

Starting from Scratch

Presentation to Victorian Seniors Conference 2009 by Jim Thornley

My “retirement” came early. In 2002, 6 months off my 65th birthday, I was invited into my employer’s office at 5.10 one afternoon, thanked, and presented with a redundancy cheque.

Two years later, we moved from Melbourne to Warrnambool where I had family. We were strangers and outsiders in a country town. At 67, I didn’t want to wait 20 years to become “a local”, so I set out to build a new life and become part of the community.

We lived on the edge of a public housing area and stumbled into the first meeting of a local Residents’ Group which was being formed in a newly created “outreach house”. These were both part of a state government WAVE project, part of the *Community Capacity Building Initiative 2000-2004*. We became involved in both the Outreach House and Residents’ Group, working with local housing area folk and professional community workers.

After giving a short presentation on behalf of the Residents’ Group at the final WAVE meeting, I was approached by the pastor of the local Church. He stressed that his Church was interested in our local community and had developed some outreach programs. Now I had been a stranger to Church life for some 45 years, but attended first as a courtesy to the Pastor and to help build bridges with the community – only to have my dormant faith revived so that in time I became an active member and worshipper.

Perhaps that enabled me on 31 May 2006 to have my last drink; I had for 35 years been a heavy drinker (15-20 drinks a day). This cleared the way for a more productive life!

After a while, I started a “Community Lunch” program at the Church; every Thursday local folk were invited to a free lunch put on by a dedicated team of Church people - no strings attached. The aim was to provide a venue where local folk could find companionship (and tucker) and feel at home in a Church setting.

Through contacts at the outreach house, I learned about a meeting to set up a Men’s Shed. I blundered into the first meeting, only to hear all participants outline their role in the community organisation they represented. Speaking last, I said “I’m Jim, retired, and think a Men’s Shed is a good idea”. I’m currently secretary and we are at last preparing for the formal launch.

At a Men’s Health seminar at Hall’s Gap with some Men’s Shed proponents in 2006 I heard about OM:NI, an older men’s discussion group promoted by COTA. It sounded good, and seemed an activity in the Men’s Shed program that I could implement – not being a shed-type bloke! With great help from COTA and other OM:NI members in Melbourne, we started the Warrnambool OM:NI group in late 2006. In time I became one of the “gang of four” who COTA got to lead the OM:NI movement in Victoria.

Involvement in COTA led to my being trained as a COTA peer educator for the *beyondmaturityblues* program. With *beyondblue* training, we speak to groups on the

issue of depression in older people – how it is not a normal part of ageing, is often caused by chemical imbalance, is treatable and is not a sign of weakness.

When I moved to Warrnambool, I had continued as a Tax Help volunteer, also registering my interest in volunteer paralegal work. I let Tax Help go to make way for university Accounting students, but my legal enquiry led to an invitation to train for the Court Network. Nine of us were trained to support users of the Court system. We give one day a week each to attend in teams of 3, provide support (and coffee!) to users and active help, referral and counseling where there is a need. Court Network was founded in Melbourne 30 years ago.

One day my colleague Michael was late, explaining that he had been interviewing someone for a role as a Community Visitor. This is a Commonwealth scheme to provide companionship to aged residents in nursing homes for approximately 2 hours per fortnight. Seemed to me I could find that time, so I asked Michael if I could join his team. I now play cards for an hour a week with a couple of old fellows. We play on a table in the corridor, and our presence there seems to spark up the place.

I take with Peter with me, he's a mate from Church who had extensive surgery recently after a head-on car crash. Peter has carers helping him with his daily life. But Peter and I together provide care and support to a couple of old men. In this role, Peter himself is a carer. Peter, the one with "short term memory loss" is the only one of us that can remember whose deal it is!!!

Michael, it turns out, was also the Chairman of Lifeline South West, so I joined Lifeline as a trainee. Their training in counseling is first rate, especially in dealing with folk who are suicidal. All my formal volunteer roles, especially Lifeline, require initial and ongoing training. Often, the studies and experiences overlap so I'm better in each role than I would be doing one alone. I'm learning and changing more quickly now at 72 than at any other time of my life.

An old work-mate said recently "Jim, I was at your 65th birthday. You're 5 years younger now than you were then!"

As a pensioner, I don't see why folk should be out there working to put bread on my table. Call it pride if you like, but I need to put at least the value of my pension back into the community.

All these activities, together with the catalog distribution business we run, involve interaction with our community. Every day we have things that must be done, activities that must be attended. From being an old bankrupt with no community involvement, I now have a full, busy and incredibly rewarding life - enriched by the friendship of many of the best people in our community.