

RYDER-CHESHIRE BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
MOUNT GAMBIER
30 April - 02 May 2010

After many months of preparation and planning the Ryder-Cheshire Biennial Conference, Mt Gambier 2010, has come and gone. What a great weekend it was – facts, figures and anecdotes - the work of the homes, inspiring speakers, challenges for the future, and good company.

Activities started on Friday evening with a warm welcome at the Civic Centre hosted by the Deputy Mayor Byron Harfield, and another welcome on Saturday morning from Malcolm Anderson of the local Boandik people, and Neville Gilbertson as MC on behalf of the Conference Organising Committee.

We were fortunate indeed to have Brig Anil Sinha SM (Retd), CEO of Raphael, and Joaquim Soares, Manager of Klibur Domin, present. They both provided comprehensive and well illustrated presentations about the work of their respective Homes, and the wonderful programs and positive outcomes achieved with fairly minimal resources. For we fund-raisers it is immensely reassuring, and humbling, to know to what use those funds are being put. In both India and East Timor a little goes a long way. Most of us will return re-invigorated to raising the money that is working so hard at Raphael and Klibur Domin, knowing that every dollar does truly make a difference. Johanne Sunnex described for us the uplifting experience of being a volunteer at Raphael.

President Don stepped off the aircraft and up to the lectern to give a short official address, followed by presentations by Di McEwen and others to sponsors and several special people.

Short presentations from the Presidents of Ivanhoe and Singleton Homes updated us on their activities. In their communities both are well established, well supported, and fulfilling their aims, while always seeking new donors and volunteers. Patrick Lewis gave a moving account of the opening of Barbara Cottage at Raphael, and Carolyn Tapley, Chair of the Ryder-Cheshire Foundation Canterbury, told us about changes to the structure of Ryder-Cheshire in New Zealand. She emphasized the value of co-operative effort.

A thought provoking talk from Pam O'Connor about the 30 million year history of the limestone region put us in our place as infinitesimal specks in the march of time. She traced the successive waves of people coming to the area, starting with the aborigines, and continuing to this day as migrants and refugees are made welcome.

Malcolm Kentish talked about the challenges of growing potatoes in a competitive environment, drawing parallels with organisations competing fiercely for the charity dollar. Innovation, adaptability, creativity – all characteristics we need to adopt if Ryder-Cheshire is to continue to flourish.

We shared a lovely meal on Saturday night in the historic Barn Palais adjacent to the conference venue. Many of our hosts had attended dances there as young adults, and in keeping with the laws of the time had to walk 300 yards down the road in order to imbibe alcohol. As well as the delightful Burmese Karen choir we enjoyed some charming singing and dancing.

Incoming National President Peter Newton spoke appreciatively about the fine work done by former National President Dr Don Sinclair, during his 43-years-and-still-going with Ryder-Cheshire, and especially the last eight as National President. Peter presented Don with a book to commemorate his years at the helm of RCA, and we were treated to several anecdotes from Don about his association with Leonard Cheshire.

Perhaps the highlight of the conference for me was the video we watched on Sunday morning, about Sue Ryder and her work with Polish people, during and after World War II. Hugh Elphinstone had searched this out, and what a gem it is. Live footage, it gives insight into Sue Ryder's character, and shows the profound impact she experienced in her contact with people with disabilities. It was very moving and inspiring.

We wound up with a whirlwind bus tour of the city and its attractions, topped off by a visit to the Mt Gambier Home. This home to five young women with disabilities, is a credit to the hard work and determination of the Mt Gambier team. It is a significant achievement. Finally lunch, then fond farewells, before people set off for homes near and far.

In conclusion it was announced that the next Biennial Conference will be hosted by RCF ACT in 2012. Our congratulations and thanks to the Mt Gambier Organising Committee of Neville Gilbertson, Paul Jenner, Diane McEwen, Olive Lane and Pat Janz for an excellent Biennial Conference.

Anthea Swann