

## Living Smart: Building communities of hope

By Marco Cuevas-Hewitt

With the constant stream of apocalyptic fare out of Hollywood, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine we might avert catastrophe and turn things around for the better. Environmentalists share the blame at times, particularly when their awareness-raising efforts shade into prophecies of doom and gloom. However well-meaning, the risk with this approach is that, rather than spurring (or scaring) people into action, it can leave people feeling overwhelmed to the point of *inaction*. One can have all the awareness in the world, but if one lacks *hope*, then none of it can be translated into meaningful action on the ground.

Enter Living Smart, an award-winning community education programme that aims to equip participants with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to live smarter and more sustainably, while improving both personal and ecological health. Said Shani Graham, a Living Smart facilitator since 2008 and one of Perth's foremost sustainability gurus: "For me, it's not just about getting people to reduce their power bills or water consumption, as important as that is; it's also about building a community of people who have *hope*".

### The course

Usually delivered once a week over seven weeks, what makes Living Smart unique is that, instead of just conveying information about environmental issues and expecting people to take action on their own, it is actually focussed on the action itself – that is, on the practical steps that people can take and how they can tweak their daily habits in the service of their environmental values. In each session, participants are encouraged to set personal sustainability goals and to report back on them the following week. Victories – which might range from making one's own yoghurt, to cycling to work, to installing a new rainwater tank – are celebrated, feeding a sense of community and collective purpose.

I speak from recent experience, having completed an inspiring Living Smart course in June at the City of Melville's Piney Lakes Environmental Education Centre. The curriculum consisted of ten core topics (Healthy You, Healthy Home, Living Simply, Gardening for Food, Gardening for Biodiversity, Waste, Water, Transport, Power, and Community), with each delivered in an engaging way that had little in common with traditional chalk-and-talk style teaching. Rather, there was a range of hands-on activities and cooperative group-work, with participants given ample opportunities to exchange and pool their knowledge, experiences, and stories. Guest speakers gave presentations on particular topics, and experiential learning was facilitated through fieldtrips to the South Metropolitan Regional Council's recycling plant in Canning Vale, Jetto's Patch (a famed permaculture garden in Maida Vale), and Ecoburbia (a sustainable housing cooperative in Beaconsfield).

On the theory side of things were passive solar design, permaculture principles, and the concept of Peak Oil, while the skills that were taught ranged from toothpaste-making to composting, and even to life skills like goal-setting and finding your life purpose. Along the way were all manner of 'a-ha' moments, with one participant's realisation about community being particularly memorable: "The people I'm looking for probably live next door, and they might be looking for me too". Another shared her insight that "we might not be able to change the world, but making changes in our own lives and communities is easy!"

## **Cultivating hope**

The City of Melville's Environmental Education Officer, Penny Musgrove, who has been inviting Living Smart to run courses at Piney Lakes since 2010, has observed that the programme generally attracts two kinds of people. The first are those who care about the environment but who want to learn more about what they can do to protect and restore it; the second are those who are already taking action at an individual level, but who "want to meet like-minded people and form their community".

With community comes the hope, inspiration, and motivation necessary to stay the course on one's sustainability journey, even though it can sometimes feel like swimming against the tide, particularly given the way that society is structured present. For me, this was the great value of the course – not just the information I learnt or the skills I gained, but my renewed sense of hope after years of political depression. This was a sentiment shared by others too, with one participant stating "At a time when I feel Rome is burning, this group gives me faith". Another affirmed that Living Smart has "given my direction hope and my hope direction".

It is evident, then, that although Living Smart declares itself as a behaviour-change programme, it is equally a programme that builds community and cultivates hope. Importantly, the community-building does not end with the course, but carries through into an ever-growing alumni and alumnae network, with so-called Living Smarties groups regularly convening for skill-sharing, film-screenings, and the like. Some former students have even been instrumental in setting up community gardens and other initiatives, while many others have gone on to become Living Smart facilitators themselves.

## **Penny**

Penny Musgrove is herself a Living Smart alumna. One of the most enduring lessons she learnt from the course was the value of breaking down big-picture sustainability goals into a series of smaller goals, and just taking them one step at a time. Without such a technique, the big stuff can sometimes feel overwhelming and unachievable. Furthermore, before becoming an Environmental Education Officer with the City of Melville, her focus was more on the natural rather than social environment; that is, on conservation and biodiversity, rather than on the lifestyle changes that humans can make to live in greater harmony with the earth. It was Living Smart that formed the basis of her working knowledge in the latter area. Since then, she has

overhauled the way waste is managed at the Piney Lakes Environmental Education Centre, and even catalysed something of a revolution in her own home.

“I was living in a sharehouse at the time with three other people... We had a large friend group and people were always coming and going. We had a lot of barbeques, and we had recyclables in the green bin and food in the yellow bin. The meat scraps in the recycling used to do my head in. I was trying to educate my house without being overbearing or nagging”.

The first ally she won over was a housemate who professed a love of the environment, but had not realised that failing to sort waste properly was actually harmful to it. In time, the other two housemates got on board, and after three months, there was no longer any need to take their green bin to the kerb. Everything was either being recycled or composted on-site.

“So it was like a cultural change, but within the household” I remarked in response. “Like a microcosm of what ideally would happen on a wider scale, bit-by-bit, finding your allies...”

“Yes, exactly!”

It is owing to her positive experiences with the programme that Penny has been arranging for Living Smart courses to be held at Piney Lakes year-in, year-out. That, as well as the fact that much of Living Smart’s curriculum aligns with the City of Melville’s stated priorities around community engagement, waste education, increasing biodiversity, and encouraging residents to create a clean, green environment.

## **Xavier**

Further to the theme of the personal impacts that Living Smart has had, and continues to have, on people’s lives, the story that a young professional named Xavier (not his real name) tells is an interesting one. Five years after moving from Perth to Adelaide for work, he found he was still lacking a sense of belonging – not just to the local community, but also to the local environment. When he saw a Living Smart course advertised on the City of Melville’s website, he thought it might be a good opportunity to meet like-minded people and start building more of a connection to place. “How can we be intentional about where we are?” he said to me in conversation. “How do we make tangible a concept of home? How do we make an environment we want to be in, with others with shared values?”

Another core motivation for him to enrol into the course was his one-year old daughter. Since becoming a father, he has become much more mindful about what his family is eating, while also realising the need to find a healthier work-life balance. As such, he began to grow organic food at home, so he can feel confident that he’s feeding his daughter well. The Living Smart course has propelled Xavier further along this path, with the excursion to Jetto’s Patch, in particular, sparking a new interest in edible natives as well as in the permaculture concept of a food forest. “It was really an ‘opening doors’ kind of course for me”, he explained.

Beyond gardening, Xavier and his family are now using less water and plastic, producing less waste, relying less on their car, and even making their own chemical-free toiletries. The biggest impact on Xavier, however, was finding what he described as “a tangible sense of community; a sense that we’re all in this together”, which is precisely what he had been searching for all along. Inspired by what the course facilitator, Shani Graham, had achieved on the now-fabled Hulbert Street (her TEDx video entitled “Take a street and build a community” is indispensable viewing), Xavier is now brainstorming with a neighbour about what they can do on their own street. Since the two of them have performing arts backgrounds, it is sure to be something fun and lively. “Basically what we’re thinking is ‘How can we get people to play together in public space?’”

## **Alina**

Like Xavier, Alina (not her real name) is also an out-of-towner, having migrated to Perth from India some twenty years ago. She comes from a state in India where plastic bags have been banned, and was raised by ecologically-conscious parents. An environmental engineer in her Thirties, she is also passionate about maintaining a healthy inner environment through meditation and nourishing food. All her life choices, she said, have been made with her environmental values in mind, from what she decided to study to who she decided to marry.

Despite already being so advanced on her sustainability journey, Alina said that Living Smart has nonetheless been immensely important to her, particularly in helping her connect with the Australian environment and find a sense of community. “You feel you’re not alone”, she said. “Sharing between people, getting together like-minded people – it encourages you to do more. You get confirmation and keep positive. You become determined to do more, because there is always room for improvement”. Since graduating from Living Smart, Alina found she was able to improve in the areas of harvesting greywater and refusing plastic packaging, not to mention taking steps to declutter and simplify her life. Additionally, the goal-setting techniques that she learnt in Living Smart, combined with visualisation techniques from her spiritual practice, have become a way of life.

## **Sharon**

Sharon (not her real name) is an amiable, middle-aged woman originally hailing from England. Like Alina, she already ticked a lot of the boxes (having long kept worms and chickens, for instance), but credits Living Smart with helping her to “fine-tune” her sustainable lifestyle. She also made a number of new friends, who help keep her motivated and inspired. Sharon herself is passionate about essential oils, while some others she knows are experts on water or have creative ideas around living simply. When they pool their knowledge and resources together, magic happens.

In our discussions, though, Sharon was keenest to highlight the many lifestyle changes she has been making since the course ended – definite improvements on what she was already doing.

For starters, she has joined a community garden and has been gardening more at home as well, even to the point of producing a surplus of fruits and vegetables. She distributes this to neighbours in exchange for their surplus, strengthening community ties in the process. She gets up earlier, makes her own almond milk as part of her daily routine, walks and carools more, rugs up instead of switching on the heater, and spends less time in front of the computer. Indeed, reflecting on what is really important, and tweaking our daily habits accordingly, is a huge part of what Living Smart is all about.

### **Past, present and future**

From its homegrown origins as a joint initiative between Murdoch University, the City of Fremantle, and the Meeting Place Community Centre in 2002, Living Smart has since spread to other cities in Australia, building greater community-level capacity around sustainability one course at a time. Furthermore, anyone who has completed a Living Smart course is eligible to train up as a facilitator with a view to eventually running their own. Not only does this model keep the ripples spreading, but it also ensures that Living Smart stays fresh and dynamic. As maintained by Living Smart coordinator, Dr. Stephanie Jennings, the programme “has been influenced and fed by the facilitator community, [since] its early beginnings... As the facilitator community has grown, the richness of the course content and the cleverness... of the Living Smart behavioural change education model has grown substantially”.

As a gardener, I see an irresistible botanical parallel here: Self-pollinating plants recycle the same genetic material over and over again, allowing them to reproduce easily, but not to evolve or improve themselves with the same efficacy as cross-pollinating plants. Living Smart thrives on cross-pollination, ensuring it will stay relevant in an ever-changing social and environmental landscape. We are the pollinators and *communities of hope* are the fruits.

*Perth, Australia  
August 2015*