



press clip

Helping towns to embrace generosity and community

It Takes A Town to harness people's goodwill

Aisling Brennan

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IN THE middle of the chaos surrounding the March floods, the It Takes A Town project was launched as a means to bring the community together.

While the project wasn't just in response to the floods, organiser Carmen Stewart said it seemed like the perfect way for ITAT to directly help those in need by capitalising on everyone's generosity.

"Essentially, it's about getting the culture of generosity growing in this community," Ms Stewart said.

"We have great generosity already but how do you actually harness it in a way that really benefits the community?"

ITAT aims to help families in crisis, whether that's from poverty, homelessness or trauma.

"We launched pretty much the same week as the flood, so it's been going really well and probably bigger than we ever imagined," Ms Stewart said.

"That probably has something to do with the timing of the flood – it put a bit of different spin on it.

"We were already funded by Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation for a project that's focus was on creating

opportunities for children to thrive. It's directly in response to our community as we have one in five children growing up in poverty, while it's one in eight nationally.

"We've taken that and said it's not good enough.

"What so often happens is that we expect governments to fix our problems – whether it be homelessness, poverty or children with developmental delay – and we expect services and government to fix it.

"The emphasis of this project is saying no, the community itself is responsible for its members."

Ms Carmen, who has worked for more than 17 years as a consultant supporting homelessness and community services, said everyone had something to offer but they might not know how to reach out – and that's where ITAT could help.

"We've got great skills and resources in this community that we never tap into," she said.

"We never really ask the churches to get involved, we don't ask the residents what they can contribute, we've got every club under the sun

and they're all doing great things in isolation.

"It's (about providing) the coordination so we as a community can lead a

response and then ask government and services to be a partner. It's around creating opportunities for children and their families.

It's about getting it at the forefront and getting a culture of generosity, sharing, responsiveness so it benefits everyone."

Since launching in March, the project has enjoyed a string of successes, including prompting the State Government's \$12 million commitment to the regional housing crisis and linking people with others who can help.

"Post-flood, the big area of interest was homelessness and that's why we decided to focus on it," she said.

"We got the (ABC's) 7.30 Report onto it, which led to some fantastic outcomes from the government. In response to that story and response to the work which had been done by Social Futures and other services in the region, the State Government committed \$12 million to housing in the region and that was a direct response to putting some pressure on at the same time of what was happening with social services.



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“There’s no estimation in the numbers of how many houses we did lose. We know that the real estate said they lost 25 rentals, then we had the owner-occupied rentals and the private homes, we had caravans washed away.

“You had all this new influx of homelessness and what it did for our community was put a spotlight on homelessness in a way that generated empathy that hadn’t been there for a long time.

“We’re helping to coordinate and keep the focus on homelessness in this community.

“We are working with partnership with the Family Centre, groups like Rotary, to look at possibilities of having a tiny homes community, which is high up on the agenda.

“This stuff never happens quickly but we need to keep the focus on it. If you get

multiple ways of seeing, multiple sets of knowledge focussing on an issue, then you’ve got a lot of potential to get an outcome.”

ITAT is helping 15 families get back on their feet through everything from emotional support to music lessons and child minding.

IT TAKES A TOWN

For more information:

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— Carmen Stewart



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STRONG CONNECTIONS: Carmen Stewart created the It Takes A Town project to bring the Murwillumbah community together.
PHOTO: SCOTT POWICK



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The It Takes A Town project organised some art earlier this year at Knox Park in a bid to connect community members together.
PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



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Carmen Stewart organised the May rally calling for more affordable housing in Tweed. PHOTO: NIKKI TODD