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Community Idol Presentation

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
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CERES

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A small and beautiful bird, the sacred kingfisher, has become to many people a symbol of hope for the future. It represents positive solution-oriented community action and the impact this can have on creating a better world – a more just and fair world, a world where people will live together more harmoniously with one another and with the natural world.

This bird disappeared from the Merri Creek Valley in inner Melbourne when the area was industrialised, but through community effort restoration has occurred and the creature now returns.

Each year in November thousands of people from the community from all sorts of diverse backgrounds come together to celebrate and to create visions for a better place, a better world.

This celebration is called the Ceres Return of the Sacred Kingfisher Festival, and this little bird has become a beacon for the future, a bright and shining light for another way. It is the mascot for Ceres, a community place, and its people, committed to finding solutions.

We are thrilled and honoured to be a finalist in the Community Idol competition.

I would like to acknowledge the other idol finalists (though community groups are traditionally used to working co-operatively and collaboratively rather than in competition, so we find ourselves in an unusual situation).

It's a great honour to have a chance to tell you about the wonderful place that is Ceres, its people, and the work that we do, and why Ceres would make a fantastic CI.

Ceres was born out of the turbulence of the mid-seventies, when unemployment was high, education systems were failing many kids in the community, and environmental issues were beginning to be considered a important concern.

Community visionaries were able to envisage a place that offered solutions, tackling all these issues at once and seeing them all as connected.

Employment, education, environment, social equality and community were not unrelated, and needed a combined strategy. The solutions would improve the environment, they would work for greater social equity, and they would work for greater harmony and respect for all living things.

The vision was so compelling that in 1982 the then Brunswick city council supported the community by providing some land in East Brunswick on the banks of the Merri Creek. And Ceres began.

It was a tip. And before that it had been a quarry. And before that a market garden, and, of course, before the European invasion it had been Wurundjeri land.

Since 1982 thousands of people from the Ceres community have transformed the landfill into a thriving inner-city green oasis, restoring the landscape and creating a pioneering model of a sustainable community development, showcasing environmental technologies and management practices. It is a village, a community in itself, a place where people come together to meet, to work, play, study, and dream of a new way.

Today our proud mission says CERES is a place which exists to initiate and support environmental sustainability, social equity, cultural richness, and community participation.

Ceres is a not-for-profit incorporated organisation. Its overarching governance is a committee of management made up of members of the community and Ceres staff representatives.

The members of the management committee come from a wide variety of backgrounds and represent a wide spectrum of community stakeholders. They have a variety of strategic and practical skills and involve themselves in the day-to-day running of Ceres as well as supporting the implementation of visions and projects for the future.

Nowadays Ceres has numerous projects, programs and activities that make it what it is. If you were to come to Ceres – which I hope you all do – this is some of the activity you might see on a typical day.

Schoolchildren parade past, carrying on their heads buckets of water that they have all collected from the Merri Creek.

They sing an African work chant as they go, and are encouraged and inspired by Jibril from Guinea as they make their way to the model African village where, among the mud-brick thatched-roof huts, they will learn from someone who was born there about a different life happening far away, gaining an understanding of issues in developing countries.

They are some of the 60,000 students from across the state who come to Ceres every year – students from kindergarten to university, visitors from overseas, and children with various challenges.

Ceres is the only centre in Melbourne offering such a comprehensive range of educational and environmental programs. All five of our cultural education programs are presented by an educator indigenous to that culture. Ceres Education has one of the longest-running Aboriginal education programs in Melbourne.

Sustainable schools is a relatively new initiative for Ceres. This award-winning outreach program is active in 186 schools across Victoria, and is now involved in a national rollout in every state in Australia.

At Ceres volunteers work alongside artists to create puppets and lanterns for festivals. Alongside staff they're in the office helping with the mailout to members – or repairing bicycles, collecting the eggs from the chooks, researching alternative technologies, and feeding the cows.

Parents, grandparents and children alike find Ceres a great place to meet and play, where old and young alike find creative and interesting pastimes. Elderly Maltese folk work alongside a new generation of vegetable growers in the community garden plots, sharing skills – sharing lives.

Many visitors come to Ceres every day to eat at our sublime organic outdoor café, buy their vegies at the Saturday market, and get plants (as well as great advice) from the permaculture and bush food library.

All of these enterprises have been part of our response to creating solutions to contribute to the finances of Ceres, as well as contributing to our mission and to Ceres' dynamic fabric. And they make the best coffee in Melbourne!

These enterprises are developing principles and practices in cutting edge sustainable business development. In the Ceres organic farm you will find diverse community members working side by side.

It has always been a place where unemployed teenagers with limited options and people with other challenges have come together to learn and to gain skills and to feel useful and connected.

Some days, too, at Ceres you might see Japanese scientists being shown through our award-winning water project, which is breaking new ground in practical water conservation and reuse research and practice. Our village green at Ceres is always green – because it is watered with recycled water from our café. True to Ceres' origins as a tip site, the Ceres community have dreamed, designed, experimented and made it largely from recycled materials.

Capturing new opportunities at the forefront of change is what Ceres is known for. Most recently, we are developing an urban orchard program, green technology initiatives, and contact and connection with developing countries.

Ceres is a longstanding innovator in the realms of environment and community, dealing with diverse audiences – local, Australian, and internationally.

Ceres has a proven track record in community building through synthesising a variety of approaches. Ceres is in a ready position to take the new next step into the future – the creation of a sustainability centre.

Funds thus far allow for the construction of phase one, and we are now seeking funds for the entire project.

The Sustainability Centre will provide an example of what a sustainable future might look like, combining local and global – a

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new visitors' centre of local, national and international significance, a thinktank and centre for leadership and creativity and sustainability innovation, research and practice, a place for learning how to reduce our ecological footprint, locally and globally, a place for arts – performance, music, theatre and celebrations, for singing up our stories and our work towards a better world.

Ceres operates at a time when singing up solutions for a better world is crucial. Current trends show rising oil prices, the need for a factor ten reduction in consumption and other concerning environmental indicators, and increasing social and personal ailments such as loneliness and depression.

At a time when 20% of the world's population consumes 80% of the world's resources, Ceres finds this an unacceptable inequality with dangerous environmental and social implications.

Ceres is leading the way in exploring strategies for tackling this. We know that Ceres has a vital part to play in addressing both local and global concerns, and in doing so will contribute to crucial and fundamental shifts in public understanding and lifestyle.

A quiet revolution has been going on in Brunswick; we'd like that revolt to start getting a bit noisier.

Thanks to you all. Thank you to ourcommunity.com.au for giving me the opportunity to tell you about Ceres. You are all very welcome, and we look forward to your visit.