



I started out of fear actually. I'd just been dancing as a hobby. But Aldo Malavisi, the Jesuit Social Services worker, was organising a café night in 2002 with performances from residents and estate workers. He asked me if I'd dance and I felt so fearful I knew I had to do it. My daughter and a friend felt the same way. The three of us danced. Straight away four other people wanted to join us and, with each show we had, more wanted to join in. They want to know how you move your hips so much and what the movements mean. So I started classes and began teaching what has always been my passion.

Tangi Stickland, *interview*



Café Nights at Collingwood have adopted a tradition first started at the Richmond housing estate. In May 2004 a *Gala Café Night* brought together residents from the Collingwood, Richmond and Fitzroy estates for an evening at the Collingwood Town Hall. Choirs, dancers, actors and musicians from a wide range of backgrounds showcased their talents. The night was coordinated by the members of the Melbourne East Timorese Activity Centre and organisations such as the Collingwood Neighbourhood House.

The Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House, renovated, is packed with the results of ceramic, weaving and stained-glass class projects. The Collingwood Neighbourhood House was formed after the City of Yarra asked Sue Kent and her Committee of Management if they were interested in running outreach programs in an empty space beneath one of the high rise towers on the Collingwood estate. A fenced-off former kindergarten, the rooms were dusty and dirty with the ground outside barren and forlorn. In the five years since the outreach programs began, the transformation of this space into the Neighbourhood House has been remarkable.

Performances from *Collingwood Café Nights*:

LEFT: Tangi Stickland

ABOVE: Young performers rapping

BELOW: The Voices of the Atherton Gardens



Having graduated Fine Arts (Sculpture), naturally I found myself working in part-time child-care at Belgium Avenue. The Ministry of Housing had provided a decrepit cottage for use by some single Mums from the flats. One day the Mums asked me if I could show them how to make those great Australian icons, garden gnomes. They were convinced their flats would be much nicer if they contained a plaster garden gnome. That's where my training in the Fine Arts paid off. We made a lot of gnomes together. I saw one recently with a price tag of a hundred dollars in the window of an antique shop in Toorak. I wish I knew where the rest of them were, those gnomes.

Sue Kent, Coordinator, Collingwood and Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood Houses, *interview*

Cultural activities over the past five years have ranged from ballroom dancing to an on-going project to make the whole precinct, as well as the car park, a more vibrant environment: from the *Autumn Sun* and *Harvest Festivals* to *Music By Candlelight*; from *Koori Weaving* and the *East Timorese Felting Project* to *The Barefoot Artists* of creative writing and performance classes; and from the East Timorese *Uma Lulik* art exhibition to the *Positive Images Photography Project* which engaged young people from the Richmond and Collingwood estates. Some of their photographs were selected by residents for greeting and Christmas cards. Others were selected for permanent displays in the foyers of two tower blocks at Collingwood. Life inside the flats is also projected outwards in the current *Fencing Art* project. Environmental artists and residents are turning part of the fence-line along busy Hoddle Street into a woven composite of

memory-laden personal mementos and found objects.

Visually, the most striking thing at Collingwood are the ceramics.

Around the exterior of the Neighbourhood House, mosaics extend along all of the walls. Across the estate, there is a proliferation of ceramic pavers, tables, cones, mandalas and totems, many of them based on the shape of the high rise towers. Inside these mini-towers are tiny inlaid objects referring to everyday estate life. There are ceramic works at Richmond and, to a lesser extent, at Atherton Gardens in Fitzroy, where the ceramic art and the three Babushka dolls gracing the estate were made by residents working with artist Bronwen Gray. But Collingwood is *the* place for ceramics.

In 2001 artist Suesy Circosta came to the Collingwood Neighbourhood House to teach drawing. Gradually she and the twenty-five members of her drawing class moved into the making of small-scale interior and exterior visual installations. Artists Bronwen Gray and Kate Clark, like Suesy Circosta herself, were also involved with other tenants in installing ceramic artworks outdoors. However the proliferation, if not the explosion, of ceramics began when Suesy Circosta started teaching and training hundreds of secondary students from the nearby Collingwood College. Adults funded by various work-

for-the-dole schemes also came to learn and to participate, joining residents from different cultural backgrounds, male and female, young and old. At one stage there were night-time and weekend teams making hundreds of pavers, mandalas, dream cones of archetypal images and the emblematic totems with their little windows into the lives of their creators. Altogether, based at the Belgium Avenue and Collingwood Neighbourhood Houses, twelve different ceramic projects were carried out in the space of three years.

All Neighbourhood Houses reflect the communities in which they live. At Belgium Avenue and at Collingwood, past history has shown that accessible art-making is a powerful and effective way to bring people from different cultures together. From children right up to the elderly, it forges new friendships and builds a strong sense of community. It also enhances the skills residents bring to the artwork, or through it they learn a whole array of new skills. It is a tribute to the Committee of Management that they have decided to stick with the arts as the way to go, even during times when it might have been easier to raise funds for strictly *educational* courses.

Sue Kent, Coordinator, Collingwood and Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood Houses, *interview*



Over the past thirty years there have been many attempts at defining how an artist best works in the community. My own practice is influenced by my training and experience as a health practitioner as well as an artist. I've also learnt to trust my own intuition. Typically I go into a new environment, soak it up, talk to people, listen, ponder – and trust that I'll come up with a theme which is relevant to the community. It must also be universal so that the outcome will appeal and communicate to people outside the initial community. Once the theme is established, people can personalise it, make it their own, transforming themselves and the theme as they do so.

I then interfere as little as possible in the substance of what they do but instead keep re-enforcing the process of art-making, pushing and pushing technique. Because on one level I so much want them to have concrete skills they can keep for the rest of their lives. But on another level I see the whole artistic process is a conduit through which a community can find meaning and fulfillment, with the people within the community made healthier through the force of their individual spirit and the power of their own imaginations.

Suesy Circosta, artsworker, *interview*.

ABOVE: The mandala mosaics, Collingwood housing estate.

BELOW: The mosaic benches, Collingwood housing estate.

