

# Finally, a place to call home

A worldwide project aimed at housing homeless people is a big success in NSW, writes **Adele Horin**.

**L**ife on the banks of the Hawkesbury River had its good moments for the homeless men who called themselves the Sunshine Club.

But hoons had found their tents and caves; the bashing and harassment were growing more common; one man had been set alight; another had his legs broken.

The younger homeless on the banks had attracted drug pushers and fights; disrupting whatever harmony had existed among the older alcoholics. The Sunshine Club's members were ageing, getting thinner and sicker. When the sun didn't shine, it was bitterly cold.

The offer of a home came just in time for Kim "Kimbo" Ballard, 55, a 12-year veteran of the river bank and a founding member of the Sunshine Club. For years he had suffered an ulcerated leg, and after endless hospitalisations, the limb was amputated in December 2009.

When workers from Project 40 came looking for the most vulnerable of the homeless in the Windsor-Richmond area, it was hard to go past this alcoholic amputee, struggling on his crutches.

But they also saw in Ballard signs of a potential leader who would help prove the thesis that what the hardcore homeless needed, was first a home – not a crisis shelter for a night or a refuge for three months; not a soup kitchen; not a "living skills" program; not even rehab.

First and foremost they needed the keys to their own permanent abode; their signature on a long-term lease; home, sweet home. And then they would be offered all the help they would take.

Scuttling decades of accepted wisdom, the "housing first" policy has spread around the world from its birthplace in New York City, where about 4000 people have been taken off skid row over a decade, housed in their own apartments, then plied with services.

In Sydney, a big apartment building in Camperdown is due to open at the end of the year to put the housing first idea into practice.

But Wentworth Community Housing, a non-profit agency that manages 2000 properties in the Penrith/Blue Mountains/Windsor area for the NSW government, has already adopted a policy of assigning 40 properties – hence the Project 40 title – to the street homeless over three years. A further 20 have been promised. The project uses federal government homelessness money to fund its critical support services.

Ballard was the first to move into a property, nine months ago. Instead of a tent he has a comfortable one-bedroom house in Richmond, with a white picket fence at the front and a red Weber barbecue at the back.

Instead of a sleeping bag he has a double bed. He has exchanged the banks of the Hawkesbury River for two pink velvet sofas, and his single gas burner for a stove and oven. There's a television, a stack of DVDs and a computer in the living room, and four pet cockatiels in a big cage in the yard.

Project 40, charities, and street throw-outs have provided the furniture and the fit-out. Like all the Project 40 tenants, Ballard pays 25 per cent of his income – the disability pension – in rent and has a "continuous" lease, which effect-



**New start ... Kim Ballard, 55, has moved from the banks of the Hawkesbury River to a house in Richmond.** Photo: Jon Reid

ively means the property is his for life if he is a good tenant.

"In the bush you'd have paper plates and burn 'em," he says. "I'm at it all the time now, doing domestic duties. It's actually good."

Ballard, as predicted, is a success story. He hasn't given up drinking but his health has improved. It is checked regularly by a visiting community health worker and he visits a specialist to get his false leg adjusted.

He keeps his house tidy, is a good neighbour to an elderly man in a wheelchair next door, and is establishing a rock band for rough sleepers through St Matthew's Anglican church. He is now an advocate for Project 40, helping to locate the homeless.

"I know all the hiding places," he says. "Sheds, water tanks, caves." He helps the street and river-bank people fill in the paperwork that may put them in line for a flat or house.

"Why give them anything?" Stephanie Brennan, Project 40's manager, echoes a question that many on public and community housing waiting lists may ask.

"People don't realise it's about life or death. Many of these rough sleep-

ers will die early if we don't get them into a home and support them.

"And what sort of a society do we want? Behind every one of these people is a harrowing story. These are people who've lost all contact with love."

Molra\* ticked all the boxes. An escapee from a violent home, she had lived on the streets since the age of 12. She was a heroin addict who had lost three children to welfare authorities. She was sleeping in abandoned train carriages before she was moved into a Project 40 house eight months ago. She got furniture; a support team, including a drug and alcohol worker and a trauma counsellor; started taking

**You don't realise how nice it is to have walls around you.**  
**Project 40 tenant, Robert\***

methadone and then weaned herself off it.

"Her house is pristine; she's a first-rate cleaner," Brennan says.

"Of all our tenants, no one has traded anything. They know it's their home for life."

Battle-hardened social workers have wept at regular meetings that decide who will get housed. For one three-bedroom house Wentworth Community Housing allocated to the project recently there were 26 homeless people vying for the key.

The project brings together 80 agencies, from Centrefink to neighbourhood centres, that may come into contact with the homeless. The agencies send an account of "their" homeless person to a Project 40 coordinator, Ingrid Matthews, who collates and summarises their stories.

At February's allocation meeting, agency representatives sat through a précis of each narrative, then they ranked the applicants according to a vulnerability index.

Mental illness, addiction, chronic illness and advanced age are some of the factors taken into account.

"The meeting took hours. It was harrowing, tense, sombre. We were

all trying to do the right thing," Brennan says.

Matthews adds: "Everyone's biggest asset is a home and we had it in our hands to give." One applicant was a family with four children that had been living in train stations and children's playgrounds. They missed out but were helped into temporary accommodation.

Instead, two rough sleepers, Jack\* 54, and Robert\* 32, who had made a joint application with Ballard's help, got the keys to the door.

"It wasn't luck; they were both so vulnerable," Brennan says.

You could understand Robert's amazement when he saw the house in Windsor. "Everything was new. I couldn't believe it," he says. A week after they moved in, it was still sparsely furnished, but the floors were highly polished, the kitchen gleamingly modern, the bathroom newly renovated, and the television flat and large.

"The first night I slept good; to have a roof over my head, a shower, to get away from the dramas of the river and all that," says Robert, who has been homeless on and off since he was 14, and has a history of depression, and drug and alcohol dependence.

The pair, a week in, hadn't yet cooked a meal and were sure they would share the housework equally without the need for formal rosters.

"Until you've been out there on the river you don't realise how nice it is to have walls around you," Jack says. Not all those housed have been ideal tenants. Domestic violence is a major issue in one family that is well in arrears on the rent, but the children, who had previously been sleeping in a car, are doing well and attending school. Wentworth Housing is undertaking a payment agreement with the family through the NSW Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal in the usual way.

Can society's sickest and most damaged keep the keys to their own flats and houses in the long term? And can a room of one's own prove to be a springboard for getting well? New York, Denver, Colorado, and Wichita, Kansas are among the cities to claim they have significantly reduced their street populations, in some cases by more than half, and achieved high housing retention rates, using the housing-first model.

Just how sustainable such tenancies will prove to be in Australia is being investigated by academics from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute in Queensland. Mission Australia, which has served the homeless for 50 years, mostly using the traditional stepped approach, is exploring the housing-first model.

"Homeless people aren't a homogeneous group. 'Housing first' won't be the answer for everyone and we'll always need a range of responses to get people back on their feet," the missions' national homelessness and housing adviser, Sean Lappin, says, "but we think it has a great deal of merit."

The mission is to roll out its own housing-first initiative – the MISHA Project – to help chronically homeless men in Parramatta.

Project 40's Brennan says the street homeless have been invisible to society to services, and to housing authorities. Where attention was paid, short-term accommodation was made conditional on their first getting off booze or learning to cook.

"We say everyone has a right to a house. More than that, these people will be fantastic tenants," she says. "I've been moved to tears to see them buying little eggcups, pillow cases, picture frames, to see how they treasure things we all take for granted."

\*Names have been changed to protect people's identity.