

# **BEGINNINGS: NEW WORKERS, NEW SUBURBS, NEW EVERYTHING**

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Kris Saunders is a social worker with Pregnancy Help, Brisbane, and Teresa Scott is a social worker with the Community Support Program, Psychiatric Services, Brisbane.

In the final year of their Social Work course, Kris and Teresa worked together in Kingston, on the outskirts of Brisbane. Kris and Teresa share an interest in community development theory and practice.

## CONTEXT

Kingston is a suburb on the southern outskirts of Brisbane. Officially, it is in the new city of Logan, which came into existence in 1978. Logan has since become the fastest growing city in Australia and is now the third largest city in Queensland. Consequently it suffers the growing pains that such rapid development brings. Many families are migrants, both from overseas and interstate, with no extended family support, which has led to increased demands on welfare services. The rapid growth in population and the slow response by bureaucracies to growing needs has resulted in a situation where many areas, particularly those in Central Logan (that is Woodridge, Kingston, Marsden and Loganlea) are grossly under-resourced.

Logan has an atypical age structure, characterised by a heavy bias towards youth (36.6% of the population under the age of 15 years).<sup>1</sup> Such a population profile brings with it particular demands on all health, education and welfare services, and on statutory agencies such as the police and children's services. There is a large percentage of the population (28.6%) in the 25 – 39 years age group, which is the main child-bearing age group.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a large Housing Commission development has attracted many poor and disadvantaged families. In 1981, 13% of the housing in Central Logan was owned by Housing Commission, compared to 3.7% for the wider Brisbane area.<sup>3</sup> Many of these households are headed by single parents, mainly women.

Many of the resources that do exist – welfare agencies, shops, doctors, lawyers, public halls – are centrally located within the main business district and there is little public transport to make them accessible to people without cars. In 1981, income levels showed a concentration of middle to low income earners in Logan City, with 27.1% earning between \$1,000 and \$10,000 per annum.<sup>4</sup> There are a large number of people on Unemployment, Sickness, Widows, Deserted Wives or Supporting Parent's benefits. The Woodridge office of the Department of Social Security has one of the biggest monthly payouts in Queensland.

We became involved in Kingston in July 1984 through our contact with Mick Devlin and Pat Murray, two Christian Brothers who were working and living in the area. Much of their work was based on the results of a family needs survey which was conducted through a local Catholic primary school in 1982/1983. In this survey the three most commonly expressed concerns were lack of income security, inadequate counselling and support for family members, and the need for inexpensive accessible childminding and recreational facilities. In the previous eighteen months, Mick and Pat had chosen to work with at risk youth and their families in Logan City, particularly those who were coming in contact with the juvenile justice system. They saw possibilities for further work with local families, perhaps with single parent families living in the Housing Commission areas. They suggested that we undertake this work as part of our final community work placement.

The Brothers house backed on to one of the Housing Commission areas in the eastern part of Kingston. Using their house as a base, we spent the next four and a half months working with the people who

lived within this area. While we both lived in Logan City, we were not living in the exact area in which we chose to work. We did not know the residents of Kingston (apart from the Brothers) and had now been invited in by them. We were initially tentative and uncertain about what we could do in the community. However, as we began to meet people, to share ideas and work together at putting them into practice, we began to feel as much a part of the community as the people who lived there. So although this story begins as a record of our own personal experiences, it becomes the story of a community of people working together.

From the very earliest days, we had ideas about things we would like to see happen. Our primary aim was to put people in contact with each other, so that they could become aware of common experiences and needs. We hoped that, from the relationships formed, people would become aware of a potential for change. We believed that people needed to have a sense of control over what happened in their lives. We found this most usefully expressed in the well-known analysis of Connie Benn.<sup>5</sup> We interpreted this analysis in terms of four basic needs:

- People's need to actively participate in the relationships they have with others;
- People's need to have appropriate and accurate information;
- People's need to make decision that affect their lives, and
- People's need to exercise control over sufficient resources (especially money and energy).

This analysis helped us understand the meaning of poverty and some of its important manifestations, and we kept it at the back of our minds in all our work.

