

THE COMMUNITY
TEACUP GARDEN
LIBRARY

MADE BY THE RESIDENTS
OF CHARLES O'NEILL
HOSTEL

In 2017, Charles O'Neill Hostel (CON) became home to a 10 bed psychiatric transition unit, in partnership with NSW Health. (The MHACPI Unit)

CON is situated in suburban Newcastle. The building and surrounds are small. There is very little space for residents to have a garden. I wanted to create an interactive green space that was accessible to both the MHACPI Unit residents as well as those in the hostel.

Using the idea that we can grow greenery and food in unused space, we created a mobile, interactive garden library for residents to borrow plants that they liked. Non residents can purchase plots, which helps to fund the library when plots are not returned.

The plots were made from teacups or other recycled vessels and succulents that we root from cuttings in our local community. Most of the plots were donated by staff and visitors, the rest were purchased.

Initially, we held a working bee, where MHACPI residents made a number of plots to start the project. Residents in the hostel also make plots during their 1:1 programs. The MHACPI Unit now have regular working bees to replace borrowed or sold plots.

The Community Teacup Gardens are located in the sunny window sills near our reception. We host about 30 plots at any given time. There are water sprayers left on the railings at the gardens so that people can tend to them when they want to. Residents of the MHACPI Unit are supported to care for the gardens daily.

There have been many positive outcomes for residents since we implemented the Community Teacup Gardens.

As the plots are small and easy to move, residents can participate in working bees, where ever they are in the facility. They can also place a plot that they would like to care for, where ever they want. They can sit a plot or two in their space at the dining table or in their bedrooms. They can care for the garden when ever they wish to and MHACPI residents have a place to go to have time out from the unit. Watering the garden is very social for residents in the MHACPI Unit as they talk to external staff and residents who are waiting outside the clinic or reception.

We have many other garden spaces at CON now, however non are as popular at the Community Teacup Gardens. I think this is a reflection of how flexible the program has been.

This project has influenced my practice by showing me that not all people engage with their environments in the same way. While a group program might suit some people, it will not suit everyone. Some people do not like group programs at all. This project gave us a 1:1 activity to offer residents that was clear and strong. It was more than just dropping in and having a chat. I could actually walk up to some one and ask them "Would You like to make a garden with me today?"

We have since started offering more of our programs to residents as 1:1, opposed to expecting them to join into a group. Being a unique facility, that specialises in looking after people with mental health issues or homelessness, we need to think outside the box when we look for engagement. We have called our 1:1 program, simply "Where Ever You Are" and it is great.