

## **Computerpals for Seniors 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lunch**

Good morning everyone, it's such a pleasure to be invited to celebrate this marvellous milestone with you today. I have been asked to talk about the formation of Computerpals in Newcastle which began in 2000.

Like most western countries we are an ageing population and at that time we were just coming to grasp how this would impact on health and welfare services and access to recreational opportunities for older people. One of my roles as Community Worker for Aged and Disability Services was to develop an Aged Services Policy for NCC. To do this required extensive community consultation with seniors across the city on what were major issues and concerns affecting them.

One of the major issues identified was being able to use a computer and how many felt they were being left behind in the increasing reliance on electronic devices. Such as, Computers, mobile phones and digital cameras. Common themes were; being given a computer from well meaning family members and not knowing how to turn it on. Others had taken the plunge and enrolled in an Introduction to Computing course and struggled with the pace of learning, being unfamiliar with tech jargon and some felt intimidated by younger students competency. Some felt they were being left behind by grandchildren in an increasing technological world.

Studies show older adults can effectively learn new skills. They may require more time, such as with computer literacy, but tend to retain knowledge better and that older people prefer to learn from their peers, decide what they want to learn and to learn at their own pace.

In 1999 through my membership of the Local Government Community Services Association I met Nan Bosler who was President of the Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association Inc (ASCCA) and what a wonderful resource she proved to be.

Based on the feedback received during the community consultations I decided to call a public meeting to gauge if there was enough interest to form a Computer Club for Seniors in Newcastle. This was promoted at the 2000 Seniors Week events, mail outs to Seniors groups and Associations and media releases.

I booked the Newcastle Room at City Hall which usually accommodates 60 people and was blown away by the numbers who attended. We had people standing and also spilling out into the corridor, from memory there were approx. 100 in attendance. Nan Bosler and a colleague from ASCCA gave a presentation on establishing a Computer Club for Seniors and the support ASCCA could provide including a comprehensive Manual on Starting a New Computer Club for Seniors and answered questions from the floor. I then asked for volunteers to form an Advisory Group to move this initiative forward.

I would like to acknowledge both Peter King and Peter Wales who were instrumental in establishing the Computerpals Newcastle Committee and applying to become an Incorporated Association. I also wish to acknowledge Bruce Deitz for his

commitment and expertise in developing the various training modules relevant to member's needs and essential to the success of the club.

Computerpals is a worldwide voluntary organisation for seniors administered by seniors. My role was to facilitate and support this keen group of volunteers until they could function independently.

Well let me tell you the Committee hit the ground running and in my career by far the most successful community development project I have initiated. From memory in the first two to three years there were over 400 members.

Gaining access to a suitable training venue was a challenge with a few hiccoughs and location changes however, Peter King approached the Headmaster of Merewether Primary School with a suggestion for a mutually beneficial arrangement; if Computerpals could access the school's computer room for training when not needed, members would volunteer to read to students to improve their literacy. The benefits were reciprocal particularly for children who may not have had an older relative as a role model in their life. This was a very successful partnership and allowed the club to build their resources, promote the club and enhance their reputation over the first few years.

The club has thrived due to the dedicated volunteer tutors, good governance and the ability to be flexible in meeting the changing needs and interests of members. Another crucial aspect is the opportunity to socialise with like-minded peers, to make new friends and stay connected with friends and family via the internet.

Congratulations on this very special anniversary and my very best wishes for the future.