

Carman Stewart It Takes A Town

SPEAKERS

Jeremy Melder, Carmen Stewart

Jeremy Melder 00:00

Hello, my name is Jeremy Melder, and I'm the presenter from beaming green. Before we start, I would like to acknowledge that this podcast is being held on the traditional lands of the bundjalung people and paying our respects to elders both past, present and emerging. The beaming green podcast is a weekly podcast, which will help you to take out some of the stress and confusion about how to live your life more sustainably. And we do this by introducing people that have first hand experience and expertise in all aspects of sustainability. So you can get some amazing insights on how you can implement simple and practical solutions to enhance your life and the lives of your family. I'm really excited to be speaking with Carmen Stewart, whose key role at present is the design and activation of it takes a town. Now this is a collective impact project focused on the 2484 postcode area in a town or area called murwillumbah, or tweed Shire, in Australia. Now its aim is to grow a culture of trust, generosity, and responsiveness in order to create opportunities and environments for children to thrive. Sounds great, doesn't it? Prior to this, Carmen designed and managed the award winning making places project, which is an initiative to imagine safer, healthier and more sustainable futures in communities across South East Queensland, and Melbourne. Carmen is highly skilled and an engaging facilitator. I can attest to that. She is passionate about inspiring and activating change to create futures we would all love to live in. Right now she is particularly interested in how we can collaborate, post COVID-19 to not return to business as usual. Something I'm sure many of us are thinking about right now. Welcome to beaming green Carmen. Really nice to have you here.

Carmen 02:38

Thanks, Jeremy. lovely to be here.

Jeremy Melder 02:41

Now we want to talk about your project called it takes a town now I'd like to get some background as to when and how that got started.

Carmen 02:53

It takes a town started in 2017. It's based in the 2484 postcode area, which is murwillumbah Northern New South Wales and surrounding villages. It got started, really because I saw the need to focus on community culture. And the focus of the project. As you know, Jeremy's about building a culture of trust, generosity and responsiveness. In order to benefit everyone really, is the focus. Although due to funding, we have a focus specifically on children and families, but we can go in all directions with it. But it also started because of work. I've been doing working a lot with services, and as a consultant and I saw through that how under resourced services are to deal with what we call wicked problems in society. At the time, I was helping set up homelessness services in this region. And when I saw the funding that they had to resource homeless people. I just really realized how important it was that we

actually went back to the resources that exists within community. So there was a really strong interest to say, Well, what happens when we go in we engage residents, you know, our businesses, our churches, our clubs, our little groups, rotaries, what happens if we turn to them, first and foremost, to deal with our wicked problems, and then add government and services on as the extra partners rather than the leaders of social change.

Jeremy Melder 04:28

So what did you find in terms of getting that engagement from the community when you started this off the ball rolling with takes the town Did you find engagement people wanting to be participating?

Carmen 04:38

We were incredibly fortunate that we happen to launch as a movement the same weekend as the 2017 floods, which were the biggest floods ever experienced in this region. Obviously not other people's fortune but from a project angle. Because we're all about responsiveness having launched the same weekend as the floods, it gave us a position. And what we found straight up is that people wanted to respond. Everyone is you would remember Jeremy being in community, everyone was helping each other people were doing whatever they could cleaning other people's houses, you know, carrying Food, Cooking whatever they could do. So we were able to harness there was a door open on generosity that was really wide. And we were able to harness that generosity and keep some of that door open. So it didn't shut because this is often experienced in communities after a natural disaster, generosity is on steroids, then the door shuts and people return to live says normal. Well, we were able to keep some of that door open.

Jeremy Melder 05:45

You know, I remember that. Not fondly. I was actually locked out for a few days, I was not allowed to get home because I was blocked off by water from both sides of Baker's road. But I really did remember how everyone did participate, as you know, we have someone here as well, in terms of housing and giving people that, you know, relief from the community. Did you have an open arms type of scenario from people saying Yes, I'd love to provide a home,

Carmen 06:17

we probably saw very quickly that lots of other people were doing other things. Yes. So people were doing the cleaning that this or that? Or went Oh, can I do because it takes a town was largely just me at that point. And I went, What can I do? We didn't have a following we and we were dreaming, I was dreaming of being a movement. But at that stage, it was me. And I realized the response I could take was to push out with the campaign to get some local accommodation. And that's what we did do. And we housed around 15 families and or individuals by just on Facebook asking who had a studio, a room that they were willing to share or give, you know, give for a period of time of two people who get back up on their feet. And that was that there was a really interesting learning in that because we did, for example, go to the emergency shelter where people were at the time approach Red Cross and said, Ah, well, we've got you know, these 15 offers of accommodation. Can you let us know who'd be best suited we want in good candidates. And they were like, No, we can't do that. They had hotels organized right out of community over on the coast for people and people had to meet certain eligibility but we didn't have to go down that path. See there was a risk averse path, they couldn't actually connect those

people in need with the asset that existed within community. Because what if it read wrong? Which I do believe it didn't your case? What if it went wrong?

Jeremy Melder 07:51

It was I got over it?

Carmen 07:53

What would happen? What would they be sued? What happened? You know, there was these risks that organizations couldn't take in connecting people at a time of vulnerability to resource in community in a very agile way? Yeah. And so straight up, it takes a town was able to set itself up as a movement that could be very agile, because we're based on trust.

Jeremy Melder 08:17

Yeah, yeah, I would use the word nimble. You were able to really adapt quickly and and people were able to, and you know, this, obviously, when you do things like that, in any situation, when there's a dire need for an emergency that you could rectify something. You could make a mistake, even if you've got procedures in place. Absolutely not. So it doesn't really matter if you're a big organization a little is but at least you acted and did something which is great. Now, how has that evolved now since the flood and so on? Have you grown and what sort of support have you managed to get for tax a town

Carmen 08:56

where we receive funding? So we were very fortunate to receive five years of funding from the Vincent? Us? Yes, the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, which is fantastic, because it's virtually not heard of community development initiatives to get any funding, let alone five years worth in substantial funding. We have moved in many directions probably because of the flood. We initially pursued the housing crisis here now that wasn't actually aligned with our funding. Because we went down, you know, this desire to get the culture of community right growing trust, generosity, responsiveness, we went with the angle of doing that in order to create opportunities for children and families to thrive. Why we did that was because one in five children were growing up in poverty at the time. What was beautiful was that I realized very early on our funding body was very flexible and allowed us to be responsive to the situation will be energy in our community was around housing people who historically might not have cared about people who were homeless. All of a sudden cared deeply about homeless people after the flood, empathy really opened up. So we pursued that initially. But it really made us put an emphasis on the responsiveness. And so we've grown in many directions, we have three key strategies. Number one is growing circles of support, which is where we support any families who are seeking change. And we support them by connecting them to people who are often themselves a little bit isolated, who want to connection in community, typically an older woman, and we connect them together for social support. But then we also access other things, particularly for the benefit of children. So for example, we've got people on our database who have offered free drumming lessons or free art activities, or writing workshops or mentoring. So we line them up with those offers that have come out of community. So we've put a very big focus on our other strategy, which is harnessing generosity. So we do go out, we pop up wherever we can, and we ask people have you got a skill of passionate talent, a resource that you're willing to share? People are never asked that as soon as you are set of people. Outcome z, oh, well, I used to be a midwife. I wouldn't mind helping a mother who's about to have a baby, or I've got a

van, I could help someone with some transportation if they needed to move things. So we focus on talking up generosity harnessing those offers. But alongside that, we also focus on talking about vulnerability, because we could all be vulnerable at any given time. Our third strategy has grown over time, and that is a focus on growing permission and confidence to act. And right now, as we hit towards the last 12 months as a as a movement, that is very much where we're focusing, because we're seeing that is what's actually key to sustainability of the benefits that have been going through it takes a town is the importance of getting people to a place where they actually acknowledge and feel a sense of power, that they can actually do things either on behalf of themselves, their family, or their community instead of feeling as though response has to live with government or something formal.

Jeremy Melder 12:24

Now, one of the projects that you have is called pitch for change. And that's one of those examples of that, isn't that where people are feeling empowered, that they can roll out a project that they've passionate about?

Carmen 12:37

Yeah, look, we, we started that last year. And, I mean, it's realizing that programs aren't sustainable, right? We couldn't sustain For example, we have someone coordinate our circles of support program where we support families, we also support older people, but it needs a paid resource of someone coordinating that's not sustainable. What is sustainable is people who become actors on behalf of community. So pitch for change is one of those things that we do where once a year, we get a gaggle of people together around 10. And who have got an idea, something that could create benefit for any target group or the environment. And what we do is help them take the seed of an idea and we help them to plan for it, we help we give them the information they might need to know about how you get funding the legalities, you need to watch out for around risk. or seeing if you need your project auspiced. So we help people to really take an idea to a level where they're then able to pitch it for the prizes and support that they need to implement. We're very much about getting to the stage of implementation. Last year, we had 11 projects pitched in 2019. And of those seven are up and running, which is fantastic in their projects. It's a great number. And they're very much about, you know, their projects in there about people's mental health, providing connections for people and community when they're feeling vulnerable. There's a beautiful project in there, which is some older fathers teaching new fathers, the wisdom that they have about fatherhood. They were cooking classes, you know, so beautiful mix of projects that have gotten off the ground, purely because people were told, hey, I like your idea. That's great. How about we just help you move it along. And then people came from community and responded to the needs that those people had, whether it be for an office space, a bit of mentoring, some free graphic, design, room, hire, whatever, that's our job is to help link people and what they need to the resources in community

Jeremy Melder 14:54

and you do a really good job of that. I must say, you know, in linking those people, how many of you are there

Carmen 15:00

Well, it takes a town is a movement now, which is great. So it was a vision, initially there will be a movement. And at any given time, we probably have around 150 to 200 people connected in different ways, whether they're receiving some support, whether they're giving support as supporters of families or older people, people connected to things like pitch for change. People who are actively offering something, you know, I get phone calls all the time saying, you know, are, I'm a writer, and I'd like to teach them children how to write and I've got a program idea. And I'm really, you know, I just need a little bit of help to identify some children. Well, we can say, fantastic. We can just organize the venue. Yes, we can tick a box and make sure you've got you're working with children check. That's great. We can make that happen all find you, the kids. And we can start in two weeks, should we just do that? Because we're very much act in an instant. So there is always this changing rotation of people who come in and respond as they're able, because we talk about being responsible. Yes, spotters, you're able, don't feel responsible, that's boring. It's tiring. People don't want to commit in that way. People don't really want to volunteer in their busy lives anymore. Whereas you talk to people about just responding as they're able, for as long as it feels good. People are really keen to do it. What I've come to realize over time, Jeremy is the importance that when someone makes an offer, it is equally important for us to then pursue who to link that offer to, instead of always just working from the other end, someone has a need and we wait for it. You know, we actively go out and find someone who can respond to the need. We're very aware that when people make an offer, it's often because they themselves are seeking social connection. Yes, that's a really important thing, isn't it? And it's true. You can have volunteer burnout, can you you know, if you feel obliged to be, you know, funding up for a workshop that you're running every week, people can really just burn out, but what you're

Jeremy Melder 17:09

giving people the opportunity to say, I can do so much and that's it. You need to stop them, you know, that's great. We'll be back in a moment.

Advertising Bee Folk 17:22

Hello, everyone. My name is Marianni from bee folk. And it is great to be joining Jeremy here on the beaming green podcast, helping us all to live more sustainably bee folk produces beeswax wrap kits to make your own beeswax wraps at home. Our bee folk blend bar is made from natural beeswax, tree resin, organic coconut and hobo oil. Make your own great looking, reusable, eco friendly reps to cover your food and keep it fresh and natural alternative to plastic wrap. And to support the good message of beaming green, and help reduce single use plastic waste, we are giving away a free B folk wax rep kit. Just go to the website, beaming green.com and subscribe to be in the drawer in the second week of November.

Jeremy Melder 18:16

Welcome back. Do you feel common the? Well, you know you've got engaged with the local community. But how do you feel like your local government? Are they fully supportive of what you're doing and? And are they you know, sort of championing championing New Orleans? Well,

Carmen 18:37

I wouldn't say local government is championing in us on however, look, that's okay. We're very much acting. We have some engagement from local government, for example, the mayor came to a

workshop and one of the councillors last week, which is fantastic. But they probably in our community don't necessarily get they don't engage with the text in town as much as I would like them. And that's okay. We've got enough engagement elsewhere. Because our first is, as I said, you know, it's businesses, churches, clubs, groups, residents. Yeah, they're the people that were first and foremost seeking to connect and find share points of mission and government and services we do try to bring in, but then often not as nimble, to stay up with the pace of which community is implementing and doing things. There's quite a lot of red tape that they have to go through that they it's not all their fault, really, but

Jeremy Melder 19:35

no, it's just the way I know the structure works. You know, you have to report up the line and down the line and, you know, cover all these bases to make sure that something's done properly. So it's a due diligence type of thing that they have to follow. Now, I know that you've got the community engagement model working quite well and that you had this community meeting a couple of weeks ago. It takes down about 80 people came in, I was fortunate enough to be part of those 80 people that came. What did you think about it? I mean, I was excited by that, because you had lots of different community groups and various aspects of the covered business and so on. What was your What was your aha of that?

Carmen 20:21

And look, I think it just really showed how much people from whether they come from an interest in business, whether it be more social, whether it be that they have a spiritual interest and environmental or cultural, that people are really one syncing the opportunity that exists right now, as we come out of the COVID lockdown as we move through having had the biggest bushfires in Australian history last year, they're sensing an opportunity to do things differently, and also a need to do things differently. We had a focus on bringing people together, we call it the 2484 reset. And it was saying, Well, what does a thriving, resilient and more adaptive future for our community look and feel like? And what are the priorities that are going to get asleep? The other half for me is that I've done a lot of community planning over the years. And what are really, you know, didn't surprise me, but what it affirmed is how big the issues of food security, water security, energy security, disaster preparedness and response, there were two of our biggest priorities to come out. Now, those issues have never come up in any other community planning process I've ever done in the past. And maybe because we get permission in the language we use, but we very much directed people to the social as well. And social connection was very strong as well, absolutely. And neighborhood connections, for the sake of people's well, mental well, being participatory democracy was also a big area. But it just surprised me how strong it was when we were very conscious about ensuring we had a mix of people in the room who weren't just environmental, we had our church leaders there, etc, as well, very diverse. And we still came out with two of the strongest areas really being around what we might see as key sustainability points and resilience issues, adaptation issues for our communities as we move forward.

Jeremy Melder 22:37

And I noticed, so we're all in different groups, and we put up all these ideas, and we volunteered all these great, or shall I say, these possibilities of project that can you know, it's up to the people that

drive those to do that? What's the next step? in those projects? Are they going to be put up on some sort of website or

Carmen 22:59

Allah, we're, I'm just back from holiday since then. So my first step is to actually pull all of that together. But really, you know, we were very clear. And it takes a town isn't about people coming and giving us ideas and telling us, here we go, here's the priorities. Off you go. Thank you. We'll come back in two years and check on progress. As you know, Jeremy, we asked people on the day well, who's willing to drive this. So we asked for drivers. And then we asked people who wanted to join around the drivers. So what we'll be doing is supporting the drivers a bit like we do with our pitch for change process. Our focus on growing permission and confidence to act will help those people connect firstly with what is already happening in community. So obviously, disaster preparedness and response was a big issue. Yeah, well, let's connect with the Red Cross and the ACS and the rural fire service. And let's connect and local government, let's connect those people who've got the passion for that with what's already in existence. But we will be helping the identified leaders to actually just move forward. We'll give them everything that came out of the workshop. The vision for it takes a town because we are initiative avert of responsiveness. That's our key focus is that we are moving in the direction of morphing into it takes a town to adapt. So we have 12 months left where our key focuses on children and families. But as I said, we have found thankfully, with the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation behind us, we are able to be responsive they can see the need right now. We are morphing into that direction where we see that our focus on getting the culture of community right in saying the focus is on trust, generosity and responsiveness that really applies to the adaptation, and work around strengthening resilience and creating opportunities for people to continue to thrive, as our communities need to change to respond to the environmental emergency we're in.

Jeremy Melder 24:59

So Tom and the Vincent Fairfax foundation have been supporting you for five years. They've done a great job every day in terms of supporting you in in, you know, you've mentioned lots of tangents of the ways you've had to, you've had to adapt in terms of engaging with the community. What would it mean for you, if you were able to, you know, get some more funding,

Carmen 25:21

we we will be looking for more funding. And very much as I said, Jeremy, to continue with that focus on the culture of community in saying that what a community does is really turn on protective factors. Yeah, the community is a place you can turn on protective factors. And that might be for an individual experiencing homelessness, someone who's in a domestic violence situation. And so it could be social. But it also turned some protective factors when it comes to climate change, and how that really makes us all vulnerable, we are all potentially vulnerable without a doubt. So to really, we're going to be seeking funding to continue to strengthen that focus, because we've been able to demonstrate some really interesting growth, we have actually seen how generous and responsive this community is, it was naturally already. But as I said, you know, we were able to keep the door open on that generosity after the floods back in 2017, it has continued to grow. I think it was something around 90% of people said that, in a recent survey where we had 350 people respond about 90% said that our community is very or fairly generous, which is fantastic. So we would like to continue focusing on that aspect of community

culture to apply to the issue of adaptation, and adaptation not being you know, it's it's social, as well as environmental, that we really need to strengthen connections, again, between people. As much as we need to look at our issues of food security, water security, air energy, as well as we need to look at preparedness for natural disasters. But there's a lot of social, and also the cultural aspects that we want to carry through what's already great about where we live, that we want to sustain, you know, for a little town like murwillumbah, and the villages here and see are things like a banana festival, and all those great cultural aspects, supporting our local businesses. So yeah, that's, that's the direction we're wanting to move. And we're already starting to scout for funding for that. And that's great. Well, I hope

Jeremy Melder 27:36

I know you, you really do deserve a because you put a lot of effort into it with your whole team. So there's a big team involved in doing that. Now, other people, other communities in Australia, let's just focus on on Australia want to do this type of thing in their local community, what would be the tips for the, you know, people that want to start? A version of it takes a town in their own community? What would you say they need to do?

Carmen 28:02

I would say that a few things. One, it takes a town, really, we wouldn't be saying Well, we've got the fit, and just come and get it from Marshall every community and have its own version. But key learnings would be that really begin by actually seeing what resources exist within your community don't come from a thought that your community has no resources that that is scarcity, no, have a look at the abundance of resources that exist there. And I'm meaning Have a look and see what the role of churches in your community might be what their aspirations are, think very much in terms of shared mission. So begin to approach groups that you might have, I mean, we have often so many people working on common agendas already in our community. So set yourself up in a way not to be an organization that's going to do things but to become like a backbone, you know, a backbone holds us up and to set yourself up to be good to get a movement that's more like a backbone, where you're setting yourself up to be the connector between the things that are already working, helping what already exists and is already working to some level to leverage from each other, rather than just having offerings side by side that never seem to have impact. But focusing on what happens when you leverage, begin to go out and ask people about their mission. So don't go and say, Look, we're going to do this and this is the mission, will you join with us No, go out and say, Look, this is my thoughts. This is the mission that we were planning to pursue, what's your mission? What's our shared point there and help people to identify that shared point of mission, something that I have a lot of knowledge of that's important in this work as collective impact work. And really, that is around that work around seeing shared mission, being a connector, helping people to leverage working as a movement. One of the things that takes a town purposely did, we were initially only given two years funding, we went back for three years more, we didn't go in ask for this huge wad of money because it was never about us becoming an organization. Yeah, even now, you know, we're four years in, we still only have a resource of just over 30 hours a week, which is split between four people. Because we were never to be set up to be the people who do, we're the people who activate. So to know how to activate and to know when someone comes to you with a great idea to know how to say, fantastic. I love your idea. I can support you in this way. Yeah, what do you need, and maybe to help them find the resources they need? But yes, begin by looking at what you've actually gotten community itself, do have some sort of shared

mission, that you actually do have to target something, you can't just have responsiveness. Moving in 200 directions, you've got to have a key focus,

Jeremy Melder 31:11

but be light and allow it to move, which is where you started off really with one key focus really? Was, wasn't it? So? Do you still balance your life with this 30 hours? or what have you? A finding that you're able to do that still?

Carmen 31:28

Oh, look, absolutely. I really go downtown without having a conversation with someone. But absolutely. I'm very much into having balance. And yes, I know the importance of that, Jeremy, you

Jeremy Melder 31:42

bet you do is you've had a little bit of a health scare yourself.

Carmen 31:46

Yeah, I did. Which was interestingly, it really did begin with launching, it takes a town Actually, I started to get well around the same time. And it took me quite a few months of investigating to find out I had breast cancer two and a half years ago. So I've actually had a period of time where I've experienced my own vulnerability in it takes a town which really affirmed the whole model really, for me that at any given time, we can all be vulnerable. Yeah. So yes. But I am thankfully now in a place of good health. But breast cancer, for me was also an experience of the micro macro of life. And it was my own little bit of climate change. It was my environmental emergency in my own body.

Jeremy Melder 32:37

Yeah. And you've learned to adapt with that. And you look wonderful texture, you know, unless the camping trip, but you're glowing and looking great. And look calm. And I really want to thank you for coming on to beaming green today. And I hope, and I'm pretty sure you will get more funding for your future of it takes a town. And I will put all your details and contacts on our show notes. Thanks, Jeremy. Thank you. Thank you for being part of the beaming green podcast. The music for this podcast is produced by Dave Weir now we need more people to get on board and raise awareness about sustainability and climate change. The more of us that are shining the light on these issues, the more government and business leaders will listen. We would love you to subscribe to our podcast, and share and engage in social media so that we can get some traction. Let's support one another and envision a brighter future. Thanks for listening. See you next week.