



OPSO

OPSO news and information, Winter 2004

Whither the West?



picture: Alan Hales

In the cities of the south-east corner, if the car doesn't work we get a bus. If we are having a baby we drive to the nearest hospital; if our tooth aches a dentist fits us in quickly.

If we are sick at night there is an after-hours service on call. There are medical and dental specialists, lawyers, and allied health professionals, universities and TAFE colleges to select from. Our children can go there to choose from the multitude of available careers; information is available for them.

If we are not satisfied with a school, we have many other options. If we are not satisfied with the service from any business or professional, we simply change to another.

Yet we still complain. But think



By Val French

what it's like to live where you have none of these conveniences . . . if you lived away from the cities, if you lived in the far north, over the other side of the ranges, the whole of the Outback.

Over the last 20 years, members of OPSO have been visiting regional centres on many projects. Whatever we worked on in the east, we brought to the Outback.

So we have seen a lot of change. But we have also seen a lot of despair.

Respite centres have become social hubs for the older person; 60 and Better bind the older people in close protective

friendship; multi-purpose centres, that we fought so hard for, are solving problems in towns lucky enough to have them.

Some medical specialists come out to the bigger hospital hubs now, and there is a small network of home and community care workers- but like all other health services, they are far too underfunded and skimped of services and service providers.

So, you'll probably get by eventually if you need glasses, but in most of the west you wouldn't want to get toothache (although one nurse told me recently she was now very good at pulling teeth). There is a shortage of allied health workers – you could wait a year in some places to be assessed by an occupational therapist for just a bath rail from Home Assist.

continued next page



We gather their Visions

As we have travelled the state, collecting communities' visions for 2020 for the State Government, never have the differences between the south-east corner and the rest of Queensland been so potent.

While an intrepid seven travelled north and west, dauntless others collected visions from the south-east corner.

In the west, victims of five years of drought and years of semi-neglect had visions that spoke to their basic survival.

Whither the West?

from previous page

There's an urgent need to develop some of the projects that we have brainstormed with innovative service providers and enthusiastic townspeople to bring professionals to the west, and to help them "want to stay a while".

There's a need to bring light and enthusiasm back into the eyes of the school kids, products of an economy starved by five years of drought, who see no real opportunities for them to go away for higher education or a trade, let alone to find a job in their home town.

And for the few who will have the opportunity, there is a need to develop the detailed information kits that the eastern universities use to attract overseas fee-paying students so that they, too, can know the full breadth of new career opportunities.

There is an urgent need for governments to take another look at solving the public liability insurance crisis that is strangling the sporting, social and volunteering lives of young and old, let alone the health system. Ask any pregnant woman in the small towns out west. She travels one or two hundred kilometres or more before her baby is due and stays at a town with one of the bigger hospitals, because the high cost of public liability insurance means she can no longer have her baby in the local hospital.

Older and younger people alike over the years have planned with us ways for the generations to work together to share skills, to provide training after school and in the school holidays. It's time to give these a chance to work.

Perhaps it's time to take a real look at the Patient Transit Scheme that demands 30-plus hours of bus travel for sick people going east for specialists.

What about providing ambulance cars to small towns to help get patients without transport to the bigger rural hospitals for the treatment that smaller local hospitals cannot offer? For example, the towns surrounding Mt Isa have no bus service which means hundreds of miles of travel . . . and if you don't have a car?

What about a mobile phone service that is reliable outside towns, or an Internet service that does not drop out all the time?

And talking about dropping out, what about changing policy and attitudes to ensure that bureaucrats don't just fly in and out, but stay long enough to really understand the needs of the west? They must understand that culturally, environmentally and economically east and west are different.

The red tape and regulations that make things accountable in the east can only hamper the west where shortages of services make it essential to improvise. They can strangle primary and secondary industry and volunteer initiative.

The people of the west are our

sort of people. They are what the real Australia is all about; communities where people care about one another.

When two OPSO women a few years ago were travelling out in the far west consulting with older people, they went through Longreach on the way to Cloncurry and then to Cairns. "What'll happen if you break down?" a tourist asked. A local grinned. "The people of the Outback'll look after them; don't you worry," he said.

Perhaps it's time we looked after them now.

Let's put some of the eastern tourism development money into really developing an innovative tourism industry around the state to include the dinosaur country of the far north with the heritage of the central and south-west, and the rugged splendour of all in between. Let's sell the real Australia overseas, not just the jaded tinsel.

Let's develop the hot rocks alternative energy and decentralise some of the industry from the over-crowded south-east, and seal roads to link Cairns to Melbourne through the state's centre, put money into helping diversify the north with the red claw crayfish and jade perch industries, and harness what they tell us is only four percent of floodwater from the wild Gulf rivers needed to develop agriculture.

Let's put something back in the west that gives us so much. ❖

– and an OPSO Community Voice

People in northern and coastal towns were also concerned about survival as the sugar industry faced a mounting crisis.

While some townspeople tried to cope with intergenerational disharmony, others created a sense of community with goodwill and innovative projects.

On the other hand, residents in the south-east corner had visions of social, economic and educational equity, opportunities for life-long

learning, sound environmental management, an integrated transport system, sustainable housing and services that keep up with the population growth.

We have invited people we met in each town to become part of our Consultative and Research Forum's Community Voice.

Detailed accounts of the solutions that regions have put forward to solve their problems are available from OPSO.

Email: opso@zipworld.com.au ❖

Community harmony – what's the secret?

Perhaps it's time some of the over-50 generations took a leaf out of the book of Queenslanders of the Year, Chris Sarra, Cherbourg State School's headmaster.

He said the secret of his success was simply believing in his students.

Perhaps it's time for all those who ask why young people don't respect them to begin paying them respect. Respect has always been a two-way street.

During our consultations across Queensland, one of the hardest things we were forced to recognise was the huge division between young and old. We listened with growing disbelief to adults telling us "they should bring back the whip, the cat-o-nine tails and even the stocks".

On the other hand, in the same towns we had Year 12 students telling us they were leaving the town as soon as their school year ended because of this attitude and lack of support. Even their teachers agreed with them.

One of the worst examples of community dysfunction is where complaints by older generations have forced the closure of Blue Light discos because of their objections to the sounds of kids having fun. Ironically, these discos have been set up by the Queensland Police Service to keep the kids off the streets.

Perhaps we could learn from some western towns where the generations live and work in harmony and where "you don't have to lock your doors at night".

How can we bring the generations together? Think about it. ❖



Years Ahead of the rest

The program that teaches older drivers how to retain their driving licences and their independence in one sitting is drawing attention from older Queenslanders.

As a result of the demand, bookings for our presentations of the RACQ Years Ahead program are overflowing our diary.

Our Years Ahead presentation consists of a 40-minute interactive look at the new Australian road rules and tips on driving safely.

As one participant said recently, "No matter how many years you've been driving, or how you keep up with the changes, you can always learn something new that could save your life." ❖

Seniors' Week bonanza for everyone

A mock parliamentary debate featuring young people and the voluntary organisations in cahoots!

On:

1 The rights of people under 25 and over 65 to drive.

2 The right to health insurance and Medicare rebates for the over 65s.

At 1.15 pm at Parliament House on Thursday, August 19, 2004. WHERE? Go to the Parliamentary Annex foyer for directions.

Act your age?

The pressure to grow old begins from an early age. As children, we're constantly being scolded by our parents to 'act your age'.

In our 20s, then 30s, and 40s, if we do anything that is outside society's 'norm' for that age bracket, we're told, in tones of annoyance and maybe even disgust, to 'grow up'.

Ironically, however, if we follow the natural hormonal instincts for our age as teenagers, we're told we're not old enough!

But it is from our 50s on that the effects of this continuous message take their most devastating toll, and I believe make us 'old' before our time. 'Old' people are 'expected' to dress a certain way, wear their hair in a certain way, do things 'old' people 'like' to do.

Labelling is society's way of controlling people. With every individual different, with different needs, the more individuals can be made the same, the easier society becomes to organise and thereby control.

And while it is obvious that society cannot survive without rules and regulations, today, most people have been brainwashed to fit the mould, according to their age. Retirement villages are being built everywhere; complete with bingo, lawn bowls, etc, which research has 'shown' is what the people 'want'.

My feeling is that people 'want' these things because it is what they have been conditioned to 'want'. My feeling also is that most people's true wants have been stifled, silenced, from early childhood, and that by retirement years, society's messages have been so assimilated into their psyches that they don't even realise they have been manipulated throughout their entire lives, and so they settle for what society provides for them



by Arlene Palmquist

after their working days are over.

No wonder we are surrounded by unhappy people who cling to each other and anything else they can find (that has the approval of our society, of course) for emotional sustenance!

Recently, I broke my arm. It was a severe break, and took many months to heal. If a young person had had the same injury, he would have been told, 'you're young – you'll be right'. But without fail, people said to me, by way of comfort (?), 'You're not getting any younger, you know.' Sugarcoated negative input, and very, very hard to resist.

Destroying self-esteem

It's a well-known fact that we believe anything we're told, whether it's true or not. But if it works by destroying self-esteem, it must also work by preparing a person for getting old, and programming him to behave accordingly.

Of course, some people out there have the courage to resist living up to society's expectations. They're the ones who make the news when they do something 'out of character' for their age, such as skydiving, or riding Harley Davidsons. They're hailed as eccentrics at worst, or heroes at

best.

But what if they were the norm? If everyone did what they really wanted to do, instead of what they're told by society they should be doing, what would our society be like? Can you imagine the chaos that would cause? Flying grannies everywhere, lead-foot geriatrics hooning around on motorcycles – who could keep up with them? Their children would be frantic.

"I haven't got time to take Granny to the airport! I have to pick the kids up from school."

No, it would all be too hard. Just keep telling Granny that you love her and she really shouldn't be doing things like that at her age. What if she had a heart attack? No, she'd better stay home and take it easy. She gets everything she needs from life when the grandkids come to visit. Just take her spirit away. That's how to control her.

And so it goes.

It's not even conscious, it's subtle. It's done with love, and the best of intentions. But it's done, and it's fatal.

Wouldn't it be nice if we weren't so obsessed with control?

It's one thing to change the community's perception of older people, and action is under way in the media on that front. But we also have to tackle the labelling system at the centre of it all, right from day one, birth. We are not all the same at any one age. Age itself has very little to do with it. It's our minds that are important, from the time we are born until we die. And it's our minds that are being denigrated and controlled, for convenience only.

"You laugh at me because I'm different. I laugh at you because you're all the same."

Which one are you? ❖

Alarmist reports exploit elderly fears

Living has always been a risky business, and the 21st Century is no different in that. Currently, as our news media constantly remind us, we are vulnerable to attack from all the usual suspects, ranging from war, terrorism, crime and violence to car accidents, the weather and crossing the road.

It's enough to make anyone want to retreat under the bedclothes and never leave the house – which might not be such a good idea either, as the majority of accidents and some crimes happen right there.

And while there are so many risks around, most of us do manage to live our daily lives and go about our business without coming to too much harm, especially if we take sensible precautions without tipping over into panic.

So we need to be aware that it can be very tempting for the media to exaggerate a story to catch the readers' attention, and that that can mean both playing on and exaggerating the fears of the more vulnerable groups in our society.

While these include children, women, and various ethnic groups, the elderly receive special focus as one of the most vulnerable groups because of their increased frailty, health problems and isolation. Crimes that would generally receive minimal media attention are more likely to have emotive banner headlines and opinion pieces if they happen to the elderly.

Take, for example, the stealing of money from someone's purse in a

by Anne Ring

handbag left on a supermarket trolley. Without in any way condoning this type of crime, it has to be pointed out that it is relatively minor and non-violent.

When it happened to a 92-year-old great-great-grandmother in February of this year, however, it made front page news in The Courier-Mail on successive days, with the February 11 headline of 'Pensioner falls prey to meanest sneak thief in town', followed by the February 12 headline of 'Heartless predator: Career criminal avoids prison despite life of robbing elderly'.

And by February 14 it was used as a stepping stone to a two-page Courier-Mail feature story illustrated by two separate pictures of elderly woman behind security bars, beside headlines and sub-headings that read 'Crime's hidden face: Society's most vulnerable are still living in fear despite what official statistics say'.

The remarkable thing about this story was that more than half of the text was taken up with a general description of the crime of the 'sneak-in' burglary, where burglars rob homes while the occupants are at home, discussing the rise of this type of crime and related social and legal issues, the type of criminal most likely to carry it out, and the fact that no particular age group is targeted by them. All very reasonable stuff. But it is well known that the main messages of a story come from its headlines, illustrations and initial paragraphs.



And what the story purports to be about is the elderly being terrified by a wave of crime targeting them. It opens up with an account of a brutal bag snatching that resulted in an elderly woman being seriously injured and ultimately dying 18 months later in a nursing home.

The only thing is that this event occurred in 2001, suggesting that the journalists could not find any more recent instance of a violent crime against an elderly person in Brisbane. Nonetheless, they contend that 'the spectre of such crime resurfaced this week when police released security footage of a woman standing behind a 92-year-old woman . . . and allegedly robbing her as she shopped for groceries.' And quote a representative of the elderly saying that 'such incidents have made crime the most pressing issue for older members. >>

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And that it is pointless to try and show members statistics that elderly people are under-represented as victims of crime . . . because if it happens to you, it blows statistics out of the water’.

In fact, of course, this reaction is one experienced by anyone, of any age, who has had direct experience of what is normally a statistic, whether it is a crime or a car accident.

Nonetheless, the story then segues into an account of an elderly woman who – like so many of Brisbane’s citizenry these days (just read any local Neighbourhood Watch police report) – has had the shattering experience of a ‘sneak-in’ burglary, which she discovered after the event when she found that her bedroom had been ransacked.

Naturally, ‘it took her weeks before she could walk into her bedroom without feeling afraid’.

And, of course, that is a perfectly normal reaction that any aged victim of such a crime does experience – that feeling of fear and of being violated. And the fact that this is a crime that does not target any particular age group, just certain types of houses, is reinforced by the remainder of the story, which is the more general analysis of this type of crime.

Essentially, then, what this whole story showed was that the official statistics were probably a whole lot better reflection of the diversity of the elderly as part of the community than its headlines and illustrations claimed to be.

And the elderly would be a whole lot better served by a more realistic approach to their situation, even if that means fewer readers or viewers than come from alarmist reports that exploit the vulnerability of the elderly for the sake of a dramatic story. ❖



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The Fairy Floss lady

I twirl sticks and stuff bags with fresh pink fairy floss. I'm a one-of-a-kind fairy floss lady and I love my job.

My workplace, under the bright lights of a suburban shopping centre, is defined by pink frilly tablecloths, huge pink fluorescent signs, pink and white balloons and a gently humming pink-skirted fairy floss machine.

My uniform is a candy-striped tunic over white pants and I wear a large decorated hat to suit the occasion, be it Christmas, Easter or Paddy's Day.

I'm at home in a setting of bustling crowds and soft background music; but my three teenage children hardly share my passion. Some people might suggest I'm unusual, unconventional or even eccentric. But my children say, "You're weird, Mum. Bizarre."

I remember sitting in a shoe shop watching the shop assistant tighten the laces on my daughter's new joggers. A child's shrill voice made all three of us look up. "Mummy, Mummy, it's the fairy floss lady. It's her. But she hasn't got her hat on."

I acknowledged the child with a finger wave and my daughter looked daggers at me.

Amid much laughter, she recounted to her brothers in exaggerated detail her latest shopping experience with Mum. "This kid was pointing and I was like, 'everybody's looking

by Florence McBryde

at us'. It always happens. Everyone knows her. It's so embarrassing."

Her brothers added their own horror stories. "My friends always ask me if I have fairy floss sandwiches for lunch," the older one complained.

"I didn't tell Mum that the principal wanted her to do fairy floss at our school fair," the younger one confessed. "Can you imagine it? Mum in her pink clothes and that stupid smiley hat, grinning at everyone. Not cool, so not cool."

I knew that it was therapeutic for my three teenagers to share their embarrassing stories and I remembered myself at their age.

We had a truth session in the dorm at college one night after lights out. One of the girls said, "Florence is always her own person."

I've often wondered how that particular, perhaps questionable, virtue manifested itself back then.

But now, after umpteen years at home raising three children, always renewing my teacher's registration annually just in case my husband dropped dead, I am doing something I've always wanted to do.

So if you see me twisting those fluffy sticks of fairy floss, wave or say hello. Ask for a taste test. But don't be embarrassed for me. Remember, this fairy floss lady is her own person. ❖

The getting of wisdom – the hard way

Wham! A heart attack and my mortality jeered at me over the shoulder of a surgeon, wielding a scalpel!

Until then I hadn't given much thought to growing old, far less suffering a heart attack! Those things happened to other people – a fairly common attitude when someone is healthy enough to do all the things they enjoy doing and take for granted they always will.

After the surgeon's expert performance with his trusty scalpel, I continued my busy life, but not quite as before. The attack and subsequent surgery was a sobering experience, leaving not only ugly physical scars but psychological ones which made me slow down a little and take note.

Nature had been giving me gentle hints and nudges for some time about growing 'older' but I managed to ignore the graying hair, deeper 'laughter' lines and thickening waistline very successfully. And dealt with the not so gentle hints and nudges from family such as, "You're

really going deaf you know!" by accusing them of mumbling!

After the heart attack, however, I forced myself to take criticism seriously; a painful experience! I had grown used to my surface changes gradually, but suddenly discovering hidden parts of my anatomy atrophied and that other bits, decorated with a network of stretch marks, had also succumbed to gravity, was shattering.

While deciding I couldn't undo the ravages of time, I took comfort from knowing that, because of surgery, my heart was in excellent shape and I decided to keep it that way.

Convinced by experts that exercising mind and body postpones many debilitating aspects of ageing, I made a few changes to my lifestyle! While continuing to pursue my love of painting and remaining involved as ever in various activities of friends and family, especially grandchildren, I began exercising

by Betty Ritchie



regularly and changed some eating habits. Mars bars disappeared from the menu!

Joining a writing group to exercise my mind subsequently led me to acquire a rudimentary knowledge of a computer, a family gift to encourage my writing which exercised my mind even more.

The heart attack and its consequences helped me discover many positive aspects about ageing and I hope that one day I acquire something else I always considered an award for growing old – the getting of wisdom. ❖

So, who reads the newspapers, anyway?

The Melbourne Age is read by the people who run the country.

The Canberra Times is read by the people who think they run the country.

The Sydney Morning Herald is read by the people who think they ought to run the country.

The Melbourne Herald is read by the wives of the people who run the country.

The Australian is read by the people who realise that no one's running the country.

The Financial Review is read by the people who own the country.

The Western Australian is read by the people who think the eastern states run the country.

The Hobart Mercury and the Melbourne Sun are read by the people who think the country ought to be run the way it used to be run.

The Adelaide Advertiser and the Brisbane Courier-Mail are read by the people who think it still is.

The Sydney Daily Mirror is read by people who don't give a stuff who runs the country as long as she has big tits. ❖





2004 Media Awards

Choose your category: (You may enter more than one category and send as many entries as you wish.)

Print, news and features:

- Queensland regional and suburban newspapers – weekly, bi-weekly and daily.

Television:

- Queensland news and current affairs.

Print media photography:

- Queensland photography.
- Queensland senior-specific newsletters.
- Queensland inter-generational journalism – print, electronic or photo.

Print, news and features:

- National metropolitan daily newspapers, Sunday newspapers and national magazines.
- National regional and suburban newspapers – weekly, bi-weekly and daily.

Television:

- National news and current affairs under 5 minutes.
- National current affairs and documentaries over 5 minutes.

Print media photography:

- National photography.

Radio:

- National city and regional.
- National advertising.
- National senior-specific print media.
- National inter-generational journalism – print.
- National inter-generational journalism – electronic.
- National inter-generational journalism – photography.

Please read the terms and conditions of entry, as listed below. Ensure you have completed the details on the left and signed the form, accepting conditions of entry.

The 11th OPSO Media Awards recognise excellence in the reporting of over 50s and their issues, helping to break down the stereotypes and the consequent social problems.

Closing date for entries:
Queensland and National:
October 22, 2004

Each nomination must have been published or broadcast between October 9, 2003, and October 22, 2004.

Entry formats: Print: Original tearsheet or high-quality copy.

Photographs: Colour print no smaller than A5 and up to A4.

Audio: Standard audio cassette/CD.

Video: Standard VHS tape (please disable copy protection).

It is a condition of entry that the entrant agrees to the use of their work for the non-commercial promotion of OPSO and the Media Awards.

Please note that the decision of the judging panel is final.

All items entered must have the entrant's name, phone number and title of work clearly displayed.

Prizes to be announced.
All finalists will receive a certificate.

Awards function date:
Queensland and National:
November 15, 2004



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