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"There's a beauty in talking to a stranger"

Insight Briefing, March 2022

Camerados are working with People's Voice Media as part of an ongoing learning process that seeks to better understand how the movement works, how it can be developed further and the impact that the activities of the Camerados movement makes. This short insight briefing is based on 23 stories gathered from members of and people connected to the Camerados movement between January and March 2022. The stories have been gathered using the Community Reporting methodology, which is a digital storytelling approach rooted in lived experience. The topics covered in this insight briefing include how people became a Camerado, why and how they stay connected to the movement and their experiences of different Camerado spaces and activities. Thematically, notions of '*togetherness'*, *'belonging'* and '*diversity'* come through strongly in the stories.

"I really like the concept of Camerados. It appeals to me - the none institutional space, being alongside one another and being with people all over the world is a really magical space": Bringing people together and cultivating connections

A core foundational theme throughout the stories was one of togetherness. Camerados has been a form or support - even a lifeline - for people who have gotten involved. One person when as far to state that, *"Camerados saved my life"***.** The storytellers felt that Camerados had a form of 'magic' in it and this was *"stoking up the fire for a movement"*. As one storyteller went on to describe, *"we are all born a Camerado"*.

Some of the Camerados discussed the Public Living Rooms and the role they play in helping to tackle isolation and loneliness. They have enabled people to meet and connect with others, whilst also providing a safe warm space and this was becoming ever more relevant due to the rising cost of living. However, it was the togetherness that encouraged people to come back. The Camerados' ethos of connecting people and underlying principle of not to fix one another but to just be is what enables people to feel relaxed in these spaces. The Spoon Rooms have provided scope for Camerados to connect with people all over the world, and some of the Camerados felt like this had expanded their life and it would not have been possible if it wasn't for Camerados. As one, storyteller stated - "*I really really like Spoon Rooms… It felt like something was rekindled inside of me and I started to feel like I belonged"*.

"Usually from my experience, if you dress a certain way then people judge you, I don't think I felt this with this group at all.": A feeling of togetherness and belonging

Through this togetherness, a sense of belonging is created as people come together with no agenda and Camerados does not have any pre-requirements about who can get involved. This has led to people feeling comfortable with joining and participating and participating in the spaces they help to create.

Camerados have been creating spaces to meet people, whether that is online or in-person. This can often mean some people who once felt socially isolated and had spent a lot of time

on their own were now able to get out and meet new people. As one person explained, *"I feel very socially isolated with being unwell for most of my life. That's really meant that I spend a lot of time on my own. It's wonderful to go to Camerados and see people, and chat and be sociable".* From what people have shared in the stories, this combination of being able to meet online and/or in-person, meant there was increased opportunity for belongingness to be established and grow.

A storyteller spoke about an appreciation for the welcome pack - *"I loved it when I got that first parcel and it had all the badges in it… I loved the colours and the ideas of wearing badges."* This pack, the visual identity it brought and emotions it stirred, instilled a community-like feeling, increasing and encouraging the sense of belonging as people now felt they were part of a wider movement. For them, being part of a *"tribe is important"* and they feel like *"Camerados is one of [their] tribes".*

"People would never meet otherwise, the group has brought people together from different backgrounds": The value of spending time with people who you may not otherwise meet

The spaces that Camerados create appeal to a range of people. As one storyteller explained, *"I've met people from different walks of life and it didn't matter whether they were rich or poor or in the middle… they were all so interesting."* From the stories, a key part of this was the no fixing ethos and the storytellers felt that this has led to a diversity in terms of the people who choose to get involved. The value of this to people was that it created conversations and encounters that they would not otherwise have had. As a Camerado explains, "*I have never met more amazing people... I would never bump into people like I have at Camerados".*

Many of the Camerados discussed about the relaxed nature of Camerados spaces and the ability to not agree yet still remain respectful to one another. Again, this principle is why they felt this was why Camerados was a diverse space. However, one Camerado who had set-up a Public Living Room mentioned how it was hard to determine who was responsible for making sure the principles were followed by everyone. As they explained, *"In the guide book it says level respectfully and if someone is like that, then tell them to come back next week, and that what they were doing wasn't acceptable. But who does that? That's the thing. Who does that?"*. This Camerado in particular was worried about how being the person who makes sure the principles are followed creates a hierarchy and that is something they feel the movement tries to avoid.

The sentiments about bringing together a diversity of people were both as applicable to online and in-person spaces. Online there is the ability to pull people in from all over the world, whilst in-person spaces attracted a wide array of people from within the area. Many liked the aspect of meeting and talking to strangers. As one Camerado said, there is *"a beauty in talking to strangers"* as there is *"less pressure"* and you worry less about what others may think about you.

COVID had created a greater feeling of isolation for many people and the stories indicated that Camerados help to combat isolation. One storyteller describes how their Public Living

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Room had brought people together, particularly children who had experienced mental health issues through the lockdowns and this was both helpful for the children and parents as it was a space that were they could discuss things and relate to one another. This ability to connect with people at a human level is what brings people to Camerados spaces. As one Camerado explains, *"What I get from Camerados is very much that human space, the feelings that you can change the conversation and you can change that institutional approach to things..It's not about fixing, it's okay to fail".*

Key learning from the stories

From the stories, the key learning about the Camerados movement are:

- The core principles of 'Don't fix each other, we are just alongside' and 'We can disagree respectfully' attract people to the movement and help to great a sense of togetherness within Camerados spaces.
- Camerados stay involved in the movement and keep attending spaces as they meet their needs such as wanted to connect with other people and providing a warm space. Underpinning this though is a sense of belonging and feeling welcomed in these spaces 'as they are' and not needing to pretend to be anything - or anyone - else.
- Online and in-person spaces have the potential to bring people together and reduce isolation. Online spaces help to connect Camerados from outside of their geographical area and people felt that this was important. During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, Camerados has provided support to help people through tough times.

Recommendations based on the stories

To support the development of the Camerados movement based on the insights from the stories, we would recommend the following:

1. **Continue** to use the principles as a key communication tool - they help to both hook people into the movement and keep people involved. They invoke a sense of belonging and differentiate Camerados spaces to more institutional spaces.
2. **Strengthen** how people are welcomed into the movement and what they received. There is value in existing welcoming packs and also the Public Living Room guidance, and this can be built on to help strengthen the sense of belonging and also support Camerados in creating spaces where the principles are followed and embraced.
3. **Explore** how Camerados can connect across locations, as there appears to be value for the movement in connecting with people in the movement from outside of their immediate geographical area.