

President's Report – 13 May 2014

INTRODUCTION:

It is just over 18 months since our previous AGM. The Society received permission from the Department of Fair Trading to delay the hosting of this event and we have just squeezed it in before the deadline on Friday May 16th. This additional time especially, has helped accommodate the work of the drafting of the revised constitution. It also reflects the size of our organisation, as we are no longer required to report annually, given the size of our budget; bi-annual reporting will be sufficient from now on. In the past eighteen months, there has been considerable activity and in this particular week, which marks the 25th Anniversary of National Volunteer Week, it is wonderful to acknowledge the work achieved by our current and past committee members who have dedicated time and energy to this small organisation which also celebrates 25 years since Incorporation. Volunteering can seem a thankless task particularly with the kind of 'unseen' work our Society performs. It is not always easy to see the results of our endeavours in terms of providing information or advice, or simply maintaining the basics for an organisation, such as membership lists and record keeping. A big 'thankyou' to all past and present dedicated volunteers, who have contributed to the work of the Horticultural Therapy Society of NSW.

COMMITTEE:

At the last AGM, we commenced the new period with an elected committee of 5: Marie, Judith, Karen, Ling and myself. This was expanded to 6, when Kerryn was co-opted. Kerryn was unable to attend the previous AGM, however she had expressed interest in joining the committee and she was invited to join formally, after the meeting. We have valued her contribution. Then Ling left us about a year ago. She has continued to help with some promotion and support, but with her many interests and current role as President of Transition Parramatta, something had to give.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES:

We commenced the period with a couple of special visioning meetings, so that we could seriously discuss the future of the Society. The first big question was 'do we continue?' NB: If the answer was 'no' we needed to see how to dissolve the organisation. It is challenging with a small membership and changing times to feel assured of the validity and value of the organisation, however, we did agree to continue, initially for 6 months with a check-in after this period and as you can see, we are still here. In making this decision, there were a couple of changes that needed to be made. The first of these was to cease the role of go-between to provide the horticultural therapy sessions at the Hills Clinic. The Hills Clinic was taking a large amount of time and energy and as an organisation, not responsive to our requests. The various people who had been providing services have since negotiated individual contracts with the Hills Clinic. This alone, proved to be a challenge as we supported our members to negotiate realistic salary rates and conditions. The service at this facility is an ongoing challenge. We have

members who provide services at the Hills Clinic. Their premises have expanded and there is a designated service for young people (16 – 25) with a mental illness and some horticultural therapy programs are specifically for this group, which has been particularly challenging.

Almost to the day when we advised the Hills Clinic that we were withdrawing from that initiative, we were invited to advise the Royal Rehab on major activities there. This includes a new garden at their main facility which they intended for public use as a sensory garden and potentially therapy garden. The organisation also has many group homes around Sydney and they had the idea of establishing sensory / culinary gardens in each of these houses. For these to be successful, appropriate design and training will be required. Karen and Kerryn have both communicated and visited Royal Rehab. The organisation had already engaged a landscape designer who had developed plans that were not ideal for horticultural therapy use. Nevertheless, their new facility is now opened. We are still waiting to hear about training and the group homes.

Another significant request for advice was for a rooftop garden in the inner city. This service intended to use the garden for culinary produce to support a community service that provides hospitality training for people with a mental illness. After a big crowd funding exercise to raise funds – they raised nearly \$50k in this manner. When the City of Sydney heard about the initiative and advised them they needed a development application for this activity and needed to apply formally. This has put a delay on that program which was meant to commence last year.

These activities have led us to think seriously about the advice we offer. We do get enquiries for professional advice and members do give of their time and energy to meet this need. We propose charging a fee for service in the future and are developing a scale of fees for this purpose. We have experienced that organisations like those mentioned above, which do have the funds to pay, are not always respectful or responsive to the free advice given. For example, the Royal Rehab spoke with Steven Wells – on the recommendation of our members. Royal Rehab was given very similar information as that provided by our members, and yet he was seen as ‘an authority’. There is a sense that a ‘fee for service’ may establish some authority. As an incorporated body, the Society is able to enter into contracts and agreements which are intended to offer more certainty to potential contracting parties including lenders, lessors, employees and suppliers of goods and services. The request of fees for service has not been an established practice of the Society in terms of grants, but in other contexts, may prove a means to establish a viable future. We have also taken advice from the organisation ‘Building Better Boards’ regarding payment for management committee members. The advice is that members can be paid where the work is independent of the management committee role. This will require careful scrutiny, as we don’t wish to be seen as corrupt, however it will be helpful to take this path if the Society is to remain viable.

To assist with managing these matters the Committee trialled managing a paid project worker for a few months in 2013. This had some benefits and some assistance was given to Marie at the time. However there was a conflict with worker avoiding some of the specific tasks identified in the project brief and this position was not continued after the trial period. It was a good exercise and learning experience for the Committee.

Another initiative is the development of a Manual in Horticultural Therapy Skills for Australian conditions. We have initiated this work and are seeking funding to assist with the development of this product, which we sense will be welcomed and useful in the current professional climate.

WEBSITE:

Another 'must do' for the committee was the update of the website. This has been an issue for several years, together with concerns about the administration of the site. On the recommendation of Jennifer Stackhouse, we changed the host for the site and a new front page and design was created. We also had the support of a student from UTS in 2013 who assisted by researching and providing website content. Karen has taken the training to administer the back office of the site and is our mainstay for managing it. Achieving this has made a huge difference. There have been increasing numbers of enquiries to the organisation from many state-based, national and international sources. The main hiccup has been with managing direct payments via the site, but we are working to improve this.

TRAINING:

With the advice from Building Better boards, we have been able to offer training independent of TAFE, which has given us much needed freedom in this regard. A program in Horticultural Techniques as Therapy was delivered in February 2014, and another is scheduled for July. The updated website has helped with promotion of such activities. A separate training in Disability Awareness was delivered in 2013.

Virginia has been in conversation with AgriFood Industry Skills Australia, the organisation which has oversight for the training packages for vocational training in horticulture. The discussions have been around creating recognised qualifications in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture – ideally at Cert III and Cert IV levels with a view to a Diploma. This will be discussed as a 'continuous improvement' proposal at the next meeting of the AgriFood Skills board. If the request is approved, there will be a scoping exercise to decide on skill sets and competencies required to combine together to create the new training package. Cultivate NSW is well placed to influence these discussions and to have input into the review and maintenance of the packages and the accreditation process. The proposed qualifications would be an invitation for more training opportunities and potentially expand our audience and membership.

PROMOTION:

Where we can, the Society is mentioned. At the inaugural Australian Garden Show, Karen & Virginia delivered a talk to some 70 people. Feedback was very positive and there were inquiries for membership and resources following this initiative. Several other talks to garden clubs and presence at community events when people are available, give voice to the Society's work. At the last AGM, we discussed hosting an international seminar. This event has not been realised, however the International Conference in Agriculture in Brisbane later this year is far bigger than we could hope to host. The Victorian Association will present a paper at the conference on the current need for Horticultural as Therapy. Here in NSW, we plan to participate in the Australian Garden Show – Sydney for a second time. We need to choose activities that our members and resources can fulfil successfully.

CONSTITUTION:

As mentioned in last year's minutes, a major task has been to revise the constitution to comply with the common rules. Many thanks in particular, to Marie and Judith for their many hours of work to achieve this and to Kerryn, for leading us through the exercise to establish a current vision for the organisation.

NEWSLETTER:

Jennifer Stackhouse has been preparing and editing our newsletters for over two years now. Jennifer has received positive feedback for the content and design of these and we are grateful for her expertise and the enhancements she has made to this essential document. The newsletters are distributed in electronic format to many members however there are many others who still required a paper version which are posted. It is also good to have paper versions on hand and for the time being, both formats will be made available.

MEMBERSHIP:

A critical matter for the Committee is how to recruit new members and ideally expand the Committee. We would like to have 8 members. This has been too great a challenge – remember we lost Ling after 6 months.

GRANTS:

Money for volunteers travel was received as a grant from the Commonwealth in 2013. There is also funding to purchase a new First Aid Kit and portable shade structure. The funds need to be expended and acquitted by August 2014.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, I would like to say thank you to all the committee members for their ongoing time and commitment to the Society and for maintaining some of their valuable time to devote to the work of the organisation. Life's priorities and demands are significant and it is always a pleasure to be associated with people who share the vision of what our Society represents and who care enough to allocate time and resources to realising this. I believe we make a valuable contribution to our world.