

As an independent advocate for people affected by mental illness, I had for some time been visiting Debbie, a single mother who suffers from a very severe case of Schizophrenia, living in a run-down government flat in the suburbs with her son. A mutual friend had told me that she is virtually illiterate, just managing to do her shopping by recognising the items by sight.



Like many mentally ill people, due to both stigma and poverty, Debbie has no friends, and, while providing superficial support, her family doesn't really want to be associated with her, because the stigma similarly attaches to them.

Support from the mental health services sector amounts to a case-hardened government mental health nurse (whose visits are rare unless Debbie requests one), and a friendly enough support worker from a community mental health services organisation, but her weekly visits are of short duration, partly because the two have nothing at all in common, and partly because Debbie is embarrassed that she has nothing to offer her for morning tea.

On my first visit to the family, I was saddened to see the living conditions under which Debbie and her son were living – the walls and ceiling badly in need of repainting, her kitchen equipped only with an ancient fridge, no dining table or chairs on which to have their meals, and a second-hand lounge suite stained from years of use. I was further saddened to hear that her son's expensive bike, one that Debbie had scrimped and saved for, had just been stolen.

The sole decoration on the faded living-dining room wall was a cloth banner with royal blue edging, showing a photo of her son when he was a little kid, with an endearing mullet haircut. In large gold lettering underneath the photo were the words: "The Light of my Life".

When cyclone Yasi was about to hit Townsville, I went around to see her to make sure she was prepared for the emergency, knowing from experience the cyclone was likely to cause a loss of electricity, and perhaps water supply, for up to a week. Not only did she not have the essential battery radio, torch, candles, masking tape (for the widows), and of course a good supply of tinned food, she had only three cans of spaghetti to last her and her son until pension day, five days away.

All the local supermarkets, of course, were out of stock of these items due to panic buying by the residents. However, being an obsessive hoarder of such items myself (due to anxiety about going broke, that misfortune having struck me many times), I was able to come back and give the family pretty much everything they needed to face the cyclone, an event that clearly terrified Debbie, fearing that her precious son might be injured, or worse.

The cyclone did hit, thankfully not with full force, but the sound of the 100km winds shrieking through the town were indeed terrifying. Debbie phoned me at 3.00am during the night it hit, asking me if it was then safe for her to end her vigilant watch in her tiny flat and to go to bed. Fortunately, I had just heard on my radio that, at that very time, the worst was over, and I told the poor thing that she could go to sleep.

When I went around to see them next morning, Debbie and her son came out to my car, and I said cheerfully: "So, you survived." She didn't say anything, just stood there, with her arm protectively around her son's shoulders, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Inexplicably, Debbie didn't call me for about three weeks, and when she did, she said it was to ask me when I wanted her to pay me for the assorted food and other items I had given her for the cyclone. It was clear that she hadn't called me before because she didn't have the money to repay me. Knowing from my own experience in the past, as a disability pensioner, the humiliation of being offered charity, I told her that we could talk about that at a later time. My commitments to other advocacy clients kept me from contacting Debbie for some weeks. She called me one night, crying, saying that she would never be able to repay me, and that she must be "a bad girl" for someone to be so kind to her. I said: "Debbie, I've been doing this stuff for 20 years, and it is very easy for me, because I'm mentally ill myself, and you're one of my mob. Those of us who are a bit stronger, where we can, we try to look after our own."

Weeks later, when a friend and I took Debbie out for our regular picnics with her, she had a bright new confidence, unlike her previous downtrodden look. At the park picnic table, after we had finished eating, she proudly produced the radio and torch I had given her, and, startlingly, took from her purse notes and coins, amounting to about \$80. Incredibly, even though virtually illiterate, she had managed to calculate, to the very cent, the total value of the food and other items I had given her for the cyclone.

I managed to hide my feelings, and avoided accepting this large amount of money from her, saying the coins and small notes would just be a nuisance, but I held up a \$50 dollar note, saying that I'd be presenting it at my favourite bottle shop that day.

As has been my experience many times before, I felt that Debbie's new confidence and high spirits were due to a sense of belonging (in "our mob"), no longer feeling so alone and ashamed of her mental illness that she was unable to face a world that had ridiculed and rejected her.

Debbie's untold story is just one of countless others in this country, stories that are not told because no one wants to hear them.