

Community

SONGS of JOY

The Weekly visits a choir in Dubbo that is bringing hope to people living with dementia, their family and friends.

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Alan is friendly but softly spoken. He's never considered himself much of a singer and so was sceptical when he was invited to attend the Sing Out Choir in Dubbo. It is now the best part of his week. Every Tuesday, he and his wife, Mary, travel 75km from the small town of Mendooran to join between 120 and 200 enthusiastic community members for a vocal workout. Alan particularly enjoys getting up to dance. For him, Sing Out Choir is not just a hobby but an important part of how he manages his dementia.

"It's like a medicine without taking drugs," says Mary. "It does so much good for your body. Alan's dementia has a Parkinson's piece too, so it helps him keep coordinated. It's a full-impact workout. We're very lucky we found it."

"I'd try anything to make things better," Alan adds.

Sing Out Choir is the brainchild of registered nurse and dementia counsellor Anne Gemmell, who wanted to bring joy and support to people with dementia and their loved ones in the regional NSW town.

Alan and Mary Fleming ("One 'M', we can't afford the second one," quips Mary) say it has been a lifeline for both of them. Having watched his mother slowly succumb to Alzheimer's disease in 2012, and then his brother to frontal lobe dementia, Alan felt "lost" when he was told he had Lewy body dementia about two years ago.

"It was a hard thing to take," says Alan, who has also lost his sight. "I thought, 'Oh well, I've got to live with it'. And I can live with it and just keep trying harder. That's why I've pushed myself at choir, and if I can push it a little bit further, I will. And I have improved, improved, improved."

"I think it's a very lonely disease even if you've got sight," says Mary. "The brain gets frozen and it's quite scary."

"In our little town there's nothing. We were anxious to keep him motivated and keep him happy, and someone told us about the dementia choir. This helps me too because while

Alan's happy, he carries that happiness. We recommend other people to come and enjoy the whole atmosphere. It's beautiful."

It's a Tuesday morning when *The Weekly* arrives at the church that hosts the weekly singing sessions, and voices are blending, ascending and filling the building with harmonious song. Volunteers are in the kitchen, cheerfully making tea and preparing lunch, and conductor Camilla Ward is leading the crowd through a rendition of *Take Me Home, Country Roads*. Some members of the audience are gently swaying. Later, Anne holds the mic for a gentleman who has stood up from his chair. His posture is stooped. When he sings a few lines of *I'll Never Find Another You*, his rich baritone rises above the many voices. There's clapping, dancing and smiling.

"It's like medicine without taking drugs. It does so much good."



Pianist Sharon Simons fills the room with music.

"I knew that dementia and music was really powerful," says Anne, who worked at Dubbo Private Hospital for 15 years.

While some of her nursing colleagues found the high levels of agitation dementia patients sometimes exhibited a challenge, Anne could see that what the patients were really experiencing was fear, and she was determined to reach them and help them feel safe.

"I don't know what it was, but I just thought, 'I can manage this so differently and I can calm this person', and I could. I could do it quite well."

One encounter that stayed with her involved a post-operative male patient in his 80s who thought he was at home and was upset because he couldn't find his mother.

"I just went into that person's reality. I had this instinct that I could do it," Anne says.

She wanted to do more, so she enrolled in a bachelor's degree in dementia care. At the time, Dubbo had only one registered nurse dementia counsellor, Kath Readford, who had been in the role for 28 years. When the time came for Kath to retire, she approached Anne to ask if she would consider applying to step into her shoes.

"It quickly became apparent there was a need and a gap that could be filled in the Dubbo region," says Anne. Anne chuckles that she has never been musical. "I can't sing!" However, she had been captivated by dementia choirs. She began researching music and dementia and found research that showed the benefits aligned with what she had witnessed as a nurse: Music is a positive and calming force.

Anne applied for and received three grants to start a choir for people with dementia, and in 2022, she set out to find a conductor and accompanist.

She started with Sharon Simons, who plays piano at Dubbo's Sing Australia community choir every week.

"I scouted her," Anne laughs. "She played, and in the first five minutes I thought, 'Oh my God, I have to have her'."



What started as a group of 25 has swelled to nearly 200 enthusiastic choir members who meet weekly to enjoy music, movement and community.



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Clockwise from far left: Founder Anne Gemmell puts the choir through its paces; volunteers feed the masses; community is a cornerstone of the group.

Little did Anne know, Sharon already had her heart set on being her pianist. “I saw the choir announced on the local TV news and it caught my attention. I stared at the television and thought, ‘Who’s going to play for that? You need me!’”

Sharon’s mother used to play piano for community dances, and the classic old songs that had formed the soundtrack to her childhood were part of her repertoire. Moreover, Sharon had been playing piano at care homes for most of her adult life and, like Anne, had seen how a beloved song could make someone come alive.

“I just knew it was something I wanted to be involved in,” says Sharon. “We have an emotional connection to music and hearing a

familiar tune awakens that emotion.” The final piece of the puzzle was the conductor. Like Sharon, Camilla Ward had already heard about the choir, so when Anne approached her, she quickly said yes. She was also eager to work with Sharon, who she calls “Spotify Sharon” because “there’s nothing she can’t play”.

On July 26, 2022, 25 Dubbo residents attended the first meeting of Sing Out Choir. Among the first group was a gentleman called Spike, who had been brought along by his wife.

“His family thought that he was probably in the last part of his life,” Anne recalls. “He came to choir in a wheelchair. He didn’t talk. He didn’t

give you eye contact and he really didn’t move. He just sat with his head down, looking at the ground.” Spike had worked as a shearer, so Anne suggested the choir try some old songs like *Click Go the Shears*, hoping it might trigger memories.

“As the weeks went by, he’d start to put his head up. We’d focus on him and sing to him. He’d start to tap his foot and a few weeks later, he’d start to do this...” she demonstrates a hand action. “I’m thinking, ‘Wow, this is unbelievable.’ They never thought they’d get him out of a wheelchair. He’d walk into choir every week. He was up singing and dancing and was just out of this world. I used to say to the girls, ‘This is a miracle.’”

Alan and Mary Fleming joined in the middle of 2023. The group was immediately welcoming, and because of her work, Anne was able to connect them with more resources to help navigate Alan’s diagnosis. Mary says Sing Out Choir makes them both feel secure and seen. Alan battles depression, which is common among dementia patients. They now arrange their medical appointments around the choir.

“No one’s going to judge you while you’re here. It’s just a lot of people all in the same boat,” Mary says.

“My singing has improved too,” Alan adds.

Anne, Camilla and Sharon work hard to ensure the choir is a joyful place. Dementia, Camilla says, is the great leveller.

“There is no cure. It is extremely distressing for the person with

dementia but also their family and friends. They’re going through grief. We’ve got people from town and country. People walk in and they know they’re accepted.”

Camilla’s spirited leading of the choir includes choreography to get participants moving as best they can. “All the gross motor things,” she says. “For a lot of them, it’s the only exercise they’ll do.”

She and Sharon work together to choose songs that will evoke happiness and memories.

Sharon recalls that once, after playing *Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree*, a woman named Bernadette approached her and shared a story from her youth in Coonamble, when the real von Trapp family visited Australia and spent a week staying on her uncle’s farm.

“At the end,” she said, “we had a concert and they sang for us and they said to us, ‘Can you teach us an Australian song?’ We taught them

“You leave your troubles behind... When the piano starts, everybody just joins in.”

Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree.”

Sharon asked Bernadette how long it had been since she’d told that story. Her reply was that she didn’t think she’d ever told it. Sharon marvels that the simple tune brought the memory back to Bernadette.

“Sing Out Choir has uncovered a formula that is bringing people back to the glory days of family, young love and singing around the piano,” Sharon says.

“One fellow who used to be a pharmacist in town said, ‘This is better than a pill I could ever prescribe’. Another fellow said, ‘I don’t know what it is but as soon as I walk through that door, a feeling of euphoria comes over me.’”

In the few short years that Sing Out Choir has been bringing comfort and community to its members, it has swelled to almost 200 participants and has expanded to include people with other disabilities.

“It’s an outlet. If you could call it, at our age, letting off steam, rather than going to a nightclub or a pub,” says Stuart Beveridge.

Stuart’s wife, Wendy, is a keen singer. When she heard of Sing Out Choir, she wanted to go, but she wasn’t able to drive, so Stuart started bringing her along a few years ago.

“I’m no singer. I never was,” Stuart chuckles. “I always say that, when I was out droving sheep, if I started to sing something the dog would go home. Then I got to like it.

“They just seem to have that knack of involving everybody and making everybody feel comfortable. It’s a great atmosphere and even though it’s got as big as it has, it’s still a comfortable atmosphere. Nobody’s really uptight about anything. Everybody relaxes.”

The choir has been a source of constant support for Stuart and Wendy over the course of a difficult few years. Stuart has been diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer. The

an Anne. You won’t find them, and you can’t have ours!” And he laughs.

An estimated 433,300 Australians live with dementia and 1.7 million are involved in the care of someone living with dementia, according to Dementia Australia figures.

With this in mind, Anne is working to take the choir Australia-wide. She’s running a pilot program to deliver pre-recorded Sing Out Choir sessions into three care homes, including one in Queensland and one in Western Australia. The pilot will be monitored by researchers at Charles Sturt University, who have already compiled a report on the choir’s benefits for the Western NSW Local Health District.

Associate Professor Belinda Cash says the research found the choir makes people happier and gives them a sense of purpose. It improves mood and personal satisfaction, and ignites new friendships. However, establishing and sustaining an inclusive choir is

chemotherapy made him sick, so he has discontinued it. Wendy has mild dementia. Stuart says she went downhill two years ago after their daughter, Sarah, died from a heart attack. Wendy recently moved into an aged-care facility, but she still comes to Sing Out Choir every week.

“It kept Wendy going,” Stuart says. “You leave your troubles behind when you come in here.

“When the piano starts, everybody just joins in. Things like Sing Out Choir take you back to when you were going to balls and dances and things. Those songs were sung. They were quite modern in those days. It’s great to have them now ... We used to look forward to weekends because there might be a party. Now we look forward to Tuesday.

“People have asked me, from other towns, how can they get something like this going?” Stuart adds. “First of all, you need a Sharon, a Camilla and

a huge undertaking that requires funding, an appropriate and accessible venue, and skilled staff and volunteers.

“It’s quite expensive to run this every month,” Anne says, which is why she is trialling the recorded sessions.

“If that works, then yes, let’s go into the care homes. Let’s go into the individual homes,” she says.

“Every week, I watch people walk in here and they’re a bit round-shouldered and they’re a bit glum in the face, and a few songs in they’re up and they’re smiling and they’re just happy.

“A lot of the husbands and wives will say that, during that dance time, when there’s a little bit of an eye connection, ‘I actually think I got them back for a few seconds’. You watch them and you get teary because that’s a really powerful thing.” **AWW**

To learn more or to support Sing Out Choir, visit singoutchoir.com.au