

## NEW COMMUNITY SERVICE OFFERING CANCER RESPITE

Interview: Stephanie Williams

*Jay Chapman's own journey through a cancer diagnosis and treatment was the catalyst for her to start Homely Retreats. It's a growing Hobart not-for-profit providing a much needed service that fills a gap in respite services available to cancer patients and their families.*

### How did Homely Retreats

**come about?** On December 16 2014, I was suddenly diagnosed with Lymphoma (a form of blood cancer). As a wife and mother of two young boys (aged 4 and 12), our world fell into chaos overnight. The following day I began an intense regime of chemotherapy which meant I was admitted to hospital for 6 days every 21 days for the next 6 months. I missed my family so much and in between hospital stays, my husband (Dan) and I struggled to keep up the bills due to loss of income, the volume of specialist appointments, and day to day chores - even school drop off and pick up became a logistical nightmare. Dan became the only source of income for our family and the only adult well enough to perform the household duties. Life was really tough and I could feel our family dividing as we moved into a full on 'coping' stage. Fortunately by June 2015, I was given the 'all clear' and I began a long road to recovery. As I reflected on our family experience, I thought about what could have improved? I remembered when I began researching cancer support services and was met by voices on the end

of the phone telling me that there was no respite available in Tasmania and a 3-5 year waiting list for services in Victoria and NSW. I was devastated. I thought 'I could be dead by then.' I decided that there needed to be a service that provided an experience where families could rest and reconnect.

**So what did you do?** In 2018 Homely Retreats was founded as a registered not-for-profit organisation and immediately began offering a complimentary weekend break to eligible Tasmanian families. The only eligibility criteria is that a parent is undergoing (or has undergone in the past 12 months) treatment for a cancer diagnosis whilst caring for dependents under the age of 18 years. In the two and a half years of service, Homely Retreats has positively impacted the lives of over 140 Tasmanians.

**How does it work?** We're regularly in contact with staff at the Royal Hobart Hospital, Cancer Council Tasmania and The Leukaemia Foundation to educate staff about our services, who refer patients. Our service has a very simple application process because we understand that families are typically stressed, tired and in need of a break. Clients apply through our website [www.homelyretreats.com.au](http://www.homelyretreats.com.au) and once applications are verified, we work with the client what the family needs and would enjoy.



The Homely Retreat's original committee.

**You started Homely Retreats because there was nothing like it during your own journey - is this something the Tasmanian Health Service should be offering?** Homely Retreats is currently exclusively the only source of respite for Tasmanians affected by cancer. There is a sparse range of respite services across other mainland states, but as mentioned the waiting lists can be up to 5 years. Families applying for respite need support now - they are applying because they need help. I believe the government could be offering a stronger mental health/family counselling support system for the families that we assist. I recall enquiring about counselling and was informed that I would need to seek help privately.

**What are the benefits to families?** We provide HOPE and time to reconnect the family to their greatest asset at this time...each other! Families who use our services always send a lovely message remarking how grateful they are that our service exists and how they used their weekend break as something to look forward to - a glimmer of hope. Giving the gift of family time - allowing families to take a break from the stress of their current situation to rest, reconnect and enjoy their time together making everlasting family memories - hence our hashtag bumper sticker #FAMILYTIMEMATTERS

**Where does your funding come from?** Homely Retreats is a publicly funded not-for-profit organisation. Our servicing capacity is increasing by 23% each year, but the rate of applications is increasing by around 30%, meaning we currently have 27 families on our waiting list. The average cost of sending a family for a weekend of respite is \$550. We apply for any available government grants and host a range of annual fundraisers as well - a major fundraiser raffle, our school's Community Fundraiser Day (schools across the state dress in blue and raise funds), and sell a small range of merchandise on our website. We are extremely grateful for the support of the community which allows us to continue to offer our respite services in Tasmania.

**How can readers help?** The amazing Purdie family have recently purchased Abs By The Bay accommodation at Tarama on the Tasman Peninsula and have partnered with Homely Retreats. This has given us the opportunity to offer families extended periods of respite due to the heavily reduced costs. To keep our costs down and allow us to assist as many families as possible, we're always seeking accommodation that is suitable for families as well as petrol, food and experiences. Contact us at [info@homelyretreats.com.au](mailto:info@homelyretreats.com.au) or [www.homelyretreats.com.au](http://www.homelyretreats.com.au)