

THE STORY OF THE BENAMBRA
INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

SALLY RICHARDS AND
TIMOTHY WEST

MAY 2014

Getting a Life Family Governed Group 2014



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Foreword

The Benambra Intentional Community project is a story of love, hope and commitment. It's also about how something wonderful can be achieved when government and community take a risk on an idea and work together to achieve it.

My first involvement with the project came in 2004 when I met with Sally Richards to listen to her idea for her son Jackson to live independently in an environment where his rights were acknowledged and respected. Karen Connaughton and Cheryl Pattrick soon joined Sally to create the Getting a Life team — forming a formidable team advocating for a new accommodation arrangement that recognised their three sons' right to not only independent housing but also a home.

I watched from a distance as these three women campaigned, organised and gathered supporters around them. Everywhere they went the momentum for this project grew. One of the strengths of the Getting a Life (now Benambra) Intentional Community project was that it was developed from the communities that knew and loved Jackson, Ben and Dan. The model wasn't imposed from above, which would have required the young men to fit in, but instead it was crafted around their needs first, thereby giving it the very best chance of success.

As I watched this project develop over a number of years, culminating in the official opening in 2013 by the Governor-General of Australia, I have been inspired by the families' work and dedication to secure for their sons what many of us take for granted. I've also been heartened by the ability of the oft criticised bureaucracy to work flexibly to deliver a new way of supporting families and people with a disability. The partnerships made with the nongovernment sector, in particular Hartley Lifecare, have also been essential to the overall success of the project.

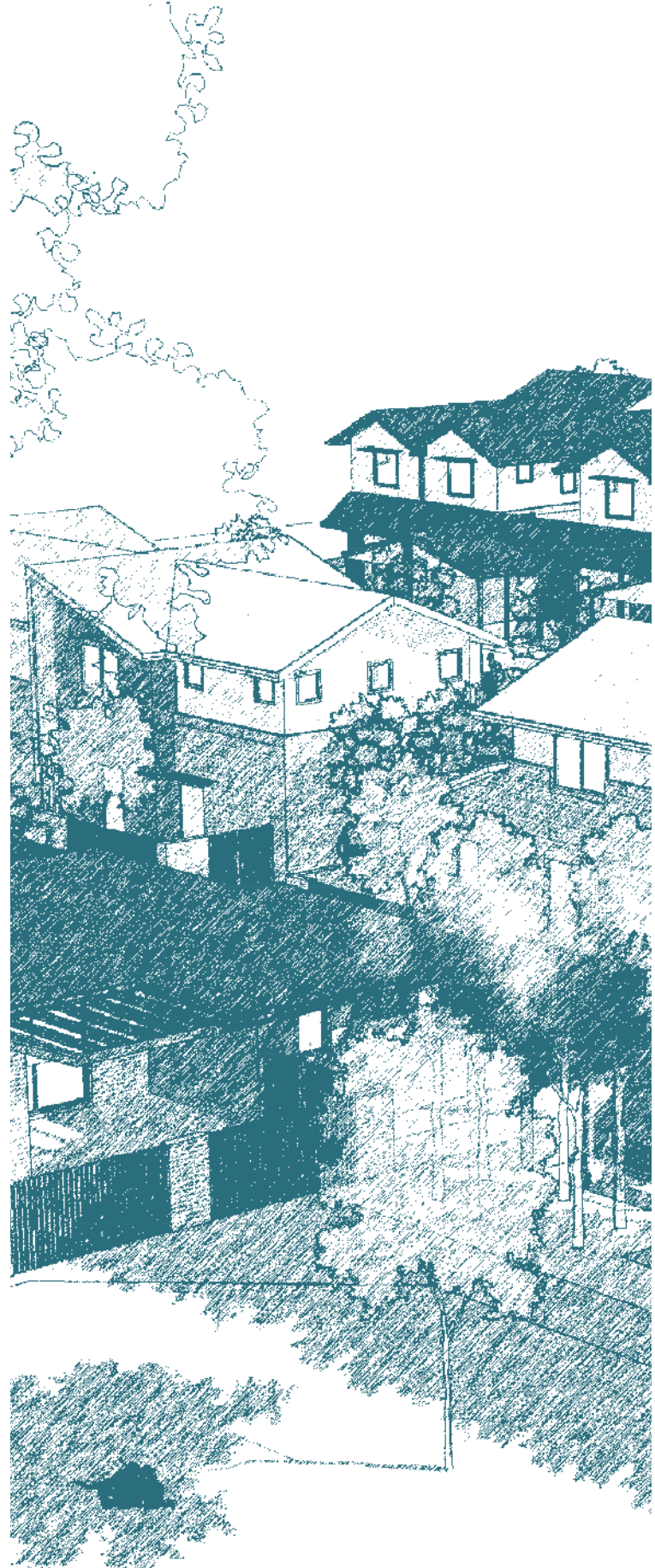
This project stands as a shining example of what can happen when good people work together to create for three young men what sustains us all — a home and a community.

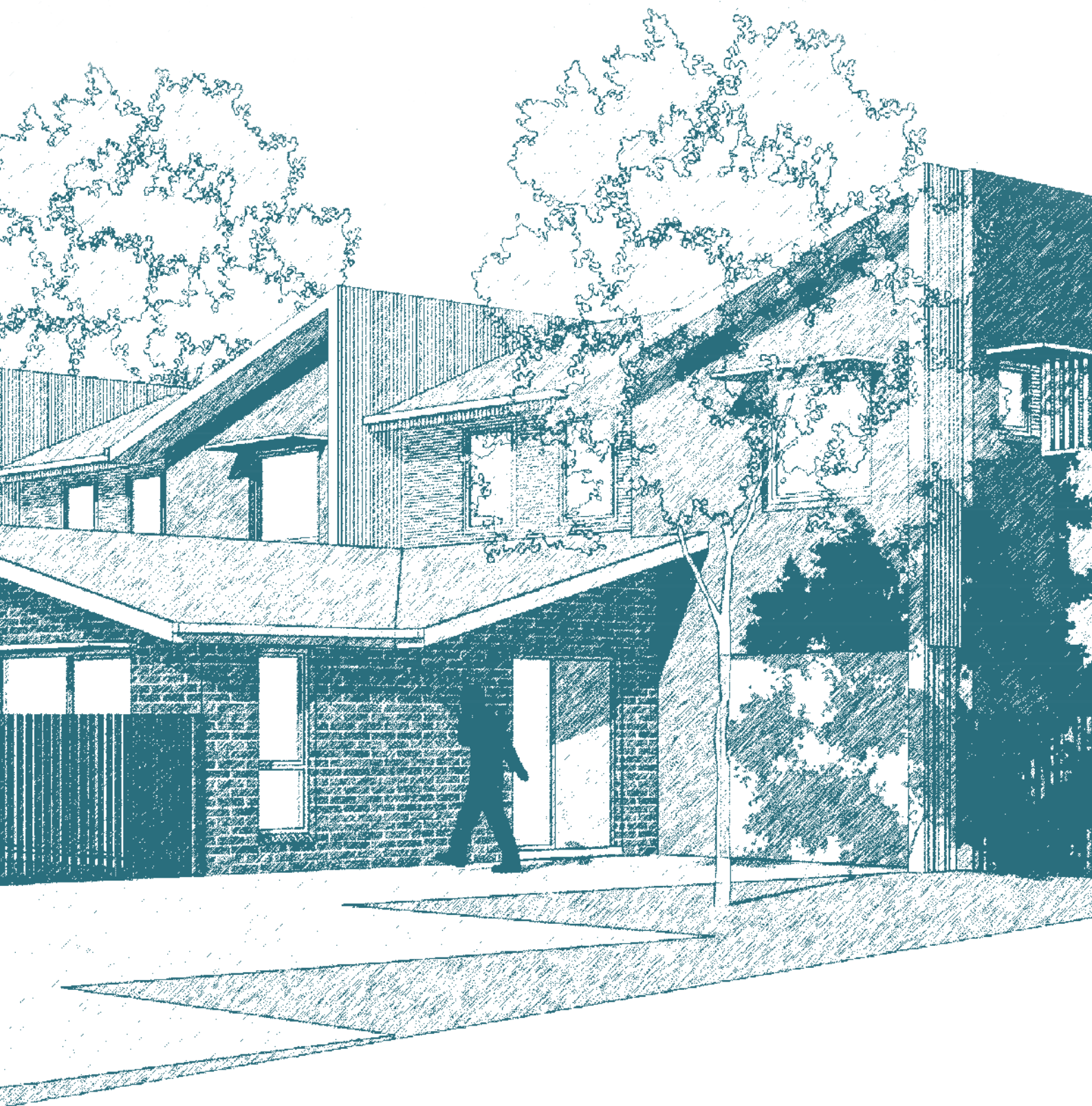


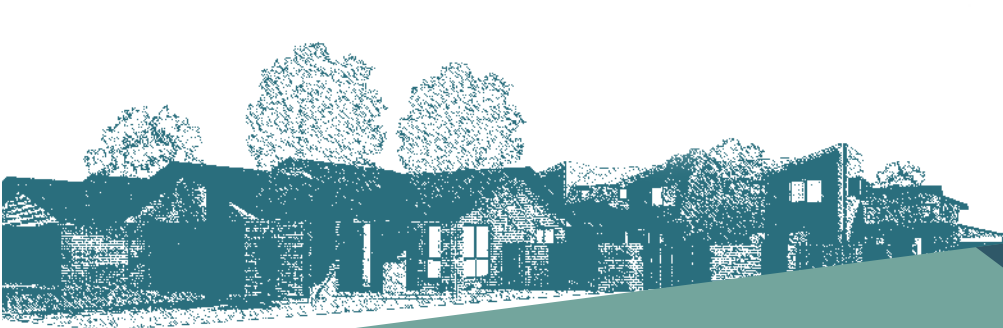
Katy Gallagher MLA

Chief Minister

ACT Legislative Assembly







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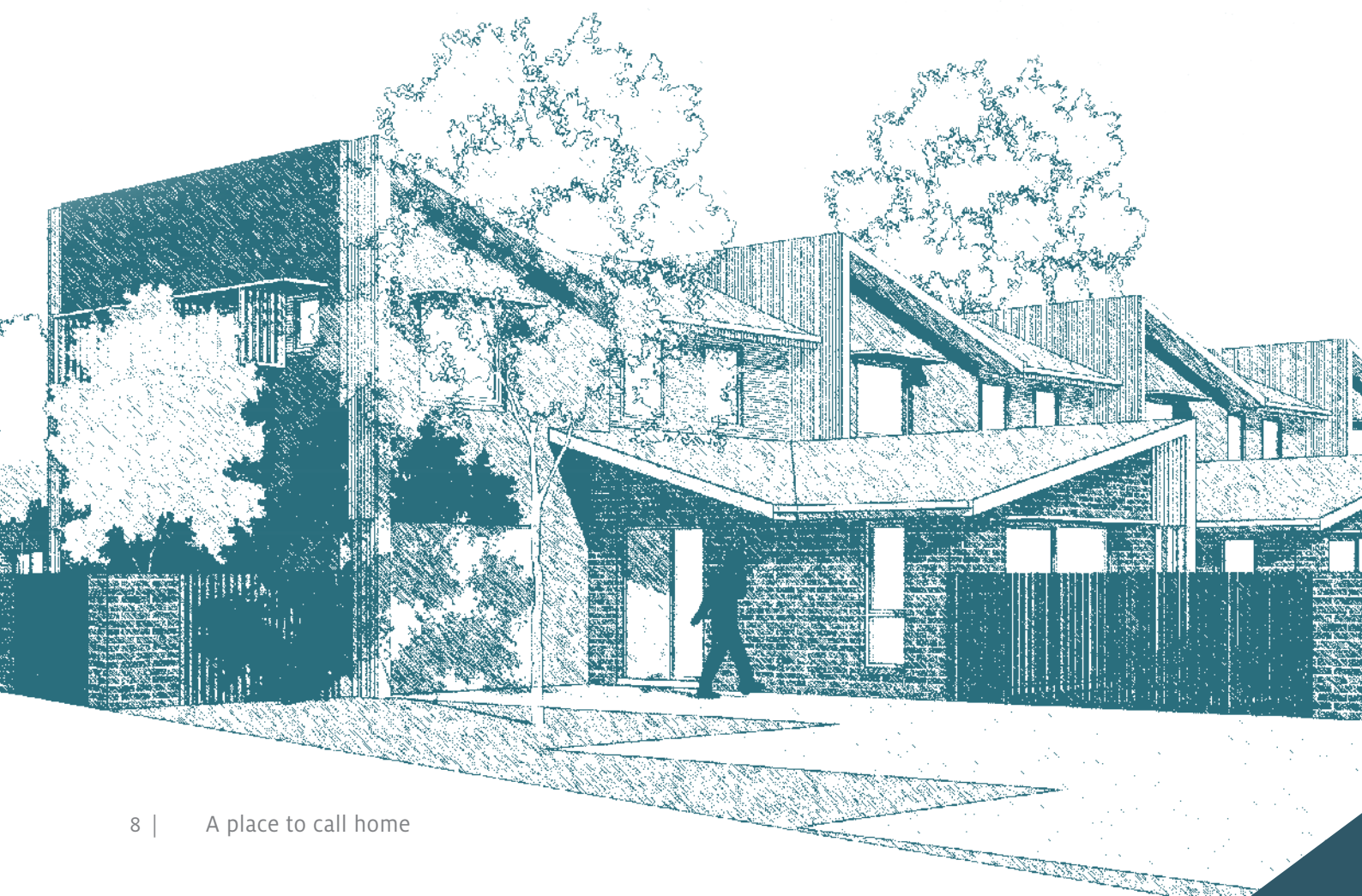
A PLACE TO CALL HOME

WHEN PEOPLE GET A HOME OF THEIR OWN YOU WILL SEE THEM FLOURISH. THE LEVEL OF DISABILITY IS NOT IMPORTANT. WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS THE HOME ARRANGEMENT THAT HELPS PEOPLE THRIVE.

Michael Kendrick, Talks That Matter,
www.belongingmatters.org

Everyone deserves a place to call home — a place where they belong, feel safe and can be themselves. Every parent wants their children to grow up and, when they are ready, to leave home and move into their own home. The Benambra Intentional Community — a unique residential development in Canberra — is that place for Jackson, Dan and Ben, three young Canberra men with a disability.

This paper tells the story of the establishment of the Benambra Intentional Community from its inception to its completion. The story starts with the birth of three babies, each with a disability, moves to an alliance of the mothers of these babies, describes the formation of a family governed project — Getting a Life — and culminates in the building of 25 homes where the three young men live in a friendly supportive community.



Author's note

We have come a long way since the institutionalisation of people with a disability was the norm.

Deinstitutionalisation, with the promise of community homes and community living, was a positive theoretical step but the reality did not match the promise.

Group homes became the solution of choice for policy writers, governments, disability organisations and services. If you had a disability you were expected to live with other people with a disability — but the only thing you might have had in common with them was that you had a disability; you might not know or like them or have any other thing in common.

It is a great leap to treat people with disabilities as people with their own rights, wants, needs and preferences. It is a greater leap to ask them what they want and to place them at the centre of their own lives, their own homes and their own community.

There is nearly always a tension between providing people with adequate safeguards and security of tenure, services and funding and giving people a real life with choice and control. Parents of adult children with a disability worry endlessly about who will care for their child when they no longer can, through either the frailty and disability that comes with ageing or through death. For many parents the fear that their sons and daughters would never find supported accommodation was and still is very real. Many parents in their 70s and 80s are still waiting for this peace of mind.

Jackson, Dan and Ben are lucky in that they were born in the 1980s when policy was changing and people with disabilities were starting to be seen as people first and their disability second; when people with disabilities were seen to have human rights and when the idea of a person-centred life increasingly became best practice. They are also lucky that their mothers were prepared to fight for them to have a life whose choice, quality and contribution more closely resembled that of their brothers.

These three men have rich, varied, contributing lives with layers of safeguards. They have a wonderful organisation and people they have chosen to support them. Most importantly, they have a home they can each truly call their own and each of them is thriving.

SALLY RICHARDS AND TIM WEST

(Mother and brother of Benambra resident, Jackson West)



WHAT'S IN A NAME

In the planning stages of the project, we called our vision 'The Getting a Life Intentional Community'. When the buildings became a reality, they were named 'Benambra' — from a list of names approved by Housing ACT for naming residential complexes.

Benambra is the name of a small town in the Victorian alpine region, not far from Omeo. The name is thought to be of Aboriginal origin, meaning either 'hills with big trees' or the more colourful 'men spearing eels'.

