

Community Building Demonstration Project Case Studies - Bass Coast

Oral History Project Brings Past To Life

Capturing the stories and recollections of older residents is giving the people of Victoria's Bass Coast hinterland a better understanding and appreciation of their heritage.



Department for
Victorian Communities



achieved what might otherwise have been lost forever - a creative connection for our community between the past and the future."

To the Future

Following the success of Stories of the Hinterland, further oral history projects are now planned across Bass Coast in Phillip Island, Wonthaggi and Westernport.

In addition, two historical walks and a self-guided car tour have also been developed in conjunction with Stories of the Hinterland and a series of teaching notes are being written for local schools.

"A project like this creates a real sense of order and completeness out of the chaos of the past," said Gill. "And you begin to realise you have a lot more in common with earlier generations than you first thought."

More information:

Tony Cornish
Community Building Facilitator
Bass Coast Shire Council
Phone: (03) 5671 2211
t.cornish@basscoast.vic.gov.au

DVC Gippsland
Victorian Business Centre
48 Breed St, Traralgon
Phone: (03) 5174 7308

www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au



Finding the right venue for the first performance was also critical, said Gill. "We wanted a place with a lot of atmosphere where local people actually came together. In the end Archie's Creek Hotel was the clear winner."

Our Success

After the first performance, Stories of the Hinterland was staged another four times at a range of small venues across Bass Coast including Inverloch, Ventnor and Krowera. The performance was also recorded and is now available on CD.

"The number of performances wasn't actually planned. Each one kind of grew out of the one before," explained Gill, who said the positive feedback from audiences was overwhelming.

"People felt the simplicity of the storytelling was very powerful and many family members reported getting a new insight into the hardships and triumphs of their older relatives."

Gay Garry, who played piano for the performances, said it was a very special event that took place at just the right time for the hinterland community. "In another five years many of those stories would have been lost."

Anne agreed, "Each time I performed the piece, the more beautiful I thought it was. The impact on the audience was astounding with moments of laughter, tears and stunned silence."

Another important strength of the performance, according to audience member, Paul Haar, was its ability to bring the past to life. "It filled the audience with such joy, warmth, respect and awe as I don't think I've seen before. The project has

Community Building is about local people working with government to strengthen their communities and improve the places in which they live.

It is also about government listening to what local people have to say and supporting them to develop projects that achieve their goals.

In 2002 the Victorian Government established 10 Community Building Demonstration Projects with grants from the Community Support Fund. These projects focus on neighbourhoods or towns experiencing geographic isolation or rapid social and economic change.

Each project received \$500,000 over three years to develop action plans that create positive improvements for their community by gathering the diverse knowledge, energy, ideas and resources of local people.



Background

The Creatively Connecting Communities Project focuses on the Bass Coast Shire and includes the major commercial centre of Wonthaggi and a variety of small, diverse communities such as Phillip Island and Inverloch.

The project was established in response to a growing sense of isolation and dislocation of residents in recent years caused by rapid population growth and increases in land and house prices. Supporting the local tourism industry and creating jobs for young people were also identified as important priorities.

The Creatively Connecting Communities Project has established four community representative Bass Coast Action Networks (BCANs) that are developing solutions for issues across Bass Coast, with an emphasis on self help, community cohesion and pride. These BCANs are: Transport; Employment and Training; Reconnecting the Community; and Community Support Services.

Creatively Connecting Communities is one of the Victorian Government's 10 Community Building Demonstration Projects. It is auspiced by the Bass Coast Shire Council.

Why We Started

Capturing the personal stories of older people for future generations was first put forward by the Reconnecting the Community BCAN in late 2002 as part of the Creatively Connecting Communities Project.

"The group felt there was an important task to be done in terms of connecting the past with the present in a way that was positive and meaningful," said project facilitator, Gill Heal.

After much discussion, the BCAN decided to undertake a pilot oral history project focussing on the hinterland region in the north of the Shire. Predominantly a dairy farming region, the area is becoming popular with lifestyle and hobby farmers.

According to Gill, the hinterland was an ideal place to start collecting stories because of strong family and community bonds that went back a number of generations.

The Way Forward

One of Gill's first tasks as project facilitator was to conduct a ring around of local people to form a project working party. "I started off with one name and it just snowballed," Gill recalled. "We finished up with a group of 10 people, many of whom had wanted to collect oral histories in the hinterland for some time."

The group set to work on selecting interview subjects and developing a process for conducting the interviews. "Our goal was to talk to older people who had lived in the hinterland most of their lives and remembered what life was like in their childhood," said Gill.

Local farmer and interviewer, Gillian Dakin, said she jumped at the chance of being involved.

"I don't think people's memories should die. It's so easy to lose a lot of information that is valuable to a community."

A total of 11 older people, both men and women, were interviewed as part of the project. It was left up to interviewers to find a suitable time and place to meet, and recording equipment was shared among the interviewers to capture the stories accurately.

Making It Happen

Early on the group decided to go a step beyond simply recording oral histories by weaving them together as a live performance. "We wanted to give the stories back to the community in an immediate and tangible way," explained Gill.

Once the interviews were complete, Gill and experienced journalist Catherine Watson, spent three months piecing together an overall narrative that celebrated the pioneering spirit of the hinterland. They also included excerpts from local historical publication, *The Land of the Lyrebird*, to take the story back to the early 1870s.

At the same time a community song writing workshop was held by musicians, Ian and Jane Chambers, which produced five original songs for the performance, and local actors and performers were called on to get involved.

Wonthaggi Secondary School teacher, Anne Looney, who took on the part of narrator,

recalled being hooked as soon as she read the script. "The stories fired my imagination because many of my own students are from the hinterland and it gave me a real sense of connection."

Entitled *Stories of the Hinterland*, the first performance took place at the tiny Archie's Creek Hotel and was attended by about 65 local people.

Challenges We Faced

Although the project was extremely well received, Gill admitted she faced some resistance from locals at the beginning.

Hinterland farmer Frank Garry said he was initially sceptical even though he was involved as an interviewer. "I didn't really think it was going to work, particularly the performance side of it, but the end result was something we never imagined."

Frank was so impressed with the first performance he did the mail run with the postie delivering fliers for the second.

Frank interviewed 94 year-old neighbour, Jim Caldwell. "His family were one of the first pioneers in the area and he's got a terrific memory for detail."

Another challenge faced by interviewers was making sure people didn't clam up when they turned on the tape recorder. Gillian recalled that a well timed gin and tonic helped her interviewee, Anne Russell, relax.