



The Glenmead Village  
Chapel-an icon in the centre  
of the village square



# Dare to be Different

## BLUE CARE ON CREATIVE COMMUNITY CULTURES



Julia Turner  
interviews Blue Care  
about a recent project

As this edition of NHJ has a strong project design focus it seemed only appropriate to feature an extremely unique and dramatically different approach to aged care.

### One person can make a difference

In a recent interview with Jean McCubben, Regional Director of Blue Care, North Queensland we discovered that sometimes a fresh, independent perception can become a landmark in both the aged care industry and its geographical environment.

Upon initial enquiry, I was a little intrigued as to what leap of faith had relocated Jean's established teaching background into the aged care industry.

Jean explained she was a teacher that knew very little about aged care. However, through this process, she quickly realised that there had to be a better way of caring for the elderly, as there was no way her parents were going to be placed in some of the homes she had seen. "Absolutely no way! If it wasn't good enough for my parents, how could it be good enough for anyone else's," she passionately expressed.

### The catalyst for change

In May 1998, Jean found herself facing her first major challenge, having taken on her new role for all of one week - the Good Samaritan Nursing Home in Cairns was facing sanctions following its failure to meet the Residential Aged Care Standards.

Without a true appreciation of the severity of the situation, the CEO of Blue Care Alex Lobban, informed her that the Good Samaritan Nursing Home that had served its 180 residents for 39 years through cyclones and floods could be closed down.

Unfortunately, it was built on a medical institutional model. There were six beds to a ward with a floral curtain providing the only privacy for residents. The buildings had no air conditioning and Jean saw beads of perspiration settling on the faces of her residents. The heat and humidity refused to allow even the luxury of cooling evaporation.

The residents and staff battled stoically on - trying to provide compassion and care, struggling to maintain each individual's dignity and respect.

The kitchen staff provided meals in temperatures reading 42 degrees Celsius and food was plated and carried out to the various wings of the facility.

There had to be a better way. This called for an 'Exodus'.

### Location and community

Jean worked with a real estate agent until she found the perfect place. Smack bang in the middle of the newly developing suburb of Redlynch where heaps of family homes were going up around the site. Not too surprisingly, as it is a beautiful mountain valley with the Williams Range right behind it and Crystal Cascades at its feet.



The big question was - would this community accept a nursing home in the middle of their modern growing suburb?

Due to the importance of this project, Jean smoothed the way by explaining the concept to the community.

This was going to be a typical North Queensland town, similar to what the residents had left behind. The residents (High Care) would be citizens of the town and everyone else, including the staff, would be visitors. Glenmead Village, as it was named, would have a resident as mayor. It would have a village green, shops, church and/or community hall. And the community were invited to jog, ride and walk their dogs through the village. They would be welcome at the church, matinee, coffee shop and events such as Carols by Candlelight and Anzac Day ceremonies. People, action and the normal suburban noise would provide the residents with a reason to live!

### Finding a model to build on

With the location and concept secured, Jean sought further assistance to create the infrastructure.

With the combined experience of project manager, Bill Douglas of Douglas Associates, an architect from Ralph Power Architects and her maintenance officer, Mick Tobiano - they flew to Brisbane, hired a car and visited every nursing home that had been built in the last 18 months.

Each one was discreetly measured against 15 pre-selected criteria. When they arrived back in Townsville, ideas were beginning to take shape. They'd seen the best of the best, but wanted to push the envelope further to give the residents a town they could call home!

Jean highlighted that in her estimation, Ralph Power stood out among the architects due to his record of awards for innovation. She was confident that, "This man would understand - he would be capable and willing to develop the concept and bring it into reality."

"I knew we had achieved our end when we received a surprising amount of feedback that "it doesn't look like a nursing home" and "It looks like a resort" as how else would you camouflage a nursing home in a place like Cairns?

In regards to the interior, a designer who had not been conditioned by any previous experience working in aged care facilities embraced a fresh new approach. In fact, the contract was given to an applicant who had never even been in a nursing home, who had recently finished many of the resorts in Cairns and Port Douglas.

### How do you ensure a group of contractors understand what you want?

Jean's initial approach was to show them what she did not want. And she was insistent that en-suites accommodate bed baths.

In her unique approach of translating her requests, Jean had the staff put the Project Manager on a bed bath and pushed him down the verandah with his modesty cape flapping in the breeze. His embarrassment was obvious - and he was fully dressed! The architect was encouraged to spend time in the kitchen and laundry. He listened to staff; he



ABOVE: Sunny resort-like outlook.  
INSET: Etta enjoys her home.



listened to end users, families and service providers. With a realistic understanding of the functional needs and desires for the environment, the design was drawn up in the Glenmead Village Room at Good Samaritan in clear view of the staff to ensure they could see the impact of their involvement taking shape.

Fixtures such as furniture, lighting and equipment were also trialed in the Glenmead Village Room. The exact size of a room was painted on the activity room floor with real furniture placed on it. And ultimately, staff were able to get a real feel for how it would work - long before the first sod was turned.

### The wheels in motion

As soon as the purchase of the site was sealed, the first community event in the form of a 'Picnic on the Block' was organised. To ensure all residents could be included, disability taxis were booked, with one resident in attendance in her bed, a celebration took place under a huge marquee.

The residents were taken regularly to visit the facility as it took shape. They had the opportunity to see their rooms, drive around the village and waited patiently until it was ready for relocation.

With the help of volunteers and families, the first 110 high care residents arrived under the direction of Enid MacDonald, the Chaplain and Counsellor. The shift went off with military precision and all 110 residents arrived safely into the arms of families who had planned a private 'welcome home' party in each room.

Regardless of what may have been foreseen as potentially





LEFT: The village square - a town of their own.  
 BELOW LEFT: The DON Matt Sierp walks a new resident into the village.  
 BELOW: The icon of the church is a focal point.



disruptive transition, the staff recorded the first of many cool and comfortable nights sleep undisturbed by others. They had indeed come 'home'.

### Feature elements

To design a NQ town means there has to be a chicken run. And for the first time in his career, Ralph Power designed one at this site! The team researched the area to establish which trees attracted local birds, and they were planted appropriately throughout the site, attracting flocks of birds to the environment.

The rooms are so large that families are able to bring the residents' pets in to see them and the local children ride their skateboards, scooters and bikes around the exterior paths.

The sense of community has thrived in this environment, with couples marrying in the air-conditioned church on the understanding that the residents can sit in the village square to watch the bridal party come and go.

Rev. Doug Foster and his Uniting Church congregation have adopted Glenmead Village church for regular Sunday services. The services extend to the residents as the members of the congregation serve morning tea to the residents.

The children of the community have also been welcomed with open arms, as the Redlynch Day Care Centre provides care for 3-year-olds every Wednesday in the hall. This 'clutch of terrors' is let loose to provide instant entertainment for elderly folk who get to enjoy the antics of that particular age group. Disaster? No, just good medicine!

### Community nursing complement

The village continues to develop with Blue Care's Community Nursing centre being relocated to Glenmead Village in the New Year. Medical suites and a pharmacy can be included, as there is a medical clinic in the village.

Jean was invited to present the concept of Glenmead Village at the first International Eden Alternative Conference held in South Carolina in November last year and the reaction was outstanding. The participants from nine countries commented that their high care facilities were still heavily biased towards a medical model.

### And the final test

Jean brought her mother up from Townsville and took her through the facility. Her mother's response was, "I'd move in here tomorrow."

### Back to basics

Blue Care's North Queensland Team asked this basic question: "What can you do for people who must enter full-time care?" Their answer: Design a concept that returns back to the resident everything you are taking from them.

**Dare to be Different!** nhj

*Blue Care is a Queensland agency of the Uniting Church in Australia. The NQ region stretches from Mackay in the south to Thursday Island and out to Mt. Isa, just three times the size of Victoria.*