

Members Magazine

Roundtable

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Edwina Coates retires after 29 years fostering a thriving OSHC community

The beloved coordinator of Ivanhoe Primary School OSHC opens up to Community Child Care Association consultant and long-time friend Lucy Harberts about her career and the people she shared it with.



Edwina:

As a child, I dreamt of being a television cooking demonstrator. My second dream was teaching, and if I didn't get into teaching, I really wanted to be a hairdresser. I used to amuse all the other younger children in our neighbourhood – I made cakes out of washing powder, cut other children's hair, and made up little games like hide and seek and treasure hunts.

It's interesting to think that's where it all started. When I got to 20, I still had that love of being with children. I didn't push it aside. When you look back, I've lived my dream careers – I was a teacher, but then in OSHC I could also cook and be creative.

I have worked for 29 years in the OSHC sector and all of them at Ivanhoe. At my interview, the families who'd started the OSHC program said they were

looking for stability. They wanted someone to be with their children every morning and afternoon as they progressed through primary school. I bumped into those parents recently and they said, 'we wanted you to work for seven years – we didn't image you'd still be there now'.

When I started out at Ivanhoe, we didn't have a phone, fridge or running water. OSHC was in a portable building at the top of the school – we had to go fill a bucket from the oval tap to do the washing up. It's come a long way since then.

Lucy: It certainly has. Can you tell us about some of the people who've helped you build the program up from that portable building to a thriving community?

I met Monika back when I was teaching in South Australia 45 years ago. Her little boy was

the same age as mine, so we got to know each other through playgroup and doing crafty things in a tiny country town. Her daughter was also in my class. Then we both found ourselves in Melbourne, and 29 years ago I employed her at the OSHC program at Ivanhoe. She's been there with me from the beginning.

She started one day a week while working other jobs. She soon realised it could be a fun place to work and took on the job full time. We used to do speedy trips to look at art exhibitions together during the day. It was quite inspiring – we've found that cooking, art and other creative endeavours have bonded us, and are the best ways to develop relationships with children and families. The art-seeking has continued – most recently, we went around the city searching for UooUoos [100 colourful sculptures designed by Australia's most talented artists]. Even the principal got into it!

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Edwina Coates and Monika Riley dressed up for Ivanhoe Primary School's 150th birthday

I think when Rekha joined the program about 15 years ago, she didn't know what to think of us. She was a parent who came into my office right at the end of the holidays wearing a beautiful green sari. She asked, 'What would I have to do to work in a school in Australia?' – her family had only been out here for around six months.

I said, 'First you'd need a Working with Children Check', and she said, 'I've got it'. I said, 'Well, you'd need a first aid certificate', and she said, 'Yep, I've got that too'. Those were the two priorities in my mind, as well as a desire to work with children, so I offered her a job.

She started working with us full time straight away. She took on her role so seriously that after only a few months, I was comfortable leaving her in charge while I went on holiday. She and her family became my family.

That's what you do Edwina, bring people in and they become part of your family. You've created a web of connections. For many children, OSHC is their extended family. Our neighbourhoods have changed – we don't have children of all ages playing in the street so much. That idea has been picked up and popped into an OSHC service.

Exactly. Lots of families see us as grandparents or an extension of their family. Years ago, you were told, 'don't get too close to the families – say hi and bye'. But I couldn't help myself from sharing things with families and supporting them. Now, that's just the way it is – it's all about building long-term relationships.

Over 29 years, I've connected with thousands of children and families and overseen hundreds of educators. At some points we've had 12 or 13 OSHC staff at once, sometimes half of the team being men. One educator, Sam, came to OSHC regularly as a child, then started as a junior at the program at age 15. He's now doing teacher training – he developed his love of children and teaching through mixing with the community.

In the heyday, before COVID, we had 10 juniors coming each week. The junior program all started with Caitlin. Like Sam, she was in the OSHC program as a child and then at 16, she said to me 'Can I come on a Friday to make the pancakes? I don't want to get paid – I just want to come and be a part of it.' Of course, the principal said we had to pay her. At 18, she did a diploma to become an educator at the program. She worked with us for over 10 years.

Other children in the program worked out that they might be able to get a job when they

were older. I asked them to hand in resumes. The school really supported it all the way through. It's funny, some of our staff who were in the program as children still have crafts and things at home that they made at OSHC.

It's wonderful they have these memorabilia – it shows how important it is to them. What are some of your most memorable moments? What would you tell yourself about OSHC if you were just starting out now?

So many people have said to me 'why didn't you go back to teaching?' – but there's nothing as fulfilling as working in OSHC. You're working with like-minded people and mixing with the whole community of children, families, extended families, friends and sometimes even pets.

There have been countless memorable moments. We used to cook extravagant dinners and have children set up the tables. We'd have art exhibits where parents had to buy their own children's work. We got dressed up at school fairs – one year I was Pippi Longstocking and dyed my hair red. But just being a part of the Ivanhoe community is the highlight.

Over my time, the introduction of the education and care regulations and frameworks and calling us 'educators' has given us

support – and elevated the level of expectation from the school and families. I would tell myself to make the program as welcoming for families as possible.

When I first started, there wouldn't have been a child from another country. The growing diversity is so exciting, you're learning all the time. It's not a normal job – you've got to bring passion, enthusiasm, and a love of children. You've got to be patient and come with an open heart.



▲ Clockwise top to bottom: Edwina at her computer in 1998, dressed up for Ivanhoe Primary School's 150th birthday, and dressed up in the OSHC room



Want to see Edwina in action at Ivanhoe Primary School OSHC? Check out this popular video:

<https://bit.ly/EdwinaCoates>