

Beginnings

New Workers, New Suburbs, New Everything

Kris Saunders and Teresa Scott

Kris Saunders is a social worker with Pregnancy Help, Brisbane, and Teresa Scott is a social worker with the Community Support Program, Psychiatric Services, Brisbane. In the final year of their Social Work course, Kris and Teresa worked together in Kingston, on the outskirts of Brisbane. Kris and Teresa share an interest in community development theory and practice.

CONTEXT

Kingston is a suburb on the southern outskirts of Brisbane. Officially, it is in the new city of Logan, which came into existence in 1978. Logan has since become the fastest growing city in Australia and is now the third largest city in Queensland. Consequently it suffers the growing pains that such rapid development brings. Many families are migrants, both from overseas and interstate, with no extended family support, which has led to increased demands on welfare services. The rapid

growth in population and the slow response by bureaucracies to growing needs has resulted in a situation where many areas, particularly those in Central Logan (that is Woodridge, Kingston, Marsden and Loganlea) are grossly under-resourced.

Logan has an atypical age structure, characterized by a heavy bias towards youth (36.6% of the population under the age of 15 years).¹ Such a population profile brings with it particular demands on all health, education and welfare services, and on statutory agencies such as the police and children's services. There is a large percentage of the population (28.6%) in the 25-39 years age group, which is the main child-bearing age group.² In addition, a large Housing Commission development has attracted many poor and disadvantaged families. In 1981, 13% of the housing in Central Logan was owned by Housing Commission, compared to 3.7% for the wider Brisbane area.³ Many of these households are headed by single parents, mainly women.

Many of the resources that do exist — welfare agencies, shops, doctors, lawyers, public halls — are centrally located within the main business district and there is little public transport to make them accessible to people without cars. In 1981, income levels showed a concentration of middle to low income earners in Logan City, with 27.1% earning between \$1,000 and \$10,000 per annum.⁴ There are a large number of people on Unemployment, Sickness, Widows, Deserted Wives or Supporting Parent's benefits. The Woodridge office of the Department of Social Security has one of the biggest monthly payouts in Queensland.

We became involved in Kingston in July 1984 through our contact with Mick Devlin and Pat Murray, two Christian Brothers who were working and living in the area. Much of their work was based on the results of a family needs survey which was conducted through a local Catholic primary school in 1982/83. In this survey the three most commonly expressed concerns were lack of income security, inadequate counselling and support for family members, and the need for inexpensive, accessible childminding and recreational facilities. In the previous eighteen months, Mick and Pat had chosen to work with *at risk* youth and their families in Logan City, particularly those who were coming in contact with the juvenile justice system. They saw possibilities for further work with local

families, perhaps with single parent families living in the Housing Commission areas. They suggested that we undertake this work as part of our final community work placement.

The Brothers' house backed on to one of the Housing Commission areas in the eastern part of Kingston. Using their house as a base, we spent the next four and a half months working with the people who lived within this area. While we both lived in Logan City, we were not living in the exact area in which we chose to work. We did not know the residents of Kingston (apart from the Brothers) and had not been invited in by them. We were initially tentative and uncertain about what we could do in the community. However, as we began to meet people, to share ideas and work together at putting them into practice, we began to feel as much a part of the community as the people who lived there. So although this story begins as a record of our own personal experiences, it becomes the story of a community of people working together.

From the very earliest days, we had ideas about things we would like to see happen. Our primary aim was to put people in contact with each other, so that they could become aware of common experiences and needs. We hoped that, from the relationships that formed, people would become aware of a potential for change. We believed that people needed to have a sense of control over what happened in their lives. We found this most usefully expressed in the well-known analysis of Connie Benn.⁵ We interpreted this analysis in terms of four basic needs:

- people's need to actively participate in the relationships they have with others,
- people's need to have appropriate and accurate information,
- people's need to make decisions that affect their lives, and
- people's need to exercise control over sufficient resources (especially money and energy).

This analysis helped us understand the meaning of poverty and some of its important manifestations, and we kept it at the back of our minds in all our work.

THE BEGINNING

In the first two or three weeks we familiarised ourselves with the physical environment — the houses, street layout, parks, and the local resources, both government and voluntary. We

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In the first two or three weeks we familiarised ourselves with the physical environment — the houses, street layout, parks, and the local resources, both government and voluntary. We

also visited community centres in other parts of Brisbane to find out what they were doing and how they had started. While this was important ground work, we had yet to make contact with the community of East Kingston. The prospect of meeting people, and the problem of exactly how to go about it, was frightening.

As places to meet local people, the schools and shopping centres had limitations. Their catchment areas were much larger than the specific area in which we were working. To meet the people of East Kingston we had to approach them in their homes. We were wary of how we would be received, so we made tentative plans to take around some sort of survey, to give us a reason to knock on people's doors and to give us something to talk about. We soon found this unnecessary. People had seen us walking around the area and they were quite curious about who we were. When we knocked on their doors, we were welcomed in.

Our first attempt at doorknocking was a nerve-racking experience. After running out of excuses and virtually prising ourselves out of our house, we approached a young woman in the house opposite. Margie was to become very involved in the community, but on our first meeting she was, naturally, quite wary of two strangers at her door. She told us, later, that at first she had thought we were trying to sell something or push religion! She was, however, curious about what we were doing in the neighbourhood. This encouraged us, but the response wasn't always quite so positive. A few times we were greeted with 'None today, thanks', even after we'd explained who we were!

For us, as beginning workers in an unfamiliar community, doorknocking was an obvious way to introduce ourselves to people. We met people on their own territory and, over a cup of coffee, were able to talk about what it was like to live in East Kingston. We doorknocked together because it gave us confidence and increased our contacts with people. However, we soon realised that, as a way of meeting people, doorknocking had drawbacks. It was slow, time-consuming and emotionally draining. We began to take advantage of any opportunity to meet people — in the street, in parks, on the queue at the phonebox, at the local school Sports Day, and at Tupperware parties.

We found that there were three issues that kept coming up

in our conversations with people. These were the isolation of women, (particularly those with small children), the need for locally-based, inexpensive family entertainment, and the general lack of resources such as halls and public transport in the area. We also discovered that people did not know about many of the resources that did exist in Logan City — and consequently under-utilized them.

BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

To begin to address the needs of women with young children, we invited a few people around to the Brothers' house for morning tea to discuss the idea of establishing a local playgroup. Three women attended and, with a little prompting from us, decided to hold a first playgroup at Margie's home on the next Wednesday morning. Armed with this information, we all went out and encouraged other women to come along to the playgroup. It was a great success. The group decided to meet weekly, each person taking turns at hosting the playgroup in her backyard.

We realized that, in many ways, playgroups were an easy way to bring women together, particularly when it was in response to an expressed need. Playgroups had a well-defined objective, but they needed no financial outlay, formal venue, special equipment, or special skills. The informal, friendly atmosphere amongst a small group of women meeting in their own backyards fostered many new relationships and opened up opportunities for further activities.

Although the women came to the playgroup for their children's benefit, they found themselves making new friends and fulfilling some of their own needs for friendship and social activity — going shopping together, babysitting each other's children, forming a tennis group and encouraging each other to attend the Positive Parenting course at the Woodridge Community Health Centre. When the women wanted to purchase playgroup equipment or when they needed money to put on a small Christmas party, they organised a fund-raising event themselves.

Like any new group, the playgroup had its ups and downs. Sometimes the children fought, other times attendance was low, and a couple of times it rained. Initially the women depended on us to invite new members and organise activities, but gradually they began to feel that the playgroup belonged

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Like any new group, the playgroup had its ups and downs. Sometimes the children fought, other times attendance was low, and a couple of times it rained. Initially the women depended on us to invite new members and organise activities, but gradually they began to feel that the playgroup belonged

to its members, so they felt encouraged to bring their friends along or suggest activities.

At the same time as the playgroup was becoming established, other people were talking to us about the problem of finding affordable family entertainment in the local area. One of the neighbours, Gloria, was very keen to do something about this problem. Together we came up with the idea of having a "Family Fun Day" at the local football oval, Meakin Park. By this stage we had begun to feel frustrated with the slowness of doorknocking as a way of meeting people. We hoped the Fun Day would provide us with the opportunity to meet a large number of people and to show what could be achieved using local resources.

We organised the Fun Day in two frantic days with an outlay of only \$20. We were able to borrow an earthball and parachute from the Woodridge Police Citizens Youth Club, begged potato sacks from a local fruiterer and face paint from Kate, a local teacher. We made playdough, bought clay and materials for kite-making, borrowed a large tent and prayed for a fine day! Our only form of advertising was by letter-dropping 450 houses, a task completed with the aid of Gloria's children. Walking the streets delivering our leaflets, we were amazed at how many houses there were in our small locality. We only covered twelve streets, and could have delivered twice as many leaflets if we had been trying to contact all of East Kingston.

To our delight (and momentary terror) over one hundred people took up the invitation to join us in the Park on Exhibition Wednesday for a BYO picnic lunch. Once again, everything didn't go exactly as we'd planned. The Brothers had promised to help us set up, but were called away at the last minute. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as people immediately became involved in helping us put up the tent and organise the activities.

The Fun Day gave us the chance to renew contacts we had already made as well as to meet many new faces. However we were so busy running the various activities that we barely had time to answer people's questions about how the day was organised. Luckily for us, Gloria spent most of the day talking to people, explaining our ideas and encouraging them to think about becoming involved in organising their own activities in the future.

The next step was to bring all these interested people

together while the enthusiasm generated by the Fun Day was still fresh in their minds. This proved more difficult than we had anticipated. Although interested, people were reluctant to commit themselves to take an active part. Only five people came to the first meeting. While we were disappointed with the numbers, much was achieved at that meeting. A group was formed, F.L.A.G. (Family Leisure Activities Group), and decided that its first project would be to run a school holidays programme in September. Since we needed money to run the programme, fundraising became F.L.A.G.'s first task — a stall at the Woodridge Trash and Treasure Market. The time we spent collecting, sorting, pricing and serving on the stall consolidated relationships and helped clarify purposes.

The four mornings of activities during the school holidays were again held in Meakin Park. Luckily we were blessed with beautiful spring weather and the problem of what to do should it rain did not arise. Denise and Margaret, two of the founding members of F.L.A.G., did much of the hard work, but as the holiday programme progressed there were offers of help from other quarters. Some teenagers brought their horses to give the youngsters rides, while others offered computer paper, plaster cast moulds, paints and occasionally even money. Most of the activities catered for primary school age children, and held little interest for local teenagers. This, together with the obvious enjoyment of the mothers in the craft activities, gave us ideas for the future.

The programme provided games for the children and, even more importantly for the future of F.L.A.G., it allowed their mothers (and a few fathers) to get to know each other. As they ate their picnic lunches, the conversation often turned from the day's programme to a wide range of possibilities for community activities, such as arts and crafts group, youth groups and further fun days. But it seemed we always came back to the same problem — where to accommodate these activities.

F.L.A.G.'s next meeting was a tremendous success. With eight new people, the energy and enthusiasm knew no bounds! The original members (Gloria, Denise and Margaret) came well prepared with an agenda and many ideas to discuss. Naturally, discussion centred around a review of the Fun Day and the School Holidays programme. The sense of pride in these achievements was infectious and people at the meeting took up the idea of community self-sufficiency with enthusiasm.

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The meeting was a turning point for the community of Kingston East. Sitting close together around a dining room table eating sandwiches and drinking coffee, the ideas for activities within our suburb flowed thick and fast. The possibilities seemed endless — child care, counselling, after school care, family support, youth groups, playgroups, holiday activities, craft groups, adult education courses . . . Unlike the programmes that F.L.A.G. had previously arranged, this new list of activities and services obviously required public accommodation rather than a member's house or backyard. Thus the task changed from simply providing local, family entertainment to establishing a venue for a wide range of community activities and services.

At one point during the meeting, when it seemed that we were getting carried away with our enthusiasm, a lone voice of experience spoke up. "Hold on! Hold on! Do you know what you are getting yourselves into? It's going to take a lot of time and a lot of hard work!" Sue, who was to become our Publicity Officer, knew from her experience with the Asthma Foundation how much work would be involved in the organization of such a venture. However, while her timely statement brought us back to reality, it did not dull the enthusiasm. What it did do was to help us look at the practical steps we now had to take. We saw that we had to become incorporated. We planned further fundraising via a Weekend Garage Sale at Margaret's place, and we agreed to visit a nearby and recently established community centre, the Logan West Community Centre. We also decided on a "get-to-know-you" bar-b-que for F.L.A.G. members and families.

Gloria took on the job of contacting the Justice Department about incorporation and approval for fundraising. She was horrified to discover that our early fund-raising for F.L.A.G. had been illegal. Although we had been innocent of any attempt to circumvent the quite strict and formal rules of the Justice Department, this discovery did spur on our determination to become an incorporated body as soon as possible.

The visit to Logan West proved interesting and informative. Wendy had been a driving force behind its establishment eighteen months previously, and she was happy to talk to us. She explained that the Logan City Council had paid for the house and land, local business had donated building materials for its improvement, and the Federal Government was

supplying funds for a Home Care Service based at the centre. She insisted, "It can never happen again!" Nevertheless, she suggested that local entrepreneurs might be able to donate a house that would otherwise be demolished to make way for new shopping developments in Logan City. We were impressed with this idea. We realized that it was important to become aware of available local resources. The other important advice we got from our visit was to keep our activities responsive to local needs, and not be unduly influenced by outside pressures.

THE KINGSTON EAST NEIGHBOURHOOD GROUP

We decided that a name change was now in order. F.L.A.G. no longer represented what we were trying to achieve. We became the Kingston East Neighbourhood Group (K.E.N.G. for short) and F.L.A.G. was then a sub-group of the larger committee, with the continuing role of organizing family leisure activities. K.E.N.G.'s first priority was incorporation. We had to formulate our goals and objectives, write a constitution and establish a formal committee. We decided to have official office bearers, but agreed that the workload be shared amongst all members, not just those who had the titles.

As a result of our visit to Logan West Community Centre, we realized that K.E.N.G. needed to be well-known within the area and have the support of local government, local business and, most importantly, local people. We decided to hold a public meeting to introduce ourselves to local politicians, welfare agencies and the media. The date was set for 13th November, the venue at Cathy's, one of the few of us with a Queensland style highset house.

With local elections coming up in four months time and the Federal Election one month away, we were able to lobby for support from the various candidates. We felt that it was important that we be very clear about our aims and objectives by the 13th, so we spent the next three meetings writing a constitution and preparing the papers for incorporation. Of course, these meetings were not all work. We laughed and talked together over lunch, strengthening friendship and common understanding.

Meanwhile, the problems in Logan City had once again caught the media's attention. Mick and Pat's involvement with youth led to an interview with a reporter from the **Courier-Mail**, and at Mick's suggestion we were also interviewed. We were

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determined to tell the reporter the positive things that were happening in our community, but found she wasn't really interested. Beyond describing us as "a bright glow on the horizon of Kingston", she was more interested in paedophilia and the mythical streets where unmarried mothers were "deliberately" becoming pregnant.

The article that resulted, "City in Crisis",⁶ sparked an angry response from K.E.N.G. members. We wrote a Letter to the Editor, detailing our work and describing ourselves as "just one example of the optimism and energy that exists in Logan City".⁷ The letter stressed that we were no different to other people in other suburbs and "that we needed to be supported in our efforts, not degraded, ignored and looked down upon".⁸ This letter to the **Courier-Mail**, along with our regular press releases in the local papers, brought K.E.N.G. to the attention of many more people in the Kingston area.

Other reactions to "City in Crisis" ranged from resigned acceptance of Logan City's negative image to outright surprise. As one woman who had recently moved to Logan from interstate said, "I thought this was a nice place to live, until I read the papers. Now I don't know if I want to live here after all!" Intended as a joke, her comment nevertheless illustrates the way that negative media reports can shape a community's self-image.

While K.E.N.G.'s main aim was to find a building for a community centre, we recognized we had to encourage groups and/or activities that might eventually be based at the centre. A youth group was an obvious need in the area. We had not adequately catered for teenagers, either at the Fun Day or in the School Holidays programme. Consequently we helped to form a youth group. At first, most of the young people were children of K.E.N.G. members, but gradually other local teenagers joined the group and met weekly at different people's houses.

Some people had expressed interest in craft activities, particularly Barbara, a committee member who offered her house as a venue. We had heard of an arts and crafts bus run by a local church group. They drove the bus to various parts of Logan City and set up for a morning's arts and crafts. We negotiated with them to park their bus outside Barbara's house on Monday mornings, with us organizing the child minding. While grateful for the opportunity to use their equipment and

expertise, we felt vaguely uncomfortable with the arrangement. It seemed that something was being done *for* us rather than *with* us, that they were giving and we were simply taking. However, with all too few resources at our disposal to enable us to organize our own crafts sessions, the arts and crafts bus continued to visit. We hoped that with the establishment of our own community centre we would eventually be able to run these craft mornings ourselves.

The playgroup had now been running for three months and another one had begun. Both groups had joined the Playgroup Association and were making plans to buy play equipment. Some of the members of these groups and other people that we had met through doorknocking and the F.L.A.G. activities were playing tennis or attending fitness classes on a weekly basis. We encouraged all these groups to send a representative to the November 13th meeting to show that sectors of the community were already well organized and that a venue could be put to good use immediately.

THE VITAL MEETING

Despite the preparation and rehearsals, there were many trembling hands, knocking knees and fluttering tummies on the morning of the 13th of November. There were a few apologies, but all invited groups were well represented, especially aspiring politicians!

We began by carefully placing ourselves beside each guest within the circle of chairs. After a welcome from our President, Sandra, we invited all present to introduce themselves and to explain their interest in the establishment of a community centre in Kingston. We asked for constructive ideas about how to achieve our objectives. As people made suggestions, we were very pleased to be able to demonstrate how effective we had been. One alderman advised, "First, you must write a constitution". We replied, "We've done that." Another followed with, "The next step is becoming incorporated", to which we could reply, "We're doing that." Many guests were genuinely surprised at the level of organization we had already achieved. Dropping their condescending attitudes, they complimented us on our enthusiasm and efforts so far, and offered support.

One of the most important outcomes of this meeting was the increased confidence with which K.E.N.G. members and supporters were able to deal with authority figures. We realized

determined to tell the reporter the positive things that were happening in our community, but found she wasn't really interested. Beyond describing us as "a bright glow on the horizon of Kingston", she was more interested in paedophilia and the mythical streets where unmarried mothers were "deliberately" becoming pregnant.

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that politicians, government officials and journalists are people like ourselves with jobs to do, and this has made consequent negotiations with such people much easier. As well as gaining in confidence, we began to see the Community Centre as a real possibility rather than just a dream, and we were even more determined to succeed. All the hard work had paid off. As a result of this public meeting, K.E.N.G. gained widespread local recognition and respect, and the group was strengthened for the tough times that lay ahead.

FROM THEN TO NOW

Late November signalled the end of our formal involvement as community workers with the people of Kingston East. Although in the beginning we had been the initiators and motivators of many of the events in this story, we were no longer central figures. We knew that K.E.N.G. and all its associated groups were self-sufficient and would continue in our absence.

Of course the story of Kingston East did not end with our departure. The following year, 1985, we were replaced by another two Social Work students who were able to help with the writing of submissions for funding through Welfare Services and the Commonwealth Employment Programme. After much lobbying, K.E.N.G. successfully acquired a block of land from the Logan City Council in June 1985. Unfortunately, the house promised by developers was not made available, and the long, hard slog that Sue foreshadowed in our first meeting became a reality. Frustrations and disappointments were many, especially when dealing with bureaucracies. The Justice Department managed to "lose" the constitution three times. In September 1985, eleven months after lodging the application, the group finally became the Kingston East Neighbourhood Group Incorporated.

Activity in the community has expanded. There are now two youth groups, and the playgroups have continued; there is a fruit and vegetable co-operative, coffee mornings each fortnight, and K.E.N.G. membership has increased. K.E.N.G. fundraises by means of the ever-reliable baby shows, craft stalls and lamington drives. Plans are in the final stages for a community newsletter, and for a programme of school holidays activities during each holiday period next year.

K.E.N.G. continues to fight Logan City's negative media image by replying to newspaper and television reports with

positive examples of initiative and self-help. Members' skills in running meetings and dealing with bureaucracies and their knowledge of possible resources within the welfare sector have increased.

While the difficult first year took its toll, at K.E.N.G.'s first Annual General Meeting people were determined to keep moving forward. Their determination was finally rewarded in July 1986 when the house they had been promised was, at long last, placed on their block of land in Meakin Park. With the support of the local alderman and business people, it is now just a matter of time before the Kingston East Neighbourhood Centre is fully operational. Although earlier funding submissions were unsuccessful, the group is now applying for funding to employ a community development officer.

K.E.N.G.'s achievements illustrate how much untapped energy and potential exists in the suburbs of our large cities in Queensland—energy and potential that we release when we work together to improve the lives and meet the needs of people in our communities.

References

1. **Logan City Community Profile Information Paper No. 1.** Logan City Council. (Based on ABS Census 1981).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Benn, Concetta. "A New Development Model in Social Work", in Boas & Crawley (eds.) **Social Work in Australia**, Aust. Int. Press, 1976.
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