

# There is no place

A young Bendigo mother-to-be has become the ambassador for Homeless Persons Week. **LISA KORYCKI** reports.

**GEMMA** Douglas looks like any 22-year-old.

If you passed her on the street there is nothing about her that would make you look twice.

But at 16, Gemma was "dancing for dollars" and couch surfing as her life spiralled out of control.

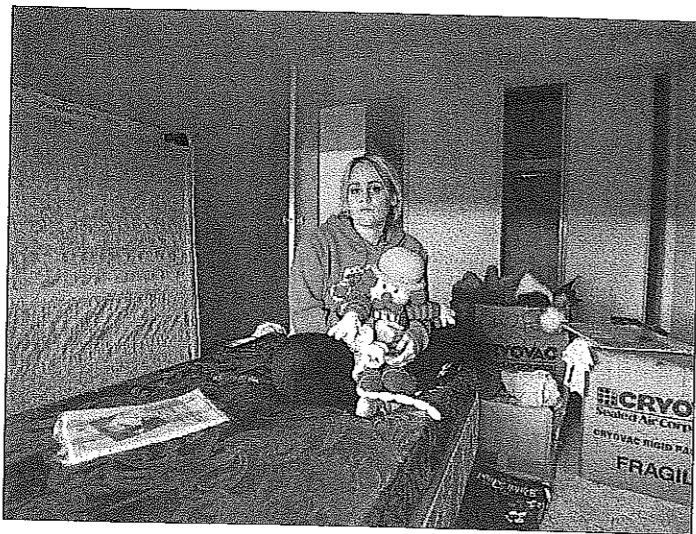
What began as a search for friends to ease her loneliness led her down a path of alcohol and drug abuse and homelessness.

"I went looking for friends and fell into the wrong crowd," Gemma said.

"These people did drugs, but they seemed okay to me at the time. They gave me a place to stay — I kind of looked up to them."

After years of abuse, Gemma, now 15 weeks pregnant, is starting to rebuild her life with the help of a pilot program with Loddon Mallee Housing Services.

Under the program, A Place Called Home, Gemma has the chance to create a



**PREPARATIONS:** Gemma Douglas in the baby's room, which she is setting up.

home for her and her unborn child.

Normally the constant flow of people needing housing means people are placed in temporary accommodation for six to nine months and then moved on.

If Gemma sees a drug and alcohol worker, checks in with LMHS regularly and

maintains her house, after 12 months she gets to stay.

Her 12 months' volunteer work with LMHS gives her the experience she needs to start a welfare course to become a drug and alcohol counsellor.

She is also Bendigo's ambassador for Homeless Persons Week, which is held

from August 2-9, to bring attention to the plight of Australia's homeless people.

"I want to do it. I want to be in a nice house and I want nice things," Gemma said.

"I want to have a healthy baby in a healthy house."

Gemma also wants to help others avoid the path she took.

Gemma went from one night to the next not knowing where she would sleep.

She has slept in the roof of buildings, in Rosalind Park and barbecue areas.

With her mum away a lot because of work commitments and her dad out of town, Gemma said it was easier to hang out with friends than go home.

"At 16 nobody wants to be at home by themselves, so I would stay on the couch at friends'."

With no commitments, she fell into the nightclub scene and "found a love of serving grog."

"They (nightclubs) let me dance on the bar for an extra \$5 an hour," Gemma said.

"I was intoxicated on drugs the entire time."

Gemma and a group of friends had a few meagre possessions — an Esky for a fridge and a shabby couch, sometimes a bed.

They tried to find accommodation but were often rejected.

She said private rentals were fraught with danger.

"We had one landlord break down the door while I was sleeping on the couch and yell at us for having so many people staying there."

"We were rejected by landlords and looked down on by people because of the way we looked."

Gemma and her partner decided to try a new start

and move to Queensland to be with her partner's father.

They drove more than 1300 kilometres only to be told they weren't welcome.

Extreme cyclone conditions meant they couldn't camp in caravan parks, and they couldn't afford accommodation — so they slept in the car.

"We got kicked out of every vacant block we slept in," Gemma said.

"After three days we ran out of food and had no petrol... we had to wait for a Centrelink payment to keep going."

It was on the return journey that Gemma hit rock-bottom.

Their car broke down in the middle of nowhere on a long weekend.

After being towed to the nearest mechanic they had no option but to sleep in the car and wait until it opened.

On the morning when the mechanic arrived at work he mistakenly took Gemma and her partner as thieves and called the police.

"Four undercover raid cars cornered us in the servo; they didn't believe we weren't trying to rob the place," Gemma said.

"They stripped the whole car in front of the servo; the whole town watched me go into a panic attack."

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# like your own home

"They had to call an ambulance... I was in tears because they were pulling my underwear, my personal stuff out in front of everybody."

"It was degrading, that was my whole life in that car. To have your whole life thrown around and be treated like a criminal when I hadn't done anything wrong."

Gemma was put in touch with LMHS not long after returning to Bendigo.

It was a turning point in her life.

LMHS is the largest integrated housing and homelessness service in regional Australia, and is rapidly becoming one of the biggest non-government landlords in Victoria.

A service spokesperson said there were more homeless people than there were houses for them.

"We need to make people aware there is a problem in this city — it is probably a bit more underground than in the city, but it's there."

"It's a chronic problem and there are a whole range of reasons. Everybody has a story."

"The ongoing affordable housing crisis is contributing to the different faces of homelessness as the poorest, the youngest and the eldest get squeezed out of ultra-competitive rental markets."

"There is a need for people to understand any one of us,

at any time in our life, could become homeless."

Gemma encourages anyone on the verge of homelessness to reach out and use the services available.

"There are places out there that are trying to help."

"A lot of people are proud, they don't want to ask for help, but you just need to say your story."

"Sometimes all you need is a person to listen."

Anyone who has been through what Gemma has endured could be excused for being bitter.

But she has a remarkable take on life and is determined to move forward.

Gemma said she had reconciled with her mum, and "now has the best relationship ever."

"You just have to live with life and deal with it. I have lashed out. I had a lot of times when I was very angry and disappointed in life."

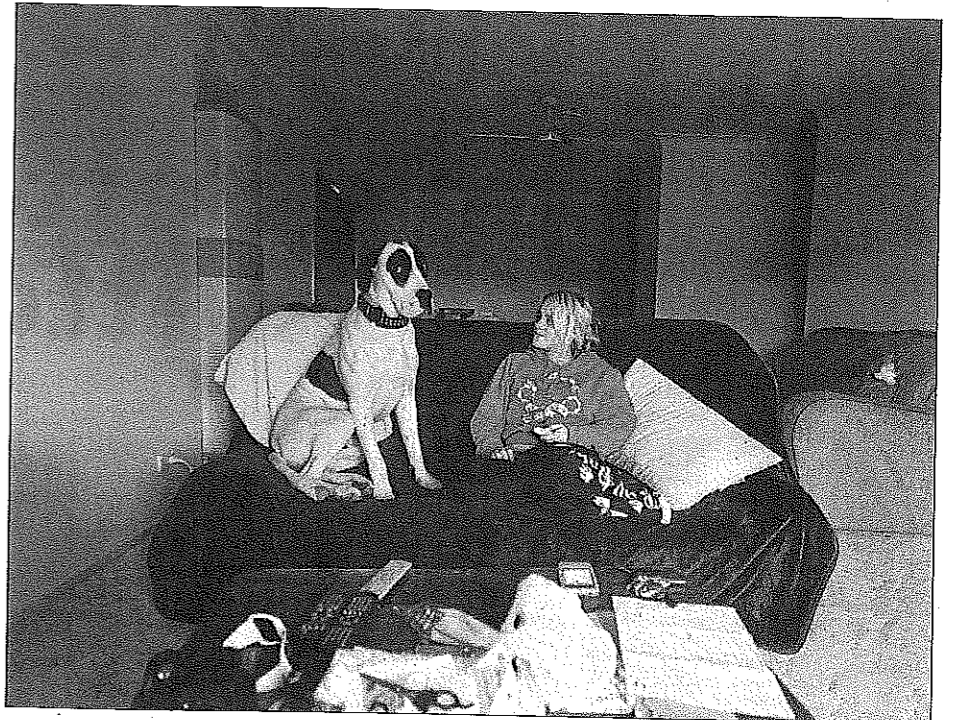
"But I've figured out my life is my life, I did what I did."

"I blamed everyone else when I was 15-16, but I want to have a life."

"I want to teach my child to love and save and teach them to think for themselves, follow their dreams."

"I'm looking forward to having a home. A home to build a life on."

Advertiser photographer Alex Ellinghausen captures Bendigo's homeless in a moving pictorial essay this Saturday in More Weekend.



**FRIENDS:** Gemma with her dog, Snoopy, in her housing services home.

Pictures: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN