

This used to be my playground – *The Minto Under 12's Project*

The Minto Under 12's Project is located at Uniting Care Burnside's Minto Family Centre. Uniting Care Burnside has a long history of working with children, young people and families in the areas of child protection, early intervention and strengthening vulnerable communities.

TANYA SMITH

Minto is one of the older suburbs located to the north of Campbelltown in New South Wales. Almost 25 per cent of Minto's of 11,540 population are aged between 0 and 12 years (2001 Census Data). At the time of the 2001 Census, 29.2 per cent of residents lived in public housing.

On 29 May 2002, the Minister for Housing announced that the Minto Public Housing Estate was to be redeveloped over ten years, with 800 public housing homes to be demolished. This will affect 3000-4000 residents in Minto.



"Kids at the Minto Under 12's project"

The Minister's announcement described the redevelopment as an answer to the poor standard of housing design and general social problems existing in the estate. Many residents were offended by the implication that Minto is an area with immense social problems. Many residents have lived in Minto for over 15 years, and this is their home and their community.

Since the commencement of the demolition of homes, community

consultations have been implemented by the Department of Housing and various other resident groups and service providers. However, there has been one obvious group omitted from this process – children.

Our plan

The Minto Under 12's Project aims to give children a voice by providing opportunities to explore and express their feelings about the redevelopment. The team is developing a series of focus groups. There are four primary schools in Minto. All four schools are working with the Minto Under 12's Project to identify children to participate in the groups.

The focus groups will include children who are impacted directly and indirectly by the redevelopment. They will give children an opportunity to talk about how they feel about houses being demolished around them, the possibility of having to move and of moving away from friends, changing schools, and how they are experiencing the redevelopment in general. Even children who are not facing relocation at this point in time will still be experiencing the impact of the redevelopment on some level. For example, they see friends moving away, they watch as houses are vacated and eventually demolished and they hear their parents and neighbours talk about the redevelopment and how it is effecting their lives.

The focus groups will run for approximately one hour each during the

school day. Some of the groups have ten or so children. One of the schools has agreed to let their 60 Year 6 children participate in smaller groups.

We will be asking the children to "interview" each other about the redevelopment – how they feel about houses being torn down, moving house, saying goodbye to friends, changing schools and so on. We are interested in hearing about the good things and the difficult things.

Workers will facilitate the process of "interviewing". The children will be encouraged to come up with their own questions to ask. We feel the questions the children come up with will be as revealing as the answers received!

Along with school focus groups, the team is exploring other options for speaking with children about their experiences of the redevelopment including street-based activities and children accessing the Family Centre through other groups and activities.

We are also keen to hear from parents about how they feel the redevelopment is impacting on their children and their families. The Minto Under 12's Project held two parent forums – one in August and another in October. At the October forum we showed some footage from the children's focus groups to parents and schools. This was a great opportunity for adults to hear what their children are saying and for the team to get some feedback from families. Parents are also encour-



aged to come and speak with workers about their experiences if they cannot come to the forums.

Why drama?

Drama is a technique we have used before at the Minto Family Centre to work with children around issues concerning the redevelopment. The “interviewing” activity has been used with great success during our Afternoon Drama Group with children aged 6-12 years.

Drama has long been a means by which humans seek to understand each other and the world around them. In chapter one of *All the World's a Stage*, Ronald Harwood (1984) says of theatre that it is one of the most powerful instruments humans have for exploring and attempting to understand themselves, the world they live in and their place in it.

Drama and storytelling is a valuable means whereby children are able to hear others' stories and relate to them, identify with them, gain hope and encouragement, and understanding and knowledge from them. Drama provides a means to express and confront feelings, and to work through those feelings to gain a level of understanding. It helps in resolving conflict

and solving problems, as well as communicating to others in the community (including their parents) what they think and how they feel about the redevelopment – to give children a voice.

Documentation and evaluation

We are planning to document the focus groups using written materials, artworks, photographs and video footage. We are hoping to produce a short video of the outcomes of all of the focus groups. We will be seeking the permission of all parents before filming children.

Our aim in documenting these stories is to work with the parents and children in developing strategies for supporting families during this time of redevelopment and relocation.

Everyone who participates in the focus groups and parent forums will receive a journal. We are sure the discussions initiated in these groups will spread beyond the one or two hours spent with us. The journals may provide families with a way of capturing their ongoing thoughts and feelings about the redevelopment. (Of course, they may want to use the journals for any number of things!) We would love parents and children to share

their journals with us, however we have no expectations other than they be useful in some way for people.

The Minto Under 12's Project views the focus groups and forums as a starting point in documenting the impact of the redevelopment on children. How this information will be used will be shaped and guided by the parents and children. There are a number of opportunities in the coming months for these stories to be told in various arenas. We are sure the parents and children will have very strong ideas about who they would like to have hear their tales and the next steps to be taken in this journey.

References

- Census data (2001), Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Harwood, R. (1984), *All The World's a Stage*, Little Brown and Company, Boston.
- Minister for Housing's Media Release 29 May 2002.
- Macarthur Housing Coalition Briefing Notes, August 2002.
- Warren, K. (1992), *Hooked on drama: The theory and practice of drama in early childhood*, Printing Headquarters Pty. Ltd., Sydney.

Tanya Smith is Project Coordinator for the Minto Under 12's Project.