

FLIP SIDE

The Association of Participating Service Users



**Back
to
school?**

INSIDE

Articles and Stories:

Editorial

So much to learn

A new meaning

A journey that changed our lives

Getting there

How did I get here? How could this happen to me...

My road to helping myself and helping others

What's up at APSU: Strategic Planning Day

Poetry:

To my addiction

Art:

Front cover: Collingwood street art

Back cover: *Digs me, digs me not* by John La Mude

All other illustrations are photographs of street art around Melbourne taken by APSU.

Flipside No.37 Winter 2014
Editing and layout: Edita
Proofreader: Edita

Contents: Thanks to those who contributed artwork/photos and to all those who contributed articles, stories and poetry.

DISCLAIMER:

The views and opinions expressed within Flipside do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of APSU.

If you have any original articles, poems or artwork that you would like to see in the Flipside you may submit them to:

apsu@sharc.org.au or

APSU

140 Grange Road Carnegie VIC 3163

phone: (03) 9573 1776

ABN: 18052525948

EDITORIAL

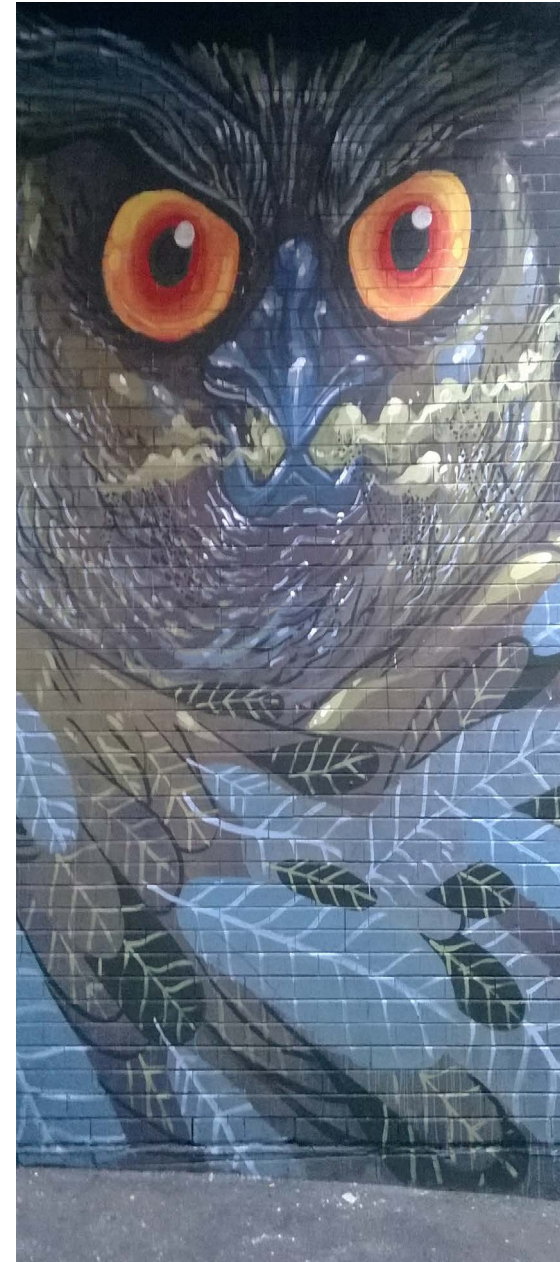
Going back to school can be overwhelming after a long period of addiction. All sorts of scary thoughts go through one's head: Is my brain still good? Am I capable of reading school texts again? Can I really learn something new? Even just the thought of sitting in a classroom for hours at a time is scary.

Our Peer Helper Training was a helpful tool for those that wanted to test the waters before making the final decision about enrolling in some form of formal education. At this time we still do not know if APSU will be able to deliver this training again, but we are doing everything to find a way.

But in the meantime we have gathered the stories from some of those that did go back to school. At first it was overwhelming for them too. But they made it. For many this meant a significant life improvement. Some are still dealing with their past, but receiving an official certificate or diploma proved that they can do more than they ever thought.

Because our brain is adaptable; it can learn, forget and relearn. It is not necessarily an easy process, but it becomes easier with the time. Most of all, the process of learning unfolds a bigger learning about one's self and helps face the future with confidence.

We thank our contributors and hope you will enjoy reading their stories.



So much to learn

I remember the moment when I was convinced that I had truly destroyed my brain. I was a few days into a detox, and I'd been given a book about recovery which I was told to read. One evening I sat in my bed and opened it, hoping to find some shred of hope to grasp onto. At that point, I had lost everything that had any significance to me, the world seemed like an alien place which I had little desire to inhabit, and my mind and body plagued me with an incessant screaming for just one more drug. The words were a blur all over the page. My eyes kept tracing the same line, over and over, trying to make some sense of it. I kept straining to move to the next line, to comprehend the sentence, but to no avail. I could not read. A sudden panic flooded through my body. I'm fucking brain damaged... what the hell is going on?

It was an utterly petrifying moment for me. You see, despite everything – losing friends, relationships, jobs, my history of mental health issues, eating disorders, drug addiction and so on - the one thing I had always been able to count on was my intellect. And there I was, 24 years-old, sitting in rehab, and my formerly reliable mate upstairs had decided to pack it in and call it a day. Thankfully, this situation didn't last forever. The human brain is a wonderful thing, and eventually the fog lifted, and throughout the next months and years my mind and body returned to a fairly normal state.

And I'm so grateful it did, because there was, and still is, so much to learn. Returning to university a couple of years later was initially a fairly unnerving experience. But the gifts for me have been immense. Among many other losses, one of the things addiction robbed me of was a sense of competence; I had been left feeling as though I was incapable of doing life, that I was somehow different and flawed. As it turned out, that was far from the truth. I got to re-discover that wonderful feeling of being engaged, interested and passionate about ideas and knowledge. It was a stark contrast to the deadened, medicated existence brought on by addiction. One of the many things it brought me was the realisation that I am not actually as different as I had thought. Despite some of my fairly colourful experiences over the years, many of the basic struggles I experience day to day are simply human experiences.

But truthfully, school and university aren't the most significant experiences which come to mind when I think about 'education'. I had grown up a gifted and high-achieving child, but that didn't prevent the runaway train of addiction from running down my life. As it turns out, awards and degrees didn't offer any defence in this respect, at least for me. My most vital learning has actually been a lot more personal; it's been about gaining an understanding of myself, about addiction, recovery and about building the kind of life I truly want. I've found as long as I stay open in that journey, I get to enjoy all the other ones life brings.

Anonymous

A new meaning

My name is Laurie and I am 83, by the Grace of God a sober alcoholic of sum 54 years plus.

My story began in a small country town, born to an unmarried mother was brought up by my grandmother, aunts and uncles. Somehow I never felt as though I belonged, a sort of square peg in a round hole. Consequently I became a loner, which in many ways I still am.

I had education in several schools in Victoria. In 1943 I left school with a merit certificate. This was to hold me back throughout my working life along with my increasing intake of alcohol.

About the time I joined Alcoholics Anonymous in 1960 I was divorced for habitual drunkenness. So began my journey toward a sober life.

In 1990 at the age of 60 I began to obtain an education at Holmesglen Tafe. I began with a Diploma of Occupational Health and Safety. It was during this time that two important aspects of my life became apparent: I was illiterate in my oral and written English, and I was dyslectic. Now armed with what was wrong I was able to complete and pass that diploma. By this time I was on a disability pension and I began a Diploma of Drug and Alcohol Studies, which I also passed. I went on to complete a Community Studies [Welfare] plus a Training Officers Certificate.

After working for a while as a drug and alcohol counsellor, some 10 years ago I completed The Partner Program at Port Phillip Prison, which allows me to access a set of keys and go unescorted in the prison.

To those who may be experiencing difficulties with sobriety or clean time, be assured of one thing: providing you can adopt the belief that "I am worth something to myself", then providing you do not booze or use, your life will take on a new meaning.

Laurie



A journey that changed our lives

I returned to the education system as an adult student aged 29. My experience of school as a child was unpleasant to say the least and during my teenage years I was expelled from secondary school for displaying anti-social behaviour. I had just turned 15 at the time and without a worry in the world concerning my lack of education I was able to focus on the more important things in my life..... my drug use.

I became a teen pregnancy statistic aged 17, giving birth to a beautiful baby girl at the age of 18. I maintained my drug habit and supported myself and my daughter by selling drugs for the local Motorcycle Club. I lived in a constant state of anxiety and fear as the police raided our home on countless occasions searching for "illicit drugs for supply".

At the age of 20 I was ready to let go of the criminal lifestyle and put my energy towards supplying a legal substance: alcohol. I completed a part time bartender course, moved away from my home town, and obtained employment in a night club. This was perfect!! I could maintain my alcohol use in my place of employment and have no fear of the legal ramifications as there was nothing illegal in what I was doing.

Eventually I applied for my Bar Managers Licence however it was declined due to my history of gang affiliation and alleged drug supply. I desperately wanted to excel in my line of work but was held back due to my past. Eventually I was granted my Bar Managers Licence and I moved on to manage a family run tavern on a part time basis. I applied and was accepted to study part time toward a diploma in business.

It was by this stage my addiction was evidently interfering with my ability to work, study and most importantly parent. My daughter commenced school and I was unable to get her to school or pick her up from school on time. We lived across the road from her school and the pedestrian crossing lady used to knock on my bedroom window as the school bell had rung and my daughter had not arrived to school. I would arrive at work extremely hungover, often requiring a few drinks to fulfil my role and I was missing classes due to either actively drinking or lying in bed terribly hungover.

I was seeing a counsellor at the time as I had contracted Hepatitis C aged 14 due to intravenous drug use. I was hoping to go on the Interferon treatment, however the specialist would not let me commence the treatment until I ceased my alcohol use. I tried and tried to stop drinking but found it impossible. My counsellor eventually intervened after ringing me one lunchtime as I had missed an appointment. My daughter (aged 5) answered the phone and told my counsellor she could not wake mummy up. It was a school day and she had again not made it to school because of my drinking. My counsellor came to our house, gave my daughter some lunch then left. I was given an ultimatum by my counsellor later in the day when I contacted her: go to rehab or we will be removing your daughter from your care.

With the decision made for me, my daughter and I embarked on a journey that would change our lives. We attended a 3 month rehab program for mother and children. It was there that I learned I was powerless over my addiction and I had to take whatever steps necessary to abstain from all substances in order to recover.

What about my career?? Hospitality was no longer an option; neither was dealing for that matter. My early years of recovery consisted of stacking supermarket shelves, cleaning jobs, kitchen hand work, making sandwiches for a catering company to name a few. I continued to try and complete the diploma in business, however I did not find it stimulating or enjoyable. I faced bankruptcy at age 28 and 4 years clean. There went the business career!!

This too was another life changing moment as I was again left with absolutely no direction for future employment. I was getting older, was financially broke and living in fear of ongoing financial insecurity. I made a decision to try education once again however this time I found something I was passionate about. I enrolled in a Bachelor of Alcohol and Drug Studies in 2007 at the Wellington Institute of Technology, New Zealand. I was terrified!! Could I do this?? Would my brain work after all the years of damage I had caused?? Was I smart enough to study a degree due to my expulsion of school at a young age?? Would I like the line of work I was making a 3 year commitment to??

It was a tough ride and the third biggest commitment I have ever made. We barely had enough money to survive and I was required to work part time while studying full time so I could feed and clothe my daughter. It was of paramount importance that I maintained my recovery during all of this. Interestingly my substance use history, current bankruptcy and ongoing recovery worked in my favour. I applied for 3 scholarships throughout my study sharing my struggles as a recovering addict studying full time and trying to support myself and my daughter. I was successful in all 3 applications. I graduated on February 10, 2010 and moved to Australia with my daughter to embark on my career in an area I was familiar with and passionate about due to my personal experience.

I am now employed as a Team Leader in an organisation I feel very privileged to be part of. I work with young people ages 16-25 who are attempting recovery from addiction. Their stories are similar to mine and I feel honoured to walk alongside these young people in their journey. I have recently gone back to school again, and am currently half way through a Post Graduate Diploma in Addiction and Mental Health. Once completed, I would like to study towards management.

I now rent a lovely home, can afford to feed my daughter and our two beautiful cats and we even go on overseas holidays. I pay my bills on time and no longer live from payday to payday. I take pride in the hard work I put in to better my life and my daughter's. I no longer experience guilt and shame as I feel worthy to be where I am. I believe it is never too late to go back to school and follow your dreams. If I can do it anyone can!!!!

Anonymous

To my addiction

by Anonymous

Never thought you would fill me with a sick desire.
Never thought I'd feel so ashamed.
Never thought all of this would backfire.
Never thought you would go break the chain.
You got me chasing my tail and going insane.
Now it's time to stand up to you and close up the hole in my vein.
No more bringing me to my knees.
No more begging you please.
It's time to move on and let you know
That I will no longer chase the slow.



APSU believes that people who use alcohol and other drug treatment services are the reason the system exists; their needs, strengths and expertise should drive the system. APSU is run by service users for service users and has an active member base. We invite you to join us in having a say. APSU membership is free, confidential and open to anyone interested in voicing their opinions and ideas on the issues facing service users today. We need your help to give us all a fair go. To become a member please fill out the form below and post to: **140 Grange Road, Carnegie VIC 3163** or fax to: **03 9572 3498** or go to: www.apsuonline.org.au to register online.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

I wish to become a member of APSU and I would like to:

- Receive the quarterly APSU FLIPSIDE magazine
- Be sent information on how to become involved

I am a: Service user Service provider Family member Other

How did you find out about APSU? _____

Language spoken at home: _____

Cultural identity: _____

Age: 16-25 25-35 36-45 46-65 over 65

Other issues: Physical disability Mental health Visual Hearing
 Speech Acquired brain injury

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/Suburb: _____ Postcode: _____

Phone: _____ Mobile: _____

Email: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Getting there

After appearing from underneath the roller door from “the college of knowledge” that I was accustomed to (H.M. Prison Pentridge), I thought I had my education sorted – really! I was soon to learn that there were other such forms of education out there. Not only that, but they also catered for older folk, as in mature age students! For me to kick on and be successful I needed to apply myself to this, for me, new form of education. But how do I educate myself? What do I want to do?

I chose a diploma in community services to be completed on campus at a major Tafe in Melbourne. I'll cut straight to the chase and declare I passed and was issued a certificate in 2013. I can also declare that I was challenged continuously both cognitively and emotionally. During this time of my course I was also attending voluntarily a positive lifestyle program which, I believe now, is what got me through the course. I also learnt a hell of a lot about myself and how institutions have affected my life, relationships, prospects and most importantly me. Learning about me was probably the best thing of all. I needed to learn about myself if I was to head into the world of community services, my ego needed to be knocked down a few notches. I also needed to hear others, their values and beliefs.

It is now May 5th 2014. I must say I have both my Certificate IV and Diploma proudly hanging on my wall, but have no intention of pursuing a career in the field. Even though it has been more than 7 years since my last incarceration, I still feel somewhat socially inept. I am prone to isolation and still battle on a daily basis with my past and resentments I've left to fester. I am presently looking for employment in the casual sense as that is all I could handle at present. I'm a firm believer that if things aren't OK with self, one can't possibly take up responsibility with something else. To a minimal degree and depending on type of capacity, maybe. I also believe to lift my self-esteem, create a new life and most of all be happy – this man needs to work. It is time I need to face my fears (face everything and recover), stop using drugs which enable me to deny or hide from my fear (fuck everything and run), and believe this step alone will kickstart that new life I've been seeking for what seems an eternity.

* People learn to hate. They can be thought to forgive. *

Anonymous



...How did I get here?... How could this happen to me...

"...How did I get here? How could this happen to me...", constantly spinning around and around in my head. There was no reprieve from the chatter with myself in my head; it was merciless and relentless.

I was 45 years of age, first day in rehab (05/05/2010), feeling confused, scared, angry and alone. I was once a family man, highly educated working in an elite field of science, yet found myself in a long term treatment facility for ice addiction.

It took some time to understand that drug addiction had no boundaries. Young or old, male or female, rich or poor, educated or not, drug addiction was non-judgmental and a fair and equal commodity available to all. Years of formal education did not protect me from the despair and misery of a using drug addict, nor did it avert homelessness, family breakdown, bankruptcy or legal issues to name a few. Its only use in later years was for illegal purposes.

After long term rehab and in my second year of recovery, I took on the support of mentors and made the decision to reinvent myself, choosing a new career. Part of this process was to enroll in school and undertake tertiary studies. Easier said than done. Returning to the classroom after nearly 25 years was a difficult and gut wrenching experience. I sat at the back of the class room, feeling extremely anxious, embarrassed to speak, telling myself I was a fool to think I could do this. The use of computers and online study or learning resources further exacerbated feelings and thoughts of; not smart enough, too old for this, I'm going to fail anyway....I was drowning in fear.

It was only through what I had learnt in recovery and the support of sponsor and others who had travelled this path before that I was able to work through my fears, eventually reaching a place where I felt comfortable in this new learning environment. The year finished, successfully completing the course and making a lot of new friends along the way to new employment.....my first full time job since 1998.

This year, I am undertaking further studies at RMIT. I sit at the front of the class, participate enthusiastically, am making new friends and have a real desire for learning.

My experience with RMIT (and Swinburne 2012) is that they both have an abundance of resources available to support new or mature age students back to study. I had to take responsibility and either ask for help or put in the action to find the help. Reflecting over the last four years it is quite clear (for me) that any attempt at study or full time employment would more than likely not have been successful. Any successes in my life today, I attribute to a new way of living learnt in the classroom of recovery.

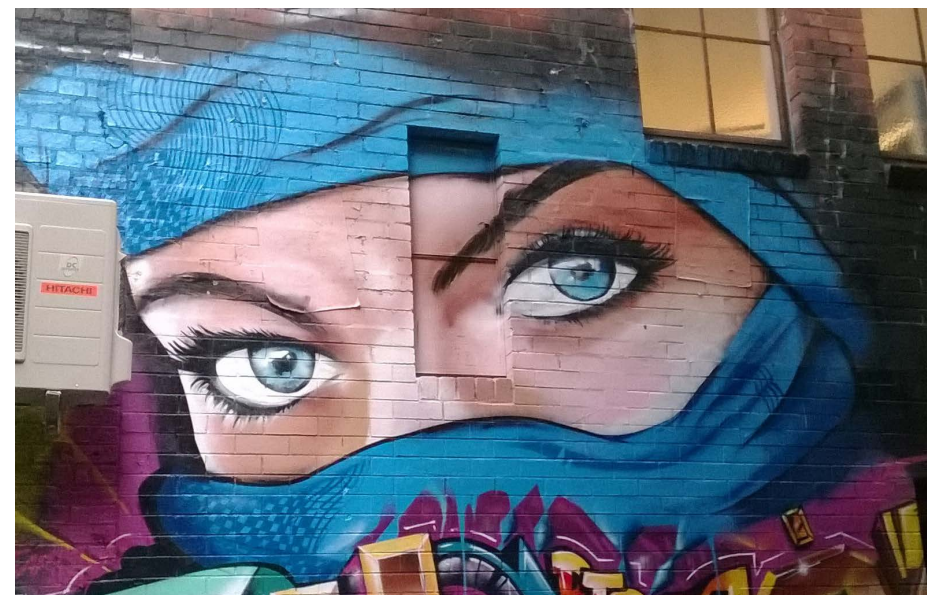
What more can I say, "...How did I get here? How could this happen to me..."

Anonymous

My road to helping myself and helping others

For starters I would like to say that I believe in life-long learning. Post-compulsory education that everyone is supposed to do (i.e. primary and at least some secondary education) throughout my life I have continued to undertake various types of learning, including both formal courses and informal training. These have been across a wide range of topics, as my areas of interest have changed over time.

Some of this learning was pre my alcohol use problems, some was despite these problems, and some, in recent times in recovery, has been, at least partly, because of these problems.



Regardless, the concept of life-long learning to me has been, and remains, one of continuing to learn and to consequently grow as a person. I believe that no matter what your age or whatever life circumstances you find yourself in, learning and growing as a person is important.

I am going to focus here on my 'education' as it relates to my recovery and my future now.

Firstly, I don't underestimate the learning that I received during my struggles trying to overcome my alcohol use problems, over a six-year period.

In some good detox and rehab facilities and other alcohol and other drugs (AOD) services that I was involved in during that period I benefited from the addiction and life skills education that was informally provided. Topics such as the stages of change, dealing with cravings and urges, understanding triggers, communicating effectively and problem solving, even though I had to hear them many times over before they 'sunk in', have all helped me in my recovery.

By the time I became sober in April 2012 I had made a decision, albeit fairly unconsciously at the time, that I wanted to help others with experiences of substance addiction.

It actually all began way back during my first detox – there I was, a few days in and finally clear-headed, fastidiously writing my copious thoughts on a feedback form about how I thought the service could be improved. Little did I know at the time the seed that I was planting!

In recovery I wanted to learn all there was to learn about consumer participation and peer support. However, my early forays into consumer participation had always ended with my overdoing things, getting overwhelmed, then relapsing. Having finally learned that particular lesson, when I became sober this time around I made a conscious, deliberate effort not to take on too much too soon. This has been very important to me and my recovery.

When I was truly ready I started seeking out opportunities to learn about consumer participation and peer support with an AOD sector focus. Much to my dismay, I only found one such AOD-specific course, and that is the first training I did in recovery – APSU's own Peer Helper Training (early 2013). This was highly beneficial

to me in lighting the way forward – even though I've never yet been employed in peer support I realised that I was actually providing peer support already, in an informal way, to many in my recovery circles. The APSU training very much enhanced this.

Because of the lack of funding and opportunities in AOD-specific training for consumers I found that I had to venture into the mental health sector, and undertake training with a mental health sector focus. This is, of itself, not a bad thing – many people, myself included, have a dual diagnosis of both substance addiction and mental health issues. However, I think that there is a huge gap between mental health and AOD in terms of consumer participation and peer support, and associated training, and

this is a big bugbear of mine.

Some examples of other training I did last year are as follows (I provide these not to give my 'resume', but to possibly give readers some other ideas as to what they might like to do themselves, if they are ready in their recovery and interested in this):

- Mind Australia (Mental Health) - 'Peer Support Training' (Mental Health sector focus)
- TheMHS Conference (The Mental Health Services Conference) (ANZ) - Consumer Forum Day
- Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council (VMIAC) - Consumer Workforce Education & Mutual Support (CWEMS) Training Days
- Centre of Excellence in Peer Support (CEPS) (Mental Health) - Peer Conference 2013
- Health Issues Centre (HIC) - 'Course in Consumer Leadership' (22095VIC)
- Western Cluster (of Vic) (Western Education & Training Cluster) (WETS) - Consumer Advisory Group (CAG) Summit (Mental Health)

This training has increased my knowledge in both consumer participation and peer support, and since late last year opportunities have arisen for me to utilise what I have learned and to now be very actively engaged in the following three projects:

- leading consumer member of a social services organisation's 'Consumer Participation Working Group', harnessing consumer expertise to improve the organisation and its services;
- sole consumer member of an AOD service's 'Working Group' planning and organising a Consumer Evaluation of one of their programs; and
- leading consumer member of another AOD service's 'Working Group' planning and organising a 'Mental Health Week' Art Exhibition for one of their programs.

This year I have embarked on the next step in my recovery education journey – I am currently undertaking a combined course in Certificate IV in Alcohol & Other Drugs and Certificate IV in Mental Health. It's a long way from where I first started out with APSU's course, but it's amazing what I now find myself capable of in recovery.

Where eventually all this will take me I don't currently know and I'm not concerned. All I know is that I want to help others with experiences of substance addiction. Education in my recovery has opened many doors for me thus far – I have no doubt I'll find my way.

Glenda P



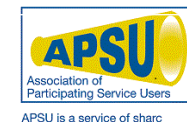
What's up at APSU: Strategic Planning Day

On 22 May we held the APSU Strategic Planning Day. We wanted to have an open conversation with a selection of our members about what APSU's role should be in the new alcohol and other drug (AOD) service system.

The day was a success with a total of twenty participants working their way through five very engaging hours. Guided by fantastic facilitators Colin Pidd and Evelyn Jonkman, we looked at the past and present of APSU and the consumer participation in Victoria. Then we embarked into the future. We allowed ourselves to dream, but we maintained the distinction between the dreams and what we can realistically achieve.

One of the outcomes from our Planning Day is the new advisory committee that will be formed. This body will provide a significant contribution to the work of APSU.

Many learnings have been drawn from this event, but if we were to choose one in particular it is the confirmation that we are the testimonies of reality and we need to be heard! There was a hell of a lot of talent, knowledge and experience at the APSU Planning Day. That is a precious resource available to service providers and policy makers in Victorian AOD sector.



APSU Families Project

APSU is developing a manual aimed at creating more opportunities for family members (defined as anyone else affected by another's substance use) to have a say in the way Drug and Alcohol treatment services run.

In order to gather information for the manual we are inviting interested family members to either

- complete an online survey or
- have a phone interview with the Families Project Worker.

For more information please call Kathryn Wakeling,
Project Worker, on (03) 9573 1762 (Tuesdays and Wednesdays) or
email kwakeling@sharc.org.au

Survey available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/famsurv>

Survey closes 16 July 2014



Digs me, digs me not
by John La Mude
(recycled materials)



140 Grange Road, Carnegie VIC 3163
Ph: 03 9573 1736 Fax: 03 9572 3498
Email: apsu@sharc.org.au
www.apsuonline.org.au



Self Help Addiction Resource Centre