

Helping Residents Feel More at Home: A Project at Gordon Street in Maribyrnong

Organisations Involved & Contact Details

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Aims & Target Group

Aims: As part of the “Doggies to Highpoint” Community Building Project, Helping Residents Feel More at Home: A Project at Gordon Street in Maribyrnong, aims to build a stronger, more self-reliant community.

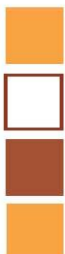
Target Group: The project focuses on residents living in an area running along Gordon Street, from Footscray's Whitten Oval, in the north, to Highpoint Shopping Centre in the south.

- More than half of the area's 7,500 residents are from non-English speaking backgrounds and many are recently arrived asylum seekers and refugees.
- Nearly a quarter of residents are unemployed and many experience transient housing, homelessness and social isolation.
- The area has particularly complex social, economic and physical needs. It is also experiencing significant gentrification issues with several new housing developments occurring in the precinct.
- Most Gordon Street residents are over 55 years of age and have a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

Project Description & Components

Paola's first idea for *Helping Residents Feel More at Home* developed from the desire to produce a book of recipes from residents with personal stories attached to each recipe. The idea was strongly supported by the nutritionist who had wanted to do something similar but didn't have the time or resources.

“It was a lovely idea in theory, and many residents I spoke to were enthusiastic but I soon realised not everyone on the estate was involved in the cooking classes so I decided to cast my net wider.”





After speaking to the facilitator and nutritionist running the cooking program in the area, Paola thought it might be a good idea to collect residents' recipes and put them into a book, as a way of capturing and validating people's experiences.

Process

After joining 'Doggies to Highpoint' in September 2003 to work with people from Gordon Street public housing estate, Mission Australia project worker Paola Bilbrough was keen to build on a number of community development projects that were already in place.

"I was looking around to see exactly what my involvement could be and for ways of working in with other agencies such as the Western Region Health Centre and the Victorian Office of Housing," said Paola.

She soon learnt about a cooking group that met every two weeks in the community space and was run by the Western Region Health Centre. Interested residents shared lunch together and took it in turn to select the menu.

"What you've got to remember about Gordon Street is that there isn't really a common bond that brings people together. It's really just a group of very different people who coincidentally live in the same estate," said Paola.

"When it comes to building community you have to start from scratch in many ways and try to attract people to become part of what you're doing."

With a background in writing and mentoring people to put together newsletters, Paola felt people might enjoy putting together a newsletter as a way of telling their own stories, and increasing their sense of belonging.

About six people turned up to the first newsletter meeting but only a couple of those who got involved had computer experience or typing skills. Some people came along simply to share a cup of tea.

"There was a lot of interest in what was going on but many residents are older people and were a little bit reluctant to learn to type up their own stories," said Paola.

Earlier in the year, Paola, with input from the Tenants Union and the Western Region Health Centre, also came up with the idea of a photography project to celebrate Housing Week. *"Our idea was to ask residents to choose a space around the estate where they felt comfortable or happy, and which signified home,"* recalled Paola. *"We put together an application to the Department of Human Services for funding to take a series of photographic portraits and exhibit them as part of Housing Week."*

Although the application was unsuccessful, they decided to press on regardless. A student photographer, Grace McKenzie, had contacted Paola and expressed a strong interest in volunteering. Over a 12 month period Grace and Paola visited residents in their homes to take photographs and collect personal narratives. Paola also co-facilitated an art group at the high rise with a worker from the Western Region Health Centre and residents gradually began to draw and paint. This group amalgamated with the newsletter group to become the '127 Art & Storytelling Group'.





“As well as reporting on activities and events happening at Gordon Street, I wanted the newsletter, '127 News & Views' to function as a communication tool for both residents and service providers.”

The narratives, photographic portraits and residents' artwork contributed to the original recipe book idea and form a book entitled 'At Home'.

Outcomes

- More than 30 Gordon Street residents have now shared their stories and recipes with Paola or had their portraits taken.

“It's been a great thing to do because it's opened up a lot of doors and residents are starting to talk to each other more and connect with those who work on the estate. It's also been lovely to see how excited people are to explain something about themselves and their lives.”

- In addition, Paola said the Gordon Street newsletter is currently being distributed throughout the estate every six weeks and residents were always asking when the next edition was coming out.
- Plans are also underway to provide newsletter group members with their own personal computers. Group member Brian explained,

“It takes your mind off things. It also helps you relax, let things out and express how you feel. It's good company too, and all those things mean a lot.”

The next step for Paola and residents is to start work on the production of the At Home book. “Our aim is to launch the book in February 2005 in conjunction with an exhibition of photographs, artwork and story extracts that will be blown up to poster size. I think its going to look pretty amazing.” The Footscray Library is organising the exhibition and book launch as part of their 'Made in Maribyrnong' initiative which supports local arts activities.

Challenges & Obstacles

The main challenge faced by the project is to constantly find resources and get the residents who are in large numbers from non-English speaking backgrounds and many are recently arrived asylum seekers and refugees to take part in the program.

Also, a substantial number of residents are unemployed and many experience transient housing, homelessness and social isolation and to encourage them to participate in a collective community self-help project with limited resources is a very difficult task.

Funding

Mission Australia had donated a number of computers to the estate and Paola liaised with the Western Region Health Centre and the Tenants Union to have these computers installed in the ex-caretaker's flat.

Although much of the actual typing and layout is still being done by Paola, one member of the newsletter group regularly writes stories, proofreads and comes up with story ideas. Another person is a touch typist.

