

Good morning. I can't claim to have been one of the small group that had the vision of establishing a U3A branch on Hibiscus Coast. That honour belongs to Judith Cliffe, who's here this morning, Nonie Coates who's now confined to hospital in Warkworth, Ray Marino who returned to the United States to live after his wife Jeune died and Pat Hawkins who went back to England.

However, like Pat Varney, Norma Buckland, Maureen Christensen, and Chris Doorman who're with us today, I've been a member of the Hibiscus Coast U3A since 1996 and so I'm able to share with you some of the aspirations we had regarding the Branch in those early days.

You may have seen in the Newsletter the Foreword to the 10th Anniversary Souvenir Booklet I wrote in November 2005. In it I explained that the University of the Third Age movement had its beginnings in France in 1972. In that year the University of Toulouse developed new learning opportunities designed specifically for older adults. The primary objectives of the new arrangements were to foster the idea of life long learning and to encourage older people to keep their brains active.

Educationists around the world noted what the French were doing and began to see that, in relation to learning, later middle age is a third age that differs from both normal schooling and training, and later career preparation and social development including family raising. They suggested that as we approach retirement we enter a third age in which there's the opportunity to listen and learn for fun rather than necessity, to learn for learning's sake and in order to gain a fuller understanding of the world we inhabit.

And people around the world caught on to that message. As a result since 1972 U3A type organisations have been established in more than 50 countries – from Norway in the north to New Zealand in the south, and from China in Asia to Argentina in the Americas. And there are now millions of U3A members around the world.

However, while the interest in life long learning opportunities for older people has spread widely, some U3A groups are different from others. Some branches, particularly those close to normal universities, provide reasonably traditional learning opportunities in which experts and professionals give lectures.

But other branches have developed a different way of operating. They've tried to create self-directed study groups that encourage the members to increase their own understanding of a given topic and to share that knowledge with group members. The aim of these groups is to foster active participation in the sharing of knowledge rather than passive membership.

From the outset, the leaders of our U3A have been committed to this shared learning group approach. The outcome has been that, while we've put a lot of effort into arranging stimulating general meetings on a bi-monthly basis, our U3A has focussed on developing study groups that foster participation and sharing.

Over the years, a wide range of study groups has been established. The diverse range has included Nonie Coates' History, Judith Cliffe's Book Lovers, Ray Marino's Cinematique, Pat Hawkins' World Today, Pat Varney's Regional New Zealand, Gerald Warner's French Conversation, Kath Robinson's Music Appreciation, John Walker's Humour, Phil Sheldon's Geology, Barry Dale's Discussion, Jenny Tresize's Food for Thought, Ian and Nancy's Short Film, Trish Litherland's Art Appreciation, Kaye McLean's Archaeology Groups and many others that I don't have

time to list. The study topics have been different but the purpose has been the same - to encourage people to learn by participating.

The thing about our U3A that's given me most satisfaction over the years has been seeing people who haven't been accustomed to leading discussions gain the confidence to do so in one of our groups. And we should honour those who've helped with that by being convenors and leaders.

In the early days groups met in members' homes. That was good because it helped create strong personal bonds that are different from those we establish when we meet at the Library. However the number of members grew dramatically, from fewer than 50 in the early years, to more than 100 within three years and close to 250 after ten years. In the process the Branch became the victim of its own success. We reached the point where groups became too big to fit into homes and had to move to public spaces.

Our Branch has experienced some happy and exciting times, as for example when we sponsored a writing competition as part of our 10th Anniversary celebrations.

And we've had to deal with some sad occasions including the awful day when Spencer Tuck - our third president - dropped dead while speaking at one of our meetings.

But, we've come a long way and there's a lot of which we can be proud. And there's also much for which we should be thankful. In particular we should be grateful for the time and energy that presidents, secretaries like Judy Lilley, treasurers like John Tucker, and the many group convenors devote to their U3A duties. On your behalf I thank them.

My hope and prayer is that our U3A will remain committed to the vision our founder members had for it. My God bless us all in the days ahead.