

Transcript for the podcast **Coming Home**

Episode 5: Home to Nowhere

Kate: A warning to listeners. This episode contains references to domestic abuse and violence.

This podcast was made on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and we pay our respect to Elders past and present and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be listening.

[Music]

Neen: Mark said, “Neen, I wouldn't put my dog in that.” I said, “Yeah, I know, but there might come a time when, if things get too bad, it might be the only option I've got.”

Mary: And I still applied for houses. I was knocked back so many, one million times.

Kiara: And then he had told me that he all he did was just play along with the game and pacify them.

[Music]

INTRO

Kate: G'day, and welcome back to this 5th and second last episode of **Coming Home**. My name is Kate Lawrence. If this is your first time listening, I highly recommend that you go back to the start. The whole series will make much more sense.

In this episode we follow Neen's story as she teeters on the knife edge of eviction. Mary's family punishes her when Jimmy goes to jail and she finds herself homeless and Kiara faces the challenge of extricating herself from an abusive, coercive and controlling ex-partner.

[Music]

So let's get started. Here's Neen from her life today, as she recorded into her phone from her home in late 2020.

Neen: Hi there everyone, I was supposed to go out to, back out to Rivers again today, which would have been really enjoyable in amongst all the plants and flowers with a nice cuppa. Um, got up this morning feeling extremely lethargic and just no energy whatsoever, so couldn't go out there. Went back to bed and I've only just woken up, so I don't know what's going on, whether there's something, whether I have some sort of bug or something, but my energy levels are worse than what they usually are.

[Music]

Kate: We pick up Neen's story after she's been granted the disability support pension. She now has some security of income, but with only weeks before she's evicted from the home she's lived in for 15 years, she still needs to find a roof over her head.

Neen: I went into Haven homes and I said (claps), "I've been approved DSP." I said, "Now I've gotta try and bloody work out where I'm gonna live." And they said, you know, "Yeah, housing list is so long." And I went, great, you know.

Kate: The Housing Lists. Most of us have heard about the long and growing housing lists for so long, we have almost come to accept them as normal. But they are a direct consequence of policies and decisions made by successive governments over the last 70 years.

Here's Dr Katrina Raynor, a research fellow at the University of Melbourne, and also the academic convener for the Hallmark Research Initiative for Affordable Housing, who we've heard in previous episodes. When she mentions social housing she's referring to government owned housing.

Katrina: In the sixties, about 8% of our housing stock was social housing and it's now about four and a half percent. And in Victoria, it's three and a half percent. Following world war two, we thought about social housing as an asset to the community, as something that supported low income families to live productive lives and to support returning servicemen to live productive lives.

Over time, because we, our population has grown and we have failed to invest in social and affordable housing, it's become a smaller and smaller and smaller part of our housing system. And it's increasingly about housing the most vulnerable people in society with the most complex needs.

And so the role that it plays in our housing system has changed over time. And that has impacted on the way that we deliver the housing and we ration the housing and the way that people perceive the housing, because of this trend of over time of under investing in this social infrastructure and this social asset.

Kate: In December 2020, the Victorian government made an announcement about social housing to great celebration.

[Music]

Dan: Our big housing build, 5.3 billion dollars of new money provided in last year's budget, that's on top of more than billion that we'd already committed to invest, both in terms of maintenance and new build at the election in 2018. This is more than 12,000 extra units, so new units, an increase of 10% fully on the total social and affordable public housing stock.

Kate: But it's all relative. Here's Tess, the homelessness case manager with Juno, who we've heard before.

Tess: It's estimated we have over a hundred thousand people on the wait list.

Kate: The state government announcement is definitely good news for a sector starved of political commitment, funds and action, but with over 100,000 on the waiting list, 12000 new units is just the beginning.

Neen: And Mark's there and he's saying, "She's got to be out of her house by bloody June and we're well into May". And then they said, "Look, we, you know, we haven't got, we can put you on the list, but we don't have anything."

Anyway, in desperation, like Mark said, just sort of off the top of his head, he said, "Oh," he said, "God, you know what? If I knew. If anyone had a caravan," he said, "I'd put her up in my backyard, in the caravan." And then they said, "Oh, well, we actually deal with a couple of like, caravan people that do put people up in caravans in backyards."

I went you could have bloody told us that three months ago! Gone through all this for, you know... So, then we had to go down and of course, one was down near Frankston, so we had to go all the way down there. And she said, yeah, and this is the van and we, opened it and it was just a shell, there was no stove in it, no nothing. And I'm like, "No." (laughs)

And Mark said, "Ah no, that's not..." And she's saying, "You gotta pay me now." Um, no I'm not paying you until I see like, something that's worth paying for. Anyway, Mark said, "Neen," he said. "I wouldn't put my dog in that." I said, "Yeah, I know. But there might come a time when, if things get too bad, it might be the only option I've got." And he said, "I think we can do a little bit better than that, hopefully," he said.

So anyway, the next day we go down to Springvale and there was one there, and it was a big van, and it had like, you, oh, it had shower and toilet and everything in it. And, you know, just sort of kitchen, a lounge, little kitchen and lounge area. And then the bedrooms had four bunks and then, off that was like the main bedroom. And I said, "Now that would be ideal."

But we couldn't get it in his yard, like the measurements just weren't there. So anyway, we found this next one- had toilet, shower. I had a camp toilet. I used to have to empty that every, you know. That wasn't great, but better than nothing. So anyway, we got that. It's in his backyard and I'm like, "Ah," you know.

Kate: To understand women's homelessness better, it helps us to understand how it looks different to men's homelessness. For women, the streets, rough sleeping will always be a much more dangerous option than it is for men. For women with children, to avoid being on the streets, they're often forced into situations where they are choosing, perhaps the lesser of two evils, more likely the known evil over the unknown.

Tess: When people think of homelessness, they often do think of people who are rough sleeping. So, people are sleeping in, yeah, on the streets, in, in stairwells, in squats, kind of intense, but that's actually less prevalent than say people who are couch surfing with family and friends temporarily. They may be in emergency or crisis accommodation. They may be in rooming houses.

That's actually kind of the larger, um, picture when it comes to homelessness. It means that the community don't recognise how prevalent homelessness is.

Neen: Then it was back to the house, get everything packed up. I, I'm with a singing group, "Sisters and Mistresses", and the people in that group were just amazing. They came in. They helped me pack up the house.

One of them's son drove a truck. So, in came the truck and whatever shit I had left was pretty much put on that truck. Another couple, um, were renting a storage unit in Epping and they said, look we've got about half a dozen things in it, so all your stuff can go in there. "That's great. Let me know how much you want for it." Nah.

Kate: Neen has something that is invaluable when facing a housing or any crisis - a social network. But for so many women the impact of coercive control is to systematically and deliberately isolate them from friends and family and social supports.

Beth: When men isolate women, it makes them feel cut off from the world, quite literally and emotionally and psychologically.

Kate: This is Beth the Family Violence outpost worker at Juno, who we've heard from in previous episodes.

Beth: And that there's less people to talk to. There's no one to reach out to. And then at the same time, perpetrators constantly harassing women and monitoring them and demanding to know where they are, every second of the day, when they're not with the perpetrator, can also make women feel quite stuck. It makes you the perpetrator, same omnipotent: he's there, he's ever present, and he's never going to go away.

Neen: Okay so, that was done and I was so like, relieved, but I knew that the struggle was nowhere near over so I couldn't sort of allow myself to breathe. And Mark, he was still, "Have you rang Haven Homes?" Oh. (laughs) Anyway, we, we kept on them and then Mark was through office of housing, and of course he hadn't told them that I was in there.

And he said, "I can't tell them that your here. So, you know, you can't be here for long." I said, "Well, I understand that, but.." And he said, you know, "They do housing inspections and things all the time so..," or, you know, and he'd had a few issues go wrong with the house so, people that had to come out and do things.

And he said, oh, the story is that, you know, if they come out that that's my son's caravan and it's in the yard while he is doing, whatever. But, you know, we, we realised that that certainly wasn't a permanent thing. And then my daughter, she said, "Mum, it's not big enough for the two of us."

[Sad music]

So she, she was going out with a boy at the time. She moved in with him and his parents, which I really didn't want to happen. So yeah, the family was split. I did still see her, and she was still going to school too.

So then, I was sort of worried about how that was gonna affect her, because she had to come all the way over from Montmorency across to Reservoir to go to school. And she did it, but I was a bit worried about how it was going to affect her schooling and stuff like that.

Kate: Women separated from their children because of homelessness is not uncommon, and is part of the many losses that occur as a result of homelessness.

Here's Dr Andrea Sharam, from RMIT University, who we've heard from in other episodes, reading from a Swinburne University longitudinal study of around 50 families experiencing homelessness that she co-authored with Professor Kath Hulse.

Andrea: Homelessness is about loss: a progressive stripping back of the elements of family and home, which the families regarded as effectively one and the same. The families experienced

loss: loss of settled accommodation, loss of possessions, loss of family pets and loss of family support and friends....

And threatening their ability to parent: to keep their children well-presented and clean and to preserve memories. In this process of cumulative dispossession, parents feared that their family might be stripped back further through loss of their children. This fear was very real; 14 families had relinquished care of at least one of their children, usually to an ex-partner or family member, but occasionally to a foster carer, and 17 had some form of intervention, or threatened intervention by DHS acting in its child-protection capacity during the three waves of the research.

Kate: Here's an actor reading a response from one of the participants, a 13-year-old boy who lived with his father, while his mother and sister lived in rooming houses or slept in their car.

Actor: It was weird and painful because at that time, at the beginning of it, I had a place, like I was staying with my dad and my brother so I had somewhere, but at the back of my mind knowing that my mother was sleeping in the car and stuff like that ... It was a little bit weird for me and my dad; I didn't feel like it was a good place for me at the time.

[Music]

Neen: Anyway, we were in there and Mark's getting sick all the time.

[Coughing and wheezing]

He had really bad lung issues and there was a lot of mould in the house and it was an old and like the housing hadn't done anything to it for years.

And so, you know, he said, "Well, I'm going to have to put in for a transfer." And his district nurse helped him with all of that, as well. This house came up in, oh, Williamstown I think it was. You know, he sort of came down with that exciting news and I was right in the middle of not knowing where the hell I was going or, or I was fighting every day for things to happen and they just weren't happening.

[Sad music]

And he comes in with that news and I said, "Oh, that's all, that's, I'm really pleased for you if that works out," and then I burst into tears. He, he was really worried. For like three days. I just cried and cried and cried. I couldn't stop. And he said, he said to me, you really had me worried

there. And I said, well, that, that there was one of, many of the nervous breakdowns that I've had over the years.

And I was getting quite concerned about it as well, coz I just couldn't stop. But it had been almost 12 months of this constant thing every day, trying to get things done. Trying to get settlement sorted, knock-backs on, on housing, knock-backs on all of that sort of stuff, coming up against those brick walls.

That was a bloody tough time. And that was when he said that he thought that I would go back to my ex and I said, you know what? I said, as hard as that time was, there was never one moment where I said I want to go back to him. Never entered my head that I would, would do that.

The housing was never stable anyway, but that just destabilised everything even further. Then there was even more reason to get on to Haven Homes and, but then he found out it was in the high-rise. And he couldn't take it cause he's got two dogs,

Kate: Mark not being able to move takes the immediate pressure off Neen, but she still needs to hide from the housing department, move as soon as possible, and she needs to become a client of a housing support agency, before she can get a home through a housing provider like Haven Homes.

Neen: Because Mark was saying, "Neen, you can't keep staying in the van." I said well, "I understand that Mark, but I can't pull it out of thin air. I'm doing my best. The only thing I haven't done is gone down there and sat in the office (laughs) until a house became available."

And he said, "You've gotta keep ringing them." And I said, "I've been ringing them. I ring them every day." My energy was totally drained. It took everything out of me. And on this particular day, I rang them and they said, "We've got someone here that may be able to take you on. I'll just have a word to them."

[Music]

Later on that day, Beatrice or Beatrice, she, she called me and said, we're sorta 95% sure that we can take you on, but we need to fill out the paperwork and all that sort of stuff.

Kate: Beatrice works for Juno, and so Neen becomes a client of Juno's, a housing support agency for women and the makers of this podcast.

Here's Tess from Juno explaining what they do:

Tess: The crux of the support we provide is, is to help find, a suitable housing option. So for, for people who may be in that housing crisis, it's finding either private rental, doing kind of applications for social housing, making referrals for community housing or other kinds of options that are out there.

Or for people who might be currently housed, but experiencing kind of housing stress, it might look like connecting them with financial support to keep them in that house, if that's a feasible option, or if it's not going to be affordable for them to continue living there to sustain the rent, then we'll look at sourcing a more affordable option for them.

[Music]

Kate: And two weeks after becoming a client of Juno, Neen gets a call.

Neen: They said, oh, look, this house has become available. Would you be interested in having a look. I said “Absolutely!” (laughs) I said, “Is the Pope a Catholic?” (laughs)

[Music]

Kate: While Neen laughs at her own quip, the system takes its toll. The relentless grind of being a squeaky wheel in a giant bureaucracy that for the most part is only really shifting chairs on the Titanic, trying to offer something when there's nothing much to offer except another way of saying there's nothing much to offer.

Nearly all of us know the frustration of bureaucracies, whether it's the hours on hold with a telephone company or getting through to make an insurance claim, it can sap the joy out of a posy of flowers and leave us anywhere from irritated at the wasted time to blind with rage at the arbitrary and absurd rules or the dehumanising way we've been treated.

[Music]

Luckily for most of us we don't have to engage with these systems too often, but for people in housing crisis, people like Neen, for months it was a daily activity, a full time job, driven by survival and it impacts people already in crisis. It unnecessarily re-traumatises vulnerable people over and over and over again.

Bureaucracies are a feature of modern society but that doesn't mean they always serve us well, individually or collectively. They're the hallmark of large institutions built around hierarchical systems, not human beings.

[Music]

Mary grew up in a Turkish immigrant family. She married in her early twenties, but it didn't work out. Eventually she met an fell in love with Jimmy which has been a rocky relationship, with Mary moving back to her parents' house many times.

But when Jimmy was sentenced to prison, Mary's parents were deeply embarrassed and despite Mary being pregnant with her second child, they told her to get out. So Mary packed up her car, her two-year-old son and she left

Mary: I went to a friend's house. She said she couldn't have me there. And then I went to Salvation Army. They said they don't do that thing anymore. Finding people, places to live- said if you found a place and you couldn't afford it, then we'd pay for it for you, but only for a week here and a week there.

And then I called up Centrelink I said, "I need help. I'm homeless now and I don't know where to go. I really don't." Um, they gave me a few phone numbers and Salvation Army gave me a few phone numbers, and they all kind of directed me to St Vincent's in Glenroy.

Kate: I asked Mary how she was feeling at this point.

Mary: I actually was a bit optimistic at this stage. I was like, okay, I'll find my own place. I've got this.

Kate: And how she was feeling about her parents.

Mary: I was so upset. I was like, how dare you put me in this situation? I thought, come on, like, if you wanted me to leave, you could say eventually find your own place while you're still here, or you know, something like that.

Like, you didn't have to kick me out. I'm 30 plus years old. I'm pregnant and I've got this baby as well, this one-year-old, and the douche is in jail. That's not my fault, that he's in jail. They made it feel like, made me feel like it was my fault. Like, "How dare you go with someone and have a kid with someone who's ended up in jail?"

I don't think they thought about the fact that I was homeless. Maybe the word will get out of that, about that too. Like your daughter's homeless with your grandkid out there. You're not doing anything about that, but your son-in-law is in jail. Like that's the part that were more, "Oh, what are we going to say about this now?"

It's all community-based. I was so angry with my mum, coz the words kick, like, "Get out," just went round and round and round in my head.

Kate: So Mary's left her parents' house with nowhere to go. Of her two sisters, one sides with her parents and the other has no capacity. And a friend Mary asks, says she can't stay there, so she's turns to the housing crisis support system.

Tess: It is very, very complicated at the base level, if you're experiencing housing crisis, you don't have somewhere to stay, then your first point of contact would be the crisis services or the access points.

Kate: This is Tess again, one of Juno's homelessness case managers.

Tess: So, you'd be making contact depending on which area you live in. There's a different service that will service that area, so you would make contact with the initial assessment and planning team, who would do an assessment of your situation, and then either provide you with some emergency accommodation, or refer you on to another option, like a rooming house option or community housing, things like that.

From there, they can also refer you for case management support. So, that's the kind of support that Juno provide. So, we'll get referrals from Haven Home, say. The people who I guess have kind of more complexity with their situations and could really use that ongoing case management support, they'll come through to us, and then we'll pick up that case management support and work with people on a longer term kind of basis to find, help find that, housing option.

Mary: Vincent care put me in a hotel with my son for a few days. They paid for that. Salvation Army gave us some food. I didn't realise how expensive it was to eat takeaway for you know, two days' straight. I couldn't do it. Plus, you know, your body doesn't agree with all that oil sometimes and all that, ugh. I'm not throwing up because I'm pregnant, I'm throwing up because the food's bad.

So, it was a slap in the face. It was so hard for me to feed my son like that. I thought he needs a good cooked meal. Then I went to another hotel for a day or two. I paid for that. Tried to get Salvation Army to help with my phone bill, which they did.

[Music]

Apparently we don't do petrol vouchers or anything like that anymore, but I did get a lot of food support. There's this food bank place that does nappies and wipes as well, when you pick out the food that you want in the basket. And that was good. I really, really appreciated that, coz I get to pick what I need, whereas sometimes, they had to just give me bags of crackers and nuts.

After that I helped, I had help with 'Mums and Bubs'. They got me my double pram, like ready for my second son as well. Royal Women's Hospital helped me out with food when I was there for my appointments and my friends helped me out. I had two friends at the time, so yeah, I stayed at my friends' houses. I alternated between two of my friends' houses.

One- I stayed there for a month. Thankfully, she didn't let me pay for the rent, but I cleaned her house, top to bottom. I looked after her kids. She had two kids. I would make as much food as I could, and then I went to my other friend's house, but she was pregnant too. She was newly pregnant. I was probably four months ahead of her, but she didn't want me to be there during, when I gave birth.

Kate: Again, we see a picture of homelessness for women that's different. Here's Drs Raynor and Sharam again.

Katrina: I think that people's vision of who is homeless is the old man with a big beard who's been drinking his entire life, or like, the young, scary guy who's selling ice on the street. Like, I think we have a very male, very substance abuse image of who the standard person experiencing homelessness is.

And it's not the case. When you look at who is most likely to present to homelessness support services, it's usually a woman with children. It's usually a woman in in her thirties with children, and so I think the face of homelessness is quite different to what people have in their heads, and women's experiences of homelessness are different to men's.

Andrea: In statistical terms, we track primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness. So the, the primary homelessness, being on the streets, that's a pretty small number. There's a much larger number, far larger number of people who have a roof over their head most of the time, but that roof, can be very unstable and very, very insecure, so couch surfing..

You know, I interviewed, you know, young mums who had had four children, couch surfing at their friend's houses and churning through the friends, then. The friends wouldn't want them back, you know, kick them out after a certain time. Wouldn't want them back. It destroyed the relationships having to ask for those things. Not being able to get help. You'd go to the

homelessness service, but because you've got the couch for that night. you can't get to the head of the queue. So yes, there's a lot of people are living in very precarious housing situations.

[Music]

And one of the main places really in our major cities now are rooming houses. Some of which, many of which, are illegal rooming houses run by very unscrupulous, sometimes criminals. These are very, often very, very dangerous places.

And of course, then it's the women who stay in relationships, abusive relationships. They, they put up with the violence in order to have that roof over your head, but we would still class that as being homeless because you're a prisoner in, in the house. You don't have any security.

Kate: Mary, and most women with children, are not ever going to appear on our streets. So, it's critical we broaden our understanding and images of homelessness, to see the women and children in their cars, in unsafe rooming houses, in overcrowded houses and in caravan shells. And the women trapped in violent and abusive homes with nowhere else to go.

Mary: I was at housing commission services regularly, asking for help and support. "Is there some sort of crisis accommodation?" That, the one that really got to me was, I called, probably the first month of being homeless, I called child protective services because they were in contact with me, probably six months prior, because of the situation and what he'd done.

I said, "Look, I'm homeless. I know you said if there's any issues I can call. Can you help me with this situation? Is there anything you can either tell me to do, or send me somewhere or something?"

He said, "As long as you're not sleeping in the car with your son, I cannot help you. You are a great mum and you're clearly doing everything you can to keep your son off the streets."

"If you're an alcoholic we'd be at your doorstep. If you're taking any drugs, instead of feeding your son, we'd put you both into a house somewhere, but because you've got nothing bad like that, and you're still trying to find a place for your kid and yourself, and you're doing something about your situation, we can't help you." They're child protective services! They should be the first ones to help me!

Andrea: "We are seeing an increase in family homelessness and that is, of course dominated by single mothers. It's really very problematic. In Australia, we say we protect the rights of children, but we have a system which, which doesn't. You show up to a homelessness service

with a child in tow.. It's not that you get to the front of the queue, because a child is going to be experiencing homelessness. It just doesn't work that way.

Yeah, I did this piece of research where we interviewed homeless families three times over 18 months, and they said to me repeatedly, the first time we interviewed them, they expected to go to the front of the queue and they were shocked to the core that the system, we, we just did not care about what happened to those children.

And those children, they had to work extremely hard to try and protect their children from psychological harm. They were very concerned that there would be long-lasting impacts, but of course, they had to work very hard to physically protect them during the times when they are homeless.

Because they were cycling in and out of rooming houses, some of them illegal rooming houses, caravan parks, crisis accommodation, in and out of all sorts of housing types, and encountered many, many problems- things like trying to maintain stability for your children. So, you get given a motel room for three nights, but it's 50 kilometres away from where your child goes to school- trying to get your child up, onto the train to school and come picking them up. Those kinds of issues that they faced. So, immensely hard to keep the stability for children.

[Music]

Kate: So Mary was directed to the crisis access point in the northern region.

Mary: Every other, every service has directed me to you guys, coz its the northern one, that supposedly helps everyone, but they couldn't do anything. That's the only option. They were, the people inside there were, I know for a fact they must have been in worse situations than me, and they would just show them the door.

I saw this three days straight when I was there, every single day at nine o'clock in the morning I was there, coz apparently nine o'clock in the morning, they can help you. So nine o'clock in the morning, I was there for three days straight with my son every single day, and they still did nothing. And they make you wait.

And I still applied for houses for rentals, wherever I thought I could afford- something decent enough for me, my kids. I was knocked back so many, one million times, because at the end of the day, I'm homeless for a reason, which is my fault!

Kate: Here's both Tess the housing worker, and Dr Sharam the researcher, talking about the issues of discrimination in housing rentals against single mothers.

Tess: For women trying to enter the private rental market, if you're a single mother, real estate agents don't look too fondly upon that. They, they want either, a nuclear family, they want that double income. They don't want a single mum looking after children, coz they just don't see that as kind of a long term viable option.

Andrea: Discrimination, when it comes to private rental is a very difficult thing to establish, because agents have other legitimate grounds for discrimination. So there, they would never admit, "Oh, we discriminated against this, this woman because she was a single mother." I mean, parental status, of course is protected under equal opportunity laws, but they could say we didn't feel like her income was satisfactory. That's a legitimate. So it's hard for us to know how extensive it really is.

Mary: I did everything I could to keep my son, obviously not sleeping in the car with me, which we did, once or twice. I just didn't tell anyone at the time, because I thought that they're just going to start pointing the finger. This is what, they point the finger, like, you're homeless because of you. That's how everyone made me feel, except for the "Mums and Bubs" and the mum's groups, except for them.

Kate: Here's Dr Sharam talking about some of the niitty-gritty details of the crisis accommodation system we have now.

Andrea: It's a heavily rationed system now. So you have to have your high, complex, multiple needs, really to have much of a chance to get in. If you go to a crisis housing service, a homelessness service, you, you literally have to be facing sleeping on the street that night, really, in most cases to get service out of them.

And even if you do, you'll be funded for a few nights in a motel someplace, and then it's back to square one. If you get through that, you might get to go into crisis housing, you get 13 nights, and then they have to turf to a few out, by law. And those places are often, really horrible, often a lot of violent people there, so lots of families don't want to go to those places.

You might, if you're really lucky, you're getting to transitional housing, which is supposed to be 12 weeks stay, but many people end up in there for years. So, the problem is that the whole crisis system, there's nowhere to exit to. There's very little social housing to go into and the private rental sector, while there's a lot of it, most of it is unaffordable to those people who are on benefits.

Kate: I asked Mary about contact with Jimmy at this time.

Mary: Um, I was in contact with him. He'd call randomly, and sometimes I answered, sometimes I couldn't answer. But you know, he'd wanted to speak to the one and a half year old a few times. It was, "Hey Dad, Hey Dad." That's all he said.

And he apologised every phone call during that whole six months. He knew I was homeless. He tried to get on to the support people in jail to say, "Yes, she's my ex missus, but she's got my son as well. Like, can you help them, they're homeless?" They couldn't do anything.

Kate: When Mary was eight months pregnant, her sister got married and the wedding opened up communication with Mary's family.

Mary: My mum spoke to me the next day like, "I'm not going to push you to do anything, but what's your plans, coz you're about to give birth?" I said, "Mum, I'm literally homeless when I give birth." And she's like, "No, you're not. You can come back here whenever you want."

That changed, the whenever you want part, probably a week later, coz she was like, "Oh, look, me and your dad are gonna go and have a trip on our own for a couple of weeks. So, you can come back here after you give birth with your baby." It was another a slap in the face.

I was booked in for a induction, but they had to do it two days early. So, I told my sisters, you need to watch my son, because I can't do this by myself. I can't have him in the labor room with me. So, I was crying. I was all over the place. My sisters stepped up.

So, I was induced, contractions and everything for a good 24 hours and then eventually they tell me to push, and with the fourth push, he came straight out. I thought, yes, (laughs) so much better than the first one.

So, and then ___ called from jail. Heard his son cry for the first time, which made me cry, because I'm so emotional and so angry at the same time.

[Music]

Kate: Homelessness doesn't just impact a person for the time they are homeless. Homeless has a long tail. It leaves a trail of scars, psychological wounds of not mattering, of being neglected by an uncaring system and society, of being alone, an outsider. And these things are remembered. They don't magically heal once the crisis is past. They continue to undermine self esteem and identity and change people's relationships with the world around them. For children, this impact can be for a lifetime.

And on a societal level, as we'll hear later in this series, the cost of homelessness is far greater than the cost of making housing a universal social infrastructure.

[Music]

In the last episode Kiara's situation with her husband reached a crisis point when he tried to strangle her, threatened to stab her and urinated over her and her children's possessions as she's packing the car to leave.

Kiara goes back with police and child protection to get her young son. Her husband seems remorseful. He convinces her that he'll change, he'll do whatever it takes: counselling; men's behaviour change; and anger management programs. Kiara's persuaded he is genuine. She decides not to press charges against him and she tries again. But it's never that simple- not in Kiara's mind and not in the system that surrounds her.

Kiara: I even tried harder the second time round because I go, I thought, I was ashamed- an embarrassment to my parents, my family, with the first relationship ending. I couldn't let this happen again. So time and time again, I kept on trying to make it work and change.

Again with my children in the car, and I just felt like, "Where, where do I go? What do I do now? What are my parents going to think when.. me coming back and telling them this." I'm gonna, I just felt like again, a big, big failure. Yeah.

[Music]

Kate: Kiara's deep shame, is now compounded by a second failed marriage, and years of abuse and coercive control.

Katrina: Families can often make women feel ashamed, or try and hide the family violence. So, they like, making women feel obligated to stay in a relationship that's abusive because they don't want the fallout for their family or the shame that goes along with that. And I guess on a community level, it's kind of the same.

Kate: But it's not just layers of shame that keep women stuck in abusive relationships. As Kiara asked herself, it's the very practical and real problem of, "Where do I go?" Because in our housing system, there is nowhere to go.

Katrina: We know that women will often go back to their perpetrators. There's a number of reasons for that, but one of them is, there's simply no other options and they can't afford to live anywhere else. Often throughout the course of this abusive relationship, they've lost

relationships with their families and friends, and don't have those people to fall back on. Um, and the impact of that can literally lead to someone dying.

So, access to affordable housing can literally save lives and can avoid broken bones and irreparable, physical and mental damage to a human being, to a woman and her children. Um, and we can talk about like the, the monetary impacts of housing until the cows come home, but fundamentally a lack of housing can kill a person.

Kiara: He persuaded me to come back, that he'll work things out and that he'll get counselling etc. And when I came back and when DHS and the police came to the door step, he said to me that I expected this to happen. Then Child Protection stepped in and they came and interviewed me and questioned me.

One of the women had said to me that she couldn't understand why I still wanted to work at the marriage and came back, considering he basically wanted to stab me and, uh, he was choking me and all these things were happening.

And I guess, yeah, I look back and I, I can understand that, at that time, hearing it from, from the person telling me that I, yeah, I felt, I didn't feel too good. I felt really bad, because I felt as if she was judging me as putting my husband and my relationship first before the children's safety. I guess now I look back and I, and I don't blame her for making that comment because that's something that I hold guilt to now. I guess there's so many chances I've given and that believing, hoping that things would change and it never did.

Kate: Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Women are judged and blamed for staying in a violent relationship, judged for supposedly putting the relationship with their partner ahead of their children.

If they leave, they're judged as failures for not being able to make the marriage last, judged because the crippling poverty, the broken housing system that accompanies single parents means she can't provide a home for her children, let alone all the other costs that go with raising kids that she wants to provide for them. And all the while she blames herself and is abused by a partner who tells her it's all her fault.

Over the 18 months from March, 2015, Kiara doesn't live with her partner. Instead there's a regime of authorised and carefully controlled contacts, while he attends the men's behaviour change programs Kiara is promised will help him.

Kiara: It was supervised access at the office and then gradually, so after he's done a certain amount of counselling and men's behaviour change, he then, they allowed him to have in-home visits, but then with supervised access.

First a DHS worker was in, and scheduled to be in while ah, and supervise the visits at home. And then after that, what happened is that he allocated his, his oldest son who was from another relationship to supervise these visits, which was actually quite a, I guess, a bad idea, um because most of the time his son would be just on the computer and playing games, etc, so he wasn't really supervising.

Kate: Eventually Kiara tells her husband about her father-in-law's behaviour.

Kiara: When I finally mentioned to him about what his dad, dad did, he actually, basically threw his dad out of the house.

Kate: During this time, Kiara's living in a private rental and money is tight. She asks her family for money and then constantly plays a catch-up game, paying them back. In episode three, we heard about housing affordability stress from Dr Raynor. Here she is again talking about broader impacts of housing stress.

Katrina: The impacts of it are really wide ranging and significant, and you can see really strong correlations between housing stress and mental health deterioration. You can see strong connections between housing stress and lower productivity, less access to disposable income, less ability to help your kids do homework, because there's financial stresses or there's overcrowding.

If you're already spending a lot of your money on housing, then you're more likely to be in lower quality housing, so there's linkages to mould and asthma and cardiovascular diseases and all of these sorts of things. So, I guess the Cliff's note of that is housing and health are fundamentally intertwined, both from a mental health/stress perspective and from a housing quality/physical health perspective.

[Music]

Kate: Finally the day arrives where the Department of Human Services pulls out and Kiara's husband returns to the family home

Kiara: After he had gone through counselling, men's behaviour change etc, and then when he was, finally was able to step back in the family home, he was blaming me that I reported him to police and got him into trouble.

He only just did everything, just to pacify and get a DHS off his back really. I guess it always, it did hit me that was a possibility, but I guess I was always on the hope that men's behaviour change and the counselling was going to work. And then he had told me that he, all he did was just play along with the game and, to pacify them and basically do what they requested of him. He told me that, that he knew how to work the system.

Kate: I asked Kiara how it feels to hear that from her husband, after 18 months of interventions.

Kiara: That was, uh, (laughs) I guess, a big kick to the stomach. It was like, I realised then and there, I should have just left. I wasted an extra year on the hope that things would change.

Yeah, I wasted another year of my life and the children's life, holding onto another hope and false promises that he never intended to change. And again, I felt really stupid (laughs) coz, um, again, I fell for his lies and manipulation. I felt pretty dumb.(sighs) Yeah.

I said to him that I could no longer, after everything I went through, I could no longer live a lie anymore, because it's clearly is not going to work. If men behavioural change and all this that we went through to get back together and to reunite is, not going to work then, I don't see that happening.

[Music]

And especially when I did mention that you're still blaming me for your actions. So, he wasn't, uh, happy with things, with that. That was where he says that if we're going to separate that, that I had to leave my son with him, that I have a lot of work with my other daughter with autism, and that she'd need a lot of help.

He persuaded me to believe that he would do a good job raising my son. That was probably another hardest decision I made, was actually to step down because we both wanted to raise my son, our son.

Kate: It might seem incredible that Kiara would leave her son with this man, but she's endured years of coercive and controlling abuse from him, and as we heard in the last episode, this gives him disproportionate power over her decision-making.

Katrina: Perpetrators are often using access to the children as another tool of family violence. So, they all of a sudden, when the woman decides to leave the partner, the ex partner or the perpetrator, becomes quite obsessed with getting access to the children, being a model parent, but often it is just about actually perpetrating further abuse towards the mum.

[Music]

Kate: So Kiara leaves her husband for the last time, leaving her young son with him, convinced that he will care for him.

Kiara: Initially, I stayed at my sister's house for a bit. Then I guess I had to break the news to my parents. That was difficult. I told Mum and Dad and they told me to go back there. I stayed there for a while and then my ex-husband had an issue with that. He didn't want our son being around my parents.

And then after that, I had to move out of that house because I didn't want to involve my parents, because he, my ex-husband knew where they lived and he'll start trouble.

Kiara: Again the question, "Why doesn't she just leave?" Here we see a woman who has left and she's being pursued and cut off from her family by her abuser.

Katrina: The women do leave. They leave the relationship, they leave the home, they leave everything behind to get away from abuse, but perpetrators, relentlessly chase them, whether that's navigating through the legal system to harass women, literally stalking women, using spy ware or financially trying to cut her off so she's destitute. It just never ends and I think that's the thing we don't understand about family violence.

Kate: Perhaps we should be asking a similar question of our society- why don't we do something about the glaring, worsening and damaging inequalities that create the conditions for women's abuse and poverty?

Kiara: I was still on a waiting list. It's been, it's actually been like 11 years now. I applied for again, public housing.

Kate: Again this issue of the public housing waiting lists, and the impact of a failed social housing system. Here's Dr Sharam explaining some of the historical issues that have changed our public housing system overtime.

Andrea: Most of it was built in the 30 years after the second world war, so by the 1980s, it's getting to be quite old. It needs major refurbishments. So the, the state governments were needing to put a lot more back into the system at that time. And they really didn't want to do that. So rather than doing up the houses again, they would sell them off, so the number of houses has reduced.

Nationally, it's down to about 4%. In Victoria, which is the laggard, you know, it's three and a half percent of total housing stock. So, there's not very much of it. We see from the 1990s...you know we had the recession we had to have, we see the house prices go off and rents have followed. Households, there's a certain proportion of households, who become quite impoverished and so they had a need for public housing but they couldn't get in.

Kate: According to Homes For All, a Victoria consortium of non-profit agencies, charities and politicians, in the last 20 years, Victoria's population grew by nearly one and a half million, but only 89 extra public housing properties were built.

[Music]

In the next episode of Coming Home, we come to the end of the women's journeys, and see how it is, in this mess of a system, that they finally find what is the birthright of all on planet Earth, a place to call home.

[Music]

OUTRO

Thanks for listening to Coming Home, a podcast about the impact of Australia's inequitable gender culture and failed housing system, on three strong yet ordinary women.

If this podcast has raised any issues for you, please call 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or see juno.org.au for a list of support services.

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If you like this podcast, please tell people. Word of mouth is the most common way people learn about podcasts. But liking, reviewing and sharing on social media also helps. Podcasting can be like speaking into the void, so we love hearing from listeners.

This podcast is made by Juno, an intersectional feminist social change organisation run by women for women. Since 2002, Juno has been working with women and non-binary folk in Melbourne's north, who are experiencing homelessness or family violence. Juno also advocates to improve systems and structures which contribute to gendered poverty, homelessness and family violence. You can find out more about Juno on their website www.juno.org.au and follow them on social media.

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This podcast is written and produced by me, Kate Lawrence.

[Music]

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