

# A STORY ABOUT PROFESSIONAL YOUTH WORK



*Speech by Dr Phil Daughtry  
at the launch of Professional Youth Work SA - 3.11.16*

I heard a story of a young man who lived inside his room almost all of the time.

The extent to which he did venture out was limited within the walls of the house in which his room was situated. For two years, this young man did not go outside.

For him the outside world seemed overwhelming, threatening and hostile. He lacked the confidence to engage it. His room was the only place where he felt a relative degree of safety.

The fact that he was stuck inside of his room and afraid to leave his house was for many people who knew or heard of him the dominant story of his existence.

This kind of story is variously categorised by the broader public under one or more of the following titles:

- Mental Health Issues
- Online Gaming Addiction
- Weakness and Irresponsibility

The various diagnostic labelling of this young man's story didn't actually change anything in his experience of the world as a too-frightening place nor did it assist him in changing the picture of himself as a person unable to negotiate its dangers and explore its possibilities.

But there is some good news. Into this young man's story arrived a youth worker. The youth worker was assigned as a case manager with a goal to assist the young man to re-engage.

The youth worker approached the young man on a quest to uncover the alternative story. The alternative story is based in a belief in the capacities, dreams and values of every young person, without exception. In short, the youth worker's approach was restorative rather than pejorative. Strengths-based rather than deficit-blinkered.

And so the case work began. Tentatively. With care and sensitivity. Not by the youth worker sitting in an office with the false expectation of the young person turning up at an appointed hour to work through a check-list across the bureaucratic space of a desk. But with a series of gentle home visits. A service of human presence and silent empathy. Through the closed bedroom door to begin with, initially with just one-way verbal communication, the youth worker began to whisper his vision of the alternative story.

The thing about belief, is that it's like breath and in traumatic circumstances we can lose our capacity for it. Sometimes we need someone to breath for us until our lungs regain their own natural capacity. At other times we can lose belief and need someone else to tell us the story of who we are and what we can become until we regain the natural capacity for our own dreaming.

But case work is about goals and progress and tangible achievements. And these goals and achievements cannot effectively be imposed. They must mean something to the one whose case is being managed. They must be realistic, achievable and democratically constructed. So what do you think the youth worker was able to draw out of the young man in our story as his first concrete step towards re-engagement?

The simple answer is: 'fish and chips'. The first established goal was that within a designated period of time the young man, with the support of his youth worker, would leave the house, for the first time in two years, and walk down to the shops and buy fish and chips.

And that goal was duly achieved and celebrated.

It didn't make newspaper headlines. It's unlikely that the reporting and evaluation structures of the funding body behind the service have the capability to fully recognise the significance and artistry this story represents. But on the way to the fish and chip shop, in the supportive company of his youth worker, the world began to change for the young man at the centre of the story and that's what's important.

I've told you a story about professional youth work.

I've told you a story about the nature of professional youth work, its values, its standards, and its necessity to the community.

I've told you a story about yourself, because each one of us knows what it's like to find ourselves stuck in a room of some kind from which we are afraid to emerge because to do so would expose our vulnerability to a hostile and unforgiving world in which failure and weakness are not an option. Each of us at some stage has benefitted from someone who has played the role of soul-whisper. The person who breathes us back into our natural confidence, capacity and dreaming. It is precisely the recognition and embrace of our own vulnerabilities and recoveries that equip us to engage helpfully with the vulnerability of others.

A professional youth worker understands this. An association for professional youth work promotes understanding of this in the broadest possible way.

This South Australian Association for Professional Youth Work is launched with the idea of inviting you to contribute by your membership, your participation and financial investment, in an educative and healing movement. The promotion of a unique and much needed way of working with young people that unlocks doors and opens pathways to a flourishing future.