

Gardens and Personal Growth

Jane Picton, Vice Chairperson, Kevin Heinze Garden Centre, Melbourne, Victoria

Gardens and gardening often mean different things to different people. When I was invited to join a committee about nine years ago for a garden centre for people with disabilities, I was, to say the least, tentative. I knew more about disabled people and their needs and more about volunteers than gardening. I enquired about the centre and the committee. The Centre had been established by an idea sown by Kevin Heinze, the well known television gardener and educator, after he had seen a garden for people with disabilities overseas — one to work in, not just to sit in. He interested many people with the idea of developing such a garden in Melbourne. The Doncaster Council then negotiated with the State Electricity Commission about the use of some land believed suitable in Doncaster, approximately 25km from the city.

This was in 1979. I accepted the invitation to join the Kevin Heinze Garden Centre Committee just a few months after it had started operating. This paper will describe the development of the Centre and its value for people with intellectual and physical disabilities, and the work of the co-ordinator and volunteers.

One of the purposes for writing this paper is to attempt to enthuse people in other parts of the country to start similar ventures. In some aspects, the garden centre is a simple concept but in others, it is complex — it involves people working and interacting with each other and being close to nature. Ideally, I believe there should be garden centres in every region for disabled people. In fact, one concern at present in relation to the Kevin Heinze Garden Centre is that some people have to travel too far.

THE CONSTITUTION AND COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT

The first task of those interested and concerned about establishing the garden centre was to draw up a constitution, to determine the composition of the Committee; the centre membership; its aims and purpose and the way it could operate. This constitution has since been altered and redrawn to comply with the regulations concerned with incorporation, but the aims remain the same.

The committee membership has consistently been reasonably strong except for a brief period, when it seemed that the centre could not continue due to financial constraints and running difficulties. It now has representatives from the staff; from centre volunteers; from staff from the user institutions or agencies; from the local council; from the Kiwanis, a service club; and from interested individuals (like myself who work in the welfare field).

EARLY DAYS

I intend to touch on this only very briefly, preferring to write about the present running of the centre and what I believe are its values for all who are associated with it. At the time of writing, I understand that a brief history of the centre is being compiled in booklet form.

The centre opened with a volunteer co-ordinator and a few volunteers and at the time of the start of my association with it, was offering gardening

activities to about six to eight different groups per week for two hours each — either 10am-12 noon or 1pm-3pm in the weekdays. The volunteer co-ordinator worked extraordinarily hard and enthusiastically, and had many useful local contacts. Certainly her dedication in those early days was invaluable, together with the backing of a person, who is still at the centre, who had experience with intellectually disabled young people and was prepared to undertake any physical task.

From that modest beginning, the centre started to take shape. I propose to describe the land on which the centre has developed its garden and its facilities; the visitors or participants who use the centre; the staff and volunteers; and the finances of the current organisation. And finally, to attempt to consider what exactly the centre achieves and whether it achieves all it could from such a venture.

THE LAND/THE GARDEN

The Garden Centre is situated on undulating land, part of which has been sectioned off into allotments for local people who wish for additional personal garden space. The centre has a utility building divided into three parts. This provides shelter from the weather, particularly in Melbourne's heat and rain, so that centre visitors can be easily provided for inside as well as outside. Additionally, there is a glass house, a shade house, a shed and gazebo (the latter is new, acquired with bicentennial funds). The land has been laid out into vegetable and flower beds — some raised for those who find it difficult to bend down.

Changes take place all the time — to the beds, and what is in them, and to paths — the garden is never complete; never finished, never perfect — always growing and changing, with everyone who comes and shares in the growing and changing.

THE CENTRE USERS

In 1987/88, there were 3331 attendances of disabled people — some coming weekly or fortnightly, others only coming once. They came from a variety of institutions, schools, centres, nursing homes, day hospitals and disabled groups.

There were 1005 staff attendances in the same year, accompanying the participants and 1380 attendances by volunteers in the 500 two-hour sessions in the year. The participants' ages and disabilities vary enormously. Some are able bodied but possibly slow learners, while others are mentally quick but frail or physically disabled in some way.

In more recent years, some schools have used the centre for work experience for students and some 69 attendances on 209 days were recorded for 1987/88. Also students from three high schools visited the centre as part of their schools' community awareness programmes, in that year. The centre is therefore being extremely well used by a variety of people.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PARTICIPANTS ATTEND THE GARDEN CENTRE?

Participants come for about two hours usually with their "group". The group number is usually

no more than 16-18 and more often 8-12, and there are usually staff members accompanying the participants — staff, who know the people well but usually in a more structured situation at their institution or school. Volunteers are in regular teams of about three to five and "service" a particular group, weekly or perhaps fortnightly.

A team leader takes responsibility for the gardening activity for the session. The regular users have particular plots which often produce vegetables or flowers, much to the pride of all concerned.

THE STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

The paid staff now number three, all of whom are part-timers. There is a senior co-ordinator who is in charge of the centre assisted by a second co-ordinator and another employee, who is in charge of the work experience programme for students.

The co-ordinators are essential for the smooth running of the centre. In the early days, there seems to be a reluctance to consider paying the co-ordinator, as it was thought that this would damage the relationship with the volunteers. However this has not been the case. The volunteers appreciate the essential role that the co-ordinators play in the organisation of the centre.

The volunteers number about 60, some of whom have been with the centre since its inception. Many are locals; or have had some personal experience with people with disabilities; or are gardening enthusiasts; or have some time to give — or a combination of some or all of these or different personal reasons. Some find the centre through friends and relatives, others from advertising. Recently some volunteers have begun their connection with the centre as participants and after their rehabilitation has finished, have remained as volunteers — much to the delight of all concerned.

The staff arrange training sessions regularly on topics mainly requested by the volunteers themselves — some on gardening, others on various disabilities. A quarterly newsletter has been produced for the last two to three years to provide news for all those connected with the centre.

FINANCES OF THE GARDEN CENTRE

Almost every independent, voluntary agency has financial difficulties, particularly at the beginning, and the Kevin Heinze Garden Centre certainly was not an exception. Funding is now more secure but it will possibly always be necessary to take care in making decisions which involve spending. It will also be essential to consider ways of raising funds and to attempt to seek financial assistance and security, even to maintain the present level of service.

Present funding for the Garden Centre is provided by the Doncaster Council; the State Government through Community Services Victoria and the T.A.F.E. Board; the Kiwanis Service Club; the Early Morn African Violet Group; several charitable trusts and various companies, nurseries and individuals. In addition, the staff and volunteers

of the centre raise funds regularly — the annual fete being the main fundraising event. In 1988/89, it is expected to cost about \$25-30,000 to run the centre. A great deal of money to find and raise but a small amount for the service and a small amount compared to many other institutions or agency budgets.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Garden Centre there is growth — growth in the garden and alongside is the growth of people and not just the people with disabilities, who are the ones that it purports to offer a service to, but the staff and volunteers and others associated with the centre too. Everyone learns so much and particularly from the participants. Someone commented that surely everyone has some disability — it is just that some are not so obvious as others. Plants need sowing and care to grow and perhaps because of this factor in the garden, it is made even clearer that people need so much care too in order to grow and reach their own personal potentials. Although the gardens often look attractive, that is not the main aim — how people are welcomed, accepted and cared for is more important. Sometimes an enthusiastic staff member or volunteer has to be discouraged from doing a job quickly or efficiently — everything takes time and perhaps the final result is not always perfect but something has been gained by the “doing”.

Where from here? At present the Committee of Management are considering a three year plan — a rather ambitious undertaking. The garden and physical structures are being examined and also

the present and possible future users are to be considered.

Questions are being asked, such as: should the centre be opening for longer days and/or on Saturdays?; should what is offered be changed or altered and if so, in what way?; and if there is an extension in the service in whatever way, where can additional funds be sought? These are all important issues, which need addressing and no doubt will be resolved by discussions.

The Kevin Heinze Garden Centre is a unique and exciting experiment, which has worked extremely well so far. It set out to use the medium of a garden to assist people with varying disabilities. Kevin Heinze inspired people in those early days (and indeed is still a strong and loyal supporter of the centre) and it has developed and grown since then. Sometimes there are disappointments — sometimes sessions do not run smoothly as planned — groups do not turn up because they have not organised their timetable properly or their transport arrangements break down — all frustrating.

But those associated with the centre will tell stories of the real achievements of those attending — the young man who came very reluctantly and did not want to do anything and was obviously not caring for himself but after a few weeks attended enthusiastically and looked brighter and cleaner. The woman who remarked how much she had enjoyed herself and that she had been on many outings with her institution but never done anything before but had always been entertained. As the co-ordinator noted in her Annual Report last year — that is one of the things that makes the Centre

different and rather special — the participation of each person according to their degree of capabilities.

FOOTNOTE

I would like to thank Margaret Armstrong, Senior Co-Ordinator at Kevin Heinze Garden Centre, for her support and interest in writing this article.



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