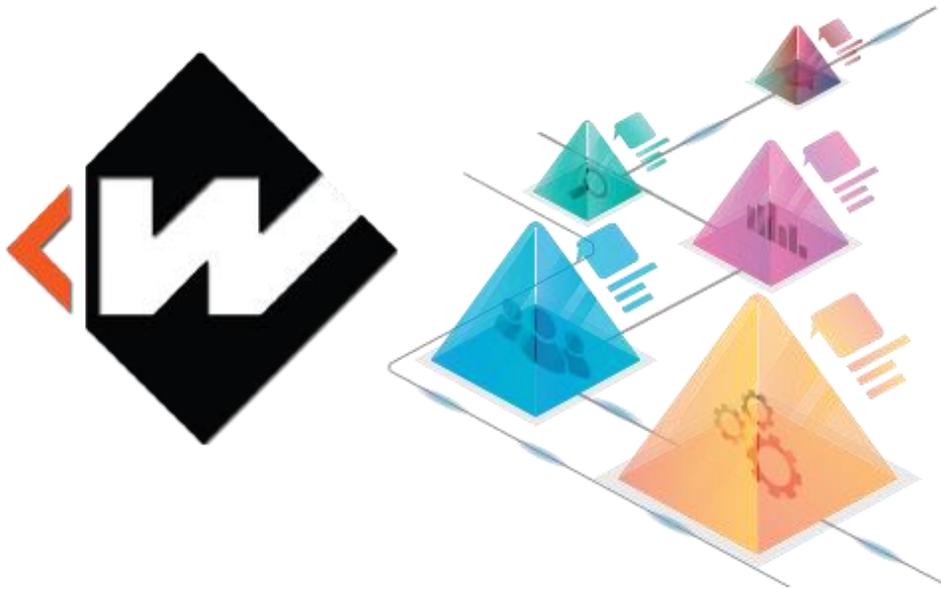




# Blacktown Memories – Liveable Communities: Project Evaluation Executive Summary

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Officers*

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# ***Blacktown Memories – Liveable Communities***

## **Project Evaluation Executive Summary**

**WESTIR Limited, June 2017**

**Written by:**

**Dr Olivia Hamilton & Amy Lawton**

### Acknowledgment of Country / Statement of Commitment

We respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which the *Blacktown Memories – Living Communities* oral history project took place, the Darug people of the Darug Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that Darug people were the first people of the Blacktown area and have strived to retain their culture, identity and special connection with country for more than two centuries of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settlement. We recognise the valuable contribution made by Darug people to the local community in working towards a future of mutual harmony and respect.

## **Blacktown Memories – Liveable Communities Project Evaluation**

WESTIR Limited was approached by Blacktown City Libraries to undertake an evaluation on its *Blacktown Memories – Liveable Communities Project*. *Blacktown Memories – Liveable Communities* is an initiative of Blacktown City Library, aimed at collecting, recording, and preserving oral histories from Blacktown’s older residents. The library has partnered with four residential aged care organisations, and is collecting life histories from selected residents. This pilot stage of the project received funding from the NSW Family and Community Services [FACS] Liveable Communities Grants Program, with oral history interviews taking place from January through to May 2017.

WESTIR Limited is making the executive summary of the evaluation report online, however the full report will not be released publicly, except by special request. Individuals and organisations interested in reading the full report are advised to contact Mary Ternes, Community Learning Coordinator at Blacktown City Library on (02) 9839 6621 or [mary.ternes@blacktown.nsw.gov.au](mailto:mary.ternes@blacktown.nsw.gov.au)

## Executive Summary

*Blacktown Memories – Liveable Communities* is an initiative of Blacktown City Library, aimed at collecting, recording, and preserving oral histories from Blacktown's older residents. The library has partnered with four residential aged care organisations, and is collecting life histories from selected residents. This pilot stage of the project received funding from the NSW Family and Community Services [FACS] Liveable Communities Grants Program, with oral history interviews taking place from January through to May 2017. Most interviews were conducted by the project coordinator from Blacktown Library, though some were conducted by a family member (usually son or daughter) of the participant. Completed interviews are being stored by the library, and, if participants have given permission, added to the local history section for use by local historians and other interested library users. Interviews will also be edited and made available online, except in cases where the participant has refused permission for online publication.

WESTIR Limited was approached by the Project Coordinator to conduct an evaluation of the *Blacktown Memories – Liveable Communities* oral history project. The evaluation of the project sought to measure the benefits of the project for participating seniors, their loved ones and partner organisations; measure the impact on relationships between participating seniors, families, and organisations; measure the benefits to the library and to broader community; identify process improvements to help design a project that has the potential to be scaled across the NSW public library network; and analyse whether the project contributes to developing or reinforcing a sense of personhood.

Four staff members representing four participating organisations were interviewed for this evaluation. Staff members were overall pleased with the project. They felt that their organisations benefited from participating through improved relations with Blacktown Library, and through a better understanding of the life histories of some of their residents. They saw the project as fitting into their approaches to person-centred care, and in one case in particular the project was used to inform an initiative aimed at deepening staff-resident relations. Some issues raised included staffing requirements to ensure that the project ran smoothly and limits to participation by residents with memory loss.

Fourteen participants were also interviewed for this evaluation. Participants in the oral history project were overwhelmingly positive about their experience. They felt that participating had given them an opportunity to share their story with a sympathetic listener. Some people were unsure if their life history would be interesting to others, but had been reassured throughout the process by the project coordinator and by staff members at the participating organisations. Their families had displayed varying levels of interest in their life histories prior to their participation, but they were happy to have a copy of the recording to share along with other memorabilia from their lives. They hoped that the project could continue, so that others could also participate.

Three family members were also interviewed for this evaluation. All three participated in the oral history interviews by asking their mother or father the questions. They described the project as a positive experience overall, both for their parent and for themselves. Positive aspects of participation included learning new things about their parent; adding to the knowledge of family history; strengthening family relationships; strengthening relationships between residents of the aged care facility; adding to the local history collection; and beginning the process of recording their own life stories. The negative aspects of participation mentioned were focused on the interview process itself, with one family member stating that their parent was uncomfortable with the recording device.

As part of this evaluation, the project coordinator provided copies of ten of the oral history interviews, and reflected on his experience of conducting the interviews. As this was the first oral

history project he had led, he undertook training prior to commencing the interviews with the Oral History Association of NSW. The project coordinator reported that participants overall enjoyed their involvement with the project, and have continued to engage with the Library following their interviews. He did observe that some participants felt their stories were not worth preserving, and related this to their working-class backgrounds, as well as potentially their gender. As with other respondents in this evaluation, the project coordinator felt that the oral history interviews were opportunities for participants to strengthen their relationships with their families, to add another element to the family history and memorabilia, and to contribute to the legacy for future generations.

The ten oral history interviews examined for this evaluation revealed a range of themes to emerge from this oral history collection. Many participants spoke about their experiences of the Great Depression or the Second World War, two major historical events. They were young at the time, so these recollections provide insights into the experience of children during these major historical events. Many of the participants had grown up in other parts of Australia, or had migrated from other countries. Their recollections therefore also help to shed light on the migrant experience. Other respondents had grown up in the Blacktown area, and their recollections will be a rich resource for researchers interested in local history. There was much discussion of work, both paid work and domestic work. This aspect of the interviews would provide rich data for anyone interested in pursuing research into gender roles and the changing world of work. Another major theme was religion, with many participants reflecting on their spiritual beliefs, both in terms of how they have lived their lives in the past and in relation to the knowledge that they are nearing the end of their life. Finally, a range of different relationships were described, from memories of their own parents, friendships, marriage, to becoming a parent themselves.

Regarding the process of interviewing, many participants sounded as though they were reading from pre-prepared notes. The interviewer asked minimal prompting questions in those interviews. When participants had not prepared notes, the interviewer asked more questions. While this allowed the participants to pursue the topics that they felt were most important about their lives, it has meant that some interviews have little in common with others. This has occurred for example when participants have chosen to focus on different periods of their lives, e.g. early childhood as opposed to early adulthood, or different experiences, e.g. working life as opposed to relationships with others. Gathering life histories from such a wide cross-section of elderly residents was always going to uncover a great variety of experiences, however in order to help these interviews sit together as more of a collection, some thought should have been given to focusing the questions on particular themes, so that common ground could be found between the interviews.

While the analysis of the interviews with staff members, family members, and participants reveals an overall positive response to the project, there were some suggestions for improvement. These mainly focused on the recording process, on the time allowed for interviews, and on the possibility of more people participating. Two staff members did mention the possibility of including people with dementia, however this would require a different approach, with more involvement from staff and family members and more specialised training of Blacktown Library interviewers. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Review the focus of the oral history interviews, with the aim of creating a more cohesive collection, and making it more relevant to the local history collection of Blacktown Library and future researchers.
2. Recruit and train interviewers to assist the project coordinator, to relieve staffing pressures and to allow participants more time in the interview.
3. Review possibilities for extending the project beyond aged care facilities, for example by engaging with local seniors' groups, home care organisations, and other services and activities aimed at local elderly people.

4. Review the equipment to see if it is possible to use a less intrusive microphone, at least in cases where participants are clearly uncomfortable.
5. Pursue opportunities to present the oral histories in innovative ways, with the aim of engaging new audiences with the local history collection.
6. Strengthen relationships with participating organisations, for example through the planned collaboration to hold an exhibition of photos and memorabilia of the Hungarian community.