

CL Miranda



with Genevieve Barlow



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CL Interview

Shining a light in the darkest of places

You might have heard of Garry Higgins. He's a baker by trade. And a Rotarian in Maryborough in central Victoria, a town where, as somebody put it recently, every statistic tells a sad story.

How it came to be like that is for another day but how it's tackling its problems head on is the upside.

Sometimes shining a light in the darkest places has the most profound impact. In this sense, Garry, 59, has a firm hand on a powerful torch. And for good reason. The reality of those sad statistics is all too close to home for him. He calls himself "a product of family violence."

Only recently he discovered some of his lifelong friends are, too.

They thought they knew each others' life stories well, but it wasn't until Garry began talking about the steps Rotary is taking to tackle family violence in Maryborough that their shared realities were revealed.

"There were four of us sitting at the table and just one family hadn't experienced family violence," he says.

"The thing we had in common was our fathers were all returned servicemen from the Second World War. A lot of people came back from that war very damaged."

There it was. The pain of secrets revealed. People no longer silenced by

A central Victorian town is leading the way on family violence

shame. That's because domestic violence has become a subject that's OK to talk about.

About three years ago, after a social audit of their community, Maryborough Rotary Club developed a plan to work towards providing a safer and better community. This aligned with the local council's goal to address the needs of vulnerable families.

"The community has to take control of this," Garry says.

"There is only so much the judiciary and police can do."

The force of that commitment, to acknowledge that people are responsible for the community around them, has seen some significant developments in Maryborough.

The Rotary Club funded one of the town's local coppers to complete an advanced diploma in men's behavioural change.

It's also funded, via a vocational scholarship, a local teacher to travel to San Diego to study world's "best practice" in positive behaviour change in schools. The director of the local

children care centre has gone to the UK to study how those dealing with family violence can work more collaboratively.

Garry and his Rotary colleagues have also involved the local footy and netball clubs. Players have worn white armbands in recent games, to represent nonviolence.

"We're also talking to the clubs to get them to have a charter within their code of conduct that is all about respect for women."

Across the broader community, the local Goldfields Shire, government service providers, schools, preschools and playgroups and others are focusing on tackling problems by improving language and literacy skills.

Garry says he's had an employee arrive at work with a black eye. "It was difficult for my wife and I," he says. "We asked should we get involved. Most people don't know how."

"One woman came to me from a small town and she'd been a victim of family violence.

"She said everybody in her town ... knew it was going on but no one did anything about it."

Now, the people of Maryborough are doing something about it. It's called taking responsibility and it's to be applauded.

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