

THE ANIMATION PROJECT

Working for change in Campbelltown's public housing estates

Overview

The Campbelltown Animation Project is an innovative community development and education project which works with residents of large public housing estates in Sydney's outer south-western suburbs. Established in April 1999 by the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Animation Project has built on new approaches to community work pioneered by a joint project the Society established with the Good Samaritan Sisters in Claymore in 1995. Partners in the project include the Franciscan Friars, the Presentation Sisters (Wagga Wagga Congregation), the Sisters of St Joseph and the Catholic Diocese of Wollongong.

The process of "animation" – of bringing to life, energising, inspiring – is based on a strong belief in the power of "ordinary" people to effect change in themselves and their communities, if supported, encouraged and trusted. The Animation Project focuses not on achieving a pre-determined set of outcomes or on what non-government organisations can do for residents in a struggling community but on how residents can be supported to discuss and act on the community needs that they regard as important. Each community action residents decide to take together brings about some change and, over a period of time, people's self-belief grows and the local culture of isolation and despair begins to be replaced by a spirit of co-operation and achievement.

The communities in which the Animation Project works are, according to social researchers, among the most disadvantaged in New South Wales. At the time of 1996 census, in the suburb of Claymore the unemployment rate was 38 per cent, the average income was the second lowest for any Sydney suburb, 44 per cent of households were headed by single parents and only 25 per cent of people of working age were in the active workforce. Within the Campbelltown district, Claymore and the four other large public housing estates – Minto, Airds-Bradbury, Macquarie Fields and Ambarvale-Rosemeadow – are seen as very different to other local suburbs and the residents are heavily stigmatised.

While comparative social disadvantage and stigma are part of the reality of life in these suburbs, they can mask the many positives and the potential of the residents. In every community, no matter how stressed, there are people providing local leadership in many ways and others ready to do so if the climate is right. The changes which have occurred in Claymore since 1995 – and also the change in public perception of Claymore – provide an excellent illustration of this. In 1995, after a series of fires (one in which five people were killed), Claymore received much media attention, all of it focused on the problems of Claymore and how they could be managed. In the past three years, residents of Claymore have regularly received positive coverage in local, state and national media for their achievements and many politicians, social researchers and community workers have visited the suburb to learn about what has changed.

Since 1999, the Animation Project has worked with residents of Claymore, Minto, Airds-Bradbury and parts of Mt Druitt. The impact of the project can be seen through the residents' many achievements. These include the development of a community laundromat and coffee shop, the growth of residents' groups, the reclaiming of vacant land as a community park, successful lobbying for changes to transport services, a variety of formal and informal education programs and the development of a small food co-operative. These achievements have improved community co-operation, brought significant changes to the lives of many individuals and begun to change people's perceptions of residents of these suburbs.

Background

The Society of St Vincent de Paul has been active in the Campbelltown district since 1955. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Campbelltown district experienced rapid urban growth, quadrupling from 30,000 to more than 120,000. As the district grew, so too did the Society's response to needs in the local community. By the early 1990s, the Society in the Campbelltown Region had developed a network of local volunteer groups involved in emergency financial assistance, several services for homeless people, a child care centre, an addictions recovery program and a local care and support centre (the Nagle Centre, a partnership with the Presentation Sisters).

In response to concerns about deeply entrenched problems in some suburbs – particularly the five large public housing estates built by the NSW Government in the 1970s and 1980s – the Society decided in 1994 to put resources into a social support program in one of those suburbs, Claymore. A partnership was developed with the Good Samaritan Sisters and the NSW Department of Housing and, in March 1995, the Kalon House of Welcome was established in Withers Way, Claymore. With premises provided rent-free by the Department of Housing and a Good Samaritan sister employed by the Society as a full-time community worker, Kalon began its work of providing social support and encouraging co-operation in the local community. Kalon's key goal was to find ways of promoting self-determination among Claymore's residents.

Effective ways of promoting self-determination remained elusive until a community worker from India, Mr D. Abraham, came to Claymore as a guest of Caritas Australia. Abraham spoke of his 20 years of work in Andhra Pradesh state, where he and others had been working to animate new hope and leadership among residents of impoverished rural villages. He outlined how people in villages had worked together to tackle illiteracy, domestic violence and health issues, had developed new community facilities and had lobbied successfully for new roads and new services.

The crux of animation is not about giving resources to people but developing the resources of the people so that they can develop themselves.

The whole program is to involve people, to create a forum for the people where they can come together as equals, where they can discuss and dialogue, find the root causes of their problems and together search for solutions.

**Mr D. Abraham,
Andhra Pradesh Social Service Society**

Inspired by Abraham's example, the team at Kalon House of Welcome decided to search for an Australian process of animation, relevant to the lives of people in an outer-urban housing estate. In February 1997, Sr Mary Gregory, then the community worker at Kalon, decided to formalise the occasional lunches she organised for residents into a fortnightly luncheon open to all. This soon developed into a forum where people could come and share their troubles and share common hopes for the future. As discussions became bogged down in a sense of despair, the medium of art was introduced by artist Rob O'Brien, to encourage deeper reflection and a sharing of dreams.

The residents gathered for lunch began to talk of their hopes – for an improved bus service, for better facilities for their children, for a new sense of hope in their community. A group decided to develop their own campaign for changes to the local bus service. Despite never having attempted anything like this before, the residents formulated a petition, sought signatures and took their case to the local bus company. Agreement in principle to change the bus route proved to be a turning point, as the residents' group began to see that change could happen.

In fact, the bus route change took 2½ years, but the change in attitude among the residents was immediate.

As the first changes began to occur in Claymore, the then diocesan president of the St Vincent de Paul Society, Bob Burke, formed a committee to explore how the animation process could be sustained in Claymore and spread to other communities. The committee searched for funds to employ experienced community workers to co-ordinate this work and support was received from the St Vincent de Paul Society's NSW/ACT State Council and Parramatta Diocesan Council, the Franciscan Friars, the Presentation Sisters (Wagga Wagga Congregation) and the Sisters of St Joseph. In April-May 1999, Julie Foreman and Dr Bakthan Tychicus joined the Animation Project as co-ordinators, to strengthen the animation work in Claymore and work with others to initiate animation processes in the nearby suburbs of Minto and Airds-Bradbury and in the Mt Druitt area of Parramatta Diocese.

The Animation Project 1999-2002 – highlights

Since April 1999, the Animation Project has encouraged and supported residents of Claymore, Minto, Airds-Bradbury and Mt Druitt through a wide range of local initiatives. Highlights include:

- Development of a Community Laundromat and Coffee Shop in Claymore;
- Graduation of 20 Claymore residents from TAFE accredited “Working in the Community” course (in partnership with Macquarie Fields TAFE);
- Reclaiming of vacant land as a community park in Minto, including the painting of a community mural and numerous community events;
- Graduation of five people from Wholistic Community Organising Course, conducted by the Animation Project for Indigenous people in Mt Druitt;
- Participatory workshops for community leaders in Claymore and Minto to evaluate the residents’ achievements;
- The initial development of a People’s Forum in Airds-Bradbury;
- The development of residents groups in Willmot;
- Skills development workshops held for resident groups topics included submission writing, GST for community organisations, planning and evaluation;
- Establishment of a small food co-op in Claymore;
- Development of community action groups on transport and housing issues, with achievements to date including a change to local bus route and in-principle approval from local, State and Federal Governments for a pedestrian overpass across the F5 Freeway;
- Community-based project to record achievements of Claymore, year-long workshops with community writer resulting in public reading of material attended by over 60 people.
- Twenty-five positive press articles focusing on Claymore, Minto and Airds, helping to reduce stigma and encourage residents’ achievements;
- Interviews of Laundromat and Coffee Shop committee members by ABC Radio and ABC-TV “Dimensions” program;
- Half-hour ABC-TV “Compass” program, due to go to air on 18 August 2002.

Skill development

At a recent evaluation participants in the Animation Project have identified the following skills developed through formal and informal learning:

- Public speaking
- Management
- Writing
- Networking
- Cross cultural skills
- Communication
- Community development
- Computer skills
- Organisational skills
- Lobbying
- Understanding confidentiality
- Occupational health and safety
- Drug and alcohol awareness
- Developing policies and procedures
- First aid
- Media skills
- Evaluation
- Design, promotion and marketing
- Meeting skills
- Hospitality
- Cash handling and budgeting
- Submission writing
- Recruiting and working with volunteers
- GST and book keeping
- Strategic planning
- Survey skills and assessing community need
- Team work
- Time management
- Interagency co-operation

Who participates?

“The first time I have ever been involved as a volunteer was with the Laundromat and now I’m involved in all sorts of community things...”

Resident of Claymore for 15 years

The Animation Project works alongside and fosters local community leadership. However, its strength is also in working with those in marginalised communities who may never have been involved in community organisations or actions. It does this by providing a range of opportunities for participation. This often begins at a social support level with a regular lunch group and moves through formal and informal training to membership of local community action groups or networks. The luncheons are an expression of social capital, which builds a strong platform for further community development and learning.

What makes the Animation Project different?

“Other workers want to solve our problems...Julie (Animation Co-ordinator) encourages us to do it ourselves”

The Animation Project has at its core the belief that people, whoever they are, can act both on their own behalf and together with others, to change themselves and their local communities. We believe that healthy communities are those that have the freedom to make choices and the capacity to implement them.

By working with local communities, the Animation Project supports and resources individuals and groups to come together and raise awareness, access resources, make their voices heard and promote the rights of their community. Through this process, participants uncover their own inner potential, learn and share skills, develop knowledge and increase understanding. The Animation Project fosters principles of self-determination, inclusion, participation, critical thinking and local decision-making and builds on the strengths, experience and knowledge of local communities. Our experience tells us that this process takes time.

The beliefs behind the Animation Project could be summarised as follows:

- Beliefs/assumptions matter deeply in working with communities
- Structural injustice and exclusion exist in Australian society, but this reality is often ignored.
- In 'disadvantaged' communities, disadvantage is only part of the picture. Every community has people with energy, passion, ideas and skills
- People in any community can make change happen - if trusted and supported
- The people who live in a community know better than anyone else what that community needs
- There is no division between teachers and learners but all are teacher-learners
- Those who have the least have the greatest motivation to work for change - if the climate is right
- An animator's role is to create space for people to meet and open up possibilities for change. Lasting change comes from the people themselves
- Individuals do change, but through community - mutual sharing, support and action. A person's sense of being worthwhile is linked to their capacity to act with others
- A more just world is possible

What is the process of animation?

It is difficult – perhaps even quite misleading – to suggest that there is a single process which can be used to develop a process of animation in a local community. The needs, experiences and strengths of each community differ greatly. In the different communities in which we have worked, the process we have used has been different. However, in thinking about our work, having a general process of different steps in the back of our minds has been helpful. The following nine steps have been adapted from the work of Caritas Pakistan. But, in offering this step-by-step process, I must stress that my aim is only to give an approximate idea of how things can work in some circumstances – and not as a set of hard and fast rules to follow:

1. **Contact:** The animator makes initial contact with the community and builds a relationship with the people for whom the process is intended.
2. **Social research:** Conducting research into, and compiling available information on, the local sub-culture and the needs of the people.
3. **Group formation:** Bringing people together into groups, through informal gatherings or the development of special interest groups.
4. **Building self-esteem:** Building the self-esteem of the individuals involved in the process, making use of some creative medium such as art, music or role plays.
5. **Analysis:** Leading a process of group analysis of key personal and community needs.
6. **Action:** Collective action on a key community need nominated by the group. The action is nominated, devised and carried out by the group members, with the animator's role being to motivate and support the group.
7. **Celebration and review:** Review of actions undertaken and celebration of achievements.
8. **Emergence of leadership:** Handing over the leadership of the group to the natural leaders who have emerged. This process also involves the development and delivery of suitable training programs.
9. **Growth to a self-sustaining group:** By continuing the process of action and review, the group builds its confidence and experience. As the group grows to become self-sustaining, the animator's role begins to diminish.

Feedback from community members

Here is what community participants have said about the Animation Project:

I feel good about myself because I'm doing something for the community. When you look how far we've got, and how others have listened to us, it's wonderful. I feel we've achieved things by talking to people. Once I would have thought I'm a nobody but now I know I can speak out....and you know what? You know how we talk a lot about people 'above us', well, we have found out there is no one above us!

Lyne Challis, Minto

Animation is about soul- building.... gradually got involved in the Laundromat Group and began to realise there was more to life. Being involved helped me regain confidence. I began to believe I can do something, I can take control of my life and ...I can give back. Through this process I've met others, become aware of injustices and the issues that people face on public housing estates. This has all been important in helping me work out my purpose. I now say: I don't survive anymore, I live!

Sue Claydon, Eagle Vale

Through their experience of a self-managed projects participants own perceptions have changed:

"We've helped provide a community service, to work together and it makes me feel good..."

"We've brought the community together for the good of the community, a need was met."

"We're skilled up in many areas, working as a team, committed, and improving lives in the community..."

"I'm excited. It's good to achieve what we wanted, even overwhelming. Now anything is possible..."

"We decided and made the decisions."

These changes have not only been observed and identified by those involved but also by external organisations:

"The Laundromat and Coffee Shop are a visible outcome of the hard work of the volunteers and their supporters. There are many significant outcomes for individual, the community and organisations that have arisen from the project These include community pride in the achievements of community members, a changed relationship between organisations and community members, an experience for the community and the volunteers of the possibilities of achieving success."

(Robyn Brookes, Director Centre for Women's Health, The Benevolent Society, and Chair, Steering Committee, Claymore Integration Project)

For more information about the Animation Project, contact Julie Foreman or Mauro Di Nicola on (02) 4628-2929 or at nagle@cyber.net.au