

BUILING ON OUR PAST, SHAPING OUR TOMORROW

“The House that built me: memories from my time at

Sussex Neighbourhood House”

After retiring from 30 years of full time employment in office administration, and management private assistant roles within the health sector: I wasn't ready to switch off my computer and pick up my crochet hook.

I decided instead, to check out what that very interesting building on 233 Sussex Street, Coburg North, which I drove past every day on my way to work, actually did. Having heard conversations from friends of the House, I was aware that they ran great programs, informative classes, fun events and occasional child care for the general community to mention just a few and I learnt that the House was owned by the Moreland City Council, and operated with a Committee of Management, a paid Manager, staff and tutors and plenty of volunteers.

So on a Friday afternoon in November 2006 I walked into Sussex Neighbourhood House (SNH) and asked if they were in need of volunteers. “Well, it really depends on what area you are interested in,” I was told. I offered my resume and portfolio and said, “office admin and ESL would be good.” The Manager took her time looking through the pages, handed them back to me and said very seriously, “when can you start?” “Next Monday would be fine with me”, I said, “what time?”

So began two decades of my journey of being part of building bridges into the community. I found great joy, and deeply rewarding experiences - moments that shaped me and brought much satisfaction; it was a journey of heart and hands.

From this



On the 9th of August 1991 SNH was officially opened by the then Premier of Victoria Joan Kirner and Hazel Hawke, wife of the local federal member and Prime Minister, Bob Hawke. Sue Harris managed the House until 2012, and assisted by staff and volunteers, strove to provide a relevant hub that would support, engage, connect and excite the local community through offering lifelong learning, social activities and by responding to community needs. This was evident in the choice of programs and events that empowered and nurtured those who visited the House.



After that initial interview, I did start my journey at the House on the following Monday, and I did spend time in both the office and the English as a Second Language classes.

Stepping into this new role felt so different. The culture was warm and easy-going, yet remarkably productive. People listened. Ideas were welcomed. There was room

to breathe, to grow, and to contribute meaningfully. It wasn't just about getting things done - it was about how we do it together; and for that, I'm deeply grateful.

With plenty of help from Leigh and Joanne, I soon reached a place where I began to enjoy myself, soaking in the atmosphere of a busy House, and truly loving the work.



I looked forward to each day spent at the reception desk, meeting and greeting people, handling phone enquires, and having conversations with people who wanted to know what programs the House offered while happily scrutinising our programs. I learnt to be aware of meeting time lines for the next semester enrolments and just completing daily office routines. I was surprised by the collaborative, supportive, and motivating atmosphere of the House and the “warm fuzzy” feeling it engendered in its visitors.

It was enjoyable to sit with a cuppa around the kitchen table sharing my latest batch of muffins and sharing the current news from class attendees on their way to Computer, Yoga, Pottery, Sewing and Quilting, social groups, Languages, and the Knitting Circle. There was also public access to a computer in the kitchen, which became quite important to an increasing number of people in the community; giving them a helping hand with new technology when they needed was always welcomed.

If it was a nice sunny day I would check out the garden in the Grotto, and refresh the cactus collection and we would light up the BBQ for special occasions. Because of my love of cooking, I enjoyed helping to cater for social events and always had a jar of my lemon spread available for our “share” table (a photo of which was used on the cover of the 2011-2012 AGM Annual Report).



I was wrong about not picking up my crochet/knitting needles. There were so many opportunities for me to put my crochet hook and knitting needles to good use creating contributions to varying projects organised to support community needs. I kept up a steady supply of beanies, scarves, hot water bottle covers, and knee rugs; with one of my rugs featuring in a display of “Our yarn storming installation in the Victoria Mall” at the 2012 Coburg Carnivale.





I began to realise that my experiences in this House were going to shape me - not just in the moment, but for the future. And I soon learned to forget the Ausy vernacular when I assisted Gianna the tutor, teach English to a mixed cohort of people from non-English speaking countries.

To this



During the years there were many changes made to the property, with repairs, painting and plastering, extensions, ramps, car park and play-round reconfigured. Programs and activities soon filled the new spaces. In the later years, as we grew, it became increasingly difficult to deliver services from the old House; affecting the ability to run a sustainable organisation.

In 2001 a life-size mural was painted on the Rising Street frontage of the House. "Sussex Neighbourhood House Values its Volunteers" appeared in the name of the mural and expressed the community's gratitude for the thousands of valuable hours that volunteers offered to the House. The mural remained in place until the move to 7 Prospect Street.

I think Sue appreciated that I was computer literate, especially during a time when personal computers, the internet, and broadband were becoming increasingly common. Businesses were starting to introduce computer programs, which were beginning to be a "must have" commodity, quickly taking the place of the calculator and typewriter. And we were learning to communicate via Email, Facebook and Twitter social media platforms.

In mid 2006 The House was granted \$50,000 from the Department of Victorian Communities and \$25,000 from Moreland Council towards the first steps in relocating to a more suitable building.

We had no idea at the time just how long it would take to move into the new facility. The journey was marked by numerous delays and challenges that took years to overcome. Strong opposition from the community and Moreland Councillors to the proposed sites created significant setbacks. The process was further complicated by

a long history of legal disputes, false starts, and the struggle to secure adequate funding. We had to advocate tirelessly for the new House. Finally, after 12 years of persistence, the new facility at 7 Prospect Street opened its doors in January 2018 - ushering in a new era for SNH.

In 2007 I joined the Committee of Management and undertook to serve as Assistant Secretary and then Secretary until 2016 when I accepted the Chair of the Committee of Governance (CoG) and served for six years.



The years were filled with committee meetings, and building a strong CoG and attending to the business of running a very busy semester calendar. After Sue's retirement in 2012 new managers Suzanne, Frances, Elizabeth, Victor and Joe stepped into manage and through their steady commitment and visionary leadership, they helped bring out the best in the House and its people - encouraging teamwork, unity, and a belief in what was possible.

Even though space continued to be a difficult problem, we managed to run some first-rate programs and events; Computer Programs, Languages - English and Arabic, Sewing, Pattern Making, Quilters Circle, Mixed Media Program, Arts and Craft, Pottery & Mosaic, Yoga, Creative Movement and Dance, Neighbourhood Friends, Friday Friends, Scrabble Club, Family History, Walking Group, Book Club.

We operated a very successful Scallywags Children's Centre Occasional Child Care Service and also ran the Moreland Volunteer Groups Initiative which comprised of running training for volunteers. Some of the courses were: Governance Training for Committee members, Financial Records and Budgets for Clubs, Asthma Management, Food Handling and Safety, Anaphylaxis and First Aid.

And did you ever wonder how we created and distributed the Programs? Like this!



After using our desktop skills to design each semester's Program Guide and running them through the trusty Xerox photo copier, they were folded, sorted, and divided into bundles for distribution around the letterboxes of the target drop zone by a very dedicated community-minded bunch of local legends with willing hands and warm hearts.

In 2009 the House won both the Adult Community Education Learner of the Year, and the Leader Newspaper's Melbourne's Overall Favourite Cultural and Community Organisation. Winning these awards was very helpful for raising the profile of SNH.



Also in 2009 the House underwent another "facelift", which was to the House what some of those TV makeover programs do. We marvelled at the response when we put the call out for volunteers. They engaged willingly, displaying "community at its best"

The “flagship” of the project was the image of the front of the House, with the portrayal of the sparkling creek, and the newly adopted House colours. The Scallywag’s play yard was resurfaced and a new shade sail added. Don, my husband, and I became involved in renewing the paintwork from top to bottom. New bold signage was erected. It all happened on “the smell of an oily rag,” plus a raffle, and a sausage sizzle or two!

The House became a leader in regards to social media in the Neighbourhood House sector and our social media platform such as Facebook, was referred to as a “portal” for the local community organisations requesting inclusion of their activity and events. We also included Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter and You Tube in our social media.

In 2012, Consumer Affairs Victoria introduced changes to our Constitution. In keeping with our commitment to good governance and responsiveness to the evolving needs of our community, the Committee of Management took the time to carefully review and revise the document. We welcomed the opportunity to update it in ways that better reflected and supported our operations, Vision, Values, and Goals - as well as the unique character of our House. The result was a thoughtfully shaped Constitution, designed to serve the House well into the future.

2013 Street Party





International Day of People with Disability and the end of 2013 held a Sussex Street Picnic, thanks to Moreland City Council for their support of the event.

In 2014 a survey was taken by the ANHLC of the 371 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria, I was pleased to learn that the main benefits in coming to a Neighbourhood House is to: “Spend time with other people: Meet new people: Make friends: Improve personal wellbeing and confidence: Develop a new interest or activity: Improve health: Help the community: and Improve job skills”.

So you can see why our efforts were targeted to meeting those expectations. The success of our classes wasn’t just measured by attendance or outcomes - it was in the laughter, the thrill of learning new things, life stories exchanged, and the friendships that grew stronger. We supported one another, learned from each other, and built something meaningful together.



In 2015 The Sussex Skylarks Choir was nurtured and blossomed and flew into the community. Rehearsing at the House and performing at many events during the

years, like The AGM, Coburg Village Coles Christmas Carols, Dorothy Impy Home, Sod Turning Ceremony, Sausage Sizzles and events in the park.



As both Secretary and Chair of the CoG, I was happy to represent the House at House and Community events, Information Seminars on Governance and Finance, Focus Groups on the new Act, Human Rights, and Council community planning, Moreland City Council and Project Meetings, Bunning's Sausage Sizzles, and I also enjoyed spending time supporting the office staff when required.



In November 2016 we were thrilled to receive a letter from Lizzie Blandthorn State Member for Pascoe Vale in the Victorian Legislative Assembly, detailing her speech in the Victorian Parliament in regard to attending the House's 2016-17 AGM. She acknowledged the amount of work that was being put into the new facility by the

Manager and Committee of Management to house the new facility. Lizzie also acknowledged my long association with the House, and I was deeply honoured to be awarded a lifetime membership of the House in recognition of the years I've had the privilege to volunteer and contribute to our community.

The New Building – a new era:

From This



To This





On the 31st January 2018, in my speech at the Opening Ceremony of the new facility, I quote: “Today is the culmination of years of advocacy for the establishment of SNH occupying its new premises. Our sincere thanks to Moreland City Council for their continued support and their willingness to establish a new hub to be committed to providing lifelong learning, and social activities that would be inclusive, accessible and sustainable for the local community’s connectedness, here in North Coburg.

Today you bear witness to the celebration of a building that will likely be unparalleled during our lifetime. Be proud, take ownership, protect the place, and above all, enjoy the experience when you come on site.”

We wanted to maintain the House’s identity and purpose when moving into the Pascoe Vale Community Centre. We were also going to be taking on broader site management responsibilities. The extra space provided opportunities for partnerships and networking. But importantly, we considered that the welcoming, informal gathering and entry spaces would be very important to promote our values and provide a warm ambience for those who would use the space – to linger, and provide informal meeting spaces - where people could have a cuppa and mingle. And yes we brought our kitchen table concept with us and called it our “Chatty Table”. This was integral to the feel of a welcoming space and at the end of the day, the most important thing was that people felt welcome and valued.

To celebrate the open spaces of our new facility, we joined with YMCA Active Moreland, for the Pascoe Vale Festival At The Pool. The collaboration of both parties to bring the event to the community was an overwhelming success. And for me it was an occasion when I used my hook to crochet a colourful Afgan rug to be one of the raffle prizes;-only one of so many attractions, from information booths and

activity stalls, Sussex Skylarks Choir, food vendors, community groups, to free access for the afternoon, to the Pascoe Vale Outdoor Pool.



During the COVID lockdown years, we faced unprecedented challenges - but they also became a catalyst for growth. We are not always able to measure the strength of our colleagues until something like COVID-19 happens, and I express my very sincere thanks to Management, staff, tutors, volunteers and CoG. As a unit we embraced technology out of necessity, and in doing so, we became surprisingly savvy with digital tools that had once seemed daunting. From video conferencing, to online training and digital outreach, we expanded our technological capabilities in ways that not only kept us connected but also strengthened our operations. What began as a survival strategy evolved into a powerful advantage, enabling us to work more flexibly, engage more broadly, and future-proof our House. It was a steep learning curve, but one we climbed together - emerging more resilient, more connected, and more capable than ever before.

In December 2021, an end of year celebration was held to celebrate the return to the House with the end of the COVID-19. We were able to meet and greet friends and to enjoy each other's company whilst celebrating the festive season. It was great to see so many faces return to the House after such a long period of time.

So over the years, our organisation grew from a modest community centre into a vibrant, welcoming hub - a place where energy and purpose meet. We weren't just offering services; we were able to do so much more in created spaces. Office rentals became homes for group initiatives. Meeting rooms buzzed with ideas, plans and partnerships were formed. We proudly supported and auspiced projects that might otherwise never have progressed smoothly, like the Pascoe Vale Food Collective and the Merri Community Shed. We also welcomed the Merri-bek Toy Library and the Pascoe Vale Repair Café.

Children worked and laughed through homework clubs and holiday and weekend programs. Artists were encouraged to display their art work on our walls. We started a Library, and offered public access to the Net and use of a computer. The Community Garden took up a prominent position on our front lawn and bloomed with more than vegetables - it grew connection, care, and shared ownership.



Every corner of our site echoed with activity, collaboration, and the quiet strength of people working together. But it wasn't just about what we did - it was about what we made possible. The community began to seek out our expanded diverse programs and services and participants embraced the fresh opportunities available. Our modern spaces and purpose built functionally designed areas for ease of use and multi-purpose areas were in frequent use by groups and organisations. It was our dream come true - to see the House in full-time use, buzzing with activity across weekdays, evenings, Saturdays and Sundays.

Sustainability remains a cornerstone of our work. Our community and volunteers have made remarkable contributions to reducing waste and encouraging greener practices.

The Merri-bek e-Bike initiative was launched, offering residents a no- cost two- week trial of an e-Bike. Since inception, the program has supported 40 local residents to experience the benefits of cycling, encouraging healthier lifestyles, and reduced reliance on cars.



And we are still teaching many programs that we started off with in 1991, plus many new and innovative ones like; Digital Mentoring, Makers, Menders & Basketry, Youth Artspace, Digital Skills for Everyday Life, From Sketch to Screen, Understanding Smartphones, Mat Pilates, Keyboard Lessons for Kids, Ukulele Intermediate, Gardening Social Group, and Introduction to Gardening. Lego Masters and Chess Club, Cultural Cooking, Let's Shoot, Intro to Screen and Multi Media.

House participation figures from 2006 – 2025

	2006	2025
Volunteers	29	125
Programs	30	106
Participation	880/yr	2160/yr

Shaping our Tomorrow

As we stand at the threshold of tomorrow, we carry with us the strength of our shared past - three+ decades of dedication, growth, and community spirit. What began as a small neighbourhood initiative has blossomed into a vibrant hub of connection, creativity, and care. Every challenge met, every milestone reached, and every hand extended in support has shaped the foundation we now stand on.

But the story doesn't end here.

The future is not something that simply arrives - it's something we shape, together. It lives in the ideas we nurture, the people we empower, and the values we uphold. It lives in the courage to adapt, the willingness to listen, and the belief that even small actions can spark lasting change.

To those who will carry this work forward: know that you are not starting from scratch - you are continuing a legacy. Let your vision be bold, your compassion unwavering, and your commitment to community your guiding light. You have everything it takes to shape a tomorrow that's inclusive, resilient, and full of promise.

Thank you to all of you who support what SHN is doing today, and I invite you to celebrate with me, the diverse and talented people who support the House and the wonderful opportunities of sharing a Neighbourhood House in our community.

As I close this chapter of my 20 years of volunteering at SNH, I look back with gratitude, and will carry with me not just memories, but moments of laughter, learning, and deep connection. I have come to realise that volunteering here wasn't just about giving my time, it was about growing alongside people who care, who show up, and who make a difference every day. More than the buildings and meetings, it's the people I'll remember most. Colleagues, friends, and members of the House, you've filled my years with joy, learning, and purpose. Thank you for being part of my journey.

So as I retire I praise my Lord, and maybe I'll just pick up my crochet needle, and continue to enjoy the quiet joy of creating something new. But I'll always carry the spirit of this House with me, remembering it was a journey of heart and hands; full of memories, and hope for all that's still to come.