



DRUM Beats

True to form, Byron Bay's older residents are moving to their own beat. Casey-Ann Seaniger ventures into Northern NSW to meet members of the local drumming circle.

"I feel alive again," declares Feather, as she strides toward me in a flowing white kaftan.

Upbeat and unreserved, Feather dons a silver halo made out of Christmas tinsel as she floats among a crowd that has gathered at the local community centre to celebrate the last drumming class of the year.

Within seconds, the facilitator, Gareth, strikes the first drum.

The faces around me light up, toes start tapping, and the energy in the theatre is electric as the hypnotic rhythm reverberates through the theatre walls.

Outside, Byron Bay's streets are buzzing with tourists, mostly backpackers and young hippies keen on drinking, drugs and surfing.

But the town is also occupied by a forgotten group, the many elderly people who have called this region home for many years, long before Byron became the holiday mecca it is now.

Over time, older people had become less visible in the community, with many choosing to stay in the sanctuary of their own homes instead of venturing outside.

And it was the local Byron Community Centre, located on the main strip of the town, which noticed the

changing landscape on the streets outside, prompting it to address social isolation amongst the town's older people.

Staff at the community centre had heard about drumming classes making a difference to dementia patients in neighbouring towns' aged care homes.

The centre's community services manager, Cat Seddon, approached the man behind the work in aged care homes, Gareth Jones, to trial the classes at Seniors Week.

They were a hit, and the centre began running regular drumming classes.

Every week around 35 seniors, who have dubbed themselves the 'Byron Elder Beats', gather to mingle, make friends and release their energy through drumming.

Seddon says one of the key goals of the project was to create a more age-friendly, socially inclusive society.

"For many, it's given them a purpose each week because it's not like going to play bingo or lawn bowls.



Feather with drum facilitator, Gareth

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"They feel respected. They have been given this activity which has traditionally been viewed as an activity for younger people but it's something they are perfectly capable of doing and they find it really elating and energising.

"Since it started it's been a huge success

and we've had some saying their arthritis has improved; we had another guy who has had a drop in his blood pressure and others who've said it's contributed to a more positive mental health."

Drumming circles for the elderly are rapidly spreading worldwide in forward-thinking organisations like the one in Byron Bay. Therapists have long used music to connect people, particularly the elderly, and, unlike speech, music is processed in multiple areas of the brain. Drumming has also been linked to reducing loneliness and isolation, and nursing homes have reported seeing increased energy levels and morale since drumming became part of the routine.

It's something Gareth can vouch for after seeing remarkable changes in people suffering late-stage dementia.

"As they react to the beat of the drum, you can see more vocal activity, increased eye contact, changes in their facial expressions, their upper body is moving, the blood is flowing into their fingers and you can see their mind is thinking," he says.

After conducting drumming classes to people with a disability, Gareth – who owns his own business Sound Synergy – was inspired to comfort the elderly with what he knew best – music.

"Music is one of the last things your mind holds on to and with even late stage dementia, it (drumming) started working.

"Carers have told me, 'we've never seen that person react, she never joins in, this is the first time we have seen her smiling or anything like that'".

Gareth is paid a modest amount by the community centre to conduct the weekly classes but it is clear he is much more invested in the project.

"My whole idea behind this is to make aged care facilities think about activities that stimulate the mind and body.

"For them, it's an emotional release, they feel free to express themselves."

The drumming circle is just one initiative the community centre is running in an effort to tackle social isolation.

As part of the Byron Healthy Ageing Project, the centre also runs weekly singing groups, free computer training sessions and is documenting local elders' stories on a video blog. One of those sharing her stories is Feather Thompson, a Byron Bay local of 25 years.

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Feather knows what it is like to feel isolated. After her husband died of bone cancer 15 years ago, she struggled to be social. After five years, she decided it was time to break free and says

drumming has helped soothe the pain.

"The drum has soul, it just speaks to you," she says.

Wendy Saville, 74, from Lennox Head is another singing the praises of the drumming group.

"I just found a whole new life had opened up for me; I couldn't stop smiling". ■