



HUGH
HOUSTON
FATHERS'
WORKER

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Hugh Houston Fathers' worker

Project: helping men become better fathers

Hugh Houston has polished brown shoes and a pleasant, lilting voice. You tend to notice such things in Bidwill, on Sydney's western perimeter. "I was born in Dublin, but I grew up in Tasmania," he explains.

Apart from nine years in the navy (hence the clean footwear), Houston, 62, has been a Tasmanian farmer for most of his life. Twelve years ago he moved to western Sydney to work in a family support group, later moving to the fathers' centre. "I guess I like people," he says. "I've always wanted to work in this type of environment."

Giving up life in rural Tasmania to run an outreach service in the western suburbs is not something that would occur to many people – his own epiphany followed the death of his first wife from cancer. He has since remarried and now has two young children, six and nine. "It's hard work having young children, but it does help me with my work because it keeps me in touch with little children," he says.

Newpin (New Parent Infant Network) provides fathers with a place where they can spend time with their children, improve their parenting skills and find

support or counselling. Drugs, violence and unemployment are recurring themes.

The centre, operated by UnitingCare Burnside, occupies a cramped, two-storey house in a bland housing estate. The service is woefully under-funded. Houston, the only full-time member of staff, has 28 fathers on his books – five more than his official case load.

Although the centre's operating budget, which comes entirely from Burnside following the loss of government support, is just \$72,000 a year, Newpin may be forced to close by next June unless a new source of funding can be found. Lack of money and a reliance on volunteers means even more strain.

"We are sailing too close to the wind [financially]. I shouldn't have as many dads as I have now," he says. "But you can't just turn these people away."

With five children (he has three grown-up children from his first marriage) and two grandchildren of his own, Houston is not short of experience in this field. "I've had some struggles in my life so perhaps that's why I can empathise and feel for these people," he says. "I also feel blessed that I can see the beauty in anybody, no matter who they are."

Over the past three years Houston has seen some remarkable transformations as men take control over their lives, bond with their children and support each other.

"They come here because they want to break down those destructive patterns of behaviour. That's a very hard thing to do," he says.

Houston is not blind to the immensity of his task. Not all of his clients are attractive people. "Some of them are tough. They often have horrendous backgrounds," he says. "But once they get here with their children it's surprising how calm and soft the atmosphere becomes."

Those who work with him praise his listening skills and his bullet-proof optimism. As one father said in a testimonial: "Hugh makes me feel part of his family." Another put it more succinctly: "Hughie is a legend."