

JULY 2016

HAPPY WANDERERS

A Unit of Dandenong Ranges Music Council Inc

Reg No A0009702L

BACKGROUND

Happy Wanderers was formed twenty five years ago on this day at an Interest Meeting convened by Dandenong Ranges Music Council in response to a request from Elsie Briscoe from Lilydale to Bev McAlister. Elsie had been a foundation member of the Yarra Valley Singers which formed in 1988. She had always had a dream to get a day time concert party running in Lilydale but had not succeeded. After Bev had publicised and promoted the idea through DRMC and the local newspapers, 16 interested people attended the meeting Friday 5 July 1991. We had weekly rehearsals on Fridays at the Community Music Centre. The group quickly consolidated into a focused, supportive and professional music group specialising in hands-on music for the aged and frail aged. Their first performance was at Willowbrooke on 2 August followed by a second at Lilydale Senior Citizens Club on 28 August. Performances continued approximately twice a month to once weekly for the next few years. The rehearsal venue changed in 1994 to the Belgrave Masonic Hall where they practiced weekly until 1996. Three months before our fifth birthday the group was devastated when Elsie died suddenly in March 1996. At this stage they were performing weekly and occasionally twice a week. As there were a number of bookings to fulfil they had to pull themselves together and carry on. With Win Kent planning the programs, they went on to being busier than ever. Vera Willis, the accompanist left the group at the end of 1996 and Happy Wanderers gave up their practices at the Masonic Hall. The practices were then held at Joan Zavan's home and later on at Win's home. Sam Derrick took over the accompanist's role. Sam is blind and plays everything by ear and has a marvellous capacity to change key at will to suit the singers. He learns songs he has never heard before very quickly and the group is extraordinarily lucky to have him. The group became a member Unit of Dandenong Ranges Music Council Inc in 1997. The venues covers a geographical area between Lilydale, Nunawading, Glen Waverley, Ferntree Gully and Emerald. Membership of the group comes from an area bounded by Mount Evelyn, Croydon, Bayswater, Boronia, Ferntree Gully, Upwey, Tecoma and Sassafras. One member travels up from Pakenham once a week to participate. Members try not to travel further than half an hour to a venue, as there is plenty of work inside the half hour travel time.

CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNITY LIFE

The work of the Happy Wanderers is specific in that it is a participatory music program for the aged, frail aged and people with disabilities. The aims and objects were clearly set down initially by Elsie Briscoe in her letter to the Chairman of Dandenong Ranges Music Council in 1991. The group

travels to nursing homes, hostels, retirement villages, day centres and various types of clubs for seniors to present its program and at all times to encourage participation from the audience. The activity is almost self-promoted as Lifestyle personnel in these establishments either see the group in action or hear about the program from their peers. Happy Wanderers gets many requests to come again. The program is changed every second month to accommodate repeat performances. Happy Wanderers celebrates its 25th birthday this year with a membership of 12, 5 of the original members still with them. They run an hour long program of group songs in brackets of three, interspersed with solos, duets, etc. All members get a chance to participate in the solos and duets, depending on their personal inclination. The songs are nearly always old songs, some well known, others less so. The format has proved very popular, both with the clients and the members. By the end of each year the group has more than half of the following year's bookings.

Being part of the Happy Wanderers has been a marvellous experience for all of the members. It has brought regular social contact to the members who live alone and encouraged the shy members to show their true musical colours by being able to perform solos etc in a friendly environment. It is something that all the members look forward to and try not to let other commitments get in the way of Happy Wanderers. It has allowed the members to socialise and empathise with the aged, frail aged and with people with physical and intellectual disabilities. An offshoot group continues the work in a fortnightly music program in the community residential units with clients from the Melba Centre.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The main achievement is the look of anticipation of the faces of the clients when the group makes a return visit as they are full of expectation and knowledge that they will enjoy the next hour. Another achievement was being selected as a joint recipient of the Shire of Yarra Ranges Australia Day Community Group of the Year Award 2004. During the last 25 years Happy Wanderers would have participated in more than 2000 performances. Another highlight is the group's involvement in various DRMC performance opportunities: the Attitude musical performances, eg. Pirates with Attitude and Snow White & the 7 Amazing Personalities, and massed choir performances, eg the Fire Cycle and Bells of Peace.

REPORT FROM ELSIE BRISCOE, LEADER, TO THE CHAIRMAN OF DRMC, LAWRY WATSON, December 1991

We are a group of "older" people who have got together to perform the songs of the 30's, 40's and 50's for retirement and nursing home residents. Our idea is to personally involve these people in the entertainment, in the form of sing-a-longs. We move amongst the residents, rather than stand in front of them and perform, and encourage them to sing, clap, or wave their

arms. This, we felt, would be an entertaining and helpful form of therapy.

I don't think we realised, at the time, it would also be therapy for us. The group consists of mainly widows and pensioners and others who are looking for a daytime interest. I have noticed a couple of women in particular who have benefited greatly by our Friday afternoon meetings/rehearsals, as well as the shows. They appear much more confident in themselves and where, at first, they were unable to make physical contact with the elderly, now do so with pleasure. All of us look forward to and enjoy our meetings.

This group has been a personal dream of mine for some years, whilst singing with just a pianist around retirement and nursing homes some years ago, I felt there was a need for these elderly people to be involved, rather than just being entertained. I found this increasingly difficult to do alone, and eventually had to give up.

I joined the Yarra Valley Singers at their formation, but soon realised that it wasn't what I wanted to do. It was through joining the Yarra Valley Singers that I first heard of the DRMC and met Bev McAlister. When I left the choir, Bev was very interested in my reasons for leaving, which was to try and get a concert group started. She offered to help in any way she could. Several tries at advertising in my own area brought little or no response. Then Bev tried advertising and talking to people in the Hills area and the response was good.

We met for the first time in July 1991 and, with help from Bev and Joan Zavan, the group was formed.

Our first concert was in August 1991 and since then we have had 33 bookings. We have also been asked to sing for elderly citizens clubs, CWA, Legacy widows, church groups and, on one occasion, an RSL club. We also meet regularly at the Community Music Centre for rehearsals, as we have to keep learning new programs so as we do a different program when we do return visits to various venues.

There are 16 people in the group, which includes a pianist and a 92 year old saxophonist. There is also a waiting list of people wishing to join, but unfortunately we can't have the group too large as some of the rooms we perform in at the "homes" are very small. Perhaps the answer would be two smaller groups.

While we are not, as a group, members of DRMC, we do hold our meetings and rehearsals in their Centre at Upwey High School, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank DRMC and Bev in particular for all the support and assistance the Happy Wanderers have received in and since their formation. Thank you.