

SURVIVING WINTER APPEAL: Wise retirees make beeline for Wisdom Group



GUESS WHO: Ron Frost says the good company is what keeps him coming back to the Wisdom Group



COMPANY: (l-r) Barbara Ricketts, Doreen Whitehead and Pearl Meadows share a joke



FAMILY AFFAIR: Beryl Bell, right, and her daughter Karen Fennell said they enjoy their visits to the group

Fun social club warms cockles even when it is nippy outside

By Harriet Sinclair

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IT'S NO secret that the winter months can be hard for the elderly and vulnerable, as staying indoors to avoid the plummeting temperatures can mean being cut off from company.

But for the organisers and regulars of the Wisdom Group in Melbourne, there's no skipping the weekly meet-up of the thriving social club, where the emphasis is on friendship and fun.

And even a nippy January morning couldn't deter its members, who came out in their droves to the Scout Hut on Langton

Avenue for cake and bingo.

"The women outnumber the men 12 to one, that's why we come here," joked Ron Frost, who has been going for around eight years.

Friendly

"I actually call this a wisdom gossip club. People are very friendly, there's a good atmosphere; the sisters do a great job."

Clubs like the Wisdom Group, which was set up by two nuns who used to teach at New Hall School, are at the heart of the Chronicle's Surviving Winter Campaign. The campaign is being run in

conjunction with Essex Community Foundation (ECF).

As well as raising awareness of people who may be vulnerable during the winter months, the campaign is proud to raise awareness and money for groups like the Melbourne meet-up, which provides people with much-needed company and friendship.

"It's been going for 11 years now," explained Sister Margaret, who set up the Wisdom Group with fellow nun, Sister Moira more than a decade ago.

"When we got here, we put our heads together and found that things for the elderly were a bit thin on the ground. We began as a small group, just eight people, and now at capacity there are about 45 of us.

"The ECF has been great for us in all our work, funding has come in for all of it. We've been very lucky."

And as well as the weekly meet-ups, group members also have the opportunity to take part in trips, activities and classes, although the big draw is clearly the atmosphere.

Company

"People really like the company," Sister Margaret added. "Most of them live alone, and for some people it is the only outing of the week. For others, they have a social life from the group – they meet up in the week. And we have lots of activities for people to join in with here as well, we go on trips, go to the theatre, have a Christmas party, barbecues in the summer. We also have someone who comes in and does exercise classes, and someone else who comes in and teaches cookery."

The group also celebrate their member's birthdays, most recently that of 67-year-old Barbara Ricketts, who credits the weekly meet-up with contributing



VOLUNTEERS: (l-r) Tracey Tully, Helen Delahunty, Sylvia Lyes, Chris Bailey, Marion Clark, Karen Mason and Sister Margaret

to her social life.

"I've been coming here for about seven or eight years, I think that meeting people gets you out," she explained.

"We're all good friends here; I have friends from here who I go on holiday with. It's the social part of it I like. There are people here who understand you, who know what you're talking about or what you're going through."

The company is certainly important to Doreen Whitehead, 84.

"You don't meet people if you stay inside," she said. "It gets me out of my shell. It's companionship and it takes us out of our way as we meet lots of people. I've been coming here for years, and it's nice to talk to people – even if you don't know the names of the people you meet, it's good to have a chat."



BIRTHDAY GIRL: Volunteer Sylvia Lyes delivers a cake to 67-year old Barbara Ricketts



MEET: Sheila Bowen and Vera Hitching come to the group to catch up with friends

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