



No time to waste for

Life on Sydney's streets may be about to get even harder, writes **Angela Saurine**

TO LOOK at Shane Summerfield you would never know he once played A-grade representative baseball and performed in two state dance academies. The 32-year-old has been living on a mattress under a train line for eight years. When he moved to Sydney from Queensland he began taking drugs, including heroin, and now spends much of his time reading fantasy novels.

He would love to do some physical work but finds that whenever he tells an employer he is a grand mal epileptic, the job disappears.

"My old man says, 'Don't tell anybody', but if I have a fit while I'm working and somebody got injured I couldn't handle it," he says.

Robert Marchesi, 56, has matted hair, a nicotine-stained moustache and a warm smile, which fades as he explains the reason he became homeless.

"I went home from work and found my best mate having sex with my wife," he says.

Travers Roach, 30, left home when he was 13 after being raped by his mother's boyfriend for eight years. The offender spent 12 months behind bars, but Roach is still suffering and often thinks about ending his life.

His friend, Leigh Riley, 24, threatens to "beat him up" for that kind of talk.

Since he began driving a Missionbeat van, Albert Torrens has come to know these men well, and many others who share similar stories.

He is greeted like a god when he walks down the lane behind Matthew Talbot Hostel (Mat Tal, as blokes in the street call it), not for past exploits as a winger for the St George Illawarra and Manly rugby league teams, but for his uniform. Torrens' van provides transport between hostels and hospitals for many of Sydney's most desperate citizens. Two of the more colourful characters he encounters are Peter Goldfinch and Timothy Clissold — twins, although the latter changed his name by deed poll. When Torrens feels down he often looks for the bickering brothers, born 20 minutes apart. They always manage to make him smile.

Just down the road from Woolloomooloo's Finger Wharf, a magnet for the city's social set and home to Hollywood superstar Russell Crowe, the gutters are lined with homeless men. Some read the paper, one is on crutches and another has plaster on his arm. Missionbeat recently introduced a Medibeat van with a nurse who can treat these homeless men, who will often go barefoot or wear ill-fitting shoes or thongs, for ailments such as cuts from broken glass, falls and assaults. They are also linked up with dentists, doctors and podiatrists.

Heavily tattooed Vince Greentree, 56, has lived on the streets for more than three decades and proudly reveals he met Prime Minister Kevin Rudd when he visited recently.

"I'm supposed to be schizophrenic," he says.

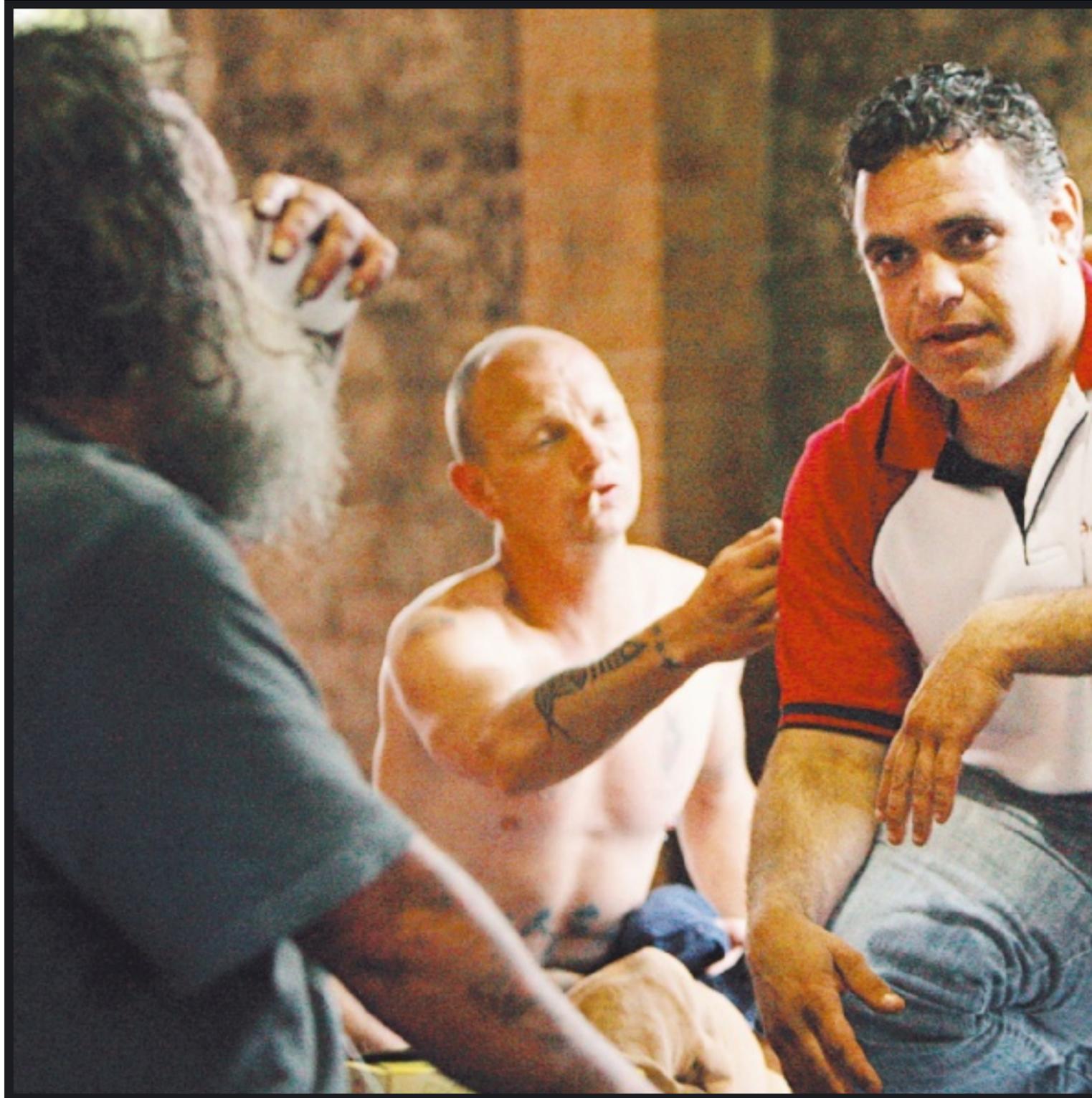
Rudd has taken a strong interest in the homeless since his elevation to power a year ago, commissioning a white paper to set out a national plan to address the issue through to 2020. Funding is set to be announced at the COAG meeting this weekend.

With the global economic crisis tightening its grip, those in the sector say there is no time to waste. A paper by Access Economics this week warned the credit crunch will lead to low- and middle-income earners turning to welfare services. As a result, the needs of the nation's worst-off will become even more acute.

Homeless services have seen a rise in people living on the edge asking for food vouchers and petrol vouchers, but say it is too early to see the results of the economic downturn yet.

About 16 per cent of all homeless people are sleeping rough — the rest are relying on the generosity of friends and family, or short-term crisis centres or boarding houses.

Torrens has seen new faces, but there are a lot of old faces too. So far he has only seen a couple of families living on the streets: "I don't want to see any more, either," he adds.



Homeless services have seen a rise in people living on the edge

Sleeping rough: Regulars on the Missionbeat run include twins Peter Goldfinch (left) and Timothy Clissold
Picture: John Fotiadis