaign have focused more on where these people are now and where they're going, rather than where they've been.

Highlighting their past is vital in helping people to get under the skin and inside the minds of homeless youth.

We don't want people to see where these youth are now and take pity; we want them to understand where they've come from and empathise.

IF ONLY MORE PEOPLE WERE LIKE PETER

Peter manages Mission Australia's Youth Accommodation Support Service in Western Australia, which provides crisis accommodation and transitional housing for homeless youth aged 15-25.

When visiting the crisis house and talking with Peter and the young people who live there, Peter shared with me a story about a troubled teenager who stayed in the house. He said that staff found her difficult to work with as she displayed extremely disruptive behaviour. Some of the staff, he said, had even dismissed her as 'nasty', as if they had given up on her.

Peter, however, knew better. He got her to open up and once she had shared her stories about her past and her abuse as a child, staff were able to develop empathy for her and, as a result, her behaviour started to improve.

This story is a representation of what needs to happen in the wider community. The truth is that many homeless youth are troubled and they can cause trouble. However, if we all knew why that was the case we would be in a much better position to do something about it.

The proposition: When we ignore their past, we deny them a future.

START BY STIMULATING BEHAVIOUR

While traditionally social marketing often works to elicit an attitudinal change followed by behavioural change, many marketing gurus, such as Hugh Mackay, now argue that it is behavioural change that leads to attitudinal change, as was seen with drink driving and the introduction of random breath testing.⁵

The key challenge with the task at hand is that there is currently no single action people can take to help address the problem. We have to create a mechanism that makes it easy for individuals to commit to the cause and motivates them to act.

CREATING THE MOVEMENT ONE PERSON AT A TIME

An 'online activation strategy' will be used whereby people can visit a designated URL (e.g. endhomelessyouth.com.au) and 'register' their support of the movement to end youth homelessness.

When registering, people will be asked to provide their email (building a database), select their occupation and provide their postcode, which will be used to plot them on a map displaying where in Australia people are showing their support.

Upon registering they will be prompted to take further action such as 'share' with friends on social networks and seek information on the site about how to tackle youth homelessness.



Broad reach, visual media (TV, outdoor, press) will be used to drive people to the website as they imply that this is a 'big' issue that everyone is noticing.

The email database can be used to send more targeted information in order to facilitate action. For example, tradesmen could be sent information regarding the benefits of implementing apprenticeships for troubled youth.

It can also be used to inform people of key dates (e.g. Youth Homelessness Day) or invite people to exclusive events (e.g. fundraising concerts), as PR will be essential in heightening awareness of the issue.

CREATIVE THOUGHT STARTERS

Stories are the key to the success of this campaign.

- Show someone feeling sorry for a cat in the window of an animal shelter, who then crosses the street to avoid a girl sleeping on the footpath. Then show the upbringings of both the cat and the girl and the similarities between their experiences of abuse and neglect. VO: "I can't change where I've come from but you can help me change where I'm going."
- Tell the story of a boy who was always in trouble because he couldn't concentrate at school because there was never any food in the house, who was hit by his mother's partner, who dropped out of school, who took drugs to deal with the pain, who couch surfs every night. VO: "Now you know my past, you can help me find a better future."
- Use someone working in the 'front line' (e.g. Peter from Mission) to tell the stories and ask people to help.

MEETING OUR OBJECTIVES - ARE WE GETTING THERE?

The success of this campaign will be measured against our core objectives.

1. Create an attitudinal shift whereby youth homelessness is seen more as a problem of society, not of the child.

This will be measured by a tracking study. A benchmark study, prior to the campaign, will measure how people currently view the problem including measures on who they feel is responsible, what they think should be done and who they think should be doing it. Over time we should see a decrease in the number of people attributing blame solely to the child and the parent, and an increase in the number of people suggesting a sense of personal responsibility.

2. Drive 320,000 'registrations' from people wanting to join the movement.

This figure should be achieved within 12 months of the campaign launching.

"Looking through the eyes of a homeless person, you see this staircase. The staircase represents the climb homeless people have to make to get accommodation and get somewhere in life. Looking at this staircase now, I'm half way up.

I have temporary accommodation, but it's still not good enough. I'm waiting to get my own home, but it's a struggle. There are not enough houses out there that are affordable for me."



Image by Matt
Mentor: Mathew Reed



Image by Anna
Mentor: Nicole Norelli

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Coffey, M. (2009). Perspectives on Youth Housing from Australia. Youth Accommodation Association.
- ² Homeless Youth Matter – media release. (2007). Homelessness Australia.
- ³ The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness. (2008)
- ⁴ Grinspoon, L. (1982). Psychiatry: The American Psychiatric Association Annual Review.
- ⁵ Grayson, R. (2006). Communicating Development: getting the NGO message across. Pacific Edge.

Images from: Home is Where My Heart Is Project, YACWA, 2009. Permission to use images obtained from Lisa Laschon, YACWA, October 2009.