

Dr Bourke Men's Sheds Motion – Wed 7 May 2014

We are constantly being warned about the dire consequences for our nation of the ageing of our population. At times, it borders on ageism and not valuing the contributions the senior members of our community, our elders, have made to our nation throughout their lives, through their careers and in raising and educating the next generations.

Our senior members of our community continue to make a great contribution.

They are valued members of families, supporting and mentoring younger members and they contribute through a range of groups as diverse as the Country Women's Association, professional associations, sporting clubs, various disease support groups and of course the subject of today's motion, the men's shed movement.

Men's sheds are a grass roots movement filling an identified need in men's lives for, primarily, a post retirement way of men to get together, support each other, value each other, and do things together.

More so than women traditionally, men's lives have revolved around families and careers with so many of their social relationships built around the workplace and those work networks. After retirement, many men lost these contacts and the men's sheds help rebuild social and support networks outside the work place.

We know that strong friendships are one of the greatest preventative health measures in addition to giving up smoking and getting more exercise. The friendship and camaraderie offered by men's sheds are immeasurable in terms of the health benefits though men's sheds are also a great vehicle for spreading positive health messages and combating isolation, depression and the illnesses of the elderly.

With this in mind, I and the other Labor backbenchers have been meeting with Men's Shed representatives to discuss their needs, as well as to hear what they do and what belonging to a Shed means for them and for the community.

We arranged a recent roundtable style forum in which Shed members were able to network and share knowledge on resources, activities, finding sponsors, gaining grants and recruiting members.

The ACT government is also currently preparing a report on Men's Sheds and their needs.

The Men's Shed movement began in the mid 1990's. The nationwide movement is a wonderful self-help way of promoting social interaction and reducing depression in elderly men. It has evolved to include men of all ages. Following its success in Australia, the movement has also gained momentum in Europe and South Asia.

What's important for men in the community seeking friendship and active interests is a space to meet. These gatherings give the men an opportunity to be valued and to be valuable members of their community. It is also an opportunity to have a lot of fun and use and share skills learnt over a lifetime.

Some sheds specialise in restoration and construction and helping community groups, others concentrate on social and educational activities though there are many sheds doing both and more.

As well as meeting members of Canberra's Men's Sheds as a group at the Assembly, we have visited individual Sheds in our constituencies.

I was welcomed at the Melba Shed on a day of downpour in April. Members had made valiant attempts to create stepping-stones through the flooded footpath at the entrance to the shed. The Melba shed president jokingly suggested I had come along to open their new Shed 'Pool'.

Melba Shed opened in August 2008. It is a joint initiative of the Rotary Club of Ginninderra and the North Belconnen Uniting Church.

In contrast to many other Men's Sheds, Melba does not have a workshop or aspire to one. In fact one of the spin offs of the roundtable bringing sheds from across Canberra were the invitations between sheds to visit and to use the equipment in the different workshops. Some workshops have basic tools, one specialises in woodturning, another has welding equipment, and another has a programmable computer controlled saw available to shed members with the expertise to use it. The pooling of ideas and resources between the sheds was magnificent.

Melba Shed's representatives at the roundtable, Billy Williams and Ray Nelson were especially proud of their shed's IT group's expertise, their email and online networking and offered mentoring in the area to other sheds.

The Melba Shed caters for men who enjoy convivial discussion forums, listening to guest speakers, going on excursions and participating in special interest group activities. Their regular meeting takes place on a Friday morning and everyone is welcome. There are about 80 members on the active roster, and a regular meeting attendance of around 50 individuals.

A typical meeting starts with morning tea, a discussion around the Shed's activities and plans accompanied by a few cheeky interjections and then a guest speaker on an advertised topic. After the gathering, there is a lunch at McKellar Soccer Club. I'm looking forward to being guest speaker at the shed later this month during Reconciliation Week.

Some Fridays are reserved for a BBQ or an excursion to a local attraction. Members also volunteer for helping community groups such as the YMCA at their garage sales, working bee garden improvements at the not for profit Greenhills Centre, and fundraising at the Rotary Trivia night for polio research.

There are also the SIGs, the Special Interest Groups, who regularly meet for walking, cycling, bowls, meccano, golfing, tennis, mah-jong, men's sing along and gaining and improving computer skills. To promote healthy eating and lifestyle there is an activity at CIT Fit and Well Gym at Bruce.

I am truly impressed with the energy of this Shed and their wide-ranging interests and activities on offer. They have a terrific website that includes everything you need to know about their program and activities, information about other sheds and so much more including a funnies page, plans and pictures for Rosella bird boxes and links to wellbeing sites. The weekly newsletter, which is written with style and wit, is on their website, and it is a testimony to the enjoyment and comradeship of the Melba Shed.

Men's Sheds are an important means for men to improve their quality of life. They offer enjoyment to many, which in turn encourages a more active mind and body. This is good news for men's health in general. I look forward to seeing the ACT government report on Men's Sheds and hearing the reception from the Men's shed community.

Finally, I am pleased to learn that the forum has resulted in reciprocal invites amongst the Canberra Men's Sheds, further linking the community and spirit of friendship.