

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

22 May 2017

### **FRIENDSHIP BLOSSOMS AFTER THE HARDSHIP OF HOMELESSNESS**

Best friends Charmaine Idris and Michele Cooper are the face of the fastest growing group of homeless Australians – women over 55.

Despite being well-educated and having enjoyed successful careers, raised families and travelled the globe, unexpected and tragic circumstances led both into a spiral of financial and emotional hardship.

Charmaine, 62, was left with paraplegia, reliant on a wheelchair and walking cane, after a brutal stabbing attack in a basement carpark in Kuala Lumpur 20 years ago.

She returned to Australia in 2007, but family breakdown forced her to move from house to house, staying with family members when it was possible.

“The attack was life changing,” the former IT accounting manager and art gallery administrator said.

“I had to reconfigure my whole life, come to terms with limited mobility and work out how I would earn a living to support myself. It took me many years to get back on my feet.”

Michele, 64, once worked as an executive assistant to former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. She raised two children and later managed a successful Sunshine Coast tourism business with her former husband.

But divorce and a battle with tongue cancer eroded her finances.

“To face that uncertainty of not knowing where you are going to live and how you are going to survive day to day ... unless you’ve experienced that, it’s hard to understand just how overwhelming that is,” Michele explained.

It’s estimated that up to half a million Australian women will fall into housing stress over the next two decades, largely a result of rising divorce rates, the gender pay gap and a lack of affordable housing.

For Charmaine and Michele, their fortunes were turned thanks to a vibrant over-55s affordable housing village in the heart of New Farm, known as Bowen Court.

The 51-unit complex was developed under a partnership between aged care service provider Blue Care and Queensland not-for-profit housing company BHC.

Close to inner city services, the award-winning sustainable development has proven to be a lifeline for its community of seniors on low and middle incomes, with many forging strong friendships.

Charmaine said the loneliness that goes with homelessness is now a thing of the past.

“On one occasion, I had a fall in the middle of the night,” Charmaine recalled. “When I confided in my neighbour Michele, she gave me her number and told me to call any time, day or night, if I need help.

“If it wasn’t for these apartments, I’m not sure where I would be – it’s as simple as that – I never realised there were developments like this.”

BHC CEO David Cant said there are many women who have turned to BHC for housing support after a similar experience.

“Homelessness is not a choice,” Mr Cant said. “As a community, we have a responsibility to support women who find themselves vulnerable and with nowhere to go.

“Housing developments like Bowen Court go a long way, but the statistics show we will be in desperate need of more affordable housing in the coming decade.”

Michele said she worries for other women who are feeling the trauma of being homeless.

“We don’t fit the typical profile of what a homeless person looks like. Anyone can find themselves in this situation, and hopefully governments and the wider community are starting to realise that homelessness doesn’t discriminate,” Michele said.

**ENDS**

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