

**The Wheeler Centre, 176 Little Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.**

Thursday 14 February

**SERIES: IDEAS FOR MELBOURNE: ENDING HOMELESSNESS**

Tonight, 20,000 Victorians are homeless. How do we get people off the streets and into shelter? Should we give money – and if so, to individuals or organisations? Is homelessness inevitable – or can we make changes to end it once and for all?

Chairperson: **Alan Attwood**, Founder? & Editor of *The Big Issue*

**Heather Holst**: Manager / Spokesperson of *Homeground*

**Suzy Freeman-Greene**: Journalist for *The Age*

**Spike Chiappalone**: Advocate for homeless persons on Council to Homeless Persons (CHP).

**Heather**: Not prepared to tolerate homelessness.

It is a huge state and federal problem - change will only be brought about by the voting public on such things as “residential policies” that currently support developers and homeowners and their quick turnover of money on highly priced property.

**Spike**: For 20 years as a former heroin user, who contracted Hep.C, he was quite happy to be homeless, couch surfing at mate’s places, however as he got older it was not “cool” any longer and he became demoralised living in Shelters – it was a roof, yes, but not a home and he felt very vulnerable. Spike said he often begged aggressively to confront people with the issue!

**Suzie**: As a social journalist has been doing a survey on Begging, pondering on why we are emotionally disposed to give to some beggars and not others. 90% of beggars are homeless and some of the ploys used can really get under people’s skins.

The Property Market boom is a widely reported News item, which says something of our society's values, as there is no equity while prices remain high as it becomes impossible for a poorer section of society to buy a house.

**Heather:** Property Market in inner city is very difficult. In earlier times, people shared their houses – where has kindness gone?

**Suzie:** stated that in her research she saw many instances of kindness but the media rarely reports this and prefers reporting more conflict situations.

**Heather:** In answer to a question on why politicians don't keep their pre-election promises, she stated that Kevin Rudd was very sympathetic and did put money into concrete expenditure into housing and welfare.

**Spike:** as a representative of CHP his self-esteem has grown and he is a mentor to others. He said that Governments need to build homes – not community places that check you in and out, which ends up making you become institutionalised!

**Heather:** said that what is needed is the co-operation of benefactors to build places, e.g. Daniel Grollo and Homeground buildings. Wintringham for the over 50s is one such place that proves that somewhere safe to stay is a remarkable impetus to people.

**Suzie:** Media? Politicians need to take the lead and the journalists will follow. Need new fresh ways into capturing the public interest.

**Alan:** noted that the capturing of the public interest was why *The Big Issue* came into being and related a story where it is thought wrongly that the homeless always sell *The Big Issue*. He noted how the self-esteem of many people was boosted by selling the magazine – and many enjoyed the contact with the general public and their regular patrons.

**Spike:** reiterated the need for a home of one's own where one could feel safe and secure – also need to experience security of tenure.

All sorts of people can be homeless for all sorts of reasons. People can moderate behavior in varying situations – e.g. by accepting food must appear grateful!

**Heather:** Publicity - Is homelessness always there or a relatively new thing?

She studied history and noted how Frederick Oswald Barnett in the 1930s managed to get 20 days of journalism? – Photos in Herald, during a campaign to get slum clearance in Melbourne's inner suburbs, which led to the first social housing estates in the mid 50s. (He managed to get politicians to actually visit the slums in many areas of inner Melbourne).

**Suzie:** Do we live in a divided society? Is there a whole section of the city that doesn't see any evidence of poverty? She said *The Age* does print some articles on the inequity of housing.

**Spike:** Housing is a human right not a privilege!

**Alan:** In response to question on resentment in the poor to those of more affluence he stated that in the 10 years that he has been editor of *The Big Issue* he has not seen evidence of resentment in his distributors.

**Heather:** People with less can be more generous!

**Suzie:** who writes passionate articles on social issues says that beggars can be fatalistic and YES, benefits can be cut off if you are homeless and don't comply with Centrelink conditions.

## QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

1. Home-Ownership – is Australia at a time when H/O is at an end?

Social Housing - e.g. in Holland it is at 35% - in Victoria it is 3.5%.

2. Mental Problems and Homelessness?

Many Homeless people suffer from mental problems but studies show that many had their first attack when they became homeless.

It doesn't always correlate – there may be a pre-disposition toward mental problems but does the situation exacerbate it?

There is a gradual build-up of recognition that Homeless people with mental problems need a home!

**Spike** felt that there was a need for consumer users in all advocacy groups dealing with Homelessness / Health / Mental Health / Drugs / Gambling.

Help and awareness is important – as advocates talk to politicians, particularly in an election year.

### 3. Developers and vacant property?

There should be legislation against developers holding onto vacant property for years, to get a better price.

Longer tenure in social? Housing would be better!

### 4. Any form of shelter is better than none!

This is a fallacy as many shelter situations are not good and people can be caught in insecure and vulnerable circumstances.

**Heather:** Rooming House Strategy has only changed about 10% of the situation!

Lorraine Siska