‘Have you considered the challenges those with a disability face in our community?’

Luke Taylor, Speak Up

When the small Victorian country town of Alexandra celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2017, a key aspect of the celebrations was a series of beautiful projections displayed on some of the town’s civic buildings.

Inspired by Melbourne’s White Night Festival, and designed by local self advocacy group Speak Up, the projections displayed a series of messages that centred around people with disabilities. As couples walked into the 150 Year Commemorative Ball they were greeted by projections which read:

- My Voice Matters
- Nothing About Us Without Us
- Choice Equals Quality
- Don’t Dis My Ability
- Not all disabilities can be seen on the outside
- My disability allows me the freedom to be different

These projections were Speak Up’s gift to the local community.

Speak Up Alexandra has been running since 2015. Group members come mostly from the Dame Pattie Menzies Centre, a local disability support service based in Alexandra.

‘It took a long time and a bit of work to get going but since we got started it’s been fantastic. The changes with the group members have been really important. One fellow has got his licence. They have coordinated and run major community events. They are networking and linking with decision makers in the community and have also developed their own Facebook page.’ Wendy Kelly, Nexus Primary Health

One of the key supporters of the group is Wendy Kelly, the local RuralAccess Officer based at Nexus Community Health Service. Wendy was instrumental in getting the group started. As RuralAccess officer, Wendy has responsibility to work across 2 local council areas - Mitchell Shire and Murrindindi Shire which covers Alexandra.

Pictured (above) left to right: Christian Bell and Wendy Kelly from Nexus Primary Health, Cr Margaret Rae, Ian Hewitt, Stephanie Phelps, Luke Taylor, Nola Cook, Mayor Charlie Bisset, Anne-Maree Fricke and Nicole Thorn.
Speak Up shows the critical role that partnerships can play in strengthening self advocacy. *Speak Up’s* partners include:

- The Menzies Centre
- Nexus Health
- Murrindindi Shire
- The Department of Health and Human Services
- Self Advocacy Resource Unit

These partners bring an array of different skills and knowledge to the community planning table.

When people with disabilities are given the opportunity to stand beside these people and organisations and engage in community planning and project design, all sorts of possibilities can be realised.

The partnerships have given *Speak Up* a strong community profile and presence. It also helps to focus community attention on key issues that the group feels are important.

One of these key issues is the level of marginalisation and isolation that many people with disabilities experience.

Projection slogans like those listed on page one capture this sense of isolation, but by drawing attention to it in creative, provocative and surprising ways (like Alexandra *White Night*) the opportunities to transform attitudes and to inspire connection is potentially far-reaching.
Alexandra *White Night* is a wonderful example of the power of collaboration and partnership with community leaders. That council was prepared to fund the projections and align them in such a central way with the 150th celebration shows the important place that *Speak Up* occupies in the hearts and mind of the local community.

As well as *White Night*, the group has been involved in a range of other projects and activities. *Speak Up* helped to host (and coordinate) *Dangerous Deeds*, a touring exhibition which captures the history of the self advocacy movement in Victoria. Group members staffed the exhibition for the three weeks that the show was in town. They were also key players in the *Dangerous Deeds* community education program.

*Dangerous Deeds* complements the political messages of Alexandra *White Night* by its celebration of the self advocacy movement in Victoria.

The ability and confidence to draw on this history to crystallise your political message and embolden your efforts and political struggle should never be underestimated. There is a link between this 40 year history, described so powerfully in *Dangerous Deeds*, and the emerging confidence of the community leadership being shown by *Speak Up*.

*Speak Up* has also worked alongside Wendy on a number of initiatives.
With support of the SARU, the group has also been involved in a range of more formal training programs which build their leadership skills, including Voice at the Table training.

‘I love seeing the way people have come out of their shells. Many didn’t speak up much before – they didn’t really want to have a conversation with you. But now they are networking and branching out in really powerful ways and have developed the confidence to Speak Up at Rotary Cubs and other official functions.’

Wendy Kelly, Nexus Primary Health

Speak Up runs their meetings in the Murrindindi Shire Board Room which gives them access to one of the ‘seats of power’ in the local community. The local CEO, who chairs Council’s access and inclusion committee, is also an important supporter of the groups work.

One of the important aspects of self advocacy is the opportunity it provides for people to engage in what we might call ‘citizenship work’. This includes the opportunity for people with disabilities to advocate and inform communities about their rights and the issues that impact on the exercise of those rights. But it is also about the opportunity that self advocacy provides for people to position their stories in communities in creative ways which capture people’s imagination and engages them in the transformations necessary to ensure that people with disabilities feel valued and connected.

Speak Up Members are involved in this ‘community creating’ work – they are a great example of the giving and receiving elements of self advocacy.

Speak Up members actively contribute to the community of Alexandra, and by partnering and working alongside others, they seek to make it a better place for all who live there.