Alice House Home and Garden Care – *Your* opportunity to contribute towards developing a deserving social enterprise.

In addition to its training activities, Olympic Adult Education (OAE) operates the Neighbourhood House for the benefit of the West Heidelberg community. Most of its Neighbourhood House activities are conducted from Alice House, which OAE jointly uses with the Exodus Community and SALT Foundation as a community facility. This house was made available for use as a community facility by Alice’s family following Alice’s death - for a period of 5 years (which commenced in 2014).

OAE’s Neighbourhood House offers a range of activities for local residents including food relief services, gardening, a seedling enterprise, craft groups, various classes (which change over time according to need/interest) as well as participation in a garden maintenance program named the Alice House Home and Garden Care (AH HGC).

AH HGC uses a team of volunteers who do basic garden maintenance (lawn mowing, weeding, trimming) for the public, particularly those members of the public who are unable to manage this themselves. (There has also been a battery mower that can be borrowed without cost for those community members who want to mow their own lawns.)

**Along with helping the community through the provision of low cost garden maintenance, AH HGC aims to build up work and team skills amongst its volunteers, who generally are long term unemployed or face difficulty entering the workforce.** As the volunteers are not as skilled and/or experienced as the employees of a standard commercial gardening and maintenance business, the rates charged by AH HGC for its services are typically below commercial rates.

AH HGC began with its first paying job in November 2014. In its first quarter of operations, there were three volunteer workers for between three and five jobs per week. To build up the number of jobs, in the first half of 2015 OAE arranged a partnership with the City of Banyule’s Home and Community Care - which involved subsidising Home and Community Care clients for mowing their lawns if they had their lawns mown through AH HGC. More recently, AH HGC (through OAE) has also registered to provide these services to NDIS clients.

In three years, turnover has increased by a multiple of five.

The way AH HGC is structured does not lead to significant profit margins as most of the revenue is offset by the cost of petrol, maintenance and running costs, as well as a small monthly honorarium for the volunteers, with the payment determined by how often and long they have worked for AH HGC within the month. The management and supervisor costs of operating AH HGC are borne by OAE. These costs are not paid out of AH HGC revenue and are wholly subsidised by OAE’s other operations – which are currently running at a loss.
Nevertheless, **OAE is committed to continuing with the AH HGC program** as it not only benefits the community in general through the provision of low cost garden maintenance, but also provides the volunteers with much needed work and team participation skills that the volunteers typically have difficulty acquiring. Over time it is hoped that with these enhanced skills, the volunteers will be able to obtain permanent work elsewhere.

AH HGC is a maturing well equipped operation, with a regular team of five to eight people and five to ten regular jobs each week (varying significantly with the weather). The team generally work a Thursday (and occasionally another day when needed). The Thursday lunch is an important part of AH HGC and helps to foster a good team and community spirit. The cost of this lunch is borne by Alice House and OAE. Some come for this social aspect, as well as the knowledge that they are doing a community service for those in the community who cannot afford regular lawn mowing services.

AH HGC has recently employed a supervisor. The supervisor organises the teams on the Thursday and oversees their work on site. This has made a huge difference to the team spirit and ensures that issues can be dealt with as they arise. The supervisor also provides advice to those team members who need extra help.

Capital costs for equipment costs such as mowers, brush cutters and a trailer, have been supported by the local Exodus community, Bendigo Bank and Rosanna Rotary Club. AH HGC has recently purchased a utility vehicle through generous donations from Bendigo Bank, Jenny Macklin MP, Statewide Gas and Valley Maintenance, with the ‘ute’ being shared between four community services - with one day a week for use by AH HGC.

AH HGC has visions of operating as a true social enterprise where its costs are covered by income and its workers are paid a regular wage whilst simultaneously providing an employment pathway for those who develop enough confidence and skills from volunteering with AH HGC.

AH HGC is proud of the growth of this service and the value that has been created for the volunteers as well as the community.

**OAE is now looking for sponsors and/or donors to ensure the continued success of the AH HGC program for its volunteers and the community.**

By contributing to the cost of paying for the management of the AH HGC program and the cost of the operations supervisor (approximately $35,000 p.a.), the long term viability of this important Neighbourhood House activity is likely to be ensured.

However, OAE is aiming to obtain approximately $50,000 per year for its AH HGC program, which includes a budget of $15,000 per annum to scale AH HGC towards becoming a successful social enterprise.

Any financial contribution you can make towards funding OAE’s plans for AH HGC would be gratefully appreciated. Please contribute to this valuable cause.
The AH HGC volunteers: A story of success

The VAH HGC is constantly on the lookout for ‘volunteers’ from the community of West Heidelberg. People have incentive to join AH HGC and stay for the money and many are enjoying the increase in pocket money.

One of these people, “John” (not his real name), joined AH HGC on Jobstart. This means that Jobstart pays the majority of John’s wage and AH HGC has someone working with AH HGC for three days a week (actually working across OAE and Community programs – including the school and Buna Community Gardens). He was an excellent worker and a valuable addition to the team. He has come to the end of his contract and went straight onto working with one of AH HGC’s and OAE’s partners mowing lawns for NDIS clients. John has decided he would like to start a business for himself and the management of AH HGC is supporting him with this through OAE’s small business mentoring program. Being a part of AH HGC has increased John’s confidence and enabled him to take the next step into the workforce.

Another man who joined AH HGC “Joe” was in a similar situation. Joe had fallen on hard times and had been out of work for some time. He was a very keen volunteer and worked very hard to complete a horticultural certificate. Joe was introduced to AH HGC through his favourite volunteer organisation. AH HGC helped him to gain the confidence he needed to pursue paid work. Later, he started a short term position through a partner organisation and this set him up further to apply for more permanent work. He recently got his dream job - ongoing permanent work in the area he loves - gardening.

Other examples of people that have benefitted through AH HGC are:

- “Luke”, a Burmese asylum seeker, learnt about how the Australian system works and took advantage of training opportunities that were offered through OAE. This led to full-time work for him;
- “Mark” decided he may as well get paid work if he was being kept so busy through his volunteer work;
- “Bert” got part-time work through an Alice House contact and continues to work with AH HGC because he enjoys the companionship; and
- “Craig” came from working with another disability organisation because he got more money through this and felt he was treated better.

AH HGC has regular long term volunteers who enjoy the social aspect, the physical exercise and the ability to help community members. The team numbers are always up and down depending on what is going on in the individual lives of the volunteers. With its success AH HGC has seen people go on to bigger and better things, but because of this AH HGC is always looking for volunteers. This is a good problem to have!