

# ‘Five Bags Thumping’

## *Impressions of first project visits*

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*Putting together an article on the SFLEX team’s first visits seemed straight-forward enough. ‘Ask all the SFLEX team about their experiences and keep it simple’. The initial issue was to define a first visit. Quite often the first visit of the SFLEX worker was not the first visit for the project. So we settled on the first visit for the worker. A further issue that arose was that this is our account, and it is only one part of the story. The other parts of the experience include the perspectives of committee members, project workers, community participants and FaCS workers. We look forward to hearing their stories later.*

Most of us have similar emotions on our first visit to a project. There are mixed feelings about leaving family, even if only for a few days, and we are both excited and nervous to be going. Unsure of what to expect, we tend to prepare for any eventuality. We really enjoy meeting people involved in the project and the opportunity to start to get to know each other. Indeed, on the first visit this stood out as the thing that we most value.

We have found that once we have met face to face, other ways of communicating (mainly phone and email) are easier and more productive. It is also very important for us to see where the project is located and to get a picture of the surrounds. Each location is unique and often new to us. We find we work hard and get very tired. We also find that we can feel disconnected from our own environment and who we are in the other parts of our lives. Overall there is a sense of connecting and caring and a positive anticipation of what will happen next.

### Preparing to go

We are a bit anxious as we prepare to go. Uncertain of what is going to be

required of us, we gather together a great deal of materials that we think we just might need. Indeed, some who are more experienced with first visits continue to take a lot of material, despite feeling somewhat embarrassed at carting around so much heavy luggage. Nevertheless, if we leave it behind inevitably we will wish we had brought it.

Others in the team have found that, over time, as information becomes integrated less material is required. Whether we take a little or a lot we know that each situation is unique and that we have to be able to adapt our materials and resources to meet those unique needs.

Leaving family can be hard. For those with younger children there can be some very fine tuning required around child care arrangements. At the time of writing we have only had one missed Melbourne departure flight. Another team member spent the Sunday of her departure ringing the airline to get onto progressively later flights until she eventually could delay no longer, caught a late taxi, was held up in a traffic jam and arrived at the airport to hear a last call for her before the flight closed. Known more

for her swimming than running she nevertheless did the dash to gate 12 with her five bags thumping at her side. (Yes, she is one of the team who prefers to take everything, and yes she reports it is possible to get this many bags on as cabin luggage!)

### Being there

Upon arrival, the difficulty of departure is forgotten. The team talk about the excitement of meeting new people, being in a new place, seeing new projects and communities, developing a new working relationship. In retrospect, it is these things that stand out for team members as the most important thing in first visits.

The landscape often dominates first impressions of a new place. ‘Everything in Kalgoorlie is BIG’; ‘driving through the country I saw the



salt lakes, then the silos dotted on the horizon'; 'you drive along big roads to the edge of the city where communities are cut off behind the crisscrossing freeways'; 'it is magnificent, beautiful country'; 'there is the feeling of the tropics'.

Overlaid on the landscape and climate are the first impressions of the distances, ease or difficulty of movement in that area, the community, the houses, the location of organisations and services, the local economy and so on.

*'I love to drive around to get a feel for what it looks like, where things are, look at the landscape and vegetation, see how the houses are organised. It's important to understand the local context so I can start to understand local knowledge.'*

In beginning to develop trust in working relationships it is the informal time that team members have found to be the most significant: 'Chatting over a coffee and scones in Tassie or a toasted sandwich in Kalgoorlie'; 'I took biscuits from Brunetti in Melbourne to Townsville to share at morning tea'; 'we had a wonderful meal at a seafood restaurant'.

We are also conscious of the small amount of time we have to communicate the support role we can provide. Each situation is unique, and we are learning about what

this role involves as we go along. Who we talk to and spend time with; the expectations of the project members and FaCS worker; the time we have available for project participants, such as workers, the management committee, community members.

We are learning that we need to be well enough prepared to adapt to any situation. We have developed a First Visit Resource Manual on the topics we think we might encounter. This includes: action research; ethics; the role of the Australian Institute of Family Studies in the Stronger Families Fund (SFF) and the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX). As one of the team noted:

*'I need to be observant, flexible and responsive. I need to have all this stuff – this is what it takes to do the job. I need to have an agenda, and I need to be able to drop it.'*

We are learning also how to introduce action research into a project, how to support projects, and how to work using an action research framework with the different roles and responsibilities between SFLEX worker, SFF project members and FaCS workers. In an early first visit the SFLEX worker and FaCS worker agreed that the latter would first spend time on the work plan, and the former would then talk about using an action research approach. On reflection they would now do it the other

way around and look at how using an action research approach can inform workplan development.

SFLEX workers talk about how tired they become on first visits. This appears to be due to their absorption in a new environment, and their need to be flexible and adaptive while attempting to establish a relationship that will be regarded by all as beneficial to the project.

### **A challenge and exploration**

It can be lonely in a strange place, and indeed team members have developed some strategies to overcome the aloneness. Some take a part of their life with them, such as photos, a fishing rod, a good book, bathers for a swim. Others plan to pursue a special interest, such as photography or indulging in the local cuisine.

There is also elation and appreciation that accompanies meeting new people and learning about their lives: learning about a new place, a new community; hearing and talking about new ideas and solutions to community and family issues; and the exploration together of how we might be able to connect and make a positive contribution to that process.

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