

the forever tree



Time for Remembering Art Group 2013



*the tree that felt
love never leaves*

Art therapist - *barbara joyce*

Why a tree?

The vision for this art therapy project was to bring together a group of people who have suffered road trauma and allow for creative self-expression using simple felting techniques. The result is a beautiful tree that embodies feelings of loss, recovery, dedication, love and healing. The process of creating what is a collective story – as depicted in the symbols and colours of the tree – has provided solace and comfort to the women involved.

But why a tree? We need symbols to express who we are and how we feel. To me, the tree is a symbol of life's story. We have roots and a heritage that help to shape who we are. The trunk of the body supports us and gives flexibility. Our arms are like branches, indicating directions, goals, plans, wishes for the future. The leaves I see as a metaphor for all who are special to us, alive or no longer living, and are how the tree really breathes. The people we love form a canopy for our lives. Overall, the Forever Tree is intended as a symbol of hope for everyone.

As an art therapist, I like to build a sense of empathy and mutual support in the groups I work with while also providing art materials and instruction to encourage individual self-expression. This kind of shared creative process is especially helpful in dealing with trauma and grief. I live in Strathewen, a community which lost 27 people in the Black Saturday fire storm of 7 February 2009, so have been touched by trauma myself. For three years after, I organised a group of



women to knit life-sized chooks for the local primary school children, who had lost their school, based on the children's designs. The chooks were an ice-breaker and a way for people to start connecting again.

I enjoy trying to make the artistic process seem easy, so that creativity and self-expression can flow. The participants in this group project were led into a soft, gentle, sensory world of colour through the fibres of the wool. Different felting techniques were learned, including needle-felting, where a barbed needle is used to compact fleece, as seen in the embellishments on the leaves. The ancient technique of wet-felting was also used to create the main tree, background and "fallen leaves".

Symbols and patterns have emerged that hold special meaning for each woman, while the process of creating the tree as one has provided comfort and is another step on the long journey of healing after trauma.

The counsellors

‘Some of the women didn’t even realise their own capacities’

After some inspiring conversations with artists from bushfire-affected areas who had used art in a healing way, we wanted to offer a similar opportunity for those who have come through our doors. Our vision was that this could be a space to talk, cry, sit in silence, laugh and drink tea while working on a creative project.

Road Trauma Support Services Victoria (RTSSV) is a not-for-profit organisation contributing to the safety and wellbeing of Victorian road users. We provide counselling and support to people affected by road trauma, and address attitudes and behaviours of road users through education.

The Time for Remembering monthly group began very simply last year with members creating some items to give away as keepsakes at the annual road trauma memorial ceremony Time for Remembering held in November. This year, using a generous grant from the Ian Potter Foundation, we were able to employ an art therapist, Barbara Joyce. With her gifted guidance, and the inspired work of the women of the group, a tree was born. It started slowly with the creation of simply decorated leaves, but then became the focus for an incredible outpouring of artistic expression. Some of the women didn’t even realise their own capacities.

Each woman came to the group carrying much grief and pain. Our mornings



Lynne Irving, Maria Smart and Maree Burns
not present Bernadette Nugent

offered an opportunity for their senses to be bathed in beauty: the soft touch of the wool, the incredible colours, the sunlight that always managed to pour through the windows, the blood that was drawn from the prick of a needle, the music playing in the background. All this added to the creation of a warm, safe, sacred space where everyone could just be.

The creation of the trunk of the tree was one of the most profound experiences we, the counsellors, have had the privilege to be part of. First came the careful teasing-apart and placing of the fleece, then the gentle application of soapy water before a gradual pressing and rubbing together of the fibres – an action that had to become very physical. So similar to the birth of a child!

And so the Forever Tree was born. Thank you to the incredible, inspiring women who have allowed us to share their most intimate journeys of loss, grief and hope.

THE WOMEN OF
the forever tree

Our stories



Cathy
Jan
Lauren
Linda

Manny
Ninette
Wendy
Yvonne

Love for Emma gives life to the tree

Joan Didion, the author of *A Year of Magical Thinking*, wrote that, "Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it". How true this is.

My life was ideal – a wonderful husband, Peter, and mother to three loving daughters, Emma, Clare and Julie.

In March 2011 our family celebrated Emma's wedding at the age of 37. I loved looking at her wedding photos every day – it gave me so much pleasure and joy. This joy was shattered when, three months after Emma's wedding she was struck down by a tram while walking to work and died instantly. I could not look at those photos for a year after her death.

I was ever thankful to the counsellors at RTSSV in assisting my family in the months after Emma's death, particularly my daughters. I was happy to join the Time for Remembering group in 2012 to help give back to an organisation that supports so many families.

Starting the tree project with the group this year has been incredibly special. Creating the leaves has allowed us to make a tribute to those we have lost, and to others who have been affected by road trauma. Watching the tree come to life with all its vibrant colours and beauty has brought the group closer together. We all know that we have experienced loss and sadness, and we support each other through the very personal journey of grief.



Clare, Emma and Julie on Emma's wedding day

Despite the awful tragedy in losing Emma, my life is still full of happiness and love. This love has helped to create the leaves of this beloved tree, which I hope will inspire others impacted by road trauma.

I loved making the leaves for Clare and Julie, Emma's Dad and her beloved husband, Alan. However, the most precious are the ones I crafted for Grace Emma, Clare and Kent's daughter, who was born in January 2012, and for Julie and Josh's baby, expected next March. They will never meet their charming, fun-loving aunt, but they will always know her in their hearts.

*we all have need for love and care
both giving and receiving
within a group, if we feel strong,
we can console the grieving*

~ from *Being Part of a Caring Group* by Doreen Witt

'It was the most sickening feeling I have ever experienced'



I was 25 before I got my driver's licence as I did not wish to face the responsibility of driving. My father was hit by a car and spent 12 months in hospital. My mother didn't drive at all, so I got my licence and drove her to the hospital almost every night to visit Dad. My youngest brother was killed in a mining incident in 1979. Then in 1981 road trauma hit again when my young nephew was killed in a car accident. I have known the grief of losing loved ones and all that it entails.

In June 2002 I was driving in Melbourne on a cold winter's night. I drove over a hill and saw a man in the middle of the road. I tried to steer away from him as far as possible. There were cars parked along the street and another car was coming the other way. I prayed that he would not move and maybe we would both miss him.

At the last second he took a step back. He hurtled towards me, his face hit the windscreen and it shattered. Then he hit the roof of the car, it caved in over my head, and he fell behind the car on to the road. I could not see out of the windscreen except through the hole that his head had made. In a state of shocked disbelief I managed to stop the car a bit further along and get out to see him lying on the road. It was the most sickening feeling I have ever experienced. He died in hospital a few days later. In an instant my life and that of his family were changed forever.

Although the police who attended the accident assured me that I would not be charged, I was not sure of that information until after the Coroner's verdict in October of that year. It was a hard and lonely time. Apart from two friends, most people I knew avoided me and I experienced the judgmental attitudes held against drivers although 99.99 per cent of drivers do not intend to kill or injure. Luckily I was given a RTSSV leaflet and I joined the Drivers' Group which, with the help of the counsellors, got me through.

When I retired in 2009 I decided to become a volunteer at RTSSV, and I have been helping out in the office. I was asked if I would like to join the Time for Remembering group, which has now become the "tree group". It has been a very special time for me. It is good to be with others who understand if you shed a few tears while you are working and who will just pass the tissues. Together we have made the beautiful Forever Tree. I thank you Barbara for your gentle guidance and introduction to the world of felt.





the making of the forever tree

Lauren

'I have to use my time doing things that are worthwhile'



Felted kookaburra made by Lauren

My name is Lauren and I live in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne with my husband and three living children. While on holiday in September 2011, my son Rex was killed in a road accident. He was a pedestrian and was hit by a truck. Rex was five-and-a-half years old. He was killed in front of me and two of my other children. I carry the guilt of my son Rex's death as he was in my care when he was killed.

Since Rex's death, I have received counselling from RTSSV. This counselling has been a life-saving support for me. The service is extremely important and was the first point of contact given to us by police. It is also financially accessible to everyone, which can remove worry during such a difficult time. Life has been very difficult since Rex's death. The Compassionate Friends (a group of bereaved parents supporting bereaved parents) have also been a great help and comfort.

In 2012 my counsellor, Maree, asked whether I would be interested in joining a craft group, with people who had also suffered road trauma. I went along and found that it was comforting to be with other people who had some sort of understanding of what life was now like. We did not have to TALK about our circumstances, we could just DO the craft. The craft took the focus off our situations and moved it to something positive. By doing the craft we slowly got to know each other and each other's stories. I have met an amazing group of

women who I find to be inspirational.

In the craft group I have learnt new craft skills, creating stone art and wet and dry felting. I feel that what we are doing is something worthwhile. Because Rex didn't get to live his life for very long, I feel I have to use my time doing things that are worthwhile.

The group has given me something to look forward to each month. It was something positive for me to focus on. The group also helped me to learn "mindfulness", or "to be in the moment". I had to concentrate on the task, which gave me some respite from the continuous thoughts of the trauma and the sadness of Rex's death.

For me, the tree represents togetherness. I think it's all about the support that the women in the group have given to each other. We used both our pain and our love to create something beautiful. Creating the base for the tree was amazing. Each person had her hands on every part of the tree. When creating the leaves, we could add meaning to each leaf, using colours from a vast rainbow of colours. The wool was so soft. We combined our thoughts and feelings for our loved ones into the leaves.

The tree is so much more than an "artwork". So many emotions are entwined in this tree, from many women with many stories, and it is this that gives the tree such life. It is beautiful.

Linda

'I feel like I am travelling through a tunnel'

It was a balmy Monday night in February 2012 and I was driving to work. I was looking forward to my shift that night, working with babies at the mother-and-baby unit at the hospital close by. I wasn't in a hurry. I wasn't on the phone. In fact I was in a good mood.

As I crossed over the intersection, doing 60 km/h through a green light, I suddenly saw a car coming at me from the left. It was going through a red light. I slammed my foot on the brake, pushing as hard as I could and bracing myself for the impact – but too late. I went head on to the side of the man's ute in what was a "t-bone collision". He was a 26 year old driver who said he didn't see the red light at all.

Unfortunately, 19 months later, I still struggle to cope with the major changes in my life and the chronic pain from soft tissue injuries I suffered as a result of the collision. I used to be a very active person, enjoying cycling with my family, skiing, playing basketball and tennis with my girls, swimming, high-impact gym classes, running and Zumba. I also loved scrap-booking and different crafts, and got involved in fundraising clubs.

I am now unable to do any of these things and I feel like I am travelling through a tunnel. It's been a long and lonely journey, and I don't know if there will be an end to this tunnel. On the outside, no one can see my pain and struggle.

My counsellor at RTSSV, Lynne, told me about this wonderful group of women



Linda at work with Barbara

and I was excited to attend the group. It was a real challenge to be there as fatigue and chronic pain affect even activities like sitting or standing for a length of time. The women were friendly and non-judgmental, and I didn't feel the need to explain myself. I was pleased to learn a new craft and see our unique leaves taking shape. I saw photos of the main tree being created and the progress the group was making.

I was unable to attend a few mornings as I was unwell. It was a special experience when I returned to the group and saw the tree for myself.

We are lucky to have someone as talented as Barbara to teach us through sharing her skills and knowledge. The Forever Tree represents togetherness, love and originality – a group working on a special project together.

'Felting to me is very much like my grief journey'



Jack at age 13

Our younger son Jack died on 23 December 2010. He was 13 years old.

Jack was out cycling with his dad in Ivanhoe when he was run over by a prime mover. My husband held our precious son as he lay dying. I am so grateful to Claude for having the strength to do this and forever thankful that Jack was not alone in those last moments.

It's been almost three years, and every moment since that day has been filled with immense pain and sadness for my family. Claude and I have been unable to work since the accident. My older son Tom was almost 17 when he lost his brother. Tom struggled terribly through his VCE years, and we are so proud of his courage to attend school every single day regardless of how he was feeling and what was going on at home. Not only does Tom grieve for his only sibling, but also for the parents he once had.

Jack was the happiest child I have ever known, and he lived his life to the fullest. We all miss his beautiful smile, his warm hugs and his absolute joy for life. Jack was incredibly kind and he had the most wonderful ability to make everyone he'd meet feel special. I miss my dear son with all my heart.

RTSSV counsellors have supported my family from the beginning, providing the care and understanding we so desperately needed. Over the past two years, I have been involved with the Time

for Remembering group, and I've been blessed to meet other women who have also been touched by road tragedies. I have connected particularly with the other bereaved mothers. I think it's been important for us all to have a place where we can share our thoughts, sorrow and hopes, without fear of judgement.

We have been fortunate this year to have Barbara teaching us how to felt, and we have spent many months working on our leaves and tree. Felting to me is very much like my grief journey. The fleece is initially separated into small tufts and placed gently in layers. These are lightly patted and rubbed so that the fibres begin to mat together. If the wool is rubbed too hard in the beginning, it falls apart. As the wool starts to felt, the rubbing becomes more vigorous, and this makes the felt quite strong.

When Jack died my life was ripped apart and I am trying to slowly and gently put the pieces back together. Like the wool, life is not and never will be as it was. But I pray that, with time, I will be strong enough to live with the pain while forever treasuring the memory of my beloved son with joy in my heart.

'The tree represents the love for my husband'

I will never forget the day of 15 March 2011. It marks the worst time of my life, the day my husband of 17 years died in a motor accident, and the day I had to tell our children – aged 10 and 14 – that their dad was never coming home. Our lives were forever altered from that moment.

About five months after this tragic day – when the phone calls, the visits and the “casseroles” stopped coming – I was home by myself, feeling very low and alone. Desperate for someone to talk to, I called RTSSV. It was a relief to be able to talk to someone who understood what I was going through and who could provide some reassurance. After attending some counselling sessions, I was invited to join the Time for Remembering group. Here I met others who were suffering the impact of road trauma.

Under the watchful guidance of the lovely and talented Barbara, we have created the Forever Tree. The tree represents the love for my husband, Russell, and the memories that I will always carry with me.

With a caring heart, generous spirit and amazing talents, he gave willingly of his time and touched the lives of all who knew him. His incredible energy allowed him to pack a lifetime of achievements and experiences into 45 years.

The Forever Tree is also a reminder that grief is a never-ending, ever-evolving journey that must be taken by anyone who has suffered a loss, since life must go on. To me it symbolises new life down



Ninette and Russell

a different path, leading me to people I would never have met and experiences I would not have had.

Naturally, I miss my husband every single day and would give anything to have him back – but that is not possible. Instead I focus on the positive outcomes, and being a part of this group is certainly one of those.

'I realised the power of three'



Jesse on his 18th birthday

My beautiful teenage-son's fatal accident on 3 May last year brought me to the "tree group". We started work on the individual leaves not long before the first anniversary of this single-car accident in Westgarth Street, Northcote.

As I felted the baby-soft fleece, trying to work my own small designs, I realised the power of three: circles or swirls, often in sets of three, took shape under my jabbing needle. My 18-year-old son Jesse was one of three young men – good mates – who all died instantly after their car skidded on the straight road, hit a tree, and exploded.

The time was 1.30 in the afternoon, half an hour after Jesse had finished a shift at his new job. We think they were simply off to buy lunch. The day was one of the wildest wet-weather days of the late autumn of 2012, or that is how I remember it. We heard about the accident on the news, but didn't know Jesse was one of the people killed until the evening. That news is still sinking in.

This tragic event, this still-unbelievable loss, turned us abruptly into a family of three: Robin, Wendy and Peta (just 15 at the time). Or at least, that is the harsh fact of our physical lives. In our deeper emotional and psychological world, Jesse is still everywhere; we still think, feel and dream of his presence. The terrible pain is in this constant aching "presence of the absence" of the fourth member of our family. We are incomplete. How could my big, annoying, fun-loving son – a

young man with the most gorgeous smile and tender heart – be so suddenly gone?

The Forever Tree is a loaded symbol for me. After the accident, the boys' friends kept vigil around the damaged tree and it became an impromptu memorial site. On 3 May this year the families planted a new white cedar at the site in remembrance and hope. I often thought of the accident and memorial tree as I worked the colours of the fleece into shape and sat with the group. It was the most comforting experience, in the sunny kitchen where we worked, when it came time to put all our hands into the wet-felting of the main trunk, base, branches and blue sky. The physicality of that connection with others who also know the suffering of trauma helped, temporarily, to ease the isolation that goes with deep grief. Thank you to all the women – clients and counsellors working as one.

The tree includes a leaf – "clarity" – made by Peta for Jesse, the big brother she describes as "perfect to me". It is the word that Jesse used to entitle one of his photographs of a blue-sky horizon in Tasmania. I wonder if clarity is the state of mind that most eludes the traumatised and the bereaved: the clear understanding of, not the how and the where and the when – but the why? Besides this incomprehension, our hurt and our tears, this tree bears much love, some hope, and the promise of budding new friendships. May we grow strong again.

'Just duplicate that order'

I lost my identical-twin sister, Lynda, on 30 October 2009 after she was struck by a car while crossing the street near her home. I've cried every day for four years, but you can't be sad for your families all the time, you have to put on a happy face for the grandchildren. When you come to this group, it doesn't matter, you can cry yourself and hear about the other women's sadnesses.

We lived a shared life and I didn't need friends. Lynda and I worked together after having our families, retired at the same time from the NAB bank, and were planning the future with our husbands. I was often called Lynda, and Lynda got Yvonne.

We had the same clothes and would initial them so as not to mix them up. Now I initial mine "LY". We had the same tastes – at restaurants we used to say, "Just duplicate that order". There were so many things: the same books, the same knitting. She would ring me up and say, "What row are you up to? Hang on, wait until I get there."

It was 4.40 in the afternoon, and I didn't know she'd got hit. We always met each other on Wednesdays and Fridays. This was a Friday, just before the Melbourne Cup weekend. We met at Melbourne Central, went for lunch and did our shopping. As we went for our trains – hers was the Glen Waverley line and mine is Frankston – I had this white flash in my head, "Go and have a drink" but we went off as usual. Her train went at 3.56 and mine a bit after, so I stood with her on the platform for a while and



Lynda (left) and Yvonne

then looked down and waved from the escalator. That was the last I saw of her.

She rang me as her train passed Kooyong: "Are you on the train yet? Don't forget to ring me when you get home." Lynda got off at Jordanville station and walked up the sunny side of Huntingdale Road until she had to cross a side street. The driver of the car that was coming signaled to her to cross but then moved forward and struck Lynda. A doctor was passing and attended to her, and a schoolboy covered her with his blazer.

I was on my bus home from Frankston station when the police called. The first information was that she didn't seem badly injured, so I thought we'd go to hospital and she'd be sitting up there and we'd go home. But they transferred her to the Alfred Hospital with head trauma. We were initially given the option of saving her life in a diminished state or letting her go. But then the surgeons decided we did not have the option.

At least I know she saved lives through the donation of her liver, lungs and kidneys. Lynda was a blood donor. We hadn't discussed anything like this but, if she'd been asked, she would have definitely donated and given life to others.

We were always the twins so it hit me twice: I lost her and also half of myself. We were meant to go together, that's what I don't understand.

art group 2013



Left to right: Manny, Lauren, Ninette, Cathy, Linda, Jan, Maria, Lynne, Maree, Wendy and Barbara sitting. Not present: Yvonne

Contributors: Glenda, Jackie and family, Tania, Peta, Rachael and Bern

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