

Participants in Sumner Estate's Sustainability Street. Left to right: Julie Proe, Kasia Zygmuntowicz, Haydn Chiron with son Raphael, Sue Sheehan, Tim Thornton, Sarah Ewing with son Tom.



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Village green

Want a local community that's friendlier to you and the planet? ELIZABETH GRAHAM reports on an environmental movement that's suburban and proud of it

There's something interesting happening in Sumner Estate. In this small suburban pocket of Melbourne's north, residents are changing to a more sustainable lifestyle. They're buying more food from the local co-op and organic markets, replacing grass on nature strips with indigenous plants, switching lights off when not in use and even auditing their household water use.

What's just as remarkable, though, is how close-knit the area has become: neighbours know each other's names and hang out on a regular basis.

Why is this area so environmentally friendly — and just plain friendly? Because mid-2006, Sumner Estate became a Sustainability Street.

The Sustainability Street project was conceived and developed by environmental educators Vox Bandicoot, who then partnered up with local councils to get communities interested and active in saving the environment. Sustainability Streets have been popping up throughout Melbourne and Sydney for the past five years, now numbering more than 100.

"It starts off with a training program, lasting from six to 18 months and can become as much as the imaginations of a group of people would like to create," explains Vox Bandicoot principal, Frank Ryan. For Vox Bandicoot, informal and entertaining communication is the key to getting people to start thinking constructively about reducing waste and water and energy use.

"It's not about doom and gloom. We don't gloss over it, but the undertone is 'Ok, let's take it from here.' Sustainability Street provides the how."

"Good company, good food and learning about sustainability along the way" is how Sumner Estate resident Sue Sheehan, 36, describes the past nine months of the program.



Sheehan and partner Haydn Chiron, who have lived in the area for three years, were the instigators behind Sumner Estate becoming a Sustainability Street.

Chiron read about it in the local paper and met with Vox Bandicoot, then the pair called their first community meeting — in their own home — to see who else would be interested. "We literally told a few people to pass the word on and come around. Thirty people showed up that evening. We nearly ran out cups," Sheehan laughs.

After their application to local council was accepted, the Sumner Estate residents were invited to attend meetings with Vox Bandicoot and other experts for the next year. Whoever attended would then spread the information to the rest of their community. For Sumner Estate, this dissemination happened over barbecues at the local park.

"We wanted it to be fairly informal so it didn't become just another thing people felt they had to do," Sheehan explains. "It shouldn't feel like a job. A lot of it really is about socialising."

Sheehan estimates there are now 50 families who have some involvement in the program. It's up to each community to decide what kind of projects they take on and they don't have to be specifically about saving the environment, either. While Sumner Estate has a strong focus on rehabilitating their local creek, working in communal gardens and reducing their water use, two of their other big projects relate to craft and oral history.

"It's a nice way of getting together and having a cuppa," Sheehan says. "I've made a couple of really great friends and you definitely feel safer about your kids when you know the people around. I know a lot more of them now."

Jason Cox works for Vox Bandicoot as a mentor to a dozen Sustainability Streets, including Sumner Estate, and has seen the environmental benefits first-hand.

"On average, Sustainability Streets achieve 30 per cent reduction in water and energy use, purely by doing simple things," he says. Cox also knows how quickly the dynamics of a community can improve.

"These people have a desire to have a stronger community and do something about all the things they don't like happening to the planet. It's the best thing in the world." ■

Start your own Sustainability Street

- Ask your local council if they have a Sustainability Street program.
- Visit the Sustainability Street website www.sustainabilitystreet.org.au to find out more about upcoming programs or contact Vox Bandicoot on 03 9416 1066.
- Start talking to your neighbours! Tell them about your concerns and find out what they'd like to change about the environment.