

Participant Stories of the Living Smart Course Experience

Graeme Henderson, 2003 (Participant)

I was attracted to the Living Smart programme in 2003; 1) because of the programme content which so obviously addressed the key urban sustainability issues urgently requiring attention and, 2) because of the partnership of organisations combining in its presentation - my local council, a leading university and my local community centre. I suspected therefore, that the council was serious about tackling at least some of the issues, that the content would be well researched and presented and the venue would be warm and friendly as it was already a well known hub of community activity. I was keen to meet others who thought the way I did, share knowledge - both practical and theoretical - and hopefully be inspired. I was not disappointed.

The programme's innovative, goal-centred approach meant that I clearly identified actions I could take - individually or as part of a group - to bring about effective change. For me this ranged from simply sticking a 'No Junk Mail' sign on my letterbox, through preparing a winter vegie patch (rather than just talking about it) to considering the logistics of mounting a campaign to push for a plastic bag free city.

Through the vitality of the lectures, workshops and synergy that materialises when like-minded people are brought together in a common cause, anything seemed possible. Because the course was free and the venue easily accessible a wide range of participants were attracted - all (adult) age groups were represented and from all walks of life. Tales of environmental successes, challenges and failures were swapped regularly and those struggling with the implementation of a project always found a local 'expert' who'd 'been there before'. Thus, not only was detailed, factual information communicated by the Murdoch University team in a very entertaining way, we were also building a kind of self-empowered urban sustainability community - within a community. This was made clear at the conclusion of the programme when most participants elected to continue with a Friends of Living Smart group that enabled us to explore more fully the expertise that locals had to offer - from practical solar cooking to grey water systems, energy saving to nutrition and natural medicines.

In the 2004 programme I was invited to help facilitate a new and extended approach to the programme delivery. More time would be devoted to workshops in an attempt to maximise the sharing of local expertise and knowledge. The group would also be asked to divide into three geographically-based sub-groups to further focus the workshops and help engender a sense of community at the street/neighbourhood level. These innovations addressed some of the ideas raised by the 2003 Friends group and I was encouraged to see the programme planning committee take these on board. Consequently I helped facilitate one of the sub-groups and then became involved further when asked to present two of the lecture topics - Garden Smart for Biodiversity and Garden Smart for Productivity.

It is this continual empowerment of the community to do it for ourselves, to take responsibility, that keeps me inspired and involved in Living Smart. Already one of the neighbourhood groups has been at the forefront of a campaign to save a local community garden. They used skills picked up at the Living Smart workshops to organise themselves effectively and to successfully run a public meeting. For me - that's empowerment in action - at the community level and a direct outcome of the Living Smart programme.

Inspired by the interest shown at a Living Smart workshop conducted in my own backyard I have put together a short course on organic gardening which I will run at our community centre - another offshoot of the programme.

I am not an academic, nor am I a scientist. Metrics and Evaluation Criteria I will leave for those better qualified. My assessment of the Living Smart programme comes from one who simply wants to lead a lifestyle that *really* minimises my impact upon the Earth. *Doing it* is much, much more important than talking about it - but talking about it and listening to those who have researched the facts is, for many, a critical starting point. To have the knowledge to back up one's actions when challenged by friends and family - that is important. To have the encouragement of your peers - like-minded people in the community - to know that you are not facing a 'world gone crazy' on your own - this is also important. And to be given the tools to set goals effectively, to make them realistic, to track them, to fine-tune them if need be and to see them through to a successful conclusion - this is a powerful thing. But to see it all come together - in positive action - as I did, hosting the workshop in my garden or as part of the group working to save the community gardens - that is indeed very special - that is making a difference. And that is what Living Smart is actually bringing about - lasting changes in attitude and behaviour through extended knowledge, through community empowerment focused on sustainable living and through individuals and communities networking to achieve common goals for the common good.