

60 years of highlighting 'ability'

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Things got a little green at Orana as cake was shared among workers and friends the celebrate the organisation's history in Port Augusta.

This year marks 60 years since Orana opened in South Australia, in its role in providing employment, training, support and accommodation for people with a disability.

In an effort to highlight the "ability" in all disability, the not-for-profit organisation was primarily established in 1950, under its original name of The Mentally Retarded Children's Society of SA Inc., to ensure that people with a disability had a safe and supportive environment wherein they could live and work in their local communities.

For Port Augusta's Orana workers, the candles on the cake burnt a little less smoke, as the group celebrated its 30-year relationship with the city, since its inception in 1978.

Among the group was Ed Schuster who moved to Port Augusta with his wife Elaine to help establish the centre as its first manager.

Originally set up on the west of the city, he said the team had come a long way.

At the start, the organisation provided a working environment unlike any other.

"There were quite a few parents who had children with a disability who were entering into adulthood and were in the need of employment or a form of employment service," Mr Schuster said.

Over two stints as manager and through his current voluntary involvement in retirement, Mr Schuster said the highlight was seeing the group move into its workshop at Tassie Street.

He said the move symbolically represented a shift in the community's attitude towards disability.

"It was as if people with a disability were on the outskirts of town at the west side workshop - having it in the middle of town with the rest of the community was a real highlight."

He said watching employees "come out of their shells" in the workplace and beyond was also among the highlights.

"Gaining a TAFE certificate, or getting a drivers or trucks licence as an adult ... it's quite an achievement for someone with a disability," he said of the learning opportunities provided.

That same sentiment has been echoed by a string of managers.

Among the longest serving, Dale McMullan enjoyed a 14-year stint with the Orana team, with the team dynamic keeping him in the role for so many years.

He stepped into the role fairly familiar with many of the workers, through his previous role at the old Northern Hotel, a few doors down from the workshop.

"The guys use to come in on their lunch break and I'd let them play pool while they had a feed ... taking on the role was just a natural progression," he said.

He said Orana came to be a place parents felt comfortable sending their children. "People came to us knowing that it was somewhere their growing children could go daily and know they were safe

and doing something productive."

"It got people out from their homes, where there were being kept most of the time. Giving them that independence ... making sure everybody got a go," he said.

He agreed the move to Tassie Street helped unite the Orana team with the rest of the community.

"People with a disability were often considered social lepers of society in the early days - having this here helped break that notion down, and show the community it is not ... it did change the mindset of many people."

For Mr McMullan, his greatest achievement was not just seeing social mindset change, but also that of several governments over the years.

"The governments back then even have the mindset of out of sight, out of mind. That has since changed incredibly and it continues to improve."

"While I was at the job, one time the department came in and saw what we were doing, and saw what we were doing was good and asked how they could help - I said 'you can start with giving these guys a proper wage' ... I mean they were all doing good job, and good work, and they deserved it," he said.

The Port Augusta team today provide an eclectic mix of services - which include a range of contracts with businesses, governments and the local council and from their pet and furniture outlet store.

While the Schusters originally helped establish a pet section within the store - having found that many of the workers had a natural skill with dealing with animals - the newest scaly, cold blooded animal attractions have arrived under the influence of manager Dennis Cartwright.

Mr Cartwright stepped into the manager's shoes last year, having been a supervisor four years ago.

After a career at the Port Augusta prison, he said the job provided him with a different challenge, but one he "wouldn't trade for anything".

"What I admire most about these guys, is that when they come in and say good morning to you, and ask you how you are in the morning, they actually mean it - it's not like anyone in the street just asking for courtesy's sake, these guys here ask you because they actually care. what the answer is going to be."

He has overseen the most recent of renovations to the store's retail outlet in the past 12 months, and said the product the team served was only as good as the community support it received.

He said by far their biggest supporters in recent and past years had been the Port Augusta City Council, which held the biggest contract held by any Orana site in the state.

While Orana has long provided unique working and learning opportunities for its workers, their growth has never been limited to the workplace.

Social and sporting events remain a major part of the employees' lives. In particular workers have been participating in the Tri State Games for more than a decade. Their participation has been greatly due to Carol Shilabeer's guidance, who helped initiate the event locally when her son Mark was looking for



another outlet for his love of sport after starting at Orana in the early 1990s.

A staple on the Port Augusta Tri State team is Anthony Grantham whose sporting success has seen him represent Australia overseas, namely in the art of 10 pin bowling.

Anthony, or Tony as his known to his colleagues, is one of five workers who has been working at Orana since its inception in Port Augusta. His older sister and carer, Heather Barry, remembered Anthony starting with Orana as a 16-year-old boy.

She said it provided her late mother, and Anthony a suitable outlet, when he became old enough for work.

She said it has helped him grow to be independent man, who she said has come to make the most of his "impeccable memory" and has come to appreciate the importance of earning one's own living.

She said his work has helped create confidence and a place to belong and this became most apparent when he took up a role at a mainstream hardware store several years ago.

While proud to talk about his seven-and-half year stint at the mainstream hardware shop he said he had to come back. "I missed all the people ... and they missed me," he laughed cheekily.

Among his favourite jobs is getting up early for the 6.30am shift when a group of workers make their way around city council parks to clean the public toilets and parks.

"It's good ... to get out of the back of the office, I like it a lot," he said.

THE ORIGINALS: Orana employment service and business general manager Tony DeVries, Kelvin Leahman, Andrea Scholar, Alan Collins, Maureen Cross, Dennis Cartwright and Tony Holtham.



NEW & OLD: Ed and Elaine Schuster and Dennis Cartwright.



WORK MATES: Mark Shilabeer and Gemma Balaschek.



PARTY TIME: Paula Darby and Billie Kernahan.



SUPPORT NETWORK: Marlene Schlaefer, Shane Grantham and Brenda Johnson.



MILESTONE: Shirley Yates and Jane Prodiomou.

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