

SANTA'S WORKSHOP

Redundant workers become a primary community asset



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

Santa's workshop became a community project that brought retrenched workers and others together to make large outdoor Christmas decorations.

Throughout the year people drop in to see what's happening at the workshop and in the pre-Christmas period people come in to make decorations for their own houses and for others in the community.

Background

Santa's Workshop 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. Since he was made redundant from the power industry, Keith Peters had been making large outdoor Christmas decorations for his house. Keith was recognised as an important community asset, and when asked said he would be prepared to teach other people and help them make Christmas decorations. Council identified a disused

preschool building that could be used for Santa's Workshop. Staff from the Community Partnering Project worked with Keith to ready the Workshop for its opening in October.

The Project

Santa's Workshop has continued operating since 1999. It's open 2 days a week throughout the year. For most of the year people come along and make large outdoor Christmas decorations that are sold to individuals for their homes and to town committees for street decorations. Nobody is paid for their labour so once the cost of materials is taken out Santa's Workshop makes a surplus from what it sells. Using voluntary labour was a decision that the core group made early on. Another decision they made was that they didn't want to handle money, so all money is paid directly to a local hardware store that takes out the cost of the materials and then holds the surplus that Santa's Workshop makes over the year.

In the lead up to Christmas, Santa's Workshop uses its accumulated surplus to purchase timber and paint that's given to local residents so they can make their own decorations with guidance from Keith and the core group (currently Carmen, Lynne and Colleen).

Core values

Santa's Workshop exemplifies an ABCD approach. Local residents who have time on their hands, and a keen interest, run the project. Keith and the core group never saw themselves as community leaders or community teachers but Santa's Workshop is an opportunity to develop these new skills.

Santa's Workshop aims to make a strong contribution to the community. The

***Giving the
community a
lift***

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workshop uses its surplus to make decorations that are donated to schools for fund raising, to nursing homes for Christmas cheer, and to local families who are doing it tough. The Workshop also hosts visits from groups. One memorable visit was from Baringa Special School (for children with intellectual disabilities). The Santa's Workshop team worked with the children to help them make their decorations.

What works well

Santa's Workshop worked initially because it was run as a trial to see if people were interested and if the idea would work in practice. There was no expectation that it would necessarily continue beyond the trial. Delightfully however, Santa's Workshop worked! Keith thoroughly enjoyed himself and found that he had a really talent as a teacher. Along with Keith a small group of local residents stepped forward to take responsibility for running the workshop.

Over the years the membership of the core group has changed as people get jobs, move out of the areas and so on. But Keith has always attracted a small group willing to share responsibility.

The project has also been successful because of the support of Latrobe City Council. Council provides the building, pays for the electricity and covers public liability insurance. In return, the building is used and maintained by the group.

Local business support the project. The local hardware store acts as a banker for the group. In return, the group buys most materials from the store (and they are only charged cost price). Other businesses lend support where they can. Local paint shops have donated mistints of paint, and one of the electricity companies donated an electric jigsaw.

Because secondary assets like Council and local businesses support the project, Santa's Workshop has never received any grant funding. This means that the group doesn't need to spend time applying for

funding or filling in report forms, instead the group can get on and do what they want to do—make large outdoor Christmas decorations!

One member describes the arrangement in the following way, "It's so refreshing just to come when you want to come, paint what you want to paint, leave when you want to leave. There's no meetings, no sitting, no 'You can't do this you can't do that', no minutes. It's loose and that's why it works."

Challenges

The group has faced ups and downs. Sometimes there is conflict between people, and copyright and intellectual property can be an issue (i.e. who owns the designs? can people copy each other's work?), but these challenges are responded to with good humour and equanimity. One member says, "We have some major stuff ups", and the rest of the group chime in, "But there's nothing that can't be fixed!"

Another challenge is that Council may redevelop the preschool building. The group would have to find new premises and an arrangement that gives them the flexibility they have at the moment.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is that Santa's Workshop relies on Keith's involvement. Would the workshop continue without Keith?



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See also the story on Community Partnering Project.

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