

LATROBE VALLEY COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL GARDENS

An enormous undertaking



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

Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens was a project that a group of dedicated local residents put their hearts and souls into.

However, after almost four years of hard work, the group decided to close.

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Background

Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens (LVCEG) started in 1999 as part of the Community Partnering Project. This was a joint action research project between Latrobe City Council and Monash University that used ABCD to initiate community and economic development projects. As part of the Community Partnering Project a mixed group of people who were unemployed, sole parents, retired and had various disabilities came up with the idea of developing a community and environmental garden for the Latrobe Valley. The Community Partnering project team worked with this group to start the garden.

The Project

LVCEG started in October 1999, on an old caravan park site near the centre of the town of Morwell. The group worked

through the local council to gain access to the three hectare (or almost 8 acre) site. There was tremendous excitement when the news came through that planning permission had been approved and the group could use the site. There were working bees to clear the site of the rubbish, weeds, concrete pads (that the caravans used to sit on) and rows of old pine trees. The group worked hard to raise funds to reconnect the water, get perimeter fencing (a condition of the planning permission from council) and purchase gardening equipment. To help with these things the group was successful in getting funding from the Federal government (through the Family and Community Networks Initiatives), the Latrobe City Trust – Gambling Impact Fund, and the Latrobe City Council Community Grant scheme.

Over time the group set up a composting system and a worm farm, and put in crops of broad beans, potatoes, onions, corn and pumpkin. Some of the produce was kept for seed stock, some given away to local charities and some was eaten by members.

However, the group found it tiring to keep up the momentum and finally in mid-2003 they made the difficult decision to close the garden. But their hard work on the site left a lasting legacy and a group of local rose growers were able to immediately use the site for propagation.

Core values

Set up through the Community Partnering Project, LVCEG was based on the principle that the groups of people who had been most heavily impacted by the restructuring of the power industry—the

unemployed power industry workers, the young people who never had the chance to work in the industry, and the families whose relationships had broken apart under the pressure—were the primary asset of the Latrobe Valley, and that their skills and abilities, dreams and passions, should be the basis for community and economic development projects.

The group who were working on the garden wanted it to be a project for everyone. One member said “we’re talking about for the whole community ... elderly citizens, street kids, your drug addicts, correctional services, work-for-the-dole”.

What worked well

The group who were involved learned an enormous amount over the almost four years that LVCEG ran. As well as doing formal training in Occupation Health and Safety, Leadership and Accounting, members learnt about the general organisation needed to get things going and keep them running. The learning was hard, but also rewarding, as one member described, “And I have fallen apart quite a few times. And I’ve been helped a lot. I’ve cried a lot ... The hard work has taken all this time to learn and slot things where they really fit, your safety, your health, your environment, your office girls, your banking, your fund raising ... It’s one big giant job, but you learn from it.”

Along with more formal skills in things like office and meeting procedures, members learned about the ups and downs of working with other people. Here’s how one person described it: “It wouldn’t matter if you were ten in here, or a hundred and ten, everybody’s equal. They’re sharing, their morning teas, their coffee, have a laugh, have fun, get ideas, the youngies can come up with things too, you all learn from each other, you’re coping with all types of people, from your hot-tempered stand-over bully to your type that if you say something to them they scream straight back at you. You’ve got to learn to deal with every

type. It’s good learning, it’s (I don’t know) there’s just something right about this whole thing.”

Challenges

LVCEG was an enormous undertaking. It involved redeveloping an old caravan park site, so in the earlier years gardening had to wait while considerable effort was put into preparing the site.

It was also an ambitious project. The large site meant there were tremendous possibilities. The group had dreams of not just individual and shared garden beds, but orchards, free-range chickens, and demonstration water recycling projects and mud-brick and straw-bale buildings. In retrospect perhaps it would have been better to start with a smaller site that needed less preparation and so gardens could be up and running almost from the outset.



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See also the story on Community Partnering Project.

Written by Jenny Cameron

“There’s just something right about this whole thing”