

# MAXIMISING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

Ric Thompson

## Abstract

The obtaining of citizenship for all persons, including people with a disability is greatly assisted by the existence of “welcoming communities”.

This paper introduces the relationship of citizenship and the building of welcoming communities by the recognition of all citizens’ gifts, talents and contributions, and how, this is possible.

The evolution of this paper is based on the witnessing of communities capacity to welcome.

## Introduction

The concept of citizenship is often defined as “membership of a state or nation who enjoys political rights and privileges.”

David Engwichts, 1993 Meares Oration gave citizenship “essence” when he describes citizenship as “a rich concentration of exchanges, friendship, wisdom, skills, goods, support and culture.”

Citizenship is not about separation, exclusion, and expulsion.

David Richmond (1993) and Peggy Hutchinson (1996) introduce us to the concept of a ‘citizenship paradigm’ where people with disabilities are seen as full citizens, rather than clients of services.

The relationship between membership and citizenship and how such membership makes ‘good’ communities ‘better’ was reflected in the visit to America by writer Alexis Tocqueville in the 1830’s. He drew attention to the extensive nature of ‘civic associations’, the countless array of clubs and organisations. It was, as if ‘membership’ was an inherent part of the American culture.

Further to this Marshall (1950); Putnam (1993) and more recently the Australian writer Eva Cox (1995) have written to support the view. One’s citizenship status is further enhanced when membership to ‘associational life’ is acknowledged, by one’s collective gifts, talents and contributions.

The recognition of the value that citizens bring to a community is

concisely portrayed by Putnam (1003) and Cox (1995) with the term "Social Capital". Social Capital refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms, social trust, and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.

The provision of recreation/leisure opportunities without doubt contributes significantly to the development of a community's social capital.

For too long the value of communities has been based on the financial or physical capital status. There has been too little attention paid to the social capital or social fabric or glue of communities.

Vern Hughes (1995) in his paper 'Between Individual and State' prescribes that Australian history is not without a significant and honourable stream of associated endeavour. Ranging from the early Mechanics Institutes, Friendly Societies, member based libraries, adult education groups, agricultural co-operative, bush nursing, hospital auxiliaries and credit unions. In the 1950's, country fire fighting agencies and diverse women's associations, to health related self help groups and elements of the post 1960 alternative movements evolved.

### **"Me than We"**

Despite the historical evolution of associations both in USA and Australia there is evidence of a decline in some of the more traditional options such as the CWA,

Scouts and Union movement, and an increase in the more personal self help options or associations focusing more on personal rights and protection such as Neighbourhood Watch.

Harvard Law Professor Mary-Anne Glendon agrees with Professor Robert Putnam that more than ever before, the 'we' in the US society is being replaced by 'me'.

Glendon believes that "Americans express their rights in a way which captures our devotion to individualism and liberty, but omits our traditions of hospitality and care for the community.

Cox (1996) relates this trend to Australia, when she says, "The way American society is fragmenting has very clear implications for Australia, because we already have a significant adoption of American culture, and we run the risk of the same thing happening here."

This trend is further supported by McKnight (1995) with the proposal that communities have in fact been excluded from caring for each other, by the very existence and domination of the human service system. A system that has over a short period of time taken away from community a responsibility ("caring") that was once theirs.

This is particularly evident in some of the smaller rural communities where human service infrastructure has been placed in communities, often without consultation, from above. The consequence is that

communities then assume that their natural caring response are neither wanted nor recognised. Hence the introduction of service infrastructure has weakened rather than strengthened communities.

The physical, social and emotional distancing of people with disabilities from 'citizenship' has interestingly been assisted by the constantly evolving human service industry.

Some neighbourhoods/or communities, especially isolated or culturally specific communities are now environments of service, where behaviours are effected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client.

As with the development of any 'industry', there comes a number of assumptions, namely perceived ownership, and responsibility for a particular area or interest. Along with this comes the assumption that this area of responsibility or interest doesn't belong to any other system or structure.

The 'human service industry' in accepting this responsibility for the provision of 'service to people with disabilities' may have also contributed to the demise of what was once a shared community responsibility.

Communities have consequently, in a very short period of time learnt not to be part of everybody's life, on the basis that for some people, services are the answer, and somebody else's responsibility.

Communities have forgotten how to welcome all of its members.

How do we build welcoming communities?

Cox (1995) in her pursuit of social capital says "We need to make time for social interactions and the development of trust relationships. We will only increase social capital by working together voluntarily in egalitarian organisations.

Learning some of the rough and tumble of group processes also has the advantages of connecting us with others. We gossip, relate and create the warmth that comes from trusting. Accumulated social trust allow groups, organisations, even communities to develop the tolerance sometimes needed to deal with conflicts and different interests".

The successful development of 'welcoming communities, is based on the existence of a clear set of foundation principles juxtaposed with effective community building practices.

Community building maybe necessary in some communities because what was once an accident, now needs to be recognised, encouraged, and nurtured.

### **Foundation Principles**

The following foundation principles have been strongly associated with 'welcoming communities', and equally absent in communities that are not welcoming.

1. “You have to believe that people with disabilities have a place in the community, and the capacity to contribute to the development of community.”
2. “You have to believe that community members have the capacity and willingness to welcome people with a disability and their families.”
3. “You need to let go”

The above principles are based on the assumption that for too long communities have been introduced (often by the human service sector and media) to disability, by the way of perceived and portrayed deficits, rather than gifts, capacities and contribution. Likewise these same influences assist communities to see themselves as being excluded from welcoming people with a disability, as this is often portrayed as the sole responsibility of the services system.

Schwartz (1992) reminds us well, of how much community has been excluded by the lack of “asking”. This deliberate and conscious act of inviting others, has contributed greatly to both individual lives as well as the wider community.

Despite this, as agents of the human service sector we have many collective memories of the hesitation, procrastination, and reservation of the role of asking. This has often resulted in the delay in community in the lives of people with disabilities, by the mere failure to ask, in some cases for years. Lost opportunities!

When approached in a planned manner (see ‘Practices’) communities have and will continue to respond well. The expectation of community’s truly welcoming and supporting individuals with a disability, will never occur, unless the human service sector “let go”.

### **Practice**

The practice of ‘building welcoming communities’ can be assisted by the way of the following strategies:

1. Look for the unique gifts, capabilities and interests of the individual with a disability.
2. Look for the opportunities available.
3. Seek out the ‘best’ opportunity.
4. Identify ‘the power broker’ within the chosen opportunity.
5. Seek out the assistance of the ‘power broker’, because they are the power broker.
6. Seek assistance of the ‘power broker’ to connect community members capable of meeting needs.
7. Offer support.
8. Don’t hang around unnecessarily.
9. Give praise
10. “Let go”.

These practices build on the recognition of both individual and community assets, the use of marketing and business strategies, and the need to exit appropriately allowing communities to accept the real responsibility.

These strategies flow with a natural sequence yet the major fault often encountered in its implementation is the speed in which stages 1 to 5 are implemented. Good practice has identified that up to 60% of the total effort should be dedicated to these stages, in that it is only through such thorough planning and negotiation that its true impact can evolve.

### **Building Welcoming Communities: In Practice.**

“Atherton is a small rural community in the tablelands region of Far North Queensland. Within this community there is a community access service called Tableland Community Link, whose job it is to bring community into the lives of people with disabilities.

There was a need to do it differently. An alternative community development path, that was asset-based, internally focused, and relationship driven.

The co-ordinator sought assistance, and after some planning it was decided that the Mayor (power-broker) would call a breakfast meeting (6am) of community leaders to seek their assistance on how people with disabilities could be more welcomed into the lives of the wider community and how in so

doing their community would become a better community. The agenda was the deliberate celebration of this community’s people, places, and events, and it’s potential to welcome.

The success of this asset driver (rather than deficit) approach is evident today with people who attend that breakfast meeting some 9 months ago, who are still enthusiastic about how they can help build their community from the inside out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“The church is a social infrastructure spread throughout the cities of Townsville and Thuringowa in North Queensland, whose capacity to welcome people with disabilities had not been fully explored and maximised.

The Rev Andy Calder (power-broker) was to visit Townsville on holidays and it appeared to be an ideal opportunity to call a meeting of the community church leaders to discuss how people with disabilities could strengthen further the various church communities scattered throughout the cities.

Tea has been drunk, biscuits consumed and the meeting commenced. By the way of introduction, the participants were asked to share why they had bothered to attend. The overall response, was because they had previously never been asked. Here we had one of the largest social

infrastructure just waiting to be involved.

Further to this, it was thought that it was the sole responsibility of the Church's Social Welfare/Disability Service Departments to respond. Hence, the church's greatest asset, being it's membership was being denied the opportunity to welcome people with disability, and to gain from such membership.

This opportunity still continues with the church looking at the various ways in which it can be strengthened by opening up membership to the full community.

The link wasn't through my role as a bureaucrat but Andy's capacity to highlight the churches role in building communities. He spoke their language."

\* \* \* \* \*

The following newspaper advertisement clearly shows the potential of community to share its assets and in so doing contribute to the building of a better community. Having never met Mrs Blanche Ramsey I get the impression that Mrs Ramsey did not become the only recipient, as she clearly gave of herself to the extensive number of people that chose to be around her.

*"Thanks  
Blanche Olive Ramsey (Deceased).  
On behalf of the wider family of the  
late Mrs Ramsey, I write to express  
our very sincere thanks to the  
Wodonga Community for the  
wonderful, helpful support they gave*

*to Mrs Ramsey, of 43 Leonard  
Street, Wodonga, over the last 8-9  
years of her long life. (She was 90  
on 29/3/87).*

*Your assistance has enabled her to  
stay in her home until four weeks  
before her death in Wodonga District  
Hospital on 7/4/87.*

*To the nearby neighbours, who  
answered alarm bells at odd hours  
during the night, to the wide circle of  
friends who provided Christmas  
goodies or called on her with flowers  
or wrote to her, to the Nursing  
Sisters who showered her daily, for  
the Home Help Care so freely given  
(thanks Betty), to the Day Hospital  
that she attended when she could, to  
the Pickup Driver, to the Postman  
who brought mail to her (after finding  
her fallen in the drive), to Meals on  
Wheels (ever cheerful), to Mrs  
Rodgers of Lions Ladies, who took  
her for regular eye-tests by car, or  
tapes of services from St Stephen's  
Uniting Church in Australia, for large  
Print Books from the Library, to Dr  
Francis and Ian Richards, and to any  
other group inadvertently over-  
looked (apologies to you), please  
accept our warmest thanks. You  
have done a marvellous job and we  
deeply appreciate it.  
Keep up the good work!*

*Yours very sincerely, Allan Howells  
on behalf of the family."*

Communities have the potential to "welcome" all of its citizens, but what maybe necessary is for permission to be given, the opportunity, and sometimes assistance to do so.

Failure to do so “will result in people with a disability not having a life that is surrounded by the richness and diversity of community – a collective life, a common life, and every day life, a powerful life.” (adapted from McKnight (1993)).

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This paper is based on a two day intensive workshop on “Building Communities” that is offered by the author, allowing more detailed analysis and practical discussion.