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"A really magical space"

Summative Story Insight Report, December 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 summative insight report is based on 63 stories gathered from members of and people connected to the Camerados movement between January and September 2022 and ideas that emerged during various sense-making activities with the movement held during this period. The stories have been gathered using the Community Reporting methodology, which is a digital storytelling approach rooted in lived experience. This report synthesises the findings of three previous insight reports, published over the first three quarters of 2022. It covers the topics of the principles of Camerados, togetherness and a sense of belonging, and thoughts around Public Living Rooms (PLRs).

"This isn't about fixing, this is about being alongside and when we do that, we realise we can be together": The principles and how Camerados are using them

The core principles of Camerados were at the heart of many stories. One storyteller speaks of entering a new country and not knowing anyone. This led to extreme loneliness. Once they joined the PLR they felt relief and happiness as they were building a support network. **They felt that the principles were key in creating this environment**, particularly the principle about not fixing one another. The idea of just being alongside meant that they could just be themselves with no pressure.

Other storytellers suggested that **these principles enabled people to grow and thrive**. One Camerado discussed how the alongside principle was a huge learning curve. They spoke about a scenario where their friend was going through a tough time and they felt the urge to tell them how to respond. It was only when discussing it with a fellow Camerado that they reflected on this approach as they asked 'what about the principle of just being alongside?'. The storyteller immediately reflected and realised that being alongside is actually the key to supporting friends.

One storyteller said how they immediately connected with the principles upon reading them: "I was looking for Principles that fit what we do and it was like 'oh there they are', someone's done them for me". Seeing them written down validated their own feelings and reinforced a sense of belonging to the Camerados movement. This feeling was strengthened further by hosting a PLR. As one Camerado described, their PLR is the "most powerful community engagement thing they had ever done". Furthermore, **Camerados are taking these principles outside of PLRs and into other spaces**. As one person stated - "I love the principles and I promote them in my life as much as possible".

However, one Camerado who had set-up a PLR mentioned how it was hard to determine **who was responsible for making sure the principles were followed by everyone**. As they explained, "In the guidebook it says level respectfully… 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, something which they feel the movement tries to avoid.

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"The group has brought people together from different backgrounds": Creating a sense of belonging

A theme running through the vast majority of stories was one of togetherness. **The movement has been a form of support for people who have been involved**. One person when as far to state that, "Camerados saved my life"**.**

A sense of belonging is created in movement and in individual PLRs, with peopling coming together with no agenda. Camerados does not have any pre-requirements about who can get involved, which has led to people feeling comfortable with joining and participating in spaces that they help to create. **This allows people who might be otherwise socially isolated to get out and meet new folk.** As one storyteller 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". **It is also apparent from the stories that Camerados particularly helped to tackle the isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic**. One storyteller described how their PLR 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 where they could discuss things and relate to one another. As a 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".

The insights about the movement bringing together a diverse group of people were applicable to both online and in-person spaces. Online can attract folk from all over the world, while in-person spaces attract a wide range of people from within the area. **Many enjoyed meeting and talking to strangers**. As one Camerado put it, there is "a beauty in talking to strangers" as there is "less pressure" and you worry less about what others may think about you.

"It looks like we're just sitting on our arses and doing Jack shit but we're doing something with no agenda - we're looking out for each other": What folk think about Public Living Rooms

It's perhaps not surprising that many storytellers wanted to talk about different aspects of the PLRs. **Their experience of PLRs was overwhelmingly positive**. As one first time attendee of a PLR explained, "today was my first time visiting a Public Living Room. I felt very welcomed and supported... Thank you for accepting me as me."

It is clear from the stories that PLRs mean a lot to the folk who use them and really help people through tough times: "It looks like we're just sitting on our arses and doing Jack shit but we're doing something with no agenda. We're looking out for each other. It's a big thing - you can't see it from a distance can you but it's there." This is quite a pertinent comment in many ways and encapsulates the essence of PLRs for many in the movement. First it highlights the importance of no agendas and human connection through chatting. Second it identifies a key learning point for the movement and PLRs - **to understand how PLRs work and their importance, you have to experience them - not just watch from the side-lines**. How to create the right 'feel' is best achieved experientially - not conceptually. More so, the 'magic' of the PLRs is not rocket science - **creating a space for conversations is good for people**.

The principle of 'It's okay to be a bit rubbish', was something that a number of Camerados involved in PLRs spoke about. This principle in particular "takes the pressure off" the Camerados who are setting-up PLRs

and gives people the confidence to learn as they go. However, **for some people there were still barriers in place to setting-up a PLR**. As one Camerado explained: "People over think it and worry about where they will host it, who it will attract and what they need to do. Not everyone has the confidence or skills to do it." **Another key barrier to PLRs has been the COVID-19 pandemic**. This has been firstly because of the various restrictions in-place but also because of the changes in how spaces work and the priorities of different organisations shifting.

To overcome such barriers, Camerados provides support to people setting up PLRs and encourage PLRs to learn from one another via visits. As one new PLR organiser has said - "the team have always been very quick to respond and very supportive even though we've said it's not been going quite as well as we had hoped". Despite this, the individual felt that there was a "disconnect" between how the Camerados team spoke about PLRs in terms of their "feel" and how they felt in reality. **Some Camerados also had some misgivings about the PLR boxes supplied to hosts and felt there should be more of an option to individualise the contents** to reflect the unique nature of each PLR. As one Camerado explains, "it's about people knowing that this space is theirs… and they can make it theirs". Ideas from the movement involved having different boxes for different spaces - i.e. Pavement PLRs and pop-up PLRs having a unique box.

Key learnings

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

- The core principles are key to attracting people to the movement and helping the movement to grow and thrive. A positive consequence of the movement is that folk are taking the principles into other parts of their lives.
- Some Camerados feel more support could be given in helping them to understand how the principles work in different types of spaces and how they can ensure the principles are observed in PLRs.
- The movement is a real source of support to people, allowing those who would otherwise be socially isolated to meet new people. This was particularly beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and restrictions, but this has continued to be relevant beyond this timeframe.
- To understand PLRs and how they work you need to experience them, not just try to understand them conceptually.
- Some folk do experience barriers to setting up PLRs and while Camerados does offer support, some folk find a disconnect between the concept of PLRs and the reality of them. Additionally, some Camerados feel that there could be more options to individualise PLRs and the PLR boxes.

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:** Putting the principles front and centre as a fundamental part of the Camerados movement to support active engagement.
2. **Strengthen:** How people are welcomed into the movement and build upon the existing welcome packs and PLR guidance to bridge the perceived gap between the concept and reality of PLRs, and

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give increased support to Camerados in creating spaces that embody and embrace the principles of the movement.

3. **Explore:** The barriers to the movement that people perceive and ways in which these can be overcome. This might include (1) individualising the PLR boxes or creating different types of boxes for different types of PLRs, (2) ensuring that learning and ideas are shared across the movement and (3) creating spaces (online and offline) that Camerados can connect, share experiences and learn from one another.