

brotherhood action

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Making the Break

Some hundreds of low income families have taken part in one of the most far-reaching welfare experiments ever conducted.

In 1972, the Brotherhood decided to close its traditional social work services and set out to demonstrate that, to lift people out of poverty, there had to be a change in their basic living conditions. It was of little use to poor people for a charity to continue to give 'hand-outs' without doing something about the reasons for their poverty.

Through the Family Centre Project, families who had been long term clients of the Brotherhood — some of them second or even third generation — learnt skills to help them solve their problems, instead of having a social worker to do this for them. They took part in an income supplement scheme funded mainly by the Federal Government; in activities such as camping and a bulk food store; in welfare rights and social action campaigns. They learnt from professional staff the skills to help other people with the same problems, usually related to housing, employment, pensions and benefits, or credit and debt.

The Project ran for three years and in 1975 the responsibility for its management was transferred to the families themselves, the name changing to the Action and Resource Centre for low income families (ARC).



Ruby Canham (left), legal worker at ARC, Les Hope (centre), staff supervisor and Margaret Fitzgerald, resource worker.

For the first time, low income people had developed the skills and confidence to speak for themselves, to tell what being poor is really like. People who had once been passive recipients of charity were now in a position to take part in the debate on poverty.

ARC members spoke at national conferences, they became members of decision-making bodies. One became the first low income person on the board of the Australian Council of Social Service, another, a commissioner of the Victorian Legal Aid Commission. They agitated, they demonstrated for the changes they knew were needed. And they developed services which, as they knew from experience, were best suited to poor people.

A Savings and Loans Scheme led to the first Credit Union for low income people. A Legal Aid Service, children's and teenagers' programs. A resource room, with information and help coming from people who had been in the same situation themselves.

Although the Brotherhood's original intention was to fund the project for six years only, this was extended for a further three years, until June 1981. ARC will soon move from the building in Fitzroy it has occupied for nine years to a smaller community house. While still financially supported by the Brotherhood, ARC's new base will allow low income people to establish their own relationships

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Mrs Ruby Fox of Fairfield helps Northcote Technical School student Geoffrey Blachford, aged 12 years, with his reading at SPAN.

SPAN Reading Program

Members of SPAN, the Brotherhood's community project for older and retired people in Northcote, are very excited about the grant they have received to cover the cost of a part-time co-ordinator for their Reading Program. Together with Northcote Technical School, they made a successful joint application to the Melbourne Newsboys' Club Foundation and were given \$3 000 to continue the program.

About 25 students from Forms 2, 3 and 4 spend some time twice a week with their 'listener' from SPAN, who helps with reading and spelling problems. Co-ordinator Beverley Brown says that the individual attention and the relaxed, friendly atmosphere at the SPAN house has done wonders for the students' reading.

The Reading Program is one of a range of activities developed at SPAN over the last two years, involving older people in their community.

Our Budget Deficit

Dear Brotherhood Friends

The Brotherhood has long believed that it should attract public support for its present performances and not shore up past legacies to protect itself. In not building up an endowment fund providing a guaranteed income, we have avoided the temptation of putting a soft cushion under the organisation.

All we have is a modest security fund which can only be drawn on for a short time while income and expenditure are balanced. Its function is to protect essential services from sudden fluctuations of income.

Our other reserves cover obligatory provisions like depreciation, maintenance and long service leave and can't be drawn on for general income.

At present we have a serious budget deficit which may force us to draw on our invested security fund and to lower our general income. This letter is not to cry poor, but to tell you that like most other welfare organisations, we have some serious financial problems.

In the long term, I am sure we

will resolve them and come out a stronger, trimmer and even more efficient organisation, though the immediate path ahead will be painful and difficult. The staff have been asked to make suggestions on how we can cut our costs and I am confident of their full commitment and co-operation. Perhaps there are suggestions that you would like to make for us to consider? They would be warmly welcomed.

We are working hard to lift the profit level of the Donated Goods Division in the hope that we can avoid program cuts. Basically we will aim to be as self-sufficient as possible.

However, there are areas such as with Commonwealth Personal Care Subsidies where the Federal Government has not indexed its payments. Thus we are now carrying burdens in our aged care hostels that we never anticipated when we built them. So while part of the solution lies with us, the balance lies with the Federal Government.

Peter Hollingworth.

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rather than being under the umbrella of the Brotherhood.

The original concept of the Family Centre Project was not to provide an instant solution to poverty that could be mass-produced, but many of the ideas developed there have now become part of accepted social work practice.

This unique project has helped to give low income people:

- a voice in the community
- services that best suit their needs
- the ability to take charge of their lives and to make their own decisions
- the confidence that they, too, can stand up for their rights.