

My speech today is written by a man that we will just call 'Pro Bono'. He contacted me during the election campaign and we have been communicating over email ever since. I am very grateful of the trust that Pro Bono has put in me to share his words and experiences of being a public housing tenant in the ACT and of homelessness. I believe these words provide unique insight – so I would like to share some of his words today.

His words are titled The Invisible People

In 2001 I was homeless for some months, due to a mental breakdown.

The good people at Samaritan House, a refuge for homeless men, rescued me and helped me to get settled back into society. It was a struggle, but I was eventually able to settle down and resume something like a 'normal' life.

Understandably, to most people becoming homeless is very traumatic. Suddenly, one is alone. One has no home to retreat into, to hide from the pain.. All hope has gone. It seems common, at this time, to feel disorientated, lost, confused, and particularly helpless. The newly-homeless often find themselves wandering around, not knowing where to go, what to do, just having to keep moving, unable to settle in one place, unable to think.

The first night out on the street is often said to be the worst. Night time is when we all want to retreat to the safety of our own homes. The loneliness and hopelessness of that first night is something that you never forget.

Many homeless people manage to find some friendliness, or at least acknowledgement, from other homeless people. For them there is a culture of sorts that will welcome them and help them to cope with the loneliness and emptiness of their life. Much depends on the individuals, who they meet on their daily wanderings, and whether they are still capable of making human contact with others. Many aren't. They are the ones for whom the loneliness never ends.

One of the biggest problems with understanding homeless people, is that there is no single reason why they became homeless, which makes it harder to understand the homeless as a group. They need to be treated as individuals each with their own individual problems.

The best way to find out why people are homeless is to go and ask them. They are the ones who know why they are there, and they can be very articulate when it comes to the matter of how society has failed them.

Most people in the wider community think that drug-abuse is the main cause of homelessness. In my experience, this is not necessarily so. It is only true in a minority of cases, although many homeless people become drug-users to escape their situation. However, the so-called 'experts', the policy makers and most researchers, believe that drug-abuse leads to homelessness, It is lazy and discriminatory thinking to conflate the two issues.

Common to all people who are homeless, is the extreme vulnerability of the person, the lack of adequate and suitable housing, the lack of an income to pay for accommodation, and often the lack of social support to enable them to live settled lives. Homelessness rarely has a single cause. It is the interplay and cumulative impact of systemic, structural, and individual circumstances that forces a person out into the streets.

The charities do a wonderful job with their limited resources, helped by a vast army of volunteers willing to give up their free time to help those less fortunate than themselves.

Just because you have a nice home, a good job and a close family does not mean you are safe. Homelessness does not discriminate.

Thank you.