

Community - Series Balmain Library Knitters

Interviewer [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Community series. I'd like to start by acknowledging the original custodians of the land. We now gather the Gadigal and Wangal peoples of the Eora nation and pay my greatest respect to any first nation people past, present and into the future. Today, we are speaking to Jane and Judy from the amazing Balmain Library Knitters Club

Firstly, I'd like to thank you both for speaking with me. This year has been an extraordinary year. We have experienced drought, fires and now we're experiencing an epidemic. But the Balmain Library Knitters Club has survived and thrived through it all. Firstly, would you be able to give a description as to what the Balmain Library Knitters group is? How often do you meet and how long have you been running?

Judy Deguara [00:00:37] We've been meeting since 2011. Origins of the group where from one of the librarians, at Balmain and the first member was a woman called Edna, who doesn't come any longer. But we had about five people to begin with. It began so that we could knit for Wrap With Love, which is an organisation at the ABC at the time used to promote. So we knitted for Wrap With Love for about five years. I joined the group at the end of 2011. We've grown from about seven people originally or one person and then seven to now up to 30, and we meet twice a month on Fridays between 10 and 12 in the meeting room at the back of the library, and it's mainly women at the moment.

Interviewer [01:25:00] That was going to be one of my questions was just organically just been women that have come to the group,

Judy Deguara [01:29:00] Mainly organically being women as women, generally are the knitters we've never really asked.

Interviewer [00:01:34] We'll see how we go after this goes on to our podcast. Maybe people will want to join. This has been quite an interesting year. We've had lots and lots of different things thrown at us. We've had fire, drought, we've had the COVID situation. And unfortunately, due to the COVID situation, we were to have people coming in and having programs here at the library premises. And it was really quiet an unusual sort of

thing because you had to meet twice a month. And, you know, it's a great way to be social. But you, interestingly, came up with a brilliant idea of conducting Zoom knitting meetings, which I thought was just amazing so can you let me know how that came about?

Jan Christensen [00:02:08] I'll I'll answer that one. Yeah. It is such an interesting group of people. We range in age from probably late 40s right up into the 90s, and it is very much a social group as well as a productive group. And I felt that I wanted to make sure that the group stuck together if we can't knit together in the library meeting room. I thought that maybe we could knit in our own homes at the standard knitting time from 10 to 12 on this first and third Friday of the month.

So, I had never used Zoom before, I thought that might be a good thing to do. And that way, if people wanted to join in online, we could catch up and knit. And other people who didn't want to be on Zoom might sit in their own homes, out in their gardens, whatever at that time, and knit or crochet and still be part of the group. And so that was how it started. I know that if there wasn't something formal like that, I would probably let things slide. And I wanted to make sure that there were enough people in the group when we were all able to get back together again that the group didn't die.

Interviewer [00:03:18] It's a fabulous idea. And how many people are you getting in on Zoom meetings?

Jan Christensen [00:03:22] We usually only get five or six, but I do know that there are other people knitting in their own homes. And now that things have eased a little bit, there are a couple of little groups joining together, still, keeping social distancing, but knitting at that time.

Interviewer [00:03:38] Well, I think it's a good thing to keep it all social and keep connected because these times can be quite worrying. Have you had any funny, awkward moments during these Zoom meetings?

Jan Christensen [00:03:46] Because I was such a newbie to Zoom the Balmain Library Knitters, Zoom was the first one that I had conducted myself, so I had set that up, so people had in the waiting room and wait to be admitted. First person I saw was a

man who I did not recognise, so I rejected just because I didn't really know what the story was realized afterwards, it was most probably the husband of one of the knitters, which it was because I had rejected that application, they weren't able to re-join the group. So, I did send a apologetic email afterwards. But that's just part of the fun, part of the learning.

Interviewer [00:04:22] Absolutely.

Jan Christensen [00:04:23] Was that I didn't take it too seriously and everybody knew that it was just a test.

Interviewer [00:04:28] I probably would have rejected him as well. I hope we haven't done too much damage to his ego, though.

Jan Christensen [00:04:36] No, not at all.

Interviewer [00:04:37] And you guys do quite a bit of charity work. So, I mean, I know it's a social group, so you guys love to see each other and it's a good way to keep in touch and have that human contact. But there is an aspect of charities involved with the Balmain Library Knitters Group. Can you tell us a little bit about that please?

Judy Deguara [00:04:52] Because, it originally started with Wrap with Love I think the group, their main concern is knitting for charities. So that was always been our motivator. We do occasionally have people come who want to help with that personal knitting, but, generally speaking, it's always been about helping others.

Originally, it was Wrap with Love. Then we started to branch out into more locally based schemes like one of our members, Kate contacted Wayside Chapel. And we always knitted for a couple of seasons with Wayside Chapel beanies and mittens and scarves. We knitted one of our first members, Kathleen. We knitted poppies for Anzac Day under her sort of guidance we've knitted for refugees. And I think Jan's being our main driver in that respect for knitting for refugees through one of the Newtown centres we've needed for Stewart House, which was Jill and Kate were instigators in that. Barnardo Homes, we still knit for precious small knee rugs and Balmain Hospital with

one of our members, Val, she's been our contact person with Balmain Hospital. And we knit rugs that go home with people who have been in rehabilitation.

Interviewer [00:06:03] I also, sorry to interrupt you I also recall when I came in to see you one day there was I can't remember what it was called a shrug where you actually put your hands through it.

Jan Christensen [00:06:11] They're called Tweddle muffs

Interviewer [00:06:12] That's it

Jan Christensen [00:06:14] What they are, is they used by people who have dementia and some people with dementia get very fidgety hands. And so, what it is, it's just a knitted muff that then has things to fiddle with attached to it. So, it's a knitted muff ideal in lots of different colours, lots of different textures, very simply knitted. Great way to use up tiny little scraps of wool, but then stitched onto it as buttons and bows, little pompoms, maybe little bells, that sort of thing.

So, it can be quite soothing for some people with dementia. So initially we were knitting them for the Balmain Hospital. They then had enough to be using. And so, we've now been knitting them also for the Minnamurra Aged Care Facility over at Drummoyne.

Interviewer [00:06:58] That's such a fabulous idea, when I saw it

Jan Christensen [00:06:59] One other interesting little knitting project that we had a couple of them at one stage, we were knitting little jumpers that were going over to a maternity hospital in the mountains in East Timor that was organised, I'm not sure by whom, but these were brightly coloured little jumpers that any mother who had her baby in the maternity hospital would take one of these little jumpers home.

And then also we did have a short period where we were knitting toys that were going to police in Redfern, that they the police were finding that if they were called to an incident where there were young children involved, that having a small toy to give the children was quite calming. So, it's all different sorts of things. We do just depend on

what ideas someone comes up with. They put it to the group and it's a really democratic group. We had discussions at every meeting as to what sort of things people are doing, and sometimes we run within an idea, an idea, and other times we choose not to do it.

Interviewer [00:07:59] People need to know how to knit before joining your group.

Jan Christensen [00:08:01] It's the sort of group where everyone is generous, there is absolutely no competition, there's no princesses. Everyone wants to help everyone else. I couldn't crochet at all. I'm a knitter, but I'm a basic knitter and I've been taught a number of things. We have had other people come who have not been able to knit or crochet at all, and they've come because that's what they want to do. And it's wonderful to see them when they finish their first square or their first beanie. It gives them such a sense of satisfaction, but it also gives us satisfaction.

Interviewer [00:08:35] That's brilliant. I really think you guys are just a group that's to be reckoned with. The fact that you guys meet every second Friday of the month and you're keeping in touch in these times of trouble just shows what a good community-based group you are. But just the fact that you've picked up and you're running with this new technology, a lot of you that you've never used Zoom before, the fact that you're giving the option so people can feel in touch is such a really brilliant idea. I noticed that in one of the photos, I think somebody had finished a vest off for a gentleman.

Jan Christensen [00:09:05] I happened to be in the meeting room one day before anyone else had arrived and a woman came in saying that Hong had directed her to us. She had the doings of a partly finished vest for a friend whose wife had died. It was a very complicated vest. I took it to our group. This was just prior to Christmas and no one at the meeting that day wanted to take on the task. I know of a group up on Lake Macquarie. That's another knitting group. I contact them who put me on to somebody else. And ultimately the vest was completed about fifth hand. The gentleman is now proudly wearing the vest that his wife started knitting before she died.

Interviewer [00:09:49] I'm sure that when he wears that vest, he wears so proudly remembering his wife, but also the helping hand that you guys had in complete that project.

Jan Christensen [00:09:57] And also recently we have contributed yarn or some of the members have contributed knitting needles as well and yarn to go down the south coast where people have had their homes burned out and women will have lost all of their knitting. Once again, it's sharing within community.

There is one other thing that I would like to add, and that is it's not a group where you have to always turn up. I probably started coming every now and then to the group quite early on, but I only ever came on a rare occasion. And it's one of those groups where you can come, you cannot come, you can drop in for 10 minutes. Some people never come, but they're contributing at home.

I've had some subcontractors who were knitting and sending things in, but the group is not open only to people who can turn up regularly, but it's open to all sorts of people who want to contribute, both knitting and crochet.

Interviewer [00:10:51] I have a question for you both, ladies. Do you think when programs do start coming back and people are allowed into venues in larger groups? Do you think you'll still keep up with the Zoom meetings or do you think that will go by the wayside and just focus on the physical contact?

Judy Deguara [00:11:05] It's been such a strong connection between everyone and such a respect and concern and friendship, such strong friendship groups within the group that, yes, I think good will come back together eventually, yes.

Interviewer [00:11:21] You're in agreeance Jan.

Jan Christensen [00:11:22] Yes, I am. But one of the things that I have found it useful for is that when I was staying up on the Upper Lake Macquarie, I was actually able to be part of the group and actually ran the Zoom meetings from up there. One of our members actually lives in Noosa, but she is often down in Sydney for extended periods and so she'll be able to still be part of it while we're still doing the Zoom because she's just about to go back to Noosa.

Judy Deguara [00:11:47] We are in constant contact, thanks to Jan at the moment, not only through Zoom, but through email. So, we do a newsletter after every

meeting just to celebrate what people bring in and their work and as well as maintaining contact as well.

Jan Christensen [00:12:03] One of the nice things at the meetings is that we everybody shares and shows what they've contributed. They choose where they want the items to go to and so that's the sort of thing that I've been trying to, to keep going the social side. And we have about 70 people on our mailing list, but we get between 25 and 30 people at most meetings.

Interviewer [00:12:29] Well, look, it's a wonderful way of communicating with people that can't make it, as you said, on a weekly basis when you guys meet. So, I do think that they would appreciate the minutes as well.

Thanks for your time today, Jan and Judy. If you'd like to know more about the Balmain Library knitters or any of our other programs, you can find more information on the inner West Library's website.

You can also access a number of craft e-magazine titles via e-resource catalogue, including Australian Knitting, Homespun and Simply Crochet, to name a few.

Thank you for listening and looking for more digital content by the library website and our social media channels.