



# The Story of the Stewart Island Community Centre

*Building community and a centre to be proud of.*

**Community:** Stewart Island/Rakiura

**Theme:** Working together in place

Living on an Island of 400 people means finding yourself stepping into roles that you might not otherwise. To get things done, local residents have to step up and share in taking responsibility for helping make things happen – and we do. Groups of people are frequently pulled together for specific tasks and projects. Building our community centre was no different. This story shares our dream and our journey to make it all happen.

## ***Why a new centre?***

One of the draw backs of living on an island is equality of opportunities. As our children left the Island to go to high school, we began to realise just how much they had been missing out on because of a lack of community facilities on the Island. For example, Island kids were missing out on playing sport because of our high rainfall and no indoor spaces to play. Similarly, they missed out on cultural opportunities because the local school never had a hall or the kinds of facilities that town kids have access to all the time.

We did have a small hall on the Island. Our old County Hall was built in 1906, and while it had served the community well, it had become quite run down. A report commissioned early in 1992 estimated that \$80,000 would be required to make the building structurally sound. Significant further work would also be required to bring the building, which comprised the hall, a Council office, library and public toilet, up to a decent standard. For local residents, this seemed like a lot of money to spend on something that was largely outdated, so in April 1992, a public meeting was called to consider the building's future and next steps.

Around 150 people attended the meeting. There was broad agreement that no further money should be put into the old hall and that planning should instead begin for a new facility. With likely building cost of \$1 million, a lone dissenting voice at the meeting was fast to point out, "it'll never work, you'll never raise a million dollars in a small community like this".

But epitomising the ‘can do’ Stewart Island community spirit, Alistair Eade, who went on to become the Chairman of the Community Centre Trust, quickly replied, “hang on a minute mate, I’ve never seen a hall made of \$1million but I have seen one made of materials.”

A committee was formed on the night of the public meeting to progress the project. The group included a fisherman, a couple of marine farmers, a housewife, a fish shed manager, and a mechanic – a real cross section from our community. Over the next few years, all monthly planning meetings took place over a cup of coffee at the Cave’s kitchen table in Horse Shoe Bay. Meetings were relatively informal. We reported on progress and continued planning forward in a way that drew on everyone’s skills to get things underway.

### ***Fun and Fund Raising***

To build our new centre, we knew we had to go beyond our usual cake baking efforts. Members from the Trust went out and met with many of the local groups to see how they could help us.

One of our first major fund raising efforts was a demolition derby up on the Ryans Creek Airstrip which brought in \$4000 and kick started the Centre’s Trust Fund. Around the Island at that time were a heap of old broken down cars laying around on the sides of the roads, and in paddocks and garages. The demolition derby provided a reason for locals to get them all going again – with the Derby winner being the car that kept going the longest. We had a hilarious day on the air strip, with bets taken as to which driver would be in the last remaining car - everyone really got into the spirit of things.



This sense of fun continued into our other fund raisers. For three years we held a ‘Spud Growing Contest’ where people were given a seed potato and a bucket to see who could grow the biggest potato. One year though, we realised the level playing field had been compromised when the winning potato dug up was red –while all the seed potatoes issued that year had been white!!!

We also held a ‘Stars in your Eyes’ talent competition which was really entertaining. We ran fashion parades, and, with the local sea scouts, also co-hosted a rowing race across the Foveaux Strait from Bluff to Stewart Island which netted around \$8000.

We also became adept at writing funding applications and were lucky to receive grants from the Community Trust of Southland, Lottery Grants Board, Southland District Council and the Ministry of Education.

Other income earners included: recycling and selling rimu from the old hall as it was demolished, fish sales, and locals donating some of their paua quota which other community members collected and sold with profits going to the Trust. People just didn't get out their cheque books – they got out and gave in many different ways over a very long period.

Two trustees also purchased an old mill and set it up in a warehouse in Invercargill and all the timber required for the new building was milled there over a three year period. The mill worked 40 hours a week for 6 months a year during the quieter months when the fishermen weren't fishing. A lot of people also gave their time to help work the mill in town, with local boat and aircraft operators helping ferry holiday home owners and locals over to work at the mill free of charge. The fact that people were able to freely travel to and from the Island made a huge difference to the multiple contributions that people were able to make.

Click [here](#) to hear about achievements from the mill and how many hands made light work.

In the end, on top of the major grants we received, we raised \$1,200 per head of population towards our new Community Centre. This proves what can happen when you really put your mind to it! Along with financial contributions, there were also many important 'in kind' contributions people made too, for example one local volunteered 1700 hours as a labourer on the building site. Trades people and consultants we employed also put way more time into things than they were ever paid for.

### ***From Vision to Reality***

When the Community Centre Trust first began meeting, our plan was to begin building our new Community Centre in 7-10 years. Our vision for the new centre came together by putting together a 'wish list' of everything we wanted in a community facility. By encouraging people both to dream, and help find extra funds for the spaces they really cared about, so much of what we dreamed about actually came true including:

- A full commercial kitchen
- A large walk in chiller
- A sauna
- A fully equipped gymnasium – complete with mirrors and stereo equipment for working out
- A squash court
- A retractable stage
- Conference/wedding reception area
- A library
- A covered walkway through to neighbouring Halfmoon Bay school so the school could easily utilise indoor recreational facilities on a daily basis

Right on track, demolition of the old hall began in 1998, with construction taking around a year. We opened our new \$1.5m facility on 11 September 1999 - debt free. This meant we didn't have to think about how to pay off the remaining debts as it was all paid for.

Our journey wasn't totally plain sailing though. As within any community, there were the some 'nay sayers' and moments of 'conflict' with other local organisations also fund raising in the same community facility space. In the end though, we found ways to work together and we both achieved our building goals.

### ***Keeping things going***

We now have a part time paid Community Centre Coordinator (8 hours per week) who has created a whole new range of exercise groups and activities. Having someone with lots of energy and ideas in this role has really helped grow things. For more on what happens at the Centre see [here](#)

The ongoing running of a community centre is another story. We soon realised we also needed to find additional revenue streams to support the Centre's ongoing running costs. One of the ideas we came up with was bottling 'pure' Stewart Island rain water that runs off the Community Centre roof and selling it at the local store and in and outlets in Invercargill and broader Southland. Click [here](#) to learn more.

While the bottling project is profitable, our more substantial revenue comes from an innovative use of a different local resource. When a local marine farming company established a new mussel farm at Big Glory Bay a few years ago, they put in two 'community' mussel lines. This means the profits from these lines (around \$20,000 each year) comes directly to the community centre, making a significant contribution towards the Centre's annual operating costs.

One of our more recent challenges has been bringing new younger people onto the Community Centre Trust. With two of our trustees having been on the group since its inception 18 years ago, we're aware of the importance of growing new blood and skillsets to keep taking things forward. This has proven harder than we thought, as while people may be happy to help with fund raising activities, many don't want to be on committees. Despite this, we've managed to now co-opt two new younger trustees onto the group to help bring new ideas, thinking and connections.

We're really proud of all we've achieved –this building and what happens here will continue to be an asset for this community for many, many years to come.

#### ***Learnings:***

- Having a vision and knowing that with hard work, commitment, persistence and time, that anything is possible.
- The importance of bringing together good teams with multiple skills and leveraging off personal and professional connections.
- Making it easy for multiple people to contribute in multiple ways. As a result the many diverse talents, assets, skills and resources of all those who lived, worked, cared, holidayed and invested in Rakiura could be all be harnessed.
- Having fun – long term journeys are sustained by fun and friendships.
- Location matters – having community facilities co-located and in the right place (good access, visibility etc) is important.

#### ***Outcomes***

- A new state of the art, multi-purpose community facility was built for only \$1.5 million dollars.
- New relationships were formed as a result of different parts of the Stewart Island community (and friends!) planning, working and socialising together over many years.
- Larger scale events and conferences are now able to be held on the Island – which also helps generate additional income for the Island's economy.
- New formal and informal meeting spaces provide opportunities for participation in a much wider range of community activities.
- Local school children are able to utilise indoor recreational facilities no matter what the weather!
- An enterprising attitude has resulted in bottled rain water and community mussel lines now providing ongoing operational funding for the Centre.

- The Community Centre is a key focal point – a place where local people can share, learn, recreate and socialise together. It's also a place of great pride, and has helped bring a greater shared sense of belonging and achievement among local people.

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