

# President's Piece



Since my last report the Fellowship has acquired a property on the Gold Coast. In doing this, our primary aim was to acquire headquarters which would accommodate

employees engaged in service provision as well as provide for other Fellowship activities. This is a landmark occasion for the Fellowship as it provides enhanced opportunities for service delivery and ensures a more permanent presence on the Gold Coast.

A little bit of history. For several years the Fellowship has enjoyed a strong representation on the Gold Coast through the provision of state-funded services to people living with mental illness and their families. These services have traditionally received considerable support from our Gold Coast Branch and from individual members residing on the Coast. Carer support groups on the Coast remain very active and committed.

Our entry into the provision of Commonwealth-funded programs enabled considerable expansion of the Fellowship. Significant federal funding was directed to the Fellowship to provide the Personal Helpers and Mentors Program, which has proved very successful in assisting people living with a mental illness who were formerly not receiving any help.

At the same time, the necessary expansion of the Fellowship, in terms of increased staffing, facilities and infrastructure, placed great pressures on existing accommodation and resources. The long-standing Fellowship headquarters at Olive Street in Southport were not large enough to accommodate the additional staff and an enlarged motor vehicle fleet.

In the interests of budgetary restraint, the Fellowship and its employees persevered with the cramped conditions at Olive Street. However this did little to enhance good working relations or organisational efficiency. A number of short term remedies were tested, including the outplacement of selected staff at Federation Hub House. This was a necessary but controversial approach to the problem, and a more permanent solution was clearly needed.

The final chapter came with the discovery that the Olive Street building had developed serious structural problems and was unsafe for even short-term occupancy. The decision to move had virtually been made for us – from that moment a new headquarters became not only desirable but essential. Our landlord at Olive Street was very helpful in the relocation process, but we had to find (at very short notice) suitable and affordable temporary premises until a more permanent solution could be found. Rental premises were quickly located in Bundall, and Gold Coast operations were relocated there. Whilst it was an improvement on Olive Street, it was a temporary measure and the search for a permanent home continued.

This was easier said than done and many long days were spent by Fellowship staff searching for a suitable and affordable location. The Gold Coast, particularly in the major residential and commercial areas, is not renowned for cheap rental, and it was quickly decided that the Southport CBD was out of our reach.

After much dedicated searching, a highly suitable premises was located at Ivan Street, Arundel. It had all the necessary attributes, including ample interior space, ample parking space, proximity to the residential and commercial areas of the Coast, and close to a major shopping centre. The only disadvantage was that it is an industrial unit within a complex of other industrial units. Accordingly, it would require internal modifications to make it suitable for the Fellowship's operations. Nevertheless, this seemed to be it! So a recommendation was considered by the Executive Board to acquire the premises.

It should be realised that the Fellowship is in a very privileged position. Early in its history, its elected Board members displayed considerable wisdom and forward thinking in purchasing the present Brisbane headquarters at Arthur Street in Fortitude Valley. Increasing property values have made this property a valuable asset, although one which has become too small for the efficient occupancy and management of a rapidly increased workforce. The vital difference with Arthur Street is that we actually own it and are not forced to pay market rent.

As with Olive Street, the Arthur Street property is no longer appropriate for

our needs, hence the Executive Board's desire to complete the refurbishment of Fellowship House as a new and highly visible headquarters to serve the needs of the Fellowship and its members for coming generations.

The Executive Board considered a number of options in relation to acquiring the Arundel property and unanimously agreed that the preferred method was to purchase rather than rent. This involved borrowing a substantial sum of money based on the collateral of our current property holdings. After much financial analysis and deliberation, the Executive Board was strongly of the opinion this was the most sensible option to achieve the future viability of the Fellowship.

A lot of detailed and sometimes exasperating negotiations took place, but as I write this report, the Fellowship has been the proud owner of a valuable and potentially very useful premises for approximately one week. I congratulate all involved Executive Board members, management and staff for their part in making this venture possible. This is a major undertaking with major responsibilities, but one which I firmly believe will benefit all members and clients of the Fellowship during the coming years.

Our next task is to complete a fitout of the premises, and this will proceed as a matter of priority now that the purchase has been finalised.

Just a brief update on Fellowship House. We are currently negotiating with our architects regarding the recommencement of work. As I have previously indicated, with a combination of existing accumulated funds, a generous private donation, and an equally generous grant from the Brisbane City Council, we now have sufficient funds to complete both stages of refurbishment. As a result of the time lapse and the injection of significant public funding, it was considered necessary to re-tender for the building work and this is currently in progress. Once finalised, work will recommence on a project which has taken so long but is without doubt worth waiting for.

All the best for the present.

**Ken Meissner**  
**President**