

Benambra nominated for the 2016 ACT Chief Minister's Inclusion Awards

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Sally entered Benambra in the 2016 ACT Chief Minister's Inclusion Awards. Although we did not win or get a mention, we thought it was worth posting our entry on the website.

Benambra nomination

Benambra Intentional Community* is a community of 11 homes within a residential Housing ACT complex of 25 homes. The intentional community (IC) began as the result of a vision and a strategy of the families of three young men with a disability; Jackson, Dan and Ben.

The beginning was engineered but three years 4 months on the community has a life and a culture of its own. The three young men are at the centre of a warm and diverse community of ordinary Housing ACT tenants. They have relationships with all the people in the IC and some relationships with the broader Benambra community. They have many more relationships outside the complex in the broader community because of the IC members.

The IC members have embraced the philosophy and goals of the vision and have welcomed living alongside Jackson, Dan and Ben. Each of the community members has brought other people into the community and into the young men's lives – they have introduced them to friends, family, extended family, colleagues, neighbours. Each of them is respectful of the young men and treats them with the dignity, friendship and support they deserve.

The young men have much richer lives than they did pre- Benambra. Their lives are richer in the number and quality of relationships, in the number of social events they attend outside of organized ones within the IC, in the warmth of the recognition and friendship extended to them by the IC, by the safeguards afforded by the knowledge that there are many people looking out for their well-being.

Disability awareness has increased through the efforts and extended contacts that each IC member has. Each person who comes to a social event, celebration or gardening day/working bee at Benambra is introduced to the young men, they ask questions about and are informed of the philosophy and goals of the IC.

Over the past 3 and a bit years there would have been more than 150 people who have been welcomed into IC events and who have returned many times to be a peripheral part of the IC. The IC goes for a Relationship Building Weekend Conference each year to strengthen ties, embed further the practices and philosophy of the IC and as a thank-you to everyone involved in Benambra. Support workers are keen to come without payment, IC members bring children, grandchildren, friends to the week-end, the IC members look forward to it and are most appreciative of the opportunity and Jackson, Dan and Ben always enjoy it.

The co-residency model of support also encourages relationship building and inclusion into the immediate and broader community. It is a stated part of the job description and listed in the duty statement.

The IC grows stronger each day and each member says that they are the lucky ones to know Jackson, Dan and Ben and to be a part of such a warm and wonderful community of connection and friendship.

Benambra Intentional Community is the first community of its kind in Australia – the first that combines intent to form a close mutually supportive community with the support model of co-residency. Both of these elements work together to expand the lives of all the IC residents. Each individual within the IC has expressed their joy and relief at living in an inclusive place of connection, friendship and support. Each has expressed their affection and respect for Jackson, Dan and Ben. Each has found their community.

The support model of co-residency purposefully blurs the boundaries between professional support and living in a shared home, and blurs the boundaries between professional support and other friendships and relationships. The co-residents are encouraged to expand Jackson's, Dan's and Ben's lives through inviting friends and family into the home and encouraging and accepting invitations to the homes of these friends and family members.

For Jackson, Dan and Ben it means they have their own life and relationships separate from that of their immediate family. Each of them now has a relationship with their parents that more closely resembles that of their non-disabled siblings; they visit the family home, are invited for dinner, drop in for cups of tea; and invite family to their home for visits, cups of tea or dinner.

The layers of safeguarding around each of the young men and the IC through the encouragement and establishment of diverse relationships, the co-residency model, the other IC members, their families and the professional oversight of the support arrangements by Hartley Lifecare means that their lives have the greatest chance of being safe, interesting, involved and respected. They are also valued for contributing to the rich and diverse life that is the IC environment.

Everyone in the IC is a winner. Everyone benefits and everyone acknowledges that they benefit. This is a community where inclusion of all is the norm, where disability is seen as another facet of a personality and of being human, where people are expected and want to be good neighbours to others, to include them in life, to invite them to be a part of their lives, to support and value them for who they are and their intrinsic values of humanness.

There is a [photo book which documents the first 2 years of community life at Benambra](#). There are many other photos and news items on the website all of which give weight to the inclusive nature of the community. Scroll down the first page on the website to see a list of presentations by Sally and Karen and to see the interest generated by the community. Sally has been interviewed by additional universities in 2016 including the Centre for Disability Studies, Sydney University and others.

** An Intentional Community is a planned residential community designed from the start to have a high degree of social cohesion and teamwork. Benambra Intentional Community was created with the specific purpose of including three men with a disability.*

What the Intentional Community People say

"I first came in contact with the Benambra community last year as a musician to play at a wedding celebration and at their Christmas function. What struck me most was the joy that these people shared among themselves. But it was a special kind of joy, because at the centre of it all were these three young men who each have a disability.

I saw in the faces of Jackson, Danny and Ben a real sense that they were deeply loved and valued by people who were not family members.

The commitment of Sally, Karen, the support workers and other team members to this community has created something that is unique in that everyone benefits from what Benambra stands for.

I was so impressed by what I saw that I have now joined and live in the community myself. I honour these people and I honour what they are doing, and I trust that they will continue to be supported in the wider community for the benefit and good of all."

– Reverend Dr V Z (IC resident)

"I like living at Benambra because I have good friends and I can help people in the community. I like having my own home and I enjoy the community functions and using my car to take people out."

– BP (IC resident)

"Working at Benambra is like champagne —FULL OF BUBBLES AND POP! I have worked here for 3 years and this community has given me a place to belong; a place to live while at the same time being in a caring role. It is a place for all community members to share their lives with other like-minded and caring people. I LOVE LOVE LOVE IT."

– MG (support worker)

"When I first heard about the IC I thought what a great idea for Jackson, Dan and Benny to branch out on their own and what an opportunity for me to give a little something back. What I've discovered is this community has not only been a chance to give but to stretch my social boundaries and improve my quality of life and health. I am both honoured and grateful to be part of this wonderful community and call these three remarkable young men my friends. I highly recommend others to come join in."

– V M (IC resident)

"I love living in Benambra with my friends. Everyone is very kind and helps me. They have time to talk and listen to me and play games and have BBQs with me. I feel very happy to live here. I like living here because of all the fun we have together. I like everyone."

– D C (IC resident)

"What I enjoy about the community is the diversity of the group; we all have something to share and something to learn from each other."

– D B (IC resident)

“Being a part of Benambra gives me a sense of belonging that I have not had since I was young. Over time we have become a community in more than just name, with Jackson, Daniel and Ben as the cornerstones. We share good times and bad and know that in a time of need we have friends indeed. I cannot imagine living anywhere else.”

– C (IC resident)

“The community is very friendly and works together for a great future.”

– A R (IC member and co-resident)

“This community is amazing. As a regular attendee of Benambra events I feel extremely emotional when I observe the love and support they show each other but in particular Jackson, Daniel and Ben. The community has offered an enormous amount of practical (e.g. developing a fire plan that ensures each of the residents has at least one buddy to assist them at times of emergency) and emotional (e.g. ensuring birthdays are formally recognised and celebrated) support to the three men. The guys are happy, safe and supported thanks to the Benambra IC residents in their lives. It is a strong example of the value of inclusion and being embedded within a community for people with a disability. If more communities embraced this ideal the world would be so much richer.”

– K C (parent of IC resident)

BENAMBRA

*A place insulated from apathy
but not isolated from society,
where people of heartfelt mind
purposefully build an interconnected web of relationships with their
neighbors to support, include and share with each other.
Where no one is forgotten in the dark and celebratory journeys of
togetherness are provided to all who give to themselves and others.
A window to the past when the clichés of caring were common and
residents had a respectful responsibility for each other.
A door to the future when local becomes global,
micro becomes macro
and everyone has a respectful responsibility for everything.
A dream to build in security, an expanding enrichment of meaningful
lives in Benambra Intentional Community.*

– SC (IC support worker)

“Any time spent at Benambra is enlightening and a great example of what happens when a caring, cooperative and selfless group of people are brought together.”

– S C (IC resident)

“I have been living at Benambra since the first day and I love it. I am surrounded by people who care about me, acknowledge me, talk to me, take me out, offer friendship and assistance. I see my family often but at Benambra I have my own home, my own community, my own housemate and my own friends. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.”

– J W (IC resident – written by his mother)

“My association with Benambra started two years ago when my son began working as a support worker for a couple of residents. During this time I have attended many Benambra social gatherings both on and off site and have always come away feeling joyful and pleased to have become involved. I know that my son’s work with Benambra residents has inspired him to be more mindful of the contribution that people living with disability can make to the broader ACT community and he values his time at Benambra as a wonderful opportunity. What most impresses me about the community is the way in which all residents, as well as associated family and friends, have developed a strong sense of belonging. Within this close-knit extended network there exists a generous culture of giving, where everyone is willing to learn from others and embraces the idea of appreciating one another’s strengths. Shared meals are an integral part of any Benambra social gathering, and whether the theme is Easter or Halloween or Christmas, the food and the experiences are always amazing and executed with a great sense of fun and good humour.”

– K H (friend of Benambra)

“This is an absolutely amazing community full of supportive people, each of the many events Benambra holds has helped make this the friendliest street I’ve ever had the privilege of living on.”

– C B (IC member and co-resident)

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