

# Skylarkers 60 and Better Program



## 2009-2010 Annual Report

Funded by



**Queensland Government**  
Department of **Communities**

It hardly seems like 12 months since I wrote the last annual report. This is my last report under the Queensland Health negotiated Service Agreement. Although we have been with the Department of Communities for nearly 3 years we have just started our first Service Agreement with them in July 2010. Some of our figures have been calculated differently from our last year's report.

### Activity Groups:

- The organisation will provide a range of social, educational and physical activities which emphasise and enhance healthy ageing.
- Activity groups will be set up in direct response to the identified needs of the target group. These activities will be reviewed regularly to ensure that the activity is relevant, viable and meeting the needs of participants.
- Participants will be encouraged and supported to be proactive in the implementation of all aspects of the program. This may include skill development opportunities leading to practical involvement eg management committee roles.



During the year Skylarkers have run 540 formal activities and groups. These activities vary from physical exercise, learning new skills, to social activities and emotional support groups.

**Formal groups and activities:** At the end of 2009 we stopped our evening card-making classes. This was sad as the group had been going for 10 years, but all recognised it was time for a rest. Thank you to the teacher, Julie, who gave us so much time over the 10 years in what was to be a one year project. Well done.

A new group, **relaxation**, has been established. The relaxation group is rather unique. It's run by a

male participant, and often has more men than women participating in it. When we started I thought the group wouldn't last very long. But that is the beauty of the 60 and Better program, that you can give things a try, and support them to see if they blossom or fade. The group has blossomed and it has now been operating for 12 months. It is firmly established and definitely filling a need for the participants.

#### Our current groups are:

Games,  
card-making,  
craft,  
relaxation,  
mah-jong,  
weigh-in,

exercise practice group (3  
days a week),  
forum group,  
computer lessons,  
computer general access,  
volunteering,

men's group,  
BBQ's,  
restaurant meals,  
bring and share meals  
food and fun.

I'll just highlight a few.

**Computer Lessons:** At the last AGM Councillor Milton Dick offered us some new computers. Thank you. These computers have been put to good use teaching people to use modern communication methods with their family and friends.

**Exercise group:** Three days a week people gather together to practice their exercises. The group is very social, possibly our most social group, and participants support each other in many ways. While the exercise formally only lasts just over an hour it is not uncommon for members of the group to be still in the centre 5 hours later. A cuppa, a chat or maybe just joining in the 'busyness' of the centre gives participants a reason to stay with their friends.

**Eating together:** By far the most popular groups are those where people share food. It's easy to underestimate the importance of these activities unless you know that eating alone all the time is a health risk. 79% of older people who eat alone have very poor nutrition which can lead to: weight changes, a weakening of the immune system, increasing the risk of illness or infections, or contributing to mental confusion and even depression. <sup>(A Place for Mom)</sup> Aside from the formal times when people can eat together, the groups often decide amongst themselves to informally bring food to the centre and eat together. This happens 2 or 3 times a week, and provides people with the benefits and the pleasure of eating with others in a social setting. Often these informal gatherings don't figure in the stats. Eg: On Thursdays when we have card making a number of participants come early and bring their lunch to eat together. Sometimes participants bring their lunch and join the volunteers eating their lunch.

**Samoan Group:** During this year we worked with some older people to set up a Samoan group. The format was exercises, then discussion and food. The group learnt how we do our exercises and were keen to continue, but on a different day. Unfortunately our centre was unavailable on that day so these days they continue on a different day in another place.

**Volunteering:** Volunteering is the way some people participate in the program and they provide a valuable resource to the us. Volunteers bring new ideas, a different way of looking at things, fresh energy, and additional skills. Their ownership of the program has been invaluable. Recently we had an *Artisan bread making day* planned. We had discussed what form it would take and everything was ready for me to run the class. The day before I became ill and it was obvious I couldn't lead the day. One of the volunteers took the lead role, and the other volunteers in the centre backed her up, to result in a most successful day for our participants. Thank you all.

**Helping Others:** Helping others is a great way to help ourselves. It helps give a sense of purpose and value to our role in the community. Activities in this section rarely get on Skylarkers statical records, because they are informal. However the program's role in them and the outcomes for participants are too important for them to be ignored.

We had two food and fun fundraisers to raise funds. These are great activities with food and some lovely prizes, and in many ways, the activity itself is more important than the money raised. While we raised some money for ourselves, we also raised some funds to help Project Love and Care.

The program participants donate money and goods, collect materials, create items from donated materials, make deliveries and generally co-ordinate Skylarkers contribution to Project Love and Care. This tends to be all informal stuff, with the centre just providing the space, including some storage, and connections for it to happen. One lady must have knitted literally hundreds of jumpers for the project. She comes in with a bag of jumpers she had knitted and asks if anyone has left any wool. Other participants love to see the wonderful creations she makes out of scrap wool. They also tell her what sizes are in demand or short supply.

Participants have shared their skills with younger members of the community teaching the old crafts such as knitting and crochet to the upcoming generation. The men's skills and interest in a men's shed assisted the PCYC in obtaining funding for their men's shed. We look forward to seeing it built so the group can share their skills further.

At the moment, all of our formal volunteers (except our researchers) are over 50, so, they're participant volunteers. It's not just the formal work they do that's important here. Sure computer

tutoring, group work, garden, cleaning and office duties are valuable services, but they also bring other gifts to the centre. Some spent many years caring for someone with a disability and then were no longer needed in that role. Their ability to give of themselves to others has helped the program to be a friendly place for people wanting to make new connections. It's when they leave their 'tasks' to make up a table for playing cards, or chat to the lonely person who just dropped in, that I know they understand what's important in the centre.

**Knowing what's important:** So how do we know what is important? Sure, as the staff member I look at the literature on changing trends, issues and innovative ideas for the program, but that's not enough. So we ask the participants! Formally this is done in two ways.

At the beginning of the year we asked all participants to complete a questionnaire for us. This year we included some questions about social inclusion, because this would be the major focus of our new service agreement with the Department of Communities. Our researcher then assisted us to make some meaning out of the answers people had given. We discovered that Skylarkers is a social friendly place which helps older people make new friends and feel supported in the community.



***Two firm conclusions were made based on the study:***

- 1) The respondents that come to Skylarkers have overall reduced their social isolation because of the activities and information the centre provides to them
- 2) Skylarkers is at currently fulfilling its objectives well of being a socially inclusive place for older adults to come to.

***This survey strongly recommends the following two courses of action:***

- 1) That Skylarkers market itself as a socially inclusive place for older adults by including text, to be decided by stakeholders, on its website to brand itself as such a place
- 2) Stakeholders very carefully consider extending this research on social inclusion and activities and use qualitative methods such as interviews to explore these results in more depth and overcome the difficulties survey research has presented in this study

Helpful survey comments, from the participants, led to the program changing some procedures and this has been very useful.

The other way we ask the participants is through a regular monthly forum of participants. This forum is the 'worker's advisory group' giving advice about the activities of the centre. The forum is an open forum and all participants are able to attend and have their say if they want to. The forum also is a valuable source of information about the issues facing older people, particularly emerging and local issues.

## Information provision.

- The organisation will provide information about health-related issues through various information displays, expos, forums and a regular newsletter.
- Information provided will be aimed at empowering consumers to make informed decisions regarding their health and well being.
- The program will establish links with other organisations to provide input into healthy ageing.

**Individual Information provision:** Over 300 people came in especially to access information from our centre during the year. Our centre provides individual information and assistance when people need it. The information people seek is of a varied nature and I'm never quite sure what I will be asked to help with next. Last year a number of people were assisted to access Home and Community Care Services, to get on the 'do not call register', to find activities they were interested in that this service does not provide, to find assistance in their roles as carers, to find volunteer positions in other organisations, to access general information about medical conditions, for information about basic computer issues or to locate resources to help themselves. Others dropped in to find a friendly ear when dealing with grief and loss issues or personal problems. We don't provide formal counselling, but can refer participants to counsellors when they need one. But by far the biggest number of people calling to have a chat with the worker are because of loneliness. There is a stigma to saying you're lonely (Professor Wendy Moyle) and at Skylarkers participants are learning "it is ok to say you are lonely".

The centre also likes to share important information with participants that **don't** need the information for themselves. Our centre participants are a wonderful resource to others in the community. They belong to other groups and talk to other local older people. Increasing their knowledge means people not coming to the centre can benefit from Skylarkers being in their community. The older people are also a resource that I tap into. An example of this is when someone brought me a critical, but very local problem, that I couldn't solve. Unable to find a solution I went to my resource – the participants – and they solved the problem for the information seeker. Never underestimate the resources you have available in a room full of older people!

**Newsletters:** Skylarkers produces a regular newsletter for older people in the area. This is a joint effort between staff, volunteers and participants. Most of the newsletters in 2010 have been created by Diana with input from participants and very minimal input from paid staff. The newsletter takes a lot of time and her dedication and fresh look at the newsletter has been very valuable. Diana had never used publisher before, and it's pleasing to see her become so skilled in such a short time. Diana has also been teaching other volunteers how to use publisher.

**Webpage:** The webpage contains much information and is a valuable resource for those able to access the internet. 6173 webpage hits since 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2009, show that the webpage is being used on a regular basis.



**Working with other organisations:** During the year the program has worked with a number of organisations and groups. This enables us to share skills and resources, and ensures we aren't reinventing the wheel or wasting effort and resources duplicating services.

The Seniors week 2009 planning group was able to assist local services promote Seniors Week and organised a Family Fun day finale.

I have been a member of the 'Inclusive Ageing Conference' reference committee, organising the state conference for 60 and Better Programs and the sister programs of Older People's Action Programs and the Older Men's Program. The conference will be held in October 2010. This conference has both excitement and sadness for Skylarkers. It is the first year that participants from the program will not be included, which is not the inclusive way that 60 and Better programs have, in the past, worked. On the other hand it will be exciting to be able to have a conference with other professional workers where we can really freely discuss issues and how to work better with our participants.

In the lead up to the election, Older People Speak Out asked me to be a member of the Seniors Electoral Advisory Panel. This panel looked at how election policies impacted on Seniors and gave feedback where necessary to political representatives and parties.

Skylarkers has maintained contact and shared information over the past year with services and groups such as: Princess Alexandra Hospital Mental Health Service, Inala Community Health Physiotherapy Department, University of Queensland, Civic Solutions, Bridgeworks, Inala Interagency, Active 60 and Better, Ipswich 60 and Better, Wynnum 60 and Better, Acacia 50 and Better, Alzheimer's Association, Network of Educators - Ageing and Technology, DAART, U3A, Rockhampton 60 and Better, COTA, Art from the Margins, PCYC, Infoxchange, Communities for Children, Wesley Mission, Brisbane City Council community Art Project and Inala Elders.

***Do make sure you check out our online auction.*** A participant was reducing the number of dolls and teddies she had in her collection and gave us nearly 100 items. We decided to auction them giving half the money to the program and the other half to Project Love and Care. The auction closes on 1 October 2010. You will find the auction at <http://skylarkers.net/auction/> please take a look, and bid if you find something appealing.

Again, I am humbled by the generosity of the community, and their commitment to this exciting program – we couldn't survive without it. To the Queensland Government, via the Department of Communities, who gives us a grant, I say thank you. This pays the worker's wage, rent and some of the operating costs. To the volunteers who support the program with practical help – thanks, you make the program richer in so many ways and are a pleasure to work with. Thank you also to the management committee, CEO and my peers for the support that makes the job so much easier.

But the most important people to thank are the amazing older people of the community of Inala. It is truly a privilege to work with you.

Be well everyone.

*Margaret Redsell*  
**Manager**