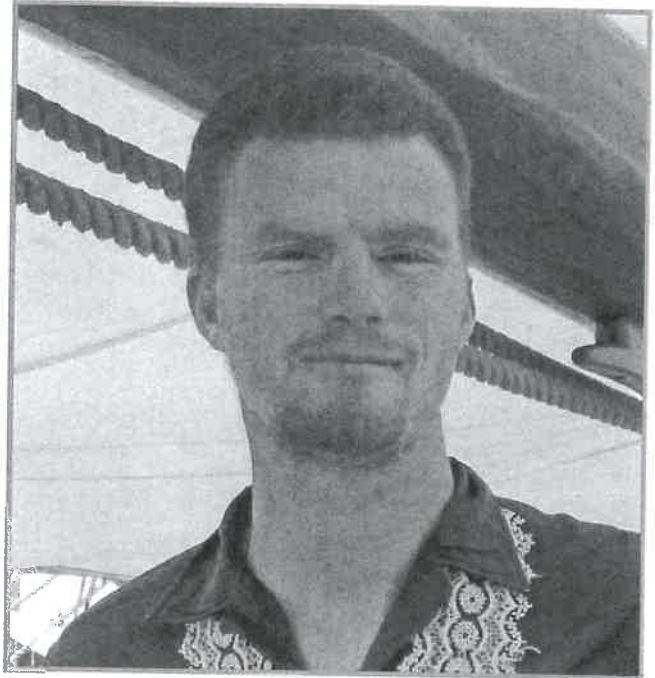


John's life story

By John Monson

Community Living Program Constituent



Accessible summary:

- Community Living Program (CLP) works with adults with a learning difficulty who live on the north side of Brisbane.
- CLP has been working with one of the constituents, John Monson for over 10 years.
- Two years ago, John came up with the idea of writing his life story about his journey of alcohol addiction. In his story, John will share with us some of his experiences with the help of his social worker, Heidi Cheng.
- John hopes this story will provide insight to human service workers on how to be more responsive to this group of people.
- John would love to know what you think about his story. To contact us, you can either call Heidi on (07) 3266 5633 or email hcheng@communityliving.org.au

My early years

The best way to start is with my parents. I was born in Sydney in the late 70s. Basically both of my parents were alcoholics. They drank a lot and could not look after me so I went into care when I was nine. I was moved from place to place until I turned

eighteen. On my eighteenth birthday, I did not know what to do with myself because there was no plan in place from Child Safety. They did not tell me what I should do next, and I had no one in my life. I pretty much started drinking once I turned eighteen and technically speaking, I have not stopped since.

On pension weeks, I think it was about four days that I was pretty much under the weather. I would buy a couple of cartons of VBs and then go to a hotel to get cheap drinks because I knew the management there. I had nothing to do with my time and so I was seeking people to talk to. I did not think I made a single friend the whole time but I sort of got over that fairly quickly.

A few days after I blew all my money, I started feeling sore and the muscles were aching. I felt sorry for myself for feeling sore. I think that's called a withdrawal syndrome. Then when I sobered up, my body craved for more alcohol and normally it was pension week again.

It was pretty depressing, I was unemployed and I did not know what to do with my time. I have never had suicidal thoughts, as such. Having said that, there had been times when I wanted to kill myself, I would like to die. I was going to drink myself to death.

Becoming a constituent of CLP

I have known Community Living Program (CLP) since I was sixteen. I came to a few functions CLP held, but I did not join up until I was twenty-one.

I was living in Albion by myself and got bored so I started playing this stupid game which I set fire out of the milk cartons in the kitchen sink. It did not actually catch fire because I put it out before the place got burnt down. Then one day my former

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foster father dropped by when I was playing this game. He thought I was not doing so well and so he contacted CLP to see if they would take me on.

Things did not start to change once I joined CLP. I was still drinking really heavily.

It took a couple years after being with CLP that I realized they could actually help me. The thing is, if I was not ready and people kept telling me what to do, I just would not do it! I remembered my first worker, Phil, would not work with me a couple of times because I was drunk. That did not bother me because I was not ready to make any change.

Regain control of my life

The idea of doing something about my drinking started when I was feeling sorry for myself one night when I had a bit too much to drink. I thought, "Hang on, I want to stop drinking so much". I knew for a fact that if I could have all my money, I would spend it all on alcohol. It does not do anything good to my liver in the long term.

It was my decision to go on Public Trustee. Morrie (CLP coordinator) brought up this idea because CLP was very concerned about my drinking. Originally I said no because I did not want to lose control of my money. But then I thought to myself, "I can actually save money if I go to Public Trustee. They can help me to save up for things that I have not been able to." I was in a very bad state and I knew it was either my choice or CLP was going to put me on Public Trustee. Therefore, I decided to jump before I got pushed.

In 2009, I managed to save up enough money to go on a two weeks holiday. I got onto the Indian Pacific train in Sydney and travelled across to Perth. It was an amazing trip and I had a great time.

I have been with Public Trustee for seven years now. Looking back, I think it was a good decision to make.

Team work

When I was desperate for alcohol, I used to pawn my stuff like my TV and stereo system. I remember once I sold my TV for \$80 and I spent it at the pub. I never bought it back. Then I decided to make an agreement with my worker, we went to the pawn broker to ask them not to serve me. I went back myself and tried to cancel once. And they would not do it, it did not feel

good at that time but in retrospect, I was glad they stood their ground.

Having an agreement with CLP does not mean I am bullet proof. I still have my ups and downs. When I get money and I actually want to drink, there is no way I can stop myself from drinking. This is the problem I am going to have for the rest of my life.

Sometimes I'll fight it and fight it and get less money and stuff like that, and then when I hang out with my friends, I'll ask for more money so I can buy more alcohol.

The difficulty about my addiction is, once I start drinking, I cannot stop. The only way I can stop myself from drinking too much is to limit the damage. That is why I ask CLP to be tough on me and stay firm. I want to hold myself accountable so I make agreements with CLP. I ask CLP not to give me any money if I have been drinking. The agreement details how I want to budget my money and the support I want from CLP every fortnight. It is signed by both myself and CLP.

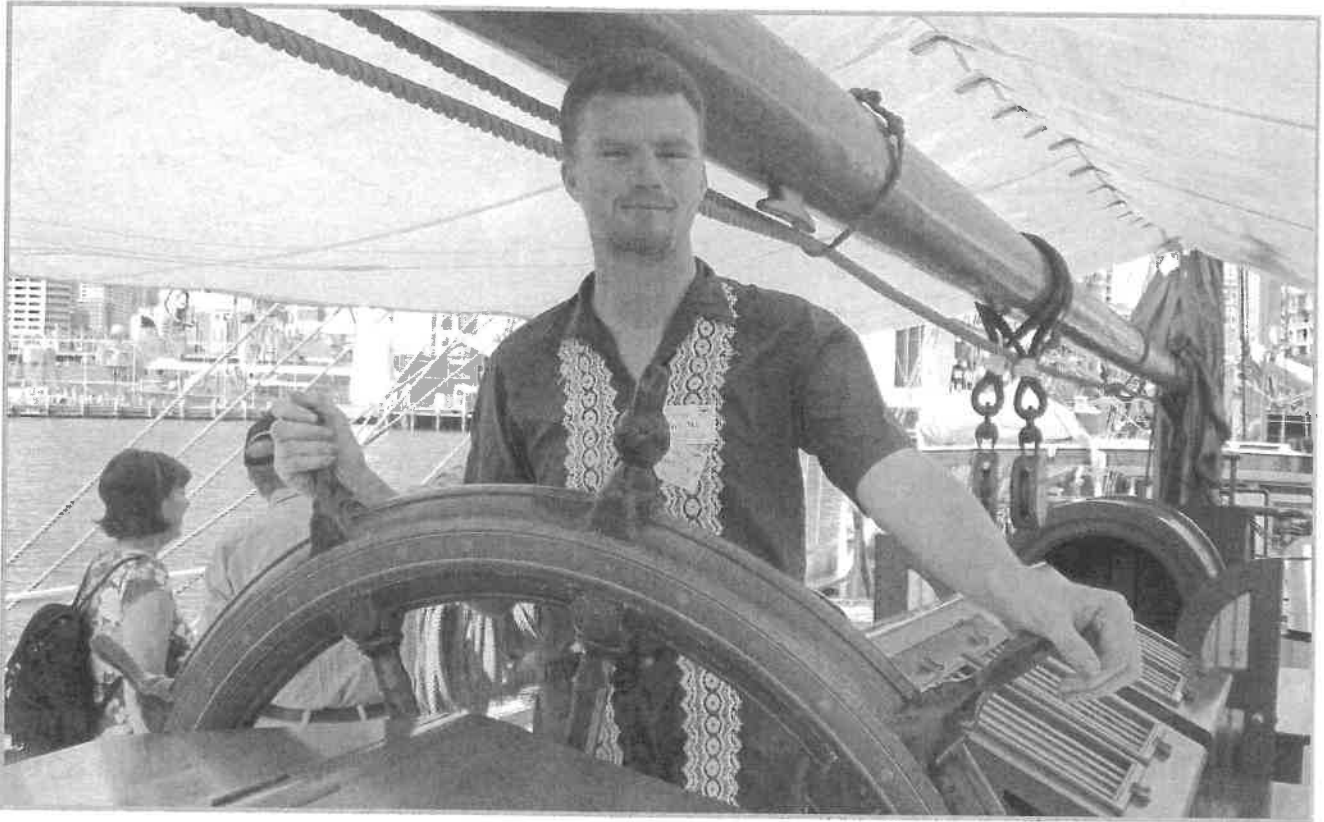
How the agreement works

On pension day, I have this "annoying little person", known as my worker, who goes to Coles with me and says, "Put money on your grocery card, put money on grocery card". It was in fact my idea to ask the worker to go to the shop with me because I know I would not buy any grocery if I was by myself. All the money will be spent on alcohol!

There are a number of gift cards you can get from Coles. However, there is only one card which you can just spend on grocery and nothing else. I tricked my worker one time when I said to her, "This card looks fancy, let's put money on this one." The part I did not tell her was, I could use that card at Liquorland, which I did end up spending most of the money on grog.

When the alcohol talks to me, I will do anything and everything to get alcohol. One of the tactics is to scam my worker. I make up excuses to get hold of my money.

There was one time when I tried to scam my worker by asking her to give me the money that meant to go towards my cleaner's wage. I remembered that day I really wanted to drink. I asked my worker and she said no, and she told my cleaner about my sneaky plan! My cleaner said no, unless I did the cleaning myself! They



knew I would not go too far on this one because I hate chores! I should have thought a bit far ahead!

There was another time when I drank four nights straight and I could not stop so on Friday, I went down to CLP blind drunk, trying to get some money that I had put aside earlier that week. I asked my worker and she said no and so did Sue, the team leader. She said she would not give me any beer or money either. I was stuck. Then I decided to go above Sue to Morrie, the coordinator. He said no and gave me a lift home. I was a bit annoyed at the time but when I sobered up, I thought it was a good idea. The next week, I went down to CLP and spoke to Morrie, asked for CLP's support to tighten up my drinking plan because I was feeling sorry for myself.

Working at the Nundah Co-op

Before I became a constituent of CLP, I worked as a trolley boy for six months. It was an ok job until I got fired. I probably wanted a job, but I drank my wage so I thought to myself, "Why bother getting a job anyway?"

Then one day Dave Langdon, who was the first coordinator of the Nundah Community Enterprise Cooperative (NCEC), wanted to give me a job as a park maintenance worker. He kept on approaching me for two years before I took up his offer. It was perfect timing because I needed a fridge and the Coop happened to have a second hand one so I asked Dave if I could

have it. I was planning to pay the coop back but then I decided to work the debt off because I knew I was going to spend the money on beer anyway. I sort of killed two birds with one stone because I ended up with a fridge and a job!

I remembered one of my first shifts was cleaning the Nundah village. I was really hung over on this particular day. This was long before going under public trustee. I actually stopped working and went to the pub! I left all the gear at the shed and walked up to the pub but I was not allowed in. The manager thought I was too drunk! I nearly got fired from the village shift. I then had a couple of months off before going back to the coop again. I am now doing one shift at the Espresso Train Cafe making sandwiches and two shifts cleaning up Nundah Village. I have been with the coop for nine years and I really enjoy it.

My future

I think I will still need ongoing support from CLP because I know for a fact if I can have access to alcohol, I will just drink them all.

I would also like to keep writing books. I am an author and I go to the Literacy group every Friday to write books. Me and my literacy tutor will work for an hour each week. I tell him my ideas and he helps me write them down. I have published three books. They are "Predicting a War", "Policing Nundah" and "Crime doesn't pay". The forth one is about aliens invading the

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earth and the fifth one is about modern piracy. I look forward to keep publishing books because I have too many ideas!

I would also like to go on another train trip. I am thinking to get onto the Ghan and travel from Adelaide to Darwin. I want to visit the Northern Territories. I want to see Uluru.

Why do I want to share my story?

I want to tell my story because it may help train better social workers about people who have problems with alcohol abuse.

I reckon people who do have problems with alcohol and substance abuse, part of their problems is they are addicted to it. So they will cheat, scam or steal to get a hand of it.

Being out right tough does not work, like people will just get up and say, "Screw you, I am out of here." But be firm and make them realize if they got a problem, the help is out there. As a worker, do not even try to be a dictator. It is team work like I have got an idea so I am going to bounce that off with my worker and see if that works or not. This is much better than being told what to do because it will not go too far. ☺