

# COMMUNITY PARTNERING PROJECT

## Building on hidden community and economic assets

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*In the 1990s, the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, Australia went through a decline as the power industry was restructured and workers made redundant.*

*Community Partnering was a joint Latrobe City Council and Monash University initiative to trial an ABCD approach to community and economic development.*

*Four community projects were initiated during the two years of the project. While three continued for several years afterwards, one is now over ten years old.*

### **Background**

In 1998, a Latrobe City Councillor (Tony Hanning) and several Monash University researchers (Jenny Cameron, Katherine Gibson and Arthur Veno) found out about Asset-Based Community Development and avidly read *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (by John Kretzmann and John McKnight) and watched the videos from the ABCD Institute. The group could see the power of starting not with the needs of an area but with the existing assets and resources, particularly those that are hidden. They could also see that responses to the soaring levels of unemployment in the Latrobe Valley were needs-based, with people looking outside the area for

expertise, resources and solutions. So they decided to trial an assets approach. They received funding through the Australian Research Council for the trial, with the Latrobe City Council and several of the privatised power companies providing additional funding.

### **The Project**

Community Partnering Project ran for two years in 1999 and 2000. Three local residents were employed as community researchers and they were supported by the university researchers and Council staff. The community researchers were an ex-power industry worker, a young unemployed person and a single parent. None of the community researchers had any previous training or experience in community or economic development; what they did have was first-hand experience of the impact of the power industry restructuring. The community researchers were therefore well-able to connect with others who had been impacted by the restructure. The community researchers did this by going to neighbourhood houses, training centres and other places where they could meet informally with impacted groups.

The first step was for the community researchers to tell their own story of life in the Latrobe Valley through photo-essays, which became starting points for conversation and connection with impacted groups as the photo-essays resonated with people's sense of hopelessness and despair.

But the photo-essays were only the start. Once they had been trained in ABCD the community researchers could turn conversations around and get people to identify the assets in the Latrobe Valley, particularly the skills and abilities of those who had been most heavily

**Community researchers—the key to connecting with marginalised groups.**

impacted by the restructure. Wonderful stories emerged of people's resilience, innovation and care, and people started to recognise not just the extent of hidden community activities but the host of diverse and informal economic activities they were involved in. People's sense of themselves started to shift. In place of the usual view of the unemployed and marginalised as a drain on society, people could see how they were already contributing to their community and being active in a diverse economy.

*People "got it".  
They could see  
the difference it  
made to start  
with assets and  
not needs.*

Building on people's changed sense of themselves the community researchers worked with groups to explore ideas for the things people wanted to do to build on the hidden community and economic assets. People came up with all sorts of ideas and got to test the possibilities through workshops, bus trips, brainstorming sessions and so on. Out of this period of play and experimental thinking four ideas emerged that groups were keen to work on—a cyber-circus, a community garden, a community work-shed and a Santa's Workshop.

In the final stage of the project the community and university researchers worked with each group to get the projects up and running.

### **The ABCD Process**

The Community Partnering Project was founded on the principles of ABCD. The project focussed on the groups most heavily impacted by the restructuring of the power industry. These groups were positioned as the primary asset of the Latrobe Valley, and the project worked with their skills and abilities, ideas and dreams. To help reveal people's assets, the project used a Portrait of Gifts; but it was used as a starting point for conversations between the community researchers and participating groups—it was not used as a comprehensive survey.

Secondary assets—community organisations and groups, the local council, businesses and so on—were then drawn on to support the projects that the groups wanted to pursue.

### **What worked well**

People who had been so badly impacted by the restructuring of the power industry "got it". They were all too familiar being treated as a problem; whereas the ABCD approach was an opportunity to create something with other people, and in the words of one participant "put back into the community what we've got out of it ourselves". People, even in the most desperate of situations, relished the opportunity to do something for someone else.

### **Challenges**

The biggest challenge was sustaining the four projects once the two-year funding for Community Partnering ceased. In the final months the community and university researchers worked with the groups to help prepare them for the change. The cyber-circus folded in the first twelve months after Community Partnering finished, the community garden and community work-shed continued for several more years, and Santa's Workshop is ongoing. The key lesson, that subsequent projects based on Community Partnering have put into practice, is to build strong relationships early on with secondary assets like councils and community organisations so they can provide an ongoing support role.



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See the [Resource Kit \(Shifting Focus\)](#) and Videos (It's In Our Hands: [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)).

See also the stories on Santa's Workshop; and Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Garden

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