Case study 5: Community Building in San Remo – a local strength based project

Background

San Remo is a suburb of Wyong, located at the northern end of Wyong Shire. Its borders are marked by Tuggerah Lakes on one side and the Pacific Highway on the other. In terms of development, it is an older suburb than its neighbour, Blue Haven. The suburb is made up largely of separate houses and in 2001 there were just under 4,000 local residents. It is a suburb that had been perceived negatively by the broader community in the past. The locals wanted to build community pride and counter the images that some people had of their suburb.

This case study is about a project that used local strengths and assets to:

- bring a number of diverse local groups together to improve community life in San Remo
- turn a potentially negative focus on drug and alcohol issues into a local project that promotes health in practical ways
- create opportunities to include people who had previously been very marginalised in community activities, and
- build local pride and the sense of belonging.

The shift to a strengths based approach

Over the past 2 years there have been a number of community-building initiatives in San Remo that have focused on:

- bringing together community members and groups interested (and sometimes already taking action individually) in making San Remo a safer, better looking and more vibrant locality, and
- building connections between individuals and groups within the community to encourage mutual learning, friendship and participation in community life.

Specific activities and projects have included:

- The San Remo Beautification Project: which has brought all ages together to improve the environment of a local park: it started with an event called the ‘Walk and Talk’ to find out what people wanted to do at the park, then moved to planting trees and designing and painting a mural at the park that reflects the diversity of the community.

- The San Remo Community Garden: this project has an active committee of 19 local people who are planning, advocating, developing skills and building relationships by establishing a community garden on a vacant block of land in the area.

- The International Interaction: 160 community members from an array of cultures joined in a day of celebration and hospitality in the local park where the beautification project had been working. This was followed up by a regular gathering at the neighbourhood centre where people can share their food and friendship as well as building on the strength of cultural diversity in San Remo.

- The Milpara Aboriginal Group: members of the local indigenous community have been working with the San Remo Neighbourhood Centre and the local schools to build connections and participation both within the Indigenous community and within the broader community of San Remo. The role played in this process by a community worker from The Benevolent Society, who brought people together to create an opportunity for these groups and the broader community to build connections and work together, was seen as crucial.
Through both the Beautification Project and the Community Garden, the local Community Drug Action Team, working closely with the San Remo Neighbourhood Centre, has played a pivotal role.

All these projects have built connections with longer term community groups and activities in San Remo, ranging from the Tidy Towns group and the Precinct Committee to the GOATS (Going Off At The Swamp) festival that began as a youth festival and has now become an annual event for the whole community.

The development of these activities began when the local community groups, such as the Community Drug Action Team, and community service providers, such as the San Remo Neighbourhood Centre and The Benevolent Society, deliberately moved away from a needs-based framework and began to listen for the strengths and assets that were present in San Remo.

The process began with the ‘Walk and Talk’ in the local park, where people came to a picnic and tree planting, and where the community-building groups listed above spent time listening to and talking about the dreams and hopes that community members had for San Remo.

Other opportunities for getting together and listening/talking were set up and taken up, and work began to mobilise and utilise the ideas, talents, skills and strengths of community members.

This process slowly developed into the range of activities that are currently taking place in the area. It has gained momentum over time and is continuing to bring new people into local community-building activities of all sorts.

What a strength-based approach means in this context

A strengths based approach in San Remo has meant starting from the premise that everyone in the local community is needed, and that all of those working in a local area (community groups, organisations and services, and local businesses) can provide crucial support and resourcing for community-building work by supporting the strengths and assets that are on the ground.

Overall, the key ingredients that are the foundation of community-building work in San Remo are:

- Reflecting on what was and wasn’t working and changing the approach to do more of what was working.
- Willingness to spend time just listening to community members and the things they wanted for their suburb.
- Taking time to build relationships and partnerships between community groups who had tended to work on their own in the past.
- Services and organisations such as the San Remo Neighbourhood Centre, the NSW Premier’s Department and The Benevolent Society working in co-operation with community members and seeing themselves as resources for the community rather than driving the agenda.
- Practising the knowledge that issues of concern can be effectively addressed in indirect ways in community life. For example, the Community Garden has addressed a range of health issues for participants, including mental health and drug and alcohol issues, in a way that direct education programs or support groups could not. It does this by promoting a sense of belonging and providing an opportunity for all community members to be valued and to develop connections with each other.
Benefits and challenges

Benefits

The benefits of this project have been:

- Discovering and mobilising a range of skills, talents and strengths of San Remo community members – this discovery has been as important for community members for organisations and service providers.
- Developing new community groups such as the Milpara Aboriginal Group, the International Interaction group and the Community Garden committee.
- Greater co-operation amongst local community groups and service providers to work for the improvement of San Remo.
- Creating opportunities for a more diverse range of local people to have a role in community life and in local leadership.

Challenges

The major challenges have been:

- Keeping the momentum going when things were moving slowly.
- Managing and negotiating conflicts or misunderstandings amongst groups (going through this process has also been a benefit).
- Remembering to continually reflect and take time in the process – not to rush things. This is often an issue for services who look for immediate outcomes, and for community groups who like to see a result quickly.

The outcomes

Significant outcomes of the community-building work in San Remo are:

- Council approval for the development of the Community Garden on a block of land behind the shops.
- Increased community participation in local decision-making and community-building projects.
- A greater sense of belonging and co-operation across the community.
- Improved relationships between groups, services and businesses in the local area.
- Better utilisation of local resources and an increase in the flow of additional resources (monetary and other) into the San Remo community.
- Increased skills for local people through the TAFE Outreach course on landscaping and gardening, organisation of local events, and participation in groups.

The future

Future plans for the area include the establishment of the Community Garden after 2 years of developing the concept; further development of the newly established community groups and continued efforts to include more local people in the process and to mobilise the strengths they bring with them for new and existing projects.