

High hopes

Housing commission estates are ditching their reputation for antisocial behaviour and becoming the heart of the neighbourhood.

Sport and gardening are bringing high-rise residents together in solidarity.

EUGENE BENSON and ANTHONY LONCARIC talk to residents who are helping to build communities.

MORE often than not the public perception of Housing Commission estates verges on the negative. As long as the estates have existed, most media coverage has seemed intent on focusing on the occasional social problems within estates while making no effort to shed light on any of the positive, often socially progressive programs and people who rise to prominence in such communities.

In the western suburbs, evidence of thriving community building programs is abundantly clear.

The Braybrook, Maidstone and Sunshine Public Tenants Association, a non-profit organisation set up by local public housing tenants, tackles a range of problems tenants may have in settling into the areas.

The association operates out of a building on Melon Street in Braybrook where residents of different backgrounds meet to engage in fun activities and education seminars, and to get free legal advice.

Association chairwoman Vivienne Conn says some public housing residents in the area are socially and economically disadvantaged and often feel isolated as they don't feel part of a community.

"Something was definitely needed in this area and Footscray Legal Service set up an outreach program to provide legal and financial advice once a week," Mrs Conn says. "Our association got involved and we now run five days a week for the entire year."

The association is run by volunteers who have lived or are still living in public housing.

"We know what it's like to live next door to other tenants with anti-social behaviour and we know how to provide comfort and relief for people," she says.

A number of classes run each day, offering tenants the chance to learn new skills and meet new people.

"We just recently renovated our building and we have a computer hub where people can use the internet," she says. "We have cooking classes, craft groups and mothers' groups, and we invite health experts to come and talk on topics like diabetes, which affects so many people in Brimbank."

Just across the Maribyrnong sits the Flemington high-rise estate. Established in the 1960s, the estate is home to more than 4000 people. It's almost its own suburb within Flemington.



Open door: Vivienne Conn helps run classes which give tenants the chance to learn new skills and meet new people. Picture: Darren Howe



Faye Murphy, centre, loves the opportunity to try new things at Wingate Avenue Community Centre. Picture: Michael Copp



Winners: The Flemington Eagles is one of the success stories of the community which has been built at the estate.



Open space: Lydia Zaffaroni tends to the chickens at the estate. Picture: Scott McNaughton

The diversity of its residents is spectacular, each trend of immigration since the 1960s being represented, as are born and bred Australians who have lived in the area for generations.

One of the great unifying aspects of the Flemington estate is its community garden.

With about 124 plots, each of 3 metres by 2 metres, the garden, which sits directly behind 120 Racecourse Road, is always brimming with activity.

No matter what time of day or what time of year, dropping in at the garden usually reveals dozens of green-thumbs tending to plants, cultivating the soil or checking on the resident chickens.

In a concrete jungle, the veggie patch stands out as an oasis.

Organisation Cultivating Community plays a key role in supporting the plot's users at both gardens.

Its paid staff undertake basic maintenance at the sites, providing gardening information and fielding whatever questions come their way.

Chief executive Jennifer Alden says the gardens are a vehicle for a range of interactions.

"The people here come from a huge variety of backgrounds and when they are all here the gardening and food act as an entree to so many conversations."

Ms Alden says some of the more organised events at the garden are attended by interpreters to help residents share information.

Back at Flemington, resident Lydia Zaffaroni is an expert at growing eggplant, silverbeet and peanuts in her plot.

Mrs Zaffaroni says she has friends who live off the estate who are jealous of her blooming garden plot.

"I was talking to a friend on the phone and said, 'Sorry I have to go, I want to do some gardening.' Then he said; 'What garden - you live in a flat?'"

"I explained about the garden and he was amazed so came down and had a look; he was very impressed."

"People are proud of their plants, sometimes when we get seeds we share and swap them with each other. We share what we grow, and it tastes much better [than shop-bought produce]."

"I've made friends who are Vietnamese, Turkish, Somalian, everything. And it's very relaxing, especially in summer when you can just come down to sit and chat. For me it's helped a lot."

Just like the nurtured veggie patch, the estate's resident Tenants Association representative Faith Griffiths believes the level of community spirit is also growing.

"People are pretty happy. There's a lot happening around the place and it's all a bonus."

"I see people everywhere when I'm getting around each day and if you don't know their name you know their face and you each say g'day. That goes across all cultures."

"There is always someone I can smile at and get a smile back. That's probably something we have here in the estate that you might not get out on the street."

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Nothing builds community better than a sports team that residents can get behind and share success with.

The Flemington Eagles soccer team faced financial ruin at the start of the 2010 season with serious doubt on whether its junior teams would even take the pitch.

With the club's members all coming from within the estate, many of the players struggled to pay for membership, insurance and the bare essentials of boots and uniform.

The threat of seeing the young charges potentially miss out on playing galvanised a core group of parents to raise funds and lobby for grants from Moonee Valley Council and the Football Federation Victoria to eventually secure the team's short-term future.

With the financial threat gone, the Eagles' obvious talent soared.

Not only did the under-11s win the premiership, they went through the season undefeated.

Since then the club has been recognised in the state government's 2010 Community Sport and Recreation Awards.

The Flemington Eagles junior soccer team took out the Community Participation Award.

Next door to Flemington in Ascot Vale, between Ascot Vale and Union roads, is another housing stronghold - more than 200 units and homes, though not in the form of high-rises.

The Wingate Avenue Community Centre is the heart of this neighbourhood.

The centre is home base for the Moonee Valley Legal Service and more community programs than you can point a stick at.

Faye Murphy has lived on the estate for 20 years, but it's only in the last four, since her full-time work stopped, that she's been coming to the centre.

"I keep trying new things. There's yoga on a Friday, Monday is bingo and I'm not really an artsy person, but I do the art and craft women's group as well."

"You can get isolated, as I always worked and just went to and from there, but now I'm not working it's a chance to come down and try new things."

"A lot of the ladies here do the English classes, so I can chat to them and perhaps it even encourages them to talk a bit more."

"It gives you a sense of purpose in your day and it's only a five-minute walk away."

Community development worker Rubydale Newman says it's a reality that some residents face social isolation, but so much is being done to help.

"Our creative programs and things with food bring people together in a way that's non-threatening."

"There can be a stigma if you live in public housing, and the media normally only have an interest in antisocial behaviours - they don't acknowledge that there are incredible people here with amazing stories."

So "incredible" are some of the residents on the estate that planning is under way to make a film telling some of those stories.

Although it's in its embryonic stages, Ms Newman says there's great momentum to make the film a reality.

"It really is more harmonious than it's portrayed. It's quite amazing to witness people of so many cultures coming together to do amazing things."