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CENTACARE
Catholic Family Services

Westpac Australian Community Idol 2008

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Presentation by

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Blyth Regional Cinema

Winner, Westpac Australian Community Idol 2008

*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

**2008 Communities in Control Conference
convened by Our Community and Centacare Catholic Family Services**

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It's a pleasure to present our project to you. My thanks to Westpac for sponsoring this award, and to Rhonda and the crew at ourcommunity.com for the wonderful support they give to communities such as mine.

If I was to ask for a show of hands as to how many of you know where Blyth is, I reckon the percentage would be pretty low. But that doesn't matter, because we at Blyth know where our place in the world is and we love our little patch. Just as all of you know where your place is and you care enough about it to attend this conference.

Blyth is a town of 300 people 140kms north of Adelaide and 13kms west of the Clare Valley Wine Region. In common with most Australian towns our size, we have lost just about every service in the past 30 years, culminating in the closure of our fantastic little hospital in 1992. In hindsight, we went into a period of mourning as that facility had been so important in so many ways to the health of our community.

In 2000, we came out of that time with a determination to restore confidence. We held meetings to set goals and got on with the job of doing.

At about the same time, I went to a Cinema in Adelaide and watched *Master and Commander*. I guess it would be fair to say I was blown away by the sound effects in that movie – I'd only been to about five indoor movies previously, and although I went to lots at the Clare Drive In, who was watching a movie from the car's back seat!

That Adelaide experience had me questioning why we couldn't have access to the same quality in my region.

Then I had a Eureka moment. I already owned a building that was suitable. A year previously I had scratched my nose at the wrong moment during an auction for the empty Masonic Lodge hall in Blyth and was suddenly the proud owner of a large stone building with no immediate use and lots of cracking.

I have a bad habit of doing most of my thinking when I should be sleeping, and over the next three months (that's a lot of lost sleep!) I visualised a design for a Cinema in the Lodge Hall.

In March, 2004, having convinced my wife I wasn't insane, we called a public meeting to see if anyone else was interested. A curious thing happened. Most of those who attended were people who were not members of any other organization in Blyth, but were really keen to be involved in this one. As an aside, it made me reflect that perhaps we cling to old organizations too long and are not perceptive to other needs or interests in our communities.

From this positive meeting we costed all the necessary alterations and equipment; it was within our budget and away we went.

We had terrific help from the NSW Film and Television office and their contacts, and we were able to purchase second-hand curtains and seats from Hoyts in Sydney.

In December 2004, local tradespersons began constructing a sloped floor and new toilets. Thirty volunteers painted walls and hung curtains – working on curtain hems up a sloping floor while they were hanging was quite a feat. One hundred and twelve seats had to be bolted together and to the floor. We met every Wednesday evening and weekends right up until opening night on May 27th 2005.

Once opened, some of the early volunteers retired to a quieter life as their offer to help was based on just helping to see it happen and improve Blyth's amenities. Others put their hands up and we soon had the same number – 30 – to work on ticketing, candy bar and projection.

Teenagers offered to help and we now have a waiting list. I'm not sure about other communities, but it is certainly unusual in Blyth to have a waiting list for volunteers! Working on the candy bar is an excellent introduction for them in handling money and people, and we are thrilled when they move on to part-time jobs in Clare.

We run two movies every weekend. We update four chalk boards, six posters, ads in two newspapers and an e-mail flyer every week. We choose and order films and restock the candybar. And not forgetting cleaning toilets and vacuuming up popcorn!

In the last three years, 17,000 people have seen movies at our cinema.

We also often act as a babysitter when adult events are held in the town hall – footy club player auctions and the like. I must admit to some nervousness when the ratio is 70 children to three adults, but by and large the kids have been terrific. I did have call on one occasion to ask a four-year-old to whisper rather than shout during a lull in on-screen action, and that worked for all of two minutes. Eventually I went and sat next to him, and when he was tempted to chatter, would look up at me and have second thoughts. At a point in the movie when I thought he would be captivated by an action sequence, he turned to me and exclaimed, “This is the most boring movie I’ve ever seen!!” At four years old!!

One of our objectives is to subsidise and enable disabled people to regularly attend movies without having to travel 100kms, and we have enjoyed hosting several groups, some at no cost, others at cost price.

We have three wheelchair spots and our sloped floor allows elderly people with or without walking frames access to all levels. We regularly host dementia patients and carers from the Clare-based respite care facility and residents of local nursing homes.

Out of school hours care groups visit each holiday period and local primary schools now use us as an end of year treat. They are appreciative of the short time required to reach our facility. Previously, the two-hour, one-way trip to Adelaide left teachers tired and grumpy and the children weren’t much better. And they still had the trip home!!

Last year in November we hosted four high schools for an Eat My Shorts film festival. Students entered short films and red carpet greeted the stars as they arrived for the premiere and judging. This is to be repeated this year.

Farm and local government seminars and church groups make use of our modern technical equipment and add to the catering opportunities for businesses and community groups. We have seen an increase in the number of community groups that use the cinema for meal/movie fundraising events; these include hospitals, schools and kindergartens. We reduce our percentage of door takings to allow them to maximise their profit.

Perhaps the best moment for me over the past three years was this testimonial. We'd had a visit from the Balaklava Nursing home, and at the conclusion an 83-year-old lady grabbed my arm and exclaimed, "I could see everything – thank you so much!" Considered near blind, she had for the first time in years not just heard a movie, but in a darkened room, and with a big screen, enjoyed the visuals.

While watching a movie may not be a life changing event, for those not into sport (and every community has a reasonable percentage in that category) it can provide valuable social interaction, and touch all emotions, from uproarious laughter to tears. It is just terrific when our audience is so deeply moved by a movie that they sit at the end for five minutes and you could hear a pin drop, or they leave after a comedy and the candy bar is filled with laughter and happy faces.

For some, the expectation was for our cinema to be in a broken down country hall with wooden seats etc. After three years we are still getting first timers on most weekends and we are accustomed to their first comment to friends, "Wow, it's just like a real cinema!"

A common question from local journalists and others just after we opened was "Why Blyth?" in a somewhat disbelieving tone. My answer was "Why not Blyth?" We'd done our business plan, and all involved understood that our success hinged on quality equipment and comfort levels, and even more importantly, that in all areas our volunteers would put ourselves out to ensure every patron enjoyed their visit and wanted to come back. Blyth residents often mention how proud they are that our town has a cinema, and the gloom and pessimism of the nineties is clearly a thing of the past.

Thank You

Additional Information

Why DVD?

We are using DVD projection for four primary reasons – it costs a lot less in freight, it means pretty much anyone can handle projection duties, we didn't have to build a projection room, and it broadened the range of uses for which the facility could be used.

What did it cost?

The total cost of the building and refurbishments was almost \$200,000, including the in-kind volunteer work.

Who financed it?

My wife and I provided all the start-up funds and provided the building (around \$180,000 in total), and receive \$2550 each year for equipment hire. The committee are responsible for all maintenance and upgrades.

When Blyth and most small towns were developed in the 1800s, business people were quick to see opportunities and to make money. Many were just as quick to put money back into their communities, funding halls, churches, sporting complexes and other community assets. It seems to me there is still plenty of money in some regional pockets, but in the last 40 years philanthropy has died. I can't think of another major donation to fund a community project anywhere in our region in my lifetime, which I think is pretty sad.

Perhaps people are fearful of the Tall Poppy syndrome i.e. it's not seen as desirable in particularly small communities to be seen to be even moderately wealthy, so we guard our money closely and don't give any clues to our real position. I guess we are making a statement and proving that philanthropy in a small community can have huge mental and social benefits for us and the place we live and perhaps others will follow our lead.

How do you promote the cinema?

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We produced a glossy brochure that has been sent to households in the region with a two for one offer attached. We also give one to new residents to encourage a first visit.

The slide show

From the beginning, we prepared slides of photos depicting regional events and history. This has proved a very popular addition to screenings and brings photos out of family cupboards or town history collections and on to the big screen. This is changed about every six weeks.

Flow-on benefits for the town

In an era when fundraising is increasingly difficult, holding a movie night is generally very easy to sell. Carefully choosing movies tailored to the expected audience is part of this success.

The Croquet Club has just eight members but puts on a superb morning tea for up to 40 persons for \$4 each. While any large catering effort is beyond their means, these morning teas have been a perfect way to raise money.

To encourage more groups to consider a day in Blyth we have put together a package of local attractions and this prospectus has been sent to clubs and coach companies.

Our wish list for the future is to add a café to cater for after-movie discussion, to upgrade the quality of projection and to purchase equipment that will allow us to receive encrypted movie data discs when that time arrives.