

brotherhood action

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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The People Bridge

So often when older people retire, they feel they are no longer useful. But they have a very real role to play — unique because they are older and have skills accumulated over a lifetime.

SPAN community project for older and retired people in the Northcote area was set up by the Brotherhood in 1978 as a three year pilot project to show that older people can make a valuable contribution to the whole community.

At the SPAN community house in Thornbury, 'Spanners', as members are known, have certainly become involved. Sharing their skills and experience, they have started, with the help of professional staff, a wide range of activities which they could see were needed — a reading program with students from Northcote Technical School, a home handyman service helping local residents with small jobs and craft groups are just a few. They have also lobbied for improved local public transport resulting in a taxi service for frail elderly people subsidised by the local council.

People often ask what the name means. The letters SPAN do not stand for anything — the message is that older people are in a unique position to cross age, sex and class barriers, forming a 'people bridge'.

Jean Hamilton-Smith has been the co-ordinator of SPAN for the



WELCOME
TO

SPAN

COMMUNITY
HOUSE...

MON-FRI 9 AM-5 PM. Ph. 480 1364

At SPAN: Front row left to right Fred Cooper, Ethel Butcher, Co-ordinator Jean Hamilton-Smith, Win Clarke, Rose Berry, Ken Lewis. Back row left to right, Northcote Technical School student Demetrios Loucas, Bill Doherty, Support Worker Norma Hampton, Nell Twohig.

three years the project has been funded by the Brotherhood. 'The most important thing about SPAN is that it's worked,' Jean said. 'Older people can take part, they can initiate new things.'

SPAN's success has now been recognised by the Federal Government with the provision of half the co-ordinator's salary and a share of the running costs. This is the first time this type of funding has gone to a group outside local government in Victoria and it sets a precedent for similar groups.

From January 1, SPAN will be run as an independent co-operative with its own board of directors, appointing their own co-ordinator. This includes four SPAN members, a solicitor, an account-

tant and a City of Northcote councillor.

But SPAN is not just for older people. In the Northcote area, SPAN has helped people of all ages. Some 500 jobs for frail elderly people have been done through the home handyman service and hundreds of children have been involved in reading and craft groups and holiday programs.

SPAN is now seen by the local community as a resource centre for people, information and ideas. Continual requests pour in for such things as foster grandparents for a young family. One request for drivers from a retarded

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Unemployment Rights Service goes to Western Suburbs

At the beginning of October the Brotherhood's welfare rights service for unemployed people was transferred to Footscray.

This move followed a review of the service after two years of operation at Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. During that time many hundreds of people had been assisted directly in relation to their entitlements by interview, negotiation with the Department of Social Security, and in representation to the Social Security Appeals Tribunal. In addition, hundreds of others had used the service for telephone advice and assistance.

However, it was considered that the location of the service in the Brotherhood's headquarters made it difficult to involve unemployed people and to have contact with local groups.

The western region as an area of high unemployment and a shortage of relevant services, was selected as an appropriate area for redevelopment of the service.

The Western Region Right to Work Committee, which is part of a network of community service activities organised by the Regional Council for Social Development, was invited by the Brotherhood to consider managing the project on an independent basis. The offer was accepted on the understanding that the Brotherhood would financially support the service, but the Committee would be responsible for its operation.

The move has been welcomed by local groups in the western suburbs and is recognised as an attempt by the Brotherhood to support much needed projects without necessarily controlling them. Constructive links have already been made with CYSS projects and others organised as part of the employment programs for unemployed youth.

The Co-ordinator of the Brotherhood's service, Steve Einfeld, has been employed by the Right to Work Committee and is now located in an office in Cowper Street, Footscray.

A Sister Leaves the Brotherhood

Concetta Benn left the Brotherhood on November 13 after ten years of outstanding service.

She came originally for a three year period to establish the new Family Centre Project. In developing this program innovation, she brought to the situation a capacity to formulate good ideas and an ability to put them into practice. Whatever conclusions are reached on the outcomes of this remarkable experience, the original concepts, formulated by Connie, have already made their mark in the wider welfare field.

From 1978 to 1981 she was responsible for the development of the Social Policy and Research Department and service innovations within the Brotherhood.

These included the SPAN project for the ageing in Thornbury/Northcote, the Neighbourhood Employment Development Project in association with the Victoria Government and the Northcote Accommodation Project for homeless young people in conjunction with the local community and the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne.

She leaves us to take up the post of Director of Social Work at Preston Institute of Technology next year.

The Brotherhood owes much to the creative contributions of people like Concetta Benn who, over the years, have come and added important new dimensions to its work and its guiding philosophies.

Poverty — Poor Choices

Not to be missed, this exhibition of photographs will be on display at St Paul's Cathedral from November 8 for one month.

The photographs, taken by Ian Cosier and Dyranda Prevost show how poverty in Australia affects every aspect of people's lives — housing, health, employment opportunities and education. They are not the traditional pictures of 'poor people' but attempt to demonstrate the ways in which our society fails to provide fair opportunities and equal access to services for all Australians.

The People Bridge

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children's centre resulted in several teenagers from the centre working alongside Spanners in the Home Handyman Service.

This has been one of SPAN's most successful activities and has led to the local council providing this service in a different way. The reading program with older people helping students has also been highly successful, and it is hoped that similar programs will be incorporated in the Education Department syllabus.

'Spanner' Moira Wilson has been elected the first chairperson of the Board of Directors. 'When I think back, it's amazing the way the whole idea has worked so well,' Moira said. 'My self esteem had been knocked when I had to go on the invalid pension and SPAN has done wonders for me. Now I'm on the regional council of the Family and Community Services Program and I attend other committees on behalf of SPAN.'

For Jean and the other staff, it's been a 'fantastic experience, working with older people and seeing them take on new roles'.

And the Spanners have found that, in the words of Bobby Mack, 'Young is wonderful, but old is better' — the title of SPAN's research report published in November.