



Soft landing

A fresh way of looking at the problem of discarded mattresses ended up becoming a recipe for renewal for a group of disillusioned, long-term unemployed men

BY HAZEL FLYNN



Russell Bullivant started working two days a week with Soft Landing. With experience and skills training, he's progressed to the leading hand position

By the time he was 41, Russell Bullivant had spent most of his adult life in prison. Finally ready to leave that world behind and start anew, he soon found that his history tainted him.

Every door he approached was slammed shut. Every door but one. Less than two years later, everything has changed for Bullivant: he is settled and happy, planning to get married and on an upward career track. And the surprising foundation of this second chance? Grungy discarded mattresses.

Bullivant is one of many people whose lives have been turned around by an idea sparked in 2009, when local councils in NSW introduced a fee to dump bedding at rubbish tips. The fee wasn't exorbitant – \$25 per mattress – but it was enough to deter many from doing the right thing. When they learned of the charge, people instead left their old mattresses on the street, or drove to the nearest charity clothing bins to dump their loads.

For the Wollongong branch of the non-denominational charity Mission Australia, that meant 80 mattresses dumped at its bins in the first week of the fee. None were fit to be handed on to needy people, yet all had to be dealt with. As Bill Dibley, NSW Operations Manager, Social Enterprise, explains, the logical step was to pack them in a truck and take

them to the tip, “But we got told the same thing: ‘We have to charge you the fee, too.’”

Dibley and his team began to think about turning their problem into a commercial opportunity. They started to research what lay under the grubby surface of a used mattress, and think about how the components might be recycled. They discovered that mattresses contain wood (for the frames) and, depending on their age and quality, metal springs or foam or coconut husk for padding, plus “shoddy” (reconstituted felt material) and the fabric covering. Could a use be found for every component?

While some of the team had engineering backgrounds – Dibley himself was formerly a boilermaker – none had experience with this kind of recycling. But, says Dibley, they shared the view that “no is not an answer. You just keep going back to the drawing board and reworking and brainstorming and reworking, and you get there eventually.” What they've come up with through their creative, lateral approach is remarkable.

Steel is always in demand – it can be baled, then melted down. Coconut husk presented more of a challenge. A brainwave led to the idea of using it for organic weed-control matting, prized by landscapers who want an alternative to non-biodegradable synthetics. Foam is treated and made into carpet underlay. The timber goes either to the nearest Men's Shed charity outlet, where it's turned into toys, or off to be made into woodchips.

The fabric and shoddy is sent to Melbourne where it is re-pulped, steam-cleaned and used to make animal bedding, or it can be turned into protective blankets for furniture removalists; what can't be re-used that way is ground up and turned into punching bag filler.

The clever name of the business – “Soft Landing” – refers to both the bedding being recycled and the whole point of the exercise: a second chance like the one that has changed Bullivant’s life.

“It’s not just about old mattresses to us,” says Dibley. As he explains, it’s also about “creating jobs and more localised employment, helping and working with the people that are most in need. The way we do that is through the mattress – it’s a great tool, but it’s not what the programme’s actually about.

“Some staff here might have three generations at home, all unemployed. You’ve got to try and break that cycle and work with them. Some have come from the corrective services system. We don’t judge. When we did our interview with Russell two years ago,



he said, ‘Look, I’ve had a colourful background.’ We said, ‘Colourful’s fine. Your past has happened; show us what your future can be.’”

Respect is key here, but so is responsibility. Dibley’s team is clear with people that it’s not a babysitting service and they do terminate staff if they don’t do the right thing.

The three-month pilot programme led to Job Fund stimulus funding of \$460,000. The goal was to have at

Mattress facts

- The average life span of a mattress is seven to ten years, though most hotels replace them after three.
- Australians throw away 1.25 million mattresses every year; this equates to 875,000 cubic metres of landfill.
- An average mattress contains 12.5kg of steel, 2kg of wood and 1.5kg of foam.

least ten trainees in the first year and create three full-time positions plus an admin role, with the emphasis on the long-term unemployed and Indigenous Australians. And it had to be sustainable: “There’s no point in creating a co-dependency, where you set a programme up, create all these opportunities, and 12 months later funding finishes and you drop off.”

Sustainable it is. Those initial goals have been far exceeded, thanks to rapid growth as more councils began to use the service. Soft Landing now turns over \$3.4 million a year (set to rise to around \$4.5 million in 2013). It’s a break-even business model, so all the profits go back into job creation.

When it began, 300 to 500 mattresses a week was what Dibley calls the Utopia goal. “Now they’re doing 3000 a week. They’re recycling 90-95% of the mattresses and want to go higher.”

With over 75 paid staff and 35 volunteers, Soft Landing has 15 trucks collecting from councils, hotels and private waste companies, covering from the Victorian border to the north NSW coast and out to Dubbo – roughly a 2000km round trip.

Now it’s partnering with a company to make brand-new, good quality mattresses and sell them through charity shops at \$90 for a single and \$135 for a queen. Last September, it won the NSW Premier’s Award for Sustainability Excellence and the Community Sustainability Award. A new business venture called Featherweight produces about 40,000 punching bags a year for a local wholesaler. “We’ve saved the 18 kilos that’s in each of those 40,000 bags from going to landfill, and we employ 15 people with disabilities in the business,” says Dibley.

For him, the greatest thing is to see someone come with very low skill levels, and within two weeks be up to working capacity. “We ensure that we’re up-skilling people. It’s not just about cutting a mattress; they complete traineeships in waste management, they get their forklift ticket, they get their [Occupational Health & Safety] card, their first-aid card. Some of them get their truck licence.”

Bullivant is living testimony to how it works. “It’s unbelievable how it’s changed my life,” he says. Abused badly as a child, for many years he lived “on the back foot, tried every drug possible. I hit 40 and I put in about 40 applications for jobs and was knocked back because of my history. I was put here two days a week by my job network. Bill said, ‘You give us a good day, and we’ll give you a fair go.’”

Within two weeks Bullivant was offered a casual position. Three months later he was offered a traineeship in

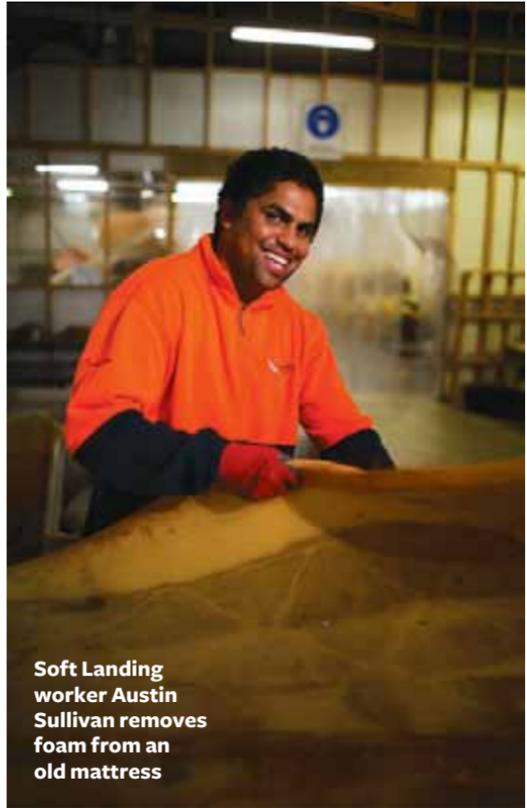
waste management and four months after that the leading hand's position.

One of the workers who Bullivant oversees and mentors is 36-year-old Rodney Smith. "I'd been unemployed for two-and-a-half years," he says. "Came out of a five-year violent relationship, lost my teeth in the process, lost my selling position as a result of that. Lost all my confidence. Wasn't really interested in looking for work. Wasn't interested in living."

His turnaround started when Jobfind - a free recruitment service - said, "Would you like to do some volunteer work to get yourself back into the workforce?" He did that for 11 months. "Missed two opportunities to get in, didn't have enough ID and that kind of stuff. But the third time I got taken in and I've never looked back," says Smith.

Bullivant explains that they do find some fairly odd stuff inside the mattresses - "An iPod, pieces of jewellery from time to time, syringes, cigarette butts."

"Lizards, geckos," adds Smith. Dibley goes on: "In one kid's mattress we found half their homework stuffed in. All the notes, school books, textbooks, library books. Another one had heaps of clothing - I'd say the kid



**Soft Landing
worker Austin
Sullivan removes
foam from an
old mattress**

was told to clean his room, so he just stuffed it inside the mattress."

The best find yet is one that's still being talked about - \$3000 in cash. "It was in notes, like an old lady had sewn it all in there," says Bullivant. "The guys were a little bit upset when we called the police and handed it in," says Dibley, with a grin. "But they were very, very happy when six weeks later no-one had claimed it, and it came back to us and paid for the Christmas party." ■