

Just like part of the family



Community has been central to SCH's success, Natalie Filmer reports

SUNBURY Community Health has kept its finger on the pulse of the region it serves for almost 40 years.

From pioneering in-school dental visits in the 1970s to today's family violence support, the not-for-profit organisation continues to adapt its programs and services to meet the growing community's needs.

Those at the organisation's helm, past and present, say its successes have always been linked to community connections.

"The enthusiasm and support from the early committees of management and the trustees cannot be underestimated," said inaugural chief executive Jim Weatherill, who led the organisation from 1976 to 1982.

"However, for everyone involved, it was the way the community accepted the organisation.

"We'd offer a program and the whole town would get behind it. Sunbury was so ready to participate in services that were more than just health-based. I can't help but be inspired by how well it

has been supported and still is today." Mr Weatherill was joined by a receptionist, community health nurse, social worker and physio when SCH began in April 1976 from a single portable on the corner of Cap Rd and Horne St.

Its purpose was not only to provide health and welfare services to Sunbury and its surrounds, but also aid the development of the community.

"The things we were able to do were amazing when you look back," Mr Weatherill said.

"Our very first major community project, Brushin, happened in 1976, targeting all primary school children. We had local dentists give up their time to see the 1250 children attending three primary schools in Sunbury, check each child's teeth, coat them with fluoride, followed by a dental hygiene course.

"Another time, a local lady in her 60s who was very keen on exercise offered to run a 'get in shape for summer' program, so we put an ad in the paper and had about 40 people queuing up."

Mr Weatherill said campaigns such as the 1976-77 Sunbury Safety Town road safety education owed their success to community participation.

In 1979, SCH successfully lobbied for a \$450,000 grant and a new centre opened on April 24, 1981.

Sunbury Rotary Club donated the first mini bus and soon a driver was employed full time.

Family day care began and occupational therapists ran a day centre, independence group, early childhood development programs, youth activities and an adult literacy group.

Today, there are more than 60 services and programs on offer under the leadership of chief executive Philip Ripper, who has been at the helm since 2010.

"It says something special about an organisation that can continue to remain relevant and highly valued by its community for 40 years," Mr Ripper said.

SCH's AGM and a twilight forum are on Thursday, 6.30pm at Rupertswood.



SCH board chair Mary Rush (centre) with grandchildren Harvey, 4, Fletcher, 2, and the health centre's Committee Reference Group. Picture: CARMELO BAZZANO

Still a special hub of caring

SCH NOW LOOKING TO FUTURE

MARY Rush was pregnant with her second child when she first walked through the doors of Sunbury Community Health to attend an antenatal class.

Thirty-five years later, she vividly recalls the care and compassion she received when SCH social worker Annie Adams discovered her son James had died five months after his birth. "Annie put me in touch with other mums who had lost a child and we used to meet, which was a little unusual so many years ago," Mrs Rush (pictured) said.

"People used to tell you to get on with life, so it was wonderful to speak to mums, and some dads, who understood what you were feeling."

Several years on, Mrs Rush attended a women's day at the centre where she comfortably breastfed her daughter and was, again, impressed by the sense of inclusiveness she felt.

Now, many decades later, Mrs Rush is preparing to retire from her position as chair of the SCH board, which she has held since 2009.

"I am eternally grateful for

the support I have received," Mrs Rush, 61, said.

"Sunbury Community Health provides the best early intervention ever. It is a hub of caring, inclusive and skilled people who are always ready to listen if you have a problem or a new idea.

"However, as much as I appreciate history, I believe we need to look to the future as well. We're always looking for new board members who can contribute and so it's time for me to step aside for the next person."

Mrs Rush said the continual development and growth of Sunbury meant community connections were more important than ever.

"Sunbury is a lovely place, but when people are spread out even lovely places can be lonely," she said.

"I think the growing diversity of the community creates a greater requirement for people to get to know their neighbours and SCH can continue to play a role in that.

"SCH creates a community where people feel connected and can get the support they need. This is what SCH continues to do."



How the times have changed

■ In 1976 SCH had five staff and three different services. In 2015 there are 160 staff and 60 services

■ 1976/1977 the clientele was 26.5 per cent male and 73.5 per cent female. Today, 49.4 per cent are male and 50.6 per cent female.

■ The main issues in 1976 were childcare and development, childminding services and allied health services, such as occupational therapy. In 2015, they are connecting community, housing, emergency relief, specialised health services.

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