



# What goes around...

Ten individuals' stories about the difference volunteering in Community Houses & Adult Learning Centres has made to their lives

## **Acknowledgments**

CHAOS thanks all of the volunteers who were willing to tell their story and the organisations that made this possible.

We would also like to thank the following people:

Sally Dusting Laird *Interviews, stories and photos*

Catherine Collopy *Editing*

Falstaff Group *Design and Production | [www.falstaffgroup.com.au](http://www.falstaffgroup.com.au)*

## **Published by**

The *Community Houses Association of the Outer (eastern) Suburbs Inc* (CHAOS) with funding from the Victorian State Government.

May 2013



## Foreword

Volunteering is rewarding at many levels. For the volunteer new skills are gained as well as the opportunity to experience new and wonderful community organisations. For the community organisation the benefits can be far reaching and the outcomes often more than anticipated. Without the generosity of volunteers many of our vital community resources would not be possible.

As the Founding Patron of Greatconnections, I am passionate about volunteering and of the mutual benefits volunteering can offer, both to the individual and to the activity or organisation with whom the volunteer works.

Community Houses and Adult Learning Centres are wonderful resources within our local communities. Opportunities for volunteer participation are many, from committee or management roles to the programs and activities that the houses offer.

The individual stories in this booklet describe the opportunities that volunteering at a Neighbourhood House can offer both the individual and the organisation. The opportunities for personal growth and wellbeing are inspirational. Thank you for sharing them and I encourage you to read them.

Greatconnections has acted as an agency that recruits professional and executive mature-age volunteers and matches their skills with the needs of not-for-profit organisations. The opportunity to hear the real life experiences of our volunteers shows that it is beneficial for health and wellbeing. The individual stories in this booklet provide an excellent understanding of what this actually means.

I would like to personally thank each and every volunteer who has supported a Community House or Adult Learning Centre. Your time and skills are extremely valuable.

**Lynne Landy**  
Founding Patron  
Greatconnections

## **Introduction**

Across Victoria 396 Community Houses\* provide a range of opportunities in their local communities. Participants may be learning a new skill or interest, undertaking accredited training, participating in a playgroup, engaging in a health and wellbeing class or a men's shed, joining a social group or volunteering.

Research conducted by the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres in 2012 found that 150 000 people participated in Community Houses across Victoria every week. An additional 8000 volunteered on Committees of Governance, in administration, childcare, maintenance, driving, cooking, marketing, publicity, teaching and many other ways that were vital to the quality operation of the organisation.

Community Houses could not exist without the participation of volunteers. There has been a lot of data gathered on the economic contribution that volunteering makes to our economy and the provision of services, but what about the value that is derived by the person volunteering?

Being part of a team, learning new skills, participating in the community, meeting new people, practising language skills, supporting others, sharing our knowledge, having the opportunity to make a difference, can all have a positive and sometimes life changing impact.

This publication tells the stories of ten people who have volunteered at Community Houses in the Outer Eastern Suburbs of Melbourne. We have tried to capture a range of backgrounds, experiences and outcomes in the hope that it will not only showcase the fantastic opportunities that have arisen from their participation but inspire the reader to find out more about their local "House" .... And maybe even become a volunteer!

## **The CHAOS Network 2013**

*\*The term Community House is used across the various names of our organisations including Neighbourhood Houses, Living and Learning Centres and Community Centres.*

# Vivi

## Rowville Neighbourhood Learning Centre

*Vivi is a devoted mother who dedicated many years volunteering at her children's primary school. But as the children became more independent Vivi felt it was time to return to learning and perhaps find a paid job. She came across the Rowville Neighbourhood Learning Centre and after a successful interview with the manager, Kerry, she began volunteering in reception and enrolled in courses that would open her world to new opportunities.*

People call me Vivi. I am Australian from an Indonesian background. My interests are visiting my local library, gardening, cooking and organising.

Before I started volunteering at the Community House, I busied myself with activities such as helping at my children's school library and with their excursions and study. My children are older now and I wanted to go back to work again. My self-confidence and skills were a bit rusty and desperately needed to be updated.

I started to look at any volunteering job in the administration area. It was hard at first to find work in my area so I expanded my volunteering search to Rowville. In their brochures, the Neighbourhood Learning Centre said they were looking for volunteers.

It's a busy place, so when I visited I didn't have courage to ask them for a volunteering position. I just got their term brochures and had a look around.

I was very impressed with the variety of courses they offered. The next thing I knew, I was enrolled in one of their short courses called Refresh Your Computer Skills in April 2011. I had a fun time and gained more knowledge. The tutor was funny and very knowledgeable.

I was so happy when Rowville offered a short course in Business Administration from July – September 2011. It was just what I needed to refresh what I learnt a long time ago.

My tutor was Karen. I learnt a lot from her. She taught the class valuable practical skills. She was brilliant and very experienced. She encouraged the class to do volunteering at Rowville Neighbourhood Learning Centre to practice our skills. I put my name down. Not long after that, the House Manager, Kerry called me to be interviewed. It was great to be able to practise my interview skills.

I was very scared. I thought the interview went OK. I desperately wanted to be accepted so I could quickly put my skills and knowledge to the test and that would make it easier for me to find a job in the administration area somewhere. More than anything, I wanted to gain my confidence back and sharpen my computer skills.

The manager and the team were very welcoming of me and some of the other volunteers. They wanted us to treat this volunteering job like a real job. This included always arriving on time and handling the customer service professionally.

For the first few times, I felt overwhelmed with the number of courses available with different times and tutors. I tried to familiarise myself with the brochure. The office ladies were always willing to help me if there were any queries. I felt so welcomed and they treated me nicely, I liked them.

Soon after that, I was given tasks to finish, daily letters to collect and record, training to make new term brochures, and much more. Bit by bit, my confidence came back. I felt that it was all coming back to me, all my computer skills and my ability to express myself at the tasks given to me.

When my confidence recovered, I started to apply for a number of jobs that were available. Résumé after résumé but I finally got an interview. I got the job. I could not say thank you enough for their support. Thanks to the staff and the community house, I gained the confidence to go back to the workforce. Many thanks to Kerry, Karen, Priscilla, Amorelle, Lisa and the team. I want to dedicate this story to them. With their support, I am who I am now. Moreover, thank you for offering me the chance to volunteer. It means a lot to me and my future.

- Vivi

# Julie

## Pines Learning Centre

*Julie fought a personal battle for many years before discovering her local community house more than 20 years ago, and she hasn't looked back. She has progressed from volunteer to student, and finally to president of the committee at the Pines Learning Centre in Donvale. Her story is emotional and painful at times but her courage and determination over the years is an inspiration to all.*

I was born and bred in Doncaster and grew up in a large family of orchardists in the 1950's and 60's. Interestingly the Pines Learning site where I now volunteer was once an orchard and owned by my aunt and uncle. Having spent many years away from the area I moved back in 1989 with my then husband.

Four weeks later my life was turned on its head when I was involved in a freak accident and sustained serious injuries. My plans for the future changed dramatically. Two and a half years on I was really struggling, not just with my physical rehabilitation but with depression. It was all so consuming and I could not find a way out. I had always been the lion in the jungle, but I had become the lion that was trapped in a cage.

I will always be grateful to my friend, my mother in law Paddy, for finding me a light at the end of the tunnel, a light that I for so long could not see. Paddy set the seed for me. She'd been volunteering and attending classes at various community houses in Maroondah and also just up the road from me at Donvale in Manningham.

Mind you it did take several months of passive encouragement to budge me. Week after week I would sit and look at either an ad or a story about a neighborhood house in the local paper. Then week after week I would try and find the courage to take that short trip down the road. My confidence failed me over and over again.

But one morning before I thought too much about it, I got in the car and arrived on the

doorstep at Donvale Living & Learning Centre. I was greeted with a warm smile and a "How can we help you?" I promptly burst into tears. The smile belonged to a lovely lady called Mary and she wasn't fazed by my tears. "Come on in." she said, and in I went.

Before I knew it she had extracted my hobbies and interests and I had enrolled in two classes. To my surprise two days later I even turned up to attend. She had dispelled so much of my fear.

It wasn't long before I discovered volunteering. I'd noticed the flyers and signs around the place, VOLUNTEERS NEEDED so after a few months of attending classes and a bit of dutch courage, I applied. It had become obvious that what made the House really happen was the teamwork between the staff, volunteers and participants. There were people from so many different places and walks of life coming together and enriching one another's lives.

As I still had many medical issues, I began with a couple of hours here and there in the office. Anything from sorting the mail to enrolling students, oh and handing out the odd tissue for someone else's tears. The Centre was quite small back then. There were VCE subjects, English classes, a variety of health and wellbeing courses and a crèche.

The Centre grew though and so did I. Everything happened so fast and before I knew it I was on the Committee of Management. Meetings were monthly so I didn't feel over committed. It was manageable. It was unknown territory but I wanted to learn more.

The next big shift came with the new growth area of computers. They were very scary things I thought at the time. But as a committee member we had to bite the bullet and invest in them. It was a big decision and a new age of learning began.

Slowly I began to learn computers myself. Actually very slowly. I did the Computers for Beginners course three times before I started to get the hang of it. The computer area began to flourish, the Centre boomed and I did my best to keep up, by volunteering to assist in a computer class for participants with disabilities.

My passion in life is and has always been the garden. I have always found it to be both

pleasurable and grounding and I must admit I do love getting dirty. After my accident though gardening wasn't on the list of things I could do and definitely impacted my depression levels.

It took me a while but I got my head around it, I would just garden differently. The shovel stayed in the shed. I had some beds built up with the help of friends and family and took up No Dig gardening. I was onto a winner and soon had fresh herbs and vegetables growing. The lawn area grew smaller as garden beds grew bigger.

So my new project was to share all that I had learnt and volunteered to teach gardening classes. I taught worm farming, composting, propagating, pruning and the No Dig method, all with great success.

Donvale Living and Learning Centre continued to grow in many areas and it soon became clear that a larger facility was required and so began the process of lobbying Council for a new premises. It was 10 years of much patience, haggling and so many meetings. I lost count early in the piece.

It was a long and protracted process during which time committee, staff, council and other stakeholder representatives came and went. There were few of us left at the end of the project. But we ended up with a fantastic new building and in 2008 we moved in under the new banner of Pines Learning.

Over the years I have held several positions on the Board and in 2011 I was elected President. A reluctant one I must say. It was never on my to do list. Again though it has challenged me and also given me further opportunities to grow and better myself.

It was at Pines Learning Graduation Day 2012. The students had received their Certificates and as President, I had just invited them, their family and friends to join the invited guests, board members and staff for refreshments. I was just putting the microphone down when I got an unexpected tap on the shoulder and I heard a familiar voice: "That was a good speech you made earlier". As I turned around I could not believe my eyes, it was Mary. Twenty years of memories suddenly came flooding back, from depressed crying mess, to President of the Board.

So where would I have ended up if I had not walked in that door back in 1993. I hate to think. I had been on a road to nowhere. Nowhere and nothing is what I would have found. As volunteers and participants we are all single stitches in a large tapestry, with each house having their own unique theme and picture and it is these pictures that make our Community Houses so strong and such vital assets and empower and enrich all those who walk through their doors.

**- Julie**



# Jess

## Coonara Community House

*Jess has got to be one of the youngest volunteers in our sector. She was just 16-years-old when she volunteered for a project at Coonara Community House to build up self-esteem and confidence in teenage girls with body image problems. As part of the team called Girls Together she organised workshops and events that attracted hundreds of local girls and changed her life! Their project had them rubbing shoulders with Olympic sports champions, members of parliament and even appearing on Channel Seven's national news and in the Herald-Sun newspaper.*

I'm 21-years-old and live in Upper Ferntree Gully. I went to Upper Ferntree Gully Primary School, The Knox School and I'm currently enrolled at Swinburne University studying Communication Design and Marketing. In 2013 however I'm doing a marketing internship at Motorola Solutions, which involves working

full time and learning the practical side of marketing. I believe my volunteer work assisted in getting me this highly sought after position.

I started volunteering at Coonara Community House when I was 16 years old. I was involved in a program called *Girls Together* and the aim was to help improve the self-esteem and confidence of teenage girls.

We ran workshops and events such as healthy cooking classes, fitness days and self defence classes to help girls aged 11-16 feel better about themselves and confident to take on body image pressures.

I started volunteering because I thought it would be a good way to gain knowledge and experience. It was a way to meet new people and to not only help others improve their body image, but to improve my own as well.

I wanted to make a difference, which sounds cliché, but it's true. I wanted to try something out of my comfort zone that would help others feel comfortable in theirs. It was hard work, however that made it so much more rewarding.

The idea behind the initiative was that it would be fun, which it was, so it made the work not seem like work because we were all so excited to be planning and organising new things.

There were times when it was stressful, and





when things didn't go to plan it could cause some strain on the team, however we always managed to overcome any problems we faced.

We were funded by the Victorian State Government and Knox City Council grants and had regular visits from Deputy Opposition Leader and local MP James Merlino in which we updated him on our progress. We were invited to the launch of the Voluntary Code of Conduct on Body Image in which media organisations were urged to participate in a range of guidelines ensuring they portray a positive body image. We were given a table right up the front at the venue in Federation Square in Melbourne.

At the event were lots of celebrities including retired three time Australian Olympic swimmer and television sports commentator Nicole Livingstone who spoke to us and commended us on our efforts. A couple of our team members were even interviewed for Channel Seven News. We appeared in various local newspapers as well as the Herald Sun, which allowed us to widen our reach.

The safe, comfortable environment that is provided by neighbourhood houses made all the difference when volunteering there. It made the experience that much better being surrounded by friendly and supportive people. It also provided the resources we needed to get started and to maintain a professionally run program.

I learnt so much being a part of *Girls Together* and working with other people in the community house. It gave me an insight into how the working world really works when I was so young. The confidence I gained from *Girls Together* was immense and being in such a safe, nurturing environment really helped.

In my current job as a marketing intern I know I will use many of the skills I learnt during my time in *Girls Together*. Volunteering was a way to take initiative in my community and it made me realize how important it was to be able to do that and to be resourceful in every aspect of life.

- Jess

# Caroline

Arrabri Community House Inc

*Caroline lets nothing stand in her way, especially the fact that she has been blind since her 20's. She will tackle any task and allows no one to limit her opportunities to give new things a go. She loves craft such as knitting, mosaic and felting, and she will try just about anything on offer. Caroline is also studying Information Technology is enjoying the new world she is discovering on her laptop.*

I live in Boronia and volunteer at Arrabri Community House in Bayswater North. I am single, enjoy mosaic work, love coming to spend time at Arrabri and love to get out and experience life.

I have been volunteering at Arrabri for 15 years and was 35 when I first started. My job is to welcome and engage visitors at reception, deal with telephone enquiries, take messages, handle cash and use the cash register.

I also carry out general administrative duties including compiling information kits, handbooks, folding brochures, labelling and stuffing envelopes, cleaning and maintenance as required.

I became involved with Arrabri through a mutual friend and have also been a student here. I started volunteering originally as I wanted to give back to the community because I had received so much support myself. It has been challenging at times but always rewarding. I love the work.

Volunteering at a Neighbourhood House gave me confidence in myself to deal with the community. It gave me a purpose at a time when I needed it. I don't think I would be as independent and confident as I am today if I hadn't found Arrabri.

- Caroline

# Margaret

**Toolangi and Castella District Community House**

*Margaret has community spirit running through her veins. She not only survived the Black Saturday fires in 2009 but was also a force in contributing to her community's bushfire recovery committee, putting aside her own personal experiences. Margaret puts her hand up for many activities in her rural community, situated on the edge of the Toolangi State Forest. She realises that this has not only added to her knowledge of government and regional issues and the principles of community development, but has also enabled her to find friends in groups she would normally not have had the opportunity to mix with.*

I started my working life in Training and Management Development in the Public Sector, and then I taught Business Management at RMIT. In the year 2000 my chef husband and I made a 'tree change' from Melbourne to Toolangi, where we built and successfully operated a B&B for a few years before retiring.

I have a lot of personal interests! Friends, reading, embroidery, travel, wine & food, history, photography, gardening and keeping fit. We still live in Toolangi, and I volunteer at the Toolangi & Castella District Community House.

In my late 40s I volunteered at the Yarra Valley Tourism Information Centre in Healesville for about seven years. At the same time, our community house started and I joined the Committee because we didn't want to lose a local asset.

I have run some courses and training sessions in the past but mostly I do general committee work like attending meetings, policy decision making, strategic planning, staff recruitment, networking and so forth.

We are a very small organisation so jobs like cleaning, maintenance, advertising, letter drops, organising community events &

sausage sizzles etc. have always been shared around, and often include our families pitching in. Having wonderful paid staff has made a big difference and now I can focus more on my role as President and work with the Executive Committee.

Our focus is on providing interesting short courses, and organising annual events like the Rhododendron Ball and Christmas Carols. There is a strong local attitude that if you want something done, do it yourself. So I did. I wanted people in our community to communicate and be more involved, to provide and improve facilities, and enjoy living here.

The hard work came along after Black Saturday in 2009, when I was Chair of the Toolangi Castella Community Recovery Committee. As the only incorporated organisation around, our community house took on a big administrative workload. It wasn't hard work, just time consuming and complex - when we were still recovering from our own personal fire experiences.



I have a thing about meetings running to time, and used a toy police siren to override any attempts at long winded speeches. (It was done with humour and we kept our meetings on track.) My enjoyment was the satisfaction of seeing our CRC achieve all of our short term and 99% of our long term objectives.

We have 350 households in Toolangi and Castella, although it is hard to meet residents in our community, as houses are spread out and most people work, shop or study 'off the mountain' during the day. So through volunteering at the Community House I now know a lot of people, and made new friends through working with groups I wouldn't have normally have mixed with. I also gained insight into local government, community development, regional issues and got things done.

Different volunteer groups (who often include the same people) that I have been involved with have made a difference to our community environment both physically and socially. For example, establishing the Community Garden, upgrading the CJ Dennis Hall, creating Castella Central Park, the Multipurpose Trail, and the Community House extension.

On a personal level I have skills and knowledge that have been useful, and it is time to pass the President role on to someone else. Not because I don't enjoy the role – but it is important that others share in the responsibility, and we don't become Margaret Community House. I will continue volunteering with weeding, catering, letter drops, and who knows what else. I can't change the world overnight, so I started locally. You do what you can.

**- Margaret**

## Ciska

Seville Community House

*Ciska migrated to Australia with her husband 47 years ago from Holland and found a great connection with others through her local community house. Since her husband passed away seven years ago the community house has offered Ciska friendships and ongoing learning opportunities.*

I live in Seville, five minutes walking distance from the House. I was born in the Netherlands and trained as a technical needlecraft teacher. My husband and I had three children: a girl, now 51 years old and twin boys, now 48 years of age. In 1966 we decided to migrate to Australia as job prospects for my husband were better here than in the Netherlands.

I taught in Australia in high schools from 1970 till 1993. At age 56, I contacted Seville Community House to see if I could do some teaching there, because I still had so much to give. Not quite volunteer work however the money was certainly not great. I ran some very pleasant and successful classes in all sorts of needlecraft and had fun doing it.

My husband was really the one who did the volunteering back then. Actually we would do it together like everything else. Henk took up the position of President of the Committee of Management and held that position for years. I joined the committee in 1993 and served as a treasurer and ordinary member.

In 2006 my husband passed away. I was asked to take his job as president of the Committee of Management. I still hold that position. I have given of my time and still do whatever I can. I also work as a crossing supervisor which curtails my available time somewhat.

My interests are needlecraft, reading, gardening, driving my car, walking my dog for fun and my health. I'm not good at it but I also love playing the piano, just for myself.

I recently realised that I have been associated with Seville Community House for 20 years. I think serving your community even in a very modest way keeps you in contact with other people. As a bonus, you make friends on the way. I do not find the volunteering hard to do. I like to help where I can. Without my involvement with the House I would probably be very lonely.

**- Ciska**

# Lisa

## The Basin Community House

*Lisa had to take a very deep breath and gather all her inner strength before walking through the front doors of The Basin Community House. It wasn't that anything bad had happened there; in fact she had never even been there before. But she lives with a condition that makes it hard some days to even leave her house. However with the gentle unfailing support of staff at the centre she embarked on an internal and external journey that has changed her life forever.*

I began my journey with The Basin Community House fifteen years ago. I was a single mother with acute anxiety disorder and agoraphobia. I was raising my two children and dealing with the everyday struggles associated with limited funds and mental distress. Life was at times incredibly challenging.

The day I walked into The Basin was indeed a fantastic experience. I stumbled in to ask about courses they were running and came upon a morning tea and special interest day discussing women's health. They ushered me in the door and promptly sat me down and I instantly felt included and welcome.

I had no idea that such a community was just on my doorstep! For the first time in a long while I started to enjoy myself. I had found like-minded people, who all had a story of their own. And my desire to feel connected had begun.

I began attending classes, mainly craft and personal development classes at first. It was such a pleasure to have a place to go where I could express my creative self as well as gain confidence in social situations and regain my self-esteem in a safe learning environment.

I moved into more expressive courses, with writing classes becoming a passion. All the while, gaining a belief that I was indeed an important member of my local community, and above all, finding out who I was.

Volunteering as a receptionist became another outlet for my confidence to grow. I had always worked in similar roles prior to having my family, so even though I was insecure about my skills being outdated, I received assurance and training from The Basin staff to allow me to reemerge as a confident woman with the belief that I had something to offer.

I continued my involvement in all aspects of the House, attending classes, and now attending accredited courses. I completed computer classes, supported morning teas, and also encouraged other students to fulfill their desire to feel confident, meet new people and enjoy learning.

I came across an accredited class that was beginning, which was considered a serious commitment to study. It was a Certificate II in Community Services. It required a three day a week commitment and assignment work. This was to me a step up from courses that were for creative expression, to a foot back into the world of work and self-sufficiency.



I was extremely concerned that I wouldn't be able to fulfill a formal learning course as I had left school at the end of Year 10, with little desire to continue to study.

Again the facilitators understood my personal difficulties and the encouragement was enormous. I realised very quickly that learning in a local community house was totally different to High School, and that I was indeed very capable of the workload.

I was still volunteering at reception and studying my course, but had found a new passion for working behind the scenes on the committee. I loved learning how The Basin worked, and the amount of effort it required to run such an organisation.

I successfully obtained my Certificate II and felt a new sense of accomplishment. I still had issues with anxiety however I had learned skills in management of this disorder and personal development had taught me new skills and a belief that I could perhaps start to follow my dreams.

I always had an interest in massage and tactile therapies. I realised that I could indeed study

and decided to pursue my Certificate IV in Massage Therapies at a local school.

I followed this with my Diploma in Remedial Massage. I began my own small home business and studied the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and have become a certified trainer. I achieved all of these qualifications in local learning facilities. This was essential to me as I still have agoraphobia.

I have since returned to The Basin as a volunteer receptionist as it still holds a special place in my heart as the Centre that helped me find my true self again. I am also a facilitator of short courses. I teach Massage for relaxation to students and meditation for relaxation. I have run accredited courses with pathways to teaching massage as well.

I know that the Basin Community House helped me find myself, gave me the encouragement to believe in myself and the knowledge to see my strengths and give me the ability to shine. I love that I have the knowledge to share my skills with the community and help them find their own passion for life.

- Lisa

## Susanne

Glen Park

*Susanne was born with a disability that makes it hard for her to be completely independent. But she hasn't let autism stop her from experiencing the joy of volunteering at a community house. She loves working hard and learning new skills but most of all she soaks up the nurturing warm environment of the community house who just couldn't do without her!*

I'm 26-years-old and live at home with my mother, father and sister. I've been working here at Glen Park Community House for seven years now.

I work as a kitchen hand in the café and wash dishes and waitress and also work in the office

learning different skills. I learn how to sort the mail in and I work out what is private and not.

Then I'm in the kitchen serving people. My favourite part is serving. I am here for nine hours a week and work 11am until 2pm during the lunch rush.

The tables are often filled with people. I love working with the staff because they are like my second family. They are warm, welcoming people and it's like my second home, yes definitely a home away from home.

I get the care I need at Glen Park because I have a disability which is autism which I was born with. I find it hard to do things on my own. They give me fresh challenges every day and I try to get past them.

It's a happy environment and I love being here and working hard. It's a very nurturing community centre. Volunteering has really changed my life. It's the best thing I've ever done. I love meeting people and getting to know who they are.



Sometimes I invite people from my town where I live in Montrose to come and visit. I used to volunteer for Riding for the Disabled up at Warrandyte. When I first started here it was a

bit nerve wracking but then I met this lovely lady called Robyn Murray (former manager at Glen Park Community Centre in Bayswater North, who sadly passed away in 2010.)

She was an incredible lady and so warm and welcoming to me.

I work really hard and I get rewards. Last year I did a barista course at Mt Evelyn so now I can make good mochas. I did the course with Naomi the supervisor in the kitchen. She loves to tease me and keeps me smiling all day! We talk to each other and get on great.

I love it here and feel warm and cared for. In fact I love this place so much I never want to leave. My mum drives me to work. I learn a lot of skills on the job and I bring all the skills back home where I live. I like cooking desserts basically and pancakes are my favourite dish. I've always tried to keep on learning. I like to learn just about anything. I don't give up!

**- Susanne**

## Eileen

### Healesville Living and Learning Centre

*Eileen turned her life around when she volunteered at Healesville Living and Learning Centre. As CEO Karen recalls, Eileen had low self-esteem, couldn't look anyone in the eye and had a lack of confidence that revealed itself in a nervous demeanor. But that all changed when she learnt new skills and started working on the front desk.*

*Tragically Eileen passed away in October 2012, her story is retold here by Karen.*

Eileen moved to Healesville with her new husband, in 2007. She had a grown son from her first marriage (her husband died) and her passion was her two Pomeranian dogs which she showed at the Royal Melbourne Show every year.

She started volunteering at Healesville Living and Learning Centre in 2008. She had never been in a Neighbourhood House before and knew nothing about what happened within our walls.

When Eileen joined us she had very low self-esteem, she couldn't look anyone in the eye and she apologised for everything. To say she was nervous would be an understatement.

Her transformation over the next eight months was nothing more than remarkable.

She started holding her head up high, looked people in the eye when speaking and started smiling and laughing a lot. She gained the confidence to deal with people on the phone, welcome them personally in reception, tackle a range of difficult administration tasks and even attend a computer course.

The latter was one of the most difficult things she had ever done (her words), and on the first day she almost turned around and went home. But with a little encouragement from the staff she went in. After class finished, we were met with the most excited Eileen I have ever seen.

She had discovered that she wasn't stupid, you are never too old to learn, learning can be fun and that she wasn't alone.

Eileen volunteered with us for us two days a week. Her learning curve was steep but her self-esteem soon caught up. She called her volunteering, 'my job' and wouldn't miss a minute. She was so dedicated she would often

eat lunch at her desk because she had arrived late due to some personal business. (Even though I told her she didn't have to do that!)

She volunteered with us for about three years and was in her mid-fifties when she started.

## Steve

### Avenue Neighbourhood House@Eley

*Steve believes he never would have had the opportunities he relishes today without the support and opportunities given to him at the Avenue Neighbourhood House@Eley. His story is one of constantly stepping outside his comfort zone, battling his demons and with ongoing determination creating a life for himself that is fulfilling and happy. After winning an award for his volunteer work at the neighbourhood house, Steve bravely told his story at the ANHLC conference in 2012 in front of hundreds of people. You will understand the courage it took after reading about his journey.*

I volunteer as a community chess facilitator, where I run chess clubs at the Avenue and for anyone in the community. So far it has been successful and we have had good numbers coming in.

I am also a volunteer community bus driver at the Avenue where I carry out pick-ups and drop offs from the centre for people with different backgrounds. I have found the Avenue to have a great sense of family and community and it is a very welcoming and friendly environment in which to work.

Personally it means a lot for me to go to the Avenue. It gives me something to look forward to and is also great for practical work experience. I enjoy driving the bus and helping other people to get to the centre who

are less fortunate than me.

My background is from NEAMI, a psychiatric community based organisation. I have an anxiety disorder called *social phobia*, which is similar to agoraphobia which is fear of going outside. Social phobia is a fear of social situations.

NEAMI has helped me to learn social skills and has given me a sense of hope for the future. They helped me to set up the chess club at the Avenue and get back into the community.

Both NEAMI and the Avenue have been stepping stones to getting me more involved with the community and ultimately back to work. I found NEAMI was a good starting point and the Avenue was a step up. Then the next step up was to attain paid work.

I have a paid job now as a transport driver in aged care where it is my job to drive clients to and from their appointments; pretty much doing the same sort of work as the volunteer position that I have at the Avenue.

Doing volunteer work has helped me realize that I can work, and it has helped me with practical experience and getting a job. Both organisations have been a great learning experience.

Getting back into the community has taught me how to be relevant and be a worker and that's what I mean by stepping stones. I have got to where I am today because of having access to these community based organisations and also by having the will to keep trying, and I hope others do too.

**- Steve**

If you would like to contact your local Community House, Neighbourhood House, Community Centre or Learning Centre in the Outer East of Melbourne please contact the CHAOS office on 03 9727 0166 or 0409021055

Or visit the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (Victoria) website [www.anhlc.asn.au/find/home](http://www.anhlc.asn.au/find/home)