

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **INDIGENOUS ARTIST OPENING DOORS FOR HOMELESS**

Six years ago, indigenous artist Gerard Bargo was homeless and sleeping rough in Brisbane's New Farm Park.

Today he's a social entrepreneur, the creator of an award-winning art program that has united people throughout Brisbane who have experienced the trauma of mental illness and homelessness.

Mr Bargo started 'The Amazing Art Project' after moving into Green Square, an inner-city apartment complex built by leading affordable housing provider BHC.

Held in the development's community centre, the art classes and social gatherings offer more than just paint and canvas: they're a sanctuary and inspirational support network.

"I wanted to bring people into a place where the door is always open, so they can set their mind free," Mr Bargo said.

"In the first week, I had 28 people turn up. Within three months, almost 400 people had come along."

Mr Bargo said that, while art is the focus, the lack of social services available in the area over the weekend led some people to just come and talk.

"There aren't many refuges for people on Saturdays," Mr Bargo said. "So I just want to give them somewhere to enjoy themselves and know that someone cares for them.

"I explain that if I can overcome homelessness and do something positive with my life, they can too."

Mr Bargo, who was homeless during the 2011 Brisbane floods, has continued to develop the project, securing funding from Brisbane City Council and partnering with other groups that provide services to people sleeping rough, including Joining Hands massages and Orange Sky Laundry.

On Saturday, more than 200 people attended an open day that showcased Mr Bargo's venture and its spin-off benefits to the wider community.

BHC's Strategy and Engagement Manager Alison Kemp, who spoke at the event, said Mr Bargo's art project has made a big difference to many people.

"Gerard's passion and dedication to his art and helping others is inspirational," Ms Kemp said.

"He has enthusiastically led this initiative, secured funding and used his tenacity and passion to bring positive opportunity and engagement to his local community.

“Gerard is a wonderful example of BHC’S philosophy that having a safe and secure place to live helps people fulfil their own potential and contribute positively to their wider community.”

The innovative art venture recently won an Australasian Housing Industry Award, with judges lauding the project’s creativity, community and social inclusion.

Mr Bargo is also planning an art exhibition at the Brisbane Powerhouse in October to mark the project’s first anniversary, his stunning indigenous paintings to hang alongside the work of art group members.

“I use my art to bring a story to life, but art also has the power to connect people,” Mr Bargo said.

“I feel privileged that I’ve been able to use my love of painting to draw people together and break down barriers.

“Painting comes from the heart and it can mend people too.”

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