



International Year
of Cooperatives

Cooperatives Build a Better World

Humans of Nundah: Amplifying the Voices of Cooperative Members through Video Storytelling

Alex Skinner and Tim Wessling

Drawing inspiration from the viral “Humans of New York”¹ series of eclectic and intimate interviews with New York residents, *The Humans of Nundah* project is a series of short form interviews that offer a window into the everyday lives, challenges, and triumphs of the members of the Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative (NCEC).

Please note; some names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals interviewed for this article



NCEC is a workers cooperative in Nundah, a northern suburb of Brisbane, Australia.

Focused on building a sustainable, equitable and better world, our overarching theory of change is:

“If we create a supportive and empowering environment for people experiencing disability and disadvantage by providing a place where people gain work experience, paid jobs, and a sense of belonging, we can help to create a more inclusive and equitable world for everyone, where workplaces and communities are diverse and welcoming.”

We believe in social and environmental responsibilities, and these are seamlessly integrated into our business in a fiscally responsible manner. Therefore, we support local work and local circular economies, undertake local habitat restoration, source (where we can) seasonally and directly from local farmers, use battery powered tools and invest in photovoltaic solar panels, which see us produce more than 2/3 of the electricity we use².

Through direct storytelling, the Humans of Nundah project champions the voices of members like Mick and Christian, both long-term NCEC workers with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties. Their words form the backbone of our collective narrative as they reflect on poverty, exclusion, human rights and agency.

*“It’s much more friendly here
than where I used to work”*

Jenny

Background – Why a Cooperative Model?

Established in 1998, NCEC is a non-profit workers cooperative, born from a participatory Community Development process involving local people living with intellectual disability or learning difficulties. At the time, there were several people receiving casework assistance and independent living support from a local disability support organisation – the Community Living Association (CLA). The support workers noticed a common thread emerging in dialogue with eight young people, who all expressed a desire to work, but faced significant barriers⁴. Some had tried to find employment unsuccessfully, while others found jobs but couldn’t keep them and had negative workplace experiences.

"I feel like I fit into a job and I am no longer an outsider. I feel like it's the right job for me and that I can actually stick to it."

Mick

Following the strong tradition of the developmental method in Queensland⁵, workers supported these young people to meet as a group and talk about their experience and shift this individualised *private concern* into *public action*⁶. Through sharing stories, young people developed a *critical consciousness*⁷. Their unemployment wasn't due to individual deficits as previously thought but was a common structural issue. Through understanding this as a collective social justice issue, people were empowered to envisage collective solutions. The group's focus shifted from trying to fit into existing systems to that of creating their own, based on shared values around place-based, people-powered change.

In the beginning they formed a 'jobs club' in the informal economy mowing private lawns in the local area. Support workers then supported the group to establish a worker's co-operative. This legal structure meant that the group could now engage with work in the formal economy. Another key benefit of the cooperative model was that workers had real ownership and agency over their work-lives for the first time.

"It's much more friendly here than where I used to work" Jenny

"I always am given a choice on what to do in any team... compared to other jobs (where) I've had where I've had no choice." – Mick

Over 27 years NCEC has expanded its operations and now runs two social enterprise cafés and holds professional horticulture contracts maintaining parks for Brisbane City Council. The Cooperative's procurement strategy has led to diverse contracts relating to; managing a community hall, detailing an automotive fleet and running training programs for job seekers that experience marginalisation. Job seekers supported now include recent migrants, refugees and young people exiting state care.

At the heart of all of this, the Cooperative continues in its primary purpose of *'creating meaningful part and full time employment for people with cognitive disabilities..'*⁸ On the wall of NCEC's Espresso Train café a slogan reads:

"We don't employ people to make coffee. We make coffee so we can employ people".

Like the camera lens in the Humans of Nundah project, the co-operative itself consciously seeks to widen the aperture through which we view the world and assign value. We expand from a narrow neoliberal view of profit maximisation to a broader alternative view, which balances this necessary creation of income with social inclusion, equity, sustainability and wellbeing. This can be a challenge for supervisors who have come from the business world- for example, they may want to schedule the fastest workers for a particular shift, or perform many of the jobs themselves so that they are 'more efficient'. However, in doing so, we would be marginalising workers with disability, thus replicating the negative experiences they have had in mainstream workforces. To combat this, we train new workers and supervisors around our shared vision and establish strategies by which it is achievable. In this training we use an image of a set of scales with 'inclusion' on one side and 'efficiency/profit' on the other and acknowledge this as a key creative tension.

Mick's Story:

Joining just after the beginning of the coop, Mick's story is testament to the Cooperative's commitment to sustainable long-term employment.

"And having been here for 25 years, it is a long time,"

Mick reflects on the rare stability and continuity NCEC has provided through continued employment in diverse roles; from hospitality, horticulture and general maintenance work to his current role as assistant producer for the Humans of Nundah project. Previous work experiences had been tainted by exclusion and rejection, which is a common story for people with a disability. In the neoliberal model in Australia, there are large government supported employment programs, and these are generally contracted to private employment agencies. For these agencies, there is an economic incentive to maximise the number of participants passing through but less attention to the quality of outcomes achieved. It is common for people with a disability to experience this system as a series of short-term jobs or training programs, with no stable employment at the end. In 2025 through Australia's two biggest government



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Mick

funded employment programs- Workforce Australia and Inclusive Employment Australia, only 8% and 27% of workers with a disability respectively gained a job that lasted 26 weeks or more⁹. In comparison, NCEC has a retention rate of 80%- with many staff working in the Cooperative until retirement, and remaining involved as members. Mick explains how the NCEC experience feels different:

"I feel like I fit into a job and I am no longer an outsider. I feel like it's the right job for me and that I can actually stick to it."



This sense of belonging is central to the values of our cooperative. In Mick's words:

"Basically NCEC is a supportive job... people support you and help you get through the tough times".

The Cooperative's structure ensures no one is left behind by adapting roles as people's needs and abilities change, which creates a work environment where everyone can make long-term contributions. For Mick this has meant working in different areas of the co-op as his needs and interests have evolved. Mick is a strong advocate for the co-op and for other people with disability. Mick represents NCEC at conferences and public events, alongside other members and coordinator Richard Warner.

For Mick, this has been a profound identity shift from periods on the disability pension as a passive welfare recipient to an active citizen in his community.

"I'm not sitting at home doing nothing... I'm actually out and about talking to people and it (work) has actually changed my life physically and mentally..."

Other workers have also shared similar sentiments about the physical and mental impacts from finding meaning, purpose, and stability. In our last internal annual staff survey, all respondents surveyed either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement *"I feel safe and my life is more stable since working at NCEC"*¹⁰.

"I get a sense of achievement, sense of belonging and great staff to work with. It's been very rewarding to be a part of an organisation that's been going since '98."

Christian

physical challenges create additional work barriers beyond his intellectual disability. To meet our commitment to long-term work for members we need creative solutions for less physically demanding roles. Practically this means Christian now handles more catering deliveries during café shifts and performs tasks he can do seated. This flexibility also allows Christian to dedicate more energy to his management committee role.

Christian's story shows how NCEC's cooperative structure flattens traditional hierarchies and encourages members to take roles reflecting their strengths and aspirations.

Christian describes balancing his dual roles as Cooperative president and his daily café work.

"There is always something you can do. When I am working here (in the cafe) they are my bosses, but when I'm not working here, (on the board) I'm their boss."

These kinds of dual roles are important in terms of workers having agency and representation at all levels. They can present challenges, so we have robust policies in place around this. While the management committee makes strategic directions around the co-operative, these meetings are transparent and open to all members.. Any member with a conflict of interest can be recused from voting on an issue that directly affects them, for example wages discussions.

With the commitment to continued support of an aging workforce who still want to work, the co-op is also training new members through a more recent program, the Youth Co-op. This introduces a new generation of workers to NCEC to provide continuity and stability for the enterprises.

This flexibility and creativity in job design ensures that every member who wants to work can find a meaningful role. The Humans of Nundah project shows that empowerment grows through participation, leadership and sharing one's story

Bringing it all together, the Humans of Nundah

The Humans of Nundah project continues the participatory critical consciousness-raising work that led to the co-op's formation. This Freirean *conscientization*¹¹, is a process of workers understanding the systems of their oppression and their roles in both challenging existing systems and creating more socially just alternatives. The project amplifies their stories by sharing them on social media.

In our 2025 worker led strategic planning workshop, another worker reflected on the impact of times when he was unable to work at the co-op:

"When we had lockdowns for covid and the floods- I got stir crazy and pissed off- losing that routine. If I can't come in here I get bored- this means my mental health gets worse- I end up drinking and smoking. If we didn't have this job- I don't know where we would be."- James

Christian's Story:

Christian, who has humble origins based in the cafe dishwashing pit today finds himself on the management committee as the Cooperative's elected president. In his interview, Christian speaks to the importance that comes from undertaking meaningful work:

"I get a sense of achievement, sense of belonging and great staff to work with. It's been very rewarding to be a part of an organisation that's been going since '98."

Christian understands that the Cooperative's design is intentional:

"We help people with disabilities, and it's been designed that way."

Christian's story reflects the co-op's commitment to long-term stable work for members. As an older member, Christian can no longer stand for extended periods. These

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While the Humans of Nundah project is ongoing, it builds upon a broader body of participatory advocacy work that has been ongoing since the inception of NCEC. We believe a better world is cooperative, not competitive. Therefore we reject the dominant economic model of 'scaling up' to become the biggest business, but rather we 'scale across'- sharing our knowledge and resources to support a diverse ecosystem of other cooperatives and enterprises¹². To this end, NCEC has worked with the social enterprise movement more broadly, assisting many other groups to develop their own cooperatives and social enterprises, and fostering dialogue and shared advocacy. In 2013 we co-founded the Social Enterprise Council, now the peak body representing social enterprises in the state of Queensland. This peak body has provided a collective voice for social enterprises to advocate to government, which has led to policy change, including millions of dollars of additional government investment in social enterprise. The success of this advocacy is due to member participation. This is humanised and reverberates powerfully through the Humans of Nundah project.

The Humans of Nundah project is an ongoing developmental process, so we do not know with certainty what the broader impacts will be. However, based on experience, we believe these stories will be a powerful advocacy tool to amplify the voices of our Cooperative. The group will continue to strategise collectively around using these videos to impact broader change. Some of this will involve sharing these stories widely through social media, and also in a more targeted way- for example in screenings for local community leaders and politicians.

NCEC members have long understood that their stories are powerful for changing public perceptions of disability. At Marhaba café in Brisbane's central business district, screens display images of work from other co-op teams such as parks and gardens.

"When people come into the city they see us on the screen – and they think- these guys might have disabilities and some challenges in their life, but they are making their life better and improving themselves"- James

The voices of Mick and Christian, Jenny and James, as captured in the Humans of Nundah project, reveal the heart of NCEC: a place where people who have faced exclusion find lasting work, dignity, and agency. Their stories are not just personal – they are an illustration of the transformational power of cooperatives.

About the Authors

Alex Skinner is a Community Development practitioner, social worker and permaculturalist. He is a Project Worker at Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative, and teaches as a sessional Lecturer and Field Educator in Social Work and Community Development at The University of Queensland and Griffith University in Australia. Alex has experience working in several settings, such as neighbourhood centres, in disability, and with young people experiencing homelessness, as well as with First Nations peoples.

Email: alex.skinner@uq.edu.au

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0117-4980>

Tim Wessling is a Volunteer Supervisor and Project Lead at Nundah Community Enterprises Co-operative in Brisbane, Australia, where he specialises in Community Development and social innovation. With a Graduate Certificate in Social Innovation from Central Queensland University and extensive experience within the higher education sector, He is passionate about building community capacity and developing sustainable community-led business models.

Email: tim@ncec.com.au

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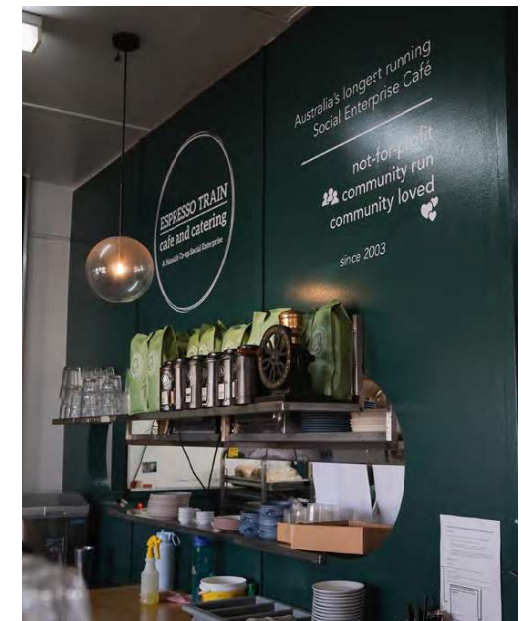
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in International Association for Community Development

📍 International Association for Community Development, Baltic Chambers, Suite 305, Wellington St, Glasgow, G2 6HJ, Scotland, United Kingdom

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