



**Mountain District**

**Women's Co-op Ltd.**

*trading as*

**Mountain District**

**Learning Centre**



**51st ANNUAL REPORT 2024**



## Contents

Chairperson’s Report .....	1
CEO’s Report .....	2
Board of Directors Committee Reports .....	3
Marketing & Growth.....	3
Finance and Facilities Report.....	4
Policy and Compliance.....	5
Asset Management.....	6
Members/Volunteers & Fundraising.....	7
A Celebration of 50 Years of “The Co-Op” .....	8
Men’s Shed .....	10
Registered Training Organisation (RTO) .....	11
The Cottage Program.....	12
ACFE Learn Local Pre-Accredited Training.....	14
Reconnect .....	15
Community Services.....	16
Home and Community Care (HACC) and Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) .....	17
Social Support Groups .....	17
Community Hi-Rise Garden.....	22
Ferntree Gully News Report .....	23
Partnerships and Affiliations.....	24
Acknowledgement of Funding Bodies .....	24
Annual Financial Report	



# Chairperson's Report

Over the past 12 months, Mountain District Learning Centre (MDLC) celebrated 50 years of service to the Community. At one time more commonly known as Mountain District Women's Co-operative, our organisation was established to help women to further their education. The Centre has expanded and has supported and educated the community in various ways.

Celebrations were held over 2024 and are anticipated to continue, as a history of "The Co-op" has been written and will be launched in 2025.

MDLC's vision is to connect and strengthen community in the Mountain District and surrounds. I think this endeavour has totally succeeded due to the professionalism and dedication of all the staff and volunteers at the Centre.

MDLC can now boast being in partnership with The Avenue School (TAS), giving students the experience of a more personal approach to education. The road to get the new School operating was bumpy but perseverance on behalf of our CEO and the TAS team, put it all in place and the students engaged in lessons at the start of first term.

At this stage I must thank the Board who have been so diligent in their governance, always available for working bees and the big one, the Bunnings sausage sizzle. To the staff and volunteers who give their time to MDLC, thank you, and to Janet, our CEO, who is a pleasure to work with. Thank you.

**Robyn Burke**

**Chairperson, Board of Directors**



# CEO's Report

I must admit, 2024 was a challenging year. However, we have got through and feel a little stronger and a little better for it!

MDLC is an organisation of considerable capacity and strength. It comes from the people we are, the values we hold and how much we respect and value each other. It comes from being ambitious for our people and drawing on our legacy of being small, but mighty! Collectively, we continue to build the MDLC legacy by supporting its valuable work as contributors to equality in society.

I am surrounded by people of enormous capacity for compassion. I am inspired by their ability to set aside the frustrations and challenges of working in a chronically underfunded sector and strive to provide opportunities that undoubtedly make other people's lives better. It's important for so many people in our community that we are here, and I am grateful to my colleagues for their ongoing positivity and commitment.

Our achievements for 2024 include the successful registration of a new school. The Avenue School is designed to provide a senior secondary pathway for the young people in MDLC's Cottage Program and others in our community who experience anxiety and find attending traditional schooling challenging.

After a slightly rocky start, The Avenue School is up and running. We are grateful to Principal, Jarrid Bartle and his team for bringing a respectful and collaborative working style to the partnership, which suggests we can anticipate a bright and successful future for the benefit of both organisations.

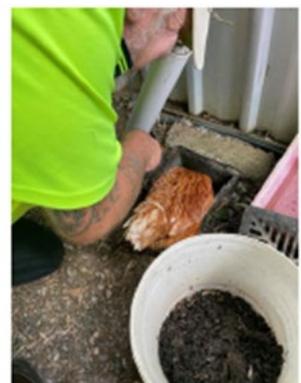
We were pleased to finally reach a negotiated settlement with the previous school and received some compensation for the loss of income from the lease abandoned in December 2023.

In 2024 MDLC welcomed a new Adult Learning Manager in Franci Buljat who has brought an impressive set of skills and an abundance of determination to the role.

Our Finance Manager, Leshelle Walford, retired in September, having handled some problematic issues in recent times and managing to keep the "ship steady" with her extensive knowledge and expertise. We are pleased that Leshelle's understudy, Sarah Zeng is continuing to achieve the high standards of financial management at MDLC.

As ever, I would like to thank all the people who contribute to MDLC including our dedicated Chair, Robyn Burke our loyal and supportive Board Members, the staff team and our volunteers. Thank you for your passion and commitment throughout the year.

**Janet Claringbold**  
CEO



# Board of Directors Committee Reports

## ***Marketing & Growth***

2024 has been a year of celebration for Mountain District Learning Centre (MDLC) as this represents 50 years of this special organisation. The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary did not pass without due recognition, and many activities were organised throughout the year.

The Marketing & Growth Committee met each month and were increasingly aware of the difficulty in attracting funds. With the national economy under strain, organisations in the not-for-profit sector found competition for support from the many generous philanthropic funds to be extremely keen.

In the October edition of the FTG News (issue 91) a contact list of 58 local organisations was identified and this was appreciated as a list of worthy organisations that should have every expectation of access to support funding.

At no stage does MDLC consider a successful application a “hand-out”. With each successful application comes a great deal of work and is not an exercise to create a profit or surplus, but opportunities for students and the community in line with our Vision – *“Connecting and strengthening community in the mountain district and surrounds.”*

During 2024 the Committee considered that a major project should be identified as a focus for future grant applications. Throughout 2024 the establishment of The Avenue School was the activity that consumed the Board, management and staff. In 2025 when The Avenue School is operational, the Board will consider another new project to secure MDLC’s future, and the Marketing & Growth Committee will fully support the Board in its endeavours.

In 2024 MDLC was successful in securing a \$37,377 grant from the State Government for the establishment of a Men’s Shed. MDLC agreed to match the Government funds and the large garage/workshop at the rear of 12 Victoria Street has been refurbished, and the program will commence in 2025 and be an opportunity to raise the profile of MDLC. Daniela di Martino MP will formally open the Men’s Shed in May 2025.

It should be appreciated that the Marketing & Growth Committee does not work in isolation, it works in collaboration with other Committees and staff for the benefit of MDLC and reports to the Board. The Marketing & Growth Committee is Robyn Burke, Janet Claringbold, Ross Corben, John Gerrard and Pat Rivett.

**John Gerrard**  
**Convenor**



# ***Finance and Facilities Report***

## **Centre Risk Profile**

Financially speaking, 2024 was a very difficult year for us with cashflow problems being uppermost. These problems were enhanced by the protracted negotiations for a settlement with the Urban College (formerly known as MDCC). As at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024 this issue was still outstanding but has since been finalised.

Financing the establishment of The Avenue School also stretched our finances but as registration was achieved in early 2025, we are happy to report that these issues will disappear eventually.

In spite of the above-mentioned challenges, MDLC is able to report a surplus of \$37,418.

## **The Avenue School:**

Although the school had not been successfully registered by the end of 2024, a principal had been selected and advertising commenced for two tutors. We encountered some difficulties with the VRQA but on submitting rectification plan documents they subsequently granted registration in early 2025. However, until Government funding comes through for them, MDLC will need to continue funding TAS's expenses.

## **Donations:**

MDLC is very appreciative of the many supporters, both local and in the wider community, groups and individuals who generously give donations to help with the education programs. In 2024 your support was invaluable and we offer our sincere thanks to:

- Rotary Club of Ferntree Gully
- Ferntree Gully Uniting Church
- Douglas and Wendy Hammerton
- P Rivett
- Ross Corben

## **Grants:**

- Jack Brockhoff Foundation – Continuing Education for Young People with High Anxiety Grant
- DFFH – Men's Shed Funding Program
- Knox City Council – Empowering Communities Grant (in conjunction with Dept of Justice & Community Safety)
- Knox City Council – Community Development Grant for Maryborough Project
- Knox City Council – Grant for 2024 Makers Market
- Knox City Council – Minor Grant for FTG News Project
- Bendigo Bank – FTG News Volunteers Grant
- Bendigo Bank – Makers Market Donation
- Maroondah City Council – Small Equipment Grant

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance from the above Councils and businesses, along with our ongoing Commonwealth and State Government operational funding.

### **Fundraising:**

The members and Volunteers and Fundraising groups invariably make a generous contribution to our organisation. This year of course the highlight was the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Mountain District Women's Co-op. This was a significant event and was celebrated most suitably with a highly successful luncheon.

Other fundraising events included the establishment of the Maker's Market, organising the Red & Green Luncheon, and a number of other events. We also owe thanks to groups such as Mountain Treasures, the Crafty Ladies and the Sit n Sew Group. Fundraising ended the year with \$4,557 in their bank account.

### **Venue and Facilities:**

With the commencement of The Avenue School those areas previously allocated to the (former) MDCC have been taken up again. Space will, once again, become a little difficult for MDLC personnel and students. As The School becomes more established it is anticipated they will need more space. Considerations as to expansion for both TAS and MDLC will need to be addressed.

### **12 Victoria Street:**

The house will remain a residence for the foreseeable future. However, as mentioned above, it is anticipated more space will be needed for both TAS & MDLC. Therefore, plans for redeveloping this property will be implemented eventually.

### **Men's Shed:**

MDLC applied for and were successful in attaining a grant from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. So, at the end of 2024 the garage located on the Victoria Street property had been renovated to become a gathering area for the use of local men who currently don't have a suitable venue. We are hopeful that this amenity will become a valuable resource for the community.

### **Enid Hughes**

**Treasurer**

## ***Policy and Compliance***

The committee met each month to review policies and procedures that were due. Policies and procedures reviewed during the year included:

- Governance suite of policies such as Code of Ethics, Governance, Compliance with Legislation.
- Strategy suite, such as Strategic Plan and the Risk Register (both reviewed annually).
- Human Resources and OHS suites: most were reviewed.
- Operational suite: 5 policies were reviewed.
- Anaphylaxis (reviewed annually).

In addition, the Committee reviewed the Skills First Internal Audit and Training and Assessment Strategies completed each year.

Thank you to the team of Janet Claringbold, Robyn Burke, Ross Corben, John Gerrard and Pat Rivett who laboured over several policies each month.

### **Sue Roberts**

**Convenor**

## ***Asset Management***

I am pleased to inform MDWC Ltd members that the buildings and associated equipment of the Mountain District Learning Centre have been maintained throughout the past year at a very high standard. This comes as a result of constant scrutiny as well as regular inspections of all areas of the campus as required by your Board's entrenched Annual Asset and Safety Improvement Plan. Under this arrangement, issues of maintenance, replacement or improvement are quickly identified and corrective action is taken expeditiously. This enables us to present to our students, staff and visitors, a suite of safe and attractive facilities where it is a pleasure to work, learn and visit.

Of all the features of our on-going maintenance program, none is more important than our system of regular working bees which are held on the first Saturday following the conclusion of term. Among the projects addressed since my last report were renovations to the Studio access ramp to bring it in line with contemporary OH&S requirements, interior painting of class rooms, stormwater drainage clearance and the removal of leaf litter from the roofs of our document storage sheds. The working bees not only have good maintenance and developmental outcomes but are also valuable and enjoyable social occasions. Should you be interested in joining us at one or more of these happy events, simply contact the Office staff who will advise you of the next opportunity to participate. I would also like to thank all those members and staff who have given so freely of their time to make our working bees so pleasant and productive. While on the subject of maintenance, I also want to express the Board's gratitude to our "in-house maintenance handyman", Ron Bast, who invariably provides solutions for those issues which require urgent attention.

My report last year drew attention to the outstanding visual attractiveness of our campus and its immediate surrounding environment. I am delighted to report that, in this respect, the only change this year is that the situation is even better. This is due to the wonderful efforts and dedication of the Gardening Group and the initiatives of its Coordinator, Luise Topma and her "lieutenants" Terry and Geoff. Currently, the Group is preparing for the erection of a new fowl house to accommodate the Centre's hens but has in no way neglected the maintenance of what is now a formidably large garden. An important outcome of their work in the garden, beyond is visual attractiveness, is that it provides an area of gentle and restorative retreat to all who seek solace there and it is one of our most valuable assets.

Unquestionably, our campus is developing in ways unimaginable even just a few years ago and this trend will inevitably continue especially in the light of the registration of The Avenue School with which we now share some of our resources. However, despite the likelihood of some challenges, your Board is fully cognizant of the necessity to maintain MDLC facilities in the best possible condition and it is fully committed to doing so.

**Ross Corben**

**Convenor**



## ***Members/Volunteers & Fundraising***

Committee members, Rachel Bast, Luise Topma (MDLC staff members) and volunteers, Robyn Burke, Pat Rivett, Heidi Lighten, Judy Bouwmeester and Betty Bibby had a full agenda throughout the year.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration was a great success with a large turnout of members and supporters enjoying Jayne De Wildt's talk on her experience as a volunteer and staff member in the early days of "The Co-op" and a speech from CEO, Janet Claringbold on the legacy.

To mark the event decorative pins were purchased with the new version of the MDLC logo on a card printed with the words "Celebrating 50 Years in the Ferntree Gully Community" acknowledging the significant milestone.

Thanks go to Jayne De Wildt for agreeing to be our guest speaker, to Sue Dunn who donated an amazing anniversary cake and to Coral Meade and Glenna Hill from the "Crafty Ladies" for making decorative bunting in the colours of the Co-op. It looked fabulous! We also have to thank Don, from Ferntree Gully Uniting Church for his assistance with the technology and Luise for putting together a photo collage that brought back many memories.

The Makers Market, organized by staff members Rachel Bast and Luise Topma had a good turnout and a great vibe. With excellent weather and lots of interesting market stalls as well as live music. Thanks goes to the organisers and to Board Members and volunteers who helped with the sausage sizzle and with raffle ticket sales. On the same day as the Market an inclusive Art Show was held at Ferntree Gully Uniting Church organized by Board Member, Ross Corben.

Our members let us know how much they enjoy our Member's Newsletter published (mostly) each term and we must thank the staff and volunteers who contribute to the content, and especially Heidi Lighten who puts the newsletter together in its very attractive format.

The Red and Green Christmas party was held on December 11 with the usual great turnout of participants enjoying a light lunch of sandwiches, cakes, slices and fruit platters. Luise put in a great effort picking up the food on the day and the Committee arranged the Church Hall with decorated tables, complete with red and green paper flowers and holly. It is always an occasion to look forward to, especially when the raffle prizes, including a Yarra Valley Dairy voucher and Hand towel and soap set, donated by Robyn and expertly arranged by Rachel are announced.

Other accomplishments for the year included a Bunnings Sausage Sizzle on the very busy last Saturday of December, which was not only successful as a fundraiser, but generated great comradery among the volunteers on the day. We are grateful for the help for all volunteers involved and for the organizing skills of Rachel, Luise, Robyn, Enid and Ray who made the day go as smoothly as possible.

Fundraising money also went to the purchase of "hoodies" for The Cottage Program" students and for various requirements for the garden and craft groups.

During the year, Betty Bibby retired from the Committee after many years helping and supporting fundraising efforts at MDLC. We are grateful to her for her tireless efforts over many, many years.

**Robyn Burke**

**Convenor**

## ***A Celebration of 50 Years of “The Co-Op”***

MDLC celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, with a special event held at the Ferntree Gully Uniting Church. Many members, friends and dignitaries were in attendance, coming together to celebrate the significant milestone.

Those in attendance were treated to a journey through the memories of the early days of Mountain District Women’s Co-operative conducted by long-term member, Jayne DeWildt.

Jayne reminisced on her involvement over many years, highlighting the joys, the struggles and the significance of “The Co-op” in the lives of the many women who found support, friendship and purpose within its embrace.

### **MDLC 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Speech**

**by Janet Claringbold**

In its formation, Mountain District Women’s Co-op brought together women with aspirations and foresight, who had hope for a better future for all women. Their dream was for a society of equality with equal rights, opportunities and greater personal freedom for women.

With courage and tenacity, they took advantage of a moment in time, to forge an organisation that would bring real, positive change to the lives of local women.

They created avenues to connect women with opportunities for financial independence and education, recognising that equity in education brings equality in society.

*This is our legacy.*

MDLC has an ability to draw extraordinary people towards it. Throughout the years, MDLC has benefited from the involvement of people who have brought with them the same levels of fortitude, dedication and goodwill as our founding members.

MDLC is a place where people bring everything of themselves and share it willingly for the benefit of everyone in the community

People who have compassion and empathy, who approach life selflessly and who are motivated by a desire to contribute to a movement for change, towards a better society.

These people are our Board members, teachers, trainers, tutors, managers, leaders, staff, volunteers, friends, members and supporters, who, for over 50 years have contributed to the collective strength of MDLC. Thank you to all of you for your contribution.

Through dedication and commitment, MDLC has developed a strong organisational culture that we can be all proud of. We were founded with ethical substance and remain an organisation of integrity. The people in our community who rely on us, remain at the centre of all our endeavours. We know and honour our values, because they reflect who we are. We are transparent, accountable and authentic. We are trusted, respected and have a strong reputation in our community.

*This is our character.*

Our ambition to contribute to equality in Victoria remains, as new areas of disadvantage take hold. There are still many people who have barriers to completing their education and reaching their potential in work

and life. There are still people who are reaching out for local community connections that bring friendship and purpose to their lives.

MDLC has much to do. Society is moving further away from our founders' dream of equality. There is still a need for locally developed community education which caters for people who need an alternative approach that is easier to engage with, is more supportive and allows them to find success when other attempts have failed.

We are still needed by our community who are looking for a place to contribute and belong.

Along the course of our history, the challenges faced by MDLC have been many. Some things remain constant. There is never enough time, never enough funding and everything keeps changing.

Being invisible to the people making decisions that affect us continues. Our ability to flourish remains under threat as we navigate a landscape of changing government priorities.

But we are confident. Our purpose is noble, our ambition is clear, our foundation is strong and our commitment is unwavering.

*This is our future.*



## ***Men's Shed***

In November, the Men's Shed project commenced. The project involved renovations to the Garage in the 12 Victoria Street property to make a new space to accommodate men's groups and activities.

The transformation of the space has been spectacular! We are grateful for the quality of the work done by Sam Leckie with the assistance of Ron Bast in creating a dedicated space for local men.

A new name, more fitting to the location and purpose of the Men's Shed has been chosen for our new space. After a number of suggestions were tossed around, we decided on "Oak Tree Den" in recognition of the large oak tree, adjacent to the building which is a feature of the garden.

A Men's Group has formed, predominately men from Glengollan Village, joined by the men attending MDLC's community garden program as volunteers. The group have called themselves "MDLC Men's Group", currently with around ten members who are meeting on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of each month.

An official launch of "Oak Tree Den" Men's Shed will be held in May. Local Member of Parliament, Daniela De Martino, who has enthusiastically supported our project, will be attending along with our Men's Group, Members and representatives from the MDLC Board.

Next step in the project is to install a path from the car park to Oak Tree Den to make it easier to access Oak Tree Den, especially in rainy months.

I take this opportunity to thank the Victorian Government, for the funding contribution that supported the creation of Oak Tree Den, through the 2023/24 Men's Shed Funding Program.

**Janet Claringbold**  
CEO



## Registered Training Organisation (RTO)

As a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Mountain District Learning Centre (MDLC) is committed to delivering high-quality training programs while adhering to regulatory requirements and contractual obligations, particularly under the Skills First Funding contract with the Victorian Government.

Throughout the reporting period, MDLC dedicated significant resources to ensure compliance with the Skills First Funding contract and other regulatory frameworks governing vocational education and training (VET) in Victoria.

MDLC diligently monitored changes in the Skills First Funding contract to ensure alignment with program delivery and reporting requirements mandated by the Victorian Government. Regular reviews were conducted to identify and address any discrepancies or updates in contractual obligations.

Internal audits, including the 2024 Skills First Internal Audit, were conducted to assess compliance with regulatory standards, internal policies, and contractual obligations. Findings from these audits were used to identify areas for improvement and implement corrective actions.

MDLC maintained comprehensive documentation, including annual Program Delivery Plans (PDPs), Training & Assessment Schedules, and student reporting records, to demonstrate compliance with regulatory requirements and contractual obligations.

Unfortunately, due to being unable to source a Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) trainer we were unable to deliver RSA in 2024. We did however successfully deliver White Card to several young people enrolled in the Cottage Program. Construction Induction Training (White Card) is compulsory for any person employed or engaged to perform construction work in the building and construction industry. It is also recommended for anyone whose employment means they routinely enter operational construction zones.

MDLC was the Learn Local representative on the Steering Committee for the re-registration of the Certificates in General Education for Adults. Sue Dunn (RTO Compliance Manager) attended three Project Steering Committee (PSC) meetings to share her perspectives, knowledge and expertise, ultimately the PSC guided the Reaccredited Project Team through the accreditation process and provided advice.

My thanks to Sue for her constant and thorough work in this compliance space, this type of work often goes unnoticed but is critical to the efficient functioning of our organisation. Her dedication and expertise are instrumental in ensuring that MDLC remains compliant with regulatory requirements and contractual obligations.

**Alison Percy**

**Education & Training Manager**



## ***The Cottage Program***

*22472VIC Certificate I in General Education for Adults (CGEA)*

*22473VIC Certificate II in General Education for Adults (CGEA)*

*22474VIC Certificate III in General Education for Adults (CGEA)*

In 2024 we delivered a pilot called The Early Years Program, which was based on our current Cottage Program framework, designed for young people who would typically be in Years 7-9. Our purpose was to re-engage students who had disconnected from mainstream schooling due to a range of physical, social, or emotional reasons. The most important features of this alternative education program included a welcoming tone and ethos, respectful relationships, tailored curriculum and learning, flexible structures and a safe and supportive environment.

We focused on building relationships with our young people based on an ethic of care, trust, and respect. To enable staff to reconnect and reengage young people we needed to provide them with a quiet, safe, and supportive setting which had the ability to cater for individual learning styles using a variety of different learning methods.

The key feature of all our Cottage Programs is to provide a strong youth worker presence. We are very fortunate to have the experience and skills of our youth workers to support our students. Our youth workers do a vital job within our programs, they help young people to make informed choices in areas such as education, wellbeing, and healthy relationships. Our youth workers also assist young people with tools to overcome challenges like poor mental health through support & referral and to encourage our young people to take up positive opportunities to build their skills, become independent, and contribute positively within their communities.

The Cottage Program team delivered a variety of incursions, excursions and workshops. We welcome our students to have a voice in what they would like to explore. Generally, this information is collected through surveys or more informal discussions with the young people during class times.

We would like to acknowledge the funding received from Knox City Council to deliver the YES Project, which allowed for many fun and engaging activities to take place throughout the year.

During Term 2, the Cottage Program staff worked particularly hard to support student absence. We tried to get an understanding of the main factors which may have precipitated attendance concerns for some of the students. As a team we discussed some of the indicators of school refusal to help us further comprehend and be able to put appropriate strategies in place. Indicators included the sudden onset of physical complaints (stomach aches, headaches, feeling 'ill') on school days, increased emotion dysregulation around school attendance, social withdrawal, depressed affect, anxiety, and loss of self-esteem and separation anxiety.

We also discussed why students refuse to attend school, some of the reasons may include, to avoid school-based stimuli that evoke unpleasant emotions. For example, traveling via public transport, difficult social relationships, large/loud classrooms, bullying and to escape social and /or evaluative situations. For example, tests, exams, speaking or writing in front of others.

By creating a positive environment, communicating the importance of attendance, monitoring and addressing issues early, removing barriers and recognising good attendance we were able to work positively towards improved attendance rates.

In June, approximately 25 students attended a tour of Swinburne (Croydon) TAFE, facilitated by the Skills and Jobs Centre team. During the tour the students were able to get a behind the scenes introduction to student life on campus, explore learning hubs, for example, Trades Barns, Nursing Labs, Engineering spaces, and the classroom environments. Students were also able to learn about Swinburne’s study pathways and how they can lead to future educational and career opportunities.

Term 4 was a very busy and productive term, we toured Swinburne Hawthorn, engaged in Swinburne Resume & Pathways Workshops and Future Career Sessions, where students worked individually with a Pathways Specialist to identify potential career pathways.



Sadly, Mark, Tiana and Callum left the Cottage Program at the end of 2024 due to downsizing the Cottage Program to make way for The Avenue School. We are excited to work alongside the Principal and staff and hope to build a strong relationship and new pathways for the Cottage students. I am happy to report that Mark, Tiana and Callum all found new and exciting employment opportunities, and we wished them all the best for their journey ahead.

In 2025, we look forward welcoming students back from 2024 and getting to know new students as well. We will have a strong focus on kindness through the delivery of the Random Acts of Kindness Project. This project’s mission is to “make kindness the norm™ in our schools, workplaces, homes, & communities”.

Throughout this project, students will have an opportunity to gather new and deeper insights about respect, caring, integrity, inclusiveness, and courage and to begin to apply them in new and more meaningful ways. Through the development and deployment of a community service project, students will build self-initiative, critical thinking, and community networking skills. Each session gives students new ways to increase capacity for kindness.

The Cottage Team is quite amazing, they consistently demonstrate compassion, kindness and empathy to our young people and families on a daily basis. Their unwavering support and care for our students is truly remarkable and makes a profound difference in their lives. I am proud of the safe and nurturing learning environment that we have built over the years and the positive impact the team has on our community at MDLC. Thank you for your exceptional work, it does not go unnoticed.

**Alison Percy**  
**Education and Training Manager**



# ACFE Learn Local Pre-Accredited Training

Mountain District Learning Centre (MDLC) is proudly funded through the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board, enabling us to provide accessible and inclusive learning opportunities for adults who face barriers to education and employment. This funding supports the delivery of pre-accredited training—practical courses designed to build the confidence, skills, and foundational knowledge that learners need to take their next steps into further study, work, or greater independence. For vulnerable adult learners, such as migrants, early school leavers, or those facing social and economic disadvantage, MDLC offers a safe, supportive, and flexible learning environment where their goals are respected and their potential is nurtured. Pre-accredited programs, run across the local government areas of Knox, Maroondah and Yarra Ranges, serve as vital stepping stones, offering learners the chance to re-engage with education, improve their literacy, language, and digital skills, and develop the confidence to participate fully in their communities.

In late 2024, MDLC proudly hosted 17 certificate presentation events, recognising the achievements of over 130 ACFE learners who completed courses including *English for Living and Working in Australia*, *Read Write Now*, *Digital Literacy*, *Financial Wellbeing*, *Brainworks*, and *English Conversation*. Attended by MDLC Board members, these events celebrated learner determination and highlighted the transformative impact of adult education.

## Innovation and Impact

2024 marked a period of growth, impact, and innovation for the Adult Learning department at MDLC. Our commitment to supporting vulnerable learners through innovative, inclusive and accessible programs has delivered transformative results. These programs continue to strengthen individual capability, community connection, and workforce participation.

### 1. Family Learning Partnership Program

MDLC successfully rolled out the Family Learning Partnership Program in collaboration with Boronia Library, aiming to strengthen early literacy and family engagement within a supportive community setting. Between October and December, three interactive story-time sessions were delivered, engaging over 50 families through storytelling, creative literacy activities, and a special live animal visit. The program received positive feedback from parents, who reported increased confidence in using educational resources and deeper connections with their children's learning.

### 2. Functional English Course for Migrant Workers at ARB

This year, a 15-week Functional English course was delivered onsite at ARB, designed to equip their migrant workers with practical communication skills for both workplace integration and daily life. Learners took part in hands-on activities covering key areas such as workplace conversations, accessing healthcare services, and navigating public transport. Using the PRIAK tool, pre- and post-course assessments revealed significant progress, with most learners advancing to post-beginner or pre-intermediate English levels. Participants

also reported a marked increase in confidence when engaging in workplace interactions and everyday communication tasks.

### **3. Just-in-Time Project – New Grant & Industry Partnership**

We are pleased to report that MDLC has secured a new grant under the Just-in-Time Project, aimed at addressing critical gaps in employability skills through targeted industry collaboration. As part of this initiative, MDLC has entered into a strategic partnership with an aged and community services provider, to co-design a pre-accredited training program specifically tailored to the care economy. Program development is guided by the Stronger by Design / PQF+ framework to ensure alignment with both learner and employer needs.

Expected outcomes include a suite of adaptable, sector-wide teaching resources and improved employment pathways for learners. This project highlights the ongoing importance and impact of collaborative efforts between Learn Local providers and industry partners.

The Adult Learning team at MDLC continues to lead with purpose, placing vulnerable learners at the heart of our work. Through collaborative partnerships, tailored literacy programs, and a deep understanding of community needs, we are creating opportunities that transform lives.

**Franci Buljat**  
**Adult Learning Manager**

## **Reconnect**

In 2024, MDLC's Reconnect program completed its second year of a two year contract with the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions to deliver local services to eligible participants seeking support in returning to education, employment and training. This two year model enabled a more seamless approach to service delivery, without the need to pause and resume services between 2023 and 2024.

At the completion of this particular contract, the Reconnect team had supported many members of the local community in their journey towards a brighter future. Over 70 people were referred to the program during this period and were either supported directly by Reconnect case managers as part of the program or referred to relevant service providers for ongoing support if they were ineligible.

The Reconnect team experienced staff movement during this period, including welcoming Ellen Jones-Brewer as Reconnect Assistant. Ellen has proven to be a wonderful contribution to the Reconnect team, who provides high quality case management and is a joy to collaborate with.

With the completion of the current contract, we look forward to extending our services in 2025 and hopefully beyond.

**Racheal Edwards**  
**Reconnect Manager**

# Community Services

2024 was a jam-packed year for the Community Services Office which oversees the Volunteer Program, Social Support Program, Hi-Rise Community Garden, MDLC Makers Market, Mountain Treasures Craft Group, Philosophy for Thinkers, Community Development and other Leisure Workshops and courses!

From Community bus trips, learning opportunities, incursions and excursions there was something for everyone every week.

**SOCIAL SUPPORT** – The Social Support Program enjoyed strong client attendance with a wait list for nearly every group. Unfortunately, though, we did say goodbye to our much-loved trainer Harry. Harry made the long-awaited decision of retiring, and we will really miss Harry’s happy smiling face and years of friendship. Other groups enjoyed crafting and many other social opportunities.

**VOLUNTEERS** - Our volunteer and student placement program is still so vibrant and diverse with a few new volunteers signing up to help out in the areas of community gardening, Social Support group assistance, Cottage Program, and The Gully News. MDLC is truly blessed to enjoy a volunteer program that is worth its weight in gold. MDLC is proud to partner with Box Hill Institute, Swinburne TAFE, Skill track and RMIT to place students looking to commence and complete work placement hours throughout the year.

**COMMUNITY GARDEN** – Luise and her team of Community Gardeners continued to work on and create a garden that is beautiful, inviting and well cared for. The garden program ran each week on Mondays and Tuesdays and welcomed volunteers from a broad range – including those who need to complete 15hrs for Centrelink and those from our local community who simply enjoy a gardening environment.

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT** – MDLC was lucky enough to obtain a grant from Knox City Council to promote healthy eating and cooking within the Social Housing Complex at Maryborough Road Boronia. Every Thursday staff worked with the residents to create healthy menus and then cook a budget friendly meal together that included using produce from their community gardens and Outer East Food Share.



**MDLC MAKERS MARKET** – The MDLC Makers Market once again enjoyed a full stall line up of local makers and musicians. We also had a sausage sizzle that was run by our fantastic board members and other volunteers. It was wonderful to meet and support our local community, and to show everyone around the beautiful MDLC Community Gardens. It was a stinking HOT day, but as usual, the Mountain Treasures Craft stall and all others were stocked up with handmade gifts, cards, jams, relishes, skin care, art and plants. There really was something for everyone!

**Rachel Bast**

**Community Services Manager**



# Home and Community Care (HACC) and Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP)

## *Social Support Groups*

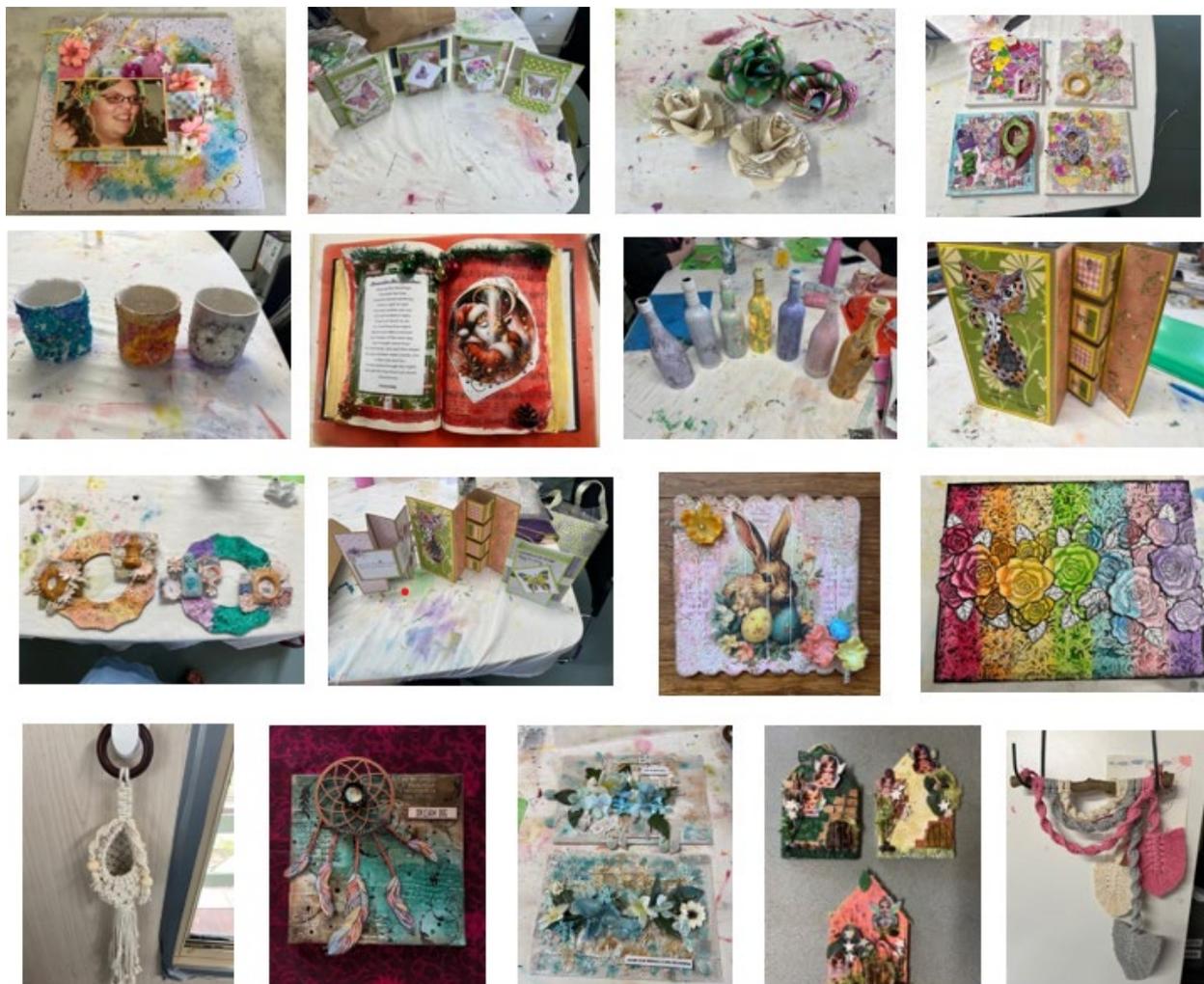
### *Monday Makers*

This group have formed a strong bond of friendship. They often discuss what's happening in their lives in class and seek support and comfort from one another.

These ladies love learning new techniques and always surprise themselves with what they achieve. They encourage each other as they create. They all enjoy a challenge and take pride in what they do. These serious crafters are very passionate about their craft and it shows in the beautiful works of art they create.

The ladies have enjoyed various mixed media projects both on canvas and in 3D structures during the year, lots of interactive cards that flip and fold, along with some sewing, macrame and other craft projects.

**Lynn Foster**  
**Group Leader**



## ***Nature Craft***

Always a busy year but last year went by so fast. We were lucky to have two students on placement join us for work experience. This is always welcome as we have an extra pair of hands to help out particularly when you run a class on your own.

Term One is always busy as we have Easter included and all the clients make presents for their family members. Some of the activities we did were, floral design, felt flowers, working with clay and an easter Card.

Term two we have Mothers' Day gifts to make and the clients made a clay trinket dish. The other things they made were a collage flower, dried flower arrangement using recycled candle jars and stone art on a floor panel. They all looked fantastic.

Term three we made a panel card, rag butterflies and a pinecone canvas.

Term four we made owls, did an Easel card, made a wreath out of corks and added dried lavender and for Christmas we made a table centre out of pinecones and jars. The clients give me ideas of what they would like to create, and they enjoy the process of putting it altogether. Another fun filled year of socialising and creating.

**Sharon Saliba**  
**Group Leader**



## ***Craft and Grow***

What a busy year for the Craft and Grow Group. So many amazing projects were made. From stunning floral Freda Kahlo inspired head bands, and flannelette teddy bears.

They had fun with paper crafts making gravity defying Paper mâché ballons, flower pinwheels and flowers made from cupcake cases.

Scrap material made cute fairy mushrooms, cactus pin cushions and lady bug magnets to help hang their brightly coloured watercolour jelly fish.

The group enjoyed many days outside in the garden crafting, painting and working in the garden. Everyone enjoyed making decorative succulent turtles, starting tomato seedlings, planting flowers and herbs, and planting the tomato seedlings into the hi rise garden beds.

Christmas decorations and celebrations finished 2024 with good food, and lots of laughter.

### **Luise Topma**

**Community Garden Coordinator & Social Support Group Facilitator**



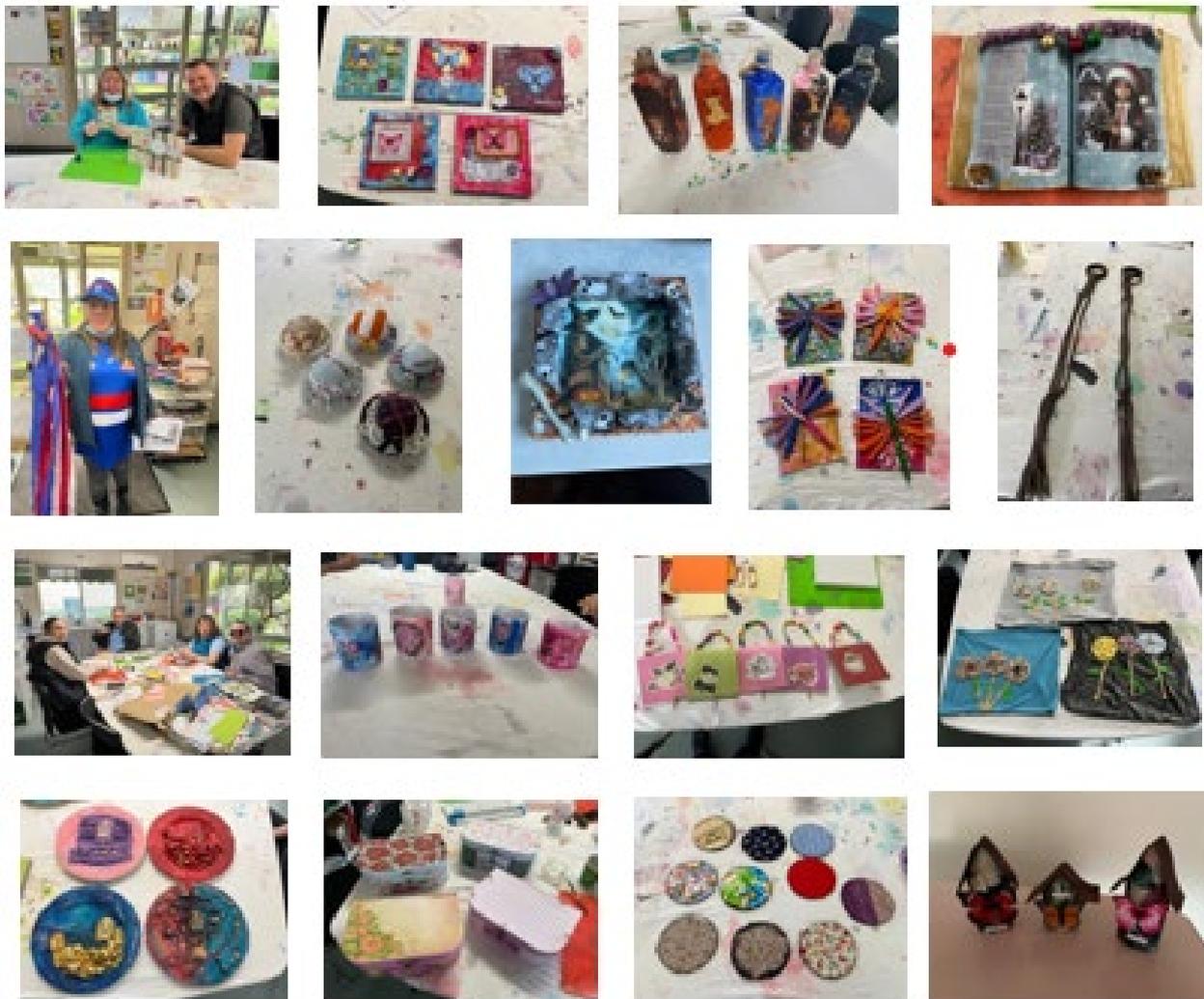
## ***Thursday Morning All Abilities Mixed Media***

This group are a loud bunch but have the best time each week. They are very social and love chatting as they craft. They always come in with a smile on their face and are ready for whatever the project is that week.

During the year this group created some wonderful projects including lots of mixed media style craft on various substrates such as plates, cds, canvases, wood and bottles. They worked with collage, did some macrame, some bead work and even made dragonflies out of wooden pegs.

This group always loves an opportunity for a party so whenever there is an occasion such as Easter, Halloween, Footy Grand Final or Cup Day there is a celebration party towards the end of class with bingo and lots of laughs.

**Lynn Foster**  
**Group Leader**



## Thursday Crafteria

The year was a busy one as usual with plenty of crafting. Term one we did a variety of activities some were, Collage, canvas, Paper bag album an Easter gift and card. Term two we made a book house, a lace and material wreath, and a lace jar. Term three we did some coasters, bookmarks and a mixed media plate. To finish of the year the clients created a cd hat, pumpkin witch for Halloween, mixed media tag and a paper angel. We always finish of the year with a party. Always a great year full of chatting and creating.

**Lynn and Sharon**  
**Group Leaders**



# Community Hi-Rise Garden

What a wonderful 2024 for the Hi Rise Community Garden. Amazing natives have been putting on a colourful show, scrumptious broad beans, rhubarb and strawberries have been enjoyed from the garden. Edwina and Pirate have been keeping us in supply of delicious eggs and are looking forward to having a new coop, and new feathered friends in 2025.

The brilliant garden volunteers have been busy bee's keeping everything in tip top condition. From removing the fence between Victoria Gardens and the main garden to make one large green space, trimming trees to allow easier access around the garden.

We moved the greenhouse, allowing easier access and more sunlight. And what a difference that made. The volunteers are now having great success with growing from seed, which is a more cost effect, than purchasing seedlings every season.

To everyone that has visited the MDLC Hi Rise Community Garden, purchased produce or plants in 2024, we would like to say thank you for all of your support.

**Luise Topma**

**Community Garden Coordinator & Social Support Group Facilitator**



# Ferntree Gully News Report

The year was eventful with the council elections to cover, along with reporting on contested uses of public space, as well as the regular topics of anniversaries, environment, history, arts and sport.

Reporting anniversary celebrations and stories is the bread and butter of local newspapers and in Ferntree Gully, the importance of gathering community news and reflections at anniversaries is well understood. The April edition of Gully News introduces the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MDLC which was celebrated in August, the June edition featured the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ferntree Gully Arts Society as one of the oldest regional arts societies in Victoria and the Ferntree Gully Film Society was acknowledged for its 70<sup>th</sup> year anniversary.

The annual Gully News Volunteer Thank You Party at Ferntree Gully Library was well attended by volunteers, local MPs, the Knox Mayor and several Councillors, along with representatives from other community groups. The occasion is an opportunity to thank the many people involved in the production and distribution of Gully News.

At the CNAV Conference, held in Bendigo in October, Gully News were pleased to be finalists in two categories, editorial and history.

Anne Boyd has taken on a new role as “Editor Emerita” with Liliane Azar taking on the role of Editor for each edition and Martin Whitely, as Operations Manager, managing the big distribution network.

Pam McConnell and Heidi Lighten have continued a great job in managing advertising and invoicing. Additional assistance is provided by John McMillan and Gavin Green. We welcome two new “journos” in Matthew Payne, a student at Boronia K-11 and former Knox Friberg Ward Councillor, Susan Laukens.

Anne Boyd and Martin Whiteley attended the Bendigo Bank grant allocation evening in order to accept a grant for funding for a second edition of the Ferntree Gully Village Guide. The support of the Bank is always appreciated.

## Ferntree Gully News Team



# Partnerships and Affiliations

MDLC highly values collaboration with organisations through partnerships and affiliations including:

- Community Houses Association of the Outer Eastern Suburbs (CHAOS)
- Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (NHV)
- ACEVic
- Adult Learning Australia
- Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC)
- OELLEN
- Ferntree Gully Uniting Church
- Knox Infolink
- Knox Emergency Relief Network (KERN)
- Eastern VET network
- Knox Learning Alliance and Volunteer 4 Knox
- Knox, Maroondah and Yarra Ranges Youth Services
- headspace Knox
- Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS)
- EACH
- Foothills Community Care
- Uniting Care
- SwinLocal
- Your Library (Eastern Regional Libraries)
- Knox, Maroondah and Yarra Ranges Councils
- Ferntree Gully Rotary
- Community Housing Limited
- Ferntree Gully Village Traders Association
- Hills Op Shop
- Other local schools, charities and community groups

## Acknowledgement of Funding Bodies

MDLC is grateful to our major funding bodies including:

### **Victorian Government**

- Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Region - Skills First
- Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Region - Adult and Further Community Education (ACFE),
- Department of Education and Training - Reconnect
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing – Neighbourhood House Coordination Program
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing – Home & Community Care (HACC) Planned Activity Groups

### **Commonwealth Government**

- Department of Health – Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) Social Support Groups

### **Local Government**

- Knox City Council – Neighbourhood House Operational Funding Program
- Knox City Council – Community Development Grants and Empowering Communities Grant
- Maroondah City Council – Community Development Grants