

INTERVIEW WITH TESS MINETT, DUCK FLAT COMMUNITY GARDEN COORDINATOR*

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The Duck Flat Community Garden is located behind the Mount Barker District Soldiers Memorial Hospital, in the large Adelaide Hills community of Mount Barker. It is an initiative of the Adelaide Hills Community Health Service and a project where its many allied health professionals collaborate with the community. It is a beautiful space for physical and passive activities and for teaching, demonstrating and growing produce using cooperative, collaborative and healthy organic principles. It currently boasts abundant garden beds, seats, wheel accessible pathways, a hot/shade house, a pizza oven and meeting place, dragon seats, native shelter belt, fruit trees, a comprehensive composting system, activity shed, various artworks and a 'playboat'.

The first moment I stepped into the garden, my initial thoughts were how warm and comforting the atmosphere was. On my way to interview Tess Minett, the coordinator of Duck Flat, I passed two volunteer gardeners who were discussing the crops of leafy vegetables growing in veggie boxes around the edges of the pathways. There was a family with three young children cheerfully riding their push bikes around the circuit path. Taking in the vast amounts of greenery, well-developed garden beds, sculptures and artistic creations, it is easy to see how this garden is a community effort. My initial comments upon meeting Tess in the activity shed was how much the wooden sculpture at the entrance reminded me of a character from *The Lord of the Rings* and how great it was to come to a hospital without actually being ill. Tess agreed. It is clear to see how much Tess's commitment to the volunteers and to the project helps develop the friendly atmosphere. Prior to commencing our interview, she stepped in to assist one volunteer who was measuring and cutting planks of wood for some maintenance. Halfway through our interview, she broke off to go and talk to a mother and her two children who had some questions.

The purpose of our interview was to discuss the garden's role within the ethos of 'social innovation', but we quickly turned to the garden's role in promoting community development and community partnerships. As to the garden's role, Tess replied:

One of the fantastic things I find about this place is that you never know exactly what role the garden is playing in people's lives as we've got a culture of openness and innovation. In other words, there's space. It's not just the physical space of the garden but there is also spiritual space; for people to feel comfortable.

* This interview was conducted by Amy Morgan, Research Assistant, UniSA, on 29 June 2009 with Tess Minett, Coordinator, Duck Flat Community Garden, Mount Barker. Tess Minett presented a paper, 'Community gardens as vehicles for social innovation' at the History and Future of Social Innovation Conference, Adelaide, 19–21 June 2008. This interview is a result of that paper.

Firstly, they've got to feel comfortable, then they get to know they can take responsibility for things and then they just see opportunities. For instance, out of absolutely nowhere, about six weeks ago, a lady from Scott Creek came to see me. She's a parent and member of the Governing Council at Scott Creek Primary School. She'd developed a small, modest kitchen garden at the school and when she'd done that of course there was food to eat. So another parent came in and started teaching cooking. Now they're really keen to spread the word about kitchen gardens but she didn't know how to do it. She came along to volunteer at the Health Service to get in cahoots with me as a 'partner' and work out how she could introduce other schools to Duck Flat and be inspired to have their own kitchen garden. Well, I wouldn't have known that was going to happen in a million years but it's the type of facility that people just hear about. I guess the idea of a garden in the Health Service actually tweaks a lot of people's interest and they may think, 'well maybe there's collaborative possibilities here'. That's partly what community development is, not doing stuff on your own but in collaboration with others.

When I asked if she thought that the garden worked so well because Mount Barker was a reasonably small hills community, Tess replied that it did not really matter.

I think what occurs over time is – if there are community gardens in suburbs – that hub actually then creates a community around it. So rather than being an amorphous mass of suburb after suburb, centres of happening start to be identified and very often gardens can be that because people feel relaxed. There is a gravitational pull like the planets around the sun. People start to gravitate towards those centres and that sense of community becomes developed. It's not necessarily the case that Mount Barker, being a smaller community, encourages interaction with Duck Flat, or the schools with Duck Flat. It's not that there are fewer facilities. I think it's possible, with certain centres of action like gardens, that a sense of community is actually created. The knowledge of Duck Flat is being spread far and wide now. We've got people coming up from Clovelly, from Murray Bridge and all over, so no I don't think that you need a small community. Once you've got a 'place', it creates the community around it.

I then asked Tess to explain the association Duck Flat has with the Mount Barker Health Service and hospital, as I believed that Duck Flat sat on hospital land.

It's actually a campus which includes the hospital, a day care centre and the Adelaide Hills Community Health Service. It was the AHCHS which initiated this project. This literally used to be cow paddock until the local council came in to create a sinkhole over there due to the flooding from the stormwater from the buildings and the car park. A physiotherapist suggested the idea of a garden when the health service decided they wanted to collaborate on a project. The service was aware that a single client with foot problems, back problems and possibly a leg ulcer was being treated as three different people in three different sections. They thought, this is one person and we should be

treating this person as a whole person. So that was how Duck Flat actually started. It was a collaboration.

They saw that by staying in their silos nothing was going to develop and it wasn't going to help the person. That's an interesting difference between the acute health system and community health services. Community health services are made up of allied health professionals. They don't come from that 'you're sick I'll heal you' perspective. Allied health professionals say: 'You have a condition but you're actually a person. We'll treat you as a whole person and treat your condition as well but we'll also teach you how to look after yourself.' It's quite a different approach.

When asked what she would do (in relation to the garden) if she won the 90 million dollar Lotto draw that night, she answered in a way that I would expect from a person who was truly committed to the community aspect of the garden. It was an answer that could only come from a person who had worked in community-based organisations for most of her professional life.

Interestingly, I would say having 90 million would possibly make the garden fail. Certainly it would not test the ingenuity or innovation of people who are involved in the garden. 'Money does not a garden maketh' and neither does it make for innovation. Necessity is the mother of invention and if people are responsible for having to think about solutions creatively, that brings them together and that's what we do here.

That's what gardens do. People come up with ideas and solutions which aren't going to cost 90 million dollars. That also engenders pride and empowerment, which relates to the Ottawa Charter. So that's one of the things we try and inculcate here.

I had a ... still have a budget of five thousand dollars a year. At the end of the first, second and third year, the health service had a surplus and we were able to purchase this shed. Had it been only the five thousand a year we would have had difficulty but by that stage the health service had started to realise it was a worthwhile project and they needed to back it a bit more. The way the garden is developing is actually just right. It's evolving.

If there was more money, then it might mean people would be employed to garden and then it would lose its community development focus. It would become just another facility and it's not that, and I don't think it should ever be that. I've got to say it hasn't been a real struggle, not really. Essentially, the amount of money we're funded is just enough, taking into account that I've had to be a little innovative in looking for supporters. Neutrog is donating all our organic fertilisers. That's about a thousand dollars worth a year. Jurlique gives us seedlings quarterly and we also receive nearly eight thousand dollars worth of bricks from Little Hampton Bricks. So we have a supporters' board saying thank you to all these people.

Employment Options has been very supportive with Work for the Dole. We've had five of their programs which are worth 10–12 thousand dollars each so that's 70 thousand dollars worth of support including a supervisor to teach unemployed people work-related skills. If we were given the money we wouldn't have any of these partnerships, so not having money is actually better.

Having said that, I am, and this place is, in the very fortunate position of having up to \$40k per year to employ me. That's not what I receive as a salary, but there are on-costs, cars, super and holidays and 17 and a half per cent loading – all those things incumbent with the public service. There's also OH and S, human resources, the backup, the stationary, computer, phone, email and all that, and that's where a lot of community organisations can really struggle. I used to work from a community perspective, I mean for nothing, as a community member, for decades. This (indicates the garden) is like the end of my working life. If you look at my whole career in the community, it's actually led to this – the experiences I've had – but those experiences have been for no pay. I know what it's like to have to scabble around for the money for just a postage stamp or to pay the phone bill every month. As you know, grants don't cover it because they're all for projects for a specific aim with a specific purpose and there's always the coda, 'this funding is not for ongoing administrative costs'. Well, how do people get the funds? That's where fundraising and community enterprise come in. Mmm, if I had 90 million I would put it into a trust account and ethical investments. I would utilise probably 90 per cent of the interest to encourage people through start-up funds that would possibly be for other gardens. This one doesn't need it.

We then moved on to discuss the physical surrounds of the garden. I asked Tess if there were any aspects of the garden that she would have done differently with the wonderful benefit of hindsight, or if there were any changes that could be made to make the garden a more efficient or 'used' piece of community infrastructure.

There's only one fundamental mistake, namely an inadequate water infrastructure. I wasn't here when it was established and there's no blame for it except the lack of initial funding. It doesn't look like it now of course (indicates that the weather is cold and wet) and it probably wouldn't even look like this in the middle of summer because we handle it very well. We have very good composting that holds the water, whatever water we've got. We're also very fortunate we have an excellent bore. It's been here ever since the place was a farm and it gives us excellent quality – almost drinkable – water. This means we can put it onto leafy vegetables which don't scorch in the sun with the salt. Unfortunately, the water pipes and connections that were put down were cheap and unlocatable as there was no map created. So that's another issue – the number of pipes and their poor quality. I can't change that. I can't convert the system into a higher grade because there are too many things sitting on top of it now. So yes, that would be my one regret, the one thing I would change.

In terms of the facilities (and I'm referring to features such as the boat, the picnic tables or the garden beds), given the amount of money and the building resources etc that we had at the time, I think we've done a damn fine job and I actually wouldn't change any of it. Not any of it. Some of it needs a little improvement. Whereas five years ago that much (indicates large amount) needed improvement and that much (indicates small amount) was really good, now it's reversed. About three months ago one of the staff members returned from a year's maternity leave. She came out to the garden for the first

time in 12 months and it was just the 'wow factor'. I asked, 'What's changed?' and she said, 'It's got this value added feel that's richer'. There were a few extra plants here or more plants per garden bed, or we've started planting out with bush tucker and natives which we didn't have before. I've done a fair bit of landscape design and architecture at university and have also worked with communities for a long time so I know that things never look exactly the same as you expect them to.

We have a meeting every Wednesday that I call 'Dirty Doings' where we discuss what we are going to plant and who's going to do what. Two weeks in a row, a lady called up from the local community to say, 'I've got some standard roses and do you want them? I can't handle them anymore, I'm too old.' Often you've got to respond fairly quickly to these offers so we collected them. Four or five years ago we would have had no trouble finding places for them. Last week we were walking around saying, 'can't do it here, can't do it there'. It's an indication that we're pretty chockas. But there's not a lot more we can do. Every time we look at something now all of the gardeners know that we have to consider such things as watering – who's going to water it in summer, is it too far away from a watering point – and is it too close to a path if it's prickly, etc. They all now understand. I don't need to veto so much anymore. They'll do it themselves in terms of what can be developed (indicates surroundings).

There's not much space out in the central garden anymore, so attention has shifted to the larger peripheral areas. There is a section of adjacent land which I have been working on in collaboration with our dieticians, youth and mental health workers and Aboriginal liaison officer. We're hoping to develop an environmentally friendly building (indicates to our right) over here with straw bale. It might go ahead but that to me is the next big development.

At the moment there's a physio, OT and dieticians' Tuesday group (called Dirty Hands, Happy Hearts or DH²) using this shed. It is only six metres by six metres and as you can see there's a kitchen squeezed in because 20 people pick then cook their lunch here. There's also a Tuesday artwork group running at the same time outside. The area is simply too small. On Mondays and Wednesdays I've got my gardeners. On Thursdays there's a men's mental health group that meets here. There's also an environmental education for children course being started up by two of the volunteers who work here. They're keen on education so we've developed that in conjunction with each other. They'll be conducting that every second Friday. Alternative Fridays there's an art class plus another one on Thursday afternoons. It's getting full and needs to expand. It's inappropriate. It's too crowded.

The Tuesday (DH²) group has been running for two years and has proven that we could hold it five days a week. What with obesity, diabetes and all those long-term health issues, it's exactly what's needed, plus the social side of things. Mental health is such a major issue in our society, brought about by alienation from each other, lack of contact and so lack of cohesion, etc. That Tuesday group has got as many people suffering mental health issues as it has from other conditions like poor diet, diabetes and so on. It's not just about cooking, it's about being together and that alleviates a lot of mental health issues. There needs to be a space that can be dedicated to that and a space where young people

can come and not feel stigmatised by walking into a health service. They can just come and go in their own space where there's a youth worker or a youth coordinator. They know that they can come and go anytime and that person is there. They have their own 'outside door'. The way I see it, the garden is a softer portal to the Health Service and now it's being seen as that too.

The relationship the children and youth of the community have to this garden is very interesting, as the garden has a warm, comforting atmosphere. As was demonstrated by the children riding their bikes around the path, they are welcome to play, explore and learn. It is very child oriented. Tess had previously mentioned the garden's role in advocating healthy lifestyles. The children fit into this too. They are running and playing, learning about vegetables and socialising in a friendly and open domain. Tess agreed that this was how they were using the garden.

They feel very comfortable here because of the creative elements. It's not just the boat which they gravitate to. They like the Children's Garden because in summer there's a shaded sand pit. There are birds and there are interesting things as you can see – the totem poles, the story poles, there are bits of mosaic and little surprises here and there. Schools love to come here because there's the space. It's not so small that 50 children crowd it too much.

Half a dozen schools visited here last year. This year we're hoping to have a program which relates to that lady from Scott Creek whom we discussed earlier on. This lady has come up with an idea for a program that lasts four hours. A class is split into two groups of 15 which is a manageable number and they alternate activities. The idea is that they be brought here to Duck Flat to encourage the school to think about having its own kitchen garden. I know there are some issues such as those related to the kitchen garden grants that are being made available through the Stephanie Alexander Foundation. I think there's 60 thousand dollars on offer but no staffing provided, so a lot of schools aren't taking it up. Perhaps a realistic option might be that a cluster of four schools have two gardens and they can share resources. Anyway, it's an idea but the schools aren't even going to consider it unless it comes from – pardon the pun – the grassroots, which are the kids.

So the kids can come here and be inspired. They will then be able to influence their schools into saying, 'We want something like this'. It's coming from the kids and the schools need to know that that enthusiasm is being generated partly by the creativity or the creative elements of the garden. As you probably know, the Department of Health and the Department for the Arts have developed an MOU between them whereby they're trying to encourage cross-fertilisation of the two disciplines and Duck Flat once again is an example of that. I'm trying to show people how it can work. How, just by having creative elements around them, people who are 'unwell' can feel more comfortable. It brings them out, but of course it also brings about the notion of having workshops so people can be actively creative – and we do encourage that. One of the collaborations we had internally was with the Bereavement Group. I've given them the names and numbers of two of our

gardeners who are also potters and will work with members of the group and the public who want to make memorials for their loved ones.

We concluded our interview with a quick walk around the garden. What was clearest as an outsider was the commitment shown by the volunteers which encapsulated the community spirit. They seemed to embody the spirit of it all. As Tess had surmised, the Duck Flat Community Garden has acted as the catalyst in creating the community around it. People are gravitating towards it and that sense of community spirit has developed into a thriving, playful and ultimately useful site for community development.