

# Rural Community Development... The Next Frontier

Vernon Knight

*A report on the International Symposium on Community Development, Saskatchewan, Canada, July 1991.*

**O**n discovering that the International Community Development Society was to hold its annual symposium in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, my growing belief in the importance of community development grew some more.

Two previous visits to Canada had already convinced me that that country has much to offer both the tourist and the 'student of social welfare', and the prospect of catching up with old friends was an equally welcome thought.

The Province of Saskatchewan has already provided Victoria with a model for distance education in social work as my previous visit in 1986 led to the establishment of the Mildura Social Work Campus of Melbourne's La Trobe University.

My interest in community has essentially been the product of the past ten years, during which a developing appreciation of urban/rural differences brought into focus its implications for individual and family well-being.

In much the same way that we learned about the importance of family in our work with children, those of us in rural communities have come to appreciate the significance of community, in our understanding of families. It is a recognition that many of the functions previously performed by the family can no longer be fulfilled by the family, and we increasingly look to that which we call community to satisfy unmet needs for security, self esteem and a sense of belonging.

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*More detailed information on the conference material can be obtained from:  
Mallee Family Care PO Box 1870 Mildura 3502.*



Vernon Knight (right) with Harvey Stalwick, Professor of Social Work, University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Major social changes have served to diminish the extent to which these needs can now be met by the family and we have consciously and unconsciously accepted the need for greater government intervention in our lives. Thus community must increasingly take on many of the jobs which were hitherto the province of the family and we must acknowledge that individual well-being must now be measured, in part, by the health of the community in which he/she resides. Take, for example, the issue of employment and the ways in which we have sought to address the plight of those deemed disadvantaged in its acquisition. In previous generations, it might be argued that those with minimal skills were somehow 'absorbed' into the extended family network, and the creation of employment opportunities were somehow a kinship responsibility.

Little Johnny's not too bright so maybe Uncle Harry can find a spot for him down at the factory!

Now while such practices still occur, structural changes in society can no longer assume that 'young Johnny' lives anywhere near 'Uncle Harry's

factory'. Or young Johnny is now living with his mother and there has been no family contact with 'Uncle Harry' since Johnny's parents divorced and Harry's wife refused to have anything more to do with the woman who dumped her brother.

Thus increased geographic mobility, marriage breakdowns, and a host of other factors have seen family members separated or alienated by some form of social dislocation. Whatever the case, we've come to expect that the community must now be called on to play a greater role and we accept as a matter of course Skillshare, Job Link, C.Y.S.S., and the like.

Accordingly, I would argue that as practitioners in the service of people, we must increasingly turn our attention to the health of the wider environment which impinges so significantly, upon the welfare of those we seek to assist. And it if means returning to Canada from time to time - I for one am prepared to make the sacrifice!

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The conference brought together community developers from many parts of the Western world under the theme "Developing Sustainability in Rural Communities". Regrettably, a report such as this can hardly hope to do justice to the range and the diversity of ideas which flow from a week of intense presentation and

discussion. I'll therefore resort to sharing several ideas which serve to reflect something of the breadth of the conference program, and conclude by suggesting some of the themes which have helped me to gain a broader understanding of that which we term 'community development'.

The examples which I have chosen have been selected for no other reason than that they evidence the diversity of thought which can now be found among community developers. The themes are those which served to 'open the eyes' of one whose limited understanding has been the product of twelve rewarding years in a small corner of rural Australia.

### The Ad Rate Reduction Program

The Ad Rate Reduction Program has been an initiative of the Mainstreet Movement in North America which has sought to provide meaningful assistance to small town traders. As in Australia, small business is a barometer for the rural economy and the present recession is taking its toll. The movement discovered that advertising was often an early casualty during difficult economic times and the reluctance of traders to spend in this area simply served to accelerate the downward spiral. In a move which aimed to reverse this practice, consideration was given to strategies which would substantially reduce advertising costs. (It was noted that the recession had little effect on the corporate giants and that their buying power enabled them to purchase advertising at highly competitive rates).

The Mainstreet Movement responded to the problem by meeting with local traders and banding them together in a manner which significantly enhanced their bargaining position with the advertising outlets. The group was able to purchase at bulk rates (akin to their corporate competitors) and advertising was then 'brokered' to the trader members at significantly reduced rates. Reports indicate that advertising costs could be reduced by up to 70% and that the strategy had virtually stopped small business failures in a number of communities.

### Compost – A Way of Life

Various rural community developers reported on their success in the establishment of compost industries. These industries have sought to provide low cost fertiliser for primary production with the added benefit of developing environmental responsibility. It was in this area that I began to appreciate the important link between community development and 'quality of life'.

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No doubt, all of us have witnessed that weekly 'cavalcade of expedience' which sees most of us dispatch lawn cuttings, prunings and other vegetable matter to our local tip. (A practice which continues to prevail while farmers struggle to meet the ever increasing costs of the chemical substitutes required to sustain intensive agriculture). The setting up of compost industries thus presents as a logical alternative with the added capacity to generate new areas of employment.

I recall thinking at the time of my agency's findings on health needs in the Southern Mallee and our discovery that the use of chemicals on farms was deemed to be the community's major health concern. So what could make more sense – a new industry which creates employment, reduces farm costs, while at the same time contributing significantly to the health of the community.

### Marshalling the Benefits of Local Wealth

Another presenter drew attention to the fact that banking institutions are inevitably prone to concentrate their investments in the vibrant areas of the economy. In times of rural recession, this inevitably means those activities which we normally associate with urban communities. The practice is referred to as 'flights of finance' and

again serves as a barometer of the health of rural communities. The practice may ultimately mean that rural depositors are unwittingly placing their funds in a manner which disadvantages their own community and it was felt that the community needed to be award of its existence.

In a somewhat bold move, one community developer stirred his community to insist that local bankers divulge their 'local' deposit-loan ratios. The revelations ultimately led to substantial changes in local banking practices and the discovery that many depositors were prepared to settle for a lesser return on their investments, knowing that their funds were being applied to the benefit of their local community.

Having said at the outset that I would avoid detailing a comprehensive 'grab bag' of ideas, I should of course acknowledge that other presenters predictably focused on tourism, leisure industries and the blossoming retirement business as other major approaches to community development. But I will again resist any further mention of these matters as the 'themes' referred to earlier should encourage us to think beyond these 'traditional' responses.

I therefore conclude with some personal discoveries which served to contradict our general preoccupation with 'grand plan' solutions and compel, at least me, to reappraise some past notions of community development.

### Big ain't always Beautiful

The current rural recession has done much to expose old myths in relation to the independence of rural communities. Our vulnerability to world market forces simply highlights the reality that rural communities have always been totally dependent. Thoughts that we can solve our economic problems by the attraction of an alternative industry must therefore be recognised as a move which aims to transfer our dependence from world markets, to the whims of the corporate board room. With this in mind, much attention was given to strategies which served to 'spread the risk' and

avoid prospects of a further wholesale dependence. Thus trends in rural community development now see far greater attention being paid to a range of small local initiatives, particularly in the area of cottage industries. Low capital outlays, diversity, and limited market exposure have now become the catch cries for those seeking to stimulate employment in small rural communities.

### Developing Local Talent

My earlier visit to Canada and our subsequent importation of distance education in social work training should have already convinced me of the wisdom of developing local talent. But there persists a notion that it's the 'outsiders' that have the answers and we invariably turn to urban consultants in our quest for rural solutions.

A good deal of community development in North America focuses upon

training for local leadership and entrepreneurship. It has long been an important component in rural 'extension' in Canada and the USA and the system of Land Grant Universities has placed clear expectations on rurally-based educators. If similar strategies are to be employed in Australia then we will need to reappraise the role of TAFE Colleges and the like, in our efforts to cultivate local talent.

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### But it's More Than Jobs

The conference also provided an opportunity to meld strategies for economic development with the growing environmental concerns and quality

of life philosophies. It is the discovery that there is more to life than jobs and economic development and that a vital part of community development involves preserving our values, our beliefs, our 'totems'.

If community development is to be in any way meaningful, then it must enable us to identify the things which we hold dear, the things which enrich our lives, and ensure their preservation. Hardly earth shattering stuff, I know, but it is a reminder that we can ill afford to be carried away with anything that doesn't fit the 'total picture'.

It is a reminder that we must resist the 'jobs at all costs' philosophy and look critically at anything which may ultimately serve to jeopardise the health of our community.

Maybe it really does mean that we now need to regard community, in a manner which befits our family. ♦

## NCBA INFORMATION SERVICE

– some available videos relevant to issues raised in this journal



**A.B.C. PGR series**  
**Country kids**  
Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1987

PGR visits the Australian outback to talk to parents about the advantages and disadvantages of living in remote areas. In particular, they look at health care, loneliness and social interaction.

**Keywords** child rearing; social interaction; isolation; loneliness; rural conditions; child care; health services; community services.



**Napcan**  
**Safe at home**  
National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 1989. 10 mins.

A primary school aged girl demonstrates the rules she has been taught to stay safe at home alone after school. Suitable for use with children, parents or teachers.

**Keywords** safety; protective behaviours; self care.



**Staying safe**  
Queensland Centre for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1988  
2 videos, 8 mins & 10 mins.

The 10 min. video explains the program to parents, teachers etc. identifying the themes and demonstrating how to help teach the messages to children. The 8 min. video is for presentation to 4-8 year olds, and presents personal safety messages clearly, simply and in a sensitive manner. It puts this aspect of safety into context with general safety, such as traffic and water safety.

**Keywords** safety; preschool children; primary children; accidents; child sexual abuse.