

We've followed Neighborhood Renewal guidelines to suit our community just as other communities have done.

So whilst we support working groups on housing, safety and security, health and well being, unemployment and environment, we also support a Social and Cultural Working Group. Because one crucial factor about Maidstone and Braybrook is its incredible social and cultural diversity. There's also the realities of changing demographics with lots of new families moving into the area, and the need to counteract the stigma of being a resident of public housing.

So we don't differentiate between those who live in either private or public housing. Instead we try to break down the barriers. It's necessary to work from strengths because if we start off with negatives such as deprivation and alienation then we're on the back foot. Instead we celebrate difference and validate respect for different circumstances, experiences and backgrounds. The community arts are the most powerful way to do that. Indeed in my opinion the community arts are the most powerful tool in community development.

Lyndsay Mason, Community Development Worker, Braybrook Community Centre, *interview*

Maidstone and Braybrook

The broad-acre estates of Maidstone and Braybrook are in the outer south – western suburbs of Melbourne. Twenty per cent of the residents are of a Vietnamese background. Lyndsay Mason is a community development worker with an extensive background as a community-based artist in Britain and Australia. She is currently employed by the City of Maribynong to support the engagement of communities in a number of activities, including Neighbourhood Renewal.

One initiative that has taken place since she came to work at Maidstone and Braybrook has been a series of events entitled ***Armchair Travel***, aimed at increasing inter-cultural understanding.

Armchair Travel has included an evening in which armchair travelers could sit back and enjoy an exploration of Vietnamese culture at the Maidstone Community Centre. Planned and achieved with people from the local Quang Ming Temple, the event presented Vietnamese musicians, singers, musicians, dancers and a visiting linguist. The climax was a display of food carving and sculpture by a highly respected expert from Sydney, an exhibition of skill which greatly impressed not only the audience of armchair travelers but also the local Vietnamese community.

The community cultural development processes at Braybrook and Maidstone are based on an evolving strategy of small-scale events and not on one-off *spectaculars*, as the emphasis is on long-term growth across many different social groups. An exception was the participation of Braybrook and Maidstone residents in the 2003 ***Big Day Out Festival***, part of the broader bi-annual ***Big West Festival***, celebrating life in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Highlights of ***Big Day Out*** included performances by refugee people from the Dinka community in the war-scarred southern Sudan. The male ***Dambai Dancers*** and the ***Dany Women's Group*** have since become increasingly busy with further public performances. The success of ***Big Day Out*** resulted in the Braybrook and Maidstone Neighbourhood Association deciding to make ***Big Day Out*** an annual event.



Dambai Dancers and the Dany Women's Group at the Big Day Out Festival, 2003.



Dambai Dancers and the Dany Women's Group at the Armchair Travel Day, 2003.

Another cultural process undertaken at Braybrook and Maidstone has produced a mural on the back walls of the Braybrook Community Centre. The mural, painted by local street artists supported by artworker Amanda Neville, is a bold statement which, since its creation, has never been tagged. After all, it belongs to the resident youth and is therefore considered sacrosanct.

The mural is adjacent to a barren expanse from which one can see the distant high rise towers of Melbourne. In 2005 this ground will become a Neighbourhood Garden designed, sculpted and cared for by local residents. It will be used for individual garden plots, performances and visual arts installations. Overall the projects at Braybrook and Maidstone signify that community cultural development and Neighbourhood Renewal do share a number of common elements; amongst them the desire to create vibrant places where people want to live.

In essence strengths-based practice:

- is an approach to people which is primarily dependent upon positive attitudes to people's dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities
- emphasises people's ability to be their own agents of change by creating conditions that enable them to control and direct the process of change
- creates conditions that enable people to identify and mobilise their strengths and capacities in the process of change
- provides resources in a way that complements people's existing strengths and resources as opposed to compensating for deficits
- acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between workers and those they work with
- seeks to identify and address social, personal, cultural and structural constraints to people's growth and liberation
- recognises and acts to address dynamics inherent in organisation and social practices and structures that are incongruent with strengths-based principles and processes

W. McCashen, cited in *Building Community – The Shared Action Experience*, Linda Beilharz, Solutions Press, 2002

Long Gully and Eaglehawk

The public housing estates in the Bendigo suburbs of Long Gully and Eaglehawk are one hundred and thirty-seven kilometres from Melbourne. The residents are predominantly Anglo-Celtic in background. Many of them have lived at Long Gully or Eaglehawk for a long time. St. Luke's Anglicare, a welfare agency based in Bendigo, is a main provider of services. Linda Beilharz is Director of the Community Capacity Building and Research Unit at St. Luke's. In her book *Building Community – The Shared Action Experience* she writes that Long Gully has high numbers of interventions by police, juvenile justice, child protection, drug and alcohol services, and is an area where significant resources have been withdrawn over the past few years including a primary school and a kindergarten.

Building Community – The Shared Action Experience is a study of a three-year community development project which ran from 1997 to 2000. **Shared Action** emphasised people's ability to be their own agents of change by creating conditions that enable them to control and direct the process of change. **Shared Action** also seems to have been based at times on the use of pre-existing social rituals.