

# Volunteers, where are you?

“Sutherland Shire is heavily dependent on volunteers – without them its quality of life would slump. It’s so urgent to keep up a flow of new volunteers.”

The speaker is Evelyn Thompson, a leading spirit for decades in the Shire’s Caring Centres movement.

Evelyn is worried. She says a hoped-for surge in volunteer numbers failed to follow intense promotion throughout the national Year of Volunteers (2001).

“Many organisation are barely marking time, and in others numbers are falling, though the Shire’s population keeps growing – and ageing!”

Behind the stats

Officially the Shire’s volunteer levels sound positive: ‘About 34% of Shire residents over age 16 are involved in some form of volunteering,’ says Council’s Peter O’Connell.

But this refers to volunteers in general, with some doing a little and others a lot. The contribution may be only a few hours a month. (A national statistic says a quarter of all volunteers give less than 20 hours a year.)

‘Volunteering’ covers a wide range of activities. Evelyn Thompson’s 20 Caring Centres in the Shire cater to 700 of ‘the aged, the frail, the lonely, the disabled, and to younger folk with disabilities’, and each of the 400 volunteer carers gives a large part of a day every week.

That’s a very different volunteering from another essential service, the surf clubs, which have about 2000 volunteers (in the Surf Life Saving Clubs of Cronulla, North Cronulla, Elouera and Wanda, including the Nippers wing of 6-12 year olds). “Our numbers are fairly stable,” says spokesman Harry Brown, “with a welcome tendency for more young women to join”.

Meanwhile referrals to the Caring Centres are running at 20-30 more persons *every month*, yet the number of volunteer-carers is not increasing. “Some of our Centres are in desperate need,” says coordinator Barbara Bourne (ph. 9525 6400).

Mixed reports

The Shire-wide Precinct/Residents Associations present a mixed picture. From 19 a few years ago, they have fallen to 13.

The Chairman of the Combined Associations, Neil deNett, agrees the fall is regrettable but says a resurgence can be predicted if pressing local needs arise.



The volunteers of the Uniting Church’s Gosport Street Caring Centre had flourished since 1975, but in 2002 had to close down because new volunteers did not come forward. Some went to join other Centres.

## Help others, help yourself

You volunteer to help others; yet while doing so you are, remarkably, helping yourself. Hard to believe? Here’s the proof:

Increased Vitality. Regular volunteer work, ‘more than any other activity’, dramatically increases vitality. – *University of Michigan study*

Longer Life. Those who help others live longer themselves. – *A finding of the Universities of Tecumseh and Michigan*

Cure for Many Things. ‘The cure for all sorts of things is not so much being cared for as caring for others.’ – *Oliver Sachs, internationally famous psychiatrist, SMH, 26.2.92*

Specific Health Gains. Selfless acts prove to be good for the heart and immune system. – *Two US doctors in ‘American Health’ (1988)*

Happiness. Happy people tend to be those who focus as much on the happiness of others as on their own satisfaction. – *University of Chicago study*

“The present Council,” he says, “has done a good job in checking the overdevelopment that marked the 1995-99 Council. So residents aren’t looking to the Precinct Associations to lead resistance – but they will do so again if overdevelopment threatens when a new council is elected in September.

“Meanwhile, some Associations are strong – those of Bundeena, Kurnell, Sandy Point and Woronora Valley for instance. They are four distinctive ‘villages’ where community spirit is well above average. Several others are very active, usually because of good leadership by dedicated individuals – Oyster Bay is a case in point.”

The positive spirit  
A recent discussion group considered the influences operating

against volunteering in rapidly changing Sydney.

The group listed increasing busyness, lengthening hours of work, traffic making travel-time longer, both parents in jobs, grandparents looking after children – not to overlook selfishness, materialism, consumerism, declining church numbers, addiction to entertainment, home computer fascination... an endless list.

But they also found many reasons why the spirit of community is effectively fighting back.

“I agree wholeheartedly that the Shire presents a mixed scene,” says the Environment Centre’s Jim Sloan. “Take the Bushcare movement. While some of its groups are struggling to maintain members, the number of groups has swelled to an incredible 143, involving over a thousand residents in caring for precious patches of local bushland.

“And more generally, the statistics show that nearly one in 10 Shire residents over age 16 carries out some form of environmental volunteering – that’s wonderful! I’m sure you’ll find a great spirit too among the Shire’s firefighters, playgroups, P&Cs, arts and crafts, and more.”

Action to lift numbers  
Mary McGregor, through Volunteer Link, works tirelessly to place volunteers in a group that suits them. “I’m very positive,” she says. “I see many generous people.”

“It’s great too that Sutherland Council supports a number of volunteer programs, as diverse as



Three of the 20-30 volunteers on Clean-Up Australia Day 2003 who worked enthusiastically to get rid of debris from an old camp site on the Woronora River.

## Volunteers’ Song

If you pause you just might hear a song  
amid the traffic’s beat,  
a song that now is filtering down  
to every Shire street...

“We’re the mothers and the fathers  
and the teens and singles too  
who feel that when a need is there –  
there’s work for us to do!

“You’ll find that we’re not far away  
when trouble’s at your door.  
We lend a hand in hospitals,  
and lift the stumbling poor.

“You’ll find us in the refuges,  
safe houses, neighbour watch  
and tossing lifelines hopefully  
that addicts just might catch.

“Our cars are at the service  
of the aged and handicapped,  
of those who need a meal-on-wheels,  
the lonely, money-strapped.

“From playgroups on to sporting groups  
we act as secretaries,  
give time by day in school canteens  
by night in P&Cs.

“We act to keep the Shire we want  
uncrowded, quiet, green,  
and join the big campaign each year  
that keeps the Shire clean.

“We join the monthly bushcare groups,  
the brave bushfire brigades,  
the lifesavers on beach patrol,  
the health and caring aids.

“The arts, the crafts, the festivals,  
the orchestras and bands –  
as much as clubs and precincts do –  
they need our helping hands.”

...It’s the song of real community  
and backed by ancient lore.  
To those who are the givers  
life gives back even more.

*Bob Walshe*

Bushcare, the Animal Shelter and Hazelhurst Gallery. It has put out an excellent brochure ‘Involvement in Sutherland Shire’, and aims to organise a promotional annual Volunteers Forum, starting in May next year.”

She argues for setting up a full-time Volunteer Link shopfront in the Shire. St George’s Hurstville Link office attracts many more than twice the volunteers who go to the Shire’s once-a-week office (on Thursdays, at GyMEA Community Aid Service, 39 GyMEA Bay Rd, GyMEA: 9525 0659). (Hurstville: 9580 9055) \* **BW**

 Our  
Community  
Our Environment



 Our Shire

## Our Sutherland Shire Environment Centre

Suite 4, Level 1,  
2-4 Merton Street,  
Sutherland, NSW 2232  
Ph 9545-3077

Web: <http://ssec.org.au>

### Started

- ☞ in 1991
- ☞ by the community
- ☞ run by the community

### Supported by

- ☞ volunteers
- ☞ donations
- ☞ memberships

### Helping our Shire

- ☞ stay healthy
- ☞ productive
- ☞ green

### Welcoming

- ☞ participation
- ☞ discussion
- ☞ ideas
- ☞ initiatives

### Support your Environment Centre

- ☞ become a member
- ☞ give a donation
- ☞ join our volunteers

### Visit the Centre Website

- ☞ Towra
- ☞ Port Hacking
- ☞ Kurnell
- ☞ and much much more

### Browse the Centre Library

- ☞ books
- ☞ magazines
- ☞ reports & studies

### Use the Centre facilities

- ☞ information sheets
- ☞ brochures
- ☞ the Internet
- ☞ photocopying
- ☞ meetings