

A mosaic artwork featuring a woman with long, flowing red hair. She is wearing a yellow dress with a pattern of small blue and red stars. The background is composed of various shades of blue and green mosaic tiles. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional mosaic art.

Majura Women's Group
celebrating 25 years

Majura Women's Group Inc.

Change nappy - baby wees over me. Roll out Tor's play dough. Make sandwiches. Collect fruit. Make up apple juice. Dig plastic cups out of sand pit. Collect wet nappies spread around the garden. Find shoes. Discover wet patch on carpet. Talk to Finnian about it. Look for Finnian's shoes. Close all windows. Pack nappy bag. Wash Tor's sunglasses. Put shoes on 3 children. Find booster seat. Help children into car. Do up their straps. Go back to close the door and gate. Get in car. Go back and go to the toilet myself. 9.30 am Off to backward project meeting. Annie sits down to feed! Sam turns up Swings on table. Julia gets out Lino cutting tools. Buffy sits down after settling child in childrens room. Annie rocks the baby while talking and reading a letter Grizzling about funding. Michael bangs head on table Liz wanders around with Michael and Kieren. Tries to get Michael to go to creche. Sam dancing on table, singing. Frankie lifts him off, gives him a kiss. Frankie gives out newsletter. Mary's feeding Clare. Liz tries to read while Kieren bats the paper. Julia gets ink and printing gear out.

Majura Women's Group Celebrating 25 years

A selection of
recollections, reflections,
images and quotations



Participating in *Reflections*,
backyard project 2006

A Majura Women's Group Inc. publication
to celebrate the group's anniversary
and to complement its 2006 retrospective exhibition
at the Canberra Museum and Gallery

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Stronger Families and
Communities Strategy

An Australian Government Initiative

I quite often sit back and think what it really means to be a mother. It is a hard role to define and I am sure each of us here today, with our varied backgrounds and experiences would have greatly differing ideas on this. Some days can be incredibly exhilarating but on other days it can be a very lonely place to be.

In today's society we quite often measure ourselves on what we do, our occupation, the perceived way in which we contribute to society. This leaves mothers in a state of confusion. What we do is undefined, as our job description changes from day to day, and when it all gets a bit much resigning is not an option. When we were at work we knew if we were fulfilling our role and doing a good job. It was something that in the structure of the work place we could easily measure. Our mothering ability cannot be measured - we do what we can, when we can, and hope it's the right thing.

The Majura Women's Group offers women a supportive place to go and be involved, to be fulfilled and be part of something, which is the one thing we so often miss. We participate in meaningful creative projects, and feel a real sense of achievement when we look at the results. We still talk of our sleepless nights, our toddler's unexplainable behaviours, and the seemingly impossible task of maintaining some kind of order at home. But that is not the focus. It is we who are the focus. The women doing the most important job that we will ever do.

Extract, speech by Mia Menzies, 2004 Backyard Project Co-ordinator, launch of the mosaic, Nurture, donated to QE II Family Centre (Newsletter, 2005).

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About this book

Majura Women's Group: Celebrating 25 Years draws together a few glimpses of the group over its 25 year history – through a selection of recollections, reflections, quotes from various sources, reproductions of artwork and photographs. The appendices add to this with comprehensive listings of the group's major projects, publications, exhibitions and public artworks since 1981.

This book forms part of the group's 25th anniversary celebrations and is a complement to the group's 2006 retrospective exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Gallery. It does not aim to be a history of the group, nor a catalogue for the exhibition. Rather, it is something of a 'sampler', which seeks to give the reader a flavour of the nature and culture of the Majura Women's Group.

The publication has been compiled by a small group of former and current members of the group who also worked on the preparations for the anniversary exhibition. We found that extracts of text from the group's newsletter articles, artists' reports, speeches, etc, provided rich windows into its workings and achievements. The text for this publication is therefore primarily a compilation of such quotes.

The vast number of projects undertaken by the group over its 25 years renders it impossible to feature more than a fraction of them in this booklet. That is no reflection on the relative value or merit of the various projects. Similarly, there have been vast numbers of sessions, that are not mentioned. For more information about the history of the group, the reader is referred to the group's publications listed in appendix 2 and to its newsletters. Some of these are held in the Majura Women's Group Collection at the ACT Heritage Library.

MAJURA WOMEN'S GROUP: CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

The Majura Women's Group expresses its appreciation to *Communities for Children* for financial support, without which this publication would not have been possible. We are also grateful to the Canberra Museum and Gallery for their support.

The group also acknowledges the considerable funding provided by both federal and local government bodies in support of its activities and projects over the years. These include: the Community and Cultural Development Unit of the Australia Council (projects to 1993), the ACT Advisory Council on Adult and Community Education, the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support, the ACT's Community Inclusion Fund, ACT Health, artsACT, Canberra Community Grants Program, Healthpact and Sport and Recreation ACT.

We celebrate 25 years of the Majura Women's Group and trust that it will continue to serve its ever changing membership of women at home with young children, for many years to come.

Margaret Simpson (member, 1988 to 1996)

Anne Robinson (member, 1994 to 2001)

Lisette Frigo (member, 1996 to 2000)

Sue Hoffmann (member, 2001 to present)

1 The group in a nutshell

For a generation of Canberra mothers the Majura Women's Group has provided sanity, friendship and new skills. It has offered support to women who are at home with young children by giving them an opportunity to meet, discuss issues and talk about the problems and joys of parenting. The group also provides a creative outlet and a reminder that even though bringing up children is a full time job there is room for personal growth and self-expression.

The Majura Women's Group was started in 1981 by a group of mothers seeking to overcome the isolation and lack of adult stimulation that can accompany the work of a parent. It now meets weekly at the Downer Community Centre. Members run the group and undertake all administrative and organisational work voluntarily. The Majura Women's Group continues to maintain its focus on supporting women with young children. It offers discussion sessions on parenting, health and a broad range of topical issues. It also offers physical activity sessions, as well as an annual creative project called the 'backyard project' ...

In recent years the group has concentrated their creative skills on public artworks which can be seen in many locations around Canberra.

Extracts, wall text introducing the 2006 Majura Women's Group retrospective exhibition, Canberra Museum and Gallery

2 **The beginnings**

Paula Simcocks¹

The Majura Women's Group was an attempt to pool the resources of the women around the neighbourhood, to help strangers become workmates and alleviate the difficulties of raising children.

We wanted more than a playgroup, we wanted a group that catered to our adult interests whilst continuing to oversee the care of our children. Women in Canberra frequently lacked any of the traditional supports to women at home, they often lacked family and old friends. They had a strong need to create a new community to build up supportive networks.

Downer Women's Community Group formed in March 1981. For the first five years, women at home with small children met in their homes, mainly in Downer. We needed an easy solution as we were overstretched, overtired and limited in our experience in organising community groups. So we decided, we would visit each other's home, and the hostess would provide a simple morning tea, and if we were lucky they would get to arrange a speaker of their choice. Rotating homes and responsibilities for organising speakers meant that each woman could further their own interests and it did not matter how organised or disorganised she was.

It became increasingly difficult to watch the children whilst meeting to have stimulating discussion with outside speakers. The catalyst for change came when one participant had her chicken coop demolished by bored three year olds. It was time to

¹ Excerpts, article by Paula Simcocks, Newsletter, 2005. Paula was the Convenor of the group from 1981 to 1986 (then known as the *Downer Women's Community Group*).

move into bigger premises and with people paid to supervise the children. This necessitated a constitution and a submission for funding which was successful on its second application and has been so ever since.

The name was changed in 1986 to Majura Women's Group in order to have a wider appeal and hence to be more likely to attract funding. They have succeeded by continuously building on the skills of women at home: interpersonal, communication, public speaking, time management, entrepreneurial and budgeting, project management and political know-how and child rearing practices.

This group was managed by the women, themselves, so their organisational skills were acknowledged by the government with direct funding, and this was empowering to those people out of the workforce. They were using their existing knowledge and developing new skills whilst engaged in the unpaid labour of caring for their young children.

The on-going success of Majura Women's Group has relied on successive groups of resourceful women that have harnessed local resources and provide valuable community services. Government funding assistance has helped these women organise and provide this service.

3 A change of approach

Back in 1990 it became necessary to re-evaluate the operating model then used by the group. Numbers were dropping and the model of occasional courses and morning teas in the Downer Community Centre was not enough to draw a regular group of women together.

The new committee came up with the idea of having a regular Wednesday morning meeting. This would provide a weekly routine for the mothers and regular employment to the childcare workers. It would also provide more opportunity to develop the energy and commitment needed for the group to go forward.

A school term program and a regular newsletter were developed and the morning sessions alternated between being focussed on discussion (political, health, child related, general interest) and creative mornings. The committee shared the responsibility for organising the sessions and working on funding issues. This model has proved successful and is still used by the group today.



Reproduced from
Wet patch on carpet, backyard project 1989

4 A self-run group

From its beginning Majura Women's Group has been run by and for its members. This has been one of the group's greatest strengths but has also always been a major challenge. It has allowed the group to adapt to the changing needs of women in the community but has also required a constant supply of women who are willing, at a time of their lives when they are already very busy, to take on huge workloads to keep the group operating. The enduring success, vitality and relevance of the group is sometimes credited in large measure to the fact that it is self-run. There have also been lean times, however, when the group has struggled to fill committee positions and to stretch to all of the committee responsibilities.



Paying the bills, 2004

The directions the group has taken have been determined by its committee. There has never been a 'community worker' or paid administrative staff facilitating the group's activities.

Group ownership and expertise [are] solely in the hands of the committee and [this has been important to] the energy level of the committee ... In the long term this has been the group's strength. The group has evolved as members' needs have changed.

Extract from *Home Bound* by Margaret Simpson, 1996

Even though writing grants and serving (on the committee) was hard work, it was also INTERESTING! It gave me a 'public self' where I could act outside the domestic realm. I found it very rewarding knowing that in addition to caring for my family, I have also contributed to my community. I liked how this 'public self' complemented (not conflicted) with my 'private self' of mother. I have got to know a lot about Canberra and my local community. I learnt a lot about myself and other women. I have met fantastic women and made great friends. I've done all sorts of things I would never otherwise have attempted or even thought of doing. I love knowing that I have helped make all this happen.

Frances Byers, Newsletter, 2004



Christmas party, 1997

5 Our Children

Our children are what bring us as mothers to the Majura Women's Group, and to some extent they share in our time together. At times, they have contributed to our artwork. Just as members access stimulating and rewarding activities together and develop friendships and community along the way, so have the children – whether through their time in the sessions with us, through their time together in the adjunct childcare provided, or through the out-of-session contact between members which is fostered by participating in the group.

The provision of childcare with paid childcare workers is one of the key underpinnings of the group. It has always been acknowledged by the group members and ultimately by grant providers that without the provision of suitable, quality childcare it is not possible for women to actively participate in the group's activities. A substantial proportion of grant funds are spent on childcare expenses (over half in 2005-06).

As well as providing mothers with important respite, the childcare has also been important for the children. For many it is their first experience of formal childcare and provides an introduction to the routines of the structured care which they later encounter at preschool and school. It is also a source of new activities and toys and interaction with other children and adults. For many children their Wednesday mornings at 'the group' were as eagerly anticipated as they were for their mothers.

While always provided, the use of childcare by individual mothers has always been optional and the presence and acceptance of children in the sessions has also always been part of the operation of the Majura Women's Group.

Eventually with funding, we were able to provide two rooms, one for the children with paid childcare workers and another for the adults to talk more quietly. A door linking the two rooms could be open or shut to link the two areas and children would be happily accommodated with the adults when need be, or the women could sit with their children when the need arose. The needs of the women and the children would simultaneously be catered for.

Paula Simcocks recollections, Newsletter, 2005



Child's artwork, backyard project 1989

I do love that about Majura Women's Group: there's never any pressure to put the children next door. Childcare is available but if you choose to keep your child with you, it's OK.

Karen Eastwood, Newsletter, 2006

6 A diversity of sessions

The Majura Women's Group has held a wide variety of discussion, guest speaker and physical activity sessions over the years. These sessions stimulate and nurture us mentally, physically and emotionally. Discussion sessions cover a wide range of topics and reflect the interests of group members at the time. Some are led by guest speakers and others are self-run. We talk about ourselves, our families, our homes and our community. Topics have included health issues, relationships, our children, gardening, legal matters and current affairs. Physical activity sessions have included belly dancing, tai chi, drumming, creative movement and massage. Following is a sample of sessions led by guest speakers held between 1996 and 2001, as reported by members in the group's newsletters.



Penny Hambling, 1997

The internet and the information superhighway

...I finally surfed the net, and an interesting but confusing journey it was. Fortunately, Mark Courbould from the ANU was able to demystify much of the jargon and gave us a potted history of the information super highway ... we drove search engines and browsed indexes and saw more advertising billboards in five

minutes than I thought possible ... The audience was enthralled and many raced from the room to the library or home computers to carry on surfing.

Anon., Newsletter, 1997

Body image and bathers

Lisa Williams and Joanne Courtney came from the Women's Centre for Health Matters to talk with us about our body image and bathers ... we talked about why we do or do not feel self-conscious when we are in our bathers and how our body image influences that feeling. We also discussed all of the different ways we are influenced by the media, peers etc. It was interesting to hear how different people felt the same way but for different reasons. We all agreed that there is no such thing as the "perfect" swimsuit.

Anon., Newsletter, 1997



Lisette Frigo, 1998

Funeral arrangements and other preparations for a death in the family

Sheila and Karen, bereavement counsellors from Tobin Brothers spoke to us about the many different and common ways of coping with the death of a loved one ... Alison Horridge gave us an informative and moving account of how she and her family managed the short life and death of her daughter Hermione. This was a very emotional time for all those participating in the session and our heartfelt thanks go to Alison.

Anon., Newsletter, 1997

Republican presentation

Margaret Rolfe from the Australian Republican Movement outlined the arguments for Australia becoming a republic and advised us of the status of the federal debate on this issue. Margaret fielded many questions from the group and summarised the outcomes of the Constitutional Convention. The session concluded with the acknowledgement that becoming a republic is only a matter of time.

Anon., Newsletter, 1998

Woodwork: Making a table top easel

I thoroughly enjoyed this session. Jo Saccomani, a carpenter, and her apprentice, Sarah, showed us all the skills involved in making our easels; from measuring and sawing accurately to using a power drill. I especially liked learning how to use the power drill ... I gained a lot of confidence through this session and feel able to tackle small repair jobs at home now.

Anon., Newsletter, 1998



African dance session, 2004

*The last session for the term was a fascinating discussion with a local Aboriginal Elder woman, **Wadjularbinna Mulyarimma**. Her description of her early life was very moving as were her observations of the pressures on modern Aboriginal society. Her very personal account of the interlinking of Aboriginal and Christian cultures and values was thought provoking.*

Anne, Newsletter, 1999

*The session on **Drug-proofing our children** was run by Irmgard Reid from Life Education. We learned right from the start of this session that it isn't possible to drug-proof our children. Panic set in for a while, a future with out of control, drug taking teenagers filled my mind. By the end of the session we'd learned that communication is the key to helping our kids deal with growing up and decision making, and this has to begin when they are young.*

Lisette, Newsletter, 2000

7 Creative sessions and projects

An important aspect of the Majura Women's Group has been the opportunity for women to engage in creative activities. When at home with young children it is difficult to move away from the necessary but often mundane tasks of caring for a house and family. Creative sessions provide an opportunity for women to have some time for themselves, to express thoughts and feelings in a safe environment and explore different ideas and artistic media. Creative sessions also provide a real sense of achievement for women who rarely have a chance to finish any task. The completion of a card, drawing or lino print is a tangible product of the period of their lives dedicated to raising young children.

Another important, but not so obvious benefit is the way in which friendships develop as women sit side by side painting pictures or placing mosaic tiles. It is at these times, when relaxed and with busy hand, that conversations about the real issues of mothering and life generally often evolve – where advice, support and friendship can be safely offered and accepted.



Participating in *Reflections*, backyard project 2006

Creative sessions have ranged from one-off self-run sessions where a member will pass on their own knowledge and skills to the group, to a large scale art project spanning up to year. Writing has been an ongoing theme of creative sessions for the group and a number of publications have resulted from sessions run by local authors – see Appendix 2 for a listing of the group's publications.

Since 1989 the group has received funding to employ an artist to run annual community art projects. Funding was originally sourced from the Australia Council. Since 1992 it has been received from the ACT Government's arts body, artsACT. Early projects were supported by Megalo Arts Access who managed the grants of behalf the group, but later Majura Women's Group applied for and managed its own grants.

The first major creative project, held in 1989, was termed a 'backyard' project to imply a sense of familiarity with an individual's immediate environment. This term has continued to be used for all of the group's annual artist-led projects. Both the length of the projects and the employment of an artist have been critical to the success of the backyard projects. They have provided for a real transfer of artistic skill to the members. For some members it has been an introduction to artistic methods never previously experienced, for others the opportunity to pick up skills put aside while working in the paid workforce or rearing children. Many women have taken the skills and confidence gained during the backyard projects and continued to develop their artistic skills through other recreational or professional art courses. For the artists employed over the years, working with the Majura Women's Group has enhanced their community development skills, introduced them to new ways of working and provided insights into different artistic approaches.



Maria Adorni, backyard project 2006

The backyard projects have been diverse in their artistic media and their outcomes. The eighteen backyard projects undertaken to date have included drawing, painting and printing, claywork and mosaic, quilting, embroidery and felting, writing and recording. In all cases they have involved a close collaboration with the artists employed on the projects and the group's members. Members are involved in all aspects of the design and making of the final works. Some projects have focused on individual works, while others have involved the making of public artworks which are on display in many venues around Canberra. The public artworks together with the exhibitions, publications and radio programs which have come from the projects have made the Majura Women's Group highly visible in the wider community.

I was exhausted. All my three children had been sick and I had been sick too. I was still so tired I had trouble following what was going on. And it all seemed irrelevant to crying children, cleaning vomit and broken nights. I was here, I told myself, just to get out of the house. But over that morning a shift happened within me. I had come telling myself that one day, one day in the future, I'll have time for myself again to create and explore, one day. I left realizing I still had it, right now, in the present, no matter how exhausted and bleary I was. I could still have it right now, despite having three children under the age of five. This is the great gift of the Majura Women's Group to me. The physical surroundings of the group that day – the slightly dusty smell of the carpet, ten women looking at blank paper and the warmth of the gas heaters – are forever associated in my mind with memories of happiness, camaraderie and an amazing sense of freedom. At the end of the session I was exhausted, I still hadn't said much, but my world was a lot larger than an endless night and a screaming child.

Frances Byers, Newsletter, 2003



Assembling Diving into motherhood
at Downer Community Centre,
backyard project 1996

The community art produced by members of the Majura Women's Group from 1989 to 1995 is documented in the group's publication, *Homebound*, written by Margaret Simpson.

It became important to me to have an outlet where I could discuss issues both related and not related to the children, and where I could do something to express my creativity and the culture that goes with being at home with children, without necessarily excluding them.

Margaret Simpson, *Homebound*, 1996

[The backyard projects] enabled participants to engage in creative expression and provided constructive outlets to the often intense emotions and feelings which surround full-time mothering. The finished forms have captured, with clarity and humour, the contradictions of the culture of which they are a part.

Ruth Weichard, *Homebound*, 1996

Community arts provide opportunities for both the community and the artist. There is an opportunity for the community to express and define its culture through its members' expression of their experiences and aspirations. Often it is the only chance ever given to record important details about that community's life at that time ...

The community benefits by becoming less of a collection of isolated individuals and by being given the means to express aspects of its members' lives.

Margaret Simpson, *Homebound*, 1996

First backyard project: 1989

Margaret Simpson

I turned up to the first backyard project with eleven other mothers who, like me, had young children. I was a bit worried about my rather rudimentary visual art skills – but keen to try something different and to have a go at visual expression.

Franki Sparke was the project artist and her enthusiasm and delight in our efforts produced an enormous amount of energy and commitment to the project. We didn't start with drawing, but with a series of meetings in everyone's backyards, where we discussed just what we thought we should do with the project. Many topics and thoughts were discussed but the common theme was that we wanted to show and celebrate our lives as mothers and also our lives with our children.



Alison Horridge, backyard project 1989

Franki gave us each small hand-made books – ideas books – where we were to jot down anything that came to mind through the week. We were given a lesson in lino-printing along with some lino-cutting tools and then we were off. There was just so much to say. Our children's drawing style was also valued and incorporated into the project. It was expected that there would be many interruptions in our ability to come along because of the unexpected in family life. In fact, I disappeared from the middle of the project because I was expecting twins. Such was the spirit of the group that I was still included and was kept in contact until I was able to return.



Child's artwork, backyard project 1989

A lino-printing group *No Chickens* was formed at the end of the project and continued to meet in people's homes until 1999. Many friendships were made and I'm grateful that I was given the opportunity and that I took that initial leap out of my comfort zone and into creative expression. My life has been much richer as a result.

Dickson Aquatic Centre mosaic: 1999

Our Mosaic

*Driving down Cowper St
On my way to fight fiercely
For the few free car spaces,
Kids wailing in the back
And the queues in Woolies waiting,
I see it.
"I helped make that!"
I recall we women
busily chattering and clattering.
Patiently puzzling and sticking.
A constellation of talents, creating
Beauty in a rectangle on the pool wall.*

*Later, I see her
As I drive from the car park.
Her alluring smile, serenity
Surrounding by glittering curlicues.
Blue swirls.
Inside that wall are waves,
Cool pools and shady grass.
"I helped make her!",
Seeing my friends and I
Relaxing on the grass,
Smiling at our splashing children.
In peace.
The traffic light, however, is red.*

Penny Atkinson, Newsletter, 2001



Mosaic on external wall of Dickson Aquatic Centre

The swimming pool mosaic is an expression of our creative selves connecting with our community: a woman holds a flowing ribbon which reaches out, linking her with the people around her.



Making the mosaic at
Downer Community Centre, 1999

Canberra Hospital textile wall hanging: 2001

This backyard project started with a bolt of plain white cotton. Various dyeing, painting, printing, stitching and quilting techniques transformed pieces of the fabric into a textile wall hanging measuring approximately 3.1m x 1.8m.



Detail of textile wall hanging, 2001

Mum was critically ill in The Canberra Hospital. The doctor said she had little chance of surviving her fourth operation in less than three months. That morning I got to the hospital at 5 am so that I could be by my mum's side in the hours leading up to her surgery. The nurses would not allow me to see her so early and I was asked to wait out in the corridor. I sat on the floor, head in hands, feeling helpless and sobbing. Something made me raise my head and to my left hung a beautiful quilt. I stood up to look at its colours and images and noticed that it was an artwork created by the Majura Women's Group some years before I became a member. I felt this wonderful feeling of hope fill up my chest and imagined all those women who were there with me – most of whom I will never even know. Mum not only survived but amazed the doctors with her inspirational recovery.

Julie Tarrant, extract of speech, launch of the ACT Action Plan for Mental Health Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention Plan 2006 to 2008 – providing a personal account of the wellbeing benefits of the group, 2006

Audio Women: 2003

I joined the Majura Women's Group at the beginning of the Audio Women project². In the first weeks of the project I was one of the women who found it very difficult to participate in the interviews we were recording - it wasn't just that I felt uncomfortable hearing my own voice played back, I really didn't think I had anything worthwhile to say. Twelve months later I was so proud to be sitting with my family listening to the radio documentary produced by the Majura Women's Group being played on 666 ABC – The subject was 'The Role of Music and Singing in our Lives'. I was one of the people being interviewed and I wasn't just talking, I was singing.

Catherine Croxford, letter of support, application for Community Inclusion Funding to establish the Brindabella Women's Group, 2004

We had a wonderful radio coup during the term when a series of interviews conducted by Sue Hoffmann, on the subject of singing to your children, were edited into a sweet 4 minute package, and played on ABC Radio 666. Louise Maher, the morning show presenter, had planned to play the recording later in the morning, but when her first couple of stories fell through, she programmed Sue's piece as her lead story.

The radio came alive. Dozens of callers of varying ages, nationalities and backgrounds, rang into the station, inspired by the rawness and honesty of the interviews Sue had conducted

² Cath learnt about the Majura Women's Group when she heard Louise Maher interviewing Frances Byers and Sue Hoffmann about the forthcoming *Audio Women* project on ABC 666.

with myself, Cathy Croxford and Anita Sherrer – the fact that we all had a go at impromptu singing may have helped as well. Callers burst into song themselves, recollected songs they'd sung to children, or had sung to them by grandparents. Wonderful stuff and a very auspicious continuation of our radio project as well. Well done to all involved, and watch this space!

Vanessa Morris, *Audio Women* backyard project co-ordinator,
Newsletter, 2004

Following the success of the 'singing mums' piece locally, it also went to air on a number of regional ABC stations. The ABC website still includes a story about this piece. It has an audio link to the package that went to air – go to: <http://www.abc.net.au/canberra/stories/s1071033.htm>.



Phillipa Hayden, backyard project 1989

QE II Family Centre mosaic: 2004

Being involved in the creation of Nurture has been a truly valuable experience for me. Having the chance to coordinate the project has raised my confidence and self esteem which can take a bit of a bashing when you are constantly at home with small children.

Initially as a group we brainstormed to formulate ideas which coincided with QE II needs. The process was very empowering and the range of ideas diverse. We individually drew our vision and presented it to fellow group members. Our final design evolved from these sketches encompassing the themes that had appeared throughout many of them. Over 50 women have contributed to our mosaic and I hope each of us feels a sense of ownership, and achievement, when we look at the wonderful piece of art that we have created.

Our process is very flexible and therein lies its success, we work with who is there on the day as this varies from week to week depending on everyone's outside commitments and if you arrive having had a really bad week and prefer to just sit, have a coffee and regrow well that is fine because we have all been there.

We chose Nurture as the title of our mosaic as it succinctly describes the essence of the Majura Women's Group and QE II. And it beautifully describes what you see here today on a number of levels.

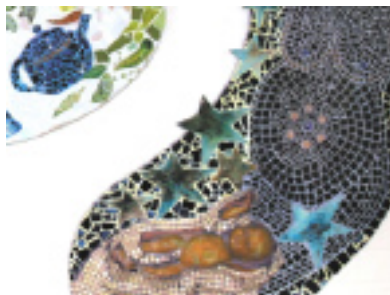
Extract, 2005 speech by Mia Menzies, 2004 backyard project coordinator at the launch of the mosaic, *Nurture*, donated to QE II Family Centre (Newsletter, 2005).



Mosaic installed at QE II Family Centre

For many women the Majura Women's Group mosaic artwork has become an introduction to the idea of community social support for women at home with children, providing a 'bridge' into opportunities to discuss creating support for women in their mothering roles.

Extract, QE II Family Centre's expression of interest in housing Brindabella Women's Group's artwork, *Windows on Mothering*, 2006



Detail of mosaic at QE II Family Centre

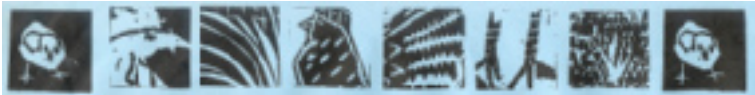
8 Off-shoots

An indication of the success of the group in community development terms is the number and longevity of the 'off-shoot' groups which have been spawned by the group. Members whose interest in a particular activity has been kindled by their involvement in the group have pursued that interest together on an unfunded basis, eg meeting in members' homes. The activities of these off-shoot groups have included linocut printing, felting, writing, and book clubs.

A linocut printing group called *No Chickens*³ was formed at the end of the first 1989 backyard project and continued to meet in people's homes until 1999.

The Majura Women's Group book club started in 1992 and is still going strong. It meets monthly in members' homes and still has ten of its original members. The Dickson library lending system that was negotiated at the time has given us 16 years of low cost access to books.

A felting group has been active since the conclusion of the 2005 backyard project which was based on felting.



Detail of wrapping paper made by No Chickens, 1990

³ The members were all keen on or fascinated by having chickens in their backyards. The first group theme was chickens and resulted in linocuts with which they were well pleased. Figuring that 'they ain't chickens no more', they called the group *No Chickens*.

9 From Majura to Brindabella

In 2004 the Majura Women's Group took the significant step of responding to community calls for the establishment of a similar group on the southside of Canberra. It set about assisting with the formation of a self-run group based in Tuggeranong for women at home with young children. The new group has chosen the name Brindabella Women's Group and it is modelled on the Majura Women's Group as it currently operates. A major source of funding for the establishment of the Brindabella Women's Group is a 3-year ACT Community Inclusion Fund grant. The ACT Department of Health is a government partner for this project. The group's sessions attract strong attendances. It has completed its first major community arts project and has an enthusiastic committee which is in the process of finalising its constitution and pursuing incorporation.

While too early to report whether the model has successfully been transplanted to the south side, the project shows the real public value, the real public good, that can flow from genuine partnerships between government and the community, born out of the community's own instinctive awareness of where the gaps exist, and what might fill those gaps.

Extract, Australia and New Zealand School of Government lecture by ACT Chief Minister, Mr Jon Stanhope titled, *Shaping opportunities, creating public value: Government and community collaboration in the ACT* (31 August 2005)

10 Reflections

I have been asked what I gained from my involvement in the Majura Women's Group. The answer is a complex one. Some of it is about little things - the back exercises that I learnt from an osteopath who spoke to the group, a slice recipe someone gave me at the Christmas party, the bushwalking group I joined on a another member's recommendation. Then there is all the parenting support which has continued well beyond the sessions even though my children are in late primary school. The helpful hints provided by speakers were part of it but even more important were the wide ranging discussions which occurred over coffee or while placing mosaic tiles. Involvement in the committee in many different roles brought friendships, skills and confidence. And I am far from the only member who took these skills and built on them in other roles in local schools or community groups or into the paid workforce.

Anne Robinson, 2006

Speaking from personal experience the group also provides an excellent platform for newcomers to Canberra to form friendships, become aware of local issues and be part of projects relating to the local community. When we arrived in Canberra we knew no-one – I felt very isolated in an alien city with two very young children and another on the way. Desperate for adult conversation was an understatement.

Since joining Women's Group I have enjoyed some excellent activities that I wouldn't otherwise have had the opportunity to try. Last year alone we facilitated tribal drumming, Tai Chi, lino cutting, a discussion on naturopathy, creative writing, fabric dying and printing ... just to name a few.

Libby Neilson, Newsletter 2002



Gail Webb, backyard project 1992

There are certain places in life that meet up beautifully with one's soul, and the Majura Women's Group is that for me. Perhaps it's the instant simpatico that comes with sitting alongside other women with small children, or the fact that it is all right to either bring your children into the meeting room or take your children to the terrific childcare next door, or the small, essential civility of the morning tea break. But I think for me, the heart of it is that this group fiercely and lovingly protects the creativity and intellectual spirits of women – not in our roles as mothers, but in our own right as women. Its uniqueness is a puzzle of sorts: while being mothers of little ones is what brings us together, what we share is beyond that. We share our multi-layered selves, not separate from being mothers, but in the wholeness of being mothers and being women.

The Majura Women's Group has a rich history ... which is evident in its weekly gatherings. The mornings have a rhythm worn comfortably like a well-loved shirt. The projects have been varied and captivate our imaginations. We produce tangible, beautiful results. This group is a rarity because it carves out a place for women to be themselves – with and apart from their children.

This group resonates with my heart and leaving it is one of the top reasons I'm sad about moving from Canberra back to the States. I'll look forward to keeping in touch with its evolution from afar.

Ellen Unruh, Newsletter, 2004

I was a member of the Majura Women's Group from the late 80's to the mid 90's. My children are now in their late teens and we all have fond memories of the Majura Women's Group and of our experiences ... I think it is important to celebrate the group – the fact that it has survived, the fact that it is still being run by the members on a shoestring budget, the fact that it has been responsible for many friendships and much support for women with young children and – last but not least – the fact that it has made a great contribution to building and strengthening the social fabric within the north Canberra community.

Margaret Simpson, Newsletter, 2006

11 Being a part of the chain

To me, the Majura Women's Group is a chain with many links in it, that began 25 years ago and reaches all around the world. Since the group's beginning in lounge rooms in 1981, many hundreds of women have come and gone as group members. The skills they learnt, friendships they made, interests they formed and ideas that were fanned have stayed with them, and impact on their families and friends today, in Canberra, in Australia and indeed, world-wide.

Involvement in the Majura Women's Group tends to stay with you. Of the group which is responsible for this publication and the anniversary exhibition, only one is a current member. Many thanks must go to Sue Hoffmann, Anne Robinson, Margaret Simpson and Lisette Frigo for their time and effort. Once a link in the chain, always a link in the chain!

I am confident that the Majura Women's Group will continue on for many years to come, and the chain will grow longer and longer.

As President in this anniversary year, I feel an immense sense of privilege to be one more link in that chain.

Gretchen Irvine, President 2006 – 2007

Simpatico



We get to ge ther to cre ate and in spi re



Time for our selves Is what we real ly need. We get to



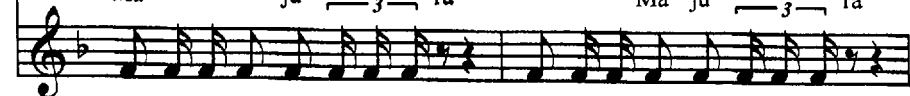
ge ther As friends, wom en, moth ers. We know we are



more than we seem. Ma ju ra Ma ju ra.



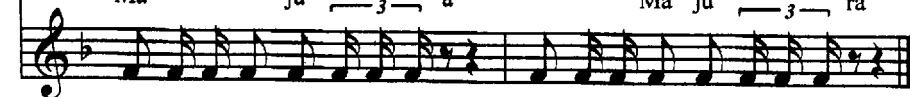
Ma ju ra Ma ju ra



Sim pa ti co Sim pa ti co Sim pa ti co Sim pa ti co



Ma ju ra Ma ju ra



Sim pa ti co Sim pa ti co Sim pa ti co Sim pa ti co

Music and lyrics by Karen Eastwood, written for singing by members at the opening of the group's 2006 exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Gallery



Detail of social map, collaborative work, backyard project 1993

Appendix 1

Projects

Year	Artist	Project
1989	Franki Sparke	Backyard Project (BYP) 1989 – Relief printing, monoprints, linocuts, screenprinting: <i>The artistic territory of motherhood</i>
1990	Jenna Smith	BYP 1990 – Drawing, relief printing, screenprinting: <i>Mothering and maps</i>
1991	Annie Trevillian	BYP 1991– Screenprinting, writing, quilting, papier mâché, linocut, printing: <i>Hidden lives</i>
1992	Bev Hogg	BYP 1992 – Ceramics, sculpture, found objects, screenprinting: Social mapping; including the creation of <i>The Majura mothers' uppers and downers game</i>
1992	Sara Dowse	Writing Project, culminating in the publication of members' short stories: <i>Home grown anthology</i>

- 1993 Franki Sparke BYP 1993 – Drawing, culminating in a social and community map of the inner north of Canberra (on display at Megalo Arts Access)
- 1993 Dorothy Johnston Short Stories: Majura Women's Group writing *project* 1993
- 1994 Suzanne Knight BYP 1994 – Screenprinting, painting, bookmaking: *Women's lives – public and private spaces*
- 1995 Sharon Peoples BYP 1995 – Embroidery: *Women in interiors*
- 1996 Kayleen Watts BYP 1996 – Ceramics: culminating in the Diving into motherhood sculpture donated to the Birth Centre, Canberra Hospital; and leading to *Tea of life* display in the Quirky Gardens area of Floriade, 1997
- 1997 Simone Penkethman BYP 1997 – Theatre and writing exercises, culminating in a 2XX radio broadcast and associated publication, *Spoken Images*

MAJURA WOMEN'S GROUP: CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

1998	Nancy Tingey & Penny Jacobs	BYP 1998 – Works on Paper: <i>Lost and found - journeys into motherhood</i>
1999	Kayleen Watts	BYP 1999 – Mosaic donated to Dickson Aquatic Centre
2000	Kathy Kituai	Writing Workshop
2001	Julie Ryder & Lyn Inall	BYP 2001 – Textile Wall Hanging donated to The Canberra Hospital
2002	Bev Hogg	BYP 2002 – Ceramic Tiles Mural donated to the Dickson Public Library
2003	Sarah Gillman	BYP 2003 – Radio Project: <i>Audio women</i>
2004	Linda Davey, Amanda Bruhn & Helen Martin	BYP 2004 – Mosaic: <i>Nurture</i> donated to QE II Family Centre
2005	Gaida Cirulis	BYP 2005 – Felted Wall Hangings (2) donated to Mental Health Unit, Calvary Public Hospital
2005	Kathy Kituai	Writing Workshop: <i>Sharing stories</i> , culminating in the publication <i>Women's works</i>
2006	Annette Fisher	BYP 2006 – Works on Paper: <i>Reflections</i>

Appendix 2

Publications

- 1989 *Wet patch on carpet* – a compilation of members' writing chronicling 24 hours in the life of a woman with young children
- 1991 *Our hidden lives* – collection of written pieces and artwork by members
- 1992 *Home grown anthology* – collection of short stories by members
- 1994 *Majura Women's Group writing project 1993* – collection of short stories and poetry by members
- 1996 *Homebound: Community art in the Majura Women's Group* – documenting the community art produced by the Majura Women's Group from 1989 to 1995
- 1998 *Spoken images* – background and printed text of material broadcast by 2XX Community Radio in December 1997, with linocut illustrations
- 2005 *Women's works* – collection of members' poetry, story, song and illustrations
- 2006 *Majura Women's Group: Celebrating 25 years* – a selection of recollections, reflections, images and quotes to mark the 25th anniversary of the Majura Women's Group and to complement the 2006 Majura Women's Group retrospective exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Gallery

Appendix 3

Exhibitions⁴

- 1990 Tilley's Divine Café Gallery – exhibition of works from the first backyard project (1989)
- 1991 Gorman House – exhibition of works from the 1990 and 1991 backyard projects
- 1992 Megalo Access Arts – exhibition of works from the 1992 backyard project
- 1994 Artstop (shop window exhibition space near Civic Bus Interchange) – exhibition of screenprints from the 1994 backyard project
- 1995 Dickson Public Library – exhibition of embroidered works from the 1995 backyard project
- 1996 ANCA – retrospective exhibition of works from 1989 to 1996 complementing the launch of *Homebound*
- 1998 Artstop – exhibition of works on paper from the 1998 backyard project⁵
- 2006 Canberra Museum and Gallery, Majura Women's Group: 25 years – retrospective exhibition in celebration of the group's 25th anniversary

⁴ In addition to the above exhibitions, members' ceramic work, Tea of life, was displayed in the Quirky Gardens area at Floriade in 1997.

⁵ A selection of these works won first prize in the community arts category of the 1998 Belconnen Community Art competition.

Appendix 4

Public Artworks

- 1996 Sculpture, *Diving into motherhood* – Birth centre courtyard, maternity wing, Canberra Hospital
Artist: Kayleen Watts
- 1999 Mosaic – Dickson Aquatic Centre, external wall facing Cowper St
Artist: Kayleen Watts
- 2001 Textile wall hanging – stairwell, maternity wing, Canberra Hospital
Artists: Julie Ryder and Lyn Inall
- 2002 Ceramic tiles mural – Dickson Public Library (children's books and story-telling area)
Artist: Bev Hogg
- 2004 Mosaic, Nurture – QE II Family Centre, Curtin.
Artists: Linda Davy, Amanda Bruhn and Helen Martin
- 2005 Felted wall hangings (two) – Calvary Public Hospital, Mental Health Unit
Artist: Gaida Cirulus

Appendix 5

Convenors and Presidents

Convenor, Downer Women's Community Group

1981 to 1986 Paula Simcocks

Convenors, Majura Women's Group⁶

1987 Linda McKenzie

1988 Gay Connors-Lorenz

Presidents, Majura Women's Group⁷

1989-90 Gay Connors-Lorenz

1990-91 Margaret Simpson

1991-92 Margaret Simpson

1992-93 Mary Toohey

1993-94 Dawn Sheridan

1994-95 Frances Lowe

1995-96 Ruth Weichard

1996-97 Tricia Byrne

1997-98 Lisette Frigo

1998-99 Cathy Franzi

1999-2000 Penny Atkinson

2000-01 Megan van der Velde

2001-02 Libby Neilson

2002-03 Sue Hoffmann

2003-04 Sue Hoffmann

2004-05 Ceri Teather

2005-06 Kate Wiseman-Taylor

2006-07 Gretchen Irvine

⁶The group changed its name in 1986.

⁷The title "President" has been used since the group incorporated in 1989.

Starts to print. Annette comes through to cut up fruit in the kitchen. Alison joins Julia to print lino cuts. Frankie comes in with the teas "who wanted weak white?" 12.00 noon. Home from pre-school. Unpack childrens' bags, change Lawrence's nappy. Phone bank to see if they've had my purse handed in (lost yesterday), but no. Start getting out lunch things. Alexander finds purse in his room, where Lawrence must have 'posted' it. Phone police to say purse reported lost now found. Phone husband same reason. Comfort Lawrence who bumped his head trying to walk down the stairs while I was on the phone. Get back to making lunch. Give Lawrence his sandwiches. Find Alexander and get him back inside to wash his hands and eat his lunch. Put off request to have cheese toasties for lunch - maybe tomorrow. We all sit down. Get up to fetch drinks. Fat Get up to butter more bread. Sit down. Get up to fetch peanut butter. Sit down. Get up to fetch different sort of cheese. Sit down. Get up to refill cup with water. Sit down. Water spilled. Get up to get cloth. Sit down. Fat Get up to make myself another sandwich. Sit down. Fat

