

Media Release

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Build a Shed – build a future

At age 42, Geoff figured Parkinson's was "a disease for old people". But as the reality of his diagnosis set in, the engineering lecturer was forced to contemplate a new way of living.

"As my condition progressed, I had to start asking myself some hard questions," Geoff, now aged 56, recalls. "I didn't want to spend the rest of my life watching telly. I wanted to contribute. But what workplace really needs people who can be perfectly calm, purposeful and productive one hour – and then incapacitated the next?"

Then Geoff found the Cre8 shed in Wangaratta. Run by Catholic for-purpose organisation VMCH, Cre8 gives participants the opportunity to build on their carpentry skills, become more independent, confident, and connect with peers.

Geoff describes it as a "revelation".

"Right from the start it felt right. The staff were very friendly and caring, my abilities were respected, and my disabilities accepted. It felt like the kind of place where I could learn and grow with my changing abilities. Somewhere to learn and teach, where I could be inspired to design and create."

This month VMCH is launching its Build a Shed appeal, aimed to raise \$80,000 to open two more Cre8 sheds in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

VMCH CEO Sonya Smart describes the success of Cre8 as "astonishing" and says it addresses a service gap in the community to meet the diverse needs and goals of people with disability across generations.

"Cre8 is many things to many people. It's a safe and supportive place for teens to hang out after school and meet friends, for school leavers to pursue their woodwork interests and build their confidence, for adults to gain purpose through creating items to sell.

"We've seen people walk into this program quite withdrawn and without much direction, but with some mentoring and support, they've become more confident in achieving their goals. It's life-changing and we'd love to see it happen for people in other communities."

James, aged 23, joined Cre8 as a shy 19-year-old keen to build on his woodwork skills for a future career.

Four years later, James is thriving.

"I love creating new projects and sometimes taking them home to show off my hard work," he says.

"The staff are like friends because we have a laugh, and they don't tell us off. It helps me feel supported and I trust them, so I feel like I could talk to them about anything if I needed to."

Likewise, Geoff says the social connections have been a bonus.

"I am working alongside men and women of a broad range of backgrounds and abilities and making new friends. We help each other, we have a lot of laughs. It is a place where I can be me, in all my shakey, imperfect glory."

Cre8 is part of VMCH's wider Job Skills program, which gives people with disability the opportunity to build on their skills across areas such as horticulture, hospitality and retail in readiness to enter the paid workforce.

Working-aged people with disability are twice as likely as those without disability to be unemployed, and to experience social isolation.

"We're hoping the public can get behind this important appeal to make a dent in these kinds of statistics," says Sonya. "We want to give people with disability the opportunity to carve out their own future, doing what they love."

Geoff says he hopes to see his happiness mirrored in others through Build a Shed's success.

"It's been incredible to be given real responsibilities and real work from the outset. People are putting their faith in me again, and from that my faith in the world is being restored. I feel hope again."

If you'd like to donate to VMCH's Build a Shed appeal, visit: www.vmch.com.au/buildashed

To read Geoff's full story, visit: <https://vmch.com.au/blog/the-future-is-yours-to-cre8/>

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About VMCH

Here at VMCH, our services are as diverse as the people we support.

Our values underpin the work we do. As a Catholic, for-purpose organisation, compassion, respect and inclusion aren't just words to us, they guide us in everything we do.

While we've been around for over a century, we're always moving forward. Always staying true to who we are by supporting people and families to live their best lives; providing a place to call home and spaces to learn and grow.

Our professional and compassionate teams are with you on your life journey; helping you with a wide range of support from early learning and therapy, specialist education, disability services, affordable homes, residential aged care, retirement living and at-home aged care.

