

EVERY DAY YOU LEARN SOMETHING

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Learning for Life? Neighbourhood  
Houses, Adult Learning and  
Transitions to Higher Education

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Karen Starr  
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Deakin University

Tracey Ollis, Karen Starr, Cheryl Ryan, Jennifer Angwin & Ursula Harrison

*I was like a sponge. I surprised  
myself in a lot of ways, I've got  
to admit*

**- Marta**

*This course has given me the  
courage, the confidence to try  
something different*

**- Sophia**

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## **Every Day You Learn Something: Learning for Life? Neighbourhood Houses, Adult Learning and Transitions to Higher Education**

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Foreword by Professor Maureen Ryan.

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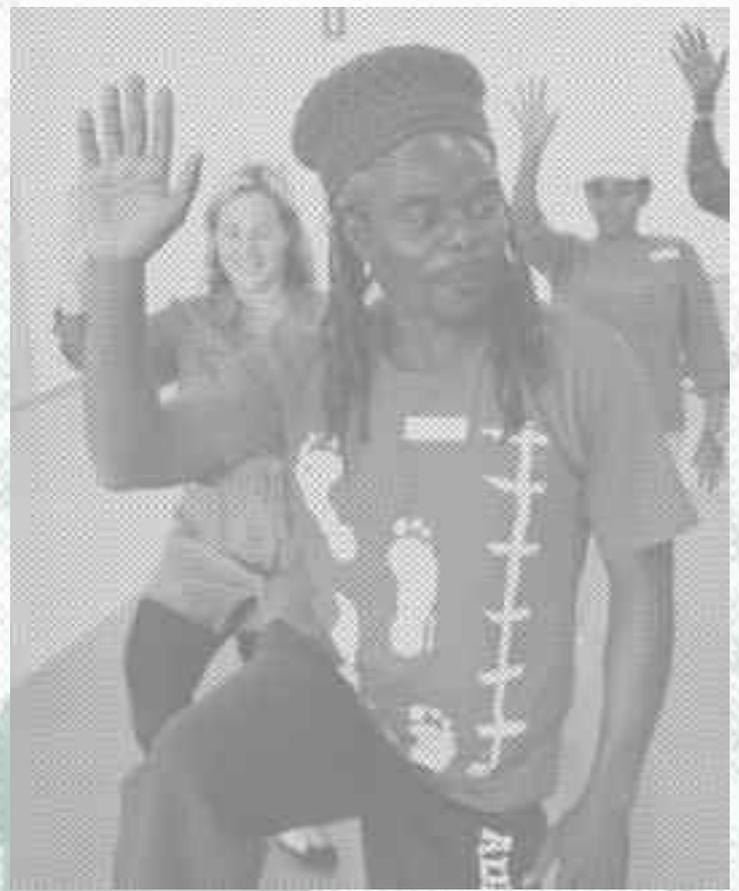
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# Foreword

**Maureen Ryan**

In this book it is not the three Rs (reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic that describe the education going on: it is the three Cs, community, creativity and connection. The book tells the stories of active participants in Neighbourhood Houses, of the formal and informal learning with which they engage. This is a small part of the stories which reveal vividly the transformative nature of the participants' engagement with the Neighbourhood Houses.

The presentation of the stories as case studies and in poetry is reminiscent of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture methodology where she exhorts researchers to employ both art and science in capturing and documenting the complexities and subtleties in human life. With both the case study and poetry framing the stories in this study it becomes something more than an examination of adult learning in the context of Neighbourhood Houses.

It is about learning as relationship. This is borne out in so many of the stories: certainly in the bonds created with teachers, other learners and administrators in the centres but additionally participants speak about their changed relationships in their families and friendship groups and importantly with themselves. Participants no longer see themselves as "silly", as struggling learners. They speak as well of what they have learned about the world in which they live and their responses to this are borne out in the community care orientation of the formal studies many have selected. For many a life of caring is validated in formal qualifications.





The stories are not so much about transformation but about transforming: there is no sense that these stories will end with this book. The ongoing relationships with the centres, with the people in them and with learning especially are clear, and interestingly, these relationships change shape along the way. Many participants speak of taking on administrative and organizational roles, both volunteer and paid within the centres and about joining committees of management, giving the distinct impression that these particular skills will carry over into engagement with other community organizations. Through such initiatives the totality of the Neighbourhood Houses as learning centres is validated. This has been referenced in other studies where, for example, Thompson (2015) found that especially for those learning English, their interactions with receptionists in their centres were valued alongside those with their teachers.

This is public pedagogy in action. The words in the stories and poetry in this study paint portraits for us of exemplary pedagogy outside of traditional education systems, characterized by many of the qualities of public pedagogy identified by Sandlin, Schultz and Burdick (2010) including informal sites of learning, citizenship, every day and public life.

Certainly there are relationships to people in these stories but there are relationships too to the spaces themselves. Compared with impersonal institutions like universities and TAFE colleges these spaces are small and offer fingertip opportunities for learners to reach out to teachers, other learners and administrators. These are safe secure spaces where participants can snuggle in and learn, develop, share, grow and dream and most importantly see those dreams come true. It's not magic: it's commitment, confidence, community, creativity and connection: lots more Cs including those that draw from rather than distance individual learners.

Sadly traditional education practices with their reliance on grade levels and standardised testing regimes consistently apply labels to learners which the learners themselves adhere to as the most powerful learning they ingest. The stories in this book attest to the strength of Neighbourhood Houses in disrupting this process and allowing participants and those around them to see themselves differently and importantly to interrogate some of the reasons why labels are applied and ways and means of their replacement. As such, these stories of Neighbourhood Houses are of social engagement writ small and writ large. You have a sense reading these stories that these are the people who will lead, populate and inspire a whole range of community initiatives. They

will be the fund raisers, the participants in not for profit organizations, the activists contesting unpalatable changes in their communities. They will also be the on the ground community carers for the young and old in those communities, leading the way with their newly accredited skills, providing the models for those who will follow. Most of all they will be the confident learners and thinkers in their communities, continuing to be open to developing expertise, knowledge and understanding.

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# The Research Project

This book comes from a research project titled 'Lifelong Learning? Neighbourhood Houses, Adult Learning and Transitions to Higher Education' (T Ollis, Starr, Ryan, Angwin, & Harrison, 2016). This research has examined adult learning in the context of Neighbourhood Houses in the regions of Geelong and South Western Victoria.

The research was conducted in 2015 and 2016 and sought to examine the learning experiences of adult learners who participate in the education programs of Neighbourhood Houses. The focus was on second chance learners and their transition pathways to higher education such as TAFE and University. A second group of learners were identified during the research process – later life learners. These learners were engaging with Neighbourhood Houses for personal interest learning and social and community connection. This small book provides a snapshot of the stories of learners who were involved in this research. It tells the lived stories of the participants, which is important as learning and education are connected with the ongoing development of ourselves as human beings. Learning is essential to our personhood and impacts on adults in terms of their welfare, health and prosperity over a lifetime. Many of the learners' stories outlined in this book reveal checkered histories of education. Some have experienced learning difficulties, others have experienced family trauma that prevented them from finishing secondary schooling. Some of the stories describe issues related to reskilling or retraining in later life, responding to industry changes and work in the Greater Geelong and South West regions. Others were pursuing recreation and social connection and came to the Neighbourhood Houses to learn crafts, writing, photography and computer literacy skills. In almost all accounts of learning in this book, individuals had experienced less social isolation by being connected to others in the unique social environment of Neighbourhood houses.

This book tells the powerful stories of adult learners who generously gave their time to the research. The French Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu claims as researchers we must be sensitive about ... 'making private words public, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on trust that can only be established between two individuals' (Bourdieu, 1999, p.1). We are grateful to the research participants who gave their stories to us to tell. Names and events have been changed to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants. All participants chose to remain anonymous and selected a pseudonym by which they could be named. We are conscious of situating these research participants' learning experiences in the realities of their social world. We hope that we have done this with sensitivity, with clarity, grace and tone that does justice to these stories and these important experiences of learning.

The stories told here are presented in two ways, through the use of case studies and poetry. Using case study and 'poetry as text' we hope to illuminate the extraordinary experiences of these learners as they gain confidence, skills and knowledge as they 'learn to become a learner'. Second chance learning is an emotional embodied experience. The research has shown that second chance learners often have negative views of themselves as learners. They also experience a range of emotions such as frustration, a sense of joy, achievement and happiness. Some develop a sense of ambition and a love of learning when once they did not believe they had the capability and capacity to learn. Later life learners too, experience learning as an emotional embodied experience relating their love of continuing to learn and keeping their minds active, alongside the happiness found in developing new friendships. The stories in this book reveal the all-encompassing process of adults returning to study in all its complexity. It highlights the importance of adult learning in small community environments like Neighbourhood Houses in extending life opportunities, reducing social isolation and establishing important social and employment networks. It celebrates the unique and oftentimes powerful processes of adult learning

## Acknowledgements

The research Team comprises Professor Karen Starr, Dr Tracey Ollis, Cheryl Ryan and Dr Jennifer Angwin – all academics in the School of Education at Deakin University. Ursula Harrison is the research assistant for the project.



Almost two years ago, we conducted early conversations with Christine Brooks from the Barwon Network of Neighbourhood Centres about the need for research in the greater Geelong region into adult learning in Neighbourhood Houses. This important partnership formed the foundation of ideas for this larger scale research project. Christine was determined to tell the stories of learners that would showcase the remarkable education work of the houses, but also show the learning journey of the participants who came for a variety of reasons to the Neighbourhood Houses to learn. We hope we have done justice to her desire for accessible stories that tell the richness of these learners' education in the case studies and poetry presented here. The study was further extended to the South West Region of Victoria and assisted by a partnership with South West Network of Neighbourhood Houses and Debra King. Our research partners have been committed partners in this research and we are grateful for the insight that both Christine and Debra have brought to our understandings of learning in these community contexts. Special thanks to Professor Marty Grace whose book<sup>1</sup> *Step Ahead – Young People's Stories of Overcoming Homelessness* was the inspiration for the presentation of our findings in this format.

This research was initially funded through a research development grant through the Centre for Research in Education Futures and Innovation (CREFI) in the School of Education at Deakin University. An additional grant from Deakin Equity and Diversity, through the Commonwealth Government Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Project (HEPPP), allowed the research to be extended to the greater South Western Region of Victoria. The research has recently been extended to further study adult learning in Neighbourhood Houses across the entire state of Victoria.

## Methodology

The research project uses qualitative and case study research methodology. Qualitative research is an overriding term to describe a number of approaches of inquiry to research (Anfara & Mertz, 2014; Biesta, Allen, & Edwards, 2014). The research is constructivist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Stage & Manning, 2003), producing knowledge that is constructed by the research team through their interpretation of the data. This research is subjective and we argue the strength of education research is its ability to connect to the human experience and the narratives of everyday people being in the world

(Flyvbjerg, 2001). To date 44 interviews have been conducted with learners across 16 Neighbourhood Houses. Access to the research site was gained through a partnership with the Barwon Network of Neighbourhood Centres and in collaboration with the South West Network of Neighbourhood Houses.

## Case study research

Case studies of adult learning in the Neighbourhood Houses and the experiences of learners have provided rich data, sometimes described as 'thick descriptions' (Merriam, 1998). This research used case studies in order to examine the autobiographical accounts of the research participants' education history, employment and learning experiences (Yin, 2013). Furthermore, the research uses multiple case studies to illuminate participants' experiences of their involvement in the education programs of Neighbourhood Houses. The case studies are ultimately narrative accounts of the participants' experiences of adult learning told as stories and in some examples told as poetry. Here we use 'poetry as text', so the data is shown in a story format through a poem. Using this medium to reveal the data was an exciting initiative of Ursula Harrison. As Brady in Prendergast (Prendergast, Leggo, Sameshima, & Voices, 2009, p.xvi) argues '*like philosophy, poetry can catch us in the act of being, what could be more fundamental to knowing the human condition than that?*' The use of poetry has given the research a creative edge, which has allowed participants' narratives and themes from the data to be revealed in a way that complimented the multiple case studies.

This research was given ethics approval from the Faculty of Arts and Education ethics committee at Deakin University. Consideration was given to ethical issues and the ethics of telling the stories of people who may be vulnerable or may have had negative education experiences in the past. Those who participated in the research were given their transcript to review, revise and check for factual inaccuracies. Places and names were changed in order to protect the identity of the participants.

## Freire and Critical Pedagogy

This research is informed by a broad critical theory and its corollary in education theory, critical pedagogy (Brookfield, 2005; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). Critical pedagogy draws primarily on the work and writing of Paulo Freire whose seminal book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' expressed the need for radical change to the traditional 'front-end loading system of education' that he expressed as being the 'banking system of education' (Freire, 1972). The broad project of critical pedagogy seeks to critique hegemony and inequality regarding

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<sup>1</sup> Marty Grace, Deborah Keys, Aaron Hart and Bernadette Keys



education and schooling as Darder, Baltadano and Torres, (Darder et al., 2009, pp, 24-25) claim:

But true to the principle of hegemony, critical pedagogy also assists educators to understand why students who have been oppressed do not necessarily embrace readily the possibility of transformation in the classroom. In an educational context where students from subordinate groups are taught early to believe in their own inherent deficit and to accept with uncompromising authority of standardized knowledge, the possibility of transgression can often signal a moment of crisis, anxiety and intense fear.

Freire believed the traditional system of education largely ignored the agency of learners. Freire argued that teaching and learning should be a process of mutual learning, one where both the teacher and students learn from each other. He believed the teacher taught but also learned from their students. That is, students have existing knowledge that they bring into the classroom if they are given the opportunity. He claimed students were able to disrupt, question, challenge and extend the knowledge of their teachers if they were given the opportunity. As Freire notably stated:

Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other (Freire, 1972, p.29).

Freire worked amongst the poor and illiterate in Brazil. He believed that literacy education had the power to change people's circumstances, that through education those who were poor and illiterate could gain some control over their own destiny. Through education, students had the potential to open up to a language of possibility. That it is our duty as teachers to not only teach students about the curriculum but also to teach students about the world around them. This would allow people to open up to their own and others' humanity. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire developed a theory of 'conscientisation' – often now known in contemporary terms as empowerment, however, it really represented the awakening of critical awareness (Freire, 1983). No doubt Freire's ideas about education, for the time, were radical, and Freire was jailed and then exiled for it (Tracey Ollis, 2012). However, these views have formed the basis of social science and critical education practice, that is, understanding manifestations of inequality and how people internalize oppression. Freirean 'conscientisation' allows people to understand that their educational disadvantage is not of their own

making, but often of social and cultural forces beyond their control. Freire's reminder to those who 'dare to teach' is – 'there is no teaching without learning' (Freire, 1998, p.32).

Many of the learners interviewed for this research had checkered histories of learning. Some have struggled with literacy. Most had not completed high school, had experienced low paid jobs and poor working conditions. Some had experienced family trauma; others were single parents. One of the common themes revealed in the data is that most of the learners had negative views of themselves as learners. This is a common theme amongst learners who enter ACE and Neighbourhood Houses. For many of these adult learners, learning is a process of identity change where they first need to commence 'learning to become a successful learner'. This will be explored further in the section outlined in the themes from this research on 'second chance learners'. Suffice to say it is the unique social environment of the Neighbourhood Houses which has enabled these research participants to reconstruct oftentimes long held negative views of themselves as learners.

## **Context and background to the research**

Globalisation and technological change have intensified international economic competition, motivating governments to increase national growth, productivity, efficiency and innovation. Training and education are seen to play a major role in enhancing national competitiveness and productivity in a global marketplace by increasing knowledge yield and ensuring a well-educated, effective workforce and citizenry (Productivity Commission, 2013). Australian governments of all persuasions have instigated ongoing structural reforms to align national education, training and employment agendas with the demands of intensified global competition. As a result, education and training policies throughout the developed world have increasingly subsumed economic imperatives to achieve national objectives. Current education and training policy is, therefore, heavily influenced by the needs, values and underlying philosophy of global market economics and attendant neo-liberal political agendas (Tyler, Fairbrother, Snell, & Carroll-Bell, 2013). As the nation rapidly moves away from mass production, inflexible employment conditions, and social democratic agendas in social service and welfare provision, emphasis in education and training policy is on increased worker productivity, organisational efficiency and innovation. Being a contested and highly controversial realm of social life, education and training policy reforms are deeply political, raising questions about their fundamental purposes.



This research was conducted against the changing backdrop of the Australian nation state's adjustment to the new economy. Victoria, like all states in Australia, is in a period of economic adjustment, with declining manufacturing industries and rapid changes in the agricultural sector, coupled with emerging new employment industries such as information technologies, service based jobs, hospitality and growth in Australian and international education. This period of adjustment has had a large impact on the Greater Geelong region with the closure of business such as Alcoa and Ford. The greater Geelong region has also changed dramatically in terms of its demography in the last 20 years. In 2016, the gradual rise in unemployment and the continued disappearance of fulltime jobs is of particular concern in Geelong.

Research in Geelong has focused on skills gap retraining and the closure of industries preparing workers for an unknown future. This continuing closure of manufacturing industries in Geelong means that there are far fewer jobs than people looking for them. Consequently, mature age workers and young early school leavers, in particular young women early school leavers who are now parenting, find themselves unemployed (Tyler et al., 2013). Much is being written of new opportunities for employment in the Barwon region, however, for mid-career adults and young parents the future often looks bleak. For young people, there are a raft of policies focusing on VET, re-entry to the workforce and apprenticeships. However, for older workers, these transitions are frequently not immediately clear as pathways into a future job market (Tyler et al., 2013). Late-career adults often meet significant barriers to re-enter the workforce.

The Vocational Education and Training system (VET) has seen rapid changes in its development in the last 20 years. The VET system has not been insulated from neo liberal policy contexts with successive governments pursuing policies of de-regulation to open-up the system to privatization (Golding, Brown, & Foley, 2009). Significant and sometimes negative impacts have occurred from the opening-up of the VET system to private providers through Registered Training Organisations (RTO's). In particular, approximately 60% of all VET activity is now undertaken in private colleges in Australia (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016), when once the majority of VET training occurred through publically funded TAFE. The number of private providers has increased and the changed policy context has driven a notable rise in disreputable VET providers<sup>2</sup>. More positive

outcomes, influenced by government supported policy initiatives to raise the participation rates in VET are the substantial increases in the number of young people entering the system. The VET Fee-Help loan scheme for Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualifications has assisted in numbers rising.

However, more recently, uncapped places for lower SES students in higher education has seen a drift away from VET towards more students studying at universities (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016). The recent Mackenzie report offered insight into the complexity of the VET system in Victoria. One of the recommendations from the report is for the government to endorse three propositions for the future provision of VET. They are:

1. Provide a strong and sustainable skills base for the Victorian economy
2. Support lifelong learning
3. Address disadvantage (MacKenzie & Coulson, 2015).

The above broad statements bring the VET system back to its initial social justice vision of providing accessible and affordable vocational education and training to all Victorians. One of the major providers of accessible and affordable education for second chance learners, sometimes referred to as vulnerable learners, has been Adult Community Education (ACE), particularly in Victoria. Within ACE, Neighbourhood Houses have a reputation for their flexibility in being able to cater to the diverse learning needs of second chance learners, who have also been described as vulnerable learners, disengaged learners or hard-to-reach learners. Pittham (2009) suggests that:

Hard-to-reach learners are those learners who do not self-refer or readily seek to engage in adult learning programs or courses. They are difficult to recruit, to the extent, that if there are softer targets available locally, little effort is made to make contact and connect with the hard-to-reach and thus their voices can remain unheard and their needs and wants largely ignored. (Pittham cited in Nechvoglod, 2010, p.12).

<sup>2</sup> <http://tafe4all.org.au/vet-review-fails-to-cap-funds-to-privateproviders/> accessed 26/9/16



## Adult Community Education

ACE has a long history in Victoria, the early 1890's saw the commencement of the first Mechanics Institutes. In the 1920's adult education programs were held Workers' Education Programs who for a small fee, provided adult education. Here people came to learn about the history of the workers' struggle and to study historical materialism and capitalism, in effect they came to study Marxism (Boughton, 2005). The development of the first Council of Adult Education in 1947 (CAE), the development of Multicultural Education Services (AMES), and the first community learning centres identified as Neighbourhood Houses in the 1970's (Golding, Kimberley, Foley, & Brown, 2008). The development of ACE in Neighbourhood Houses was further supported by the commencement of the Whitlam Government's Australian Assistance Plan (AAP). The AAP was funded to promote community development and community consultation in the development of local community services in regional areas. The initial intention of the AAP was to devolve responsibility for decision making about local community needs to the people in local communities themselves. Under this program an expansion of community education services including libraries, Neighbourhood Houses and other community services occurred (Spindler, 1994). ACE was formally recognised in legislation with the establishment in 1991 of the first Adult, Community & Further Education Act in 1991, in Victoria (Kosky, 2014). The important contribution that the ACE sector makes in delivering education and training to marginalized learners in

Australia cannot be underestimated. As Kaye Bowman claims:

ACE is a discreet fourth sector of education in Australia, the community based, owned and managed not for profit sector, committed to providing accessible learning opportunities for adults in local communities that meet their needs and support place-based community development (Bowman, 2016, p.7).

The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education (Education, 2008) acknowledges the potential of the ACE sector to support the national agenda on skills and workforce development, because of its ability to respond to changes in "industrial, demographic and technological circumstances" (Education, 2008). The declaration emphasized the important role played by ACE in building the "knowledge, understanding, skills and values" essential for an educated and just society and its contribution and provision of educational opportunities for second-chance learners (Borthwick, Knight, Bender, & Loveder, 2001, p.9)

The report acknowledges the key role the ACE sector plays in being nimble and flexible in meeting the demand for its services. The ACE sector consists primarily of community based local services such as Neighbourhood Houses and Centres, many of whom in Victoria are Learn Local providers<sup>3</sup>; Universities of the Third Age (U3As); some local libraries, and Men's sheds. In NSW and Victoria, State Governments fund a network of ACE providers to deliver education & training. In NSW these organisations are called Community Colleges and in Victoria, they are known as Neighbourhood Houses or Neighbourhood Centres. In Australia, ACE is delivered by providers who are local community-based, mostly community managed and generally not for profit organizations. They use community development practices focused on delivering recreation and education programs in order to meet local community needs (Ife, 2002). Bowman (2016 p.12) defines the distinctive features of ACE:

- Have a focus on adult learning needs and community development
- Values that are friendly, caring, welcoming, non-judgmental and socially inclusive
- Learning and education practices that are learner centred and holistic, primarily delivered in community settings which focus on empowering learners through experiences which contribute to further learner engagement

<sup>3</sup> Learn Local is a funding program for Adult Education in Victoria see <http://learnlocal.org.au/>, accessed 26/9/16.



- ACE providers are community based owned and managed, names and sizes of these distinct services vary, mainly because they respond to community needs and operate and are funded within a State-bound system

Furthermore, a major feature of ACE is its inclusiveness, welcoming and non-judgemental culture which facilitates access to education for all. ACE is renowned for its capacity to cater to a range of learners needs regardless of gender, race, culture or religion. As Bowman states:

The ACE sector is an enabler of inclusive learning. ACE has a welcoming, caring and non-judgmental culture to facilitate access by everybody and offers learning programs in friendly community settings that cater for adults of varying abilities and backgrounds. ACE seeks to be a gateway for all adults to return to learning at any stage along the learning time-line no matter their age, gender, culture, ability or previous educational experience (Bowman, 2016, p.12).

In recent years, ACE has moved from its focus on recreational programs and pre-accredited training to deliver VET programs as RTO's. It commenced with the establishment of adult basic education with a focus on literacy, foundation skills and life skills, enabling people to participate in society. The sector then moved towards other specific vocational education programs (Walstab, Volkoff, & Teese, 2005). Some of these changes were enforced by the imperatives of government policy creating incentives for welfare recipients to re-skill through training. The new ACE now provides education and training in four areas:

1. Personal interest non-formal and formal recreation activities
2. Adult basic education
3. Formal Vet training – providing a range of pre-accredited and accredited training
4. Transition pathways from one learning program to another, including from non-formal to formal training (adapted from Bowman, 2016, p.14).

Furthermore, within ACE Neighbourhood Houses and Centres play an important role in the education of adults. Providing adult education and recreational programs in local community settings, they provide a valuable education service at a reduced cost to local communities.

## Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria

Since their inception in the early 1970's, Neighbourhood Houses and Centres in Victoria have provided opportunities for women returning to study (Ducie, 1994; Lonsdale, 1993; West, 1995). Intrinsically connected to local communities they played an important role in decreasing social isolation and building social inclusion (Ducie, 1994; Golding et al., 2008; West, 1995). Their role in reducing women's isolation and increasing social inclusion was particularly important for mothers with young children. Many Neighbourhood Houses were established with the express purpose of providing local places for women and children to gather and participate in activities (West, 1995). In the early days of their development most of the houses were overseen by community-based management committees and staffed largely through the labour of unpaid volunteers, most of whom were women.

Many Neighbourhood Houses, particularly in Victoria, were developed with a feminist focus and were political in their engagement with policy and social change practices. West (1995) remarks that "Neighbourhood Houses developed out of the actions of ordinary suburban women in the context of the dynamism of new social movements' (p.5). They were focused on highlighting and responding to women's disadvantage through addressing work participation for women, access to education, issues of lack of affordable childcare, social isolation, violence against women and gender based discrimination (Bennett & Forster, 1985; Lonsdale, 1993; West, 1995). Ideas of empowering individuals and communities were key sector principles (Kimberley, 1998) and women were encouraged and supported to develop their local leadership skills (West, 1995).

This feminist history has not been documented widely, but Neighbourhood Houses are an early example of women's community development and social and civic engagement (Foley, 1999). West (1995) acknowledges that Neighbourhood Houses "are, and have been, important sites of women's action" (p.3). Here women came together to share a cup of tea, socialize, to build friendships, to engage with the local community around them, to chat about local community issues, to volunteer, and to build their management and organizational skills through involvement in non-government organizations. In effect, these spaces of learning were teaching women about the world around them and the women were learning about the benefits of a supportive learning community (hooks, 1994). Dewey and hooks have argued that education should be closely connected to community and society, that learning should be an activity that engages people not only in learning about core curriculum such as Maths and English, but learning about civic engagement and democracy. The early women



participants in Neighbourhood Houses were learning they had a place, and a voice on local issues. Women in Neighbourhood Houses became further politicised and drew attention to women's disadvantage and the need for women to have a safe and accessible place to socialise, engage in recreation and learn. They played a significant role in influencing State policy development in Victoria which led to the establishment of an on-going funding model replacing the ad hoc, limited and varied sources of funding of the early years (West, 1995). Neighbourhood Houses continue to provide locally based recreation programs, health and well-being programs, and pre- or non-accredited adult education programs. A large number of houses offer nationally accredited vocational training programs (VET), and many Neighbourhood Houses provide occasional childcare services. A distinguishing feature of these local community education providers is their neighbourhood-based models of community development practice and their provision of low cost education and recreation services to people in their local communities. Community-management models remain the most prevalent form of governance and volunteers continue to make important contributions. The houses' activities and education programs adapted and changed to the needs of the community and users of the Neighbourhood Houses, who were primarily women.

Presently, in Victoria, there are more than 390 funded Neighbourhood Houses, servicing 372 communities. They are funded through a complex array of funding sources. Core funding for the community development work comes from the Department of Health and Human Services Victoria, through the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program (ANHLC, 2003). The following table outlines the number of participants who attend

the Neighbourhood Houses in the Barwon and South West regions on a weekly basis (Victoria, 2016).

Key to these houses is their specialised approach to adult learning. Small size classes provide an intimate and personalised approach to the learning needs of adults. Adult learning principles or andragogy (Knowles, 1984), experiential and applied learning pedagogies are used to engage learners with the content of the material (Dewey, 1938). Drawing on the experiences of adult learners as sources of class content, co-construction of curriculum between teachers and learners is a feature. Didactic or front-end-loading approaches to teaching rarely occurs in these spaces of learning. Students learn from the teacher and the teacher learns from students. They are all engaged in a mutual process of teaching and learning (Freire, 1972). Building relationships with adult learners is also a key feature of the process of learning that occurs in Neighbourhood houses. In this research learners frequently referred to the safe and supportive learning environment that was created for students. This is particularly important when dealing with learners who have had negative experiences of learning in the past. Providing a safe and supportive classroom in a community space rather than a higher education institution or a school, changes their view of learning. Applied learning or hands-on learning strategies are used across the whole curriculum. Personalised learning and differentiation of teaching practices are used to cater to the needs of all learners.

The interviews, observations and literature review conducted for this research disclose a range of common themes and issues confronting learners, educators, and those charged with leading, managing and governing Neighbourhood Houses.

Region	Total regional population	No. attending NH each week	%	Total Number of NH's in Network
Barwon	269,549	9285	3.44%	26
South West	98,838	779	0.78%	7



## **From Adult Education to Lifelong Learning**

The research is set against the backdrop of the current project of lifelong learning, which has dominated adult education discourses for more than 30 years (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, & Yates, 2003; Delors, 1998; Edwards & Usher, 2001). The contemporary condition of work created discourses of education and new worker identities such as the new worker, new learner (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). It was acknowledged that individuals no longer required education for a short period of their lives which in the past had set them up for a long career in one job. Education needed to be flexible to cater for learning that occurred over a lifespan, at different stages in the life cycle from adolescence to mid and later life work needs. It is now acknowledged that most workers will have more than one job or career across a lifetime, and in fact many people will have several employment trajectories, requiring different types of education from pre-accredited training to undergraduate and vocational education, as well as post-graduate study. In conjunction with this, adult learning through craft, art and recreational programs and these needs vary across a lifetime. For example, later life learners now need computer literacy in response to the dominance of new technologies with many of the daily tasks we do to run a household now conducted on-line using computers, iPad and smart phones.

In beginning to discuss lifelong learning, the central concept of learning needs to be defined. Edwards and Usher (Edwards & Usher, 2007, p.2) describe learning as a 'socio-culturally embedded set of practices'. The notion and practice of lifelong learning is relational, embedded in and generated by social engagement / interaction. It involves 'active knowledge formation' rather than passive acquisition of knowledge (Edwards & Usher, 2007, p.2), and can occur in a multiplicity of settings, sites, spaces, and activities representing a lack of boundaries or borders (Edwards & Usher, 2001). It can occur in formal educational settings and in community-based settings such as Neighbourhood Houses. There is much debate about lifelong learning: its meaning, its purpose, how it has become common discourse in adult education and continuing education, and how it has impacted notions of education and learning more broadly (Edwards & Usher, 2001). While it is not a new concept, it has been subsumed or co-opted by neoliberal, global and market-driven agendas. In such a context, lifelong learning and learning generally becomes a commodity, a means of individuals adapting and responding to the social, economic and technological changes of the twenty-first century (Edwards & Usher, 2001).

Zhao and Biesta (Zhao & Biesta, 2012, p.333) identify key concepts within the current scope of lifelong learning: 'relationships', 'identity, and the self'. They argue these have gained greater relevance as a reaction to a dynamic global, social and economic climate, and policy initiatives designed to drive and compel flexible responses to 'socioeconomic' and 'sociocultural' changes. Edwards (1997) and Edwards, Nicoll & Lee (2002) refer to the imposition of forms of learning to allow people to maintain 'flexible identity' and 'flexible subjectivity' (p.333). Edwards and Usher (Edwards & Usher, 2001, p.285) caution against 'universal and totalizing' descriptions of lifelong learning that limit its potential and the possible outcomes of its endeavours / activities. This is especially important for second chance learners' positional and transformative motivations and outcomes.

## **Second Chance Learning in Neighbourhood Houses – key findings**

The recent Mackenzie Review (MacKenzie & Coulson, 2015) into VET acknowledged the significant role ACE plays in providing flexible and well targeted education programs to local communities. The privatisation agenda of VET has seen a drift of vulnerable learners now seeking non formal, pre-accredited and accredited training to ACE providers. Neighbourhood Houses are increasingly providing education programs for vulnerable and second chance learners. Second chance learners are described as those learners who are returning to study because their current qualifications do not equip them for promotion within their workplace, or facilitate a move outside their current workplace to find equivalent or higher level positions (Robertson, Hoare, & Harwood, 2011).

The Geelong and South West regions of Victoria have been traditionally noted for providing employment in car manufacturing, oil refining, chemical engineering and for their range of agricultural activities. Rising unemployment and the continued disappearance of full time jobs is of particular concern in this region of Victoria (Tyler et al., 2013). As previously stated, large numbers of workers have been made redundant due to manufacturing flight at the same time as eligibility for welfare provisions are tightening up. Working-age individuals bear the risk and responsibility for assuring their employment and employability. Adding to this context, the Commonwealth government's changed social policy rhetoric from 'entitlement' to last resort 'safety net' has heralded stricter eligibility requirements for welfare aid and support. Delayed entitlement and work for the dole schemes, reductions in child support eligibility and payments, tougher assessments for government supported 'carers' have forced many adults back into the workforce. Rising



fees in an increasingly deregulated higher education and training sector compound these issues (Tyler et al., 2013).

Long-term unemployment hits at many different sectors of the economy. Frequently, the first retrenchments fall on individuals who have been early school leavers, have no post-school qualifications and have worked in relatively insecure settings all their working life. However, a second layer of retrenchments has recently hit the City of Greater Geelong, with major cut-backs and the closure of some of the last major manufacturing industries, such as Alcoa and Ford. Now, more highly skilled and qualified workers are finding themselves out of employment for the first time in their working life. Many are at a loss as to where to begin to seek career change, or the direction they might choose to go. Data from this research revealed that many of the learners in Neighbourhood Houses:

- Are early school leavers
- Face equity issues in terms of access to skill development, courses and learning opportunities including access to computers, technology and the Internet
- Often have negative perceptions of themselves as learners due to negative prior learning experiences
- Are assisted to build their confidence, develop new knowledge, skills and networks in order to become successful learners and workers
- Learn, but also volunteer in Neighbourhood Houses, gaining further skills and knowledge through social learning opportunities
- Some successfully transition from education programs in Neighbourhood Houses into work and further education at TAFE
- Envisage a future in further formal learning, including acquiring higher education degrees

Low skilled workers who have lost their jobs or those wishing to enter the workforce have often had limited access to skills training programs and suitable adult education programs. This problem is further exacerbated by a lack of access to close-by TAFE colleges and costs associated with further education and training programs. Neighbourhood Houses have proven to be well positioned to take on an increasingly important role in transitional education. The major themes emerging from this research are inextricably linked, highlighting that adults succeed in achieving their goals given a 'second chance' in learning through the flexibility and inclusivity of Neighbourhood Houses. The data in the case studies show the impact of leaving school early and the subsequent challenges people faced in terms of re-engaging with education. This is bridged by the supportive and inclusive social space of

the Neighbourhood Houses. Major themes include the high level of satisfaction of Neighbourhood House users; the importance of flexibility for Neighbourhood Houses to respond to local needs; local decision-making and consultation; and the importance of Neighbourhood Houses in building stronger individuals and communities. Through their involvement, adults are able to develop useful knowledge and skills at their own pace. Participants appreciate flexible learning environments with non-hierarchical relationships, individualised and small group programming, learning and social support networks, and the personal benefits associated with work placements, training and employment opportunities.

## **Later life Adult Learners – key findings**

A developing area of research has focused on education and later life learners (Findson & Formosa, 2012). Like many Western countries, Australia has an ageing population. In Victoria, at 30 June 2009, 13.6% of the population of Victoria was aged 65 years and over (ABS, 2009). As Australians live longer, economic and social policy has made adjustments. Australians are now expected to work longer and retire later. Furthermore, learning across the lifespan is increasingly being encouraged. A major theme which emerged from the research is the large number of later life learners participating in Neighbourhood Houses. Thirteen of the learners who were interviewed were later life learners aged over 60 and now retired. Three of these learners had completed secondary school, while the majority had not. A further five learners aged over 50 were learning at the Neighbourhood Houses. Their situations varied: one was actively seeking work after being made redundant; one was on sick-leave and intending to return to work; one was retired and intending to establish her own consultancy; two were no longer working due to ill-health. Most of the retired later life learners came to learn for recreation purposes, to study creative arts and crafts based courses. Some came to learn skills associated with the new technologies, how to use computers, smart phones and IPADS. An important motivation for learning was to form friendships, to socialise, which led to learning informally from others about their local community (Schmidt-Hertha, 2013). Others came to volunteer, many participated in order to keep active and healthy. The data from the later life learners revealed the following:

- Some have goals to continue studying in higher education
- Many developed supportive learning relationships and new friendships
- Some had employment goals they were working towards



- They learned both formally and informally in the space of the Neighbourhood House
- Some gained skills and expertise through volunteering
- All found the flexible learning environment of the house welcoming
- Most are lifelong learners, they enjoy learning and find it fulfilling

The data from both the second chance learners and later life learners revealed a common theme of the importance of socialisation in the unique space of the Neighbourhood Houses. Here people learn informally from one another as well as through the accredited and short course offerings (Schmidt-Hertha, 2013). Through socialisation in the houses new friendships, contacts and connections are made. Many of the stories of adult learners in these spaces spoke of the improvement in their health and well-being, their reduced social isolation and feelings of connection to people they met, in addition to learning new knowledge and skills. The contribution the houses make to the health and well-being of participants including social inclusion and social capital cannot be underestimated (Bourdieu, 1984).

## **Neighbourhood Houses, Transitions to Work and Higher Education**

There is presently a dearth of research on the outcomes of learning in Neighbourhood Houses, ACE and transitions to work and or further study. However, the data from this research revealed that pre-accredited and accredited training did lead to work opportunities. Ten of the second chance learners in this study secured employment after their studies. Another had obtained a traineeship in a large health provider in business administration. Some volunteered and then commenced studying foundation studies, others commenced a program and then started volunteering. Neighbourhood Houses provide opportunities for people to volunteer and further develop their communication and organisational skills. It is clear that more than 40 years since their initial inception, Neighbourhood Houses continue to provide skill development for people in local communities. Significantly the houses themselves continue to rely heavily on the unpaid labour of volunteers.

Interestingly, nine participants have transitioned to study in other courses at the Neighbourhood Houses, three of these participants are now studying at a diploma level. The data revealed that once second chance learners start to study, they continue to do so. Many of these participants commenced studying basic information technology (computer) classes, or

foundational English or Maths, then transitioned to certificate level courses within the Neighbourhood Houses. Only four of the research participants transitioned from Neighbourhood Houses to higher education at their local TAFE. Lesley is doing foundation studies, Peter and Bianca are currently studying a Certificate III at TAFE, and Lilly successfully completed a Certificate III. Most of the participants in the Neighbourhood Houses in this study had completed lower level qualifications, pre-accredited training and foundation studies, Certificate II, III and Certificate IV level qualifications. Allan and Bird had almost completed diploma qualifications at the Neighbourhood House and Sophia had recently completed a Certificate IV. Recent research into transitions from VET to higher education revealed that it was mainly students who had studied higher level qualifications such as a diploma who transitioned successfully to higher education. The research noted that students who did transition from VET to higher education needed more intensive support in order to be successful in these education settings (Griffen, 2014). As this research has shown, students did move from pre-accredited training to certificate level courses within the environment of the Neighbourhood House, but very few participants transitioned to TAFE and none had moved to University. Further research is needed to fully understand the issues relating to learners transitioning from Neighbourhood Houses to higher education.





## This book

This book charts the learning journeys of those interviewed for this research. The intimate and deeply personal accounts of their learning are documented here through the stories outlined in the case studies and poems. They show the embodied experiences of learners as they account for their successes and challenges as they return to study as adults, some after a break of more than 20 years. Qualitative case studies and poetry allowed the researchers to find meaning and understanding through the richly descriptive accounts of learner experiences (S. B. Merriam, 2009).

The case studies and poetry presented here reveal the different learning trajectories for the participants. For example, amongst the second chance learners, Lesley had only completed year 8 and Marta year 9, both are single parents who came to the Neighbourhood Houses to study, with no previous qualifications and the difficulties associated with being early school leavers. Allan, who was retrenched from his position as an aircraft structures engineer, gained employment in a new industry after completing a youth work course. Anne, Curly, and Jill all came to learn foundation computer skills. Several people credited the unique environment of the Neighbourhood House for their developing and renewed love of learning. This is loud and clear in the stories of Bird, Peter, Marta, Sophia and Joy, where learning in this space has been a transformative experience for them.

For the later life learners, recreation programs such as gardening, writing and art and craft classes are outlined in the stories of Monet, Ruby, Ellen, Joye, Elizabeth and Marie. Computer skills were very important to most of the later life learners. Denise, June, Ellen and Rosemary gained experience through volunteering. Many reflected on the importance of staying healthy and active as they aged.

These inspiring stories show the richness of adult learning that occurs in this unique space of education, where learners are supported and encouraged to pursue learning, with much success. The data from this research has revealed the importance of a learning community in shaping and assisting to support and re-build people's lives. It affirms the project of lifelong learning and the importance of learning in these spaces from young people, to learning in mid-life after a career change or retrenchment, to learning in later life in order to remain healthy and active. The research raises many questions and challenges about the future of these important providers of ACE. It suggests a need for further research across Victoria and the Australian states. Being introduced only over the past four decades, Neighbourhood House programs are still an emerging and evolving form of education delivery, a new type of learning environment which could portend further policy and research opportunities.

In the current dynamic policy environment, it is important the possibilities associated with Neighbourhood House programs be documented and noted by instrumental players such as governments, policy-makers, skills development and training leaders, governing trustees, researchers and analysts. It is notable that there is a dearth of research in Neighbourhood Houses, which is surprising given they have operated in Australia since the 1970's. These complex spaces of formal and informal learning offer significant learning experiences for second chance learners, for individuals to further their skills and qualifications. They provide opportunities for transition to further study and higher education or employment. Neighbourhood Houses are sites of social inclusion and community building for individuals who are reframing and rebuilding their lives. We argue they are significant spaces for people to reconstruct previously held negative views of themselves as learners, a result of not having finished secondary school and taken the traditional pathway to higher education. For later life learners Neighbourhood Houses are important spaces of social inclusion and connection, health and well-being, and learning into laterlife.

In an era of lifelong learning with declining manufacturing industries and workers having to retrain and develop new knowledge and skills, Neighbourhood Houses offer significant adult learning opportunities and intensive individualised support so that learners can be successful.

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# **Second Chance Learners:**

## **Stories and Poems**

# Nadir

Nadir is 26 years of age and arrived in the Geelong area two years ago as a refugee from a middle-eastern country. While he waits for his permanent residency he attends short courses and volunteers at the Neighbourhood House where he enjoys meeting people. He first came to the Neighbourhood House on the recommendation of a doctor when he was experiencing depression. The doctor suggested that the House would provide an opportunity for him to meet people, make friends, and improve his English. He looks forward to the time when he can take up tertiary study in his favoured area of medicine.

I needed to be involved and communicate with other people to improve my English, to make a friend and to meet other people. I started volunteering here as a receptionist, and I volunteer at another community centre as a Home Tutor, they're the things which I can help the people with.

I like meeting people. I like to be involved with people to communicate whatever knowledge I have. I like to spread my knowledge to others in my community or any other people.

When I'm volunteering here as a receptionist many calls come in and we can attend the call, talking, 'How can I help you, this is [name of centre], what help do you need?'

I didn't join an English class, my first course was an Intel Course. It was a computer course because I had already studied in other countries as well but I did it for practice. We learned about business, how we can handle a basic business, how we can start a business, how we can make a monogram. This course can help for personal life, it is good for further studies like basic skills of computers, we can

improve the computer skills. Maybe it can help with employment as well.

If I start a small business that's exactly helped me with starting a business or a small business and good for my personal life as well.

The Leadership Course I think is a good course because we learn, and we have to teach other people. Leader means to lead some other people, for example, in one home a good leader is like a good father and a good father can handle a good home and make a good home, a good family. A good family make a good society and good society make a good country. So that's why we have to learn the Leadership Program, it can help with personal life as well, that's why I like it and I'm involved in the program. Also I can lead our own community in good manner.

For new arrival who starting life in this environment [there are] important aspects. This centre can help the multicultural environment, how they can learn, show how they can use their skills. Many communities are here so if they came to [name of house] they can learn something, English, Computer Courses and maybe other things. So I think a community like [this centre] can help neighbourhoods.

I like to study Medical, to be a Doctor in future. I'd like to study Pathology or any Doctor skills because I'm good at this that's why I like it, it is my interested skill.

## I like meeting people



# Peter



Peter is 22 years of age and moved to the Greater Geelong area two years ago. He completed school at the end of Year 11. For the next three years he worked in retail, reception and bar attending. He had no formal qualifications for these jobs, but learned skills on the job. When he moved to the area he left his previous work and enrolled with Centrelink. In order to receive benefits, he was required to attend the Neighbourhood House, which he really liked, and he enrolled in a Certificate III in Aged Care. During this time, he volunteered in administration, and followed up with a further qualification which included an internship. When the course finished he successfully applied for a 12-month traineeship in a local large health provider and is studying Certificate III in Business. He enjoyed learning at the Neighbourhood House and made good friends with other students. Studying has taught him about the importance of working hard and giving people chances. For the future he would like to help people, possibly in community services or youth justice.

I did all the way up to Year 11 and decided to move. I'd just finished a job. I was a bit lost and that led to some depression. I did admin and reception work before but when I did it I was never qualified. I worked for nine months on a reception desk and had to learn everything on-the-job. I was always just getting by. I wasn't challenging myself.

This is the first time I've never found my own job, the first time I've been helped with a job. That was one of the requirements from the government that I do that. I found I got along with everybody quite well and I thought, 'Oh well they've got this course coming up I think I'll check it out. I'll just see what it is it can't be too bad.' I did that and I really liked the place and the Home and Community Care Course I did. While I was doing that I volunteered for a few months.

We helped each other, and within the first week we were all really supportive of each other. We had group discussions and we'd always ask if

## I'm taking on new things

anyone was struggling, do they need help or anything like that. I'm really horrible at maths. I'm improving but there was a girl in there who was really good at maths and she used to help me a lot.

We catch up once a month because we all became very good friends. We had fun all the time. We were always laughing, but what was really special was when ex-students came in. They spoke to us about their journey and their story, where they were before they started the course and what they're doing now. There were some pretty special heart-warming stories.

I've never really been good with the books, I'm better at hands-on and doing it myself. The best way I learn is if I'm shown or given examples of what to do. I learnt that things take time, you've got to work hard to get to where you want to be. Working in a setting like this [Hospital] I'm challenged every day. I've been here for four months and my role just keeps developing. I'm taking on new things.

I want to help people. I'm doing Administration at the moment but in years to come I'd like to be in Community Services or Youth Justice. University has always scared me. I never thought that I was good enough for university. While I'm working full time I'm also doing a Certificate III in Business. It's really in-depth and it requires a lot of work. If I finish this then I think that I could raise the bar a little bit and try something else, maybe not university straight away but something a bit more higher level.

# Jill

I think I was ready  
to go back into learning again,  
in my sixties.

*I ran a tourism business from home for 20 years, before that I worked in disability, with children.*

I found it a bit difficult at first.

We have to work on a self-pace level, try and work it out for ourselves,

I don't know where it will go –

Being able to switch the computer on and know that I can understand where everything is

I felt very much achieved, at the end.

I think this is what's great about the Neighbourhood House –

you're offered these courses

they're at reasonable prices

you're working in a small group setting

you're getting a lot of concentrated assistance –

our teachers are great because they move around with us

personally,

at our level

at our age and stage

you can keep your brain going

which is great.

*In the meantime, I've been offered a job using those Certificates going way back.*

*I'm now in the midst of training. What's come out of this is I'm able to go online, understand what I have to do. I'm very proud of that.*

I didn't realise there is a lot offered in this area,

You don't have to stay at home and get bored

If you start to feel a little bit lonely, get in a class it's great,

The world's our oyster.

## The world's our oyster

# Sophia



Sophia is 49 years of age and lives with her son who is attending secondary school. She has lived in the area for 25 years. After completing secondary school at Year 10 she financed herself through secretarial college working in many different jobs. She left an administrative position after 20 years because she felt like doing something different. After being out of the workforce for two years she felt the need to meet people and make friends rather than staying at home on her own. So she came to the Neighbourhood House to update her computer skills. Sophia's prior knowledge of computers and her previous experience as a trainer allowed her to take on a role supporting other students in her classes. A close friendship developed with another student and they both recently completed a Certificate IV in Business, which was intense and challenging although she learned a lot.

My first position was at an abattoir, I moved on to a fish and chip shop, then I went to a secretarial job. From there I went to a psychiatric hospital where I was a carer, then I moved on to build kitchens, so I was a cabinet maker. I did that because I lived by myself and I had to pay for my education. I was with the same company for 20 years, two years ago I felt I needed a break. I became restless and wanted to refresh my computer skills. I used to train 30 to 100 people at a time. I thought one day, 'I just don't want to do this anymore I want a change. I can be better, I'm not old'.

The welcoming feeling that you get when you walk in, you think, 'Okay I belong somewhere I'm not home alone'. My son can't believe the difference in me. He loves it, he's always like, 'What did you learn today?' I'll pull out the book and show him, yeah I feel proud. He thinks, 'Good on you mum don't just sit at home'. This course has given me the confidence, the courage to try something different.

I've been helping train the students because of my knowledge of IT. A lady in the course said she could see I've got more confidence. My self-esteem has risen. I'm able to contribute my

## My self-esteem has risen

experience and knowledge and help other students. I feel important again because I've been out of the workforce for two years. After being in the workforce all my life I felt a bit lost. I've found the two teachers I've had they're very knowledgeable, so I definitely feel like I'm gaining knowledge. Not only that, they've inspired me because both teachers have said that I've helped them.

I found it quite difficult because I've never been in a business. I had to think from that mindset - how to run a business. It had to go right down to the things you don't even think about. We've spent every day here, just catching up, trying to work it out but it's quite hard to run a business. The computer side is fine with me. It was the written work, the theory. I found that difficult and I felt like I was back at school.

I've created a website through the course for women who suffer from violence. I'm reaching out to help women because I've been there. I know the information they need and I understand it. You've got to work out how they would look-up that website, because you're not going to put the real stuff of violence, it was hard to do.

I'm hoping I can find a job. I want to help women and I think my computer and my personal skills can help. I'd do anything, counselling, psychology, I think I'd be good at that. Then again it all comes down to money. You have to pay for those courses whereas I've found here it's been very financially good, it's been really good.

# Storm

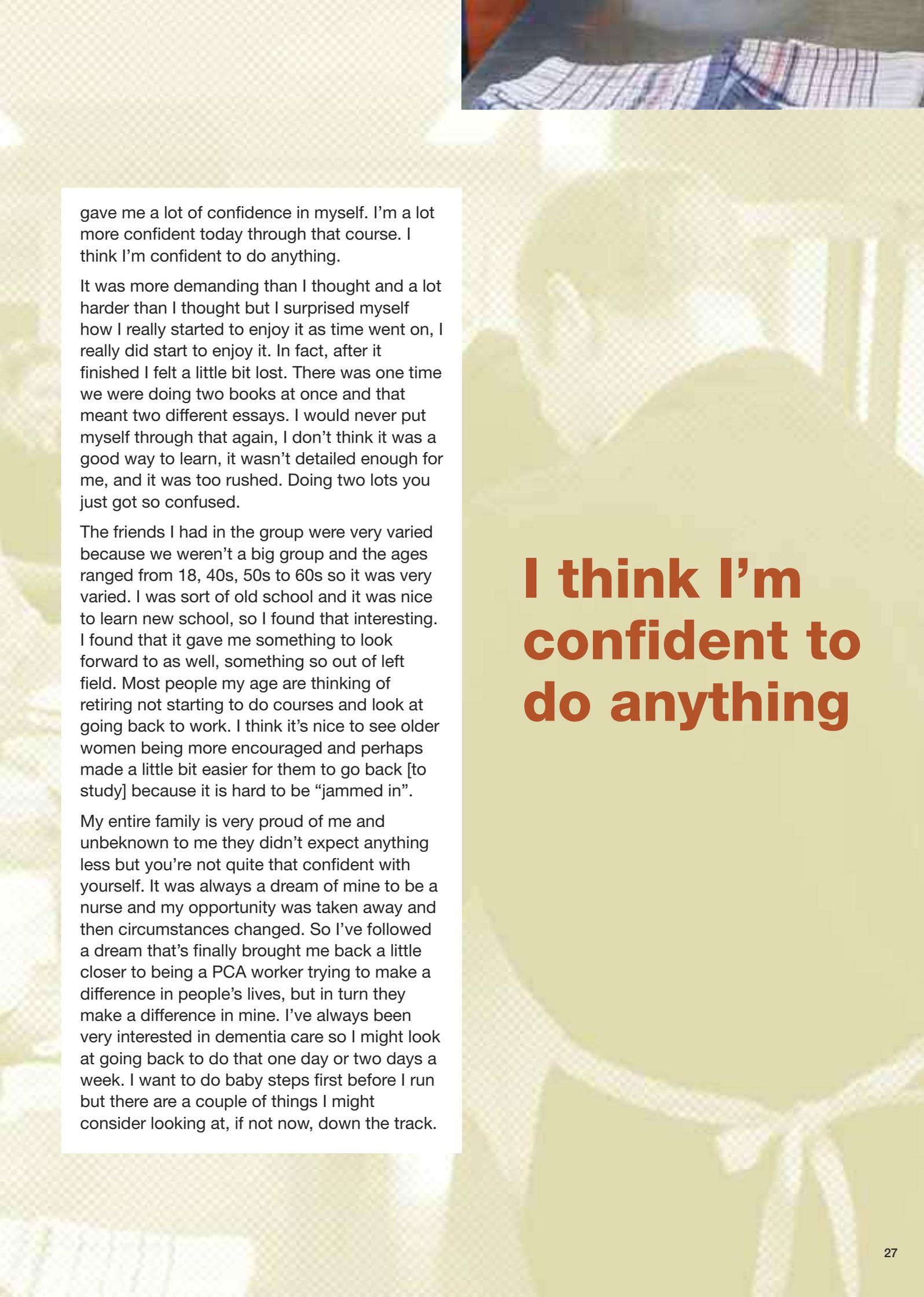
Storm is 63 years of age and has lived in the rural area for six years. After leaving school at 14 she became a nursing aide but left to help her family in their catering business. Catering work took up much of her working life, but there has also been cleaning, supermarket and domestic work. As a single mother she did whatever work was available while she raised her children. In recent years she has been housekeeping in a holiday park and it was during this time that she began caring for her family members. Her family circumstances led her to enrol in a dual Certificate III in Aged Care and Home and Community Care at the Neighbourhood House to learn skills for the demanding and hands-on caring work in her personal life. Studying for two days a week suited her although the workload was more than she was prepared for particularly the amount of homework required. Employment was not a goal at the time of her enrolment in the course, but during her placement she realised that working for a couple of days each week could be a bonus because she could continue learning and keeping active. After receiving good reports from a successful placement she was invited to submit her resume for casual work. Storm believes it is important that older women are encouraged and have the confidence to “do things” rather than being held back by their age.

I started work at 14 as a Nurse's Aide then came away from that because my parents were starting a business and needed the family to be incorporated in that. I was in catering for most of my life. I've done a lot of travelling and picked up work along the way. I had my children, single mum, cleaning jobs whatever was available. I got my kids through school and then went on to do domestic work and worked for coffee shops because of the catering business. Most of my jobs were for three or four years.

My idea to do the course was to learn some techniques that I could transfer into my personal life. I looked after my son who was in a bad car accident (in rehab for three years), then looked after my mother-in-law for three years until she passed away with Alzheimer's and then helped look after my mum, so that's where my idea of going into Aged Care and Caring. When I go into the home now to see my mum who's 90 I can implement some of those things, also with my son who has head injuries. I find that very beneficial, that's what's helped me.

I surprised myself that I could learn. I was my own critic but I was also just so blown away how bloody good I was at it, it really got to me. I learned a lot of things, new hoisting techniques that I wasn't aware of and, like you do in any course, there's so much you know and there's so much you don't. By the time I finished the course I did learn a lot more than I anticipated.

When we had to do communications I wrote a poem – ‘Do you see me?’ – about making the person who was looking after them see the person, not the old person. There weren't too many dry eyes when that one finished. I found something in myself I hadn't realised that I had. I'd done an activity and got a standing ovation when it finished and that was really nice, that



gave me a lot of confidence in myself. I'm a lot more confident today through that course. I think I'm confident to do anything.

It was more demanding than I thought and a lot harder than I thought but I surprised myself how I really started to enjoy it as time went on, I really did start to enjoy it. In fact, after it finished I felt a little bit lost. There was one time we were doing two books at once and that meant two different essays. I would never put myself through that again, I don't think it was a good way to learn, it wasn't detailed enough for me, and it was too rushed. Doing two lots you just got so confused.

The friends I had in the group were very varied because we weren't a big group and the ages ranged from 18, 40s, 50s to 60s so it was very varied. I was sort of old school and it was nice to learn new school, so I found that interesting. I found that it gave me something to look forward to as well, something so out of left field. Most people my age are thinking of retiring not starting to do courses and look at going back to work. I think it's nice to see older women being more encouraged and perhaps made a little bit easier for them to go back [to study] because it is hard to be "jammed in".

My entire family is very proud of me and unbeknown to me they didn't expect anything less but you're not quite that confident with yourself. It was always a dream of mine to be a nurse and my opportunity was taken away and then circumstances changed. So I've followed a dream that's finally brought me back a little closer to being a PCA worker trying to make a difference in people's lives, but in turn they make a difference in mine. I've always been very interested in dementia care so I might look at going back to do that one day or two days a week. I want to do baby steps first before I run but there are a couple of things I might consider looking at, if not now, down the track.

**I think I'm  
confident to  
do anything**

# Curly

Curly is 42 years of age and has lived in the Greater Geelong area for most of her life. After completing her secondary schooling at year 10 she began an apprenticeship as a jockey and continued with this work for many years. Other work included cleaning in holiday parks and hospitality work during a trip around Australia. Since then she has completed two units from the Hospitality training package. Curly's Job Services Provider referred her to the Neighbourhood House because she wanted to learn computers to improve her chances of employment. She currently volunteers with a local charity while looking for work and completing computer classes at the Neighbourhood House.

I finished Year 10 and then did an apprenticeship as a jockey. It would be about twenty years ago. I didn't really want to work in the wintertime and the pay wasn't that good anyway, so it wasn't really worth it, a lot of the time you had double shifts. I went and did cleaning, that was pretty good and then had a little boy so I had a bit of time off, and then I thought, 'Well I'd better get started on computers before he catches up and keeps on going'.

I've done two lots of computer courses, this is my third one now. The Job Services Provider paid for two, this one I've got to pay for myself, but I still want to keep on doing it. I'm looking for a job so I've been using that to look for jobs as well, whereas before I didn't know how to get on to the Internet at all. With Centrelink you've got to have an email address, which I didn't have before, so that helped heaps.

I've been here a few times to do homework. I've got myself a computer at home, not the Internet, but still I can go back home and do the things that we've done and it's like, 'Oh yeah', it just refreshes it. I do a bit of volunteering and I can go on the register and computer there as well, it's pretty basic. Before

I wouldn't have known what to do, but now I'm more confident I can do it, so that helped in that way.

I've learnt how to put a computer together. I didn't know how to do it properly and I thought my mouse was broken and the keyboard was broken, but it wasn't that it was just that I didn't put it in the right way. I found out that if I didn't work that out it would have cost me about \$90 for a person to come in and plug it into where it was meant to be. So that's been a bit of a learning thing because I thought, 'Oh no, I've got to go and buy a new one'.

There's a couple of ladies here they're really good. A few times we've sent emails to each other, 'How's your homework going?' and things like that. They've been really nice. There's a nice lot of people here. I think it depends on the teacher as well, if they're able to teach and not just say, 'You're expected to know'. I think that changes things a little bit for you. We've been pretty lucky with the ones here, they've been really good. If you don't know they'll come and let you know not like 'You should know that'.

I like going fishing and now I know a little bit more about computers and I can take photos I can take photos of the big fish I catch and save them. I wouldn't mind taking more photos so you can keep them all together. My little boy he likes to go fishing, too. There's a lot of places you can go fishing around here just depending on the weather.

**I didn't know  
how to get  
on to the  
Internet at all**

# Bird

Bird is 38 years of age and has lived in the area since she was a young child. After completing Year 10, she went into administrative work in real estate and banking where she gained on-the-job qualifications and remained until becoming a mother. When she was at home caring for her young children she realised that she would like to find more meaningful work. She completed a Certificate III in Children's Services and is now enrolled in a Diploma. Returning to learning required a juggle to manage study and homework alongside home and parenting responsibilities, as well as the 2 days a week she is working casually in a children's centre. She is a passionate learner who wants to know everything and loves the Neighbourhood House learning environment finding its accessibility and flexibility fits in well with her parenting responsibilities. Although she has a long-term vision for her future employment, potentially in special education, she decided to begin with the basics at Certificate III level and start earning while continuing with her studies. Bird considers that the role Neighbourhood Houses play in the local provision of education and training courses is very important for her and other mothers who are intending to return to work when their children reach school age. She hopes that one day higher level qualifications such as Bachelor degrees will be offered at Neighbourhood Houses.

My history has been more office related. I've worked in real estate for probably about eight years. I decided I needed a change of career, but I wasn't sure what it was going to be so I just worked for the bank for a couple of years in between. I became a mother and through motherhood realised I'll need to do something with a bit more meaning behind it, so no more office work.

I was a stay-at-home mum for six years and didn't work. So coming in and doing the course and being in a social environment is really supportive for going back into the workplace. Without pinpointing a particular thing, it is a good thing for mothers who have been out of work.

I loved the way the course was provided. I loved

## A really good thing for mothers that have been out of work

the setting, small group, adult environment, it really suited me. The hours also fit in well for me with my children being in primary school. I can drop them off, be here, finish and still go and pick them up from school. So for a mum with a family it creates great flexibility. It's really family friendly, it's really supportive. There's been a hard side to it, trying to fit everything in, working and studying and being a mum, so there's a juggle there. It's given me back a lot of confidence as well. We've got a great teacher who I feel very confident going to and inputting what I've learnt in the workplace, which is great.

Everyone has to work but I love going to school and I love learning. I could continue to do courses and build on myself forever. I thrive and get a lot out of the study and the work side of it. I love that it is in a community centre and it has all the other aspects to it which you may need to use at some point. I love that it's not like going to a University, it's not a big school you're going to get lost in or you're another number. You feel like you are a person, getting good support and good one-on-one help.

In the long run, my preference is to work with Special Needs Children. I believe that all children deserve the best start in life and all the opportunities regardless of their situation. I wanted to come in at the lower end starting at a Cert III because I wanted to learn from the basics up. I'm still employed with some rooms as an everyday educator and then other days I have a role one-on-one with children. I thought this would be a good stepping stone for me to earn money and eventually get to where I want to be.

# Allan

Allan is 54 years of age and has lived in the area for 23 years. He left school at the end of year 10, worked for a year, then went back to school to complete year 11. At school he found it hard to concentrate and to remember information. He successfully completed an apprenticeship as an Aircraft Structures Engineer and spent the next 37 years primarily doing this work. Along the way he has been a bicycle mechanic and a builder's labourer. At the beginning of 2014 he was retrenched and decided to change careers. He enrolled in a nationally accredited youth work course at the Neighbourhood House, which he had been interested in pursuing at TAFE. Since completing a Certificate IV in Youth Work, Allan has enrolled in a Diploma in Community Services which he has almost completed. In the meantime, his Certificate IV qualification has led to employment success – he now works on a casual basis in a Youth Centre.

Because we were being retrenched, the company is obliged to give you some career information and put on career seminar days and I'd always been a bit interested in working in the Youth sector. I've been a football coach and cricket coach, the usual thing that dads do when their kids are young and I had always thought about doing volunteer work, but because I worked shift work a lot it was really difficult to be regular with certain things. I had the TAFE career book that they'd given out to us and I sort of skipped over the usual forklift driver, truck driver, construction worker and I was looking at the community service area and I saw Cert IV in Youth Work.

I thought, 'Well, I'm getting a redundancy package, I'll use that to finance my way through a course'. I was getting the first course

free because I'd been retrenched. The government gives you funding for it. I had a look at TAFE and they had courses, but you had to enrol last November.

I happened to be sitting on the couch that night and I opened the local newspaper. The Neighbourhood Centre had put a full page ad in there. I saw Cert IV in Youth Work and I thought, 'Oh, how about that, they're offering a course'. I thought they did arts and crafts, drop-in centre, bingo, that's what I thought a Neighbourhood Centre was. So I jumped on TAFE website again and checked the course codes and they were exactly the same, the Neighbourhood Centre has accreditation, why not do it.

Generally the whole learning experience has been one of the most positive things that I've done for a long time. I love coming here mainly because it takes me fourteen minutes to walk here, it's all so local and I look at that as being the whole nature of the thing. I enjoy every minute I'm here. Sometimes I don't enjoy some of the course content, but the experience itself, as an overall experience, I love it I couldn't think of a better way of doing it.

I was your typical yobbo bloke who has a few beers and drives around in a Commodore, you don't really think about what else is going on. I think I've learnt a lot more about what's happening in the world, especially in Geelong, as far as the undercurrent of cities where there's a lot of family violence and there's a lot of homelessness and there's a lot of drug use and stuff.

If the question is 'Did it help you get employment?' well 'Yes'. I wouldn't have got the job if I didn't have the Cert IV in Youth Work because





that was the pre-requisite for this job. I did Youth because it was there right then and I got started in study. If I end up not in Youth Work I don't believe I've wasted the Cert IV because there's a lot of stuff in there that can be transferred.

A good part of being in the smaller community-based learning environment is that you can actually make friends, it's much easier to have contact with somebody. If I was doing it at TAFE I would be driving and there's every chance, there wouldn't be anybody else even in the same town that was at the course. I've said many times, at my age and at my learning skill level, if I had been in a class with twenty people I wouldn't have been able to handle it. It's a much more relaxed learning experience for me. I love it because we can bounce off each other. You can have that sort of interaction without having to feel like you're embarrassed or you're being put on the spot.

In ten years' time I hope to be retired, but in five years' time I'd hope to be doing something using what I've learnt to help people who are not as well off as I am and with some issues that they need help with. My ideal job I guess is to work with people with drug issues in their early twenties in the hands on field. I'm a hands on person, I've been a mechanic, I've been a builder, I've done all that sort of stuff. I'm not a mind person. I'd rather be out doing something. So if I could find employment and helping people with some drug and alcohol issues and some mental health issues with their hands doing some activity that would be my ideal job. I can't see a reason why I couldn't do that because all the stuff that I've learnt here is all working towards that.

**I think I've learnt a lot more about what's happening in the world**

# Marta

Marta is 37 years of age, a single mother with two children at home. Since leaving school halfway through year 10 she has not been in any regular employment. She has lived in the area all her life. Her first connection with the Neighbourhood House was through her Job Services Provider. After enrolling with a private provider of vocational training she returned to the Neighbourhood House when it became apparent that the course she was enrolled in was not suitable for her and that if she completed it would prejudice her opportunities for government funded training in the future. The Neighbourhood House helped her to withdraw from the course before its anticipated end date so that she would incur no penalty for future study at AQF level II or III. After withdrawing from this course she enrolled in a preparatory program at the Neighbourhood House prior to commencing a Certificate II in Warehousing. She successfully completed this course and was very proud of gaining a Forklift Driver's Licence. She is about to commence a 12 month casual position in a large local warehouse.

I could have just burned all my bridges at once there, but luckily with the Neighbourhood Centre they were really helpful, they cancelled my course. I have no other credentials I've been a mother for fourteen and a half years so how am I going to be a manager of a team I don't even know warehousing. I had to make the decision. I had two days left of the course, was I going to continue or was I going to stop? Then I got into the [preparatory program] here. That was the best thing I'd ever begun doing, walking in that front door the first day was the start of my new life, I can honestly say.

I'd been in a relationship that had been very controlling and I'd sort of got half a grip on my life but couldn't get a strong hold on what I was going to do or be and I thought being thirty-seven I've got nothing. Honestly, I was at a point where I thought there was no hope for me, there was no life, no job for me, who was going to employ me when they can employ a fifteen year old?. Now since coming here I know that's not the case. I know being a mother and being a wife is a real valuable job but it still doesn't make me feel better. I need to get out to work. But I got into a trap of just driving kids to school, go home, driving kids to school, go home and 'No' I couldn't do that anymore and this place got me out of that trap so it was good.

It makes me feel like I'm socialising, too. My life has just got better and better and I've grown as a person. My confidence and everything has grown and my kids can see me flourishing which in turn means my children are happier, I'm happier, my partner's happier. It was very important to me to show my daughter that no one runs your life, you run it. My son even sees it he says, 'Mum I'm happy with the woman you are now'. So everything got better. It was just a domino effect.





# I thought that being 37 I couldn't learn anymore

It's given me the confidence to speak to people in a public environment. It's actually taught me that I'm a leader. I just thought I was mum and mums are leaders. I didn't realise that in my everyday life that I could use that in the workforce and it could be an advantage. I think that was very surprising to me because I just didn't think motherhood would come into it. I thought to have a job you've got to have credentials and I don't I only have cooking and cleaning. So that's what I learnt. I learnt that if I set my mind to things I can achieve what I want to achieve.

I've got to admit they make you feel comfortable here, they don't make you feel uneasy. You end up being a tight-knit family in your class because they are small classes and there's a wide, diverse range of ages and races and cultures. I gained really good friendships through that. We've learnt a lot of things about other cultures. We all began to care for each other which was awesome because a lot of the people didn't have people. A lot of the young blokes didn't have family or anything and they actually felt loved, which they hadn't felt for a long time.

I thought that being 37, I couldn't learn anymore. You learn what you do out of life, what can I learn from a little kid, from a 16 year old? But then listening to some of the 16, 17, 20 year olds in class, they've taught me a few lessons. I've got to be honest I was quite

surprised that I could learn something off someone younger and that they could actually inspire me.

I was like a sponge. I just absorb information and bring it back later. That's something that surprised me too that I could learn something today and in three weeks' time [tutor] would go 'Do you remember when?' and I would go, 'Oh yeah this, this and this', and 'See Marta you can learn' and I'm like, 'Oh okay, yeah I do have a memory, not just for phone numbers.' So it was good, I surprised myself in a lot of ways I've got to admit.

I never thought that I'd be able to drive a forklift. I looked at the monstrous thing and I was so afraid. I reckon that was my happiest day of the whole course. That was the first time I've actually gone for a test, like a test, and passed. My kids were all giving me well wishes that morning so I was really nervous thinking if I fail I have to go home and tell the kids I've failed. I was so happy I ran out and high-fived one of my classmates.

What I'm real keen on doing next is getting my Certificate III and furthering my Warehousing. I really like the warehousing operations because I like working under the pump. I like moving all the time. I won't be sitting waiting for the next customer. At least if you keep moving the day passes fast, so I'm really looking to stay in the warehousing industry.

# Joy

I've always had big dreams.  
Always wanted to try and achieve them.  
Always had a dream of opening up an animal shelter.  
Yeh, I've always had big dreams.

*To a rap rhythm*

My mother passed away  
at thirteen I moved out of home lived on my own  
at sixteen in foster care  
Dropped out of school in year 10,  
Moved a round, no stable home, nowhere to go.  
At nineteen, had my first child  
I was 22 when my 2nd daughter was born.

I found the neighbourhood house  
Enrolled in a course  
Computers for my homework,  
Help out my classmates  
I'm learning  
'Bout the business  
Got a website  
Really proud of that  
I have the passion, I really want to do it,  
Ask anyone in class, they'll say I'm a nerd  
Eager to learn  
I'm 24 now, and I'm learning 'bout the business.

## Big dreams



# Ann



Ann is nearly 50 years of age and cares for her adult daughter who lives with her. She has lived in various places around the Geelong area her whole life. Her schooling experiences were difficult because she had difficulty keeping pace in class and she was bullied, so she left after completing Year 9. After finishing her schooling, she entered a six-month work experience program with the Forest Commission and after that she took on cleaning work. She realised her need to learn about computers when studying a Certificate III in Horticulture and could not turn on a computer, so she came to the Neighbourhood House to learn about computers. Ann has since joined the community gardening group and the textile class and continues learning computers. In the future she would like to find employment using her gardening and computer skills.

**In here  
it's easier  
because  
they listen**

When you were at school it was hard to take stuff in and then when you try to and write it up, they [the teachers] are already finished, but I'm still going. So I'm a bit slow with that, I am trying to keep up with the topic, and I always muck up, but then I sort of get back to what I'm doing.

I didn't know that you were supposed to have computer skills. I walked in there and there's all these computers and I said, 'I have no idea how to use these' and [tutor] said 'It's alright' because there was me and this other person, 'You can go on with one of the other people'. Well they didn't like that. Sometimes I had to jump on with somebody else because I don't know how to use a computer, and they'd do all the work and I was just sitting there watching what they did. That's why I preferred the prac work because I'm out there doing all of that.

In here it's easier because they listen and there's only a small number of people and we do it all at the same time, so if you've got more questions they don't just walk over you and go to the next person like they did in the Horticulture. I think you're learning more in a smaller group and that's what I like about coming here. The classes are very good, and I like the people. I think it's better than primary school and high school because I had trouble with school as well. I think because the classes are nice and small, the people are really good.

Tuesdays I do the gardening and then after that I use their computer room. I go over what I'm learning in the class because I don't have a computer at the moment. Then on Fridays I do textiles which is good, she [the teacher] makes it fun, she has her mother in the class and its fun.

I'm looking for work, whatever I can get, hopefully computer work or gardening stuff. I'll keep doing study. I don't mind coming down here because it's nice and classes are good.

# Kate

Kate is 45 years of age, a single mother and a grandmother who has lived in the Greater Geelong area for most of her life. Kate loved primary school but she didn't like high school. Her difficulty understanding the routines at secondary school left her feeling that it was not for her. She left school when she was fifteen during Year 11 because she had reached the point where she was not enjoying being there. Her early learning experiences left her with little confidence as a learner. Her first attempt to attend a course at the Neighbourhood House was when she booked into a sewing class, but she didn't have the confidence to be in a room full of people, so did not continue. She found it easier when a friend brought her to the weekly parents' social group, which she attended for about a year and a half. During the time she was attending the parents' group, Kate enjoyed attending a family day run by volunteers. After telling a volunteer how much she liked it she was encouraged to become a volunteer herself and signed up two days later. The supportive learning environment at the Neighbourhood House was very different to her experiences at school. Encouraged by staff and volunteers, Kate has since completed several computer courses, various Hospitality units, and a Certificate III in Business. She has been employed at the Neighbourhood House for nearly ten years, first as the manager of the café and then in administration.

I didn't like school. I loved primary school, but didn't like high school and when I left I felt, 'This is not for me'. It got to a point where I wasn't going to school so I asked if I could leave but there were jobs back then, I could leave and get a job. I got a job at the milk bar and at the chicken shop, babysitting and things like that so there were jobs around, not like today.

I was quite a shy person and there was a friend of mine who'd brought me along to her parents' 'time-out' group. It was just a little social gathering every Tuesday morning, so we could just hang around, eat, drink coffee and have a chat, that's how I came to the Neighbourhood Centre.

We had a little family gathering day and everybody that organised it was obviously a volunteer. It was just a really good day and I said to one of the ladies, 'You know this is a really good place to be' and she said, 'Well why don't you volunteer here?'. This was on the Saturday and on the Monday I spoke to the coordinator and she said that she'd love to have me on board, that's how I started volunteering and that's when I started the computer course.

I did an Introduction to Computer Class and then went on and did an Intermediate Computer Class here as well. 'Just to bring my skills up', I was thinking at the time. Everybody was getting computers and I wanted to be able to do what everybody else was doing. With the computer courses, I was like a sponge and everything I learnt was just being absorbed it was like, 'Wow I know that' or I'd seen just a little symbol and I'd go, 'I know what that symbol is on a computer screen'. I felt like this sponge just sucking in all this information and retaining it.

I needed to get a bit of confidence to begin with and they started to build my confidence



because I was learning things. I didn't think I could do all those things, just learning was a big thing and retaining information was one of the biggest things. I didn't think I could do that, but once you learn something then you learn something else it's like, 'Wow, I know how to do this', it encourages you to learn more things. Every day you learn something. There's always something you find new every day it doesn't matter if it's learning the species of a plant, there's always something new to learn.

I guess a lot of my not being in the community was from my relationship at home. I wasn't physically abused, I was mentally abused. Coming here it was like, 'Wow I'm not silly'. Seeing things from a different way it was like 'I'll be able to do this by myself'. So I took the leap, I left my husband I moved out with my kids and since then we haven't looked back. It's been a good thing to know that I can actually do something by myself.

They supported me all the way and still support me now, which is good. Even just saying, 'Wow you're doing a great job', we just all encourage each other, it's great. Some of them say, 'I remember when you first walked through the door' because we've all been here a long time. They do remember when you first walked in the door very timid and didn't want to say much, so it's good that they go, 'I remember the way you used to be and wow you've really come out of your shell'.

I'd started here volunteering then the opportunity for the café came available and I guess the coordinator knew that I liked cooking so she asked if I was interested in helping start up the cafe. So that started my employment in the hospitality here at the Neighbourhood Centre. I was doing Certificate III in Business Administration in that time and now I'm employed up here in the office.

**There's always something  
new to learn**

# Chloe

Chloe is 42 years of age and has lived in the area her whole life. She finished school before completing Year 9 and went straight into retail work. Other work has included a range of factory jobs in the food and footwear industries. Following completion of a Certificate II in Transport and Warehousing she worked for a time in this area but left due to experiencing anxiety. She has been out of the paid workforce for several years caring for her daughter who contracted a severe illness which required an organ transplant. Both Chloe and her daughter experience bouts of depression. When she was at school she was not really interested in learning. She felt she was not good enough and was scared to ask questions. Now she is determined to achieve her goals. Her Job Services Provider suggested that she enrol in a preparatory course at the Neighbourhood House which she loves. When she completes this she hopes to enrol in an Aged Care course.

I've always worked all my life. I left school at 15 to work at [a supermarket] and after two years there I went on to the foot industry until they closed down after seven years. Then I went to another company, I can't really remember the other places. My last job which was full-time was at [a food processing plant].

My daughter got sick with a one in a million disease five years ago and she was 15 at the time. I went through a hell of a lot dealing with it all by myself. I didn't know what the big words from the doctors meant, I knew nothing. So ever since then I've found it hard, I've copped depression, I didn't leave the house. I was with [Job Service Provider] then and they obviously knew I had big issues going on so

they sent me here nearly three years ago.

I've got a scholarship that's funding this course which I was lucky to get. I'm glad I got into it, it's been really helpful and gets me out of the house too. There is not one bad thing I can say about this place. I love it, the support that they give is fantastic, any problem you have you just ring them and they'll help you, they'll do anything and I recommend this to anyone.

I'm a very nervous person, I'm really nervous to learn but I'm doing it. At school I felt I wasn't good enough, I felt I didn't know and I didn't want to speak out because I felt stupid. It's given me a bit more confidence. It means I'm achieving something instead of staying still. Speaking up a bit more, learning how to communicate and making friends. Their being helpful to me made me feel like I've got to learn something each time I come and not to be so hard on myself, just forgive and let go.

The difference at school was because being young and silly I didn't want to learn. Now I'm older I do want to learn, which I should have done back then but I'm doing it now because it's never too late. I'm trying to achieve goals, a direction in life because I want to go somewhere in life and be happy.

After this course I'm going to do another course here, it's to be a personal carer to work at the Hospital, that's what I want. I'm a bit nervous about that one but I'll give it a go. I'd like to work with the elderly and push them around to their wards and give them their food and stuff like that. I just find that job would suit me fine because I'm not really in anyone's face.

## There is not one bad thing I can say about this place



I never thought of wanting to become a chef,  
I'd had twenty years of admin, thought it was time for a change.  
Took my long service leave and had a real good think about what I wanted to do.  
I started here –  
they were offering a café skills course,  
while I was doing the course  
they were offering an award,  
I was lucky enough to win it.  
I struggled, so many years of not doing any study,  
It was a real personal challenge, a shock actually -  
to sit in a room,  
textbook in front of you,  
to read to understand,  
to relate to the tutor,  
to engage in the conversation –  
I loved it in the end, but those first couple of months  
I never thought of wanting to become a Chef,  
I never thought of wanting to take it any further than that,  
I'd never managed staff before.  
An opportunity presented  
So I applied for it and I got it  
I didn't even know [it] was possible, until it was offered to me.  
Adult learning, you have to tackle it a bit differently  
Everybody's got a lot more life experiences, a lot more opinions  
Children who are sick,  
It's very supportive and understanding of that.  
Find a way that people who've struggled  
In the past, to work with others  
Know they're in a safe place,  
A little bit more time and flexibility to get through what they need to get through.  
To see somebody go and get a job who was never able to get a job before,  
It's just the best feeling.

# Bianca

Bianca is a 24 year old single mother of two young children, and has lived in the Geelong area for most of her life. She completed a school-based apprenticeship in Certificate III in Children's Services and left school to look for childcare work. In the meantime, she worked in fast food and other retail outlets. As childcare work did not eventuate she began working in a jeweller's shop, which was creatively very satisfying for her. She followed this with work as a personal carer which she found satisfying because she is a caring person. Her employment ceased during her first pregnancy. Since then she has been concerned to arrange work and study around her children, particularly as one of her children has significant health issues. A support service working with her suggested that she enrol in a work preparation course at the Neighbourhood House. After this course she enrolled in a furniture making course at the local TAFE, which has been interrupted due to the ill health of one of her children. In the future she hopes to have her own business, and a house full of furniture that she has made herself: a career that will benefit her family and friends, helping them with building things they want for their children. Furniture building, upcycling and recycling, anything to do with wood.

I did a Childcare Apprenticeship when I was in high school. I completed that as a School Based Apprenticeship in Certificate III. I left school to find a job in that while I was working in \$2 shops and fast food places.

I took twelve months off and then I went back. I sort of tried to ease back into work. I was breastfeeding and looking after my son and working as well and shortly after that I fell pregnant with my daughter, so it's been a long road. After that I just wanted to do something that I could do at home with my two little ones and something that will feed my creative soul and be productive as well.

I honestly didn't know what the program [at the Neighbourhood House] was about. I thought it was basically just a course that would allow me to see if I'm ready for study and if my two children were ready for me to study, from having me there full time to being away and being in childcare for two days a week. That was going to be the test for me. It turned out to be quite an intense course. It really encouraged deeper thinking and a lot of self-awareness, it was an awakening for me. I'm definitely more compassionate as well, I've always been a compassionate person, but not to the level that I am now. I see things from not just my perspective, but now I put myself in other people's shoes.

When I first started the course I was thinking it's been nearly seven years since I've been at school, like in a classroom environment. I really did take to it. I liked having somewhere to go in the mornings and having my books and pens. It was quite hard as well. You do a lot of deep thinking on the day and you take in all this information and then you go home and be a



mum as well. All of that, and squeeze in two days of study, and then do all this extra thinking felt very overwhelming for me at the time. I spent the other days struggling a little bit, but I loved coming to school. It just made me know that I can do what I want to achieve and that I enjoy that. I've been open to learning.

This [the Neighbourhood House] makes you feel like everybody is welcome and everybody is just as important as the next person. You're just so welcome and they'll do anything they can to try and help you. We got lunch served here and it was just amazing, this environment, everyone here is lovely and everyone here knows your name, the friends that I've made and everyone else that works here, they're just amazing.

It's been especially hard this year but once I get through it I know that it will be pretty good. It will change my life. It has but it's just been hard. I haven't really found my drive back, the motivation that I did have. I had a very strong motivation and inspiration and everything to do it all, but family life has been quite hard. I'm working through the negative feelings. It's been hard. I'm my own harshest critic.

I really hope to be owning my own business, I really want to have some space to do that, be in the country and have an awesome workshop set up and something like getting my little kids in on their own projects. I want to benefit myself and I want to benefit my family, my kids and my friends. I'd like to have a houseful of my own furniture, all unique, just my own work that I can be proud of and everyone else can be proud of and being able to help people with their own.

**It was an  
awakening  
for me**

# Rowena

Rowena is 55 years old and moved to the western Victorian town almost 12 months ago after being retrenched from her work in the IT industry. When she was working she joined in social activities at her local Neighbourhood House, and following retrenchment she volunteered at the Neighbourhood House mostly for social connection. Although she has a Science degree, in order to prepare for future employment in her new location she enrolled in financial courses such as MYOB to give her other employment options. She is looking for full-time office work, and is currently employed casually in retail, and intends to pursue further studies either online or elsewhere in the town as the Neighbourhood House does not offer accredited training. She came to the Neighbourhood House because she knew there would be volunteering opportunities and the chance to meet people. She volunteers in administration, supports children's holiday activities, contributes to knitting projects, and puts her IT/computer skills to use helping a young woman learn how to use a new camera. Being engaged at the Neighbourhood House is keeping her motivated and informed about local opportunities while she looks for employment.

I've got a Degree in Maths and Computers. I was working 60 hour weeks and then I got retrenched recently and I went travelling. Now I've done the tree change and come to the country. When I got retrenched in between the travelling I did a lot of volunteering. I did that through the Community House down in Melbourne and did courses as well as the education and the community things.

We popped in here to see what volunteer type work was available because as soon as we realised we were coming to this area we wanted to become involved in the community. We came in and talked to the people here about volunteering through the House but we found the House wasn't doing as much of that as the previous ones were. We were sent to other places as well so we got involved with other groups too. I'm working on a project through this House which is giving me more administrative type skills that I can put onto my resume.

If I'm not working I try and come here once or twice a week with the social side of it. At the moment when I come in here I'm doing the project so you'll see me on the computer or making bags, but I generally come for the social side. I've been helping out with the holiday program with the children. I always said I couldn't knit but I'm now knitting hats and doing that sort of thing.

Because I'm brand new in the area it was a good way of meeting people and getting into the community. It's made looking for work easier too. It's getting harder looking for jobs. I really need something to do, so I come down here and find a project to work on and I make something. It also gives me a bit more self-worth. When I first came here I could have felt





fairly lost. I was offered casual work but they over- employed, they didn't have a lot of work and I went three weeks with nothing. If I was sitting at home for three weeks, I'd go balmy. If I'd been sitting at home all that time just trying to find a job I would have definitely suffered depression or gone stir crazy. So for me yes it's been a very important part with the move.

I'm a quick learner but I may not always think about what else there is out there, I usually have to have a goal. I think I learn every day. My previous profession we were learning all the time, coming here has ground to a stop I suppose. I'd say I was much happier when I was learning something, I'm a very quick learner and there's not much learning going on at the moment.

I log in to the Library and I've been doing some online training but that becomes very lonely. You go to a school, a TAFE, a university and it's all someone out the front lecturing at you. Where Community House is really community you see the ladies who do the computer, how to do things online, how to back up your photos and they're talking there, they're building a support network for doing it which you just don't get in a lot of the other places and that's needed in small communities.

I'm surprised that the Neighbourhood Houses here don't seem to get as much support as they do in Melbourne. I would like to see more courses being offered through the Neighbourhood Houses. They fill a niche which a lot of other schools and companies would say were not profitable, not worth running, then that ability and that knowledge just goes out the window, and it's places like the Neighbourhood Houses that keep that sort of thing going.

**We wanted  
to become  
involved  
in the  
community**





# **Later Life Learners:**

# **Stories and Poems**

# Elizabeth

Elizabeth is 65 years of age and has lived in rural western Victorian for over 30 years. After completing Year 11 at secondary school she hoped to become a teacher. Instead, she married and became a dairy farmer. Twenty years ago a friend encouraged her to come to the Neighbourhood House to attend a craft group. She recently moved from the farm and into a nearby town, but continues to attend the craft group because she enjoys the companionship and friendship of the other women. For some years she was a member of the management committee and valued the opportunities this gave her to attend conferences and understand how the organisation functioned. Elizabeth is keen to stay up-to-date with technology. She enjoys learning computers and becoming more proficient with her iPad.

I went to Year 11 at school and then I left. I was going to be a teacher, but I met my now husband. My parents and I had a discussion and it was decided that I wouldn't go to Teacher's College. I stayed home. I got a job in a fruit shop. I stayed there until I got married. My husband's a dairy farmer, so I learned how to milk cows and do dairy work and had three children.

My friend kept saying to me, 'Come up to the centre and join the craft group'. At that time, I was working. I worked at the Kindergarten as an Assistant. I used to work on Tuesday so I couldn't come. Then I got very sick and I couldn't work anymore. She said, 'Well, now you can come', so that's when I started coming.

The same woman said to me, 'There's a vacancy on the committee would you like to go on it?' I'm game for anything, so I said, 'Yeah, I'll come'. I thoroughly enjoyed it. When you walk in here it's a house and you think, 'lovely group of ladies, all they do is craft', and then once you're on the committee you learn about the workings, how it works. I just did my bit. I volunteered when I could, I went to conferences, I thoroughly enjoyed those because I got to meet other people. I like meeting other people. It's a much bigger business than I thought, much more involved, a lot of rules and regulations that we as users don't know anything about.

Companionship, absolutely, you can hear those ladies out there. To me, that is what it's all about. It's bringing women together. We're not all the same we have different desires, we have different problems, and we talk about those problems. If you're ill. if I didn't come people would ring me up and ask, 'Are you alright?' The companionship is very important to me.

I'm a visual learner I always have been. I don't think I'm dumb. If somebody shows me something I grasp it a lot better than if I just try and read it. I discovered that when I took up





patch-working. I could look at a pattern and I'd think, 'I don't understand that', but if the lady showed me, I'd think, 'Oh, that's quite easy. I can do that', and it's the same with the computer, if you show me on the computer what I have to do, I'm fine.

You never ever stop learning, never. I'm 65 and yet you learn something new every day. It might be from your grandchildren or even your children, or your husband, or perfect strangers, but you do learn something every day if you're willing. If you can see other people's point of view, I think one of the big lessons in life is to see everybody's point of view, you don't have to agree with it but you have to at least be able to see it.

I love using the computer, but I wanted to become more proficient. I knew how to turn it on, I knew how to get emails, but I wanted to know how to utilise it more and that's what we learned. I wanted to be able to put photos on to fabric so I came up here and they taught me how to do that. Also, just to formulate letters;

how they're supposed to go, which was basic, but I wanted to know how to do it on the computer and what settings to get. I make cards, so I wanted to know how to make inserts for cards. I wasn't going to go and get a job it was more personal satisfaction for me. I play games on it, I've got my emails and Facebook, but I wanted to know other things you could do with it. I wanted to know how to use the camera better, how to get on to eBay, the settings, if you wanted to change the settings, how to get Apps. That was what I wanted to do, get all these Apps the kids talk about.

I said to my husband, when we left the farm, 'The only thing I'd like to do is learn the saxophone' and he said, 'Well go and learn it', but I have never learned it. I suppose it's a dream and we all have dreams, but if I was really inclined to do it I would go and learn how to play the saxophone. If another opportunity comes up for me to learn something, I will probably take that opportunity.

**The companionship is very important to me**

# Caroline

Caroline is 76 years of age, and has worked as a horse-breaker for more than 40 years. She was born in England and in her late teens came to Australia where she completed Year 11. Horses have been her obsession since she was a child when she would sneak into the neighbour's paddocks to sit on their horses. "Two old guys" taught her how to break wild horses. Her horse-breaking skills kept her in demand for many years. Before horse-breaking she was a librarian, then later worked as a ceramicist, and established a business producing wool for spinners. When she moved to this town she enrolled in a computer class at the Neighbourhood House and continues to keep her skills current keeping in touch with family and friends with social media. Many close friendships have been made at the House. Caroline regularly attends the writing group and has spent several years on the committee of management because she believes the Neighbourhood House is important for the town.

I have had a horse obsession since I was a kid. I've loved it, it keeps you fit, and it keeps you outside. I started breaking horses in Queensland. We were farming with my dad on a big property and there were wild horses on the place. We'd bought three horses from the local sale, one was brilliant the other one was really naughty. He used to do 24 bucks every morning before I fell off and these old guys who were fencing came over and said, 'Look we'll just sort this out, come to the yards'.

**I rely on this  
human contact  
that I find here**

I was always the gentle horse breaker. I got so much work. I would go to the property, people would give me the work and feed me, and they'd learn to catch my horses. I might stay there six weeks and I might go back in six months. That was 46 odd years ago. Oh, that was an amazing chunk of my life.

This Community Centre has been great for me to meet people, to keep my brain working. I love it [the Centre] and respect it very much. The friends and their generosity, it's just great to know them. They've lived an amazing life, we never run out of things to say to each other. It's been brilliant, a lifesaver. They've helped me in my survival and learning. Where else do I learn? I've learned what I wanted to learn in my working days. This is just an amazing backup of people that I'm totally comfortable with, a real good support system in lots of ways.

I've never stopped learning on the computer. I've been a writer, so I've done a lot of historic records of what my life's been. I didn't know what a computer was 26 years ago. A lot of people of my age are gradually finding out about it. It gives us all a sense of freedom that we wouldn't have otherwise. I find the computer is a friend. I do Facebook, my family and my friends are on Facebook, they're there if I need them. It's taken over my education and my communication, without it I'd be still reading books 8 hours a day. I'm 76 I know enough about computers to play and amuse myself. I'm coming back next year for another course with the new person we've got teaching, who's brilliant. He only does computer courses and he's helped me with a lot with things because, at this age, you forget bits unless you're doing them constantly and currently.

I'm vitally interested in the community. I do [community support program] and I'm on the Management Committee here with my whole heart because I find this is so supportive of this little town, it's just as they should be, I guess, but it's seen and it's excellent.

# Francis



started as a plumbing apprentice when I was fourteen,  
my mother was divorced, I had to go to work.  
married forty-nine years, moved around a lot,  
lived here, nine years, most we've lived in one area for a long time.  
I'm not a person to sit at home and watch TV,  
I like to be active  
like to be involved in something.

*They were advertising to start a Men's Shed through the Neighbourhood House. I came to the meeting, helped set up a Men's Shed, run a Men's Shed, get it organised. I became a committee member of the Community Centre and I'm now Chairperson.*

*We looked around for premises, back in those days there wasn't the finance around. We had to set ourselves up, get equipment, some of the people in the town were quite generous. We didn't get much outside help until we started to do some extensions then the government grants started.*

I feel I can contribute to the organisation  
get involved in different things,  
feeling useful  
knowing that you are being appreciated back,  
being with people I like,  
peace of mind.  
I feel I've fulfilled a fair part of what I wanted to achieve.

*We started taking on projects, that's what we've been doing, we've been getting enough project work from people around the area to keep us busy – making finials to put on sheds, anything that comes we think we could repair.*

*If I can stay at the Men's Shed, once I get off the committee I'll go back there and get more involved. I'd like to pass on what knowledge I've got.*

life is a learning program, you're always learning  
you've got to keep your mind active,  
every day is a learning curve, you're learning something, or trying to  
a person who says he knows everything, doesn't know a thing.

*I feel very strongly about the Neighbourhood Houses and what they do. They're very important. This has a vital position in the town.*

## I like to be involved in something

# Ruby

Ruby is 70 years of age and has retired to a small town in western Victoria. She completed secondary school and then undertook an Associate Diploma in an area of personal interest. Most of her work was in administration and then in project management for an international volunteer program. Moving to a new community, she needed to establish a social network and form permanent connections with the community. She sought activities suitable for older adults and found these at the Neighbourhood House. Ruby is very interested in programs and activities related to food and gardening. She recently joined the committee of management, motivated by her belief that Neighbourhood Houses are important to local communities.

I wanted learning. I'd read about permaculture and I had a vague idea of it. Once I got here and realised the tutor's expertise that was the clincher for me, and it was going to be hands-on, it was going to be doing and it would grow into the garden. We meet weekly and we come over at any other time for watering or picking when things get going. I went back to work for three months this year just because they were short staffed, but apart from that I've been reliable. Someone called me an original, that was really nice to achieve that bit of community and belonging.

We've got another offshoot that's grown out of that garden. Some of the original people who were mucking around with the garden, who meet fortnightly, we rotate between each other's gardens and it's a working bee type of gardening. They've become really nice friends. We'll often say the reason for coming is to spend time together because we've all got gardens at home, we don't need a plot to do our own gardening. It really is about connecting people.

I've learned about bugs and problems on plants, especially on fruit trees, some of that I've learned just by sharing with other people, but a lot of it's been from the workshops – 'Is that a fungus on that leaf, is it bacteria, is it a deficiency in the soil? How do I fix that?' That's stuff that I feel comfortable and confident knowing now.

I'm on the committee. Tonight is our very first meeting. I'm a novice at it, but I strongly think that Neighbourhood Houses are so important in the community, in the city as well as in the bush. I don't know how much I have to contribute but I'm really looking forward to it. It's important, to 'get out of the house' because I'm living by myself without another person to talk to so it's important to me to have that outlet.

I think they're a comfortable place for people to build their community and an offshoot of that [they] would then be comfortable and confident enough to do some learning there as well. I think Houses can have a place that's not necessarily formal, but still be learning and maybe then people will grow into other career paths. I think it's given me more than I thought, I didn't think I would get the friendship group out of it. I thought it would just be learning and come backwards and forwards for any workshops that were happening.

There's lots of things I'd like to learn that I will certainly ask the House – 'Can we have a go at this?' It's healthy living. It's stuff to make my life comfortable as I get old. I've asked, 'Can we have something on bee keeping please?' I want a room for spinning. I feel okay about not feeling pressured to study so I can get a job.

## It's given me more than I thought

# Marie

## I love writing

Just meeting people, the company,

I live by myself –

I was feeling really isolated out there. I think if I hadn't had this to come into

I don't know what I would have done. I probably would have gone nuts.

Lifesaving –

That's probably all I could say.

Been here just over ten years

formed some really good friendships since I've been here,

I really love it.

Coming here it's like coming home to family.

Born in the States -

When I was 7 came out to New Zealand

Completed high school, didn't go to university,

I've worked -

Mostly bar and hospitality and ladies fashion which I loved.

I'm

*Always* looking for something

New, to learn

The only thing I really don't like are computers

I *hate* using the darn things.

I'm always writing,

Supernatural things, ghosts.

Ever since I was a kid I used to win competitions. I won first prize. I was eight I think.

So I *love* writing

I've written what I hope is my book

Quite a long book, took me four years to write.

I've always had an active imagination

love stretching my brain, using it that way to write.

I *love* to write.

# Rosemary

Rosemary is 67 years of age and moved to the western Victorian town 20 years. She arrived in Australia as a newly qualified primary school teacher and spent many years teaching in country and metropolitan schools. A keen traveller, she took two years away from teaching to travel in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. After retiring she helped on farms and did other odd jobs, eventually working in a disability centre in the town. She keeps busy and active with her volunteer work; fundraising, driving and community visiting for several local organisations. She also enjoys riding her bike, swimming and gardening. As a young girl her family encouraged her to pursue education and academic studies along with outdoor activities – climbing trees and helping in the garden. Rosemary is an active volunteer with the Neighbourhood House. She gardens, participates in fundraising activities including catering for local events, serves on the committee of management and supports the many social activities organised in conjunction with other local services. Rosemary participates in the craft group where she has learned how to sew and make quilts. Her teaching background is utilised by teaching computers and mosaics, running school holiday activities, and mentoring students on placement.

I come from a family with medical backgrounds, so education was important, but we weren't shoved into it. Books were around, we were expected to learn, but also [encouraged] get out in the garden, mow the lawn or climb a tree, that kind of thing.

Small groups of one to five voluntarily take computer classes. That means we don't have to charge \$70 a session to have a fully qualified tutor. People can come to a class for five dollars. Where else can you get two hours of personalised service? People can join in without any pressure. Quite often there's someone who doesn't know computers. They'll ask, 'Can you go and look up something for me

## It's encouraged me to stay here rather than move elsewhere

please?' I'll say, 'I will, but you come along with me.' That way they might pick up a little bit. I say, 'If you can use the mobile phone you can use an iPad or a computer.' Literacy and numeracy and mosaics; I taught myself. I've run classes here and I'm quite happy to do that. I've just been involved in anything that's going. Fund raising, I've made thousands and thousands and thousands of raffle tickets.

I'm involved in children's activities because of my teaching background – holiday programs or the Local Farmers' Market each month. I like to keep busy. Genealogy is something else I've done. I say, 'I'm not doing it for you I'm showing you how to do it, how to get started, ready to get started yourself.'

I've done a few things up in the workshop. I've learned how to replace a lock. I learned how to do the sanding. I would do more of that if I had time. I learned how to sew, how to set a machine, and now I've made many quilts. I don't think I would have ever touched sewing because I wasn't interested in that. My interests are more academic and gardening. It's encouraged me to stay here rather than move elsewhere. Socially, there's always someone who'll say, 'I'm going to the cinema', 'Oh I'll come along too', so someone else will come along as well. That's always followed before or after by a meal.



# Jack



*When you get to three score and ten let me tell you every day is a good day.  
I've been in this area since 1986. I just love it, because of my memories here in my youth.*

We had nothing, to start with

We basically built, and lined, and fitted out the sheds

We were hit, with donations

We had to keep turning stuff away.

We went from, roughly, five people to fifty in a very short period of time.

*I've always been relatively outgoing. I didn't rely on the shed. I didn't realise just how strong the ties were here - the support that came through with it.*

*I lost my wife 18 months ago. There was quite some representation at my wife's funeral. Believe it or not.*

The camaraderie

I get lots of laughs out of it

The camaraderie is the highest priority as far as I'm concerned.

We misbehave, no two ways about it.

*We look after each other, we help each other. Share health and personal problems. This is one of the most amazing things. I hadn't experienced that in my earlier years.*

My skills have certainly expanded.

I feel quite confident

Wood turning.

I was always frightened

Of the very dangerous tools.

*I'm open to just about anything, anything that's a new experience is terrific.  
I think the day we all stop learning is the day we have no place left for us.*

## No two ways about it

# Monet

Monet is 44 years of age and has returned from Western Australia to the Greater Geelong area to be closer to family. She completed Year 12 and then began a creative arts course, which she discontinued when she became a carer for her mother. Four and a half years ago Monet was diagnosed with a chronic degenerative illness. At the time, she was working in Perth in her “dream job” as a program director with a lifestyle organisation. Following the diagnosis, she left work, which left her feeling severely depressed. Her doctor advised her to take up a hobby, so she went to art classes. Moving back to Victoria, she found herself isolated at home because her then partner was only at home for a few days a month, a situation she found very difficult. Although she was able to continue painting at home she joined an art class at the Neighbourhood House because she wanted the interaction with other class members and the teacher.

In March 2011, I was diagnosed and had to stop work in April. I did nothing for a while, I hit rock bottom. My world kind of crashed around me. I was going to have a lot of time on my hands and I’d always wanted to learn how to paint, but was so career orientated that I never found the time and all I had then was time, so I took the opportunity to go to art class over in Western Australia. My girlfriend ran a studio there and I really liked it. I’d done eight weeks of the night class towards the end of 2011 in Western Australia.

When we moved over here, I saw this as an opportunity to meet people, so I wasn’t sitting at home, even though I could paint at home that wasn’t the problem. I had everything at home, but I didn’t have the one-on-one interaction with the teacher. It’s the whole classroom environment and the social interaction with other people. I didn’t want to become reclusive. I’m not a reclusive kind of person and it was just driving me batty at home. I’d take my daughter to school and then I wouldn’t talk to another human being until I picked her up again that afternoon. She was the only person I saw for a week because I didn’t know anyone, my family were all at work, so I came here [Neighbourhood House].

We’re just like one big happy family in this class now, we all know each other and we all celebrate things with each other. The same students in the class have been with me pretty much the whole way through. I had extremely bad anxiety prior to coming to this class and I have cognitive issues so this has really helped the way that I’ve been able to learn. I was quite worried that there was going to be all this



writing, trying to remember things and stuff like that and I wasn't going to be able to do it, but it's been great. I've learned so much, not just from [tutor] but from all the other students because we all contribute to each other.

It's given me confidence. It keeps me motivated to come along. We show our work each week. I don't know where I would be if I hadn't come to class. Someone might be trying something new and you're watching their technique, seeing the mistakes they make or they've done something absolutely brilliant, and you've seen how they've done it and you

## It puts you in a positive frame of mind

could copy a little bit or you can take it into the work that you're doing.

It's just a happy place to be therefore it puts you in a good frame of mind, a positive frame of mind that then everything just flows from there. I've got some friends here and we get together and have a bit of a paint off, drawing and stuff like that. Some of the students in this class have supported me coming to the opening night of my exhibition and I was really humbled by that. Everyone just encourages everyone and that's a good thing.

I've gone on to have solo exhibitions and I'm permanently hanging work next door. I'm probably the only one in the room who consistently enters exhibitions. I'm painting constantly at home and you've got to do something with all that stuff that you paint. I do markets as well with my work. I have a girlfriend who comes and helps me because I've lost the ability to count properly, which is frustrating so she comes and does the money side of it and I'm right to do the rest.

How my body is feeling each and every day is a bit of a lotto in itself. Every day I wake up and if I'm having a bad day I just do acrylics and the class environment here. They know when I walk in if I'm having a bad day. I live for each day now because I don't know what my body is going to be doing in five years' time. If I can live to the end of each term at the moment that's good and to still walk in every week is a huge thing for me. In two years' time I'd like to enter the Archibald, so next year I've got to work that out or maybe it might be three years' time but I'd definitely like to give that a crack.

# Teresa

Teresa is 70 years of age and has lived in the western Victorian area for 40 years. She completed Year 10, and, she worked in a variety of jobs before marrying and becoming a dairy farmer. She came to classes at the Neighbourhood House when it first started 30 years ago. She learned computers and has completed several IT courses including Facebook and Publisher and recently completed a course on how to use a Tablet. She particularly enjoyed the photography class going on excursions and experimenting with taking different types of photos. It was important to her that it was not a competitive environment. She enjoys the friendliness and social aspect in the craft group and the small class sizes, which make it easy to have discussions. Teresa appreciates the many programs and activities offered at the Neighbourhood House and thinks it is an important meeting point for people living in the district.

. My education was to Year 10. I worked in a bank, I worked in a grocery shop, I worked at Swinburne University, which was Swinburne Technology then, and I've been a dairy farmer for the last 40 years.

I live locally. They started up the House and different things were happening here. They were holding educational classes that I've been coming to. I've done Publisher, photography, I've done a Facebook course and we just did a course on Tablets.

I just want to learn and get confident with the computer. I did [a course] years ago when [computers] were very new for me and I didn't know much about them. We didn't have a computer at home for a long time. I knew the Centre had courses and I thought, 'That's the place to go to get yourself learning and get a bit of confidence in what you're doing': that was the original reason.

The atmosphere has always been very friendly in the courses. There's never been any rivalry. In the Photography Course, we all went off and did something, but no one's was better than anyone else's. There hasn't been any competition in the courses that I've done, which I felt was great. That gives you more confidence because we're all doing the same sorts of things.

I've been coming here for years to the Craft Group on a Tuesday. It's not an organised group as such, we just bring whatever we're working on today. Two of the ladies can't sew at all now, but they still come along to have a chat with us. So it really is fulfilling a need as a social group. If we didn't have it here, we may not have it at all.

I think it's a fabulous environment for learning, for doing classes because the groups are just small and interactive. There's plenty of interaction in the classes between the teacher and yourself because it's not a great big group. It's really lovely to sit around and just discuss different things about what you're doing. When you come to the classes they are friendly happy groups. It's a great place to come and learn.

I think learning is extremely important. I don't ever stop learning, but I don't really want to formally learn. If I'm doing a course I'm doing it because I want to learn. I thought it was extremely important for my children. They've all been well educated. I think when we've got something like this we need to support it. It's no good having it and we all totally ignore it and then we say, 'Oh, they've closed the Neighbourhood House.' The coordinator is terrific. She tries to find out what people want, she tries to organise things that people want. She's a brilliant person to have as our coordinator.

**When we've got something like this,  
we need to support it**

# Denise



Denise is 58 years of age and she moved to the town two years' ago, after retiring as a primary school principal and regional network manager. A keen learner, she has taken up studies in psychology since retiring and is self-employed as a consultant. Denise was keen to establish links in her new community and she became a volunteer working in reception. Then she was invited to become treasurer on the committee of management, due to her previous financial and staff management experience. Although she came with substantial knowledge from her previous employment, she has learned much about the local community and the role of the Neighbourhood House. She regards the courses at the House as extremely valuable and thinks the learning environment is much under-valued.

Being new and not knowing anyone, I initially wanted to make some links in the community. Having recently retired after working for many, many years and not having the time to do voluntary work, I was interested in doing some voluntary work, giving back to a community. I enjoy the reception and working with the younger people who are employed here. I think I can offer some valuable experience and I learn things from them too.

I've run organisations and the Community House was at a stage where they needed to take the next step with their finances. Being a 'Not for Profit Organisation' and employing quite a few staff is a responsibility and quite tricky, so they needed someone who had that experience. I've learned a bit about not-for-profit organisations that I didn't have knowledge of before. I've developed a bit of knowledge of adult education and what it could be. I see it as [a learning environment] with good potential that is currently under-valued and untapped by the community. [This] is a unique community in terms of its demographic.

I think it's had a significant impact on my life, moving here and not knowing anyone. It has helped me to integrate into the community and meet other people and develop other networks.

It's been personally important too because my husband was very ill and passed away, so those friendships and networks have been a very significant part of supporting me through that.

I'm a very keen learner. I always like to be learning something. I'm in the process of completing a Grad Dip. I also do courses from the Community House, they're really valuable and I enjoy them. The Community House is more a personalised environment, where the university is very much a prescribed delivery. There's no way that I would say that the learning I do through [university] is differentiated in any shape or form. There's a level of inaccessibility in terms of support, whereas the Community House is much more interest-based, personalised, one-to-one and current time, which I think is important. It's a totally different learning environment. It's more a leisure type of thing, unless you're doing a pre-accredited course.

I'm heading back into more work. My goal is to finish my study and use that in my consultancy work. I would like to head back into a workplace where there's a network of people, which I miss, having had that for many, many years. Consultancy work would do me for a little while longer and then I'll look at what else there is around. So, yes, I suppose it's about finding a balance between work and volunteering.

**It's a totally  
different  
learning  
environment**

# Ellen

Ellen is 71 years of age and she came to live in the western Victorian town 13 years ago. She qualified as a librarian and spent most of her working life as a secondary school librarian. Ellen loved school and has always loved learning. Having had contact with a Neighbourhood House in another town, she knew that the Neighbourhood House in her new town would be a good place to get to know the local community. Volunteering has been a significant part of her connection to the Neighbourhood House. She was instrumental in starting up a U3A program, language classes, a Book Group and a Garden Group and enjoyed making this contribution to the community. She was a member of the committee of management. Currently, she enjoys participating in the language classes and the gardening group to socialise and keep her mind active.

I worked as a librarian for two years in a municipal library. Most of the rest of my working time, apart from family leave, was as a secondary school librarian. I've also done other jobs like tour guiding and shop assistant and things like that.

We lived in another country town where I was involved with the Neighbourhood House. When we came here I knew nobody and I just decided that the House would be the place to get to know the local community, so I volunteered. I did gardening work to start with, then reception, then went on to other things [like] the committee. I hoped to be useful, to make a contribution, but I also wanted to know about the town and meet people. I felt that I had things to offer and people appreciated the things that you did. It's a very supportive community at the Neighbourhood House.

I was very sad to leave my friends and my book group and my garden group and whatever else in the other town. So when we got here, after I joined Neighbourhood House, I started a book group and also a garden group and they have been going now for nearly 11 years and I'm happy we've still got about 60 members. I'm still a member, but earlier this year I stepped

back from being one of the organisers after 10 years. I thought 'That's about enough'.

I love learning. I have always loved learning. I was a late starter at school. My parents lived out in the country and I was well over 6 when I started. I love the Italian class. I think that's probably keeping my mind a bit more active than what it would be, which is what I value at my age. For a start, we've got a great teacher, and then you're with people who are wanting more or less the same things, they're wanting to learn too, they're wanting to increase their skills, so we're all in it together.

You need to be self-motivated to learn here because there's not the structure with university study or TAFE, or not the set assignments. We do get some homework as part of our Italian class. Some people do it and some people don't. It's not marked with an 'A plus' or a 'B minus' or whatever, so you do need to be self-motivated to learn in the classes. The things I've done have just been for my own interest, not to get any qualifications.

I enjoy it, I love it. The people are good to get on with. They're my sort of people, they're people who want to have fun doing things and learning. The committee, the classes, the voluntary work, and the groups that I'm associated with as part of the House are learning experiences, and the Garden Group is a great education.

**I felt that I had things to offer**

# Joye



Joye is 54 years of age and has lived in the area for almost 30 years. She is a qualified secondary teacher who left teaching, almost 20 years' ago, due to health issues. Since then she has done some emergency teaching and home tutoring. After completing a Certificate IV in Natural Resources she enjoyed working as a Marine Education Officer. She came to the Neighbourhood House to join the art class at the insistence of a friend. She has taught classes in raw food, music and craft at the Neighbourhood House, finding teaching adults much better than her school teaching experience. The art program at the Neighbourhood House is based on learning the traditions of the old masters, for which Joye needs to learn technical skills. Attending the classes is important for her in continuing to develop her practice. Since having her own exhibition earlier in the year, she is very keen to exhibit more frequently. Her plans for the future include continuing to attend the art classes and opening a studio with the art teacher.

A week after my mother's funeral, my best friend said that I was going to go to an art class. I wasn't interested. I just wanted to stay home and think about my mother, but she said, 'You can do that six and a half days a week, but on Thursday mornings you're going to art classes.' I thought to humour her I'd go and say it's not my thing. I thought it was something I would do down the track. I'd start it in my late eighties. I went and by lunchtime I was hooked.

I don't paint very well at home, but I can paint in a park or here. It gives me the social stimulation that I need and the impetus to put something down on paper. They have a good program that's quite unusual. It is aligned to the old masters' teaching, that's unusual. I don't think you'd find that in any other Neighbourhood House.

I really want to start exhibiting. I have exhibited before, but I haven't done it for a long time. I exhibited here in this room in July. I loved it. I thought I need to do this again soon so that the mozz doesn't take a hold again.

## I really love that inclusivity

It's not like a school where you go in and are given all this stuff, like they're empty vessels. I never ran my classes like that. I always said, 'Tell me what you know and let's use that.' What is the most surprising thing about here is the number of lovely well-educated [people], and by well-educated I don't mean university, I mean grass-roots education. You can talk to them on any subject and they can tell you something that will just make your jaw drop.

I'm a more confident learner. I'm confident to not pick up what I don't want. I think Neighbourhood Houses are good like that because you can feel quite safe to say, 'I'm not really interested', and nobody turns a hair. It's got a lovely feel this place. I really love that inclusivity. There are some very elderly women who come here. Their husband's drive them and help them in with their walking frames, but as soon as their husbands go, they change: 'I'm just me, I'm not an old woman anymore.'

I'd like to exhibit more and together with [teacher] to have an Open Studio that runs the whole time. A centre that people can go to and rent for a while. Or let's collaborate, let's get ready for this exhibition, let's get an interpretive Arts Trail going around here. Just lots and lots of different things for people to do and for children and teenagers, that's what I'd like to do.

# Susie

I was a primary teacher  
I've been retired now for about three years.  
I love reading, always got about six books on the go,  
I really relish this time of being able to do that,  
I think I'm incredibly lucky.

I'm involved  
in two activities  
just to get fit and keep fit.  
It's incredibly good for your brain, because you have to remember the sequences.  
Now that I think I've managed it our teacher's telling us  
she's got a new program to show us,  
There were a few groans but that's okay, it's good for our brain.

We often go for coffee afterwards  
It's a lovely thing  
To meet people, from *all* walks of life,  
Having interaction with other women  
You learn, about *their* life experiences  
And that could broaden your own.

## Having interaction with other women



# David



David is 83 years of age and has lived in the area for more than 30 years. He completed Year 10 at school and began working as a coach builder. Throughout his working life he held many and varied positions. He worked in the navy as a radio and radar technician, technical instruction in the army, teaching in the high school system, and electronics training in the private sector. Before retiring, he ran a workshop teaching woodwork skills to unemployed people. He has a passion for teaching practical skills and believes that training people is all about supporting them and allowing them to grow. Eight years ago, he was asked to teach wood-turning and he started the Men's Shed at the Neighbourhood House. In this non-threatening and flexible environment, David believes that he has learned to understand people and not to be judgemental: to see the "real person". He appreciates the freedom to make and change decisions, and to be accountable for the decisions he makes. As well as teaching skills and sharing information in the Men's Shed, David is a member of the committee of management at the Neighbourhood House.

I've done a lot of jobs, but I started life as a coach builder. I came down to this area and I have worked with people with disability and with the unemployed. Then I became unemployed. I did some woodwork, eventually running a workshop, and from there I retired. I had a request from one of the local boys to teach him to Wood-turn. I started a workshop in the science room at the old [school] here. We then went into a workshop at the back of [local organisation], looking after people with mental illness, and we built the shed here and I've been here ever since. We concentrated on the woodwork because the woodwork is fairly popular. We mainly make toys and the reason we chose that is the material for a little block of wood is quite cheap and with a block of wood and four wheels you can do quite a lot.

For nearly 50 years of my life I've been working in training. I feel very comfortable. I've always said the most important thing about being a trainer is to watch somebody grow. I enjoy

## It's a very good growing experience for me

what I do. I enjoy passing on information. That's what I've done all my life. We all achieve what we've got because somebody's helped us to get there, directly or indirectly. You may not be able to teach an individual to be a good wood turner or a good carpenter, or to operate a machine, but if they walk away a better human being, then I think that's really what you want.

Neighbourhood Houses can give people a learning environment that's non-threatening. You deal with people who are ostracised from society. It's a very good learning curve for me to relate to these people, to help them and make them welcome. It's important that they feel welcome and we get on together and they get on with what we're doing. It's about giving people confidence to accept themselves as they are, not the label that someone else has put on them. I've grown. It's important to feel comfortable with yourself. It's given me a tremendous flexibility. You don't feel restricted, you feel open in your mind and your beliefs. It's a very good growing experience for me. At this age in my life, I'm still growing.

In terms of the workshop, I would like to do some more mentoring because 15 years of age is a lot different than dealing with someone of 55. I think I would like to see it grow a bit more. I think while I'm able to it I'd just like to be in a position to help a few more and that would be what I'd hope for the future.

# June

June came to Australia when she was 10 years old. Now she is almost 69 years of age and she moved with her husband to the small town in western Victoria nine years ago. After completing Year 10 at Technical School, she began secretarial work, which did not suit her. She preferred working as a comptometrist and did so for many years until beginning to travel when her husband took long service leave. Travelling to different parts of Australia opened up new work horizons in tourism, retail, and managing their own businesses. Eventually, they tired of travelling. June enjoyed her own company and was happy to be at home, but her husband needed to be more active, so she suggested that he become involved in establishing the Men's Shed. After a couple of years witnessing her husband having a lot of fun she felt she was missing out and came to the Neighbourhood House to learn computers. Along with regular attendance at her writing course, June is now an enthusiastic and active volunteer and committee member at the Neighbourhood House.

I was a Secretary a short-hand typist, but I'm not a social person. I've always been the shrinking violet and I couldn't stand having to act with so many people. Do you remember the old two finger comptometrists? I was a breeze at that, I was a real whizz, so I got a job and I was as happy as Larry.

When we first came here we'd just retired and although we worked together in the shops it was surprisingly hard to be retired together, it was a different kettle of fish. I knew he needed something. I saw in the paper that the Men's Shed was starting up and I said 'Go and have a look at this' and he got in on the ground floor and helped with that. Then after he'd been here a couple of years I thought 'That seems pretty good I reckon I'll go' because I was a real hermit still and since I've come here, oh it's just been fantastic. So that's how I got here. I thought: 'He's having too much fun and I'm missing out'.

I came here to do courses. I did their Adult Ed just to keep up with the computer and stuff like that. I've done spreadsheets, I've done Outlook, Windows 10, Windows 8, basic computing because when I started I hadn't had a proper course for a few years and you forget. I've tried to cover most of the bases because I love computing, it goes with typing.

If I'd have stayed at home I would never have left it, we're 8 kilometres out of town and I had no wish to go anywhere. I was quite happy sitting at home and doing the housework and looking after the garden, it suited me down to the ground. I really didn't want to come here, but once I started coming, I couldn't stay home. I always kept asking 'Is there anything to do in the office?' because I knew I could help. I'm a good typist and I wanted to do something. I've just taken over the minute secretary, so now I'm treasurer and minute secretary and any



odd typing they want done. I love to keep up my skills.

Being included as one of the people here, being trusted enough to do their office work and being accepted as a meaningful member of the group means more to me than anything. You get to help other people, which helps yourself grow. I feel a treasured member of the community and I know I'm adding to my community as well, so it's win-win because you don't do anything, even like volunteering, unless you get something out of it too. I like the thought that someone's benefiting. It's nice to know that someone's going out there and they're getting information and pleasure out of what I've done.

I love learning new things and that's why I love going to the Network Meetings because I learn what other people are doing too. You can never broaden your mind too much, it just keeps me young, keeps me going.

I love reading, but I'm useless at writing. I've composed stories and poems in my head, but I've never put them on paper. I came here and we all just love the written word and we love reading, we give ourselves little projects and we get a good laugh out of them a lot of times, but just the love of writing. I have improved, I know I've improved. I can write more than what I can remember in my head now, I'm starting to get there. I've got quite a portfolio of short stories. I'm quite proud of them.

My communication skills are much better. I would have just sat out there and been petrified if I knew I was going to do this. I've learned to socialise and to make other people feel at home. I've just learned to mix. My social skills have improved beyond bounds. I love it all.

# I feel a treasured member of the community

