

The Story of U3A Banyule

Where it all began

Pierre Vellas was the instigator of the Universities of the 3rd Age in France in 1973. The concept was developed through the University of Toulouse to offer courses to older citizens of the city. The University offered both academic subjects and physical opportunities. The Vellas family is still associated with the U3A movement and Pierre's son spoke at the 2013 U3A Network Conference held in the Melbourne Town Hall. The model spread through Europe and the name "Third Age" became accepted. The International Association of U3A's was established in 1975 and gained recognition from the UN and UNESCO. The model was academic and generally associated with a University. The first British U3A was in Cambridge in 1981; it was run on democratic lines, reflecting the medieval origin of University as a "community of scholars" In England in 2015 there were 950 groups, 36,000 courses and 350,000 members. U3A also flourishes in China although their model is very formal and supported by their Government. It is interesting to note that the subjects offered across the world are very similar. We belong to a large diverse mob.

Our Birth Pangs

The first U3A in Australia was established in the city of Melbourne in 1984. Hawthorn was next in 1985, followed by Monash and one at Ringwood then Yarra Valley. In 2014 our name changed to U3A Banyule to better identify our area and avoid confusion. In Victoria in 2016 there are 106 Campuses and 32,000 members. In September 1988 our membership was 150 now it is over 550. U3A is the fastest growing organisation for older people in Victoria.

Our beginning was in July 1986 when there was a large gathering of interested people in the Condor Room Heidelberg Town Hall. After listening to speakers from the campuses that were already established a steering committee was formed and the rest is history! The group numbered 19 and included Hula McGregor. She was at the inaugural meeting of 59 intending members and held a number of positions on committee. She has generously given us stories and facts about the early development of the group. As with the Vellas family we also have second generation members. Robyn Polya was the newspaper editor in 1994. Gideon, her son, has led a life drawing class and Rosemary, her daughter, is the Tutor Coordinator.

At this early stage all classes were held in members' homes. Margaret Soltau, was the secretary and her home was the U3A office.

Adventurous Beginnings

The social aspect of U3A was integral from the beginning and some of the ideas of our earliest members were very forward thinking. In 1988 a proposal was made to establish a Community Housing Group. The idea was that U3A members buy homes and live together in a community. Three prominent members at that time did live in the same street. However this plan did not come to fruition. When we were chatting to Hula she told us about a trip to England in 1989 using universities as bases. This was probably to attend the First International U3A Symposium held in Cambridge. The group had only been in existence for 3 years and they were off overseas! Interstate trips included Canberra (political history) and Mungo N/P (Geology). A 24 hour "learn in" was held at the Beechworth Campus of La Trobe in 2002 on the initiative of the Native Plant Nursery. Accommodation was in the renovated Beechworth "mental" home and the program was horticulture and social history. At this time Yarra Valley U3A was involved in volunteering in the nursery.

In 1999 enquiries were forwarded to Network re any assistance Yarra Valley U3A could offer to the Kosovar refugees. While this was not taken up it indicates the wider thinking of the group. Another "grand plan", under the leadership of Gordon Bryant, was to rewrite the Australian Constitution. Kathleen Carr told us they decided the Constitution was out of date so they revised it and then took the document to Canberra to present to the Minister of the time. He was, unfortunately, away so they were unable to deliver it personally.

Chin Wagging.

Socialisation is over the good old cuppa. A yarn with a mug of tea or coffee and a biscuit is an important part of most classes. Preparing “refreshments” and washing the tea towels afterwards are one of the many ways members contribute to this organisation run entirely by volunteers. Much fun and laughter was had when we rolled and stamped up to 400 newsletters preparing them for posting. The size of our U3A allows this more intimate and friendly atmosphere. The majority of our newsletters are now received digitally, but, of course, we do send newsletters by post to anyone who requests them. Printing of the newsletters has, over the years, been done with the support of Banyule Council, Craig Langdon MLA, presently a councillor, Matthew Guy MP, Jenny Macklin MP. and Anthony Carbines MP.

In The Bosom of La Trobe University

La Trobe University has supported Yarra Valley U3A from the beginning. In 1987 Thinking Philosophically was commenced at La Trobe University under the tutelage of Leslie Claydon. This class continues today as a Philosophy Study Group under the leadership of Janice Kelly.

Seminars were held at La Trobe’s Glenn College, commencing in 1990. Subjects relevant then are still relevant today: Exporting Education, Global Warming and the Crisis in Health funding were three. Today we hold a yearly seminar, now known as The Annual Forum, in November in our premises with an attendance of about 100 people and the subjects reflect current concerns.

In 1997 we signed our first Memorandum of Understanding with La Trobe with Professor Michael Osborne to allow our members to audit some classes with library privileges. Colleen Isaacs wrote enthusiastically about us being welcomed into the “bosom of La Trobe University”. Several MOUs have followed with the last one being signed in December 2015 for the next 3 years. Initially our side of the bargain was to assist with English Conversation with overseas students, and work in the La Trobe Plant nursery as previously mentioned. We do not do either today; English language classes have been formalised and we are no longer required.

For some years we manned a stall in Orientation week at La Trobe spruiking our wares to the parents of intending students. Today, our commitment to La Trobe is to present ourselves, being a population of older persons, as candidates for suitable social research projects or other interactions of mutual benefit. Our relationship with La Trobe continues to be strong. Many of our tutors are retired La Trobe lecturers who offer us a wealth of knowledge.

Out and About

Our relationship with the community is increasing as we foster partnerships with the Yarra Plenty Libraries including Ivanhoe, Watsonia and Rosanna and the Confucius Institute located at the Bundoora campus of RMIT. Over the years we have given talks about U3A to various groups such as Probus and Solo Graduates from Melbourne University. They commented that our program sounded quite impressive. Our choir, Audacity, performs at Musical Gatherings held in the U3A hall and invites other musicians, including a band from Northcote High, to join them for an afternoon of music in the hall. I think the young ones were a bit stunned by so many Grandmas and Grandpas in one place! This year we were joined by Rosanna Golf Links Primary School Flute group and a string ensemble from Ivanhoe Girls School. Our choir stood out when they performed at Deakin Edge with other U3A choirs during Seniors week in 2015.

Our energetic knitting group run stalls and an annual luncheon, the monies being given to a women’s refuge and other needy groups. But wait there is more! The group, with funding from Banyule City council, are setting up an instillation in Watsonia Library this year. They will also be involved with a “Pop Up” craft fair in the Library where they will assist people of all ages to learning to knit. The group has made “fiddle mitts” for people suffering with dementia and to assist children who have the

fidgets. Their busy fingers made 50 beanies for Li'l Aussie Premie Foundation and NAIDOC. They have also taught knitting in Briar Hill Primary School.

A Place to Lay our Heads

Accommodation has been a problem since inception, as it is with the majority of U3A's. In March 1987 we were allocated a room and office facilities at Heidelberg Technical School in Bell Street, the hours being from 1pm -3:30 daily. Classes were held in private homes or hired rooms. Peter Staples, member for Jaga Jaga, spoke to parliament about his pleasure in assisting Yarra Valley U3A to become established. Gordon Bryant MLA was also very influential in the establishment of our campus, as well as lecturing and as a serving committee member.

The search for rooms began again in 1988 and we were allocated an office in the old Baby Health Centre Room 208 Burgundy Street (then occupied by the Citizens Advice Bureau) by the Banyule Council. A move to the Greensborough Secondary College did not eventuate. A house warming party was held at the council offices at 44 Turnham Ave, in 1993 where we shared space with Do Care (an outreach of the Uniting Church). We had office space, access to a photo copier and a meeting room. Joyce Goffin was the president and says it was a very happy arrangement. It was during this time that Yarra Valley U3A was running two weekly radio programs: one on INA and one on Plenty Valley Radio. When we were asked to move to 48 Turnham Ave., in 1998 the committee felt it was too small so accepted a move to 208 Burgundy Street. This time we shared with another group but had an office and a small meeting room, with shared kitchen and toilets. We hired rooms from local churches, the Rosanna Fire Station, Eltham Living and Learning among others and used free spaces offered by Banyule Council, offices made available by MPs and private homes.

In December 2009, under the guidance of Brian Fitt, and again, with the support of the Banyule Council we moved to our present home at 14 Ivanhoe Pde Ivanhoe. Under the council banner we will happily reside here until the new Community Learning Hub is built. While we need, due to the number of classes, to hire some space and use private homes, the main bulk of classes are now held in 14 Ivanhoe Pde. We make full use of the rooms from 9:30 -5.00pm Tuesday to Thursday and from 12noon - 4.00pm Monday and Friday.

The Battle

This arrangement was not arrived at without the huge effort and work of many people, especially our President Janice Kelly. When the Banyule Council was considering the sale of 14 Ivanhoe Parade we were faced with another move and, as we all know, premises suitable for our purposes are not easy to find. So the battle was on! As principle user of the hall we had most to lose in the sale, but there was also concern about the future of the building because of its historical background. U3A members added about 300 names to the petition to retain the building. Politicians at all levels were approached. A number of U3A members stormed the barricades of the Council Chambers to be heard at Council meetings. However, the one on one discussions held with council members to really explain what we were on about swayed the day.

We acknowledge how fortunate we are to be in Banyule and have the support of the Banyule Council. Banyule is the only city in Australia to have been granted the status of an Age Friendly City by the World Health Organisation. Judy Ellsworth is our representative on the committee. In 2014 Banyule Council awarded us the coveted volunteer group award in recognition of the work our volunteers do for the community in providing meaningful learning opportunities for older people. In May this year our President Janice Kelly received an individual volunteer award from Banyule Council. Council appreciates us and we appreciate council.

Curriculum Extraordinaire

Many classes are long standing. Music Appreciation is now 21 years old and still under the care of Noel Griffith. Donna Jaggs history classes began in 1994 and Donna completed a course last

semester. Current affairs are another long standing subject and you will experience a taste of this class later today. Subjects come and go depending on the availability of tutors and interests of the members. History, languages and art are perennial favourites as are Bridge and other activities such as scrabble and Mah-jong. Some of the more unusual courses that have been held over the years include "Cooking up an authentic Hungarian Goulash", "Conspiracies of Silence", "Folk Dancing", "Home Winemaking - using your own garden fruits and flowers", "I Never Done Grammar Proper", Bird watching, Jazz Appreciation, and "Sushi for Beginners". Walking is another favourite. These two photos were taken Woodlands Park. The current walking group plans to walk in the Olivia Newton John Cancer Wellness Walk at La Trobe University on 11th September.

Public Talks on Monday have replaced our monthly Monday Talks. These events provide an opportunity for people to try before they buy! However, where else would you be offered such a feast as we do for \$40 a year? It is worth noting that in the 1940-50s many people, women in particular, left school at 14/15. Members can catch up on lost time and gain so much from U3A. Younger members are generally better educated and computer literate and so will forge new directions.

Moving With the Times

We have not been sitting still in this digital age. Via MY U3A we went "on line" in December 2015. No more standing in the hot sun or cold wind and rain. On one occasion a woman rested on her wheelie walker one hour before the doors opened. She was going to get her first preference! We now enrol and pay memberships, pay for excursions and receive newsletters and information via our devices. While this is not a happy progression for some people help is available in the office and the library has offered to assist people to join on line when they are in the library. It is interesting to note that U3A was "on line" in 2001, however due to costs and lack of members interest this was abandoned. Our rooms offer TV, lap top computers and other digital toys to facilitate the talks. Not to forget the wonderful sound system; we just need to continue to encourage or insist our speakers use the microphones, as we all become more hard of hearing.

U3A Banyule is a robust and vibrant organisation with a secure future thanks to the vision and hard work of all those involved over the past 30 years.

References:

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Presidents Reports: 1991-2010

Oral Histories:

Joyce Goffin

Brian Fitt

Noel Griffith

Hula McGregor

Kathleen Carr

Beryl White

Searches:

Heidelberg Historical Society

U3A Network

Banyule Council

Arden Street Uniting Church