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57.

*CHORUS:  
SERVING AND  
SINGING FROM  
THE SAME  
SONG SHEET*

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*LEE PALACE:  
A 6157  
INSTITUTION*

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*LEE, DAVE AND  
FREMANTLE 'FAMILY'  
HOCKEY CLUB*

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*"TAKING THE  
TRUTH SERUM"*

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# one great song

SERVING, VOLUNTEERING, AND THE BRILLIANT WORK OF CHORUS KITCHEN

Every week, a large band of seventy-six volunteers based in Palmyra are a part of preparing meals that move through the southern corridor of Perth from Mosman Park to Singleton. 1300 meals are distributed weekly to a diverse range of people who, for different reasons, are unable to prepare meals for themselves. In many ways, the people behind Chorus Kitchen are 'facilitators of independence'; they assist their customers through helping them with the tough stuff. We caught up with Chorus Kitchen to discover the difference that they are making in the lives of many.

STORY+PHOTOS:  
**SIMON ELLIOTT**

Each day at Palmyra's Chorus Kitchen, a team of volunteers takes fresh meals to a host of people across Perth's southern suburbs. It's a three-course meal; fresh, affordable, quality food that is delivered Monday through Friday with frozen meals on Fridays to carry customers over the weekend. The meals are low-cost; partly subsidised through the Department of Health, but predominantly through the customer. The meals form one part of a greater service extended by Chorus Kitchen: the extending of care and connection.

Volunteers play their roles either in the kitchen or on the road, as the deliverers of meals. Kitchen volunteers arrive for one of two shifts: 6 am - 11 am, or 10 am - 2 pm, while drivers come at 8:30 am to ferry meals to customers and are typically finished by around 11 am.

Mandy Waters is a rarity at Chorus Kitchen. Among 82 people in the kitchen, the office and on the road, she's a full-time worker. Formerly with Community First, Mandy has worked in a range of different roles for seven years. She's currently employed as 'Specialist of Community Services' and says it's the best job she's ever had.

"I've always wanted to come alongside people and help. Here I get to do that every single day," she says.



“The reality is that a lot of our customers have very little social interaction and, for some, our driver and that short conversation might be the only one they have for the day. That’s both sad and wonderful.”

- MANDY

“I guess our product is the delivery of a three-course meal, but our service is far greater than this,” Mandy says.

“The meals themselves are crucial. They have to be good. We pride ourselves on providing fresh food that is big on flavour and tailored to the dietary and taste preference of our customers,”

“But each meal delivery is also a chance to check in. To see how our customers are doing. To have a chat about their day and what’s happening for them,”

“The reality is that a lot of our customers have very little social interaction and, for some, our driver and that short conversation might be the only one they have for the day. That’s both sad and wonderful,”

“The knock on the door each day is a lifeline - a connection with what is often the same familiar face for many, many years,” says Mandy.

Because of this dynamic, there are layers to the service provided by Chorus Kitchen. They check on how people are going - whether they’re well, how they’re feeling - and ensure a continuity of care that would otherwise disappear.

To be a volunteer at Chorus Kitchen is about far more than driving a car or peeling vegetables. It’s to be part of a bigger picture.

“Our volunteers are our lifeblood. They’re crucial. We look for people who are kind, caring, want to make a difference, love a chat, and love people,” Mandy says.

You quickly gain an understanding, talking to Mandy, that Chorus is about both the intentional and the organic. The provision of meals is intentional - customers request it - but it’s the organic opportunities that spring from the intentional that are both essential and deeply satisfying.

“It’s an amazing service we’re a part of providing. I have no doubts about that,” Mandy adds proudly.

## WHEN THE CHORUS STARTED SINGING

Chorus launched in 2017 as an amalgamation of three different community service organisations with far longer histories.

Community First International, Volunteer Taskforce, and Care Options were three smaller organisations providing services across a range of home and community care programs.

With changes in legislation and the way in which services were being provided, it was decided that a stronger service could be provided by the three organisations merging to one: Chorus!

There are twenty-two Chorus sites across the metropolitan area. The merging of the three organisations has enabled a more extensive suite of community services with which to assist their customers. Depending on the specific program being provided, Chorus receives funding primarily through

Federal, State and Local Government grants.

More broadly, the organisation provides mental health services, employment services, and in-home services such as gardening, transport, social support and a visitor’s scheme. Among the services offered, Chorus is a community home-support service provider with the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Meals on Wheels had been a service particular to Community First International and was rebadged as Chorus Kitchen.

## ‘THEY’RE NOT OUR CUSTOMERS’

While referring to those who receive meals as customers, Mandy was quick to point out that they weren’t the customers of Chorus. This seemed a curious distinction to make, so we unpacked that a little more.

“I don’t consider them our customers; they’re people that we are helping to live the lives that they choose. We don’t want to claim them as ‘ours’, they’re people that we’re assisting. There’s a real partnership involved,” Mandy explains.

## ALL SORTS OF REASONS

People use the services provided by Chorus Kitchen for many reasons. No two stories are the same but each has a common thread: they are retaining a sense of independence and still live in their own homes. It’s this sense of autonomy that the organisation strives hard to preserve.

“In a broader sense, we assist them with the things they find difficult, but we don’t necessarily provide the stand-alone service,”

“We provide help so they can remain independent,”

“For example, our cleaning services (another arm of the Chorus organisation) assists the customer in cleaning, but we’re helping them do it together rather than moving in and ‘doing the job’. It’s about preserving independence and dignity as much as it is about providing a service,” Mandy adds.

For some, the elderly wife has passed away leaving a husband that has never needed to cook and suddenly needing meals provided. Chorus steps in.

Some have dementia and are unable to have gas or electric cookers for safety reasons. Others with physical and mental disabilities are unable to prepare their meals yet treasure their independence.

Others may be able to cook but struggle to provide a balanced, nutritious diet. Chorus can bring what they need to the table. Others still, don’t require help themselves but help with someone for whom they are caring.

“It’s a wide range of people who approach us. Sometimes it’s the individual who approaches us,

other times it's a family member or friend who makes the first call," Mandy adds.

## IT'S MORE THAN GIVING

As we look across a dining room to see a group of kitchen volunteers enjoying morning tea together, it's easy to see that it's not only the receivers of help that are impacted but the givers of help that are formed into a tight-knit community.

Volunteers offer themselves at all kinds of frequencies. Some for five days a week, some working one shift each fortnight. Each is valued for being a part of something more significant: facilitating independence for those served by Chorus Kitchen, but also enjoying the intrinsic rewards of giving and helping.

One of those at the table, Jaydlee, is a full-time pharmacist volunteering once each week. She's not alone in her belief that she gains far more than she gives in the act of service. As they eat, chat, and laugh through their tea break together, few could argue that truth.

Another volunteer, who is about to leave the organisation due to relocating, has served Meals on Wheels/Chorus Kitchen for the past 33 years. Mandy notes that it's common for volunteers to have a far longer association with the organisation than many of the paid staff. It's one big team at Chorus Kitchen - 76 volunteers, six paid staff - each is dependent on the other.

## IN THE MIDST OF THE MUNDANE

While Mandy recognises that some of the administrative work in her role is quite mundane, she's quick to add, that in middle of those moments can be great beauty.

"I remember a heavy admin day in the office when the phone rang, and I had a sense of 'I don't have time for that call right now'. On the other end of the phone was a family member in tears who was simply overwhelmed at the support their Dad was receiving through Chorus Kitchen. It's in moments like that you realise again that it's why we do what we do. The mundane plays a part in creating those moments,"

"It's a unique space in which to work. If you don't care about people, you're really in the wrong place. The passion that everyone has for what they do is what makes this whole thing great," Mandy adds.

## ONE GREAT SONG

Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has". It only takes a short while at Chorus Kitchen to be reminded of this once more. A team that is singing together from the same song sheet not only creates a sweet song but when passion and service are the fuel, can make a profound difference in the lives of many. This is the work of Chorus Kitchen. **61**  
**57**



## terry's story

Terry Woodward joined Chorus Kitchen five years ago as a volunteer driver and distributes meals twice each week.

His introduction to the organisation came during long service leave with a previous employer.

"I was looking for volunteer work when I discovered Meals on Wheels (Chorus Kitchen's former name). I drove for them for a month and when I retired a year later, took on two shifts each week," said Terry.

"These days, I do Mondays and Wednesdays and help out when I can beyond that," he adds.

Each shift, Terry arrives around 8 am for a quick chat with the other drivers - a chance to catch up with recent events, swap stories, and be briefed on anything particular about the day's run.

"We gather around the table each shift. It's like being back at work!"

"I have a regular route for deliveries each week and deliver around a dozen meals on each run," said Terry.

Drop-offs vary according to the needs of the customer. Most visits are around five minutes and involve a quick chat, a laugh or joke, and an update on life.

"I might be the only person they see for the whole day, and you realise how important that is in someone's life,

"It's rewarding because we deal with a great diversity of people who are dealing with different levels of loneliness and incapacitations...we're just there to help them along a little and, often, be the brightest part of their day," Terry says.

"Loneliness is the greatest thing I encounter - they expect that I'll be there and sometimes I'm the only person who's around to help them with a simple job like changing a light globe or, for one lady, fixing a wheelchair," says Terry.

After five years, Terry knows plenty about the lives of those he's serving. He feels the loss when one of them passes away because the relationship he's forged over the years is far beyond service delivery. It's friendship, care and concern.

It doesn't take too long to realise that Terry is undoubtedly richer for the work and the relationships as well. **61**  
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## Mr T's story

Mr T passed away a year or so back in his mid-nineties, but he left a profound legacy behind him.

Mr T started his relationship with (then) Meals on Wheels about seven years ago. He was an English gentleman and former sailor who had moved to Perth with his wife. He came to us after his wife died, but he didn't want help (as much as he may have been in need of it).

The relationship began with meals being delivered, but as Mr T's health declined, we also helped him with his cleaning. Before much longer he was unable to drive, so there was help for transportation so he could do his shopping and still get out a little.

Mr T's guard fell away quickly, and he fell in love with us just as we had fallen for him. He would drop in at Palmyra for the simplest of jobs (paying a bill or whatever excuse he could find!), and he'd spend half an hour having conversations with anyone who was around.

Everyone loved Mr T, but his health continued to decline. When he finally needed to move into residential aged care, we were devastated. So was he. The bond between him and so many here had grown so deep that it was like saying goodbye to a family member.

We had an afternoon tea to say goodbye to Mr T; so many people came along because he'd made an impact on so many by his simple presence.

Mr T died shortly after.

I'm so pleased that we were able to provide Mr T with another five years of independence through the different services we offered. I look at the life of a man like him and think "we're making a difference". In ways large and small, we're absolutely making a difference.

It's the relationships you build with people like Mr T that make the work we do so deeply rewarding. **61**  
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