

EXAMPLE STORY

Health & Wellbeing
Pearls Place
Merimbula RSL Club

WINNER 2017



Outline your unique story/project/program

Pearls Place, an initiative of the Reaching Out Foundation, first opened in Merimbula in two temporary locations before finding a permanent home at the Pambula Masonic Centre in 2016.

Pearls Place is staffed by volunteers and operates through donations of food and money. Their purpose is to aid those in need in our community, by providing free quality meals, food assistance, companionship, social support, and links to other helping bodies. Pearls Place is non-denominational, and open to all.

This inspiring group of volunteers have just celebrated their second anniversary (June 2017) and is a testament to the dedication and energy of those involved.

Trying to find a home

When Pearls Place first opened in Merimbula it could only secure temporary accommodation and they were at risk of not being able to continue.

A \$2000 donation from Merimbula RSL and another \$3800 from other clubs through the ClubGrants program, a Mumbulla Foundation grant and the generosity of the Pambula Masonic Centre helped Pearls set up its new home.

The grant money went towards a new fridge, freezers, bain-marie and other pieces of kitchen equipment. The hall committee upgraded the floors and refitted the kitchen – installing new benches, dishwasher and stove.

But how could people get there?

Despite the security of having a permanent home, one aspect of the move was worrying coordinators: with the change of location, many of the original Merimbula-based guests weren't able to come.

Merimbula RSL Board member Alan Johnson heard of their plight and for the past 12 months the club has made its courtesy bus available to Pearls every Wednesday to collect and drop off people from Tura Beach, Merimbula and Pambula. This arrangement will continue for the long-term future.

Courtesy bus to the rescue

The RSL bus transports people to Pearls Place for a delicious home-cooked three-course meal plus a large dose of kindness, care and company.

Pearls Place volunteer May Kerr said having the RSL bus was hugely beneficial and they don't know what they'd do without it.

"We pick up people from different locations including people who are elderly and can't drive plus those who don't have transport. If it wasn't for the RSL bus these people wouldn't be able to come each week."

Why was this story/project/program addressed as a priority?

Pearls Place is a social cafe which first opened in Merimbula to serve a freshly-cooked three-course meal and a support network for people who are retired and on low incomes or are lonely or socially isolated.

But the volunteer-led cafe had a tumultuous first year trying to secure a venue to prepare and serve its meals. When Pearls Place was searching for a new home the Merimbula RSL looked at ways it might be able to help but the club didn't have the facilities to accommodate them.

Pearls Place found a venue but it was in Pambula, a 15-minute drive from Merimbula with limited public transport. This meant that a lot of its Merimbula patrons were unable to get there each week.

RSL Board member hears of plight

"Our board member Alan Johnson was really passionate about supporting them, so when he found out about their transport concerns, it was a really easy decision to make our courtesy bus available." RSL Secretary Manager Michael Mutsch said.

Through the generosity of cash donations, regular food donations from supermarkets, bakeries, butchers and other food suppliers, fresh fruit, vegetables and eggs from the community and clothing donations from individuals and two op shops – Pearl's is more than just a home cooked meal each week.

Volunteers and donations

Every Wednesday, more than 30 volunteers spend the morning setting tables for lunch and laying out tables of fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, clothing, hand-knitted scarves and beanies around the perimeter of the hall. Another 20 volunteers are on standby if Pearl's ever get stuck for helpers. Lumen Christi Catholic College is also involved, with Year 10 students helping out each week.

Someone writes up the day's menu on a large chalk board at the front of the room and a hard-working army of qualified chefs and experienced kitchen hands create what is some people's only home-cooked meal of the week.

An increasing need

The ages of guests have stayed the same for two years, with most aged over 60. In its first year more women than men came, but since then, it's the other way around. In 2015 Pearl's served an average of 22 meals a week, in 2016 it was 24 and this year it's 35. The highest number of people in one sitting is 55.

Tell us what was contributed toward this story/project/program?

Leslie comes for the company

Ninety-two year-old Leslie, a resident of Merimbula for over 30 years, has been coming to Pearl's Place since it opened. Wednesdays are a major highlight of her week. Leslie lives alone and although she appreciates the homecooked meal, it's the company she comes for. If not for the RSL courtesy bus, she wouldn't be able to come.

"I love the people, love the caring, I look forward to being here on a Wednesday. The volunteers are so nice and I live alone so it's nice to have a day out. The RSL bus is great, getting picked up and dropped home means I can come every week. I've met some very lovely new people. I really get cared for, they're lovely. It doesn't matter about the food for me, it's about the company."

Company and home-cooked meal

Jack from Nethercote also looks forward to his Wednesday lunch outing and the glowing smile on his face as he tucks into his Chicken Parma speaks volumes. Jack's wife went into a nursing home and recently passed away and he enjoys the company and the home-cooked meal.

"I look forward to it every week, if I get tied up with something and can't come I might miss a week here and then, but otherwise I'm always here," he says.

What was the measureable difference that the support made?

The inspiration for Pearl's Place was Ricky's Place in Bega, first established in Bega's St John's Church in 2009. The heart of Pearl's is its volunteers, says May Kerr.

"At the very first meeting we had more than 60 people wanting to help and now we have 30 active volunteers and another 20 who are standing by when we need them. Our volunteers are so willing. They treat everyone with dignity and they are just an amazing group of people."

Community generosity

May is continually staggered by the community's generosity towards Pearl's Place, the RSL Club is among those who make it possible.

"The amount of food we get is just amazing, and there is plenty there for people to take home with them. If we've got leftovers from what we cook it goes into the freezer, and we give it out the next week to those who need that extra meal. Our volunteers, know exactly who needs what, and will put aside special packages for people each week. And to be able to have a courtesy bus to transport people means we can include so many more people who wouldn't be able to get here otherwise."

May says new people were catching the bus all the time, as well as the originals like Lesley who have been on the bus since it first started.

Pearls Place family

She says the real benefit of Pearls Place was not in the nutrition of the meals, but in the social network it provides. Everyone at Pearl's considers each other as family.

"The majority are retired and on low incomes, or they're lonely or socially isolated. We also have people who are unwell and it's wonderful to see how they've changed since coming here. At first some couldn't even walk into a crowded room because they were so intimidated by crowds, but now they are comfortable here and can walk straight in and sit down and start a conversation with others."

Volunteers and supporters

Without its volunteers and supporters, Pearls Place would not exist. A big thank you to:

- Our volunteers
- The Reaching Out Foundation (www.reachingout.org.au)
- *REAP Sapphire Coast for supplying food on a regular basis - www.reap.org
- Sapphire Coast Social Justice Advocates
- Food donors - too many to name
- Paul West, River Cottage Australia
- The Pambula Masonic Lodge

- Merimbula RSL Club.

Do you have long-term plans/goals for this story/project/program?

Clubs are the heart of our communities and we provide a safe, welcoming place for our patrons and do everything we can to support local projects from sporting clubs to surf lifesaving clubs, to community groups and social inclusion initiatives. Merimbula RSL Club will continue to support Pearls Place for the long-term. In a regional area which is quite spread out, with limited community transport options, it is vital for people to rally together in the way we have with Pearls. Providing transport is our way of making sure people who are in most need of the support provided by Pearls Place are not disadvantaged and excluded.