

Photography brings lives into focus

A free digital camera may have been the lure for some to sign up for a Taster program in Warrawong on NSW's south coast, but by the end of the seven-week course, it was no more than a bonus.

Ten residents of a public housing estate in one of the state's most disadvantaged areas left the course with a new sense of self and community and a broader horizon of possibilities.

'Life in Focus' was a joint initiative of the WEA Illawarra and Barnados South Coast to build life skills, literacy and a changed attitude to learning in a community mired in alcohol abuse, domestic violence and social isolation.

Photography was the vehicle for change. For 12 hours a week – flexibly timetabled to respond immediately to family needs and volatile personal circumstances – participants took photos on excursions and worked with them on computers back in the WEA classroom.

As well as photographic and computer skills development, participants learned about healthy living and nutrition through cooking and tai chi, and family budgeting.

More subtle life skills development came about through activities in self-awareness – such as personal strengths and learning style analysis – and goal-setting. Specialist trainers, in LLN and from the community, were always present.

Family and community benefits

But just as important were the broader program goals of uniting community members and encouraging intergenerational family activities.

With supportive strategies like free child care, skilled and committed trainers selected for flexibility and approachability, close relations with Centrelink and a bus on immediate hand, the program evolved according to the needs and interests – or the mood and the vibe – of the participants.

Activities like cupcake baking and putting on a scene from a play involved whole families, and the trainers remarked on the positive effects on children of seeing their parents happy and productive in a classroom setting.

Among a number of participants, social isolation and personal hostilities – serious problems on the estate – noticeably lessened as the course progressed.

The final event was a triumph. Local community members, the media and a school principal joined participants' families in a celebration of both photography and new-found self-confidence and friendships.

Course developers and deliverers, Lesley Mortimer of WEA Illawarra and Jennifer Newton of Barnados, believe the participants are now more confident and empowered to make the leap into new life opportunities.

'They took away a lot more than a digital camera from the Life in Focus program,' Lesley says. 'One image sums it up for me. One of our women was so withdrawn and isolated she refused to join in the final group photo. She finally agreed to put her arm in the picture as a mark of participation.'

'But when I looked up again, she'd joined the rest of the group and was doing something I'd never seen before – she was smiling.'