



Sunday, August 2, 2020

Dear **Gestalt Centre** Community,

We are amid a pandemic, and it's hard to say with any confidence when more typical ways of living will return. As I sit to write this letter, a State of Disaster has just been announced in Victoria, and again we are confronted with new restrictions and curfews. And even as I understand these measures are necessary, I feel frustrated and sad for the losses of so many freedoms of movement that I have taken for granted. It is not the year we thought it would be, and my natural optimism is taking a bit of a whack.

In the meantime, the Centre's team have continued to deliver all training and clinic programs. If you haven't been to Lygon Street for a while, you might have lost sense of all the behind-the-scenes activity that makes up our school. This email is in part an attempt to contextualize this and put some names to the team.

I would like you to know that we have all been working harder than ever in very difficult times. I also want to recognize the efforts of faculty who have needed to pivot delivering the course online and who have worked so hard together to thoughtfully make the dynamic and practical changes required to keep the classes going. We have never faced such a fundamental challenge to the way we run before.

Part of the behind the scenes work has been to identify additional venues for our weekly training and other training events. We have bookings until the end of the year and are waiting for regulations to support a return to face to face teaching. We will keep you informed. Please be advised if the residential weekend in October cannot take place; you will receive a credit that covers the accommodation costs. We are committed to delivering the program online if we cannot meet in person.

Our focus for the rest of the year will be to continue to improve what we are doing. We understand that in this new 'reality' learning how to teach and learn online effectively is crucial. If teaching and meeting online are to be our new world, then we must be able to include in our thinking the impact of social distancing and increased stress and fear. More than ever before, we need to be able to respond to the growing mental health disaster that is not just looming but present for many, many people. It is already the pressing context (figure) of much of the work in the clinic. Thus, we might need to make it more figural in our GTA learning.

So, we are focusing on doing what we do better, and this takes time, energy and commitment all in a complex environment where resources (including money) are stretched to the limit. While Covid-19 has changed the platform for the delivery of our program, our running costs have not changed. I want to assure you that we have held student fees and wellbeing in mind throughout the entire time.

I want to take this opportunity to provide some background to the business and its long-term sustainability. There have been many iterations of company ownership and management since inception 25 years ago. Currently, GTA and ConnectGround are operated by a privately-owned company, owned by me. I have never envisaged this company as a profit-making enterprise. Since I became sole Director in late 2018, I have committed all proceeds back into the business to create several new roles and expanded some existing positions, to ensure the company is sustainable into the future. Belinda has been our course manager for the past 18 months. Leanne is our Director of Training. Carolyn works three days a week supporting the clinic and her team of Cameron and Nicole. Katrina is our office manager, and she oversees the work of Kim and Miranda. There are also currently 7 faculty. It's a busy place.

However, it has struck me recently that while the nature of the business is essentially a not for profit; this is not necessarily transparent to others. So, it is timely to think about how the structure of the business could change to better support the amazing work we are all doing. I am starting to think about how to run the business entirely as a social enterprise, and how we could operate as a not for profit business in the future. The idea of sharing ownership and accountability as a gestalt community of practice excites me. I am very open to having conversations about how to achieve this, particularly from anyone who has experience in this area.

One way we have already started to move the business towards a social enterprise was the establishment of the ConnectGround clinic. This clinic and the work we do for the community through this part of the company is a source of enormous pride for me. It is a unique opportunity for students and graduates too. This year we have been able to keep extending our services to the community and have offered many free therapy places alongside our low-cost options - at least 90 sessions a week. ConnectGround receives no government or philanthropic funds to provide this service. We currently have 18 interns, 12 of these have continued to work onsite.

I have also been pleased to be able to provide support for students who have been severely impacted by Covid-19.

Throughout the pandemic (at least until now), we have managed to keep the doors open and continue to employ administration. Clinic staff and interns have continued to attend and work. We have been able to keep paying rent, and we are ready and waiting to welcome everyone back as soon as we can.

As Gestaltists we are always foremost contextualists. The context of this pandemic demands new ways of engaging with each other and the theory and practice of gestalt therapy. We will be permanently changed by these circumstances, and the multiple ways we all respond to them. In this way we are each, each other's greatest teachers. As we look around, at our peers and faculty we can get a glimpse of the ways this compelling context impacts us. I want to really appreciate you all for being a part of this ongoing process, knowing it is never easy and we have no comfort in an immediate resolution.

In order that this letter inform a dialogue and not be a static document, you are invited to join Carolyn, Leanne, Belinda and me at a community meeting 6.15 on Thursday 13th August to talk about where we are all at. Here's the link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/3503705264?pwd=Wit3WVAvVGtRKzNYMjBTME5BV1didz09>

Kind regards,

Tony Jackson