

## **Merrimaker - AROUND THE TOWN**

Age, The (Melbourne, Australia) - Saturday, October 9, 1999

Author: Alan Attwood

**Carolyn Lunt** lives in Northcote near a railway line, several major roads and a creek. Walking towards her house, chirping birds compete with the thrum of traffic heard but not seen. Her home isn't hard to pick. In a street of brick houses with standard nature strips, her's is the old timber cottage almost hidden by vegetation and a pile of useful bits of wood. Out front, by the bitumen, is a bountiful flurry of native grasses.

Near the gate, which sticks a bit, is a vegetable garden. Celery plants grow up through old one-litre milk cartons in an inspired piece of recycling. Lunt is big on recycling. After I rang asking about her years of work on the Merri Creek she sent me, in the mail, a pile of bits and pieces in an envelope that someone had originally sent to her - from Adelaide, as it turned out. Among the stuff in this envelope was a copy of a Community Spirit Award she received from the City of Darebin two years ago, a letter about a local litter prevention taskforce, and two pieces of paper, printed on both sides and stapled together, headed: History Of My Work "Where I Live" From 1981 Until 1999.

It began: "Thank you for your interest in the few bits and pieces that I have been involved in since my arrival in Northcote in 1981. My work includes the following initiatives: beautification, restoration and positive litter control initiatives, reducing, reusing and recycling efforts and environmental awareness education programs. These are undertaken in my work place as a kindergarten teacher at the Annie Dennis Kindergarten in Northcote ... and in my personal life as a volunteer revegetating on the Merri Creek."

She has made the Merri her main mission. For 16 years she has been tending to a stretch of the creek that runs close to the back of her long, narrow block. When she applies for grants, which she's done successfully from time to time, she calls her work "Revegetation of the Merri Creek riparian zone using indigenous species". The key word here is "indigenous". To Lunt, anything not native is dismissed as a weed. And anything not local is regarded with suspicion. Near her place, after some prodding, the council planted a small eucalypt. Good, right? Wrong. The seeds came from Macedon, says Lunt. What were they thinking?

She has much to say about the creek and all her weeding and planting. But before I can hear any of it she asks if I'd mind removing my shoes. "It's a bit of a Buddhist thing," she explains, somewhat apologetically. Inside, the only worldly possessions she admits to being proud of are a couple of Tibetan rugs. There are none in the kitchen, where it seems as if things go up on walls never to come down again: Chinese flags; signs denouncing police states, uranium mining, and the sale of frigates; two similar portraits of the Queen, one of which is stained. "The cat piddled on it," she says, without explaining when or how this happened.

She has two cats, several itinerant possums, and a dog - a friendly terrier

which noisily gnaws a bone in her basket as tea is made: Lady Grey tea, which Lunt declares appropriate for a sunny day. Before she can pour it the phone rings. Her end of the ensuing conversation goes something like this: "Good afternoon! ... There's no Mr or Mrs here. There is a Ms ... Oh yes. Don't get many courtesy calls here. You're not from Citibank or Westpac are you? ...What do I do? I revegetate." Then, having politely declined the offer from a bemused phone spruiker, she concludes: "Have a nice day. Oh yes, I'll chat to anyone." She does. She's a great talker. But she's stumped when asked to describe herself. She says she'll have to pass, only to then offer the following terms over her tea: conservationist, environmentalist, feminist. "I'm a bit passionate," she offers. Especially when it comes to the creek, which she says is the main reason she chose to live in the area after moving from Warrandyte in 1981. She came to believe that the creek precinct was inexorably being ruined by litter, weeds and industry. In '83 she decided it was time to act when she saw a neighbor's landlord tossing rubbish over his back fence on to the creek banks. First she tossed the rubbish back. Then she started trying to beautify the creek. "It was being treated like a drain because it looked like one."

She collected litter. She organised clean-up days and got some local people to help. She formed a group called Friends of Ross Street. She weeded and planted, now aiming to propagate 1000 indigenous grass plants in her back yard every year. She got to know people running indigenous nurseries, people in other parts of Melbourne involved in similar revegetation projects. She badgered the local council, water management authorities, even the bicycle lobby (after a bike path was laid near the creek). She produced a brochure on environmental issues for nearby residents - some of whom, she suspects, still regard her as an obsessive and slightly nutty greenie.

Most importantly, she dirtied her hands in Merri Creek soil. And what she's achieved is seen when we put our shoes back on and go for a walk. Down by the creek it is cool and tranquil. Just beyond the high south bank is busy Heidelberg Road. But traffic noise is dulled by the sound of water. Lunt walks quickly, pointing out grasses and plants and places where she's spotted birds and lizards and snakes. Snakes? Sure. Without snakes, she says, there are no kookaburras. On a tree is one of her signs: Thank you for keeping domestic animals out of this area. We are using local native "indigenous" plants to create habitats for kookaburras, kingfishers, acacias ... Another sign says simply: If you litter our creek we'll dob you in.

It's a community effort, she says often. Her garden is Crown land and many others are involved in the revegetation work. But she's the one pushing the project forward ever so slowly, putting in at least four hours every Friday. As she wanders she can't resist pulling out clumps of weeds when she sees them. And all the while she talks, with her sentences invariably interrupted by another thought or plant she needs to point out: "I get so frantic that people are not connected with their environment ... The more it grows the more people are amazed ... If things are made hard for me it gives me more strength to keep going."

She points to some logs on the creek bank. She first put them there to discourage mountain-bike riders after they started using it as a slalom course. Other people pinched the logs for firewood. So she put some signs up: Lizards need logs too. Then she secured the logs with thick wire. Look there, she insists. One of the logs, rotting gently, has clumps of native grass growing on top. Mother Nature approves.

And there's a red gum. She planted it in 1989. Now it is several times her own height. "Look at that! In 100 years I'll be dead and gone. It excites me that this could still be here. I just want to leave the kingfishers with a habitat and the frogs with a healthy creek ... Some people get passionate about cars. Some people get passionate about romance. Me? A red gum."

Seeing a flash of blue as a kingfisher swoops from its nest can keep her going when it all starts to seem too hard or when, as now, her money has run out (she'd love a sponsor, though preferably not one producing the fast-food containers that keep turning up in the creek).

Here on the Merri banks, near a railway line and several major roads, **Carolyn Lunt** feels most at peace. She's a political person, she says, but "this is the only place I feel like I'm really doing something. And I can leave it behind".