

The Story of how Toy Share began

By Eddie Boyle

Toy Share began in September 2001, more as a good-will gesture for a sick Neighbour than some dynamic business concept.

My next door neighbour (Jock) had undergone an operation to remove a Cancerous Kidney. He was a very active man and was always tinkering with things...but after the operation, he wasn't able to do the things he used to do. So I tried to think of ways I could keep his spirits up and keep him busy at the same time (I'm a firm believer that people need a purpose in life - it keeps you motivated - gets you out of bed in the morning - and provides fulfilment) I was worried that Jock's debilitation would cause him increased frustration and a feeling of worthlessness....so.... I went around to a few of my friends and asked if they had any old bikes or toys that we could fix up and donate to charity. I would hand the bikes over the fence to Jock and ask him if he could help me fix them up so I could give them to sick or disadvantaged kids. It worked a treat! Jock would spend hours tinkering with the bikes and then hand them back over the fence when he had them fixed.

What happened after this amazed even me!!

I was a Manager with Mission Australia at the time and encountered lots of families who were struggling, I began offering the toys and bikes that Jock and I had repaired to the children of those families...The word soon got out that Eddie from Mission was giving away toys and needed more toys. There were days when I would turn up at my office only to find it choc-a-bloc with bags upon bags of toys, games, bikes and bears. My house was coming down with toys and my garage was filling up at a rapid rate - I was inspired and overwhelmed equally.

Around that same time, Mission's Big Heart Op Shop had opened in Kenny St, Wollongong and I went around to have a look at their new Warehouse. I noticed a small, empty building next to it and I made the necessary enquiries. I discovered the little run down building wasn't being used (probably because it was absolutely filthy) so I asked if I could use it to store some of the toys that had been donated and was relieved when I received a favourable response.

Most 'normal' people take 4 weeks off work to go on holidays and relax - not me - I took my holiday leave in small amounts each week (every Thursday & Friday for 10 weeks). Alison (my wife) and I spent every Thursday, Friday & Saturday (plus every evening) cleaning, scrubbing, painting and polishing until we had that little place looking like a proper toy store.

I then built shelves, laid carpet and decorated the store with all the donated toys. I sent gift certificates to all the major charities and asked them to offer them (free of charge) to any family they knew that was facing financial hardship...soon our little store was full of people, all of whom were extremely thankful for the service we provided....but the store wasn't depleting of toys...if anything we were receiving even more donations...we began offering Certificates of appreciation to those children who donated their toys so others may benefit. We were very moved by the incredible community support and overwhelming 'spirit of sharing'

The general public began asking if they could purchase the toys...so we established 2 beneficiaries who would receive any net profits generated

from the sale of toys (South Coast School for Children with Autism and the Illawarra Society for Crippled Children). We set up a Board of Management and we registered 'Toy Share Incorporated' as a non-profit association. Thus was the birth of Toy Share..'Australia's First Community Toy Store'!!

The following year, Toy Share was successful in securing a **Work for the Dole sponsorship contract**, which didn't bring in much money, but did bring the much-needed man-power.

I had left Mission Australia and assumed another senior Management position within another Industry and every week-end, public holiday and day off, I'd be picking up toys, dropping off leaflets or busying myself in Toy Share building shelves or repairing toys.

Disaster hit at the beginning of 2004 when we couldn't renew the lease on the building we were in as it was ear-marked for demolition. This set me on the search for new premises. The only place available that would offer the space we needed and allow a short term tenancy agreement was going to cost me \$25,000pa ...I say 'me' because Toy Share had very little income and absolutely no capital (except for the blood, sweat and tears of Alison and I...which banks don't accept as security :)). The board met..and I convinced them I could make it work...so we signed up for 6 months. At the end of our lease, the Landlord increased the rent to \$35,000....We were devastated!... In April 2004 The Board of Toy Share Inc decided to begin winding it up, as it wasn't financially viable and unfortunately Alison and I had used up all our money....

That night, after our Board meeting, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't understand how something so inspiring, so beneficial to those that were most disadvantaged within our community, could just stop. We had more than 15 volunteers at this stage, people who were giving their own time to bring joy to others. We had 10 people with Disabilities who also volunteered their time to help prepare the toys for hampers. We were providing services to children from Barnardos, parents affected by Mental Illness through Illawarra Mental Health Service. We had distributed over 500 Gift Vouchers. We WERE making a difference and I wasn't prepared to 'wind it up' simply because the money wasn't there....so....

At 2am I began hand-writing letters to local business people asking if they had a premise that Toy Share could use...

On Monday morning, Alison rang to say she had been visited by John Molnar, a local property developer, who received my letter and after suffering the tragic death of his own child last year, wanted to help. He offered us an old builder warehouse in Fairy Meadow with the instructions 'If you can turn this dump into a toy store - you can have it'so we did...and Toy Share was saved!

The premises at Fairy Meadow was offered to us 'Rent Free' and we decided to use the money we would have otherwise spent on rent, to open another Community Toy Store in Warilla to service the disadvantaged in the Illawarra's Southern Suburbs...'Toy Share 2' was officially opened on December 6th 2004 and is flying along.

In October 2004 I surrendered my full time Management position and Alison and I now devote our full attention to Toy Share (as well as our two children of course, Declan 9 & Callum 5). We have been granted another work for the dole sponsorship, are presently training our volunteers towards a CertIII in Business, have introduced on-line marketing to enable us to promote our services to a wider community, have been asked to establish

several more Community Toy Stores in Sydney and Victoria and will distribute over 2000 gift certificates to families in need between now and Christmas..... I also have a belief that 'Life is more about the memories you make than the money you make' (but the bank doesn't accept memories as security either and bills still need to be paid) So Alison and I are hoping, that if things continue as they are, we may be able to draw a part-time salary before May and become Toy Share's first full-time, paid, employees.

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