**Evan's Garden Library & Community Pantry**

**By Jennifer Brinsden**

Evan's Garden Library & Community Pantry was started very simply by my 7 year old son in March 2020 when Covid restrictions first began in NSW.

That seems like a lifetime ago.

At the time when we knew little about this Covid virus my son Evan had been identified as at high risk due to his asthma so was sent home from school 2 weeks prior to the official lockdown in 2020. To occupy his long days at home we gave him little activities to keep him happy & busy (while maintaining social distancing); building a garden in the front yard with his dad (who’s business was slow due to covid restrictions), chalk art on the pavement, inspirational quotes for the walkers passing by, art in our windows.

One day we had a declutter of his books & we decided to offer them to our community in the form of a street library (just a small bookshelf which we took out each day when weather permitted).

We wanted to ensure people’s safety so we provided hand sanitiser, alcohol wipes for cleaning & advised social distancing. From there the street library & garden took on a life of its own; donations kept getting dropped at our door; books, plants, seeds, soil, fertilizers, chalk, painted rocks, cuttings, homegrown fruit, beautiful notes were left for my son from other children in the community & little anonymous gifts & cards from the people walking by.

In a time of uncertainty, worry & turmoil this little project brought our community together. In early June we decided to make the street library a permanent feature & asked for the community’s help to source a permanent structure. We had a TV cabinet donated, then doors, then a multitude of amazing books & DVDs to fill our shelves. On the 13th June 2020 we unveiled our new & improved permanent, weatherproof street library. The street library became a place for community sharing whether that be books, DVDs, plants or home grown produce.

In the school holidays we also ran an activities swapping box for board games, puzzles and craft packs which have been so popular & has given local kids something to look forward to when we were restricted in our travels.

The quote we have in our library is "Reading gives us someplace to go when we have to stay where we are". How true a saying in these times we now face.

As lockdown continued & people’s work was impacted we noticed a need for emergency food relief in our area. Just that simple meal to tide a family over before they got paid or more accessible food for the those who didn’t have transport or needed to avoid crowded shops. So we added a community pantry; open 24/7 for non-perishable pantry items. Over the months that followed we began to make amazing connections with other community groups and charities who gave so generously so we could create weekly food hampers for those families doing it tough. No questions asked, no judgement, no paperwork just request & a bag was left out for contactless collection.

We run the library & pantry on the principle of "Take what you need, Give what you can". This gives our visitors the freedom to take, swap or donate depending on their circumstance.

As word got out the ‘helpers’ came to the forefront and we were able to act as a collection point for other projects. From school supplies packs to sanitary items to blankets & jackets for the homeless.

We formed beautiful friendships with other locals who all lend a hand when we tackle larger community projects such as Mother’s Day stalls, Christmas give-aways and hamper packing.

Most recently we’ve been able to help set up a sister group exclusively for free food hampers who once a week received & distribute a large charity donation of fresh produce.

Now we find ourselves in the midst of another lockdown and added to that in a hotspot LGA as part of Western Sydney. The impact on the community seems to have hit harder than last year. Emotional well-being & mental health awareness has emerged as a primary issue alongside financial hardship. Our efforts in all we do has been to find projects which promote connection to community and the relief of that loneliness that creeps in. All the while maintaining covid safe practices.

Because we can’t have our normal visitors from other shires coming to the library, Evan started making cooking videos to brighten people’s day.

Our hope is that we have brought a little joy & eased a little burden to those that physically visit us or view our projects via social media.

Our local community have been so generous in their donations & support in everything we do. They have claimed the street library & pantry as their own & protect, care & keep it filled on a daily basis.

Such a small thing has brought us all together.

We would of never expected that when we gave up a little bit of our front lawn to provide a place for community sharing that in just over year later it would have provided so much joy, kindness, inspiration and community spirit to not only our suburb but those around the world.

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* Evan's Garden Facebook Group link here: https://www.facebook.com/evansgardenlibrary/about
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