

Tools and talk for Australia's new men

September 29 2011, by Amy Coopes

They've long been considered an Australian man's temple but the humble backyard shed is experiencing a super-sized renaissance, and they're bringing blokes back from the brink.

The premise is simple: community spaces where men can do handywork, fitted out with wood and metal workshops, assorted tools and gardening areas.

But it's "health by stealth" according to Hunter Valley convenor Marty Leist, rescuing retired and [unemployed men](#) from lonely and sometimes dark existences and encouraging them to work -- and talk -- alongside others.

"It's like we've tapped into a new male, you've got your SNAGs -- your sensitive new age guys -- these are 'shedders'," Leist tells AFP at the thriving Maitland Men's Shed in a sleepy Hunter Valley town 160 kilometres (100 miles) north of Sydney.

"These are guys that have been tough, the strong person all their life, and now they've found an environment where they can let it all out, and be themselves.

"It's like a big relief, a big weight off their shoulders. They're not alone."

There are now 600 registered Men's Sheds across Australia -- explosive growth from a dozen or so five years ago -- and their patron is Tim Mathieson, partner of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the nation's "First

Bloke."

Their popularity has even seen some sheds open their doors to women, an issue which varies from site to site depending on demand.

The Maitland centre is a hive of activity, with saws and welders humming and a small group puzzling over a giant Maori canoe, the dream project of a local man who died before he had a chance to finish it.

Good-natured ribbings are the order of the day, and the men speak freely as they toil over a playhouse and paint bird boxes to sell in the local petshop.

Men's Sheds operate under the motto "Shoulder to Shoulder" and Maitland president John Hill says the practical element is critical in getting the sometimes gruff and hardened locals to open up.

"Guys come in with no self-esteem at all and build themselves up purely because (they realise) 'Hey I'm needed again in life, I'm not just sitting around waiting to die'," Hill says.

"Suddenly they've got a reason to get out of bed. It's a harsh way of saying it but that's how it is."

Jerry Cassidy, a retired telecom technician, came to the shed seeking companionship after his wife died and their adult children left home.

He has never looked back.

"You start to use your hands and it loosens people's tongues," Cassidy says.

"People that are very quiet normally and standoffish come here and they start to do stuff, and they talk to people.

"All of a sudden you're in your old work situation with your mates, they were like your family. These guys are just the same."

Every shed has its stories and its characters -- Maitland's resident scavenger Graham Williams is known as "Batman" because he likes to spend the days in the shed's half-finished mezzanine sorting and organising supplies.

One former mine worker who prefers to stay anonymous says the shed gives him a sense of purpose and helps him to stay off the drink.

"When I retired I started to vegetate and I was just getting sicker and sicker," he said.

"The doctor's advice to me was use it or lose it."

Local speech therapists arrive with cake for an informal talk about recovering from a stroke and Leist says health issues -- both physical and mental -- are a big part of a shed's business.

Across the valley at Cessnock's shed regular seminars are held on issues including prostate cancer, heart health, diabetes and depression.

They're touchy issues that men can be unwilling to talk about, even with their wives, but the familiar environment gives them the space to open up about their symptoms and for others to ask questions.

"They don't know what they're talking about half the time, it just comes out, they don't realise they're talking about themselves," says Cessnock shedder Col Chapman.

Men who might otherwise slip through the cracks -- those whom Leist says "were inches away from topping themselves" -- can find new meaning in their lives and the shed can be a pathway to counselling or treatment for a medical problem.

Food grown in the shed garden will often go to the single, older men to make sure they're eating well and Hill says some of the Maitland members have defied dire health predictions since joining up.

"We got a couple of guys we thought would die when they first came here, but they're still here," he says.

"The doctors have come back to them and said 'I don't know what's happening to you but keep doing it'."

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