

Dementia Care Illawarra: our journey

Sharing a common bond and a strong desire to make a difference, young NSW high school students **Mackinly Zecevic, Daniel Michelmores, Lucy Koder** and **Annabel Hickling-Smith** created an intergenerational dementia care project that has received international recognition

As students of The Illawarra Grammar School (TIGS) in Wollongong we are encouraged to find ways to involve ourselves in the local community. In 2017 our group of four Year 8 students quickly found our way together as we discovered we all have grandparents or relatives who are affected by dementia. We shared a passion and a desire to do something about this debilitating condition at a local community level.

Problem solving

This led us to accept the opportunity to take part in the Community Problem Solving Competition (CmPS) that provides students with an opportunity to learn and solve problems in a step-by-step process to better their local community. The CmPS is part of Future Problem Solving Program International (FPSP), which involves thousands of students each year from around the world and teaches critical and creative thinking, problem solving and decision making. The top CmPS projects are invited to the annual FPSP International Conference in June.

To initiate our project, we surveyed over 100 students



Dementia Care Illawarra project member Lucy Koder with Coral, a resident at Estia Health, during one of the team's weekly visits



Dementia Care team members (from left) Annabel Hickling-Smith, Mackinly Zecevic, Lucy Koder and Daniel Michelmores, presenting their project at the Future Problem Solving Program International Conference in the US

from our school to find out the impact of dementia; we found that 32 had relatives with dementia. Most of the students we spoke to admitted often feeling despondent and unable to help. Having relatives with dementia, we understood that this harmful stereotype was untrue.

Consequently, we believed in altering the portrayed image of dementia from a child's point of view, empowering students to feel capable and confident with interactions between people with dementia and themselves.

Many people with dementia experience loneliness and lack of contact with young people when in a nursing home. This loneliness can cause harmful feelings of isolation and neglect. Our goal was to initiate relationships between youth and people with dementia to reduce loneliness and stigma.

Memory books

Our project, which we called Dementia Care Illawarra, included 80 students from our school visiting people with dementia living at IRT William Beach Gardens aged care home in Kanahooka twice a term. We gave each student visiting the home a prompt sheet which encouraged them to ask questions about the resident's life – their family, meals, former occupation, favourite activities and hobbies. The conversation was dependent on the person with dementia. The discussion could be anything from a favourite colour to the flowers on the table top. Students talked individually or in pairs with the residents for 1½ hours while staff from IRT supervised.

The students returned to the home a week later, after they had created a memory book for their resident that replicated the

different stories and answers that the students and residents had discussed. We created 35 memory books and the students presented the books to the residents, who were appreciative. The books incorporated word processed personalised text and colourful, relevant artwork.

The experience was beneficial for both the students and the residents, who learnt more about each other as well as themselves. For some students it was challenging to interact with the residents because of the negative stigma surrounding dementia, which caused some students to be nervous or uncomfortable. By preparing the students beforehand and providing them with a scaffold of questions they were more comfortable with the interaction.

Another obstacle we encountered was getting some of the residents to engage with the students, however we overcame this by experimenting with different techniques for different people. For some residents we used music from the 1940s and '50s to generate a conversation; others were more intrigued by our lives and through the conversation we would eventually turn it back to theirs. As such, all students were able to have productive dialogue with residents.

This project has now been introduced into our school's community service program and will continue for the years to come.

A winning project

We presented the project to CmPS judges and members of the visiting public at the National CmPS Competition in Sydney in October 2017. Our team, Dementia Care, won first place. This qualified us to take part in the Future Problem



The TIGS team, including students, parents and teachers, in the audience at the Future Problem Solving Program International Conference in the US in June

Solving Program International Conference in June 2018 at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in the US, where we would present our project and compete with other students from across the world.

Extending the project

After winning the National CmPS Competition, we extended our dementia care project to Estia Health aged care home in Figtree, Wollongong, where we orchestrated smaller, weekly visits with just our team of four (Mackinly, Daniel, Lucy and Annabel), hoping we could build relations with some of the residents with dementia and engage in activities for enjoyment.

During weekly visits in the term we would bring in therapeutic colouring books or simple games like Connect Four. Sometimes we would read books, or just simply sit and chat. Two of our team members play the violin and clarinet so we found and practised popular songs and jingles from the 1940s, '50s and '60s. We gave fortnightly concerts for residents, which were always a bit of fun enjoyed by residents, staff and ourselves.

Alongside this we created song books filled with these songs to disperse within the nursing home. These books were valuable to the staff who helped us convert the concerts

into an enjoyable singalong.

This year our team also learnt about the Art Gallery of NSW's Art Access Program For People Living With Dementia that involves viewing two to three artworks and then later creating art in various forms for some stimulation and fun. We attended and participated in one of these programs at the gallery and were amazed by the level of engagement shown by those with dementia and how they became less withdrawn whilst experiencing art.

Inspired, we contacted the gallery's program leader, Danielle Gullotta, and were invited to the art gallery to speak at a conference called Arts Engagement For Liveable Communities, in April this year. We spoke for 10 minutes on our project.

Our team was given the opportunity to be trained to run a program like Art Access within our local Wollongong Art Gallery. Our training with the Art Gallery of NSW is due to start very soon and we are looking forward to it.

International recognition

In June 2018 our team of four, and one other team from TIGS, travelled to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse where we presented our Dementia Care Illawarra project to the Future Problem Solving Program International Conference. This



Daniel, Annabel and Lucy during one of their weekly visits to Estia Health

involved us being interviewed by a panel of judges and sending in a report summary and video of our project. We also presented our project to the other competitors and their families from all over the globe. It was an honour to speak alongside people from projects produced by 72 teams from all over the world, including about 30 teams in our Middle Division. (There was also a Junior and a Senior Division). It was a great experience to meet people of different ethnicities and with amazing, inspirational projects.

At the conclusion of the event the presentation ceremony saw us awarded second place in the

world in our division. We were thrilled.

Our wish for the future

Since returning home we've decided to continue our involvement with dementia care. As a team we can say we have been inspired by the beautiful people we have met through this program. We have personally gained knowledge on the developing issue of dementia and wish we could spread this among all school students in the world. It is a very important area of understanding that impacts so many in the world today.

We are proud of our journey and what we have learnt and hope we can continue it into the future. We strongly believe that youth have the capabilities to help and make a difference even in the face of such an immense issue as dementia. ■

■ Mackinly Zecevic, Daniel Michellmore, Lucy Koder and Annabel Hickling-Smith are Year 9 students at The Illawarra Grammar School (TIGS), Wollongong, NSW. For further information about the Dementia Care Illawarra project, email TIGS English teacher and the school's FPSP coach Jean Burton at jbunton@tigs.nsw.edu.au

See p29 for an evaluation of another intergenerational program for high school students and people living with dementia, this one based on music and reminiscence



Dementia Care team members (from left) Annabel, Daniel and Lucy celebrating second place in their Middle Division at the Future Problem Solving Program International Conference in June, along with fellow TIGS students Rubey Williams and Samuel Hobson, Year 12 students from Team BASE (Building Adolescent Self Esteem), who placed third in the Senior Division