

# PEER SUPPORT

## COMMUNITY SPIRIT KEEPS WILLIAMSTOWN SINGING

There's a buzz in the air at Williamstown ParkinSong. People sing, people smile. And as tunes and melodies ring through the Holy Trinity Parish Hall, it's impossible not to be drawn in.

Sitting to the rear of the room are Heather and Mike Jobling, the inspiring local couple behind the formation of this innovative support group six years ago. Heather's face lights up as she is joined by Heather Lloyd, who was part of the original steering committee.

Sitting down with Heather and Mike, a picture is painted of the passion and community spirit required to drive the creation and ongoing success of a unique peer support group.

The first seeds of the idea for a singing group go back to 2011 when Heather did a fundraising skydive for Parkinson's Victoria.

"People would ask me what I was going to do next," Heather said.

Around this time, Heather attended a meeting with a small group of People with Parkinson's at a local retirement village, addressed by a speech pathologist who described the difficulties on voice and swallowing.

The speech pathologist agreed with Heather that singing would be beneficial, providing exercise for voice and swallowing. So, with the encouragement of Parkinson's Victoria, a small steering group was formed in 2012.

There is no doubt Heather and Mike have achieved a lot in the Williamstown ParkinSong group's six years. Heather recalls the initial steering group meetings and how, just three weeks prior to launch, her music coordinator pulled out.

In hindsight, it was a blessing as Heather then approached local Doug Heywood A.O.M. Doug has conducted the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah at Melbourne's Christmas Eve Carols by Candlelight for more than 30 years.

"We had our first meeting in the Mechanics Institute on 21 March 2013. For the first three months, there was no music. We would just sing along with whatever Doug came up with."

One day Doug's wife, Alex Cameron, herself a well-regarded musician and conductor, brought along a keyboard lent by Wesley College Elsternwick, where she is Director of Music.

She has supplied musical accompaniment ever since and five years ago, the group was able to purchase its own keyboard through funding from the Hobsons Bay City Council's Community Fund.

Having handed over the leadership reins at the end of 2018, Heather is content to sit back and sing. Last year, she saw a dream become reality with the staging of the first ParkinSong concert, held at the Williamstown Town Hall in April 2018.

"It was a real sense of celebration. We'd hoped to get about 200 people, but there was nearly 450 in the end, including 120 ParkinSong group members. We could not believe it." Mike said.



Mike and Heather Jobling

The couple were also instrumental in helping Parkinson's Victoria achieve a Hugh Williamson Foundation grant to develop the ParkinSong program more widely, with the support of a speech pathologist and music therapist.

Today there are groups in Ashwood, Bayside, Boronia, Lancefield, Langwarrin, Mildura and Ocean Grove.

So, as we thank Heather and Mike for bringing happiness and social connection to so many through ParkinSong, we also welcome the three new group coordinators.

A teacher at Williamstown Primary School, Lynne Georgiadis has previously supported ParkinSong by organising an annual visit by the school choir to sing for, and with, the group. Joining her is Jenni Mitchell and Joanne Wheelahan, both of whom were looking for volunteer opportunities in their community.

And with new afternoon tea coordinators and helpers also on board, the future of this original ParkinSong group is looking bright.

**Heather Lloyd was one of the original members of Williamstown ParkinSong. Despite her voice being lost to Multiple System Atrophy (MSA), she continues to attend the ParkinSong meetings when she can. She shared her story of how song is helping her:**

"I am confined to a wheelchair, but I find my inability to speak audibly, if at all, is the most difficult aspect of my illness, so far. I can no longer write, so communication is very difficult, usually done by typing my message into a program which I have on my iPad.

Generally I just try to articulate the words of the songs, because I do not wish to "sing" out of tune, and often the sounds that come out of my mouth are just noise.

I was very musical, so if I try to sing I want to sound okay. And to my astonishment, in the July meeting, after doing all the warm ups that our leaders Doug and Alex take us through, I found I was able to sing a few notes, in tune.

This continued at following meetings, I actually increased the amount of singing I was able to do (even though I now "sing" at an octave lower than I used to).

I don't know whether more frequent singing practice might help me. But it does give me a buzz when I can hear myself singing in tune, and I am more inclined to "try it" at home.

Many thanks to Doug and Alex for all the wonderful work they are voluntarily doing for people with a whole range of Parkinson related issues."