

The Launceston School for Seniors – 1981-2017

The Launceston School for Seniors was established in July 1981 with the following statement of purpose:- “The concept of School for Seniors is to offer the over 50s some challenging and educative activities which will provide them with social, educational, physical and spiritual momentum for this very important part of their life.”

It is a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation providing mental and physical stimulation for persons over 50 years of age by conducting classes and activities on a wide range of subjects. All classes are organised and run by members of the school on a voluntary basis. Management of the school is in the hands of a committee consisting of an Executive (Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer) and 11 members. There is only 1 part-time employee filling the role of Office Manager. This role was found to be too large and demanding for a volunteer.

The School was first conceived by Robert Walden who was Deputy Regional Principal of Adult Education at the time. In an article written by Robert about the start of the school, he wrote:

When I moved back to Tasmania from Melbourne, I became involved in the adult and community education field. I came across some great programmes and ideas, but if an older person was interested in keeping their mind active and learning new ideas in a relaxed informal and stimulating environment, there was very little on offer. The Launceston School for Seniors was very much its own model based on a few ideas of mine and extensive consultation with individuals and community groups in Launceston. The actual title of the School was borrowed from a programme run by the Wesley Central Methodist Mission in Sydney.

Robert’s original idea was for the Adult Education office in Launceston to provide facilities and back-up support for the programme, but for the School itself to be managed by its own co-ordinator. It also included the use of the Adult Education premises at 51 York Street and 8 High Street during the day as most AE classes were conducted of a night or weekend.

The two AE premises provided central facilities which could be easily accessed by public transport, although parking rapidly became a problem at York Street, while High Street was fortunate to have some off-street parking available.

The premises at 51 York Street housed the main office of AE with some rooms available for general activities including a well-equipped computer room and a hall which could be used for courses which attracted larger number of participants such as Scottish Country Dancing, Singing for Pleasure, and for film, slide and power point presentations such as the interesting and informative series of ‘An Armchair Look at the World’. The High Street premises offered good access to four nicely sized class rooms with the convenience of some off-street parking.

Having received support from quite a number of people in the local community, Robert was pleased when about 50 people turned up for the opening of the School at 8 High Street on 7 July 1981, with about 10 classes commencing the following week. Some of the original members were still attending school programmes in 2017. Activities of the School gradually expanded as more volunteer tutors offered to introduce classes. This successful expansion was achieved with the very close cooperation between the school volunteers and AE staff

located at York Street to coordinate the use of premises to suit each organization's requirements.

April 1990 saw moves begun to structure the school's independence with a meeting held to consider the development of a constitution, and to appoint a School Advisory Council. The next few years were to prove very hectic, with numerous meetings with the powers that be (including politicians), the formulation of a draft constitution, and negotiations with Adult Education, all of which were vital in shaping the future of the school.

After these hectic years, it all came to fruition in 1995. This was the year that saw the last meeting of the Advisory Council when, at a meeting that was held in May, it was resolved to form an independent association. A steering committee was appointed and, later in the year, an interim committee when the constitution was adopted, and the school was incorporated under the Association Incorporation Act on 14 December 1995.

As the School activities expanded, it soon became obvious that planning for the future required the solid base of a secure tenure agreement, a realistic rental agreement, and a forward plan for the maintenance of the premises with the Tasmanian Government. It was also obvious that the High Street site and building was the ideal location for continuing expansion.

Nevertheless, as 8 High Street was a very valuable piece of land, it attracted the attention of some very interested developers. However, the site would have to be rezoned for an alternative use. In 1998 a proposal was put forward to rezone it from Particular Purpose 1 (Education and Training) to Urban Residential. The proposal met with unprecedented opposition with over 400 representations being submitted to the Resource Planning and Development Commission whose decision was to not approve the amendment. The Commission stated, "There is no doubt that the School for Seniors is an important community asset which will have an increasing role to play in an aging population. The existing site is well located and established for education purposes."

A similar situation occurred in 2011 when, once again, the Education Department announced its intention to sell High Street. A petition of hundreds of signatures was successful in dealing with this diversion during the school's latest submission to the Minister for Education.

Over a period of years, problems arose with the use of the York Street premises based on continuing parking problems and the difficult access for the school's age group to class rooms, particularly to the levels above those rooms on the ground floor as no elevator was available. In later years the AE staff were relocated to the former library building in Civic Square which was renamed as LINC. This lack of staff again raised issues of safety and security for school members and a decision was made to cease conduct of classes at the site.

This situation forced the school to seek alternative accommodation in which to conduct those subjects that had been presented at York Street. The criteria for the alternative was to be a hall of similar dimensions as York Street, a timber floor, a piano, somewhere to prepare a cuppa, room for parking, and at a reasonable rental cost. It was soon realised that such facilities were difficult to find close to the city.

It was fortunate that an auditorium which met school needs was found at the Glenara Lakes Retirement Village at Youngtown. While this location was a distance from the city, it was close to public transport and car-pooling appeared to overcome access problems.

The school continued to use the premises at 8 High Street as its main venue but resolved to continue pressing for a resolution to the submissions that had been made to the governments of the day over a long period of years to acknowledge the value of School for Seniors activities to the community as a whole, with a request for updating and for a long term lease arrangement to ensure the future of the school. While many indications of support were received, none came to a practical outcome.

Adelaide's Professor Andrew Beer is reported as saying, 'social isolation is equivalent to the health effects of smoking 15 cigarettes a day or consuming more than six alcoholic drinks daily. It is more harmful than not exercising and twice as harmful as obesity.'

He goes on to say, "It is estimated that 20% of older Australians are socially isolated, which results in insomnia, depression, a greater likelihood of developing dementia and elevated blood pressure, among other health problems. This has a reverberating effect on society, placing extra strain on carers, additional demands on health services, a reduced sense of community and a greater need for acute interventions by local governments, housing providers and other welfare services.

He further adds, 'scientific evidence suggests the most effective programs are those that have an educational component, are targeted at specific groups – i.e. women, caregivers and widowers – and involve the recruitment of people from the same neighbourhood.'

Social inclusion is a very important function of the school which is facilitated by being able to operate at a central facility where members can move easily from one classroom to another to take advantage of a number of different courses. This social gathering of older citizens at the one location is considered to be the backbone of the philosophy of the school. Some of the school members attend for a subject being presented from 9.30 - 10.30am, enjoy a break and a cuppa and biscuit, attend another subject at 11.00am, have another break for lunch, and then attend a further subject until mid-afternoon. This can only happen where the rooms are close together, as is the case at High Street which also has the advantage of single storey ground floor access.

The courses and activities being offered are an incentive to entice our older citizens to avoid vegetating in the isolated circumstances of their homes and to join with other like-minded persons who benefit greatly from such social interaction. The benefits of keeping the minds and bodies of senior citizens active are well documented and the school is making a major contribution to the wellbeing of these citizens which result in real and tangible savings to government services.

It provides the opportunity for these senior citizens to experience mental stimulation and to develop skills which enhance their appreciation of their own sense of worth and wellbeing as a part of a vibrant community of school participants, and which ultimately provides them with the ability to be able to utilise their skills in the comfort and security of their own homes.

The value of assisting older persons to remain in their own homes while taking an active part in outside activities is well documented. The financial and social benefits to the Government cannot be overlooked.

The popularity of the school, which is indicated by the eagerness of people to enrol again at the beginning of each term, and the pleasure that is obvious on the faces of its members, speaks volumes for the very positive impact that school activities have for those who participate.

It is interesting to note the expansion of the U3A network throughout Tasmania and Australia in recent years as they share the School for Senior's commitment to the wellbeing of the ageing population by performing similar programs in their particular communities.

The journey of the School for Seniors in this period from 1981 to 2017 has established a sound base for their activities into the future. It is recognised that the future holds definite challenges as it is becoming more difficult to find volunteers, in the many fields of community service, who are prepared to devote their time and effort for the welfare of others.

Barry Lumley OAM
January 2018