

PLOD ESSAY:

Mitchell House – Wonthaggi Neighbourhood Centre Inc.

“Mitchell Community House has a rich and dynamic history which reflects the combined vision and energy of many committed and resolute Wonthaggians”. (*Source: The Current – a free newspaper produced in 2004*)

The concept of Neighbourhood Houses emerged across Australia in the late 1970's; many were being established in towns around Victoria. The following tells the story of Wonthaggi's Neighbourhood Centre Inc. also known as Mitchell House.

The building was the former Station Master's residence, a part of the railway hub built between 1910 -12. The precinct included the Railway Station building, the passenger platform, the Goods Shed, the Crane, land and two other railway houses that extended to the east along Murray Street to McKenzie Street. In the very late 1970's/early 1980's the houses were removed. This former railway land was repurposed for commercial businesses ; today it includes Autopro, Woolworths Petrol and Aldi. The railway land west of Apex Park along Murray Street, now a car park and Woolworths Supermarket, was also developed.



Photograph taken in 1977 showing Goods Shed to the left, Railway Station and platform and the Station Master's House top right

With the closure of the railway line in 1978 the state government of the day was not really interested in the railway hub. The whole area became derelict – unmown grass, littered with rubbish and with an open drain. In 1979 the Wonthaggi Apex Club stepped up and rescued the Goods Shed. It became their meeting place. They also used the building to store recycled newspapers which the men collected as a fundraiser. They cleaned up the whole area around the station and it became known as Apex Park. Apex Club members were young civic-minded men aged between 18 and 40, who believed in community service and enjoyed the opportunity to volunteer within their own town. The Apex branch in Wonthaggi was active and ambitious. The members were good mates who liked the idea of fellows of different ages helping each other and the community.

In 1982 some Apexians - men bowing to pressure from their wives they claimed - moved to acquire the Station Master's residence to establish a Neighbourhood or Community House. John "Curly" Gardiner and John Quilford were the driving forces in this. Their first approach to Council received a very negative reaction - the cost estimated to be somewhere between \$16,000 and \$18,000 being one of the factors given. John Quilford secured the specifications from Council and costed it without labour; the figure was \$2,500. (Source – John Quilford, *Wonthaggi & District Historical Society Apex Dinner, 2018*)

Over several months the Apex Club members, together with other community groups such as Cape Paterson Life Saving Club, Cape Paterson Progress Association and the Wonthaggi Play Group, continued to lobby Council to have the former Station Master's residence used as a Neighbourhood House. Finally Cr. Des Biggs, supported by John Duscher, an Apex member and councillor at the time, moved a motion that the Council purchase the building and accept the Apex Club's proposal for the building's use. The Borough of Wonthaggi agreed to manage the property and issued a lease to the Wonthaggi Neighbourhood House Committee and other community groups. In January 1983 Apex started renovations on the property.



The House is named Mitchell House after Ross and Lorraine Mitchell. Ross was an Apexian and Lorraine was the first President of the Wonthaggi Neighbourhood Centre. Tragically they were both killed in a car accident on November 28, 1982 leaving two orphaned children, Kendra 6 and Luke 4. As a mark of respect and in memory of their wonderful contributions, the Centre was named in their honour.



The Wonthaggi Neighbourhood Centre (WNC) commenced operations in 1982. Some of the key people involved in establishing the organisation were Susan Macaulay, Ruth Le Serve, Lynn Railton, Lorraine Mitchell, (President), Pam Bodsworth, Rhonda Quilford and Fay Quilford (Secretary).

Initially WNC operated out of the Maternal and Health Care Centre/North Wonthaggi Kindergarten building in White Road. It operated as a childcare centre on Thursday & Friday, 10am to 4pm. Members earned childcare based on an hour for an hour's service or alternatively you could pay. The ratio was 1 adult to 5 children, maximum 15. This service was the precursor to commercial childcare centres and family day care in the home. WNC was described as being a mother's group, play group, child-minding centre, friendship and support network for women. Craft classes, social get-togethers and talks by guest speakers were organised. In 1983 another facet of WNC started; a Wonthaggi Toy Library. Jocelyn Howson and Susie Harding ran this with the support of a rostered group of women.

Over the years the local papers have documented and commented on many of the activities of Mitchell House.

From a South Gippsland Sentinel Times article of July 5, 1994 we learn that WNC is: "Good for mothers and good for kids." "A cheerful, friendly atmosphere is the most noticeable feature of the occasional childcare centre at Mitchell House." "This centre is a bonus for the many mothers who need a reliable home away from home to leave their youngsters while they shop, play sport, go to meetings, or just take a break." "Popular for primary school children is the after-school program. Cheryl Gilliland is in charge providing a varied program of craft, outdoor games, cooking, plaster model and clay modelling." "Sessions are \$2.00 and run from 3 til 6pm."

A 2004 article stated: "Childcare, the Toy Library and a wide range of learning activities are still central to the programs run there. The first term of 2004 includes Men's Music Program, a Basketry Workshop series, Meditation and Relaxation Classes."

Another Sentinel Times article June 26, 2007 stated: "Mitchell House is bubbling with activity." Jan Bourne said: "On Sunday ... we are celebrating winter with our Seasonal Celebration. Activities include balloon lantern making, walking a spiral and making a 'let go wish', sharing a song or two and enjoying a light meal of hearty soup and crusty bread." "Our mates meal program is going well." "The House also has a new support group 'Dads in Distress'." " In Term 3 we are running a meditation practice group and so it goes on yoga, playgroups, singing nights and social cards groups."

Mitchell House has always supported community groups, including members from both the Sudanese and Karen families who have settled here. Today there are 6 or 7 families still involved. Mitchell House management secured grant funding for the construction of a Men's Shed in 2008. Today the Men's Shed, together with the Community Garden, operates in the area beyond the rail trail behind the Centre.

Sylvia Davey said in January 2021: "In 2020 with COVID 19, Mitchell House was as important as it had ever been. Zoom meetings were used to connect people who would have otherwise been completely isolated. Typically around 30 activities happen per week ranging from crafts e.g. quilting, crochet; Learning Citizens & multicultural activities. Sometimes we conduct 'garage sales' to assist the Bass Coast Refugee Sponsorship Group."

For most of its years of operation the House has held true to the philosophies of the Neighbourhood House movement developed during the late 1970's. There is a very significant number of people from the Wonthaggi area whose lives have been greatly impacted by WNC – Mitchell House. It remains a community-orientated organisation. It has and continues to evolve to meet the changing needs of the community it represents. It is a place of lifelong learning, art and craft classes, health and well-being activities, family support, play groups, community advocacy and the provision of a supportive and welcoming place for individuals and groups.

Fay Quilford

This essay is based on one of Wonthaggi & District Historical Society's 15 Minutes of History Talks delivered in January 2021. Fay was one of the founding members of the Wonthaggi Neighbourhood Centre.