

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### POSTCARD PEN PALS CONNECT IN ISOLATION

During this disruptive time of social distancing and isolation, [Your Side Australia](#) launched a pen pal program to keep the elderly connected with the outside world. Through their [Postcard Pen Pal Project](#), Your Side have facilitated connections and friendships between elderly and people outside their immediate circle. The initiative started in April, and grew quickly into a large network of active pen pals developing connections by sharing their stories, interests and experiences. It is clearly a project that has re-framed the way we view ageing, delivered joy and positive mental health benefits and, for one pen pal duo in particular, has become something quite special indeed.

Lesley Saddington (84) from Berowra NSW says the Postcard Pen Pal Project has made a big impact on her life. The greatest thrill for her participating as a pen pal is that she is communicating with people from a different generation. To her surprise, Lesley got matched with Dr Karen Hawke (42), a post-doctoral research fellow from Adelaide, who has two young children and interests very similar to Lesley's.

“When I heard that I was over the moon! It was like a fresh breeze blowing in on the COVID-19 isolation. I was expecting another oldie like myself, and that our letters would communicate about our frailties and forgetfulness, and all the things that happen when you get old, but instead I got a wonderful young family, living on an acreage with fruit trees - things that I love because I worked for the Department of Agriculture and used to advise about growing fruit,” says a delighted Lesley.

Aside from agriculture, Lesley and Karen have many other shared interests. They both have a science background, and Karen has loved the little anecdotes Lesley has shared with her about what pathology was like at Sydney Hospital in the 1940s. They also “share a great love for music, are both mothers, and have both experienced hardship and loss, so we have plenty to write about!” says Karen.

The connection with Karen has helped Lesley to manage in isolation, but in an exciting development her new friend has been a great inspiration and sparked her to finish a project very close to her heart that she started years ago.

Lesley lost a son, [Anthony Carden](#), to AIDS in 1995, and because he was a leading activist during the AIDS epidemic she decided to write his biography and share his incredible story. However, having convinced herself that, “as an old lady, [she] wouldn't have much credibility with a publisher,” she put the project aside. When Karen, who has done a lot of work in HIV as an epidemiologist, heard about this, she told Lesley that she would love to read it. Now, Lesley is polishing up her manuscript and excited about sharing her son's story with new pen pal Karen. There has clearly been an instant connection and immediate trust between these two amazing women from the very beginning.

“Karen and I have exchanged a number of letters now and we are sharing all these wonderful things - I am so grateful and it has made such a difference to isolation,” shares Lesley.

Your Side asked all participants to share some information about themselves and made matches based on mutual interests. Every participant then received a welcome pack that included a short biography of their new pen pal, some postcards, self-addressed envelopes, basic instructions, “and then we left it up to them to do the writing,” says Danielle Ballantine, CEO of Your Side Australia.



Your Side came up with the Postcard Pen Pal Project as an offline service to help their clients stay connected to the outside world during COVID-19. As the pandemic was emerging, they soon realised that a big part of life would move online. “If you don’t have access to the internet or have not used digital solutions previously, that can lead to increasing anxiety and isolation. We thought it was important to be able to provide services that seem somewhat familiar, and provide a level of comfort. Particularly in a world that seemed very out of control,” says Ms Ballantine.

“I’m sure that anyone who was born before 1985 remembers the joy of going out to the letter box, receiving the letter, opening it, reading the story of another person, and then taking that time to sit down and write back. It is something to look forward to.”

It is evident that the benefits of the project are about much more than just combating loneliness. According to Ms Ballantine, “every hour of social connection someone has reduces the risk of their entry into residential aged care and we know that older people in Australia want to age independently at home - it’s where they feel safest.” Therefore, Your Side is chuffed to see that participants are forming deep relationships, “they are exchanging gifts, celebrating birthdays together, and sharing their wisdom,” shares a smiling Ms Ballantine.

Another major benefit of the project is that it helps re-frame the ideas and myths around ageing. “By matching elderly with people from younger generations, the younger person can see that older people can be fun, interesting, dynamic, and cheeky! It’s a great way to challenge the way we view the elderly and ageing in general,” concludes Ms Ballantine.

This pandemic will pass, but Karen and Lesley know they will stay in touch in the longer term. “When this lockdown ends and if ever get to meet Lesley one day I would love to give her a huge hug!” says Karen.

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#### AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

- Lesley Saddington
- Dr Karen Hawke
- Danielle Ballantine - CEO, Your Side Australia

#### PHOTOS

Download photos of Lesley Saddington [HERE](#)

Photographer: Bec Lewis

#### [FOR VIDEO LINK CLICK HERE](#)

#### ABOUT ANTHONY CARDEN – Lesley Saddington’s son

Anthony Carden (1961–1995), activist, studied acting at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in New York in the early 1980s before returning home to work in theatre, film and television in Sydney and Melbourne. After being diagnosed with AIDS, he joined ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), subsequently becoming a tireless lobbyist for better standards of medical care, enhanced treatment, improved hospital facilities (including beds), and effective safe sex education. He was also prominent in the fight against explicit discrimination against HIV/AIDS sufferers, and against LGBT people more generally. Together with Clover Moore, then the Member for Bligh in the NSW Legislative Assembly, he helped raise \$1 million for the refurbishment of St Vincent’s Hospital’s Ward 17 South, Australia’s first dedicated ward for HIV/AIDS patients. His health having deteriorated throughout his years of activism, Carden died five years after his diagnosis.