

# Increasing Social Engagement through Community Involvement

## Abstract

Social awareness, isolation and reduced opportunities for social engagement are well documented as key factors that need to be addressed in the rehabilitation of people who are living with dementia. This abstract aims to identify positive aspects of two novel initiatives that have not only promoted social engagement and helped reduce social isolation, but they have also raised community awareness about dementia.

The first initiative involves the novel idea of a wearing a 'Hello T-Shirt' which invites people to say hello to each other as they cross paths while walking along the coastal walkway that connects South Curl Curl beach to Freshwater headland on the Northern Beaches in Sydney, Australia. By incorporating my own mental health and well-being logo on the sleeve of the t-shirt, I also hope to raise community awareness about dementia. As one of my passions is swimming, the second initiative involves a fundraising event where participants will spend the whole day travelling throughout the Northern Beaches and swimming one lap in each of the 14 rock pools that are in this area.

As a person who experienced a loss in confidence and the ability to socialise with people, the benefits of both initiatives have been enormous. Not only has it encouraged me to get out in the community, by meeting and making many new friends, but I now feel that my eyes, mind, and heart have been re-opened to all the other wonderful things that are happening around me. I feel that I am helping to build a community where everyone is valued and treated equally.

## Ocean Rockpool Tour Initiative Sydney, Australia



During our last COVID lockdown in 2021, a few mates and I were chatting about 'bucket lists' and Mick Harold commented on the history behind the Northern Beaches rockpools and how good it would be if we could swim one lap in each of these rockpools in one day. We all loved the idea, and the Ocean Rockpool committee was formed. Besides celebrating where we live, our main aim for the day was as Mick states below:

*"We wanted to have some fun for our own health and wellbeing, and while doing so, support our mate Bill to raise awareness of a range of mental health issues. In doing so we wanted to help remove the stigma sometimes associated with mental health disorders and raise funds for affected local disadvantaged people in need of money and support"*

Starting at 7 am for breakfast on 15 January 2022, a group of 21 mates and our bus driver, Peter Farrell, travelled to Palm Beach to begin the epic journey of swimming one lap in each of the 14 rockpools that were built during the Great Depression during the 1930s. We divided into four teams (red, blue, yellow and green) and competed in a range of events including freestyle, butterfly, breaststroke, backstroke, dog paddle, dolphin diving and pool walking.

After travelling 45 km, we finished our final swim at Fairy Bower and raised over \$10,000 for local charities (Lifeline and Vinnies) and Dementia Alliance International.

A big thank-you to our sponsors Seventh Day Brewery, Sale Pepe Restaurant and Budgy Smuggler who, through their support, made this event such a wonderful experience.

Palm Beach

Whale Beach

Avalon

Bilgola

Newport

Mona Vale

North Narrabeen

Collaroy

Dee Why

North Curl Curl

South Curl Curl

Freshwater

Queenscliff

Fairy Bower Manly

## Hello T-Shirt Initiative



Following my diagnosis of Younger Onset Alzheimer's disease in July 2019, I soon realised that if I was going to experience a quality of life that would sustain me as this disease progressed, I needed to make significant changes to my lifestyle. Besides modifying my diet and incorporating physical exercise and brain activities into my daily routine, I was convinced that I also needed to look at ways of becoming socially engaged and becoming part of the local community. I say this, because I experienced a loss in confidence following my diagnosis, especially in my ability to socialise with people.

In June 2021, I was invited to join the 'Come Together' initiative, which was Tony Stewart's novel idea of inviting people to say "Hello" to each other as they cross paths along a popular coastal walkway that connects South Curl Curl and Freshwater beaches in my area. This was exactly what I needed. Not only has it encouraged me to get out into the community and make many new friends but it has also opened by eyes, mind and heart to all the wonderful things that are happening around me.

Since becoming part of this initiative, I have learnt that the simple but friendly gesture of saying 'Hello' to another person is in itself a very powerful statement. Not only are you reaching out and inviting a person to start a conversation, but you are also acknowledging their presence in a caring way. You don't have to stop and have a chat. You don't have to become friends. Just saying 'hello' to anyone who crosses your path, can create a habit that is contagious. When you make another person feel positive about themselves, you are also encouraging them to behave in the same way.

By the end of 2021, I became so impressed with the impact that this initiative was having, I decided that I would start to raise community awareness about Dementia and Alzheimer's disease by branding my own personal logo onto the Hello T-Shirts. Although in its initial stages, as more and more people are starting to wear my special t-shirt, I also feel that I am helping to build a community, where everyone is valued and treated equally. My success in this journey would not have been possible without the tireless support and friendship of my care support worker, Daniela.

