**One door closes and another one opens**

By Jennie Kerr, Birches Apartments

It was just before Grand-Prix weekend and coronavirus had suddenly become very real. We had over 150 cancellations for bookings right up until the end of April and all the customers were entitled to their deposits back. Suddenly we had no bookings!

I turned the electricity off in most of the apartments and started packing a few things away and then informed my staff I would have to apply for the Job Seeker payment for them. Then I received a call from Launch Housing, a government supported organisation based in Melbourne that provides various services to people experiencing homelessness and hardship.

They explained that they were reaching out to the hospitality industry for assistance with finding accommodation for people who had lost their jobs due to Covid-19 and generally for people who had fallen on hard times.

I felt I could help these people and at the same time it was allowing me to continue to pay my bills as well. I could quite easily have closed the business but I was happy I could help.

The guests who checked in through Launch Housing were mostly grateful, humble, maybe sad but happy to have a roof over their heads. St Vinnies brought meals every few days, so the clients were stocked up with food. It could have been any one of us in that situation.

They had their own apartments and were treated as any other guests. Like most people during lock-down they remained in their rooms. One of the guests, a chef, would cook up a batch of pancakes on Saturday mornings and would share them round. Also guests would often ask for the vacuum cleaner so they could help out with the housekeeping.

Yes, we did have a couple of problems but everyone deals with those. The apartments were kept spotless and people were polite. Once they had settled they realised they were not alone.

We are still accommodating Launch Housing guests and we will continue to do so if required.

Having the Launch Housing guests helped me keep my business open and at the same time I was able to reciprocate by providing accommodation to people in need.

People experiencing homelessness and hardship face great difficulties. Access to safe and secure housing is one of the most basic human needs. However, homelessness is not just about housing. It’s about lack of connectedness with family, friends and the community and lack of control over one’s environment. Mental health plays a big part.

Would I do it all again if the situation arose?. Absolutely!

By the way it’s great to see our regular guests coming back after coronavirus and we welcome anyone who is looking for reasonable rates and friendly and professional staff. Oh and we also have designated pet friendly apartments.