

Text of Listener Article on Mens Shed published 23/7/11

Community sheds have had unexpected results in turning men's lives -- and health – around.

In the 1996 best-selling *Blokes and Sheds*, Kiwi men told Jim Hopkins how much they loved being in their sheds. The book sold 60,000 copies – probably because it was a good gift for a hard-to-buy-for demographic, but also because it showed the shed was a cultural site for Kiwi males.

A decade later, the role of the shed in men's lives had been recognised, resulting in a move out of the backyard and into the community. By May 2010, there were more than 60 community men's sheds; the first national conference was held and a national organisation formed – Menzsheds Aotearoa. The conference was hosted by the first purpose-built shed – Henley Men's Shed in Masterton.

According to surveys, the 100-plus members joined to get access to tools, and Henley had a lot of woodcraft. In evidence when the *Listener* visited were a carved walking stick, a truck for a grandson, weta motels and predator traps for the Department of Conservation and a hexagonal seat for the park on whose border Henley sits.

“By coming here, men can buddy up with someone who has the skills, and they'll complete a job together,” says John Bush, who is employed by the Wai-rarapa REAP (Rural Education Activities Programme) as shed co-ordinator for 15 hours a week. But woodwork was the stepping-off point for other subjects. Says Bush, “One day in a group session a man said, ‘What do you know about prostate cancer?’ So we organised a surgeon to visit. That sparked sessions on diabetes, heart and oral care and hearing loss.” The surveys showed that although tools are the drawcard, companionship is what keeps members attending.

“It gives them a ‘happy place’,” says Bush. “We've got men who say, ‘I've been sitting at home having lunch by myself.’ They don't go to the pub or the RSA. That's not what they're looking for. Wairarapa DHB's suicide prevention co-ordinator, Barry Taylor, says one of the biggest issues for older men is having interests outside the home. “As a retired farmer at the conference put it, ‘There's only so much weeding you can do.’ When men feel redundant or futile, it has a profound effect on male mental health.

“The men's shed gives a space for men to get together. It reminds them they are not alone. One day there was a discussion about how hard it is to cook for one – so they got someone to come and give them lessons. They became problem solvers. They came up with a collective solution. They didn't need a social worker or a community worker. When you create that space for men to talk, they will often share – and things happen as a

result.”

Adult education specialist Neil Bruce and Wairarapa REAP director Peter McNeur attended the first Australian men’s sheds conference in 2007 and they decided to bring the movement to New Zealand. Bruce visited sheds in Australia and Britain – and was a prime mover in the formation of the Hamilton shed.

“The magic of the men’s shed is the way it turns men’s lives around. Men often become marginalised by retirement or redundancy, and their self-esteem takes a belt. The shed rejuvenates them. It’s as if you suddenly can give them back 20 years of their life,” he says. “In England I saw a man who’d had a stroke, a woodturner of exquisite skill who was no longer able to do woodturning. But he could teach others. Supporting each other in a team, recognising each other’s strengths; it’s not a prescription for mental health – but it works like one.”

Bruce says the measure of a shed is what it’s able to achieve for its members, and what it can do for the community. “We built a pirate ship for the winter show. That was our first work-alongside-each-other project. It was a chance for people to share their skills and achieve an end product that benefited the community.” The shed also repairs playcentre equipment and SPCA cages.

At the Wellington shed’s “hands on” sessions, held on Thursdays in a building owned by the Sisters of Compassion, “the span is enormous – retired surgeons, businessmen, a jeweller, an electrician, a truck driver”, says Nigel Clough, who travels from Waikanae every week. He came across the idea of men’s sheds in Australia, and had just retired when he read one was starting up in Wellington. “I thought, ‘What a brilliant concept!’ My mate and I said, ‘Right – we’re going to be part of that. It’s something worth doing.’”

He was one of those who turned an empty room into a busy workplace full of equipment. A buddy system makes sure everyone is included. “Meeting new people, that’s been the massive thing for me. Otherwise you get stuck in a small group,” says Clough. Ethiopian refugee Gabriel Residebri was introduced to the shed by community health co-ordinator Steve Jardine. Residebri had lost his cleaning job five years ago and been through a family breakup.

Says Jardine, “I see so many of my charges come from the depths of depression to bright and cheery through the shed. I used to struggle to get them to come out their front door. They lived with the blinds down and a negative attitude. That lifestyle leads to drink and drug taking. That’s why places like this are so beneficial.”

After the 2010 conference one dele-gate noted, “For the first time in a community environment, men outnumbered women.” Some sheds let women join, most don’t.

Henley has four women – “but we refer to everyone as a bloke”, says McNeur. “There’s the dilemma of, ‘Is it sexist or is it exclusive?’” says Bruce. “It may be both, but the agencies advocating for men say there’s much less available for men to be rehabilitated or reintegrated into the community than for women. Occupational therapy-type agencies whose clients have mental illness say there are not the opportunities for men to be active.

“Women tend to have more efficient social-support mechanisms – the knitting circle, the coffee morning, the book group. And they are far more experienced in supporting each other informally. Women will talk to someone. Men bottle things up, then feel isolated. They think they have to solve things on their own and talking to others about problems could be seen as a sign of weakness. What happens in the shed is that men are tutting around and out comes a statement – and it’s not a big deal, they don’t realise it’s happening.”

As the Taieri Blokes’ Shed website says: “Men don’t talk face to face; they talk shoulder to shoulder. A shed is to a man what a handbag is to a woman – both contain all the essentials for surviving in the modern world.” The survival of sheds is mainly down to their members, although some funding comes from grants and community trusts. Some sheds sell the things they make. Wellington’s sells rocking horses and breaks up pallets for firewood. The Picton shed raises money by doing house contents removal, building demolition and repairs.