

# Around & About with ASLAN (2)

## ADVOCACY ARRIVES

by Lesley Whittaker

Advocacy can be described as the process of identifying with and representing a person's views and concerns, in order to secure enhanced rights and entitlements. Advocacy is rooted in a very special relationship between two individuals who may only have met for the precise purpose of resolving the present difficulty, and who after resolution may perhaps never meet again.

The process of Advocacy involves using in turns representation, negotiation and persuasion in order to bring about the desired beneficial change in a person's life. And it is this process which grew, almost by accident, out of the Visiting Scheme and which we have been piloting in ASLAN for more than a year now.

When I joined the Visiting Team in the summer of 2003, I was interested in deepening my involvement with the homeless community that I had come to know through the Saturday Entertainment evenings.

However, as I listened to the feedback from the visitors during the regular team meetings, two things became clear to me. Firstly, that these people to whom we minister not only have ongoing social and psychological difficulties, but also that many of them have critical problems with the various organisations with whom they are involved. Secondly, it was clear that

some members of the Visiting Team (without it being within their remit) were already assisting their visitees in various conflicts.

But the philosophy of the Visiting Team was that of 'mentoring' and not actively becoming 'involved' in the individual's crises. Indeed, the team did not have the resources to take on such negotiations on a large scale.

At the time I was working part time and did happen to have some hours dur-

ing the week when I could attempt to address some of the crises that had been uncovered. One of these involved an elderly gentleman who had an outstanding housing bill for a property in which he said he was not living during the period for which he was being charged.



When beginning any advocacy with a client the first thing needed is all the letters received and any evidential paperwork that may

help the case. Also it is important for the client to be very clear and as precise as possible with all information so that we can get a concise and concrete view of the problem. As you can imagine, both these needs are very difficult to achieve with our client group in ASLAN. Indeed, in the old gentleman's case, his version of the facts changed almost weekly and each time he was absolutely sure that eve-

rything was correct. As Advocates we can not doubt the information of our client, however bizarre the detail: we are there to present their case not our judgement of it.

In this case it has taken months of letters, telephone calls, faxes and some face to face meetings to bring us to the present position. Unfortunately, in this situation we did not achieve the result for which the 'visitee' was hoping. However, the result we have got is the 'right' result.

It is difficult for our visitees when we are not able to get the outcome that they wanted, but it has been a learning curve for us all. This particular old gentleman has grown through the Advocacy process, as we have. He has had to face the consequences of his mistakes, as we all must do in life, and is doing so with the help of his visitors (who have been very much involved with the whole negotiation) with enormous courage. This growth is for us also part of the process: many of the problems that our client group deal with arise from a fear of facing an issue, that then through neglect gets beyond their control.

This has been an important lesson for us as we begin this new endeavour in ASLAN - for as a Christian mentoring organisation we are unique in the Advocacy arena in that we are not in the business of gaining a 'win' at all costs, but of attempting to make life easier for these vulnerable and battered individuals.

The most important part of our work here as we move forward with this Advocacy scheme is to remember that for some of these people, this experience will be the first time in their lives that someone has been 'on their side', fighting for them, believing in them and desiring only their good. And so we model to them God's unconditional love for them.