

Lifestyle

Working in the field



A Victorian aged care leader was so inspired by a 'care farm' on a tour to the Netherlands that she decided to start one herself. **Tim Dixon** tells her story.

One of the aims of the SAGE [Studying & Advancing Global Eldercare] Tours (see box below) is to enable delegates to meet with internationally-respected aged care professionals working in the field. And the 15 Australian industry leaders who signed up for the 2007 tour of the Netherlands got to do just that. Literally.

For many, the highlight of the trip was not the remarkable small-scale group housing in Zeeland, nor even the well-known Humanitas Apartments for Life complex in The Haag – though both were innovative and exciting facilities. Instead, the most enduring memories of the tour came from Levensvregde – a 'care farm' in the south of Holland.

A fully functioning farm, Levensvregde doubles as a day centre for up to 45 elderly people with dementia who live within a 40-kilometre, rural catchment area. The person behind the concept is Conny van der Schriek van Meel, an occupational therapist with experience in aged care. Having witnessed the plight of people with dementia left to pass time in conventional nursing homes, she was inspired to convert her property into a 'care farm' where older people from rural communities could engage in 'real' activities in a 'real' environment.

Each weekday, 15 clients come to Levensvregde by bus at 10am and get to work. For some that means sowing seeds and tending to the vegetable gardens, while for others it means collecting eggs or talking to Pieter, the donkey. One man spends all his time at the farm sweeping the yard. He starts at one end in the morning but by the time he finishes, the wind has played havoc with his careful plan – so he starts again. And while he's



Ann Danaher

busy himself with the broom, some of the older women serve as surrogate 'grannies', doting on Conny's two young children.

THE GERM OF AN IDEA

By all accounts it was an outstanding set-up and after visiting Levensvregde, the SAGE coach was abuzz with conversation.

"What impressed me was the fact that the people involved in the care farm were going on doing what they had always done," recalls tour attendee and Dutchcare CEO, Petra Neeleman. "Too often we just think about day care or Planned Activities Groups (PAGs) in terms of bringing people into facilities – bringing them indoors. But for people who are farmers and have always spent their life outside that is not necessarily appropriate. Throughout their lives, they didn't sit around inside all day simply talking, they were always out on the land."

"And at the care farm, they were contributing. They weren't just sticking cotton wool balls on snowmen to fill in time. They were doing what they had always done. They were living life."

But as well as talking, one delegate was thinking and planning. In fact, Ann Danaher, the general manager of residential aged care with St Laurence Community Services in Victoria, announced to some colleagues that when she got home, she too was going to start a care farm.

"When I was on the farm," she says, "I felt a sense of inspiration about what Conny had done. She had gone to all that effort for her clients and I just thought, 'Wow! That's fantastic!'"

"I thought back to our Costa House facility in Lara [near Geelong] which has a lot of spare land out the back. And I thought to myself, 'Gee, we could do something like that back where I am'."



SAGE TOURS

SAGE (Studying and Advancing Global Eldercare) Study Tours are a joint initiative of ThomsonAdsett Aged Care Association Australia (ACAA), and Aged and Community Services Australia (ACSA). The tours give industry leaders the opportunity to gain an international perspective of aged care service delivery.

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was dealing with internal resistance.

"Even though there were some staff who really got behind it, there were others that weren't really very interested," says Danaher. "You could probably say they were 'knockers'. They said, 'Fancy having animals here' and 'Fancy doing that'."

"But we knew that it really was something we could do and something that would be worthwhile so we kept going back to the residents and their relatives, reminding ourselves that it was about doing something for them."

Conny van der Schriek van Meel (far left) and the Levensvreugde care farm.

REAPING THE BENEFITS

Although it has been operating for less than a year, anecdotal evidence suggests the farm is already making a difference to the lives of some residents. Originally aimed at people with dementia, it has now been opened up to all residents at Costa House. Every week-day morning the facility's activities officers and volunteers lead structured visits to the

SOWING THE SEEDS

While some of her fellow delegates were skeptical, Danaher was quite serious and on returning to work she began to share the idea with selected staff members and her CEO. She showed them the photos from Levensvreugde and even took a small group of people on a fact-finding mission to Collingwood Children's Farm in Melbourne. They responded positively and as word spread, six more staff members – most of whom had grown up on farms – approached her, asking if they could be involved as well.

With the concept 'sold', the biggest challenge facing Danaher and her team was the cost of establishing and running the farm without any government support. Many of the 850 care farms back in the Netherlands struggle to secure ongoing funding as well. But the group from St Laurence was able to secure generous donations from a number of local businesses, including support from United Way Geelong, The Jack Brockhoff Foundation, RACV and Sensis.

"They could see the potential benefits of the care farm and they just loved the idea," says Danaher. "They were attracted by our enthusiasm and our vision and I think they liked the fact that it really was something a bit different. They were excited that we were willing to take on the challenge!"

With their donors' support and the team's enthusiasm, the care farm was up and running just 12 months after work began in September 2007. Along the way, other avenues of support have been found too. One of Costa House's regular volunteers is a former vet and he has provided plenty of free advice, while a local nursery has agreed to donate seedlings for the vegetable garden. Savings on the animal's feed have been made by supplementing it with food scraps from the facility's kitchen.

On the red-tape front, the process has been surprisingly easy. Danaher says the only thing needed to set up the farm was a permit for the animals from the local council and that was "not difficult to obtain at all". Actually, the hardest part of the project





farm and a number of residents have found their own niche, regularly tending to a particular patch of the garden or saying hello to their favourite animals.

“Of course some people won’t take it up because they don’t like that sort of thing,” notes Danaher. “But there was one man in particular, who never left his room before. Since we got the pony out there though, he has been down there every day, first thing in the morning, visiting him and patting him and saving him bits of food. Before he was quite reticent to be involved in any type of activities program but something about the farm touched him and you can see the change in him.”

As well as providing new opportunities for residents’, the farm has helped strengthen connections with the broader community. Local high schools and disability services make regular visits to the farm and this is an area Danaher hopes to build on in the future. And residents’ relatives have really taken to it too.

“It gives them ‘something to do’ when they come to visit

Life on the farm at Costa House.

their relatives,” she says. “They’re not just sitting in a room trying to think of something to talk about. We wanted it to be like that. We wanted it so that people could just meander through the farm

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and take in the animals, the mosaics on the walls and the colourful flags and enjoy it all. It's a bright and happy place to visit."

Petra Neeleman reached the same conclusion when she went to the official opening of the farm by the Minister for Ageing, last December.

"The fact that someone has run with the idea and put it into action is a really good thing," she said on reflection.

"Good on them! It's a great example of learning new ideas, bringing them home and adapting them to make them work. They have helped provide meaning in these people's lives and that is a great outcome!" ■

NURTURING MEANING

UnitingCare Ageing's Elizabeth Gates Village in NSW's Hunter Valley adopted the Eden in Oz philosophy three years ago. Since then it has sought to reduce the levels of helplessness, loneliness and boredom among its residents by fostering meaningful relationships and activities.

One of the ways it has attempted to do this is by introducing plants and animals for the residents to tend to. Today the mixed high and low care facility has garden beds, pot plants, chickens, a pair of alpacas, two miniature horses, a dozen sheep, a number of birds, some fish and a couple of cats.

According to the home's care services manager, Carol Liddiard residents are encouraged to participate with the plants and animals as much as possible.

"Disability is not a barrier here," she says. "If a person is in a wheelchair, then we will put extensions on the handles of the hoes and the shovels or give them the opportunity to water plants in pots on large tables covered with plastic. For residents who are in bed and unable to get out, the staff will take pot plants around on a cart so they can touch and smell the leaves."

And since the program was introduced, some residents have developed new roles and found a fresh interest in life.

"We had one gentleman who had a diagnosis of epilepsy and was very withdrawn," says Liddiard. "He didn't enter into any communication with staff and he was being heavily medicated for pain. But when we introduced our two resident cats, over a period of about six to eight months, he slowly started looking after them by providing food, water and assistance. Then he started to come out of his room more and now he is starting to communicate and interact with other residents."

"His medication has dropped away because he rarely gets headaches. It has been a complete turnaround! His sense of worth has increased and he has a sense of occupation and identity again."



Some of the Elizabeth Gates sheep.

WENTWORTH FURNITURE