

C H A O S
i n t h e m a k i n g

A collection of stories
recounting the history of
the Community Houses
Association of the Outer
Eastern Suburbs.

NEWSLETTER
No 2



SEPTEMBER
1979

MEMBERSHIP of the COMMUNITY HOUSES/CENTRES ASSOCIATION of the OUTER EASTERN SUBURBS
INQUIRIES: PHONE 876-3421 or HELEN 200-6037

At our last association meeting, it was agreed that each Community Centre would take it in turn to produce C.H.A.O.S. The aim of C.H.A.O.S. is to provide an opportunity to publicise areas of interest and concern to all our members, on a regular basis. For example, areas of special interest could be included:- After School Activities, Youth Groups, Elderly Citizens, Health Programs, etc. We have made a small start in this direction in this issue, and look to each of our members to provide more information for our next issue.

N.R.C.C.

NEXT MEETING

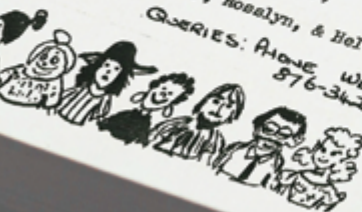
TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 11th at 8.00 P.M.
NORTH RINGWOOD COMMUNITY CENTRE
120 GRAN ROAD
NORTH RINGWOOD

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN YOUR COMMUNITY HOUSE/CENTRE?
Where are you going? Where do you hope to go?
How are you feeling about your house/centre?
Your successes? - Your lead balloons?

Community Centre, Montrose Village Network,
Living & Learning Centre, Mountain District
operative.

Publicity between Community Centres.
(Neil Tolliday)
Newsletter F.A.C.S. funding.
(Wendy, Rosalyn, & Helen)

QUERIES: ANNE WENDY
876-3421



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Strengthening local communities

Community Houses Association of the Outer Eastern Suburbs

CHAOS

Foreword

Among the first regions in Melbourne to establish Community Houses, the CHAOS Network in the outer eastern suburbs celebrates its 40th year of community development and education. Born from Whitlam's 1970s Australian Assistance Plan, Neighbourhood Houses were seeded on the fringe of mainstream society, where they were nurtured and supported on a shoe-string budget. Unique in their own ways, these Houses found solutions to their community issues, empowered people to make better choices, and supported social justice any way they could.

No longer on the fringes of mainstream society, CHAOS can be proud of the programs, services, innovative thinking and community development practices that Houses have offered over these years. We led the way in childcare, preschool activities and after school care programs, long before we had funding and regulations. We built a bridge to empower and liberate women, to support diverse cultural needs and to advocate for social equality. We survived the upheaval of council amalgamations and serious cuts to an already fragile funding system, with encroaching regulations.

By rallying our efforts, we became a line item in the state budget, achieving government recognition and recurrent financial support.

We've gone from producing community newsletters to publishing books, from doing interviews on radio to producing our own television series and YouTube videos. We've advertised on mainstream TV and spread our messages on social media platforms. We've run everything from home birth classes to dying with dignity, offering vital education programs to becoming RTOs. We trained ourselves to support our communities through the Information Technology Revolution, whilst continuing to advocate for health and well-being and further education.

We formed strong relationships with our communities, our networks, our governments, other organisations and partners. We've helped to organise Local, State and National conferences and events, from grassroots street parties to festivals, from state-wide campaigns to speaking at conferences overseas. From humbly furnishing our Houses from hard rubbish collections, to building million dollar businesses, employing hundreds of people. From finding the confidence to

speaking up and taking a stand, to developing astute communication and lobbying skills, CHAOS has been teaching, mentoring and paving the way for community connection, all the while redefining boundaries.

We could speak of award-winning violence prevention programs, being the first to offer formal community development training, or providing support for indigenous communities in Central Australia, CHAOS has been instrumental in creating widespread positive change. Whether mapping community resources, influencing Local Councils' social planning infrastructure, or developing education models that support diverse needs, collectively we have much to be proud of. Aside from all of the awards we've been given, we've done things beyond our imaginings, and the legacy continues.

The stories within this book speak of creative solutions to difficult problems, personally, locally, through the region, across the state and interstate, across the continent and into other countries. They speak of women who held the principles of Joan Kirner's Assets of Leadership, long before she released them. They grew the confidence to stand up for what they believed in and valued,

networking, connecting and collaborating through the lens of community development. These stories show the need to be responsive in navigating changing community currents, and being resilient enough to adjust to these changes.

CHAOS provided the fertile ground for innovative and effective change-makers to grow and take their knowledge into the further reaches of our country and into the wider world. The pioneer women in the sector were risk-takers, adventurers and creative thinkers, challenging the status quo and seeking to create a better society. CHAOS is full with 40 years of remarkable stories with incredible people at the helm, among them the women in this book. Learning about these women, celebrating them and sharing their stories is a critical aspect of having a shared culture and a pride in our sector, and it's equally critical in showing the success of women's ways of working.

Cathy Guinness

1982 – 1988

North Ringwood Community House

ANHLC 1988 – 1999

Cathy Guinness first heard about the Nunawading North Neighbourhood House from Phil Slattery, “because I happened to be sitting next to her on a plane from New Zealand to Melbourne, and she asked if I wanted to be a tutor”. Phil Slattery was a forceful woman and an advocate for the things she believed in. You had to toe the line with her, but she got things done; she had the vision. She ran the first women’s economic summit, which I went to. This was when women didn’t really think economics was their cup of tea but she said, “No you’ve got to get in there, this is where the power of society lies; you’ve got to understand money.”

Jenni Mitchell, Phil’s co-worker at the Neighbourhood House, who was gentle in nature but with very clear principles, went on to become the first pioneer of the Rural Women’s Movement, supported by the government. “Jenni has been a very important person in my life; she’s got a very firm grasp on human rights.” Both Phil and Jenni helped to establish the Nunawading North Neighbourhood House, which became a leading institution in this emerging sector. In the company of these strong women, Cathy took up the tutoring offer and became immersed

in the Neighbourhood House experience. There were so many disenfranchised women at home with children during the 60’s and 70’s, and Cathy remembers that by the early 80’s “Women were crawling up the walls being with young children, with no adult stimulation, no opportunity to develop their skills, and really looking for something different.” Sheila Howell, with the support of the local Catholic Church, organised the first playgroup to commence in North Ringwood. Established in response to the needs of young mothers, these playgroups then developed into Community Childcare, organised and run by mothers. The emergence of this childcare opportunity enabled women to consider what else it was that they might want to do.

In 1982 Cathy took on the position of Coordinator for the North Ringwood Community House, which had opened in 1980. With the availability of childcare, women came together to share their craft activities along with other skills and talents, and for some, to express their needs and aspirations toward further education. “Out of that grew leadership; women were not being daunted by barriers because everything was an experiment.” Cathy helped to set up childcare on the premises

and then worked with Box Hill College of TAFE to provide TOP courses at the House that brought people up to University entrance level.

“Women then started to feel confident to do university courses.” Some women were able to take on courses at TAFE, because the Community House provided childcare. TAFE became aware that childcare was acting as a drawcard for House activities, and TAFE was therefore provoked also to cater for childcare. “It was a ball rolling, where we did the first bit and then it was taken up by other institutions. That was the sort of pioneering work that was going on.” As a member of CHAOS, Cathy was also the representative on the Eastern Metropolitan TAFE board for six years. “This is the way that we gradually developed a voice with the institutions to back us up and change things for women.”

Committed to supporting people on the margins of society, Cathy ensured the local migrant community was included into the House's programs through English classes provided by the Adult Migrant Education Program. “A lot of Italian grandmothers, who didn't have the opportunity to learn English, were able to be empowered as grandparents; to be able to talk to their grandchildren who no longer spoke Italian.” Before sole parents had a pension, “We did quite a lot of work in thinking through how to include sole parents into our program, which led to the sliding scale of fees.” Community Houses introduced concession fees, which made opportunities more equitable.

After six years as Coordinator and a member of CHAOS, Cathy took her advocacy for the non-mainstream sector into the Peak Body.

Helen Kimberly had been running the ANHLC out of the Women's Cooperative in Ferntree Gully, until Cathy joined her on a part-time basis. “By the time I went to ANHLC in 1988, there were about 200 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria.” Part of Cathy's passion at the ANHLC, was “making sure that we were including people from non-English speaking backgrounds on management committees, in programs and also doing programs targeting people in poverty.”

“It was the vision and the role model that was important in that era. Once you start doing something that is successful, other people will come up behind you and that's what happened with us.” Through CHAOS, the ANHLC worked hard to ensure opportunities to learn and develop skills were available across the outer eastern sector. “We were developing skills at a rate of knots because these places were growing. As they grow you have to have more sophisticated administrative systems to handle it. The first thing we had to learn was, how do you timetable 60 education programs, organise the collection of moneys, and who's going to do it?”

Whilst organising skill development for volunteers across the sector, Helen and Cathy were themselves developing skills in how to budget for an Organisation. Teaching themselves through experience, they were also linking up Neighbourhood Houses through the regions and across the State. This was part of the creative process, which grew into a strong movement. “As we became more involved with institutions, we started running more and more programs supported by the Education System and achieving funding. The ANHLC had a big role in politicising and advocating for Neighbourhood

Houses to the government and attracting funding to support education, childcare and Community House activities.”

Cathy then joined the Victorian Council of Social Services Board, and with Helen on the TAFE Board at State Level, “We got ourselves into these positions where we could influence. That’s how we did all of this.” Then when Kaz MacKay joined the team, they collectively began to run State-wide conferences, with a large range of training programs. These included innovative classes, management training and budgeting, sharing skills, inspiring stories, and their achievements across the sector. “There was a lot of education that went on in these State-wide conferences as well as a lot of fun. Women together are so strong and so attuned to each other and so comfortable; we had a ball.”

It was no small achievement to establish relationships with government departments and prove ourselves to be credible, while learning on the job. With support from the women who were then in the Labour government and who themselves were part of the movement, they learnt the strategies for developing credibility within the government. “To handle government money, you also have to have sophisticated systems; you have to be able to report back, and collect and give statistics. We then started learning skills in management. For many years, and probably still now, there was a tension between community and business ways of doing things.”

Government was pushing the community sector to be more accountable and business-like but the business-management-education-model didn’t suit the needs of community practice. “That’s why we developed our own community-

education-management-model. They expected us to be business-like and so we were, in our own way. If you’ve got a treasurer absconding with the funds, you should know about it and put a stop to it. You should be savvy with the money, and those things need to be taught over and over again.” Once the ANHLC rolled out the Community Management Course, VCOSS, with Cathy on the board, then developed a generic Community Management Course, suitable for any group in the community.

“We also got sophisticated and got support from local government and looked at who was in our local population and whether there were groups whose needs we weren’t meeting, or who we hadn’t attracted. This was part of making sure that we were responding to everyone’s needs and not just those who were running the Neighbourhood House.” Cathy wrote a thesis on Neighbourhood House work with people from non-English speaking backgrounds, which helped to support changes in Community Houses to becoming really inclusive. As one of many challenging examples, “this meant ensuring that Muslim people from Africa had to have water in the toilets because they don’t use toilet paper. There were a lot of really important and challenging changes that people had to undergo,” to meet the diverse cultural needs of local communities.

Cathy also shared a role with Pamela Mitchell in rewriting the Community Educator’s handbook, which was designed to help with running a House or Learning Centre, a committee of management, or how to work with volunteers and how to research community needs. Then, behind the scenes of the peak body, the regional clusters and the Houses themselves, was



Phil Slattery was a forceful woman and an advocate for the things she believed in. You had to toe the line with her, but she got things done; she had the vision.

the growing need to be able to define the concept of Neighbourhood Houses. “We, (at ANHLC) needed to be able to explain what the genius of these amazing Community Houses was; we knew they were amazing.”

“It was an ongoing process, to develop language that would be able to promote us so that other people would be able to understand.” With the aim of attracting more funding for the sector, Cathy helped design and produce a booklet: Neighbourhood House, an investment for the future. This intelligent and effective piece of advocacy showed the sector’s achievements, the funds allocation next to the enormous community voluntary hours, their successful partnerships, sponsors and stories to support community investment. “It certainly consolidated our partnerships with state and local governments and the Adult Education sector. It also articulated for Neighbourhood Houses, what they were on about and how to describe this to their funders, or their community. It was a development of language; that was great fun.”

Further to advocating for the Neighbourhood House sector, the ANHLC joined the Social and Community Services Union and became involved in writing up the first Community Development Worker’s Award, with an award wage attached to it. After leaving the ANHLC in 1999, Cathy took her accumulated skills and went on to teach Community Development at TAFE. This was whilst working in the high rise flats with migrant community groups, particularly those from Vietnamese, Somali and Eritrean communities. Cathy’s commitment to social justice and reaching out to communities, or groups outside of the mainstream, continued to flourish.

“The skills that we learnt through Neighbourhood Houses was such a steep learning curve; we had to teach ourselves and it was very, very valuable. We trusted each other through the networks and we were able to experiment. Loving each other; it was a great big family.”

Colleen Sanderson

1998 – 2013

The Avenue Neighbourhood House, Blackburn
Avenue Neighbourhood House @ Eley, Blackburn South

“One thing about Neighbourhood Houses is the unpredictability of any given day; women are very good at this. I used to thrive on that; it didn’t worry me; it was just part of the day. You did what needed to be done. I was really lucky to have such a great team and committee, particularly Claire; I learnt so much from everyone I had contact with. If you can get the committee and staff on the same page; that’s when great things happen.” Colleen took up the role of Community Development Worker at The Avenue Neighbourhood House, and in 2006 she became Manager. This was at the time when The Avenue was in discussions with their landlord, the Uniting Church in Blackburn, regarding The Avenue’s lease. The Church wanted to reclaim the building for its own purposes, which meant the Neighbourhood House needed to find a new home.

Finally, after months of negotiations with the City of Whitehorse, The Avenue agreed to relocate to Eley Park Community Centre in Blackburn South, with Council agreeing to major renovations at Eley Park to accommodate The Avenue. The readjustment into a building already occupied by another incorporated group had its share of difficulties for both parties,

particularly in crossing the divide between a community development approach and that of a house-hire template. Undaunted by the challenging landscape, Colleen immersed herself in the work, with The Avenue embracing its new premises and renaming its organisation Avenue Neighbourhood House @ Eley.

“Linking with other organisations in the community gave me a better understanding of what the needs were.” Listening to people, it became clear to Colleen that the youth of the community were disengaging from school. She connected with Gateway LLEN, a local learning and employment network who improved outcomes for young people. With potential funding to run an RTO certificate course to help young people make the transition back to school or to TAFE, she gathered her enthusiasm and spoke with her committee.”

“I had to really sell this to my committee because they were all a little bit conservative and while we had diverse people in there, we’d never had youth, especially those who had disengaged.”

It was fortunate for Colleen that Claire Morton, a committee member, supported her in presenting this idea to the Committee,

because they were doing it in the context of an older demographic of people using the house, and a seriously conservative manager running the other half of the complex. The committee agreed, the program was established under the name Refresh, and the students came. Colleen felt drawn to support them, despite their sometimes challenging behaviour.

“One of the girls said she'd really love to work with kids, and I said, well we've got a childcare program here, perhaps you could speak with our Childcare Director about volunteering in childcare.” A couple of weeks later, the complex manager was quick (as usual), to inform Colleen that there was an incident occurring outside with the young people. As Colleen explained the behaviour that was expected in a public shared space among diverse people “this girl looked at me and said, ‘Fuck it’ and spat towards me, not on me. What went through my mind was, ‘I wonder how she'll go in childcare?’”

Some of the young people actually finished the course and graduated. They held a Graduation Ceremony, which brought the families in to honour the achievements of their young people. For Colleen, this was a rewarding experience to have witnessed young people on the brink of disengagement, achieving something, which they themselves couldn't have imagined. “I was in tears; it was just so gorgeous.” The Jesuit Social Services had heard about the success of the program and contacted Colleen to see if some of their clients could attend the program. The Jesuits work with disadvantaged young people with higher needs, like those through justice and crime prevention, or those with multiple and complex needs. Unable to cater for these needs, the

Refresh program tutors got together with the Jesuits to establish a new program to support the needs of more complex young people. Both programs are still running all these years later and Colleen confirms that, “If we hadn't had the partnerships it never would have happened. You can't work alone.” This project was also supported by Upper Yarra Community House and Pines Learning, who both ran VCAL programs for young people. Support from ACFE, Cate Thompson from Gateway LLEN and other houses, enabled young people with difficulties in mainstream schooling to graduate from the Refresh Program, with some going on to paid work or TAFE. “We had all these people working on these programs with us; it was fabulous. The relationships were vital.”

Making connections and forming relationships is the basis of Colleen's diverse experience in the sector. Another creative example was her association with teachers who choreographed wheelchair dancing. Colleen introduced them to the groups that came to the Avenue from nursing homes, who were already attending sing-a-longs at the house. Able-bodied people paired up with wheelchair users and, under instruction, they danced. Colleen was one of the partners; “I loved it, it was just incredible. One of the women in the group said that she had never made her debut, so we had a deb ball and they loved it. The mayor of the City of Whitehorse never normally wore her mayoral robes anywhere because she was all about equality, but she decided to wear them to the wheelchair debutante ball, which everyone was dressed up for. This program, which changed people's lives, continued for another 2 or 3 years but discontinued, “because we couldn't get transport to the house.”

Some of the women who came for the sing-a-long would often be seen at the fence talking to the children. "We spoke to the nursing home and asked if there was any way we could bring them over, and they did, which was fantastic. Four or five women sat with the kids and read stories; some of the kids didn't have grandparents. There are all sorts of things you can do if you link in with someone else. You can't do any of that stuff on your own. We organised shared activities with the kids in Child Care, with our senior participants, and people with disabilities so the kids in Child Care were getting experience with a diverse range of people with diverse abilities. There was a mix of age groups as well. At one point we had people with disabilities volunteering in childcare and one is still working in childcare. It's part of the experience of a Neighbourhood House; it's not one dimensional."

One of the guys from a group of people with mental health issues took on the role of facilitator. When the Avenue was in need of a volunteer bus driver, "This guy said he wouldn't mind doing some volunteer work; he was so shy and introverted; he hardly spoke. He started driving the bus and got so confident that he applied, with success, for a driving job somewhere." While Colleen was on the ANHLC Board, there was a request for stories with positive outcomes to be presented at a conference. She asked the bus driver if he would tell his story. "He said he'd be really nervous and I said, that's ok, I'll be with you if you like. He stood up in front of the ANHLC conference and I'll never forget it, he just addressed the conference. You just can't buy those moments."

As President of the ANHLC board in 2005, Colleen worked with the board, the

Campaign Working Group and EO Merial Clark, by spearheading a campaign that not only brought a much needed injection of funding into the sector but also brought the sector together. With the community sector in great need of funds, ANHLC embarked on a campaign in the lead up to the 2006 May budget to make Community Houses more visible. The board of ANHLC established a Campaign Working Group consisting of Colleen, Merial Clark, Mary Robb, Linda Parlane, Anne Learmonth, Mary Parfrey, Marg Fennell, David Perry, and Maureen McConnell who was the CHAOS Networker.

With support from the Victorian Networks, including CHAOS, one of the strategies was to organise walks across the State, with placards and banners, in all of the municipalities. "With permission from families, we took the kids from childcare with us on the walks around Blackburn and the other Houses. We had a quite a large group of people with disabilities doing a number of courses as part of the RTO, so they came with us which was fabulous; especially in Blackburn which is quite a sedate area. It generated questions, which meant we could inform people about what we were doing."

"Another strategy of the campaign was getting participants of the House to send a postcard to their local polities." Relationships were established with the Minister for the Department of Victorian Communities Candy Broad, Networkers from across the regions, State politicians from the Socialist Party, The Nationals, Liberals, Labor and a Greens Senator. With Colleen as ANHLC President and spokesperson, the ANHLC Campaign Working Party launched a campaign that brought Community Houses to the attention of all Victorians. "We had



I really built those relationships with the governments and funding bodies, rather than just lobbying. You build that up first, and then things flow.

all these people with expertise, giving us ideas and supporting us with what to say to the police and such. We weren't relying on just ourselves; we were reaching out."

As the budget day drew near, the community sector was encouraged to take their placards to Melbourne and to join in the rally, which would end at Treasury Gardens, outside Parliament House. "When we all gathered together it was just fabulous to see the diverse range within the sector. And all of the people we asked, they all came and spoke, pledging all sorts of things. Some in the government were a bit worried that we were becoming a little bit too militant." Aside from attracting some very positive publicity for the Neighbourhood House sector and bringing the Houses together in solidarity, the new budget included a much needed and substantial amount of funding to the tune of \$27.8 million."

Reflecting back on the project, Colleen says, "For me one of the most exciting things was seeing the whole sector come together. There are not many opportunities to see that. It was just amazing working with Campaign Working Group and learning from all these people who knew so

much more than me about how to develop an effective campaign. It really enabled us to be our best selves working on behalf of our Sector and for the community. We were learning about other ways of doing things and we had fun. I really built those relationships with the governments and funding bodies, rather than just lobbying. You build that up first, and then things flow. This was such a positive grassroots experience and I really learnt so much myself."

"I guess the first thing I got from my experience in the Community House sector was so much joy and happiness. I never once woke up and thought, I've got to go to work; I just loved it." With 15 years in the sector, Colleen left on a positive note. Considering the diverse experience that comes with the job, she concluded that, "You couldn't possibly put all the job requirements of a Coordinator into a job description, you'd never get anyone apply for it. Community Development is how you live your life. You have a core understanding that you believe passionately about equality and inclusion. There is a joy in knowing that in some small way I have helped to facilitate change."

Helen Kimberley

1978 – 1985

Mountain District Women's Cooperative

1985 – 1996

ANLC/ANHLC

The Women's Liberation Movement that began in the late 1960s gathered momentum in the 70's. It was encouraged by the International Year of Women in 1975, which focussed on women isolated in the domestic landscape of house and home. "Women, particularly young mothers, confined to their houses without external stimulation or support were prone to depression; "flailing in the suburban wilderness" as it was termed. As part of the Movement, women began to set up Houses, primarily to support women and children, though not excluding men."

In 1973, the Whitlam government launched the Australian Assistance Plan; a radical social welfare initiative bringing together the concepts of social planning and community development, which directed funding into community development grassroots initiatives. "By the mid-seventies, a number of Community Houses around Melbourne's inner and outer suburbs were becoming established." The Diamond Valley Learning Centre, (DVLC) was a La Trobe University community development project in 1973; one of the first to emerge during this time. Others included the Mountain District Women's Cooperative (MDWC), Nunawading

North Neighbourhood Centre and Carlton Contact Neighbourhood Centre.

Twelve Houses found each other in 1976 and collectively began to lobby the government to support their activities, particularly their provision of appropriate learning opportunities and support for women. "So from the beginning it was a very political movement. More Houses emerged throughout 1976-79 until in 1979 about 40 of them banded together to form a loose association. Together they wrote the 'The Manifesto of the ANLC'; a statement of philosophy and principles. This was used as a key tool to lobby government and take action to 'adjust power relativities between local communities and traditional institutions of power."

The Association of Neighbourhood Learning Centres was formally constituted in 1981 under the Associations Incorporation Act (1981). In late 1979 TAFE had begun to pay for some HSC tutors in Community Houses and Learning Centres and "Eventually the TAFE board agreed to support the houses with 1% of their budget. It was streamed through the TAFE colleges and we never knew how much we got, or whether we had spent it all, or not, though we were never knocked back on

anything.” Helen Kimberley joined MDWC in 1978 to teach HSC English to mature age women returning to study, having been denied educational opportunities usually due to their gender. She quickly learnt that the Cooperative approach to teaching and learning was unconventional. “There was a philosophy that was articulated early in the piece; it was not so much about what activities the House provided, it was about the approach it took to everything. It was about women and empowerment, the personal is political.” MDWC provided informal child care during class time and encouraged informal study groups, where class members provided mutual support to ensure time was available for learning and completion of assignments.

Gradually Helen joined in-House committees and the MDWC board, participating first in the CHAOS Network and then in ANLC. In 1981 she returned to study, completed a post-graduate Bachelor of Education and subsequently wrote the ANLC response to the Blackburn Review of the HSC in 1984/5. A founding member of the Adult VCE Educators Network, she was appointed to the Australian Studies Field of Study Committee representing VCE for adults. Then employed by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board, Helen was part of a team that wrote the new Australian Studies VCE curriculum, and she joined the National Executive of the Australian Association of Adult Education.

In 1986, Helen was entrusted with the position of Coordinator for the ANLC. Funded through the Department of Community Services Victoria, the position was, “\$10 an hour, for 10 hours a week, for 10 weeks, with incremental funding, after which time we had to reapply for another

round of 10 weeks. I started off at MDWC in a small closed-off bit of veranda, for which we didn't pay rent.” Karen (Kaz) MacKay, a student in Helen's English for Pleasure class, was recruited to help Helen with the ANLC newsletter. In 1989, the ANLC employed Cathy Guinness on a part-time basis, and Karen also joined the team in a paid capacity.

The “Three-Amigos” moved the ANLC organisation to Richmond in 1990. “We were enabling an inclusive collective from the 17 different regional networks.” Representatives of each network met for a day every two months, providing an opportunity to share regionally what was happening in the different environments and community circumstances throughout the State. Sharing knowledge, information and experience, these meetings were a learning classroom for workers, who supported each other through difficult times, celebrated changes that the Neighbourhood House movement brought, and kept ANLC closely in touch with grassroots issues.

“I organised the first conference in 1987/88 when I discovered there was money available for conferences through TAFE.” Having applied for, and receiving, a small amount of funds, Helen put on the first ANLC conference at the YWCA on Phillip Island. “We had to bunk in together in dormitories; it was hysterical.” Despite the basic nature of the accommodation offered, Helen invited Parliamentary Ministers, Caroline Hogg and Race Mathews to join the conference for dinner. The whole sector was developed through forming relationships, and this dinner experience was no different. It consolidated the government's on-going support for Neighbourhood Houses and

the Association. After two cramped and spartan conferences at Phillip Island the ANLC team established the next and consecutive conferences at Dookie Agricultural College in central Victoria. "We had a conference program with a mixture of education, information exchange and creative ideas. We did long lunch times so people had plenty of time to talk to each other. People loved it, they went away with new ideas and met people they stayed in contact with."

With 100 Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres across the State, the role of the ANLC Coordinator essentially became a role consumed with lobbying government. "I spent an awful lot of time on the phone and went to countless meetings. We were always trying to get funding for Neighbourhood Houses and in 1987 we cracked it, which was a real break-through because all the houses were constantly having to apply for funds." With well-established relationships among varying government departments, Helen became actively involved with the development of the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program in the Department of Community Services.

"There was a lot of opposition to Neighbourhood Houses; huge opposition." From the early 70's to the mid-90s, Community Houses and Learning Centres, run by the communities they served, were relatively unquantifiable to government departments, or funding bodies. The value of what they offered had far reaching consequences, though it was difficult to define and prove. With little previous attention given to the impact of Neighbourhood Houses, a project initiated by the Eastern Regional TAFE Board provided an opportunity to seriously

research what people gained from doing a course at a Community Provider of TAFE.

In 1986, Helen was appointed project officer for the research, which provided the first quantifiable evidence of the outcomes of attendance. Community Learning: The Outcomes Report "... concluded that 38% of Community Provider enrollees in the survey went on to further education, and 33% of those not in the paid workforce in 1983 gained employment. There was also sufficient evidence to show that Community Providers' high success rate in enabling women to return to study was consistent with the Cain government's Social Justice Policy. Aside from this, the report demonstrated the Community Providers' encouragement in the development of skills and understandings relevant to life.

For some this included sharing the responsibility for running a House, or Centre. "Knowledge and participation promote people's empowerment." 76% of survey respondents rated personal growth/development opportunities at Houses/Centres as important, 38% suggesting it was the most important. Irrespective of the fact that personal development contributes to the attainment of employment and to the well-being of life in general, TAFE was primarily interested in funding job specific skills. Community Providers on the other hand, who shared some educational aims with TAFE, were shown to embrace a much broader philosophy.

"Through their education, social justice and community development activities, they enable greater access to economic resources and expanded opportunities for participation in the decision-making that affects people's lives." The report, laden with statistical evidence, was

submitted to the government in 1987. It provided the necessary documentation to apply pressure on Ian Cathie, the Education Minister, but “it was the women in the Cain government like Margaret Ray, Joan Kirner, Carolyn Hogg and others, who really supported Neighbourhood Houses and the work they were doing with women.”

“Ian Cathie called me in one day and said, ‘Well Helen, we’re going to give you some money.’ He was such a patronising male but you had to ignore all of that.” With the promise of money, the Education Department was lobbied to organise how it would be managed. “It was ongoing and constant; this was most of my work at one stage.” Eventually the Adult Community Further Education Board (ACFE) was established in 1991 to manage the funds. As an inaugural member, Helen was able to play a part in writing the ACFE Act 1991.

“When I walked into MDWC in May 1978, I thought I was going to teach a nice group

of women. I had no idea I was joining a political movement or how all-consuming it was to become. I certainly learned that the personal is always political. That respect, dignity, co-operation and generosity of spirit are at the heart of every successful community; that every person has a unique and valuable contribution to make; that in every aspect of our lives I am (we all are) both a teacher and a learner.”

“At ANLC I learnt the courage to be innovative, to challenge convention and to lobby government, to stand firm against opposition and refuse to be diverted by hollow promises. Difficult to articulate, though I tried in my PhD thesis, I learnt that a kind of magic inhabits Neighbourhood Houses. I hope there is still talk about their philosophy and principles, and about that magic that makes them ‘the same but different’ and truly what they are.” When Helen left in 1996 ANHLC had a membership of about 400 houses, and now there are even more.



At ANLC I learnt the courage to be innovative, to challenge convention and to lobby government, to stand firm against opposition and refuse to be diverted by hollow promises.

Jan Corben

1980 – 2004

Mountain District Women's Cooperative,
Later known as Mountain District Learning Centre

In 1974, a woman from Boronia put an advertisement in the local paper, appealing to women who did craft work from home. She proposed to establish an agency for women's work to be sold at outlets and called a meeting/party to summon those interested. This first meeting formed the basis of the Mountain District Women's Cooperative. By December of 1974, the Cooperative 'trading society' was officially registered and members' goods went up for sale at the Christmas Bazaar.

With the success and inspiration of this event, the women explored the possibility of renting a shop as a permanent outlet for their work. With each member contributing \$1 for 10 weeks to pay the initial rent, the Mountain Treasures handcraft shop opened in The Basin in the following March of 1975. A successful submission for \$12,650 from the Department of Tourism and Recreation covered the ongoing rent, as well as some staffing and equipment, and this enabled the business to branch out from its initial shoe-string budget.

Craft classes began at the back of the shop and then moved to the spacious Progress Hall across the road, which also allowed for child minding to take place. By June, membership had risen to over 100 women,

many of whom came from a Suburban Neurosis Consultation, organised by the Knox Community Relations Centre. From this collective, a smaller group formed with an interest in establishing a Women's Care Centre. Through negotiations with the Methodist Church in Ferntree Gully, the Women's Care Group at the Co-op established a Centre in the old Methodist Church buildings in Ferntree Gully, which were run down and rarely used.

Jan Corben had been actively involved in the Cooperative during its early years, navigating the terrain of a relatively new concept. "In the mid to late 70's many of those involved in the Administration of a Neighbourhood Learning Centre were volunteers, or received a very small wage, probably under \$5.00 per hour for a maximum of 10 hours weekly, if there was any funding available. This situation didn't encourage many with formal qualifications to remain around for long. The money you received helped with petrol, phone calls from home, convenience meals and a few extra articles of appropriate clothing."

With room to move in these old buildings, the co-op members established a place for women to meet, to hold discussion groups and craft classes, with space for child

minding. In exchange for rent, working bees repaired and restored the buildings over the first six months. The Co-op office then moved into these premises and other educative classes began to evolve, including HSC as a path for women to further their own education. The Mountain District Women's Centre, on the foothills of Mount Dandenong, was officially opened in 1976. A response to International Women's Year, the Centre's opening was attended by parliamentarians, local councillors and an ABC television crew.

Whilst craft classes continued at both The Basin and the Women's Centre in Ferntree Gully, the old buildings were now also offering HSC English, English Literature and Politics, with tutor funding from TAFE. Behind the scenes women were organising themselves into working groups to administer the various responsibilities associated with running the Cooperative. The Mountain Treasures Craft shop moved to the township of Ferntree Gully and continued its business in supporting women's work, whilst also educating women in the role of business.

As the Cooperative began to expand, issues of difference began to emerge around policy and philosophy, administration and future directions, which threatened to compromise all that had been achieved. The women's liberation movement was ripe with new possibilities, but it gave rise to growing pains as some resisted the changes taking place. This was a time for women to take more responsibility and to carve themselves a path for a more dynamic future. It was the beginning of something different, and women who had formerly toed the traditional line began speaking out to those in authority about issues that concerned them.

In 1980 Jan Corben was enlisted to administer the Education Program at the centre with a budget of \$8 per week toward expenses. Participation had since grown to 400 people per week, with classes, childcare, children's programs and playgroups, discussion groups, fundraising activities and opportunities to volunteer and develop personal skills. Two years later Jan was officially employed as Education Convenor. Other significant women involved in the development of the Cooperative in its forming years were Audrey Hall, Thelma Born, Judy Bouwmeester and Jane Dewildt, who supported the Co-op in various capacities.

Among the changes taking place at the time was the Co-op's purchase of a neighbouring house, which enabled the childcare facilities to expand. The Methodist Church offered the Co-op an adjoining cottage, also in need of repair, and this enabled them to further extend the programs on offer. Box Hill TAFE technical students were enlisted to help erect a portable studio behind the cottage, and least of all among the changes, it was the first time that the Board permitted men to become members.

TAFE had been supporting the wages of the HSC tutors and in 1981 the Knox City council gave a grant of \$2,250 to support the Centre. All other funds at the time came through the craft shop and income from the annual Knox craft festival. Support for Houses and Learning Centres was provided by CHAOS and the ANLC who addressed common issues, offering shared learning and consolidating the sector of Community Houses and Community Learning Centres.

The Knox Community Education Group and the Eastern Metropolitan Region Education Group gave training sessions on submission and report writing, supporting the development of Coordinators' skills.

With the help of Judy Bouwmeester, Jan Corben organised all the education classes, whilst also establishing recurrent funding for education and training. "In a Neighbourhood Centre you had to be able to do anything and everything, but formal qualifications and specific skills were not required. A dedication to what you were doing coupled with adaptability and a very wide range of basic skills were the keys. A friendly smile and the time to listen were important, as were an acceptance of awful working conditions – old buildings, uncertain funding and no award conditions."

"Into the 80's we began to look for a more professional status. Government funding for coordination brought award wages and an expectation of appropriate skills. The Graduate Diploma in Community Education was offered as an appropriate qualification and many qualified teachers moved into the Adult Literacy and Basic Education (ALBE) field in particular." Paid Co-ordinators in Houses and Centres, like Jan, were also working voluntary hours to meet the growing needs and demands that the positions required of them.

"I used to take the phone off the hook every afternoon when my children arrived home from school until I had the evening meal and other household and family duties under control. I found I needed to keep more quick meals ready for those times when I was held up by someone, perhaps calling to have cheques signed and staying until 5.30 or later. My washing often

didn't get done in the morning or got wet before I got home because I had rushed up to the centre to cover for someone, probably rostered for childcare, who wasn't able to come."

"The 90's saw not only the expectation of formal qualifications for many teaching areas but also some expectation of formal administration/business skills and/or community education/development qualifications for Coordinators and Administrators. Multi skilling will of course be expected and we'll still be overworked and underpaid! Let's hope we don't lose too much of the 70's enthusiasm, dedication and philosophy in the credential creep which is across our whole society."

Naine Sankey remembers the vital role Jan Corben also held during the 90's, in her part time position at the Outer Eastern College of TAFE. "She knew all the courses that were there and all the Houses could contact Jan and take groups of people there, where she would induct them into which ever course they felt they'd like to do. There was this feeling that women were being held back through being insecure. They saw the TAFE colleges with their huge buildings, where everyone looked official and efficient and the women didn't want to go there." In transitioning from the safety of a Community Learning Centre, Jan had been able to support people into their higher education choices with greater ease. "It really was an important role but with the next change in government, they took the TAFE representative away, which was a shame because the role was all about people and relationships."

The Cooperative continued to grow and expand under Jan's leadership, with the Board purchasing another house in the

street to accommodate the growing learning needs of the community, which included programs for young women offenders and secondary education needs for young people not completing their schooling. This developed into a VCAL program to support vulnerable young people who are disenfranchised in mainstream schooling, which has continued to prove successful in the decades since. With the Cooperative's movement in education and learning, and its expansion to embrace the broader community needs, it changed its name to the Mountain District Learning Centre in 2005.

With Jan's retirement in 2004, it proved difficult to find a replacement to fill her well-worn shoes. An extract from the 40th anniversary Recollections suggests,

"We have had many interviews, many discussions, many anxieties, and (to be expected) much criticism about how we have gone about this. However, at the end of the day, finding one person to fill Jan's shoes proved to be impossible. We moved on to looking at dividing the duties and distributing the responsibilities of this position."

She may have retired from her position as Adult Education Program Coordinator, but her involvement in the centre continued as the Coordinator of the CAE Book Club and also as a Director of the Board. Her passion and significant work in the sector was honoured by an 'Order of Australia Medal' recognizing her outstanding achievement and service to community.



A friendly smile and the time to listen were important, as were an acceptance of awful working conditions – old buildings, uncertain funding and no award conditions.

Jan Simmons

1976 – 2013

Morrison House

“After having my first child, the happy-ever-after-cloud passed me by. I felt not only isolated but unable to manage my very demanding child, so I joined a playgroup, became a Playgroup Coordinator and that was it. I was on the journey to community engagement, which was to occupy me for 40 years.” When playgroups were still a new phenomenon, Jan Simmons’s playgroup, held at the local football club rooms in Mt Evelyn, had children playing in the aroma of mud, liniment and stale beer. The Shire then agreed to give access to the back half of the old Morrison farmhouse, now belonging to the Shire.

As nine playgroups began to orientate themselves into daily time-slots, this also was where people started to meet and began conducting and attending courses. “My family moved every couple of years; I never belonged to a community, except my school.” From her first playgroup experience, where Jan became a natural networker, she saw what it meant to be part of community. “It just lit a fire in me. The more I did, the more I wanted to do. I had gained a community and for that I wanted to contribute as much as I could to make it work.” For the first two years Jan voluntarily coordinated events at the

House until 1978 when she was paid for her work, with a budget of \$300.

“The house was established during the hippie counter-culture, which included the emergence of the contraceptive pill, women’s lib, the environment movement, anti Vietnam war moratorium and student protests. It was created by the baby boomers; women in their 20’s and 30’s, with the belief that you could affect your child’s behaviour and their future. The playgroup movement was part of the response to that belief. The importance of high quality childcare remained the backbone for over 40 years.”

“Inspiration is an aspirational thing for me as I’m not a very talented person but this has enabled me to recognize the talents in other people. In working with community you need good ways to communicate in a language that people understand. I used to road test it with my butcher. He would say, ‘If you can’t convince me, you probably can’t convince half the community.’ Instead of Local Government telling you what to do, you have to say, this is what we’d like to see happen; what resources can you toss our way. I would ring up people in high places and say, we should talk about this; I so believed in what I was talking about

it never occurred to me to hold back.” Along the way Jan connected with James Merlino, a councillor for the Shire of Yarra Ranges, who became her partner in the field of community development. “Having a partner like James Merlino, I just felt anything was possible. I think the timing was right, our thinking was aligned –we were in the right place at the right time. I feel if a community has things that need to be addressed, I might not be able to be the person to provide a solution but there are other resources just waiting to be utilised and if we can mobilise those resources we will have better communities. Its alright to have the vision but the people resources are key.”

Adjacent to the township shops along the Warburton Trail in Mt Evelyn was a neglected park with strewn rubbish. “I got some money and a work for the dole project and we built a park; we had to do something that was for everyone to start the community believing things could change.” On top of that Jan organised for the establishment of a Federation Style Community Link and Information building, to be constructed on the Warburton Trail; ideally located in the centre of town in the newly developed park.

People were by now starting to believe things could be achieved and while her attention was in that direction she established a community café which joined onto the Community Library, also connected to the park. The Outlook Community Park Project opened in 1999 at the Mt Evelyn Carols by candlelight, amongst the newly established public barbecues and gazebo. “It was so special to see the once derelict site being used by the people of the community.”

The Morrison on the Park Cafe, brought a cross section of local people into their monthly art exhibitions, which portrayed family violence, environmental or other contentious issues. “Often people would say that building the cafe revitalised the main-street because there wasn’t anything like that before. We were always thinking about ways that we could bring the community together; through the arts, the centre, storytelling, or built form. Even the Mt Evelyn Festival promoted, profiled and showcased the community –everyone joined in.”

When in 1999 a travelling scholarship became available, Jan applied to go to Scotland for three months to explore Telecommunications and IT in education and employment in remote Scottish areas. Due to the isolated nature of these communities, they had more highly developed IT technology and Jan’s aim was to discover something that might enhance opportunities for local unemployed people in Mount Evelyn. It was here that Jan and her own IT manager, Dot Gavin, were profoundly influenced by the ‘Learning Towns movement.’

This initiative developed learning partnerships between business and education communities, local government and community activities, aiming to create a culture of life long learning. Focusing on the development of human potential, Jan came home inspired to take the learning experience of her community to another level. Mt Evelyn was not chosen among the nine regional towns funded to roll the Learning Towns initiative out, but Jan, connected to the vision of this idea, did it anyway. The ACFE Board, who funded

the regional programs got wind of her success and with curiosity came out to see it working. Financial support was then offered.

In Scotland Jan befriended a couple of Korean women who were so impressed with what she had to say about Learning Towns, that they came out to Mount Evelyn to visit her community with 60 of their comrades. Jan was then invited to four free trips to Korea to speak at Learning events, including the UNESCO Conference and the International Life Long Learning and Economic Development Conference in Korea. At one of these events she met a local government landscape architect, who taught her about how the built form connects with the social form, setting Jan off on a series of projects incorporating the concept.

While in Canada, Jan discovered Community Mapping; a process which collated the available community resource information, for the benefit of local life. With support from Yarra Ranges council a community development manual was designed outlining the process for creating a Learning Town. A Mt Evelyn team work-shopped the manual with a view to empowering other communities within Yarra Ranges and the manual has since traveled the world. ACFE's financial award funds were to be spent gaining more knowledge about something new.

Jan spent her award meeting up with Ron Farris from Learning Towns in Canada to explore the subject of community and the work of libraries. Ron Farris had other ideas about Jan's visit, taking her on a talking tour where she spoke on the subject of community and Learning Towns. "I didn't know this was my job, so at first I was like

a rabbit in the headlights, thinking, what am I going to say. I didn't consider myself to be the expert." Hardly a shy rabbit in the headlights, Jan began presenting power-points and speaking from her own experience. "I was talking to Vancouver city about Little Mt Evelyn."

"To ensure we were hearing from the community about what our focus should be and what the identified concerns of the community were, we held these amazing township planning nights, which started with 12 people pressed into service. It grew to a 100+ people, including the kids, who identified their issues and how they could work with the groups present to address their concerns. In the end it was just amazing; raising issues like safety, early-years education, family violence, environment, the RSL, small business and youth."

"Connecting with the RSL to look at how to include the broader community, we got the Football club, the school and the scouts involved to put on a dawn service; a first at Mt Evelyn. These sorts of things build a community, which we feel proud to live in." Jan organised the men's shed, another of Morrison House's Social Enterprises, to do community projects like building a mini golf course in the local primary school. The same venue where the VCAL kids did lunch duty and organised sport activities. Jan's motto, 'It's adapt, not adopt', laid the path for change, both in the township and further afield.

Hearing concerns from the Maternal Health Nurse about social and health needs, Jan gathered 12 young mothers together to walk the Warburton trail with their prams each week for regular exercise and social engagement. "They'd then go

to the Morrison's Cafe for coffee, and then the library would read the children a story, which was the beginning of being life-long library members. It wasn't long before this group of fabulous Mums made a booklet on places to walk and picnic for people with prams, which the community bank funded."

"Half our community was under 25 years and young people were moving out of Mt Evelyn, saying it was a dump of a place to live. So we established a youth enterprise shed in the town centre, with graffiti walls and bus shelters as creative canvases." Then with community sponsorship Jan enlisted an artist to work with various local groups like the scouts, schools and disability groups to develop panels of Mt Evelyn's history, which were stationed along the Rail Trail in town. Young people then stayed up late to protect the town's Christmas Tree from being burnt to the ground by outside gangs. "Their heart was with their community."

It was a requirement of all staff to engage in a community development project each year, whether it was a social enterprise initiative like the Hairdressing Training Centre, or outreach training of Health and

Beauty students. It could be as simple as pamper nights for young mums, people with disabilities, or bushfire damaged communities, or even street parties to continue to bring locals together. What began as Morrison House, became simply 'Morrison's' because of the outreach programs in the town; its vision statement outlining, 'Your centre for learning, change and action.' "The more we did the more successful we became."

"A lot of Neighbourhood Houses say they work with their community but they actually work with the people who come through the door, not out in the community." Jan had skills in being able to form successful relationships with people from all walks of life and those who kept her abreast of the changing times. From humble beginnings as a voluntary coordinator, Jan saw the house progress to employing 150 people. "I've gained a lot from being in community and from finding other parts of myself, and how learning is multi-dimensional. I'm a big picture person and my goal is always to make a difference."



***While in Canada,
Jan discovered
Community Mapping; a
process which collated
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for the benefit of local life.***

Jane Dewildt

1979 – 1992

Mountain District Women's Cooperative/
Mountain District Learning Centre

A secondary school teacher by trade in 1976, Jane Dewildt expected to build a career within the Victorian government schooling system. "I was recently married and heading for senior teacher and ultimately principal roles. Not all that ambitious, but comfortable and safe. In 1979, four years after it had been founded, Jane all but stumbled upon the Mountain District Women's Co-operative in Ferntree Gully. "I think I was unconsciously looking for a connection with the community I had been 'living in' for about three years, but not really engaging with."

"My mother persuaded me that I really did have time to help her in her volunteer role managing the money and the books for Mountain Treasures; the shop that the Co-op ran in Ferntree Gully. I distinctly remember her saying:

'Really Jane it is not a big job. Every second week you'll need to pick up the takings from the shop, count and bank the money, reconcile the sales sheets and record the sales for each member. I'll do it the other week. Oh and if you would help me occasionally with the month end balances and paying members and suppliers and so forth that would be good.'

"Just to help Mum", Jane bought shares and became a member of the Women's Cooperative. "If you've ever been talked into joining committees of management you'll recognise what I call the 'it's only a meeting a month' technique. Like me you have probably used it on others when you were desperate." With her knowledge and experience as a senior secondary English and English Literature teacher, in the biggest high school in the State, she was quite naturally invited to join the education committee at the Co-op.

Although her profession was as a school teacher, this was her first introduction to community education. Like other original Learning Centres that began in old houses, the Co-op turned bedrooms into classrooms. On the whole these smaller, more intimate classrooms made the learning experience more accessible for women. With the cross pollination of ideas, knowledge and shared information, which were encouraged by small groups, these classrooms were a bonus. "A lot of the value of the sector's offering is in its setting."

Community based adult education made such an impression, that Jane was reluctant to return to teaching children in

a standard classroom. "You have to be infinitely better prepared to teach a group of 15 women ranging in age from 16 to 84 than you do to wrangle 25 Year 9 boys who don't want to be there. The challenge was – and still is – to persuade the funding bodies that their funding models should respect and acknowledge this wisdom." The learning opportunities available at the Co-op gave Jane the impetus to shift direction in her career path.

With a membership of 400, Jane connected to the core group of women who governed the centre. "Very early on the women who founded the Co-op recognised that the post-school education most of them had, was what gave them the skills and confidence to build the organisation. They wanted it to be a place where others could get that opportunity. Our focus was very much on individuals not so much on community. We were focussed on providing educational opportunities for women who for whatever reason had not had them earlier in their lives."

"Remember that in 1979 even many women in their 30s and 40s, let alone older women, came from families where it was not seen as important for girls to have an education. They were encouraged by those families to leave school and get a job until they got married and had kids. Think of a woman who can barely read and write, who has never recognised the consequences for her, or her children, of being without those skills. Offering her the chance to get these skills is one of the real contributions the sector makes to the intangibles of community development." Initially Jane had little understanding of the concept of community development, "And to be frank, I don't think most of us saw what we and the organisation did in

that way." Along with her full time work, Jane taught classes at the Co-op, took on other administrative roles and stepped up into a role as a Director of the Co-op. When explaining the difference between a Cooperative Board of Directors and Committees of Management, Jane simply says "Same hard graft; different poncy title. My husband at the time got used to the piles of paper on the dining table most nights and me flying out the door to meetings." She takes it a step further, "You know how little kids play adult world pretend games as shop keepers and the like? My two used to play 'meetings' because they had been to so many by the time they were three or four they could take on any role!"

Becoming connected with the Cooperative, its values and philosophy and its inspiring group of women, Jane's need for community was clearly met. Spurred on by the passionate energy of the women, both at the Co-op and those from the other Houses that she met through CHAOS, it took Jane's learning to a whole new level. "Some of the people I met and got to know were absolute forces of nature. Women like Christine Fensham at The Avenue Neighbourhood House and Phil Slattery at Nunawading North Neighbourhood Centre, who in their different ways drove the bureaucrats insane pushing the boundaries on funding and compliance."

"Kathy Clark at Healesville Living and Learning Centre, who got a VCE program running in a community where the school struggled to keep the kids engaged. Jan and Mary at Morrison House whose capacity to leverage the smallest opportunity for their community was legendary." In remembering Jan Corben, who recently died, as a driving force in the success of the Co-op, Jane also includes

Helen Kimberly as a crucial ingredient. "They just made things happen."

Whilst working at the Co-op, Jan Corben was also involved in the Women's Education Centre at Box Hill TAFE. With a relationship in both camps, Jan was able to marry ideas together. Jane recalls Jan, "being able to negotiate the Box Hill Carpentry apprentices to build the relocatable classroom that was our pride and joy at the time. That crossover was enormously important." Through this relationship, Box Hill TAFE also auspiced the Co-op's early Higher School Certificate programs; Jan creating the bridge between community and institution. Her continued belief in the Cooperative community saw her active in it over the decades.

"I remember the generosity of everyone in sharing ideas and approaches, and the strength of the network," woven within the fabric of CHAOS; the conduit connecting Houses and Learning Centres. Among the generous sharing, there were also lively meetings and discussions, where strong characters sometimes 'had differing views on some things.' "We in the City of Knox envied the Houses in the Shire of Sherbrooke for the financial and other support they had from Council. Knox was far less generous. Once the Co-op became landowners in the early 1980s, we paid more in rates than we received in grants from local government."

With links to the new Outer Eastern College of TAFE, Jane was nominated to take on a representational role for TAFE's Interim Council. In a response that was typical of those times, a disgruntled principal from a Technical school made Jane's position known on the front page of the local paper. "He objected to two things about me – I

wasn't from a 'real' TAFE provider and I was a woman – and he was sure I would add no value as a result." Jane spent the following eight years on the Council, four years as president.

Adding to her credibility, 'as a woman', her roles branched out to embrace other representative positions in the peak education bodies. She became the chair to The Association of Further Education Committees (AF ECC) which later became Adult Community Education of Victoria. She also took on a position on the TAFE Teaching Service Appeals Board, and later spent nine years on the Adult Community and Further Education Board. Working in the ACFE Regional Office, Jane maintained her commitment and connection with the Co-op. "The former paid the bills; the latter saved my sanity."

"The amount of support I received on a personal level while I was at the Co-op is immeasurably important to me and my children, particularly when my marriage began to founder." From earlier aspirations of becoming a school principal, Jane was able to stretch her experience into various educational arms throughout the State. From being coerced into doing the books for the Mountain Treasures Cooperative shop, a series of pathways for development and opportunities for personal expansion have taken Jane to senior positions on any number of boards and senior management roles, including the last 12 years as senior manager in the Department of Education and Training.



Jocelyn Aytan

1974 – 1984

with ongoing involvement on
the committee at Selby Community House

Living on a Kibbutz in Israel was the seed that ignited Jocelyn's passion for community.

"I never understood what democracy was, until I was living on the Kibbutz." Arriving back, after 10 years travelling abroad, Jocelyn found herself in the revolutionary times of the early 70's, in the rural mountain community of Selby, in the Dandenong Ranges. As a single parent, she moved with her young son into a weekend shack along a dirt road on the fringe of the forest.

"Throughout the 60's and 70's, many changes in social attitudes swept across the Western world with people questioning traditional values in all aspects of living – religion, politics, the arts and education. In Australia we were seeing the Anti-Vietnam war moratoria, student protests, the Women's Liberation and Environmental movements, and Aboriginal activism with moves for land rights justice, which flowed into the social and political landscape. Experimentation with alternative communities began to take place on a larger scale and the community development movement was part of these changing times. This was reflected in the election of the Labor government in 1972 after 23 years of Liberal governance."

The Australian Assistance Plan, rolled out under the new government in 1974, was effectively reversing the hierarchies which had previously been in place. The reforms that followed generated a great deal of energy in communities everywhere. Initiative and creative thinking replaced what many had begun to accept as the great Australian apathy." Arriving on the doorstep of the Whitlam era was an extraordinary experience, giving Jocelyn the impetus to help create change in her own community. "Whitlam opened up the crack in the wall for a few minutes and the light streamed through and caught us; it was so energising." An initiative to assess the needs of children in local communities was taken on as an action-research-survey, taking Jocelyn and a small team of women out to their Sherbrooke communities.

They interviewed 150 different organisations, groups and local households, simultaneously spreading knowledge of the community development movement in Sherbrooke, which they were developing as it was happening. After three months surveying communities across the Shire of Sherbrooke, Jocelyn and the survey group had established a solid network and had formed strong

relationships, which included the Shire council. The survey showed the shortfall in opportunities for children, for isolated women, lack of transport and informal meeting places, and a general lack of communication throughout the social fabric of community.

“We didn’t have anything; we were up in the bush with muddy tracks and prams. Meeting in each other’s houses, local people began to draw on each other’s ideas, sharing knowledge and resources, visions and dreams.” With playgroups now growing too large for people’s homes and with the developing community networks, a communal building became a crucial need. The survey group proposed that an old vacant house bridging a wild creek in the bush, was to be made available for community use. “Together with the help of TAFE student placements, local working bees and the council, we negotiated the restoration of Selby House. This was an innovative community development initiative at the time, as we were able to design and develop the old house suitable for our needs, and costs were minimal.”

The Selby Community House was formally established in 1975 and the community development processes from the survey created more local autonomy. Committees of Management became more accountable to the local community with meetings being open and using consensus decision making practices. “This participatory democracy model also provided opportunities for local people to make decisions around issues like planning and development of the area, which were ongoing local concerns.” In the beginning, the House supported playgroups, house teas, street dinners, a food co-op and philosophy discussions as well as offering a place where people had a

chance to meet, exchange news and ideas about community events.

“For the first three years the Community House didn’t have a phone, or an office, so the office was in my house and the phone was ringing continually. There were long paper lists with people’s names and addresses, and though scrawly with use, it was a vital resource and comprised a huge network. No-one would believe that something like this started from such an apparent mess.” With a focus on children’s needs, a variety of playgroups and child care programs began to emerge. Among these were an After School Program, Emergency Child Care, Holiday Programs and Children and Family Happenings events. A play-school was established, which then became the pre-school and in later years became the kindergarten.

This was all during a time when, as part of the changes taking place, people were questioning the institutionalisation of children’s education. Alternative schools like the Coonara community school, run by parents, were starting up. As a result of all the activity and movement, Selby Community House helped to establish the Sherbrooke Community Childcare Cooperative in Upwey in 1976/77. Sherbrooke Family Day Care was then established in 1977; the first in Australia, also influenced by Selby Community House’s Child Care activities and their relationship with local council. “I learnt that children are the natural and original community networkers. They link up the community through play and humour and families.”

“A further impact of the survey was that it set the direction for a community development approach in Sherbrooke and

beyond. Being an action research model, it generated interactions across the Shire, which had a snowballing effect; learn as you go and act as you learn." Selby House, in collaboration with Kallista and Coonara, hosted a Sherbrooke People's Day with the Shire at the council buildings, focusing on future planning. Out of this developed the Sherbrooke Community Resource Action Group (SCRAG). "Part of the revolution was discovering all these people around us with so many skills and talents, and through this movement we had access to each other; it was very exciting."

In its turn, SCRAG influenced the council's social planning infrastructure for Aged Care, Family Day Care, Youth and Recreation programs and Children's Services. With the increase in local networking, a local newsletter, Spark, was established to inform and to exchange views. "Part of this phenomenal growth in local participation was due, I believe, to the open-ended, flexible methods of organisation used, which were female oriented. It was inclusive and allowed for both change and a diversity of opinion, as well as opening up opportunities for experimentation. It's these strategies and skills for community building that provide the supportive base for society to function."

"We had to create an understanding around what community development meant, or even what a Community House was, or what to call it, or what title to give the worker, in fact what would a coordinator do? Anne Walsh, a participant of the group, expressed it when she wrote for Selby House's 30th birthday: 'We did not feel restricted by rules and regulations, bureaucratic forms and procedures, lack of knowledge or experience. We formed our own alternative processes, we

experimented and learnt as we went, we looked ahead at what was needed and created it if it did not exist, or changed it if it needed changing."

All of this activity generated more local employment, developing cottage industries and establishing a local market place. Relationships were formed with Box Hill TAFE and Monash University, where skills, knowledge and resources were combined, and student placements were embraced. Houses were becoming training centres for community development. The three Sherbrooke Houses developed their own aims and objectives and supported the development of each other and their own communities. The Houses were also a bridge to enable women to engage outside of their domestic homes, yet within the familiar environment of a house.

Women seized the opportunities provided, found their voices in a new way and experimented with new possibilities. Positive relations with council invigorated local elections, with more women becoming involved in local politics; in Sherbrooke at one time more women were on council than anywhere else in Victoria.

"I was so enthusiastic, I believed in it so much. There was an incredible sense of freedom and enthusiasm, that together we could change the world. Reviewing, soul searching and refining our values was part of the living process of what was happening at the house. We had to be willing to be open and to learn from that. It was about defining and redefining the boundaries of the democracy that we believed in. I guess that's what revolutions are all about."

The creative arts were being expressed early in the formation of Selby House, through both children and adult programs,

which included the formation of a pottery cooperative in the old garage, which maintained its creative output for a couple of decades. The establishment of the Folk Club in the late 70's saw the house packed on the first Friday of each month. Over 40 years later, with house extensions, it is still packed, and our annual Folk Festival has been running for over 40 years. As an incubator for ideas to grow, Selby House also supported the first LETS system (Local Employment Trading Scheme) in Victoria, trading over 1000 skills and talents across the shire, while connecting people together.

Alongside the current movement, Selby Community House had from the onset a distinctive relationship with local environmental education, as part of everyday living within the surrounds of the forest. Falling trees, the threat and reality of bushfires, landslips, endangered wildlife species, pets and weed control, over-development and regular power outages, were common threads woven into the hills community life, and they were a constant challenge.

"In the 80s the demise of SCRAG and other community ventures emphasised a clash between two different systems of social organisation and values.

We discovered we had two systems of democracy; one was a community based grassroots participatory democracy, accountable to the local community. The other was a representative democracy, based on hierarchical competitive structures driven by corporations; not always compatible with community values. This highlighted many contradictions, creating great stress for community development workers."

"Unfortunately, women's history and the significance of female power isn't considered important or credible enough to be included into the legends of our life and land. Two or three generations down the track, it's time now for the grandmothers to pass on the stories. The life cycle and its patterns become clearer; you start to see the connections. To keep the links, to give meaning, depth and dimension; that's what historical perspective is about. That's what cultural potency means. That's what community and individual empowerment and self-knowledge is about and that's about what it is to be human."



Women seized the opportunities provided, found their voices in a new way and experimented with new possibilities.

Kaz (Karen) MacKay

1979 – 1996

ANHLC Peak Body

“A lot of people don't realise that Neighbourhood Houses grew out of the feminist movement. They were such halcyon days really because it was the tail end of the movement, even though it's still going. We were spring boarding off that, and there was a lot of really good support for women to learn and to get out of the house and extend their education. In those days, once you left school, that was it. There was certainly no childcare, or at least not regulated like it is today. Neighbourhood Houses were springing up as fast as we could get ourselves going. They were just blooming everywhere, which of course meant the network bloomed and began to take on a life of its own.”

Kaz MacKay has been associated with Neighbourhood Houses since 1979. Finding her way to what was then the Mountain District Women's Cooperative in Ferntree Gully, she did an English for Pleasure class; taught by Helen Kimberly. On a single parent pension at the time, Kaz became the class secretary and as such didn't have to pay for the lessons. “The idea that the Co-op Board of Directors were just women, like you and me ... I couldn't believe it. Women just run this place and determine what they're going to

offer people. I just found the concept back then to be completely amazing, having been in traditional work places.” The Co-op Coordinator, Thelma Bourne, both inspired and empowered Kaz to take on an administrative role in the office and from there continued to mentor her in the ways of community development and women's ways of working.

From her part time position in the office, she was invited to work for Helen Kimberly and Cathy Guinness who were at the helm of the ANHLC. First renting a small portable across the road from the Cooperative, the ANHLC then moved to a house in Richmond, becoming the nexus for the networks to meet. Kaz moved with the organisation and together with Cathy and Helen became affectionately known as the Three Amigos. “I was invited in on that grassroots level; it was fantastic. We were all kind of learning as we went.” This was during a time where funding constraints were less restrictive and government departments were less aware of the empowering and supportive strength Community Houses offered their neighbourhoods.

“When the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program guidelines were

developed by the state government, we were all kind of shaping it together; working out who we are and what are we." Working with a team of strong political women, including Joan Kirner, Victoria's first female premier, the Three Amigos had a direct line to her office. Having had a strong association with her own Community House in Williamstown, Joan Kirner gave her full support to ANHLC in building a sturdy framework for Neighbourhood Houses to grow from.

In 1992 the Kennett Government took over leadership in Victoria, which brought about rapid change. "I was on a community advisory body for adult education but they were all abandoned overnight. There was no more consultation; the government didn't have an ear to the ground anymore. They cancelled all the advisory bodies so we lost our avenue to be seen." Governments started to bring in more funding constraints, more accountability and more bureaucratic processes. Childcare funding was cut and new regulations were brought in. Business plans were also being introduced into Neighbourhood Houses.

The State Government then began to stipulate what type of programs they wanted Houses to run, and we were advised not to use the word advocacy because anything with advocacy in it would no longer be eligible for funding; furthermore, advocacy was to be removed from all literature. "We just kept saying that we're not going anywhere; we were determined to not lie down in a hurry. When you're forced into a corner, you gird up your loins." Needless to say the ANHLC and the Community House Networks became astute in how they promoted themselves, and negotiations on behalf of Houses continued with force.

On top of this, the Kennett government was looking to replace committees of management with appointed boards. "We recognise there are issues here but we've got unqualified, unprofessional community people running, in some cases, half a million dollars of funding and being accountable for that; it's a huge responsibility. It's a challenge and it takes a lot of hard work. But you take that away, you've lost the representation of the community and then you lose everything. A committee of management can be a community development program in itself." The ANHLC and the Networks fought against this proposal and won funding streams, which supported and strengthened committees with their responsibilities.

When the Adult Community Further Education funding became available, the Neighbourhood House landscape changed again. This brought about more of a focus on vocational learning and preparation for the workforce. Now Houses were becoming training providers, which moved away from the community development focus that got the movement going more than a decade earlier. "If you wanted ACFE funding, your statement of objectives in your constitution had to include certain sentences and paragraphs relating to adult education. You had to change your fundamental philosophy, your reason for existence, to get funding."

It was around this time that many Community and Neighbourhood Houses started to become Learning Centres, offering accredited courses. As an aside to these changes, the funding applications were horrendous in themselves. "You'd get paid for 20 hours as a Coordinator and 15 of those hours was spent filling

out the forms. That's why there are so many voluntary hours beyond paid hours." Accredited training seemed to overshadow the benefits of non-vocational classes and the value they brought to both personal and community lives. "There was a complete failure to see that budget cookery is all about engaging, reading, learning, measuring, health, divorce prevention, child abuse prevention and so on, but we couldn't get funding for those programs easily."

"The whole ethos of Neighbourhood Houses was in jeopardy. We had to have all this accountability about outcomes. And we would have the arguments around, 'you can't quantify how many marriages didn't break up, or family violence situations didn't occur, or suicides didn't occur because a woman came in to do budget cookery and from there went to do something else, or went onto a committee, or went to a TAFE course, or went to university, or not, maybe just stayed at budget cooking. Her whole sense of self could have completely changed. How do you quantify that?'"

Passionate about the subject of her work, Kaz took the sector to a whole new level of community awareness by promoting Neighbourhood Houses on the Television for the first time. Seeing the Life-Be-In-it calendar of events, she felt it was only fitting that Neighbourhood Houses should also have a week in the year to promote all that the sector offers. The first Neighbourhood House week was opened at Kensington Neighbourhood House, with an invitation to the Premier. The following year it was held on the steps of Parliament, where Jeff Kennett was presented with a large cheque representing the value of volunteers at every Neighbourhood House, converted into dollars, showing

the financial value of Community Houses. In working with the regional networks, all the Houses made giant paper cut-outs of people, which they covered the front steps of parliament with. Thanks to Kaz's initiative, the Neighbourhood House week is now firmly embedded in the culture.

Jarring conflicts between the patriarchal system and women's ways of working continued across a range of subjects over the decades. Among these, "There was a very strong move (from the government) to get rid of the networks but ANHLC absolutely dug our heels in, saying the networks were critical for neighbourhood survival." This is seen to be particularly true for the more isolated houses in rural areas, though equally important for the dissemination of information, for getting houses involved in different campaigns and for general development, data collection and for network connection. It was the networks that gave the ANHLC the strength to keep the ship afloat during times of political upheaval. "CHAOS was always good at standing firm with the Neighbourhood House philosophy," and was essential in not only the survival of the houses but their development as well.

Back in the early days, CHAOS met in a church hall in Ferntree Gully, across the road from the Women's Cooperative. "There were about eight or nine of us in a circle and we'd chat about what we were doing and sharing our news. I couldn't soak it up enough. This was a new way of working; women's ways of working. It's a positive way to work; to collaborate in a work place. I got self-esteem as well as knowledge about women's ways of working because it's so empowering. I've never gone back to work for a corporate job again."

Being in the peak body, since renamed Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, Kaz remembers that: “It was a great time to be there and I felt very privileged to be part of it. They were great days.” Now working as a consultant for Neighbourhood Houses, she supports committees in a range of ways, including working with governance and strategic plans. In these changing times she poses a thought-provoking question to help committees reconnect to their purpose: “Are you a community development organisation running on sound business practices, or are you a business that runs a community development program?”

“Looking to the future, the challenge remains for Neighbourhood Houses to stay true to their philosophy; that will always

be the challenge. I think Neighbourhood Houses and particularly networks need to stay vigilant about the governmental and societal push to morph into something else for survival. Financial survival is important, but so is their role as the very important community development nexus of the society or community that they’re in.”

“It’s fabulous to see networks like CHAOS celebrating their 40th because it means they’ve survived and will continue going on doing the great work that they do. The challenges remain because the needs are still there. It’s been great that CHAOS has had good women at the helm. You don’t go into this for the money, you go into it for what you believe in and what it’s all about.”



Passionate about the subject of her work, Kaz took the sector to a whole new level of community awareness by promoting Neighbourhood Houses on the Television for the first time.

Leanne FitzGerald

1986 – 2018

Coonara Community House

Coonara Community House was born from the same visionary collection of people who had the insight to establish a local Community School. Coonara was funded through Gough Whitlam's Australian Assistance Plan in 1976. Community House and Community School shared a beautiful old stone cottage on the foothills of Mount Dandenong, until finally a separate school was built next door. Then after three decades the school closed its doors, and in the same year the stone cottage was deemed uninhabitable, so the vacant school building next door became a necessity for Coonara's continued work. Over the following five years of House renovations, Coonara grew and blossomed in the environment of the old Community School.

Leanne FitzGerald came to Coonara Community House in 1986 looking for a playgroup, and within two weeks found herself volunteering in the food cooperative. "It just had so much happening; people were really passionate and community minded. Even a little bit scary really, they were so radical." Drawn in by the energy and inspiration of Fae Dent, Jan Bourne and Carol Simpson, the leading team at Coonara, Leanne was encouraged to join

the committee. "The Sherbrooke Clusters were so into community development and collaboration, unlike other community houses."

Joining a group of volunteers, led by Yoland Wadsworth, Leanne then undertook a three-year participatory action research project to assess the effects of the late 80's recession. "People were taking their kids out of childcare; even though it was a modest fee people still couldn't afford it, because of lost jobs." Interviewing people and gathering stories in the community, culminated in a publication, *What if...*, launched by Don Chipp, who considered it 'an impact statement for the Federal government's economic policy development.' Together with two playgroup mums, Amanda May and Marie Schurman, Leanne then helped to design Back to Basics workshops, which became a great success over several years. "We were focusing on a community development response to the recession and trying to support people."

When Raeywn Kavanagh, a Coordinator in 1993 was leaving on maternity leave, Leanne was advised to apply for the position. I was shocked. I thought "Me, I couldn't do that". And they all said "Yes,

you could.” In 1994 Leanne left Deakin University Library and filled in as House Share-Coordinator. With research experience, and an Arts degree, in which she had studied Sociology of Medicine, Regionalism, the City and History she says, “It was all theoretical knowledge and suddenly I was in an environment where I could apply it. I had found where I belonged as far as my intellectual capacity and interests were. It was like I had been waiting to discover Coonara.”

After Leanne’s appointment at Coonara, the House underwent a process of self-assessment. “We got someone to help us develop our first strategic plan.” Coonara’s key stakeholders, Local Council, the Libraries, funding bodies and other Houses, were asked about Coonara’s strengths and weaknesses. “That gave us some really interesting information to look at. Another strategy was to take us out of the room, across the road to look at the house from the position of someone who has never been there before. We created a vision and a dream, and then worked toward it. Bringing it to reality gave everyone confidence and Coonara has continued to do that ever since.”

Prior to the 1995 Council amalgamations, Coonara had been connected with the Sherbrooke cluster of supportive Houses, receiving \$20,000 council funding a year. The amalgamation took Coonara to Knox council which didn’t fund Houses at all and whose Houses didn’t collaborate together. It was the former Premier Joan Kirner, a keynote speaker at a local Women’s Leadership Forum, who advised Leanne to lobby everyone who was standing for government elections. This action not only helped bring the Houses together but was also successful in securing some recurrent

funding for the first time. In the same year, the Adult Community and Further Education funding, around \$20,000 a year, changed its rules. From supporting a broad cross section of learning, it now, “pushed the House to consider a response to the depression that would help to reskill people to find work and respond to difficult times.” The Coonara team brainstormed some new courses and approached three local high schools to negotiate facilities where Coonara could run outreach adult technology classes. “We then put out this whole suite of return to work courses with a selection of modules that people could use.”

With funding support, they developed classes in keyboarding, computers, writing resumes and bookkeeping, accommodating a whole population that needed to learn computer skills, with full classes continuing over the decade. “It was a fabulous opportunity to engage the community. Working with people and supporting them to be connected to community is really hard if people’s basic needs aren’t being taken care of, or if they don’t have enough to live on. It was a really good example of a Community House changing in response to the changes in the community.” Upon Raeywn’s return, the House, busy with enrolments, was financial enough to keep Leanne on in a shared role.

When the Federal government bought in accreditation for childcare, Knox council wanted all their centres to have the highest level of accreditation. This meant all childcare workers, including those who had been working in the field for 20 years, had 12 months to get qualified, or lose their job. TAFE was offering the certificate courses without any recognition for prior

experience. "When I looked into it I realised it was something that Coonara could do. Becoming an RTO was a relatively simple process for us. We had to register, and then we could run the course in a way that recognised the skills of the women."

"Lynne Gibb, who taught Early Childhood at Coonara, also fell in love with computers and wanted to be on the cutting edge of change. It was brilliant to have her; she dragged the rest of us along with her passion and enthusiasm." Lynne began teaching other organisations how to use IT, including a group of nine Art Workers from Desart in the Northern Territory, on a tour to develop their communication skills in self-promotion. In their week of professional development at Coonara, Lynne also taught them digital storytelling. The House became an early adopter with e-learning and technology, and using technology for learning.

Relationships between Coonara and key people in Central Australia, led to a major project in childcare training across the MacDonnell Shire. This meant working with a number of isolated communities over three years. "The process of gathering evidence to show competency for people these days is really hard generally. You've got to have pieces of paper that they've written to convince the government. We had them do drawings and recordings and photos to gather evidence." By the time the training ended, 70 women had participated in the Cert 3 in Early Childhood Education and Care, with approximately 40% completing and a handful finishing the diploma. Leanne and Lynne Gibb travelled to the remote communities to present them with their certificates and "the Shire threw a celebration party, which was just amazing."

A 2013 community development project, designed to strengthen connections between houses and organisations led Leanne to producing a film about Community Houses, with a volunteer from Eastern Access television, which was associated with Channel 31. The film became so popular that Channel 31 offered the Community House sector an opportunity to do a weekly television show across 13 weeks. With support from ACFE, The House Around the Corner showcased two or three Houses each week from across the State. The success of this series continued production over 26 weeks. "We were getting messages from people in Perth about Neighbourhood Houses. It was fabulous."

One year later, Adult Learning Australia approached Coonara to do a television series Australia wide, with a view to increasing the knowledge of the not for profit sector around sustainable buildings and sustainable communities. "So we sent the team to Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and Tasmania filming six-one hour episodes, which got chopped up into You-tube videos. It's like that web that reaches out." A Green House around the Corner recorded an amazing 20,000 you-tube views across Australia, US, Germany and South Africa.

Collaborating with the Knox Learning Alliance, Coonara helped facilitate pop up learning events in the community. Establishing a working structure between the Houses, whilst retaining their independence, was a model copied by other Learn Local and Neighbourhood Houses in each LGA around the State. "Really collaborating around planning responses to local needs, joint marketing and promoting, you have such a broad offering, that they appreciate the totality

of what Neighbourhood Houses offer.” This extended into a relationship with the Westfield shopping complex, which provided a community space to promote and showcase volunteer organisations in the City. “We had to work really hard to get things happening down there but now around 140 different organisations are using the space.”

Leanne became the representative for CHAOS on the Association of Neighbourhood Houses Board for two years in the mid 1990’s. “That was a really interesting learning experience for me and helped shape my understanding of the concept of us as a sector. I think it’s a really healthy idea that new Coordinators join the CHAOS committee, so they can take advantage of the skills and knowledge. Otherwise you could be learning from your mistakes over and over, when you could be learning from other people’s mistakes and successes, which saves time and grief. CHAOS has been a really great source of professional development for the sector.”

“I have been surrounded by innovative and passionate people who were willing to take a bit of a risk. They are people who have a strong focus, in the case of adult education, on the learner. And if it’s community development, then the focus is on the community, looking for the opportunities to join things together.” With Leanne at the helm, Coonara has had a strong focus on collaboration and building partnerships in the sector, supporting and sharing whatever resources were available; and most of all thinking outside the box for creative solutions.

“Working at Coonara has given me the opportunity to really belong in a far greater way in my community than most people have the opportunity to do. I might have driven it but I couldn’t have done it without people who were really keen to be part of that. I was so fortunate to find a paid role that enabled me to do that really well and it has been amazing”



The process of gathering evidence to show competency for people these days is really hard generally. You’ve got to have pieces of paper that they’ve written to convince the government.

Leslie Wood

1986 – 1994

Selby Community House Coordinator

1992 – 1997

CHAOS Networker

“My main memories are of us making a powerful alliance; coming together and working with those amazing women; I've not worked in a place like that since.” Leslie Wood was a Selby Community House Coordinator during a time when Community Houses were still fairly grassroots orientated, though moving toward change. TAFE Colleges began to take an interest in Neighbourhood Houses, ACFE was established, Childcare regulations came in, computer technology had moved into the Houses and Council amalgamations all added a new layer of change upon the requirements of a Coordinator. On top of this Leslie also took on the role of CHAOS Networker.

“I loved having an idea and making it happen. There aren't many opportunities to do that but as a Coordinator of a Community House, you would see a need and then you go, 'what can we do? I loved the creativity that went with the work. You could not only make things happen but see the results from that as well. "I think one of the threads through my life, apart from caring for many animals, is governance; the structural stuff really interests me." Leslie explains that, when Community Houses were run on a voluntary basis, they were meeting

the social needs of people. Now that they have a greater financial component to them, they have been able to expand the programs that they offer, along with acknowledging the skills and commitment of their staff by paying them more realistically. However, that change brought with it some challenges, for example, in establishing and managing the processes for employing staff, more complex financial structures and accountability to funding bodies. 'I remember feeling some of the tensions it placed on our commitment, our absolute priority, to be responding to the needs of our local community.'

“I was part of the movement toward becoming more self-sufficient financially, which is really hard. Even with government funding, and I feel okay about government funding because those Houses fill policy gaps and they have every right to make a call for government funding. "I'm still arguing the issue that this is a more complex sector to succeed in than the commercial or for-profit sector.

The for-profit sector, is the biggest sector in the world and it could be said that it has achieved more than anyone else, but it's also shown to be the most destructive and self-serving sector. It is simpler to consider

what can I do to make a profit, regardless of the consequences. As my brother says, 'The corporate world is wide Leslie, but it's also quite shallow.'

That's the reason I am more in awe of the not-for-profit sector because it requires one to negotiate and navigate far more complex issues as you are serving two purposes; a social one and a financial one. It's where the creativity comes in.

As a Networker for CHAOS, supporting other Houses with day to day matters was only one aspect, yet a constant aspect of her work. I saw my role as Networker in three ways: to provide information, support and advocacy. First, to maintain a collection of resources, information that committees and coordinators and other staff members might need, Second, to be there for the Houses as a support when there were problems. Running a Neighbourhood House brings with it a lot of pressures. And finally, to continue to advocate for recognition of the powerful part Houses played, and I believe still do, in supporting and educating their communities, reducing social isolation and most importantly finding local ways to enjoy yourself.

Essentially, "Making the best use of the power that we had. I've always thought that it was a really extraordinary time for women, who were essentially unrecognised and underutilized for their talents. Part of the move towards getting women educated and into the workforce, was to activate opportunities that could give expression to all those talents, skills and intelligences ... from within the whole movement. And the other part was to have that recognised, perhaps by bringing it to the mainstream." "Women's emotional work is making sure that people are happy

and things are done; running a household is never ending and is invisible work. I do think the Neighbourhood House movement was about doing something meaningful but also feeling that what they were doing was worthwhile for themselves."

All those small battles about being financially recognised consumed a lot of energy. Leslie felt her arrow directed at government funding resources, in acknowledgement for the work that was already being done, "and to fill all sorts of government policy gaps. What happens in Community Houses ... childcare, education, creativity, self-actualisation ... it's amazing! We're forever thinking about other people, rather than defining our own narrative."

Yet, it was in trying to define what Neighbourhood Houses did and still do, in corporate or bureaucratic language that seems more difficult than the hands-on-work. But this definition was necessary in enabling the sector to be recognised by a cross section of government departments. "I felt, if I'd done anything, the lobbying, was part of what I did; I was really pushing for the recognition of houses. I saw that was part of my role; attracting government resources." 'We lobbied government Ministers constantly. And it was during Leslie's work as a Networker, that the sector was able to secure Neighbourhood House funding to the tune of six million dollars over six years, along with an increase to the CHAOS networker hours. Sometimes this means having a foot in both worlds and learning to understand not just their language but how they think. "You have to begin to understand what other people know and understand. It's so important."

“In walking into that political space, it was absolutely necessary to be able to speak their language. Even if it distanced you from some people.”

Aside from securing recognition in the way of funding, Leslie also saw her role as resourcing the Houses through management training and visioning. “I’ve always thought we need to make this organisation stronger, so we can stand up in a much more equal way, rather than just be shaped by the perceptions and expectations of funding partners.

META (Management Enhancement team Approach) training for Committees of Management.

What irritates me mostly, is that it’s seen that the community sector is nice. Never mistake it for nice; it’s just so much richer than that. The core of my frustration was that we couldn’t define the power that was in the sector. I can still remember the day when Judy, the childcare worker, and I were at the House, when a woman walked up to the gate and said, ‘Please take my baby, I think I’m going to hit her.’ I just found Judy walking up to the gate and saying, give her to me and we helped her through the next process. I thought, if you’ve done nothing else ... Thankfully we had been

there when she urgently needed someone to turn to. For her that was powerful, and that realisation was for me too.”

There were many battles, but I wouldn’t want that to be the story of CHAOS. Looking back, there are also so many memories of good times. Walking into a House and feeling that wave of creative warmth, laughing in kitchens, so many things.... I remember the conference that CHAOS ran with Frazer, the Networker for NIECH (the Network of Inner East Community Houses) at the York on Lilydale. Trying to provide a small but luxurious break for House staff and committees,,,, the optimism and energy of House Coordinators, administrators, childcare workers and volunteers, and the extraordinary women on the CHAOS Committee.

“In all my conversations with people, every single one makes a difference in some way and that should comfort you in old age. You have touched so many people through what you are and what you do. If you look at our sector, it is the sum total of all those millions of actions that actually shapes the world. You are part of something that is huge and it may not bring you individual recognition but you have to know that you are part of something.”



Margaret Banks

1984 – 2001

Vermont South Community House

Margaret arrives at our meeting with books in her arm; resources to support my work. She orders her coffee, letting the staff know we won't want to be disturbed. Assessing the outside annex we are to sit in, she decides to enlist my help in moving a table where there will be more air flow. The waitress comes with water; Margaret asks for ice. She is familiar with her needs and she knows how to make sure they are met, and she does it with clarity, graciousness and genuine connection.

The daughter of a minister, Margaret grew up learning by example to connect with people; witnessing human connection 24/7 was just part of life. Drawn to the subject of people and more specifically to community development, she gravitated toward an old farm house; a meeting place for the Vermont South community. Surrounded by dirt roads and a once flourishing fruit and flower growing community, Margaret began 1984 as a twelve-hour-a-week House Coordinator; "That's if there was any money left at the end of the week."

By 1976 the old farm house at 557 Burwood Hwy was destined to be demolished, making way for future developments. It was a meeting place for local groups and organisations, and it was on the back of

the Vermont South Community Association that the Vermont South Community House grew. As local orchards were being subdivided, the Community House was offering a toy library, women's luncheons, playgroups and school holiday programs, while still offering a venue for all other Association groups. With 150 people through the doors each week, the pressure of all these activities weighed on the old house, and knowing the building itself was facing a limited future, the community rallied for a new home.

Margaret and her community strengthened their relationship with local council, developing astute lobbying skills in their efforts to establish a central place for community to meet. Collectively they designed their ideal Community House and after fundraising their own portion toward the costs, the then City of Nunawading Council built Vermont South a new purpose-designed Community House. Over the following years, in her role as Coordinator, Margaret witnessed more than seven extensions to the building, cementing the integrity of this essential ingredient in the neighbourhood.

Back in the early days "the theory was to get women away from the kitchen sink.

So we got them out of the house doing amazing things. This was during a time when women accepted the fact that they were at home minding the children; they weren't looking for jobs." These were women in isolation from each other in a developing suburb, with few services and facilities. Outside of the Community House, there were few opportunities to meet. "You look at those women in the patchwork classes through the seventeen years that I was there, they were already brilliant patchworkers but they just enjoyed being together and having that connection."

Their successful fight for the stability of basic funding enabled the House to move forward with substance. In 1985 a policy for Council funding of Nunawading Neighbourhood Houses was drawn up, and the following year the State Government also addressed the funding of House Coordinators. When basic needs are met, there is more capacity for expansion and it was on these grounds that some of the success of Vermont Community House were able to flourish. Margaret and her three surrounding Coordinators in Nunawading also formed a strong support system for each other; so much so that even 35 years later, they still meet for coffee on a regular basis.

With the amalgamation of councils in 1994, the four larger Houses of Nunawading joined with the six smaller Houses of Box Hill, forming the ten City of Whitehorse Neighbourhood and Community Houses; COWNCH. Margaret in Vermont South, being among the largest, argued that irrespective of size, each house be given equal funding; equality was the bottom line. In 2001 she brought the Houses together with a series of projects to mark the centenary of Australia becoming an

independent nation, and she gained support from across the political spectrum. A Bucket full of Berries was publicly released during the centenary, with Reflections on Whitehorse, a significant piece of written history, was coordinated by Margaret among the Community Houses. Running this series of Federation projects was, "very much about bringing all the COWNCH Houses together."

The tiered levels of women supporting women was extended through CHAOS, bringing Houses together throughout the eastern suburbs. Among the other Coordinators, Margaret became a contributor and a recipient to the productive swirl of camaraderie that was made possible through CHAOS. The collective collegiate support and the building of relationships inspired her, "reducing the isolation of just doing your own thing in your little pocket. We had the collegial support of those other people striving for the same sorts of things." They shared "the stress of funding deadlines, or information about a new teacher, or just our material resources; if we had something that we could share, we'd share it."

With each CHAOS meeting held in a different House, coordinators in the network were able to identify with each of the Houses and their particular flavours. Each House offered something different to the whole, while embracing the importance of connecting those who were able to give with those in need of support. The meetings brought people together, relationships were born and nurtured, and common interests strengthened the movement. "Wild horses wouldn't have kept us away from a CHAOS meeting. I think it's really good to know what other people are doing and how they're doing it."

It was the collective support of fellow CHAOS members that encouraged Margaret to join the ANHLC Board. Along with Naine Sankey, Mary Roberts and others, she attended a regular stream of meetings and conferences, networking and strengthening relationships. In the early days she remembers being impressed by a woman who travelled all the way over from Perth to attend an ANHLC conference in Melbourne! 'All that way!' when in later years, she herself would be attending annual National Link conferences all over Australia.

"CHAOS was really the springboard that afforded me the support to run a nation-wide project to find a national logo." In order to raise the collective profile and increase credibility and acceptance in the public domain, Margaret conducted a large scale survey, right across Australia. For 18 months she was busy activating and consulting people to contribute design art for the project. The national logo, along with the Statement of Philosophical Principles, would be tools that Houses could be guided by, and be able to pass on to future members.

"These tools epitomise the 'thread' that is so hard to define; yet which binds so strongly all that is the Neighbourhood House Movement. I find it a really powerful tool for people from all walks of life, and from all over Australia to meet on common ground, in a place where similar values are held. It is all about collective strength." And where her sights may have been focused on working within the State or National level, community development was always the key, no matter where she was. "I was passionate about getting people together." In this context Margaret remembered the phenomenal volunteers at Vermont South

and how they dared to take themselves out of their comfort zones to support and strengthen their community.

"We used to run community singing for Nadrasca", an organisation supporting people with disabilities. Coming by the bus load, Margaret would encourage her somewhat reluctant volunteers to assist with the Nadrasca community members, to watch their faces light up with the universal language of sharing songs together. "Five years later they were still doing it and loving it and really understanding the joy it brought to these people. The volunteer commitment was huge."

At 52 years of age Margaret completed her Social Work degree, only to meet a woman at the ANHLC conference, who at the ripe old age of 92 was just completing her PhD! And on the subject of qualifications, Margaret received a certificate at an ACFE conference in Perth for being the Cappuccino Queen of the East; a wry smile passing her lips; "I thought that was an achievement." In the early days, Margaret says, "We built things and thought nothing was impossible; we just did it." But changing times present themselves in all sorts of ways. "At Nunawading North, they had a rack of earrings, so you could go to work each day and pick your earrings. An earring exchange; you can't do that these days."

With increasing regulations and pressure to become more financially sustainable, Margaret concedes that, "More than ever before, it is necessary to run community houses or learning centres from a business model. But with these newer business considerations, I wonder if an essence of the community experience gets lost in the professional-financial-accountability-

business side of things.” However, with her background in business studies she thinks: “anyone can run a business, but to be a community development worker you have to have heart. It’s the human element that’s really so critical.”

“30 years ago we had to create our own funding. It was monumental the first day we bought a whole box of biros. Like a whole box! That was a huge investment.” Along with her committee, a steady stream of community and volunteers, a supportive family, local networks, CHAOS, the ANHLC, National Link and many years in the movement, she was able to witness what was possible from small beginnings.

The Vermont South Community House expanded its operation under her management to 1,400 people per week, among them up to 12 playgroups.

Without supportive relationships, like that of Naine Sankey, Sue Curlis and Mary Roberts, “who were a very strong and dominant force in my life,” so much of her vital work would not have been possible. On the other hand, “My husband would say, that’s Margaret off doing her thing again. Don’t try stopping her because she’s going to do it anyway.”



More than ever before, it is necessary to run community houses or learning centres from a business model. But with these newer business considerations, I wonder if an essence of the community experience gets lost ...

Marie Holmes

1979-1990

Upper Yarra Community House

In 1978 Yarra Junction was still a small and remote village of the Shire of Upper Yarra, with a total population of around 2000 people, when Marie Holmes first moved there as a young married mother. She had ideas about staying home and raising children, which she says lasted a couple of months. "It was a fantasy and I thought it'd be great but truth is, I was so bored." Marie had become aware of the emerging Neighbourhood House movement and was already wondering how Yarra Junction could connect with it.

A CYSS (Community Youth Support) program was operating in the small town, and Marie visited with the intention of seeing whether adult programs could be incorporated into the building. "CYSS were preparing to fold and so I negotiated with the owner of the building to use it for a peppercorn rent to get something happening." Marie's husband was in the fire brigade and she was in the tennis club with some credible access to local people. "By hook or by crook I was going to get some women involved, and being Mick's wife, they thought I must be alright."

"I've always been very good at community engagement; it's always about what we need and where can we go? There is no

question about not doing it." Rallying a group of interested people together, she formed a committee. Next she connected with Judy Kiraly from the Council of Adult Education, who set her on a direction that could only go forward. Applying to the Victorian Adult Learning Group, Marie was able to secure \$500 to get started. "There wasn't a lot of funding around in those days." As a method to re-engage women into learning, she began offering some pre-accredited soft skills courses.

With the feminist movement came a push toward women returning to work, or furthering their education to advance employment options. "Being a small country town with all these women wanting to return to work, you can imagine what that was like? There was massive opposition from the male community and all that nonsense." But with Marie's husband in the fire brigade, she felt she had an advantage. Still, even offering pre-accredited courses raised a lot of issues, with women questioning whether they would be allowed to join in. "It was hard in the early days."

In an effort to break down the barriers Marie and her committee began to explore creative ideas that the township would

benefit from. They invited representatives from the Melbourne Museum to come and engage with the local community, and with funding from the Arts Council they held community tiling events to create visual art projects for the community to see. "We also did a lot of stuff with disabilities and literacy through art therapy." Eventually the community began to accept the House's activities, enabling Marie to take on a more formal approach, like getting women engaged in personal development and return to work or study programs

Whilst in hospital birthing her next child, Marie was called back to action, alerted that a nearby group of women had plans to take over the Community House in her absence. "This was a time when the feminist movement was vibrant and women were learning to find their feet and their voices, and on occasion this led to volatile action. Some of the women, from the radical lesbian community and previously involved in the House, were expressing concerns that the House wasn't operating within the constitution. Judy Kiraly from the CAE was very supportive, and with her help we attained a good resolution and we were all able to move on."

Having worked so hard to establish the House, Marie brought her strengths to the fore. "I've always been a pretty good negotiator and networker. That's always been a real strength of mine, getting people involved in community engagement and looking out for who's who in the zoo. In such a small community, when you don't have a large, strong group of people around you, battles can become quite hard. The work is about building community so more people engage."

"With the committee, I always made sure there was an honorarium. If women had to come to meetings and they had children, the committee paid for babysitting. I really felt strongly about that because again women have another imposition. I think that if people see you are trying to do something to support engagement, they're more willing to engage." With women wanting to develop opportunities for better working options, childcare became an issue, as there wasn't any in the region. For Marie however, her new born son slept in a bassinet under the desk for the first eight weeks, which wasn't an uncommon story of the time.

"A room in the House was made available for childcare, the first community childcare in Upper Yarra and one of the first in Neighbourhood Houses." This made running programs for women so much easier, with opportunities extended to include accredited courses, Certificate II in Hospitality (the first in a community setting in the State), literacy, art and health services. The distance that people needed to travel to get access to services down the line was another issue, so Marie started looking into how to bring those services up to Yarra Junction. "I met with Centrelink, who started coming up because in those days the community was very isolated."

Through the development of the Neighbourhood House movement there was a focus around exploring and planning initiatives and stretching into unchartered territory. "It was about sitting down and saying, what do we want to do? What relationships and organisations do we need to build networks with? How can we work together to get things going in this community? Who is philosophically in tune with who we are, and can we work

with them? There was a certain amount of adhocery, but in order to do that stuff, you've actually got to sit down and be quite strategic about it."

Marie joined the newly formed Outer Eastern College of TAFE board as a community member. This enabled her to establish a link and an outreach connection with the institution, creating the ability to offer interesting certificate courses at Upper Yarra. A Certificate in Electronics for women then became a pathway to move women into new directions. "The electronic department would come out with a ute full of electronic kits to support the class, which was being conducted in a back room at the House. It was the first time any of the women had ever done stuff like that."

"We tried to do as much as we could within our capabilities." Through her relationship with TAFE, Marie was able to bring pre-apprenticeship students to work on House repairs. She also negotiated with the high school to establish a community drop in centre for young people on their property, which manifested as a house on the corner. The Upper Yarra Community House also ran community programs for those on community correction orders. "It was exciting because anything was possible and we were able to do whatever we wanted basically. There was no bureaucracy."

By the late 80's the Department of Education and Training (DET) were beginning to fund delivery of accredited training in the community. "We'd done some return to work courses and then we got funding to deliver the first community based accredited training, a Cert II in Hospitality, in a community provider." Marie established a partnership with Helen

Homewood, a local chef who had a cafe in Warburton, who agreed to allow the hospitality training to operate at the cafe on Tuesdays when it was closed. "It was basically the start of a social enterprise. When the students were confident enough they would start serving afternoon and morning teas from the cafe."

Having established a strong community connection to the House, Marie and her now empowered team took on the goliath battle of staring down the dominant patriarchal male in the community. "The bank manager across the road was all powerful, on council and everybody was terrified of him. He blackmailed people and the stories we heard in the community were enough for me to take him on as a bit of challenge." Marie ran a very effective campaign at the next council elections. "We over-threw one of the most powerful councillors in Yarra Junction, which was monumental."

Jan Simmons from Morrison House was Marie's nearest Community House ally and together they shared ideas and ways to collaborate. Gradually more Houses emerged and CHAOS became established to support this new and growing sector in the community. Together with Jan, Helen Kimberly and Rhonda Moore from Coonara, Marie joined what was perhaps the first CHAOS committee. "It was instrumental in providing a uniting voice and strength to take issues to the government about the importance of what we were doing. It gave the opportunity for Houses to meet and talk strategically about future ideas and enlist funding support."

"Everything that starts, starts small, and it needed to grow, so we needed CHAOS and the other regions to come together

at state level to meet. This was very important in these early days when we were trying to get legitimacy. We started to see the potential of what we were doing and it was good to meet with other like-minded, intelligent people; all women with vision. It was in the days of Premier Joan Kirner and her Minister, Carolyn Hogg, and they were amazing times.” It was a time when coordinators were finding their own voices in a female-led State government climate which was supportive of the Neighbourhood House movement.

“That’s when the ANHLC began putting on the Neighbourhood House’s Brain-food Conferences, bringing Neighbourhood Houses together. There was a lot of energy talking about the movement and who and what we were. It was the start of a real Community House movement. There was a real sisterhood and we all had very healthy debates.

Helen Kimberly, who was instrumental in getting a lot of things going in Victoria, spoke at the United Nations and she was

the first executive officer of the ANHLC. She knew who was who in the zoo in Australian politics and she could open doors wherever she went.”

Among Marie’s many innovative ideas, she organised a community festival, complete with street floats like a Moomba parade. Encouraging the school and other local groups and clubs to design and build their own floats for the occasion, she says, “It was a bit hill-billy but it was great; the whole community got involved.” With so many things to consider in a project of this scale, there can often be last minute details that can get overlooked. “One thing I didn’t think of, was that you’re supposed to get permission to close off the highway!” Luckily as with last minute details, they can still happen in the last minute, and the day was a huge success.



Having established a strong community connection to the House, Marie and her now empowered team took on the goliath battle of staring down the dominant patriarchal male in the community.

Mary Roberts

1987 – 2015

Koonung Cottage Blackburn North

“Phyl Slattery was a very big mover and shaker.” A vocal woman with enough passion and determination to ignite the flame of possibility, she went to Canberra to promote what was still really a new idea; the birth of Neighbourhood Houses. “She went up there at her own expense and returned with a small grant program – The Australian Assistance Plan.” Phyl Slattery and Father Pat Cruddin, the parish priest at St Phillip’s Blackburn North, established the Nunawading North Neighbourhood House in 1973. The House, as it was called

then, was where Mary Roberts was first introduced to the concept of a Neighbourhood House. As a volunteer, she can remember sitting on the floor with several other volunteers, sewing up carpet off-cuts with a bag needle to make a carpet for the newly acquired House.

Outside children were making their own fun with hammers and nails, paper, paste and buckets full of imagination, creating their own revolution. This was the beginning of Occasional and Out of School Hours Care. It was from these humble beginnings that the Neighbourhood Houses grew, and it was the strength, foresight and courage of particular women that turned it into a movement. On a shoe-string budget, every

opportunity was taken to support local people in the community to improve the quality of their lives. Phyl organised to bring Chilean migrants from a nearby Migrant Hostel to the House for English classes. Perhaps from a sense of gratitude, the group wanted to make a meal to share with the House and it was Mary who took them shopping. Without any English literacy, it was the language of care and kindness that brought the ingredients together to provide a feast for all to share.

In 1987 Mary took on the position of Coordinator at Koonung Cottage in Blackburn North.

Beginning in an eight hour a week solo position, Mary nestled in among the 87 people who were regulars at the House. “It was an old two-bedroom house and when I went there in 1987 the office was in the old bathroom, with the bath removed. You couldn’t get anyone in there for an interview because you couldn’t close the door; there wasn’t enough room.” These were the days when there wasn’t much in the way of funding and every bit of money had to stretch in all directions, including furnishing the houses. “The indestructible rubbish collections were a gold mine. One house completely furnished their office

with stuff from the street. You had to do that, you didn't have money."

As a sole worker, Mary didn't have any admin staff for the first 20 years. She got by with two volunteers, a bookkeeper and assistant who came to do the wages and pay the accounts. "Then when computers came in, that was hysterical. I went off and had training but I still didn't know what I was doing. I had no one there to back me up." With a supportive committee and volunteers, she was told, "Mary, the participants come first, the admin second. Look after the participants, and if you need help, we'll come and help with the admin; and they did. Looking back over a lot of years, I can see how the success of Houses depends so much on the culture and the personnel, including the committee."

In 1994, when municipalities amalgamated under the Kennett Government, Koonung Cottage was incorporated into the newly formed City of Whitehorse. Aside from now being part of a 10 Neighbourhood House cluster, the cultures were quite different. "The City of Nunawading would say, 'You show us you've got a need and we'll consider your application for funding or support. They weren't overly generous with money but they were supportive.'" Box Hill council, however, was much more patriarchal, with top down expectations and a sense of ownership over the houses. "It was totally different and it made it hard for the cluster to work together initially but not to be daunted, we were women; we worked it out."

Mary remembers a group of women from Narre Warren, in the days when the Neighbourhood Houses were being established. They were new mums with a tribe of children between them and a

young forthright woman called Kay Vrieze, who simply needed somewhere to form a playgroup. "They had been badgering the council, saying please, we need a hall or somewhere to meet." Council were unwilling to support their needs until the group, with all their children, decided to meet in the foyer of the Town Hall. They found that, having got the attention of council, another venue was swiftly organised. "It's about women taking charge of what their needs are, and that's what Neighbourhood Houses do too."

Funding was always an issue. "We were forever on the front foot, writing letters, making phone calls, keeping our nose in there; treading water." With each election, be it Local, State, or Federal, concerns in the community sector arose about whether Neighbourhood Houses would continue to receive ongoing funding. In 2000, Neighbourhood Houses finally became a line item in the State budget. After a robust campaign in 2005 to make Neighbourhood Houses more visible to the State Government, a sizeable increase in funding resulted. This alleviated some of the pressures associated with current survival, and future planning.

"Margaret Fennel from CHAOS, the ANHLC Board and the Campaign Working Group was invited to sit at Premier John Brumby's table for the Budget Launch Breakfast!!!"

"Changes were going on all the time but that's when you got your strength from CHAOS and the ANHLC. We were all in it together. I found my mentors in CHAOS. There were some strong leaders, like the 3 Amigos (Helen Kimberly, Cathy Guinness & Kaz McKay), Audrey Hall, Jan Corben, Leslie Wood and Maureen McConnell.

Phyl Slattery, who first introduced me to Neighbourhood Houses, Thelma Bourne who started the Mountain District Women's Cooperative in Ferntree Gully and also Gwen from Diamond Valley Living and Learning; they were the pioneers. They were the ones viewed as the ring-leaders of the whole movement. You think back to all those things and what it took to get the movement going. I think women inspire each other."

With very little in the way of funding or outside support, the ANHLC (Neighbourhood Houses Victoria as they are now known) and CHAOS were vital in supporting the individual Houses that formed the foundation of the movement. "Sometimes it got very hard and you thought, I can't do this anymore." But then CHAOS provided the arena for stories and resources and knowledge to be shared, as well as permission to try different things. Above all it was, "the cooperation; the willingness of women to share with women, it was amazing. I found with CHAOS, not only did you share with others what you were doing but also the personal development and the support was probably what kept me going."

Mary went to the first ANHLC conference back in the 70's, when the threads of a movement were still being formed. "There were 14 of us who went to Cape Woolamai and we stayed in a YWCA lodge. That was the first conference and it was inspiring, even though it was minute and humble. We cooked and took our own food and ran our own workshops; I didn't miss another conference in 25 years." One conference had participants making a magnificent patchwork quilt, instigated by Kaz McKay. "I can remember people putting their feet in some white stuff and walking on the quilt

making pathways; I'll never forget that, we sat there one night for many hours making that." Pathways being a universal theme throughout the Houses, the quilt, adorned with buttons and other materials, was hung at the ANHLC office for long years and taken to conferences.

Mary was involved with the ANHLC along with representatives from other Houses across the State, working in particular on the child care regulations implemented in 1988. The regulations defined the differences between long day care and occasional 15 hours a week care, with consideration for the different licences and staffing requirements. "I always enjoyed going to the meetings, especially meetings on industrial issues, or governance." Advocating for Neighbourhood Houses has for long years been a passionate endeavour. "I didn't really care about the political persuasion of the politician currently in parliament, or council, or anywhere else; they were all the same target to me. I didn't mind speaking with any of them, any time. You could write a book on the encounters; they were challenges for survival."

Over the years Koonung was extended from fence to fence to fit all of the growing House activities under the one roof. Mary's hours also gradually increased to 30 and though the first 20 years were a solo operation, she finally gained the support of an admin worker. Before leaving her position at Koonung after 27 years, the weekly thoroughfare of house users had increased to 600. In considering all that had been achieved during these years, Mary says, "Most of all I helped to develop a tremendous culture there." With an aging demographic and over 20 different nationalities, it was the innate sense

of belonging and the intermingling and connection between people that speaks of success.

The patchwork group, as an example, went away together to exhibitions, or displays, or even holidays. “They just developed these friendships; really strong connections and they’re there for one another in times of crisis.” The exercise group, which has been going for 20 years, also has this wonderful network. “If someone is sick there’s a designated person to phone them so not everyone is ringing up. They would go to theatre luncheons, to Parliament House for a tour, or off to the art gallery.” A strength training group at the house also formed strong connections, going out for lunch once a term. “That wouldn’t have happened in a gym.”

A collaborative effort between a host of knitters saw the yarn bombing of Koonung Cottage with enough triangles threaded together to form a bunting that surrounded the entire House. Rectangles of various sizes were sewn around the trees and the hand rails leading to the front door, creating a colourful entrance to invite the curious of heart. An owl sat on the letter

box and another in a tree while a snake wove its way through the branches. Change is constant and reflective of the times. After 46 years in the Neighbourhood House sector and with a lot of stories and contribution behind her, Mary recalls the early days of the movement.

“We used to laugh that it was about getting educated and then getting your tubes tied. The movement was about freedom. Women were starting to go to university and then lots of things happened. We’ve lost a lot of that very basic stuff that we used to do and maybe we need to get back there a bit.” Still alert to the changing landscape of the sector, Mary’s passion for the movement and all that she has witnessed and achieved leaves little scope for full retirement. Nominated by Koonung Cottage to join the CHAOS Committee, Mary continues her work in the sector, even though she is now retired. Reflecting on her experience across the decades she says, “Personally I achieved a lot. I grew; I got more determined and probably extended myself beyond where I thought I could be. Thank you for an extraordinary experience.”



CHAOS provided the arena for stories and resources and knowledge to be shared, as well as permission to try different things.

Maureen McConnell

1998- 2019

Ongoing CHAOS Networker

Wanting to make the world a better place for people and helping them to identify their own capacity to do that, is what drives Maureen McConnell to work each day. With a background in Recreational Leadership, a work history covering a broad spectrum of community engagement and a few years employment in local government, she says, "I've always come back to community because that's where my soul is." Maureen harbours a core understanding that once people's basic needs are met, she says, "They need a lot more to lead beautiful and fulfilling lives."

Her first hands-on experience with Neighbourhood Houses was when, as a relatively new mum with an 18 month old and a new bundle of twins, she went to Japara Community House in Kilsyth. Living on acreage in isolation with little support, Maureen found Japara to be a life-line, because the children could go into childcare while she went to a craft group with her sister. The group offered her an opportunity to simply sit and connect with other women. "It was just so important not to fall apart." Having been a professional woman working full time just prior to the birth of her first child, she found that adjusting to three children under the age of

two was a challenge that could hardly be prepared for.

Now employed as a CHAOS Networker for over 21 years, she is still passionate about community. Aside from supporting the 29 Houses under her wing with their individual issues and development, she believes, "One of the things that is a really important part of the network, is the networking time." Not just an essential ingredient in her own working role but also integral for the sector to flourish. At the CHAOS meetings she says, "We make a big deal out of having nice food and leaving time for people to simply talk and network because that's what we are actually about; it's about people talking and supporting each other."

Issues like governance of an RTO, general finance, compliance, volunteer management, HR issues, funding deadlines and a host of other topics are generic among the Houses. Sharing knowledge, skills and resources are essential in their ongoing success. "At a CHAOS meeting you can see cards being exchanged and a cross collaboration of projects being hatched." And this isn't just about House Managers and staff but the committees too, who are just as much a part of the network, and who are equally

encouraged to participate in CHAOS. Whether it's meetings, needs based training, conferences, or campaigns, Maureen and the CHAOS committee are there to support the Community House sector.

Reaching into other areas of society that are unfamiliar with Neighbourhood Houses is a necessary part of the outreach work of the organisation. "It's an opportunity for us to constantly be out there in other sectors, saying here we are, grass roots; we're right in the community. We have people coming through from cradle to grave. In CHAOS, in any given week we've got something like 14000 people coming through the doors. To be able to consult with 500 people on a government program or policy as focused groups or surveys, is a fantastic opportunity."

Collaborating and networking and forming relationships with organisations beyond Community Houses is one of the big successes in the role of CHAOS. "We've done a lot of really good work that has exposed Neighbourhood Houses to other sectors, where they wouldn't have been exposed at all." Currently Maureen is working at the State level with the responsible gambling foundation. "At the moment we are doing a project on the reduction of gambling related harm, which has taken us into a whole lot of areas where organisations are saying they would never have thought to work with Neighbourhood Houses; and we're naturally positioned to do it."

Working with the five houses in the City of Knox, CHAOS is also engaged in a project to support community members who wish to die at home, and the people caring for them. "What we're doing is not necessarily

in the home with the person that is dying; it's supporting the people who are doing that work. Like sitting down with a mapping tool to identify who is in the person's social network that might be able to assist, or identifying if the bins need putting out, or do the dogs need walking?" End of life care is not only about assessing what the needs are but also about re-educating people to accept help. Within this crucial work is an education campaign geared around accepting help, which gives permission for people to engage with volunteering. "At this end, it's about changing community attitude."

In order for Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres to further embrace their community's needs, Maureen says, "We want to start doing some work with a University because we want to start getting the rigour that governments recognise, in the work that we're doing. We know that some people come to a House because they are lost and lonely and we know that they might go on to volunteer, or to do a course, or to get a qualification in something, or to go on a committee or board, or go on to university, or they might be a better citizen, or they might just be a happier person."

"If we can make a difference to someone's physical or mental health and to assist them to be better citizens because they want to give back and engage, then there are so many benefits to the individual, their family and the broader community. We need to get better in showing how we have a social and economic benefit to our community, whether there's less stress on the household, increased skills, a reduction in doctors visits and medication as people gain a greater sense of belonging"

Raising the profile of what CHAOS does between all the municipalities of the region includes the vast terrain of health and well-being. "We do that in terms of physical well-being: so many yoga classes, Pilates, walking groups, healthy eating programs, support groups, information sessions around specific health issues such as heart attacks and strokes, and much more. We provide "for people who are carers, preventative health, all the support around positive mental health; connecting people. Becoming totally absorbed in a mosaic class, cooking class or any other activity or social opportunity may reduce the impact of health issues, which may then flow on to their family life and the community as a whole."

It's having those conversations and developing more academic rigour around the evidence base of what Houses and Learning Centres do is the ongoing work in their relationships with Government departments. On the subject of economics, attention moves to the way Houses are run. "There was a real trend about 10 or 15 years ago to put business managers into Neighbourhood Houses, as opposed to community development workers. We saw some Houses that flourished financially but at the expense of their work with the community. They had money in the bank, which is great because you have to run at a profit but it went to the detriment of the people."

"One of the things I've really tried to encourage Houses to do after they've had their AGM, is to have the conversations around, what do you exist for? What would the community lose if the House closed down tomorrow, or what would be lost from this community? If someone's exposure has only been to do a certificate 3, to get

a qualification to get a job, then the whole other social connection, the community development connection, is lost." The community development connection is, "equally important to someone who is lonely, or has come from the justice system, or someone that has lost someone and is recently bereaved."

"Some might say that it's important that we are a really good quality training organisation. On the other hand, we've got people saying, 'Hang on a minute, a community BBQ might not raise money but we brought 100 people in who didn't know their neighbours, and now that they're connected they are starting to come into the house for other things. So if we don't have time for those conversations and just jump into business as usual, people aren't running on the same philosophy and that's where holes appear in the organisation."

"It works best when you have a range of people including the dreamers and pragmatists on the committee, and they find a way to work together by having those conversations. What we try to do constantly is to keep challenging how we see ourselves, so that we don't get complacent. We have people that can access technology and people are more mobile, and yet we are in a community where people identify as experiencing loneliness, which is increasing and has been recognized as a key contributor to health issues. That's something that we will encourage our members to consider in the opportunities they offer."

In the last year, two CHAOS member organisations have closed, and Maureen recognises that, "Strong financial practices and governance are areas some Houses could do with help in. To be able to offer

the opportunity to coach Committees of Governance over six months of their meetings, and to walk them through the process, could be of great benefit to some Houses. There have been a lot of challenges and it's not always easy. Conflict goes with the job, and you can get called in to help and sometimes it's like being given a tangled ball of wool and you have to work out the best way to unravel what is going on."

Taking the time to talk and grow tolerance between people is as an important part of building relationships within the Houses. "We don't put enough effort into a culture of positive staff morale and team work.

The whole sector is all about relationships." Reflecting on more than two decades of her work in this role, Maureen smiles; "I'm still passionate about what Houses have achieved and can achieve and that we play a really important role in society; in bringing people together. We have to pay respect to the fact that Community Houses came from the women's movement. We've been doing this work for 40 years and I do see that we make a difference."



We saw some Houses that flourished financially but at the expense of their work with the community. They had money in the bank, which is great because you have to run at a profit but it went to the detriment of the people.

Naine Sankey

1998-2007
at Blackburn

“It was lovely on some sunny mornings when I was at the Avenue and all the doors were open. There’d be the sewing class at one end, a patchwork class in the middle, a smocking class at this end, and the sun would shine on all the different materials; it was just beautiful.” Naine Sankey remembers the Community House in Blackburn, designed by Algernon Elmore, with its 1920’s renovated classrooms and sizeable bathroom. The Uniting church owned the property, which included an old shed next door, partly filled with the Church’s clutter. The remaining space housed a pottery group alternating with an upholstery restoration class. There would be tack marks in the green ware (the pottery) or clay dust in the upholstery materials, so each group had to learn how to clean up after themselves. One woman upholstered 5 chairs, one for each of her children.

The oldest child in a large family, Naine left school at 15 with her pencil and notebook to begin secretarial work, along with many other young girls of the time. Having numerous jobs and feeling exploited by the patriarchal system, like many young women, she found herself rebelling at the inequalities she was experiencing and

witnessing. Later as a professional woman in the Department of Human Resources, Naine had knowledge of the lack of opportunities for women, and found herself drawn to work for the community sector, “I just wanted women to feel freer.”

On the suburban home front, there was an awareness of women becoming depressed, in a state known as suburban melancholia. Because aside from house-duties and child raising, there was nothing to do, and making friends wasn’t easy. “There were groups of women doing things but they had to organise it themselves, like the married women’s netball association that included all women, married or not. It wasn’t easy to meet people nor was it easy to get around. There was hardly a made road, you had to make everything yourself and there was little contact with others. If you wanted to catch a bus, you’d probably have to walk up a muddy hill, like I did for a while; you felt like no-one cared about you.”

“Women back then didn’t dream they had any ability to do what they ended up doing.” The Avenue Neighbourhood House had only been operating for five years before Naine applied for the position of Coordinator. She remembers the interview

being held in the hallway amongst all sorts of stuff, with a blanket pinned to the glass doors of the lounge room for privacy. "At the interview I thought how exciting the place was. That for me began the most exciting ten years of my working life."

Coming from a corporate background and familiar with all the proper requirements of workplace furniture, she found herself sharing the one desk with volunteers, with the typing being done on another table in a different room. The blue tiled wall in the old kitchen was used as a notice board for listing classes, with room for names to be added. "When enough people indicated an interest, the class went ahead! This was a most effective system at the time." A time when life was simpler. Enrolment day was "a wonderful social experience, with queues going down the street, drawing attention to the achievements of the House."

"In the beginning the philosophy was about trying to get people to decide what kind of management they would like; not hierarchical, we wanted a more democratic sort of system. Over time, the tightening up of practices and the introduction of new regulations has meant that committee members now not only need a Working with Children's Check but they also need to be cleared by a JP who vouches for them." The years since have also added new dimensions of complexity with funding outcomes and accountability, health and safety regulations, industrial issues, public liability insurance, childcare regulations and the list continues.

As time unfolded, some Neighbourhood Houses became Community Learning Centres. "We became incorporated into the education system, which meant they

funded it but then we had to adhere to certain regulations; it became more professional. Coordinators were asked to be trained as managers in the areas required by the education system and then Houses were classified to receive the appropriate funding for a certain number of hours per week. The real initiatives that the Coordinator wanted to put into place sometimes got put on the back shelf for a long time. Instead of doing the work you felt you should be doing, we were doing lots of administration type work for funding bodies and drowning in paperwork - filling in forms and going to meetings. To fully understand the workings of a Neighbourhood House one must realise that it is a sophisticated, multifaceted organisation."

During 1988 the Department of Further Education approached The Avenue to host some adult literacy programs for people with special needs, those who had missed out on schooling, or people from the migrant community. This gave rise to the Blackburn Adult Literacy Group. Relationships were formed between the group and the House, and then there was a lot of personal disruption when the group was later moved to the Skill Share Program in Box Hill. In 1996 the manager of the Skill Share Program approached the House to ask if the House would accept responsibility for the literacy program, as it had been running at a significant loss.

The committee agreed to take it on, running both day and night groups, offering reading, writing and maths programs for a diverse community of need. It once more became a flourishing program, and has continued over 20 years to this day. "It was one of the most successful programs that ever ran. Hundreds of people have been part of the program over the years and we have

many wonderful stories of lives changed and goals achieved. Some gained driving licenses, certificates in employment areas and many gained sufficient confidence to make life changes they thought they'd never be able to make."

Naine had a particular soft spot for the migrant women, many of whom were the same age as her and had faced enormous difficulty in finding a safe place to live. Having escaped foreign occupation, they often fled by night, never to return home, and leaving families and friends behind. Settling into a new country with a different language and culture wasn't easy. "It was difficult for them to learn English, and they must have felt so lonely because things were very different here from where they came from. In time they made such a success of their lives and loved everything here. We did not realise at first that schools in many parts of the world were closed during WW2, which meant that people in that age group did not receive a formal education in their own language. It must have been very difficult to learn English, when they came to Australia as young adults."

The Avenue offered English as a second language, literacy and numeracy and a New Beginnings program for women who were separated and wanting to develop a new skill set. One day, a woman was passing the restoration shed with her husband and as she looked in, her eyes lit up. "She came into the shed, picked up some material and felt it, looked around, and she got the message of what the Neighbourhood House was, just like that. So she started to come and have lunch with us after class." It was during this time that she told Naine that she couldn't read stories to her grandchildren; "In no time

at all she was reading books to her little ones."

Aside from all the work associated with coordinating the Community House, Naine attended CHAOS meetings, working through issues and making decisions. She attended the ANHLC, ACFE and more local COWNCH meetings regularly, "Because that was the only way one got to know other peers in the field" and it was easier to enact change on that collective level. And further to that, in women's ways of working, "A meeting could be seen as a conversation outside the supermarket," where the fine-tuning of processes can occur. "The concept of CHAOS was a great relief to the Coordinators and we enjoyed meeting to discuss the important issues of that period. We used to meet Leslie, the CHAOS Networker, at a cafe behind the clothing department at Eastland.

She made sure that each of the Houses were informed about the things we discussed and whatever we asked her to do, she supported our work in the Houses."

In 1988, Naine was part of a ministerial panel to select a well-balanced Nunawading Health Council. With meetings held at the House, a network of health and community professionals established the council and a program was developed which supported a large variety of health care practices for a diverse range of people. "I found this an interesting and democratic process" Five years later in 1993, the Kennett government disbanded the district health council and all the supportive relationships, which had been forged during those years, ended quite suddenly. "I felt our community was poorer for it. It seemed as if everyone had gone home and shut the door. I'm glad to say

though that we now once again have a regional health council.”

With the ongoing changes in the political landscape and with changing funding requirements, Naine and her committee realised in the early days that, “ We needed to ensure our programs could continue if funding was ever withdrawn. Good money management has been part of the success of the House as well as its sound philosophy.” And further to this, she believes that, “Neighbourhood Houses should be striving to do some research from their own resources, to enable them to own their own intellectual property, to grow in their philosophical beliefs and to accomplish what they originally set out to achieve.”

“A major part of our philosophy was to have programs that responded to the wishes of the surrounding community. The feeling was that, no matter how good an idea was, if it didn’t appeal to the people it did not become reality. By about mid 1990s some young mothers started to believe they could plan for a future, for when their children went to school.” Through the development of the program, reflective of the community’s needs, “We saw some people becoming experts at making coats and other children’s clothes to sell at the local markets. People studied and obtained degrees to enhance their chances of employment and professional careers. About eight or more years later was when we saw the actual reality of these outcomes.”

In 2009 Naine was awarded Citizen of the Year for the City of Whitehorse, “which was really an award for the House because no single person could make the place a success without everyone doing

what they could, all pulling together.” The ANHLC honoured Naine for strengthening her local community over 35 years of dedicated service stating; ‘Her gentle manner belies a firm resolve to see that the house continues to be a vital part of the Whitehorse community.’ She was inducted for her significant service to the Neighbourhood House Sector and placed on the ANHLC Honour Roll.

“It was the intangible, non-written, non measureable side of managing that took great energy and it changed my life. I discovered that when you have faith in people and when they’re given the opportunity, they respond in the most amazing ways. There were many opportunities for lateral thinking, and patience played an important role in maintaining stability. Anything is possible, people do matter, they can make a difference and it’s always worthwhile to have a go and have your say; contributing is what it is all about. When I left, the manager at ACFE said, ‘Well Naine, I have to say, you never dodged the punches.’ There are some things you don’t bend for and other things you have to.”

“There is something about having a sense of ownership that makes you care more and want to look after what you have. I can remember saying to Sue Curlis from Mitcham Community House, ‘This is such good fun, I really love this job.’ To distill the essence of Naine’s extensive experience in the field, she concludes,

“The spirit of the House is the glue that binds the many different parts into a cohesive whole.”



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Devita Community House

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