

NEWTOWN

Neighbourhood Centre

New(town) Beginnings #19

Dear Neighbour,

The month of February brings Seniors Festival - a chance for elderly members of the community to make new friends or get together with old ones at an array of local community events.

In the spirit of Seniors Week, we want to celebrate the important role seniors play in our community and celebrate our own Multicultural Social Support Groups.

This is a story about Newtown Neighbourhood Centre's longest-standing program, which has literally supported the births, deaths, marriages (and everything inbetween!) of our multicultural community in the Inner West. Some members no longer live in Newtown but still hold a deep connection to the area from when they first came to Australia.

The group initially launched in 1986 to support Greek, Former Yugoslav, Arabic and Vietnamese residents – the four main ageing migrant groups in the Marrickville Council area at that time. Many were socially isolated or unable to work due to injury or language barriers and the groups became a way to create connection and form bonds.

“Collectively they're a real power to be reckoned with. Many have endured the horror of war and the trauma of relocating to a new country, so I think they're often driven by empathy and understanding” says Dushanka, NNC's Program Coordinator of the group for over 30 years.

With funding being scarce and longevity within the community services sector being rare, we know we must be doing something right when the program is still running today.

Twice a week, a group of elderly people from Former Yugoslavia, gather to chat, play games, share meals, go on adventures, learn and collaborate. But as a group they are so much more than that.

As the only group in Sydney for this community, it's the highlight of the week for the participants (whose average age ranges from 75-85 years). Some members travel from as far as Liverpool and Blacktown to attend.

Today the oldest member is 93 and still attends every week, with 2-3 new members joining on average once-a-month. And while no one from the original group is now left, with the last member moving into aged care 4 years ago, the group members share an unbreakable bond and still maintain contact with all who are now in care and visit them once a year.

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

1 Bedford St/PO Box 19, Newtown NSW 2042 | ABN 96 884 462 833
E admin@newtowncentre.org | P +61 2 9564 7333 | F +61 2 9519 2509 | W newtowncentre.org

I was fortunate enough to chat with Dushanka who shared with me some of the highlights for the group:

“I think one of the group’s proudest moments was when they successfully lobbied the state government and local member at the time, Carmel Tebbutt, to install a lift at Newtown Station”, she explains.

“As the group members became older and less mobile, accessibility started to become an issue.”

While the central location of our Centre opposite Newtown train station was beneficial, the lack of lift still meant it was prohibitive to members who needed walking aids. After lots of letter writing, meetings and petitions, the lift was finally unveiled on November 5, 2012.

“It was such a powerful moment for all. We celebrated with a party and one of the local papers came and took a photo. You’ve never seen such happier, beaming smiles,” recalled Dushanka.

But this is just one of many achievements with the group also winning a prestigious award for translating useful fact sheets, developing materials for public service departments, and as part of a collaboration with other partners in aged care they were finalists in the 2016 Multicultural Marketing awards.

The group also have a very strong sense of social justice, which is evident in the activities they choose to support. Every year they proudly support two main charities: Cancer Council’s Biggest Morning Tea and Wrap with Love, a charity that delivers warm knitted blankets to those in need of warmth. They always celebrate International Women’s Day and the men in the group come along to listen and learn.

Food has always played a central theme, with the group regularly sharing stories over scrumptious treats. Back in the 90s they helped develop Ethnic Food Services to incorporate culturally appropriate food for the Meals on Wheels program, plus eventually a cookbook called ‘Food from Home’, which was distributed to nursing homes and libraries.

So if you’re ever walking past the Centre on a Monday or Thursday morning, and you see a group of women excitedly chatting or you smell a delicious aroma of baked treats, think of all these lifelong friendships and the power of community.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

1 Bedford St/PO Box 19, Newtown NSW 2042 | ABN 96 884 462 833
E admin@newtowncentre.org | P +61 2 9564 7333 | F +61 2 9519 2509 | W newtowncentre.org