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The background of the poster is a vibrant, abstract composition. It features large, overlapping shapes in shades of pink, blue, red, and green that suggest the profiles of faces. These shapes are set against a backdrop of thin, dark, branching lines that resemble a network or a map. The overall color palette is warm and energetic, with a mix of cool and warm tones.

STORIES OF **CONNECTION** AND **RESILIENCE** IN A TIME OF COVID

A CDNET PROJECT

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

The Community Development Network of the ACT & Region (CDNet) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians on whose lands this project took place – the Ngunnawal, Ngarigu & Ngambri people. We pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF CSD GRANT

This project was supported by funding from the ACT Government's Community Services Directorate (Community Connections Grant Round 2 CCGR2068).

Acknowledgements of the individual contributors to the project are at the end of the booklet.

September 2022

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FOREWORD

Andrew Leigh MP



Photographer Hilary Wardhaugh

Humans are social creatures. Virtually all of humanity's great achievements have come from groups and teams working together. Australians are at our best when we engage, share and collaborate.

Yet over recent decades, Australia has become less of a nation of “we” and more of a country of “me”. Australians are less likely to volunteer and less likely to join organisations. Religious attendance and union membership have declined. Team sports are on the wane. People report having fewer close friendships and knowing fewer neighbours. As a nation, we have become more disconnected.

Canberra has not been immune from this decline, which has worsened during COVID. But extraordinary organisations are bucking the trend. From street libraries to street pantries, meal deliveries to community exercise classes, the best of Canberra's social entrepreneurs are truly remarkable. As a local member of parliament, I've had the privilege to work with some of the groups whose stories are told in this book. In each case, I've been struck by their passion for the work, and deep respect for those they are helping.

What I love about this book is that it doesn't just tell stories – it digs deeper to uncover the lessons behind them. Align activities with your skills and passions. Tap into the reservoirs of community goodwill. Harness the energy of youth, and the experience of grey hair. Use online tools to promote activities (what Nick Terrell and I referred to in *Reconnected* as “CyberConnecting”).

Building community in Canberra is a challenge, but our city starts with some huge advantages. Survey evidence shows that civil society is stronger here than in any other state or territory in Australia. Canberra's urban design means that local shops often serve as natural focal points for community life.

This valuable volume contains a plethora of ideas to build on these natural strengths. So dive in, enjoy the stories, learn the lessons. And then, as the authors say, “Just do it!”.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Andrew Leigh". The signature is fluid and stylized.

Andrew Leigh

Assistant Minister for Competition,
Charities and Treasury
Federal Member for Fenner
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September 2022

INTRODUCTION

The COVID pandemic is not over. Many more people have contracted COVID this year than in the previous two. People are still dying of COVID – currently a 7-day average of 44 across Australia¹. ‘Long COVID’ has affected an estimated 400,000 people, including 14% of the workforce, with deepening mental health consequences.

Disadvantaged groups are being disproportionately affected, particularly people with disability, many of whom have been isolating for two-and-a-half years. A recent Advocacy for Inclusion White Paper advocates providing funding to support community development work ‘aimed at improving social and community connectedness among people forced to shield from the pandemic’.²

The stories in this booklet address that aim. Based on interviews with 11 people, they present individual and community responses to the impacts of COVID which have inspired workers in the Community Development Network of the ACT & Region (CDNet)³. The stories illustrate the

creativity and generosity of community members who have initiated projects, and of community organisations which have found new ways of providing support under difficult circumstances.

We thank Andrew Leigh for kindly providing the Foreword, and the ACT Government for supporting this project through its Community Connections Grant Program. We acknowledge the enthusiasm of the community development workers who conducted the interviews. Most especially, we express our admiration and gratitude to the storytellers you are about to meet and who are listed on the last page.

It is a privilege to be part of a community that works every day to improve social and community connectedness in the ACT.

The CDNet Project Team

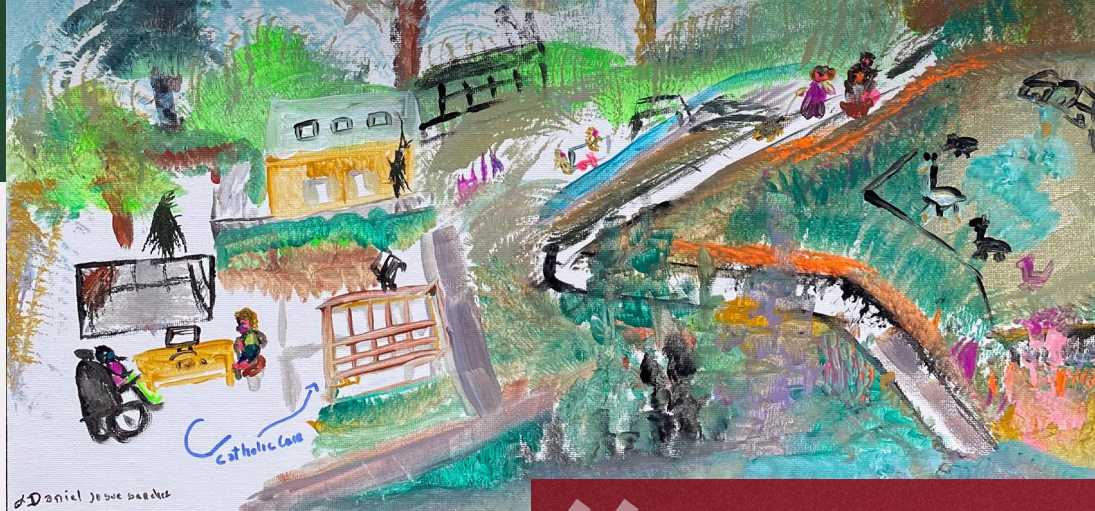
1 www.ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths - accessed 12 September 2022

2 www.advocacyforinclusion.org/white-paper-on-covid-19-and-people-with-disability

3 www.cdnet.org.au

WALKING: A WAY TO RELIEVE STRESS DURING LOCKDOWN

Daniel Sanchez



Being at home during COVID lockdown was very difficult for Daniel because he needs to keep himself busy and to be out in the community participating in various activities. Lockdown was quite a depressing time for Daniel.

Going for walks in his wheelchair was one way for him to relieve the stress and relax the mind, by being outside, distracted by nature and the animals which are part of the University of Canberra Kaleen High School Agricultural Program next to where Daniel lives.

Daniel's painting depicts aspects of walking along the path around the park and back home:

“

Walking is one way to relieve the stress. It's the only thing to relax the mind. I can't walk and so in my wheelchair it was a way to be outside.

”

A house with trees. Neighbours and people walking to the park. A road and walkway with a lady with children. A school and animals. Apart from one family outside near the river, there was no one else around.

Daniel did this painting as an expression of his experience during COVID, when he couldn't be outside.

COMMUNITY TOOLBOX CANBERRA

ACT's first 'Library of Things'

Kathy Ehmann

Kathy is the instigator and team leader for the Community Toolbox Canberra. Before moving to Canberra in late 2017, Kathy lived on five acres in country NSW 'with a giant shed full of absolutely everything'.

In suburban Canberra, she found herself needing tools and a shed that she no longer had. Surprised that there was no community toolbox in Canberra (there is a successful community toolbox in Brisbane), she gathered some people together and with in-kind support from SEE Change, began a pilot project to set up one in May 2019. The team raised \$16,500 through a crowdfunding campaign and received a \$10,000 grant from ActewAGL.

It took a long time to get to the point where they thought they could open – particularly to find affordable premises with secure tenure. Kathy heard that Youth with a Mission (YWAM) might have some space: 'So that's the property on which we are.' And then there was COVID!

Kathy says, 'We were all set to launch and then COVID happened, but we thought we'd be alright. But then COVID really happened and the day that we were supposed to open the doors, we weren't allowed to leave our houses.'

The impact of COVID was that 'it just took so long to do anything ... it was a bit disheartening having meetings at the time where we had nothing actually to do.' On the other hand, a few months of online meetings turned out to be helpful, giving the team time to think through the details.

The team waited until April 2022 to have their launch. Even then, COVID had an impact: much to her disappointment, Kathy could not attend as her daughter had COVID. Fortunately, it was recorded, as many people were still cautious regarding COVID.



“

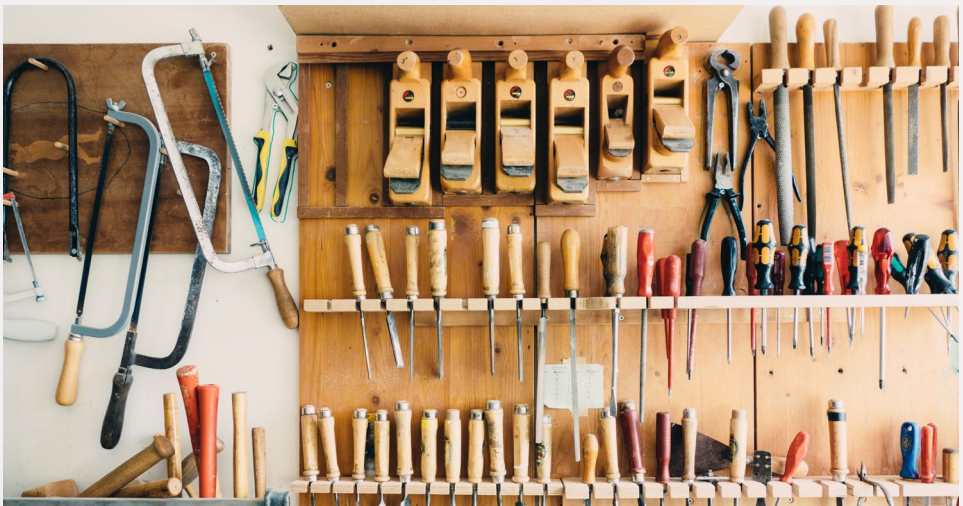
People have been really very generous and as far as donations of things go, we have had a lot of stuff [tools and equipment]. Obviously almost everything we own has been donated and the quality of the tools has been sometimes really quite surprising, things that people could sell for a not insignificant amount of money that they're just handing over.

”

Now 11 people volunteer regularly with the Canberra Community Toolbox. It opens on Saturdays for four hours and Thursday afternoons for three hours. In addition, a 'Repair Café' is held on the last Saturday of each month, at which more volunteers give their time and expertise to repair items that members bring along.

Currently, the Toolbox has over 200 borrowing members, with around ten more being added each month. Members self-nominate their membership fee on a sliding scale – and most people choose the full membership (\$99 per year). Very few choose the lowest level (\$22).

The Toolbox has a strong media presence with a Facebook group page and an email list. 'The social media is really important because it's a good way to let people know [or] just to remind them that we're here [and] let them know what other people are doing.'



CHALLENGES HIGHLIGHTS

Kathy says that the Toolbox's biggest challenges relate to premises and insurance. 'Finding suitable premises ... has been really hard. We are fast outgrowing the space that we have and so we're looking again for new premises'. She adds that it can be difficult to find insurance – 'lots of tool libraries are just being refused, even refused renewal. So that is an ongoing threat as well'.

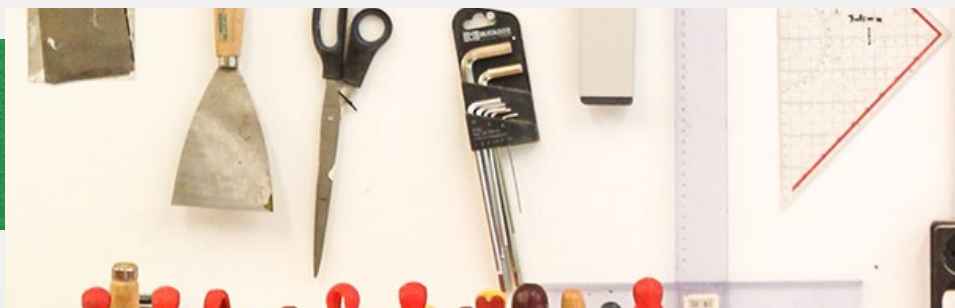
Damage to tools is not as much of an issue as might have been thought. One of the primary drivers is taking stuff out of garages and cupboards and using them to their full potential until they can't be used anymore, so there is a relaxed approach – 'We're not emotionally attached to these things living forever'. The team, including some people who have been using tools all their lives, runs a maintenance schedule to check returned items, particularly power tools. The few times things have been damaged, people have been apologetic and wanted to replace them.

Kathy says that the project has been well received and well supported. It is growing and looking like it's going to continue to grow.

We have a lot of support from our members and our most active members are very supportive. And the MLAs [local politicians], particularly the Greens, have been really great.

For Kathy, 'the really important thing about this project is as climate action' – by reducing consumption and extraction of the planet's resources by sharing and repairing existing resources.

The great thing about Canberra, which I've not experienced anywhere else that I've lived, is that generally people are really open to those sorts of ideas. So, the Buy Nothing movement in Canberra is not like that anywhere else in Australia-where every suburb has its own Buy Nothing group, that's hugely successful - that's quite unique here I think... the important message is that there is this really solid network around Canberra of people sharing skills and stuff and time. And also with the ACT government, which is really progressive in terms of climate action and responsible use of resources. I think that all of these things together make for a really interesting story.



LOOKING BACK

'I think it's impossible to know what things would have been like if COVID hadn't happened. But I think that COVID really made people stop, obviously, and not leave their houses. But I think that it made everybody think about what they wanted instead in terms of society and their own lives. And maybe it made them feel closer to their communities and maybe it made them feel more open to a sharing economy. And maybe that has made a difference.'

WHAT'S NEXT?

The project ran as a pilot between April and August 2022. It is nearly ready to start looking at ways to expand in 2023.

There's a strong desire for a similar community toolbox on Canberra's southside. Potentially, satellite libraries could work whereby people could book items and a van deliver and pick up once a week. With premises and enough volunteers, there is no lack of things being donated.

LESSONS AND TIPS

Kathy's first advice is to speak to a community organisation that is doing something similar to your idea. 'In Canberra, you're only ever two or three connections away from anybody. I think that if you go to somebody in one of those organisations and ask them for help and for guidance, even if it's just to listen to your ideas and to give you some clarity ... to ask questions that you haven't thought of, to give you some clarity on your plan, on what your idea is. I think that that is really valuable. And they will almost certainly have someone else that you can just speak to. And I couldn't tell you how many people I've spoken to about the Tool Library and some of them have only given me the name of someone else that I could go and speak to. And then, I speak to that person and they are a wealth of information. And you just never know where, when you're going to have the conversation that is going to lead to your project actually becoming a thing.'



www.communitytoolboxcbr.org



www.facebook.com/CommunityToolboxCBR



FROM BUY NOTHING TO MUTUAL AID DURING COVID

Building networks for times of crisis

Tim Hollo

In 2013, Tim helped to found Buy Nothing groups in Canberra, a movement which began in the US in the same year. There are now over 40 groups across the city with nearly 40,000 members (10% of the population). In O'Connor there are 1000 members - 25% of its population!

On the first day of COVID lockdown, Tim posted to the Buy Nothing O'Connor Facebook group, saying:

How's everyone going? Are we okay? Is there interest doing a bit of a mutual aid project around here? Who's in if we want to set up a rough stock of who's able to help and who needs help?

Within a few days, there was an informal network. Tim and others posted a flyer in letterboxes around O'Connor headed 'Staying Together while Keeping Apart'. The flyer asked whether people needed help and whether they could offer help, with links to a google form, email or phone number, and to the local Buy Nothing Facebook group.

In the beginning there was 'a big burst, a flurry of activity':

...lots and lots of people getting in touch... And there were three or four of us who were involved in sorting through all of that

material and pairing people up and getting it going and building those solid connections.

Groups were learning from each other rather than reinventing the wheel. For example, mental health issues, loneliness and depression notched up during lockdown. Tim's Mutual Aid Group were not qualified mental health carers, but a group with a mental health focus was started by people with therapeutic knowledge. Information was collected and emailed, saying, 'here's what you can do'.

In O'Connor, the Mutual Aid Group petered out quite quickly 'for one key reason ... literally 15 to 20 times as many people offering help as needing help. People were incredibly generous and connections were made, but most people were really fine, and only a handful needed help.'



...we managed to pair them up with people who were nearby who could help them. They were mostly elderly people who needed help with groceries or medications. In a couple of lovely cases, simply knowing the group existed was important.



Some people expressed gratitude at 'just having the phone number and knowing someone to call'. One woman in her 80s told him, 'It just made me feel good that you're there and that I could pick up the phone and call you and have someone to talk to'. Another person told him, 'I still have a flyer from the mutual aid group' when a tree came down in their garden six months later.

And so people keep these flyers and those community connections exist and are built through it. So even though the mutual aid group per se wasn't that necessary for that many people in O'Connor, it was really, really, handy for a bunch of people.

As people began to get deliveries and buy goods online, they had less need to rely on someone else for support. Zoom meetings and phone calls diminished as people became used to lockdown and 'did their own thing'.

The early days of lockdown allowed more flexibility for volunteer work, but later there was less scope for the volunteer work to be done and for connections to be made. People from the housing commission complexes did not ask for support. Tim says, 'we need to work out how to give isolated people the opportunity/possibility to find that connection when they need it'. Tim regrets that they did not do a follow-up round of flyers, as people became busy juggling working from home and home-schooling, etc.

There were differences across Canberra, with suburbs such as West Belconnen needing greater support over time. Some suburbs have built reasonably strong networks, for example in O'Connor where community connections already exist with tightknit and supportive networks. However, there are 'a huge number of people who fall through the gaps and have none of that whatsoever ... they live among us and are isolated'.



Tim believes that ‘connected and cohesive communities are resilient communities’ in the face of various crises. He asks: ‘How do we learn from this and work out what to do better next time, outside of crises – so networks exist that we can tap into?’

He has ‘bold plans’ on how to parlay the growth in this mutual aid group into some really strong community connections across O’Connor and build these networks and little locality groups to create the deep connections and social cohesion that we need for the next time something really bad happens. ‘Many people are desperate for connection and for this to be over’.

Meanwhile, although the mutual aid groups quickly rose and then fell away during COVID, the popularity and success of Buy Nothing Groups across the ACT, Australia and the world are also providing networks of immediate community connection that can be drawn upon when needed.

Staying together while keeping apart

Dear neighbours,

A few O’Connor residents are setting up a community network to help each other and our neighbours through difficult times with coronavirus, be prepared for the future, and make life in our community even better.

We’re being advised to keep our distance from each other, for very good reason. But we can still look out for each other and stay connected.

Do you need help?

Do you need someone to run errands, collect groceries, or pick up prescriptions? Do you need some puzzles or magazines to keep you entertained? Or would you just like someone to chat to and check in with you from time to time?

If you are comfortable online, please go to:
<https://tinyurl.com/oconnorsupport>

Alternatively, you can call
INSERT NAME AND NUMBER HERE
or email oconnor.community.2020@gmail.com

We will treat all information confidentially, sharing only with those offering to help you.

Can you offer help?

Are you healthy and keen to help your neighbours? Can you volunteer even a few minutes a day to support people in our community?

If you’re able to help, a little or a lot, please go to
<https://tinyurl.com/oconnorvolunteer>

Some of us will get sick, some of us will lose work, some of us will be taking extra precautions for various reasons. The more we look out for one another, the easier this will be!

O’Connor sharing group

Another way to keep connected and help each other is through our local Buy Nothing Group. If you’re on Facebook, you can join the group, where local residents offer things up which they no longer need and ask for things others might have. It’s a great way to reduce resources and get to know your neighbours!

Simply go to the page, click join, and answer the questions:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/608870582942532/>

More fun things!

If there’s lots of interest, we’ve got all sorts of other ideas to discuss, from occasional group web calls that anyone can join to chat to online musical performances. Like Italian communities singing on their balconies, there are so many creative and fun ways to stay connected while keeping apart.

In case of emergencies

We want to stress that we aren’t here to replace emergency services – we’re just here to look out for each other, help reduce the strain, and make life a little easier.

For official advice, please go to www.health.act.gov.au and, if appropriate, call your GP.

😊 Don’t worry, we washed our hands carefully before delivering these 😊



www.buynothingproject.org/find-a-group/#Australia

Tim Hollo is Director of the Green Institute. He has run for the seat of Canberra as a Greens candidate in the last two elections. He recently published a book, *Living Democracy: An Ecological Manifesto for the End of the World as We Know It*.

www.greeninstitute.org.au

www.livingdemocracy.org.au

NGUNNAWAL STREET PANTRIES

‘Give when you can. Take when you need’

Margaret and Paul McGrath

Paul and Margaret opened the Ngunnawal Street Pantries (‘The Pantry’) in 2019, prior to the onset of COVID.

It began when they cleaned out their pantry while downsizing their house. Margaret had seen the small street libraries, heard of food pantries and thought to put a storage tub of food near their mailbox with a sign that said, ‘Give when you can. Take when you need’. This has become the philosophy of the Pantry. From there it grew and evolved organically – ‘just amazing growth in three years’:

... we moved from a storage tub up to a cupboard, a bigger cupboard, then another cupboard. And then we ended up fitting out the garage and putting a shed up.

They had no expectations of where it would lead. Paul describes ‘one of beauties of being at this really grassroots level is that we can just address and meet the needs of the people as they come up’. Together with Greg and Cecilia Marshall – ‘the other half of NSP’ – and other volunteers, they have helped establish six pantries across two locations in their Ngunnawal suburb catering to different needs.



‘We just do what we do, and we help people. And people can come to us and ask us for anything we can if we can help.’

The Pantry now provides clothes (including dress-ups and formal wear) and toys, toiletries for men and women, daily baked goods and non-perishable foods, household and electrical items – even pet supplies, clothes and bedding for animal rescue. Paul laughingly describes it as ‘a pantry on steroids’.

During the early days of COVID, up to 30-40 people would line up in the driveway every night. The McGraths and other helpers were working seven days a week, Margaret doing 16-hour days, which was unsustainable. Changing to online appointments four days a week now allows them to manage their

time as well as the flow and quality of donations. A limit for taking items of two shopping bags of household and clothes items per person has been necessary as some people were taking 'carloads'. The clothes, household and toy pantry is open every day 9am-7pm, while the food, men's toiletries and pets pantry is open 24/7 for anyone.

On four evenings a week, the Pantry offers fresh food such as excess bread, pies and pastries donated by local bakeries (Dobinsons, Le Bon Melange and Yiayia's Bakery), fruit and vegetables from Secondbite through Canberra City Care, and dairy products were coming from Country Valley Milk. Gold coin donations enable the Pantry to buy frozen and refrigerated foods for people who are struggling.

All communication with the community is run through the Pantry's Facebook page, which allows quick messaging to advise their 5,000 followers what is available and when, or to make special requests for donations. As Paul says, 'we've got a strong Facebook presence'.

As well as helping people in times of hardship, the Pantry seeks to reduce waste, 'along the lines of Buy Nothing groups'. A third purpose has emerged, that of building community. Paul believes that COVID has added a dimension that 'people just were missing - a connection, having somewhere they could go that was safe', where they could get a few things and go home.

Offering a non-judgmental space is an important element of the Pantry's success: there are no questions asked or forms to fill. This anonymity is important for some people who prefer not to go through registered charities.

Paul describes their role as simply facilitating a community space where people can help themselves, meet and chat if they want to. During COVID, they followed safety guidelines – having one person in the garage at a time, checking in and using hand sanitizer.

Paul has seen the Pantry enable people to clothe their family for free, 'which is \$1,000 they can put into other things' like food or bills or petrol which have become more expensive. One person told him, 'You've saved me hundreds, if not thousands, this year alone by giving me clothes to get through winter for my whole family'.

On the 'give when you can' side of the Pantry's motto, Paul is amazed at the quality of what people donate, often when downsizing. He sees the donations getting bigger and bigger.



There's no judgment. People come and they take what they need and have a chat. We hear some amazing stories from people ... anybody can come. It's a wonderful community.



Learning and tips

One of the biggest problems that Paul identifies is that there is not a lot of support for small grassroots organisations compared to the big charities, and that community volunteers need a contact person, someone who might be able to coordinate start-up funds or a community grant.

Connecting with politicians is also important, to help them see what is happening 'on the ground'. To this end, the Pantry invited local politicians to an open day.

Paul's advice to anyone who has an idea but doesn't know where to start, is to 'just start and give it a try! Anything can happen'.

Paul and Margaret have gained enormously from the experience:

I didn't expect to have this much personal growth. It's just an amazing experience and it sounds funny, but I keep saying how privileged we are to be doing what we do. It is just an absolute privilege.

Life is watching the glass fill up ... And I really liked that approach because our glass is constantly filling up every day. We never know what we're going to get. We never know who we're going to see.



***Just get out there
and start and talk
to people, find out
what they want,
what they need,
and just be there
for people.***



In February 2022, the Ally Cat Productions documentary, *Ngunnawal Pantry: Giving people value and dignity*, won the Syndicate Indie Film Festival [https://youtu.be/NuCtjDO9AFg].

Ngunnawal Street Pantries also won recognition as a Gungahlin Marketplace Community Rewards Winner 2022 and an ABC Radio Canberra 2022 Community Spirit Award finalist.



www.facebook.com/ngunnawalstreetpantry





HELPINGACT

The 'GeneroCity' of Canberrans

Mohammed Ali

Mohammed, from 'a struggling family in Karachi, Pakistan', describes his three years teaching in Africa 'as a turning point for me because I saw helplessness and poverty very closely all day'. Back in Pakistan as a university lecturer in Biochemistry, he helped disadvantaged students by establishing a library with free access to expensive textbooks, providing free tuition and helping with transport to and from the university.

In 1991 Mohammed came to Canberra with his family and worked for the Therapeutic Goods Administration. There, he and some colleagues began organising curry lunches and morning teas to raise funds for various Canberra charitable organisations. Later, he distributed food hampers to those in need, working with 'wonderful friends' – in St Vincent de Paul, Red Cross, Salvation Army, RSPCA, Canberra Legacy, The Smith Family, and the Early Morning Centre. During Canberra and NSW Bush Fires in 2018-2019, he worked for many months with Slabsforheroes providing food for firefighters and fire-affected people.

After retiring in 2018, Mohammed built on these networks and founded a community-owned charity, HelpingACT, to deliver culturally

appropriate food and gift hampers to homeless people, international students, refugees, and asylum seekers. His motto is: 'One thing you need not to worry about is the food.' Initially, deliveries were through a food pantry at Companion House which provides medical assistance and food relief to migrant and Muslim communities, and subsequently through the Early Morning Centre and Havelock House.

When COVID arrived, Mohammed volunteered with the newly established Community Relief Network Program. He quickly saw (and told the government) that 'not much really met the needs of migrant, refugee or asylum seeker communities'. The government asked if HelpingACT could help cover the gap. They organised food including food required by members of diverse background communities and began getting calls from COVID families and international students stuck at home. In response, they delivered food daily door-to-door, relying on a few dedicated volunteers. During the early weeks of COVID, HelpingACT was regularly serving 30 COVID-affected people daily for many weeks, with each delivery providing food sufficient for multiple meals. Overall, Mohammed estimates they delivered enough food for around 20,000 meals between 2019 and 2021.



The need for food has doubled since January 2022. Mohammed believes 'there is an underclass developing silently in Canberra' because of the increasing cost of living, groceries, and petrol, so that families – 'not necessarily jobless families' – who were already struggling, are 'really, really, really struggling' now.

In late 2021, HelpingACT was instrumental in offering culturally appropriate support to 12 Afghan families who arrived in Canberra in late 2021. They had left their country and culture with 72 hours' notice and found themselves staying in caravan parks. Mohammed's team provided appropriate groceries such as basmati rice, halal meat and lentils, kitchen items and clothes – even laptops for two families. They also 'galvanized [the] Pakistani and Indian community' to bring traditional female clothes (shalwar kameez), copies of the Koran and prayer mats. 'Those are spiritual needs', as Mohammed says. HelpingACT continues to bring weekly food supplies to the four families still waiting to be moved to permanent rental accommodation.

CHALLENGES

Doing home deliveries during lockdown required adapting very quickly and working through the risks. Once they were confident with the precautions, 'we just geared up to add one factor to our services, and that was home deliveries'. An online form on HelpingACT's website made it possible to organise timely and tailored food deliveries that were dropped outside people's doors, followed by a call to let them know it was there. The phone was also essential to tap into and keep in consultation with each family by calling every third day.

Finding sources of continuing donations has been the greatest challenge. At one point, Mohammed and a colleague spent an hour every day on the phone asking for donations. Every community in Canberra – irrespective of their religion, race, creed, and country of origin – started donating money or food, with one family anonymously donating \$2,000. Families of residents at Mirinjani Aged Care collected \$2,500 – a cheque that made Mohammed weep. A call to the ACT Chief Minister for funding resulted in a grant of \$10,000, and later one for \$5,000 when a new car was needed. Another grant ended up giving \$6,000. ABC's Canberra Lockdown T-shirt competition raised \$9,500 for the organisation. Sydney Forex donated \$3,000.

IMPACT OF COVID

HelpingACT had to change its operation from pantry outlets to delivering food to individual families. The closer connections this created allowed them to learn more about the challenges that the community was experiencing. While the challenge was overwhelming in the beginning, Mohammed has found that ‘the resilience is just great, both in the people and the charity workers’.

HIGHLIGHTS

For Mohammed, a positive side of COVID was that it ‘brought all these charities together because the aim of all charities was and is and will remain to help community, especially those people in need.’

What Mohammed has learned about the Canberra community over the last couple of years is its generosity.

“ *One of the characteristics of the city which keeps coming out, whenever you go out to seek for support or donations, is that it is not generosity with an ‘s’, it is generosity with ‘c’ – GeneroCity ...My hat’s off to the generosity of Canberra.* ”

LESSONS AND TIPS

To anyone thinking of starting a project, he suggests focusing on what is most practical. ‘What is your capacity at the moment? And then cross out those which are already being done by other charity organisations so that whatever you’ll be left with will be something that you like to do.’ It could be a wonderful new idea that big charities could support.

Mohammed sees youth – in any society – as a ‘packet of energy ... a great force that we must tap into and believe in their strengths’.

And he advises getting people from other cultures to provide awareness of cultural and religious sensitivities of people needing help.



WHAT NEXT FOR HELPINGACT?

Mohammed would like to broaden the service and has already started a monthly lunch at the Early Morning Centre and a monthly BBQ in Civic for homeless people. He wants to work with other organisations to help Aboriginal families and people in rural areas in the ACT as needed.

He believes that, in an affluent city like Canberra, it should be entirely possible to solve the problem of homelessness in the longer term. He says, 'The ACT government, builders, communities, and charities should come together to work jointly to solve that problem by designing a wonderful, mutually agreed program'.

Mohammed Ali was named 2022 Canberra Citizen of the Year in recognition of his contribution to vulnerable Canberrans through his roles with HelpingACT, the ACT Multicultural Advisory Council, the ACT Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Humanitarian Coordination Committee, and Companion House.



www.helpingact.org



www.facebook.com/HelpingACT



www.emc.org.au





MOLONGLO EXERCISE CLASSES

Giving back to the community

Yolanda Lee

Yolanda is from China and came to Australia in 2009 as a student. After giving birth to her daughter, she was amazed at the support available to her from community services, such as community physiotherapy and nurses, and playgroups.

running a successful Falls Prevention group she had the idea of running a Mums and Bubs group:

... because I had been taking my daughter to another Mums and Bubs exercise group, I thought, oh, we can come up with our group in the community. So that's how it was started.

I never knew about this before and it's all free, it's all for the community and it's just wonderful.

She wants others to know about these free services. And as a trained physiotherapist, she wanted to share her skills and give back to the community while at home with her one-year-old daughter during lockdown.

Yolanda attended a Makers and Shakers workshop with Woden Community Services (WCS) which encouraged people to come up with their own community initiatives. She came up with the idea of running a Falls Prevention group given her background and passion for safe exercise. Kara, a community development officer at WCS, helped Yolanda get started in the new Canberra suburb of Wright in mid-2021. Later they were able to access funding for exercise equipment from the ACT Government Suburban Land Agency Mingle Program. After several months of

Yolanda had prior professional experience in running such groups, but not as a volunteer or in a community setting. She says, 'it actually helped me improve my management skills'. There were some ups and downs. For example, a small lockdown in late 2021 meant pausing the group for a month because switching to online sessions did not work for people with small children, or for some seniors who did not feel comfortable using apps or doing the sessions online.

So, we just kind of gave up doing it online. We had to pause ... so, we just had to wait until lockdown finished.

The groups used local community venues – initially a temporary community space called Molonglo Valley Make Space run by the Mingle program, and then outdoors at the Coombs Children's Playground.

Yolanda uses WhatsApp groups to let participants know if a session is cancelled and to enable them to notify others whether they will be attending. She moved to WhatsApp after finding that communication by email was disjointed with too much back and forth, while communication via Facebook was less easy to manage with participants joining and leaving. She says, 'It's great to have that flow in WhatsApp where you can quickly check in'.

There is no requirement to sign up to the group or commit to taking part for any fixed term. Participants do sign a form with contact details which is sent to WCS; Yolanda believes this provides people with a level of trust 'because it is a good organisation', as well as covering volunteers and participants for public liability insurance.

It's also a way to advocate the organisation, to let them know that there's also other services provided by WCS.

Participation in the Mums and Bubs group is flexible, as children go into childcare and parents return to work. Participants say they are grateful for the support provided by the group for getting them back to exercise.

The seniors' group is very engaged, even more so after lockdown. Participants find the exercises beneficial, especially for their balance, and look forward to the sessions.

The most rewarding aspect for Yolanda is the feedback: 'how much I helped them in improving

YOLANDA

Exercise is medicine that applies to every stage of your life!

Yolanda, qualified Physiotherapist volunteers in her own community

Yolanda became a WCS Volunteer after being involved in a WCS Community Makers and Shakers workshop which aimed to get people thinking about ideas for their own community

Yolanda came up with her own idea of a helping people prevent falls. She went on to facilitate a weekly Falls Prevention class in Molonglo Valley

Yolanda has a passion for preventing falls, exercise and moving safely and has time to volunteer during the day

After Lockdown, Yolanda also started facilitating a Parents and Bubs outdoors Exercise class as a WCS Volunteer!

FROM JULY - DECEMBER ACROSS 2 CLASSES YOLANDA HAS SUPPORTED

71 PARTICIPANTS

in

13 facilitated classes

Yolanda loves volunteering with her daughter and encourages everyone to share their skills and give back to their community

their – well, I wouldn't say improving the quality of life, but improving their social being':

So, I think helping people in need, that's the main thing that kept me going every week ... it makes you feel rewarded as well.

The benefits are reciprocal for Yolanda – 'it's a win-win event. I think I help them, and they also help me as well'– ***they keep me active as well. And my daughter is already familiar with them and she's becoming my assistant now. She hands out all the exercise gear to everyone and collects them back and opens the gate for everyone.***

Support is important for people wanting to set up events. They may only need tables and chairs but 'venue is one of the important things' and it is a challenge is to find venues

that don't charge. Support would be helpful to pay for a commercial Spotify app to avoid the ads on the free trial. Yolanda received funding for exercise equipment, support from WCS, had access to free indoor and outdoor venues, and was able to use free social media apps. This support meant she did not have to charge participants.

What is next? Yolanda recently stopped the Mums and Bubs' group since returning to work but still keeps Fridays free for the Falls Prevention group. She is not seeking more participants for the present until an indoor venue becomes available. She hopes that participants will be able to continue on their own if she has to stop the seniors' group, given that the equipment is there to keep going - or that they could join other groups, or find someone else to take over.

I think it's a great friendship that has built up between the participants and I'm willing to help them whenever they need and give my suggestions or opinions if they are asking for it.

She hopes more people can get involved in

joining the group or setting up groups, and that more events can be set up to keep the community going and meet more people.

I think the community will be excited to have all the resources there for them. And particularly now the restriction has eased up a lot and it's time to get out and have fun and enjoy life.

Yolanda also credits the Our Molonglo Valley Facebook group as a place where people can connect with their community online:

... because it's a new area ... people have a lot of questions about this or that ... So that's what gets people more connected to each other because they ... always get help from the community. They always get their questions answered.

Given her experience and success in running the groups Yolanda was recently offered a paid job to facilitate Mums and Bubs group in the new suburb of Whitlam. She will do this weekly for 6 weeks from October.



www.wcs.org.au/services



communitydevelopment@wcs.org.au



www.suburbanland.act.gov.au/en/mingle



TOOLANGI COMMUNITY

Keeping community safe during COVID

Kay McCooley

Toolangi is a public and affordable housing complex in Kaleen managed by CatholicCare and Housing ACT. Kay has been a resident for two-and-a-half years – two during Covid.

Kay has always been a community-oriented person and considers Toolangi a good place to live in this respect. When she moved in, she could see that it was 'not just a block of apartments with individuals living in individual units. It was going to be a community and more like a village'. Kay notes that 'it's a community and getting stronger' in the last 18 months since CatholicCare's Social Impact Program (SIP) engaged a fulltime Community Engagement and Tenancy Support Manager.

As Kay was the first to move into the complex, she needed to go outside to meet other people. She got involved in an art program for women run by CatholicCare. Another highlight in the last year was taking part in a Memories Project conducted by Year 9 and 10 drama students from the high school next door and coordinated by the SIP Manager and the school's Drama Teacher. She and some others shared their life stories with the students, who used their stories to create a drama piece for a public performance. She found the connection of ages and experience amazing: 'It was so good to do it as a community'.

The community pergola is a place that brings connection in the complex. Kay's vision of creating a community garden is also happening, 'with some work from a few people and a little bit of work from a lot more people' and helped by funding from CatholicCare.

“

...it's going to be a really cool community thing and even through COVID, because we can be outside, because we can be doing things individually, it really is something that can continue with this pandemic happening.

”



When residents couldn't meet physically during COVID, online catch-up meetings coordinated by the SIP Manager allowed those who wished to, to talk to each other – which was 'really cool'. Kay recalls another 'cool' event: an international afternoon where people shared about themselves and their cultures.

Overall though, connecting with other residents during lockdown was difficult. People were not there during the day, while others avoided contact for health or other reasons. She says, 'Communication in all of this has been hard. Yeah. In this block, it's been really hard'.

But when it comes to personal, individual neighbour-to-neighbour help, they're really wonderful. So, there are different

sorts of relationships, we're all different. And I think that's what's important is for us all to respect those differences.

As a community minded person, Kay found the restrictions during COVID lockdowns 'super hard' but was lucky because she has family. Her own lack of immunity meant she needed to isolate herself. However, seeing people in online meetings 'made a huge difference' that she looked forward to each week. Like others with mobility or health issues, she finds online meetings much easier to manage than getting to the community room at the right time. She hopes this continues outside of COVID times but at the same time, she is enjoying meeting face to face with social distancing – 'It's really good'.

A challenge for the community is working out how to maintain safety and protocols while being together as a community and to look for new ways to do that – for example, by allowing people to take part in online activities while in their homes if they are physically restricted. Kay mentions a quiz night that was very successful that could be repeated or 'those types of activities': 'This is life now and we do need to think of different ways'.

Kay wonders about how to repeat pre-COVID successful events – like the International Day, or Cancer Council fundraiser Cupcake Day morning tea, music and storytelling – but 'in a safe environment'.



I think everybody's going to be really cautious from now on about meeting a lot of people in a small area [the pergola] ... a lot of us here are vulnerable so I think we going to always be cautious. I think that area is going to be more and more valuable. I hope that in the end it won't be big enough. We need to extend. It would be really good.

Building community without putting people at risk is also needed for people's mental health. Kay points out that isolation decreased her sense of value in the world and stresses the importance of keeping connection with others in some way on a regular basis for people of all ages with physical or mental health issues.

I think they go together – when you're someone with physical health issues, when you're in isolation, mental health issues come along with it the more you're isolated. I think that goes for everyone, but I think it's magnified.

She describes herself as a positive, upbeat person, but with health issues that limit her mobility, 'in a time of COVID, it's been pretty hard to maintain positivity'. COVID has impacted on Kay 'hugely': she finds herself 'less joyful than I was ... it makes me really sad that I've let that happen'.

The isolation of COVID, the inability to see my family on a regular basis, even though I speak to them every day, it's not the same. And they're very good in maintaining my value to them. I feel that I'm very lucky.

But overall, Kay thinks that the strength of the community may have grown during COVID, and that it was reinforced during the lockdowns. This makes her happy. 'I think I'm valued for me. The same way I value other people from here for who they are. And that's what the community is'.



<https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/housing/about-housing-act/our-projects/toolangi-supporting-a-socially-inclusive-and-intentional-community>

HANDS ON STUDIO

Keeps Connected!

Tilly Davey

Founded in 1996, Hands On Studio provides a safe environment in a professional studio for artists with a disability. Hands On Studio has become a leader in the field of arts and disabilities in the Canberra region, exhibiting regularly and developing strong relationships with creative institutions and the broader community sector.

The Studio works within a Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) framework. 'We work closely with our artists to work out what they want to do and create', says Tilly Davey, the Studio's manager.

The collective of artists who practise from Hands On Studio have developed a model for a creative society, guided by the principle that art is fundamental to human expression and that all people are entitled to its tools of communication.

During the first COVID lockdown, the program was deemed as an essential service and staff were able to visit the artists' houses to provide one-on-one support and support the artists to explore the community which surrounds their homes

We went to individuals' houses who felt safe having people in their homes and helped our artists create studio and gallery spaces within their homes. Along with making



creative spaces in the homes, we also explored our artists' neighbourhoods on foot ... and often would find nice spaces to sit in the open and draw.

This was a really fantastic aspect of our lockdown journey as it helped people discover things within the neighborhood but also feel safe in their neighbourhoods. Now a lot of our artists who we did those walks with, go for walks by themselves and have fostered a greater sense of community in their neighborhoods, which is GREAT.

The Studio connects with the broader arts community and different creative institutions in the Canberra region and throughout Australia. Throughout the lockdowns, the artists worked closely with their friends from The National Gallery of Australia to explore the Gallery's collection: they developed a series of commissioned worksheets based on the Gallery's artwork which were shared internationally to encourage people to keep occupied throughout the lockdown.

When the community could not access the Studio during the lockdowns, Tilly used group phone calls, online zoom classes (14 per week) and a weekly zoom disco to help everyone stay connected; this ensured that the community was being supported, keeping creative and the welfare of the artists was being checked.

The zoom classes were a HIT! We were able to connect with a range of different artists, who we would not usually be able to connect with.

Generating the online program was a collaborative effort involving Hands On Studio and the large community 'who walk beside the program'.

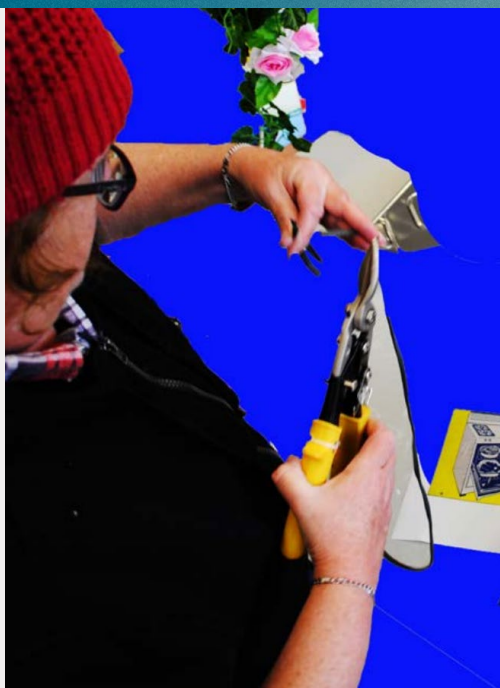
The online disco which the community hosted each week was a great way for everyone to unwind by listening to great music and 'having a boogie'. Throughout the week the community would generate playlists and would occasionally invite external people to put in their requests too.

A highlight for Tilly was seeing the adaptability shown by the artists and staff, and the huge amount of support from the

“

In some sessions people would just bring along what they were working on at home at the time and we'd all chat and make together ... we would talk about everything ... global problems, health, music, what we were going to have for dinner ... I suppose that's what art does, brings people together.

”



arts community and the institutions with whom Hands On Studio shares strong relationships.

However, the isolation imposed by the COVID lockdowns was challenging for the artists, especially those living alone. For the Studio, a challenge was to know how big or small the online program should be. Also access to technology is still not universal:

Tilly notes the importance of keeping professional boundaries to the success of the program – face to face or online. They refer people to other services when appropriate rather than seeking to solve issues which would be better overseen by other health professionals.

Feedback from the participants is that ‘they all loved going online and still often talk about it’. Working together online has built connections between people who were not in the same class together

which in turn has made the connections across the studios even stronger.

The experience has built confidence and resilience. Hearing about cases of COVID rising again, a couple of artists have commented, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter if we go back into lockdown, we can go online’. Tilly is aware that this is not the last pandemic the world will experience and has mapped out a plan to run further online classes in the future.

What is next for Hands On? Building on their experience and connections made working online during COVID, Tilly is starting a program with Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts (DADAA)¹ based in Perth. The Hands On artists will work with artists in Perth to generate a ‘Zine’ project which will run online and be shown in a gallery space in the near future.

1 www.dadaa.org.au



REFLECTIONS ON THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Just Getting it Done

Karlya Parnell

Karlya had been a community development coordinator in Canberra for about 18 months when COVID started in March 2020. She describes her job as 'bringing people together to overcome social isolation'.

She notes, 'This can be challenging in normal times because people tend to connect less readily with those who are unlike themselves, for example in language or culture'. Counter-intuitively, though, she says that this was less true in the context of COVID, because 'everybody was dealing with the same thing'.

A highlight for Karlya, especially in the first six months of COVID in 2020, was seeing the community self-organise:

people just did what they thought needed to be done rather than waiting for an organisation or being told what to do ... From the very start, I saw that my job was happening without me.

Finding her role as a worker and as a community member was 'a balancing act': she had to be clear when she was or wasn't involved as a worker.

The main priority of community organisations at this time was addressing those most at risk from COVID (especially aged people). Another was supporting people excluded from support via JobKeeper or JobSeeker. Karlya remembers 'a sense of we can't do everything', and that community development 'fell to the side'.

Karlya saw a lot of offers of help and concern from the general community not previously obvious, for example, for people sleeping rough or living with domestic violence – 'things that are generally at the forefront of community workers in our everyday work ... but in the back of the mind of the community'.

This community response seemed 'very natural, immediate and almost intuitive' and was 'real evidence' for Karlya of the strength and capability of the community – a core principle in community development.

Community members were less constrained than community organisations, which were uncertain as to 'how to navigate the restrictions': risk liability was a big concern for organisations, and they needed time 'to get it right'. 'But the community wasn't waiting for us. And that was really evident. They just wanted to do what needed to be done.'

At a time when supermarket shelves were being stripped empty, community and street pantries were 'filled with donated items'. 'So much of what we strive for just happened so organically – it was really wonderful to see'.

People were taking what they needed and sharing what they could, which was just such a wonderful show of the humanity we all have. So, I think that was really heart-warming ... a little bit sad that we needed COVID to find that, but it was nice to know that it can happen.

LESSONS AND TIPS

A take-away for Karlya is that in a world that is more and more risk averse, there can be 'a reluctance to just try something, waiting for the right time and the right people in the right circumstance'. She says the right time 'is never going to happen ... if somebody wants to do something, if there's something that's on their mind, give it a go'. She would love people to think, 'just do it'.

I would like people in the community to know that they don't have to wait for permission. It doesn't have to have a risk assessment and budget. There doesn't have to be a project



It was really humbling to see how the Canberra community just came together. The challenge is bottling the enthusiasm so you can do it without COVID.



plan for things to happen. And I think that's inherently what we saw out of this: things can just happen.

And she wants people to know that there are people like her whose job is to support community members to do these things. She says, 'Don't wait. Jump in and do it, or talk to your friends, your neighbours, your community, a community development worker – you'd be surprised at how many skills you can find to just get something off the ground'.





STROMLO GARDEN STREET LIBRARY

Shaped by the Community

Jackie Neill and Shah Petreski

The Stromlo Garden Street Library is helping to build community in a new suburb by providing a space for people to interact. Community members can also communicate and share resources through the library's Facebook group.

In the library space itself they can participate in joint activities or simply enjoy the place. Still evolving, the library has already proven helpful in combatting isolation during COVID lockdowns.

Jackie and Shah met in the new Canberra suburb of Wright – Jackie's family was the first to move into their street while Shah's house was still being built. Shah had hosted a street library before and Jackie was happy to host a library on her family's nature strip which had the advantage of an existing tree to provide beautiful shade. They began by planting broad beans. The next-door neighbours loved the idea too and 'got a little bit involved with the kids'.

Shah and Jackie tapped into a network of street library hosts. Shah knew of one who makes library boxes out of recycled materials for use in public spaces. Once, when a street library had burnt down, within a couple of days, he had put a new one up. She recalls, 'There was an article about a street library hero'. Thanks to the network and

to this person, they were able to obtain a ready-made, waterproof Perspex box for \$100. 'So that's how the box came around'. They loved the fact that the box was repurposed from recycled materials.

Jackie wanted the space to be a welcoming niche. Her whole family became involved in designing the space, adding a planter box, bench and some toys. Children began to play there. The library's use is growing, with families using it to share and swap things. The space is dynamic – parts can be moved or painted. In winter they "yarn-bombed" the tree. At Chinese New Year they found and hung up lanterns, and other people brought more. A neighbour created a wreath made from succulents from her garden, which people could take and plant.



It's a community space. So people can come and be creative, hang things that they make.





Kids from three households 'in a creative mode' took to the footpath doing chalk drawings: 'That whole driveway was covered in chalk ... it put smiles on people's faces.'

There's the garden, the books, there's seeds, there's the produce. And there's also, the sense of this being a craft space like a creative space where you can do different things and add to it if you want to.

Jackie and Shah remember other events, such as porch placemaking and the spoon garden.

And we encouraged kids who were walking by to name a pumpkin and they wrote their name on it and then watched it grow. And then they came and picked them out. And we had like ten, 15, 20 pumpkins on this patch.

The friends reflect on how the street library has changed the way their families and neighbours connect. Shah and her daughter come at least

once a week to play tic tac toe, hang around and pick tomatoes, or play with the kids next door.

They also highlight that people walking past the street library say hello, even from across the street, sometimes lingering when otherwise they might not. There's a sense of friendliness, the sense that 'this is an open space ... wow, what's going on there and so an interaction happens out of that ... people feel like they have permission to interact' and it feels safe to do that. This was especially noticeable during lockdown when there were a lot of people walking regularly as families. Jackie adds that because her family lives right there, they are sometimes out the front. She's a friendly person and would simply say 'hi' to people out walking in the evening.

They exchange lovely moments, such as the grandmother who stayed for an hour with her grandchild – 'I mean, how lovely is that?'. Jackie remembers the dad who sat there for half an hour reading to his kids; she says:

I was just melting, like how beautiful is that! Like it was a pit stop on the way back from his swimming pool. And they live over, that way somewhere. and he's like, 'Yeah we stop, this is our pit stop. It keeps us going.'

Another woman said, 'Oh, I'm not doing anything creative now, but there's something I can add to what's going on' Someone else dropped off Japanese maple cuttings and 'just put them here'.

Another person was having a bad day and passed by when there happened to be some produce being swapped and shared. *She picked out some beans and she cooked it and said it was delicious. And she said the space just lifted her spirit. and then she brought rosemary the next week.*

As if to illustrate, during the interview, a woman arrived to drop off vegetables and fresh picked beans. She said, 'they're from my dad's garden. He grows them, but he grows too many. And so I thought I don't want to waste it.'

The Facebook group now reaches a wider community who drop off different things, such as 'excess stuff from their garden'. They've heard from 'a long-time admirer of the box' and from people 'who really enjoyed the flowers when they were up or come and swap a book every week'.

Looking ahead, Shah and Jackie have ideas of having a different theme each month, or celebrating significant international or national days. They transformed the space for a

'Christmas in July' street party; February was love-oriented around Valentine's Day. March has International Women's Day, St Patrick's Day, Neighbour Day, World Wildlife Day, and more. October has World Animal Day, November has Halloween.

We can combine a few things at the beginning of the month, just announce the theme for the month and see what happens. As a community project, it is very open to whatever's going on at the time or if someone else might suggest something.

Shah has begun landscaping from her corner to connect a wildlife corridor, something she knows will take years. Already a blue tongue lizard has been spotted, and 'a lot of bird action'. This is part of a broader vision for the wider environment – 'a streetscape ... a food forest idea' – around the garden.



LESSONS AND TIPS

Jackie and Shah's advice to anyone who is hesitant to start or to start something on their own is to 'take that first step and act ... stop thinking about it and just do it'. At the same time, with an abundance of ideas between them, the project also has had to fit in with the balance of their lives, so their advice is to 'go slow', not have expectations, 'let things evolve', and be flexible. 'The garden and library can just be there to be enjoyed by anyone without having to do anything else to it. People can interact with it in their own way. But the options are there to grow it, and for others too'.

From her experience with other community endeavours, Shah concludes:

They're all such giving communities ... Everyone is doing different things, but it's all in the same spirit.

Through the Street Library, Jackie has created an ongoing project, Song Of The Animals – a crowd illustrated online ebook for children that celebrates Australian wildlife and ecosystems. The project is open for anyone to get involved here: www.letswrite.community/projects/the-song-of-the-animals.html



<https://letswrite.community/projects/start-your-own-community-project.html>

STROMLO GARDEN LIL LIBRARY



<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3107086102890420>

LIL STREET LIBRARIES



<https://www.facebook.com/Lilstreetlibraries>

STREET LIBRARY NETWORK



www.streetlibrary.org.au



<https://streetlibrary.org.au/p/digital-flyer-promoting-library/>



PUB TRIVIA

Without the Pub

Jeremy Jones

Arriving in Canberra in 2014 to study at the ANU, Jeremy began doing interviews and trivia quizzes for the student radio. Having experienced the UK's pub culture during a university exchange, he missed a sense of community at the ANU Uni Pub.

To build its community atmosphere, he joined others to host events such as trivia and comedy nights. After a fundraiser event for The Smith Family, the ABC invited Jeremy and his trivia partner Al Thorne to do a weekly segment on ABC Radio. He also hosted a weekly program on community radio.

Jeremy says that people of his parents' generation would often keep in touch with their school friends through their local pub, where 'you just know that every Thursday you're going to go and see your mates'. The real fun in the trivia nights was not so much in the trivia questions as in the opportunity they provided to catch up with mates and meet other players. Then his role 'was to give people enough light entertainment so they had a reason to keep returning'.

Jeremy is passionate about 'people and place', bringing people together and organising fun. He describes the pub as 'that third place:

you've got your home, your workplace and then somewhere else ... a place to be fed, socialise and catch up with people'.

Pub trivia became a business and source of income for Jeremy and Al. The business took a direct hit when pub venues were shut down during COVID. Jeremy remembers lining up for Centrelink 'because I had no idea what else to do'. Waiting for Centrelink payments was his lowest point until he and Al quickly realised they could 'do trivia online – and we had about 100 people.' People were chatting on the group chat, which became an opportunity 'where we were commentating on the news and what was happening ... a sort of a meeting point for people to understand what was going on and have a sense of normality.' Jeremy and Al started doing online trivia evenings, initially one night a week and then every night. 'It gave us something to do.' Eventually about 400 people were playing, mainly Canberra people, but also from Melbourne and including people in isolation. People began sending donations, 'and that added up ... they were really nice. They'd send us cases of beer and stuff like that.'

Jeremy hopes online trivia provided people with something fun and a sense of community – the buzz of meeting new people.



'We tried to build a community from that base ... and when new players came along, it was like being in a venue. ... And I really hope that in that last year of lockdown, we gave people something exciting to do.'



LESSONS LEARNT

I think when the rug got pulled from under us and we couldn't present live trivia, we realised that our online trivia was connecting people. We realised our value. What our value added to a venue was regular customers coming in and having a good time and, you know they're going to have a good time with us. It really defined what we did.

Jeremy learned that people want to help and that it's okay to ask for help. 'If you ask someone to help, they try and work out what they can do to assist. We also learned about being vulnerable and honest about the situation - this is the problem we're trying to solve.'

...taking that leap of faith. Everyone is pretty much on your team. People are happy to give you time and talk to you and open doors.

Jeremy advocates starting a conversation with someone about your idea and then chatting with your friend about it.

That's really the biggest step because you're like, 'Am I crazy in thinking that?'. Your friend is likely to validate your idea. Maybe there are a few problems, and you then reach out to the next best person.

While it might seem daunting at the time, he points out that 'rejection is the worst case scenario. No one is going to hate you for trying.'

... reach out to the best people to try and do something.

Jeremy 'loved Canberra to bits' but was offered a dream opportunity to host the ABC Radio's Midwest and Wheatbelt Breakfast Show in Western Australia out of the beach town of Geraldton. He says some of the lessons learnt from building a community, asking for help and being vulnerable are coming in handy, albeit this time by the beach.



www.abc.net.au/radio/people/jeremy-jones/13894970

KEY MESSAGES

Community development activities can take many forms. The experiences of the people behind the initiatives highlighted in this booklet have a consistent message: *Take the first step and act!* The following ideas might also be useful to anyone wishing to develop their own community activities.

JUST DO IT!

- Align activities with your skills and passions.
- Write down what you want to do.
- Discuss your idea with friends and neighbours – they might want to join in.
- Start slow. Let things evolve. Be flexible.

REACH OUT

- Reach out to any community groups that are doing something similar.
- Reach out – to community organisations for free services, to community development workers, to networks and resources such as Buy Nothing groups or Street Library networks, to politicians and local businesses.
- Remember that there are enormous reservoirs of goodwill in the community. People are generous and may want to help in different ways.
- Remember also that the energy and enthusiasm of young people are great assets.

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

- Connect with your neighbourhood. There are many ways of doing this, such as flyers in letter boxes, phone contact lists, email lists, Facebook and WhatsApp groups.
- Take advantage of the power of online tools to promote information sharing and community connectedness. The initiatives featured in this booklet include group chats, online art classes, zoom disco, trivia online and online quizzes.
- Think about funding, where it will come from, and whether your initiative will be sustainable.

BE AWARE OF OTHERS' SENSITIVITIES

- Be aware of any cultural and religious sensitivities which your project might involve.
- Be aware of the need to make spaces safer for people with disability and health issues – by observing masking, social distancing, and ventilation, and by providing online alternatives to all face-to-face meetings.



Give it a go. Just do it. Don't wait for permission.

Things can just happen

Karlya Parnell



REFLECTIONS

Dark Clouds and Silver Linings

Catastrophic events – of which the COVID pandemic has been only one in recent times – underline the vital importance of social connection. When COVID began in 2020, there was a huge burst of mutual aid groups around the world, with extraordinary work by volunteers to provide food and share information¹. Since then, Australia has had over 10 million cases and over 14,000 deaths², with massive impacts of grief, illness and disability, loss of jobs, financial stress – and rising mental health problems. The need for ways to connect and be supported in safe environments remains urgent for people who are still isolated or isolating – and for whom the recent lifting of restrictions continues to make going out of the home a life-threatening prospect.

The pandemic has shown up the cracks in support systems, particularly for Indigenous people, the elderly, aged care and group homes, people with disabilities, as well as people who are unemployed, casual workers and those unable to work from home. Indigenous groups and people with disability have had to support each other and rely on mutual aid groups to keep each other alive. The increasing cost of living has created even more need for support, as evidenced in the stories by the Gunnawal Street Pantries and HelpingACT.

Political debate is often framed as a binary choice between relying on government versus relying on the private and voluntary sectors for providing mutual support.

In reality, all sectors have important roles to play. Left unsupported, volunteers can burn out and initiatives can flounder for want of resources. Even modest support from governments can help communities to mobilise their basic human goodwill.

The initiatives featured in this booklet represent ‘silver linings’ amidst the grim reality that many people continue to experience. While some people and organisations created safe outdoor community spaces, one of the positive aspects has been the emergence of new ways to connect at a distance and online – with benefits for access, convenience, saving time and the environment.

Above all, these stories highlight the generosity of Canberra’s communities, the creativity of its people and their capacity to self-organise. Community organisations, charities and government agencies are collaborating. The community’s confidence, resilience and strength have grown. The initiatives shine a spotlight on the enormous community spirit in Canberra – the ‘GeneroCity’ of Canberrans, as Mohammed Ali of HelpingACT calls it – and why MP Andrew Leigh calls Canberra ‘the social capital of Australia’.

Connected and cohesive communities are resilient communities ... How do we learn from this and work out what to do better next time, outside of crises – so networks exist that we can tap into?
Tim Hollo

1 https://actionnetwork.org/ticketed_events/together-apart-where-are-we?source=direct_link&

2 <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/case-numbers-and-statistics#covid19-situation-overview> - accessed 5 September 2022.

RESOURCES

These resources have been recommended by CDNet's community development workers

www.communityfirstdevelopment.org.au/first-nations-approach-community-development

www.nurtureddevelopment.org/who-we-are/cormac-russell

Asset-based community development

www.bankofideas.com.au

www.community-wealth.org/content/asset-based-community-development-institute-abcd-depaul-university

www.jeder.com.au

Placemaking

www.codesignstudio.com.au/guides-and-resources-listing/placemaking-dictionary

www.placemakingactionweek.com

Neighbourhood Platforms for Connecting and Collaborating

www.neighborpower.org

www.neighbourhoodconnect.org.au

www.newdream.org/topics/community-building

Books

When People Care Enough to Act: ABCD in Action (2006) by Mike Green with Henry Moore & John O'Brien

Love where you Live, Creating Emotionally Engaging Places (2014) by Peter Kageyama

Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next) (2020) by Dean Spade

Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual aid during the Covid19 crisis (2020) edited by Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar
www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12sdx5v

Living Democracy: An Ecological Manifesto for the End of the World As We Know It (2022) by Tim Hollo
www.livingdemocracy.org.au

Rekindling Democracy: A Guide for Professional's Working in Citizen Space (2020) by Cormac Russell

USEFUL CONTACTS

ACTCOSS

Social justice advocacy and capacity building for the community sector

www.actcoss.org.au

Email: actcoss@actcoss.org.au

Capital Region Community Services (was Belconnen Community Service)

www.crcs.com.au/services

Community Services 1 (was Southside Community Service)

www.communityservices1.org/community-support-services

Communities@Work

www.commsatwork.org/services/community/communitydevelopment

Email: communitydevelopment@commsatwork.org

Northside Community Service

www.northside.asn.au/housing-engagement/community-youth-engagement

Woden Community Service

www.wcs.org.au/get-involved/community-development

CatholicCare Canberra & Goulburn

www.cgccatholic.org.au/services-directory/catholic-support-services/catholic-social-services

Meridian (formerly AIDS Action Council of ACT) Senior and Aged Care

Support for older LGBTI+ persons and people living with or impacted by HIV

www.meridianact.org.au

Email: healthyageing@meridianact.org.au

Gulanga Program Supports the ACT community sector organisations to develop and improve upon good, culturally appropriate practice standards

Email: gulanga@actcoss.org.au

The following link on the CDNet website provides further useful contacts:

<https://www.cdnet.org.au/resources/web-links.html>

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Jackie Neill and Shah Petreski – Stromlo Garden Street Library

Karlya Parnell – A community development worker reflects

Daniel Sanchez – Toolangi Community Housing

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ABOUT STORIES OF CONNECTION AND RESILIENCE IN A TIME OF COVID PROJECT

This booklet presents stories and key messages from individual and community-based responses to COVID which have inspired community development workers in the ACT. The project was conducted by the Community Development Network of the ACT & Region (CDNet), supported by an ACT Government Community Connections Grant.

QUOTES FROM THE STORIES

People just did what they thought needed to be done rather than waiting for an organisation or being told what to do ... it just happened so organically. Karlya Parnell

Just get out there and start, start talking to people and bring your ideas ... If you think you have an idea, give it a try and anything can happen. Paul McGrath

Reach out to the best people to try and do something. Jeremy Jones

The important message is that there is this really solid network around Canberra of people sharing skills and stuff and time. Kathy Ehmann

They're all such giving communities ... Everyone is doing different things, but it's all in the same spirit. Shah Petreski

My hat's off to the generosity of Canberra. Mohammed Ali

WHAT IS CDNET?

CDNet's email list connects and informs over 2400 members in the ACT community sector. It also runs professional development forums, workshops and networking events for community workers and volunteers. CDNet is supported by an annual grant from the ACT Government through the ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS).



www.cdnet.org.au



secretariat@cdnet.org.au

HOW TO JOIN THE CDNET EMAIL LIST



www.cdnet.org.au/mailling-list/subscribe-manage.html