



**L**ibraries, galleries and other cultural institutions can seem like unapproachable and intimidating places for the homeless, people dealing with mental health challenges and other marginalised groups. But, as ALISON BURNLEY reports, a partnership between State Library of Queensland and School of Hard Knocks is working to break down the invisible barriers that keep less fortunate members of our community out of libraries.

Walking into State Library of Queensland (SLQ) on a Monday morning, I see a meeting room filled with participants who are absorbed in putting pen to paper. As I chat with the people around the table and hear their stories, it becomes clear just how powerful it is that they are here, taking ownership of the space. The Word on the Street program, delivered by School of Hard Knocks in partnership with SLQ, has been an opportunity for us to engage with a community that traditionally would not step into a library. As all of us who work in large institutions know, threshold fear is a very real issue for many clients we hope to reach. So how do we overcome it? How do we get new audiences through our intimidating front doors?


Word on the Street has done just that. School of Hard Knocks is a charitable organisation based in Melbourne that aims to empower disadvantaged adults through the arts. Having opened a Queensland branch in 2014, School of Hard Knocks approached SLQ as a partner for Word on the Street, a creative writing project that works predominantly with users of mental health services.

An independent evaluation report showed that the project resulted in significant impacts. It identified key outcomes for participants, including increased energy, optimism and sense of closeness with others, the ability to think clearly and make good decisions, a perceived

*David Stavanger, Word on the Street facilitator, works with participants.*

improvement in mental health and a significant increase in rating of life satisfaction. One participant said, 'Writing was my first introduction to getting out of my room for years – after agoraphobia. It's like a natural high. I look forward to it. If I could do this class every day I would.'

Susan Gilmartin, School of Hard Knocks Operations Manager, noted that SLQ is becoming 'like a second home' to participants and is now their meeting place, as participants feel comfortable and safe here. This outcome is particularly significant because it suggests a reduction in threshold fear, which would not have been possible without the partnership with School of Hard Knocks. We continue to build on the work with them by supporting participants to gain access to other programs and services on offer at the library. Participants have, for example, performed at State Library events. This work is about the long game, enabling participants to feel that the library continues to be a place for them.

Strong partnership work is at the heart of our plans to reduce threshold fear. Through collaborations with carefully selected external organisations, we can connect with communities that we otherwise might not be able to reach. These relationships enable us to learn more about the communities we are here to serve, to learn how to best meet their needs and create positive outcomes for them in the way Word on the Street continues to do. 

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