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The story of Active Launceston

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I want you to imagine that you are lying on your back on a yoga mat in your favourite park. You can smell the freshly cut grass, hear the leaves rustling from the canopy of the trees above your head and feel the evening summer sun shining down on your face and warming your body. You hear the yoga instructor's voice and you look around and see your fellow community members: 102 of them on this record-breaking day. Men, women, children, students, older adults and people who are speaking a different language and may have just arrived in your community from another country. There is one lady in a wheel chair and a teenage boy who you suspect has down syndrome. You spot a group of women who you met at a local neighbourhood house recently from one of the city's outer suburbs. There are people wearing lycra and people wearing daggy old trackies. Some have yoga mats but some are simply lying on a beach towel. As the class starts it is clear that some people have done yoga before, but it is also clear that many of them have not exercised in a long time and probably never tried yoga. As you move through your sequence, the group smile at each other as they are challenged to take different poses. People giggle as their feet go to the ground and their tree pose doesn't go quite as planned. You immediately feel part something, you feel like you are all in this together. The instructor starts to tell you about other programs that are happening, all free in your community. Active Blokes, Active Sports, Active Gyms, Active Garden, Active Kids. So many opportunities for so many different groups of people. After the yoga session finishes everyone stands and claps for the instructor. To the side of the yoga instructor, there is a stack of pamphlets and the group of people slowly merge towards them to find out more details about what else they can do to stay active. You go and have a look and decide to take an Active Blokes flyer for your Dad who has recently been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes and an Active Garden Flyer for your colleague at work, who needs to start doing something but is very overweight and is a little nervous about exercising in a group, but you know she loves gardening. You take out your phone and join the program's facebook group that the instructor mentioned and then open your calendar and put yoga, 6.00pm Mondays as a reoccurring event for the next 7 weeks. As you leave the park you notice one of your neighbours in the crowd, you know that they don't have a car and always take the bus. You offer them a lift for the next 7 weeks. They accept with a smile and the short commute becomes a great way to keep each other motivated to stay active. In the weeks that follow, you hear about this great program on the radio, see a pamphlet at your local doctor's surgery, read about it in the paper, this program is even regularly on the evening news!

This is not a research paper and thus it is not written as one. This is a story. This is not a research story, even though it comes with impressive research outputs. This is a story of a health promotion program called Active Launceston. This is a story of community development, a story that oozes societal impact. A story that the City of Launceston and the University of Tasmania and all of their

community partners should be proud of. Not because the associated research results have been presented at three international conferences^{1,2,3} not because the results have been published in peer-reviewed literature^{4,5,6} not because it has provided practical and unique placements for 93 students, not because it has been the subject of higher degree research⁷, not because it has been awarded a cabinet full of awards, not because it attracted almost two million dollars in funding, not because the return on investment was \$416 for every dollar spent⁸, but because Active Launceston has positively impacted people's lives, right here in Tasmania.

Why is this an important story to tell? Having met the hundreds of people who've benefited from this sort of a program, it's just so obvious to me. Let me introduce a few of them.

Joan first came along to an Active Launceston program in the inaugural year 2008 to a program called Activate Your Life; this is one of 225 programs delivered under the Active Launceston framework so far. Joan has type 2 diabetes and psoriasis and sometimes uses a walking frame. You can hear her breathing when she walks, but she's always smiling. She also participated in Active Garden, Active Parks, and other Active Launceston initiatives such as designing walking maps for the low socio-economic community that she lives in. With her improved confidence, Joan started volunteering for the local op-shop and I was just so excited when Joan, who'd never done any public speaking before, agreed to speak about Active Launceston at Local Government Association health and wellbeing conference. She received a standing ovation. Joan went on to enrol in a Bachelor of General Studies at the University of Tasmania.

Now for Mary. I think about Mary often. She knew she needed some help to start living a healthier life, so she began attending an Active Launceston program. She was morbidly obese, had type 2 diabetes, lived in Launceston's most disadvantaged community, used a mobility scooter and identified as gay. She was in the minority in so many ways. She really enjoyed a particular session about healthy eating and proudly turned up to the next session with a cut-up cereal box to show the co-ordinator she was no longer eating pies and pastries for breakfast. This was a big step for Mary. However, the cereal she'd chosen (Nutri-grain) contained about eight teaspoons of sugar per 100g of cereal. At another session Mary proudly told the coordinator that every day that week, she had *walked* out to the letter box to get the mail and next week she was going to try to walk down to the shops without the scooter but a walking frame instead. She got a hot tip from another Active Launceston participant where to get a walking frame for free. Mary had a few more steps ahead of her, but she was a step up from where she started.

Then there was Ashley. Ashley started in a program called Active Walk Run. The first year she walked, the second year she jogged, the third year she ran and the fourth year she got herself an Australian Business Number (ABN) some insurance and coordinated the program. Ashley is now a regular competitor in marathons on the mainland. She also enrolled in a nursing degree and has now qualified and is working at the Launceston General Hospital.

Sally was diagnosed with breast cancer and her oncologist recommended she keep active. She wanted to do something that was fun. Something with other like-minded people and something that was free, as the whole process of having cancer was becoming an economic burden on her family. She joined the Active Parks programs and became one of the groups most regular participants promoting the program to her fellow patients at the specialist cancer clinic at the Launceston General Hospital.

The next story is about a tennis club. A club that was struggling for members. They put their hand up and said they wanted to be involved in Active Sports. They ran a session for free as part of this program and gained four new members.

A lady called Pat once boasted that she 'stole our group'. When asked what she meant she explained that the Active Launceston gentle exercise session that was started on a Friday morning in a park called Heritage Forest in 2008, still continues today. Not 'under Active Launceston' but 'under Pat' as a volunteer organising the group.

Mark came from the 'rough end of town' and had a pretty tough upbringing (his words not mine). In adulthood he decided he wanted to help kids who also came from the 'rough end of town' but didn't know where to start. Active Launceston supported Mark to start his own business and then employed him to run some sessions teaching teenager's basic self-defence. Mark said 'if it wasn't for Active Launceston, he probably wouldn't be alive today'. Mark has recently been elected as a board member of his local neighborhood house.

George was an elderly gentleman, living alone, with little to fill his days. He joined the Active Dance program held at the local primary school. At one of the ten Active Launceston focus groups, he told the researcher that the most beneficial part of the program for him was that he got to dress up once a week, and when his family rang to check on him, he actually had something to tell them. He felt lost when the 8-week program finished.

A local fitness company with an innovative business model took their sessions outside. They took the time to comply to requirements, and a pay cut to instruct Active Launceston programs, but ultimately gained a large number of new clients. Clients who still use their business to this day.

A not-for-profit health insurer was motivated to develop a workplace health and wellbeing program but didn't know where to start. Through the Active Workplaces program Active Launceston supported them to set up a system, seek management support and deliver a weekly physical activity program that still continues today. The health insurer then chose to put their hand in their pocket and sponsor Active Launceston.

An event management company ran a colour fun run in Launceston, a fun run that started at the Launceston campus of the University of Tasmania. It started when one of the project managers travelled to America and was driving through the streets and saw a crowd of university students running beside the road covered in paint. 'What is this?', she thought. 'Whatever it is, we need it in Launceston!' And so, Colour me Active was born—the first colour fun run in Australia.

The Mayor, some alderman and the University of Tasmania Pro Vice-Chancellor all jumped on their bikes at Inveresk and rode to the mall. Ride to Work Day told an important message about active transport but also promoted the benefits of a community wide program like Active Launceston. Then there was Walk to Work Day, Active Launceston Expo, World Challenge Day and multiple school events and workshops. The Mayor became pretty familiar with telling the Active Launceston story.

Active Launceston provides an evidenced based model⁶ that can be replicated in other rural and regional communities across Australia. The model demonstrates how universities, governments, community and corporate sectors can work together to improve health in a collaborative and cooperative way. A way where egos are left at the door. In recent times where demonstrating societal impact of our research is paramount, Active Launceston shows universities a way to work

where research outputs become secondary to the impact the project creates. So, can the well known saying of 'publish or perish' be changed to 'make an impact or implode'?

The evidence behind this story is outlined in a Masters' thesis⁶, but even though the thesis includes qualitative research methodologies, the results are presented thematically rather than using the power of storytelling. Storytelling research by Paul Zak⁹ suggests that using stories is more powerful at influencing decision making. 'Stories are an effective way to transmit important information and values from one individual or community to the next. Stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered, than simply stating a set of facts.'

This story of Active Launceston has been told using storytelling techniques to challenge the way we view and present our research findings, and to challenge us to think about the societal impact that our research has on our communities to create change and influence policy¹⁰ for good.

Active Launceston was the basis of higher degree research.⁶ The research question was ***Can a community-wide multi-strategy, wide-scale physical activity intervention increase physical activity participation in the Launceston community?***

Well, the answer is yes.

Background

Launceston is a regional community in northern Tasmania.

Active Launceston is a community driven project with the vision of improving the health and wellbeing of the Launceston community through physical activity.

Active Launceston's mission is to mobilise the community to increase their participation in physical activity by; filling gaps in provision, creating pathways, reducing barriers and targeting those with the highest need.

Between 2008 and 2018 Active Launceston delivered **225** community programs, engaged **12, 721** attendees, attending **33, 050** sessions, amounting to **41, 069** hours of physical activity.

Active Launceston has developed a strong community profile, an excellent reputation, and a highly-recognisable brand and community identity. The projects events, programs, website, organisational structure, partnerships and levels of community engagement have gained accolades at a state, national and international level.

An interrupted time-series process and impact mixed-methods evaluation of Active Launceston between 2008 and 2015 consisted of participation statistics, focus groups, stakeholder interviews, a serial online survey and a randomised cross-sectional serial population telephone survey of Launceston residents. Amongst numerous societal impacts, the key finding of this research was a 7.2 percentage point significant increase in sufficient physical activity for health (defined as 150 min per week) in the Launceston community.⁶

Active Launceston is delivered under a well-established evidence-based framework which enables the successful delivery of a complex community-wide health promotion project. The project was initiated as an 18-month pilot partnership in June 2008 and according to the Federal Government Department of Health, Active Launceston is the last remaining project across the country that was

funded through the original Active and Healthy Communities grants program back in 2008. I'm pleased to let you know that Active Launceston continues today, following a number of funding ups and downs and considerable in-kind and volunteer support.

While Joan, Mary, Sally, Pat, Ashley, Mark and George don't *need* the programs any more, as the most overweight, oldest, sickest, poorest, least literate, most disabled state with the second lowest life expectancy in the country¹¹ there are plenty of others who do.

The City of Launceston continues to fund Active Launceston which is delivered through a partnership with project management company Healthy Tasmania Pty Ltd.

Recommendations

- Multisectoral, community-wide physical activity programs should be provided with ongoing and easily accessible funding and support by universities, in partnership with all levels of government.
- Using storytelling to report on the societal impact of research is a valuable tool that should be adopted by researchers and community workers to help translate their knowledge and research finding for greater impact.

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Presenter

Lucy Byrne is an experienced community and health professional and a leader in her field. After growing up on a farm in Tasmania, Lucy graduated in 2000 with a Bachelor of Arts (Recreation Management) from Victoria University. She jumped straight into the industry, finding roles within local government, sports organisations, youth justice and adventure tourism. Lucy spent nine years with the University of Tasmania, where she founded, developed and managed the multi-award winning, project called Active Launceston. Following this success Lucy then created Active Tasmania, which delivered primary health projects across Tasmania. Lucy has been involved in high-level policy development and strategic planning, presented her research at international conferences and has been published in peer-reviewed literature. Lucy has a demonstrated ability to engage people of influence to gain support and funding for her projects. Lucy contributes to numerous community boards and organisations, and in 2015 Lucy established a company with her sister Penny Terry. Healthy Tasmania, works on a wide range of projects to improve the individual, social and economic health of our communities. Lucy is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and the University of Tasmania with a Master of Biomedical Science (Research).