



WALKING IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

By Neil Starkie

We often talk about walking in someone else's shoes. It's a phrase that suggests empathy, understanding and a sense of perspective. The idea that if we could just see life from someone else's point of view, we might better understand what they are going through.

Earlier this week, I was reminded just how difficult that really is.

When staff arrived at our Heathridge centre on Monday morning, they found a man asleep outside. He's someone we know well. We know parts of his story and the struggles he faces each day. The kind of struggles that don't come and go, but stay with you, shaping how you live, how you think and how you cope.

He told us that the night before he had been sleeping under a trailer. During the night, someone had attacked him and stolen what few possessions he had. He managed to make his way to The Spiers Centre and slept on a bench outside. When we spoke to him that morning, he was disoriented, but clear about one thing. He had come here because he feels safe and, in his words, we see him as a human being.

As we were talking, I noticed that he was only wearing one shoe. He thought the other had been taken during the night. It's a small detail, but it isn't really small at all. For someone who relies on his own two feet to get everywhere, shoes are not just clothing. They are everything - his means of transport, his independence and his ability to keep moving.

We checked our Community Closet, but we didn't have anything that would fit. So I went home and grabbed a pair of Crocs that I no longer need.

There is something that has stayed with me since that moment. On Monday morning, he walked away in my shoes. And yet, no matter how much I try, I will never truly know what it feels like to walk in his.

That is the tension in that phrase, isn't it?

We talk about walking in someone else's shoes as a way of understanding. But the reality is, we can't fully step into someone else's experience. We can listen, we can care and we can try to understand. But we don't carry their history, their trauma and their day-to-day reality.

What we can do is walk alongside them.

This week, we have also seen what it looks like when others choose to do the same.

We have recently partnered with Julie and Jaime Cross from Haiven Real Estate, a local business that genuinely lives out the idea of community supporting community. Through their support, we now have advertising on 6iX commencing this week, helping us reach people earlier and ensuring that those who need support know where to find it.

At the same time, our new sea container has been delivered and installed at Heathridge, expertly lifted into place by Urban Cranes and manufactured by Royal Wolf. This will soon become the new home for our Community Closet, providing a dedicated space where people can access clothing in a way that preserves dignity and choice. It follows on from the completion of our outdoor seating areas, all designed with the concept of a psychologically informed environment in mind.

These things don't happen in isolation. They happen because people and organisations choose to walk alongside us.

Even with careful planning, things don't always go smoothly.

At one point this week, we were watching Cyclone Narelle closely, wondering whether it might delay the installation. In the end, she held off. But the truck carrying the container broke down on its way to Heathridge, a reminder that even the best plans can be tested. It was resolved quickly, and when the container was finally lifted into place, Deano summed it up simply: "Easy. No problem."

But as I reflect on the week, it is not the logistics or the milestones that stay with me most.

It is that moment on Monday morning.

A man who had lost what little he had, who walked to a place where he felt safe, and who left with something small, but important.

A pair of shoes.

Maybe that is what walking in someone else's shoes really means.

Not that we fully understand someone else's journey, but that we choose to walk alongside them where we can, in whatever way we are able.

And when individuals, businesses and community come together in that way, something powerful begins to take shape. If you are a local business or organisation and have ever wondered how you might make a difference, perhaps it starts by simply walking alongside.

Because sometimes, the most meaningful change doesn't come from standing in someone else's shoes. It comes from making sure they don't have to walk alone.