

# December 2023



## GdA Powered by People



**People provide the power. People provide the vision.**

People produce results. They create the impact GdA is here to deliver. In this, our final newsletter for 2023, we focus on our people. Some have moved on from the roles they were performing, but not too far away. Some new faces have joined us. Others are still performing the roles they've held for some time but also still produce results that change peoples' lives for the better. We've lost at least one highly impactful person – Shirley Mitchell, but the legacy of what she fought for, how she fought for it and what she achieved is the resolve and passion she instilled in others to keep fighting for the justice she craved. It's people like Shirley who characterise GdA.

This newsletter honours our people – all of you; organisational members, volunteers, Board members, staff and stakeholders.

It's your effort and commitment that makes it possible for GdA to achieve what we achieve. You are all powerful but together we are even more powerful.



### 2023 Farewells



L- R Kay Timmins, Deb Verdon and Mark Thompson

**And welcomes  
- new Board Members**

Helene Roche – Ballarat

Carol Okai – Merdedith

Fiona Tipping – Ararat

Chloe Thomson - Ballarat



Vale Shirley Mitchell by Mark Thompson

**GdA and the Central Highlands Region Advisory Group wishes to acknowledge Shirley's long contribution to helping people with disabilities by being such an active supporter, voice and campaigner over many years**

When I met Shirley, she had a silvery white Labrador named Sahana. At the time, Shirley was losing vision in her right eye. Shirley, eventually, went legally blind but her friend was never far away. Sahana was always leaving her hair everywhere they would go. Shirley did radio interviews and other media work to advocate for changes to be made at the Ballarat Railway Station. She was one of six people with the disabilities that filed a case to see what we could achieve.

She often went to Ballarat City Council Meetings to advocate for improvements for the Sebastopol residents, such as footpaths, lighting, and the Sebastopol library crossing. I loved her no nonsense approach to many issues that she has dealt with such as the Media. She called a spade a spade. She didn't suffer fools gladly. Our former Executive Officer and a great friend and co-campaigner of Shirley's, Deb Verdon, provides a fitting conclusion to our remembrance here:

*“Shirley was a trooper who lived independently until the last little while. I'm full of admiration for this woman and her resilience.”*  
(by Deb Verdon)



Pic above: GdA's Shirley Mitchell & Mark Thompson (photo: Adam Trafford, Ballarat Courier) from the article "Ballarat train station to get access to upgrades, still not up to disability standard" (5/5/19)

**Great News:** Shirley's advocacy is paying off. The State Government has reconfirmed its financial commitment to redeveloping the Ballarat Station and has now listed the project on the Big Build website <https://bigbuild.vic.gov.au/projects/ballarat-station-upgrade> Plus, site engineers have been at the station drilling investigation wells as part of their technical planning for the proposed redevelopment. There's movement at the station!



In 2023 GdA's Independent Pathways and Living Skills (I-PaLS) Program has seen 50 participants successfully take part across the Wimmera, Grampians and Ballarat Regions. The program provides an opportunity for anyone aged 18+ living with a disAbility to learn valuable life skills such as Human Rights, Budgeting, Basic First Aid along with social skills and much more in a welcoming and safe space.

**Congratulations to all of our wonderful participants in 2023.**

To join the fun in 2024 please get in touch with us on the number below to register your interest.

**Ph 1800 552 272**

## NEW INDIGENOUS ADVOCATE FOR GdA

Pilot funding from the Department of Social Services has enabled us to employ a new Indigenous Community Advocate, Keiah Meddings-Cooper.

This role builds on the ground-breaking work undertaken by Fiona Tipping as Disability Royal Commission advocate with GdA until June 2023. Fiona demonstrated how the role of a disability advocate could be performed in a culturally-safe and appropriate way to engage with First Nations Communities and to best support Aboriginal Australians with disability. Fiona now works with the First Peoples Disability Network, a national body working with and for First Nations people and Communities regarding disability. FPDN and Fiona lobbied the Federal Government to apply surplus funds to create the pilot Indigenous Community Advocates program that now allows us to employ Keiah.

Since starting, Keiah has done a fantastic job connecting with Community. Keiah now has six clients, a few weeks ahead of our planned schedule for her taking clients and is proving herself to be expert at gaining clients' trust and clearly articulating their needs to those who need to hear. She's a natural advocate, something Fiona said to us when she recommended Keiah to us.

Thank you, Fiona and Keiah. We look forward to working further together on the pilot project in 2024.



Keiah Meddings-Cooper

## Heartfelt greetings for the festive season from GdA

As this year draws to a close, we want to take a moment to express our heartfelt gratitude to our valued members and partner organizations for your unwavering support and collaboration throughout the year. Together, we have made significant strides in raising the voices and representing the interests of people with disability across Western Victoria. Notably, through our Disability Royal Commission advocates Fiona Tipping and Sherree Unwin, we assisted a number of people with disability to make their submissions to the Disability Royal Commission. Also, through their casework and through direct advocacy into forums and reviews representations, our disability advocates Trudy, Phil and Kaylene and our appeals advocate Bern Duane represented the interests and views of people with disability regarding system reform and improvement. Carol Starkey and her team (Sarah Garton, Tiffany Kenny, Tilly Schembri and Tadc Quirke) have continued to support people with disability to gain skills for independent living. We are currently working on plans to take their work to the next level, subject to securing funding. GdA continues to grow and power on with its work on protecting and advancing the human rights of people with disability.

*Merry Christmas to you all & a happy and safe 2024*

## Changes to the Board

GdA's Association's rules on Board members state that Board members must step down after 12 years of service. This means that two board members were required to step down. We would like to acknowledge and show appreciation to these two board members who contributed so much to GdA. Norm McMurray (Chairperson) made a special mention in the Annual Report:

"Both Kay Timmins and Mark Thompson, have, over the past twelve years, shown extraordinary commitment to GdA. Their contribution and support to the Board over the years has been immeasurable and is much appreciated. They stand as exemplars of the sort of dedication and commitment that all our staff and members show and of the sort of organisation and service GdA aspires to be."

We asked them both, Kay and Mark, for some observations on their years with GdA as board members:

### Kay

I've been on a number of boards, including as Chair for quite a few such as Action for Community Living and Relay for Life. When I joined the GdA Board over a decade ago, I looked forward to contributing and learning. I've found it very rewarding. Everyone involved - from other board members to staff - were always supportive and helpful. It has been gratifying to see GdA grow and other people become more active in the organisation. Although I am no longer on the board, I will continue to be active in the organisation. I wish to thank the other board members and I leave the board with nothing but admiration for them all.

### Mark

My life as an advocate began in 1996, when I was in rehab after a drowning accident. Since then, I have been involved with the Central Highlands Regional Advisory Group (CHRAG) as the Chair. We have got a lot done around Ballarat for people with disability. CHRAG is now part of GdA. CHRAG helps GdA and GdA helps CHRAG. Together we're better. In 2011, I started with GdA, bringing my skills onto the board. I love the challenge of systemic advocacy. I attended VICRAN (the network of rural advocacy organisations in Victoria) meetings at Bendigo with Deb Verdon (GdA) for some time. A particular issue we campaigned for was disability access to the Ballarat train station and we provided a report with recommendations that enabled the Department of Transport to comply with a VCAT order.



## What does GdA do?

- \*Help you write a letter or submission to represent your interests
- \*Make a telephone call with/for you or help get info to resolve a concern
- \*Find information about another agency that may be able to assist
- \*Provide information on disability issues
- \*Support people to advocate for themselves

## GdA Office Locations

- ❖ Ararat
- ❖ Horsham
- ❖ Daylesford
- ❖ Ballarat
- ❖ Clunes

**Central Intake 1800 552 272**

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