

Forest Farm Community

c. 1981 – c. 1984

Other Names: • Mangrove Mountain Kibbutz

Details

The Forest Farm Community was an initiative of the New South Wales Homeless Children's Association. In 1981, the NSW Lands Department donated a 160 acre reserve of land to the Association. It was at Mangrove Mountain, near Gosford, on the central coast north of Sydney. The Association had ambitious plans for the Forest Farm Community to be a rural village for homeless youth, in the style of an Israeli kibbutz community. The village did not end up coming to fruition, despite extensive planning and fundraising. In September 1984 the Homeless Children's Association reported that it had reached the first stage of building, a dwelling for 8 young people and 2 adults. The end date for the community, and whether any young people lived there while it was run by the Homeless Children's Association, are unknown.

The New South Wales Homeless Children's Association was formed at the end of 1980, as a response to the prominent social issue of homeless young people in Sydney. The concept for a rural village where young people could live and work started to be developed in early 1981. The CEO of the Association, Simon Davies, said the community would be an alternative to city refuges for homeless young people, and would provide a combination of a "short term home, occupational training and positive human contact for some of the thousands of homeless and destitute young people in the state" (University of Sydney news, 1982).

Later in 1981, the NSW government gave a land grant to the Association, who appointed 3 directors to be trustees. The project attracted support from big business and prominent Australian politicians including future Prime Minister RJ Hawke who joined the board of the Homeless Children's Association in late 1982.

An article in the Sun Herald from September 1983 referred to Davies and the Association's success in getting support. "Persistence combined with a highly developed ability to play the bureaucracy at its own game eventually saw the Homeless Children's Association prise 160 acres of land near Gosford out of the Crown Lands Department. Publicity prompted Bob Hawke, then in opposition, to get involved (Sun Herald, 25 September 1984, p.146, in NAA, M3596, 484, p.84).

Bob Hawke apparently had "extensive discussions" with Simon Davies about the Forest Farm project, and was enthusiastic about the potential of the village to provide a solution to the social problems of unemployment as well as youth homelessness. In a speech to the International Labour Organisation in Geneva in June 1983, Hawke (Melbourne Herald) spoke of the Israeli kibbutz model as a "possible solution for Australia's unemployment ills" (Australian Jewish Times, 4 August 1983). The Homeless Children's Association later described Hawke's use of the term kibbutz and his address in Geneva as a "mixed blessing". It had led to much media interest in Forest Farm, but also contributed to misunderstanding (NAA, M3596, 484, p.110).

The ambitious plans for the Forest Farm Community were largely developed with the assistance of over 80 staff and students from the University of Sydney, who provided an estimated 15,000 of volunteer labour in 1982-83. The plans were for 5 major buildings on the site: a community block (containing sleeping quarters, kitchen, dining and living areas), an arts and crafts building, a horticultural greenhouse, a workshop and a sleeping block.

The University became involved when the Association's Simon Davies approached architecture academic Colin James, who had an interest in alternative living styles, and proposed that his students investigate the idea of a kibbutz on the land at Mangrove Mountain.

The plans for the village were launched on 17 March 1983 by the President of the Senate Douglas McLelland, representing the newly-elected Prime Minister Hawke. At the launch, a scale model of the village, complete with landscaping, was unveiled. The University's television services department had also produced a documentary about the village. Also unveiled was a "spectacular eight foot embroidery tapestry by Peter Dewis depicting the stunning landscape of the property" (Homeless Children's Association, 'The Forest Farm Community', 7 March 1983).

At the launch, the Association announced that it had commissioned an "intensive economic analysis" of the project, which would include a cost benefit analysis for the Australian treasury of different projects of a similar nature to Forest Farm, right around Australia. "It is hoped that the Forest Farm Community will be a project of such obvious success, that similar villages can be established in Australia using that model and methodology" (Homeless Children's Association, 1983).

A document published by the Homeless Children's Association in 1983 claimed that Forest Farm offered "some dynamic alternatives to the traditional methods of community caring".

Forest Farm will have no social or welfare workers acting in such a capacity. It will have no formal professional counsellors. It will have no analysts or child psychologists or remedial teachers or social therapists. Although the services of those professionals will be called upon Forest Farm will not have these people, because Forest Farm will operate on a totally different level to anything which so far has been established ... The philosophy is quite simple: if you have enough caring and consistent strong adults in any child's life, he does not need professional help. This is a principle which was proved right long long before professionals ever came into the arena of child care (Homeless Children's Association, 1983).

The document concluded by stating that "The village will be commenced this year and it is destined to be a raging success". However, not long after the launch of these grand plans, the initiative met with substantial setbacks.

Many locals in the community raised concern about the establishment of the village in their area, and the presence of "drug addicts and dropouts" in their community. Some newspapers referred to it as a "dole farm".

There were also significant issues within the Homeless Children's Association. In June 1983, a number of board members resigned from the association, including its president, Ken Richards of Esso. Prime Minister Hawke resigned from the board not longer after. A briefing within the Prime Minister's personal papers at the National Archives of Australia described the Association as "to some extent disintegrating", and citing concerns about Simon Davies' judgement. Davies was the only full time staff member of the Association and was described as having "no concept of management, budget or organising" (NAA, M3596, 484, p236).

These records also state that a former police officer working at Esso with Ken Richards was "privy to a police dossier which was damaging to Simon Davies". Davies, along with other former staff members of the Homeless Children's Association, was subsequently charged with sexual abuse of young people at its refuge in Darlinghurst in the 1980s. Davies was convicted in November 2022 (A Current Affair, 2022).

Following the upheaval on the board in mid 1983, Davies remained involved with the Forest Farm project for a few months. Davies wrote to Prime Minister Hawke in October 1983, advising that the Forest Farm project was "slowly sliding into disgrace". Davies appeared to blame Hawke for much of the project's woes (even though it was Davies who had sent a telex to Hawke in mid 1983 advising him to resign from the council):

We are losing our credibility because of the growing belief that you have walked out on Forest Farm ... When we spoke in your office I came away with the vision of a community project which had the full backing of Bob Hawke. You had many suggestions of how you could help. You indicated that on achieving government Forest Farm would have full federal support. Now we need it. Without it we will be a maverick organisation fighting for survival. We already have lost one development application through Gosford Council – your resignation being prominent in the debate – and we stand to lose our reapplication unless something supportive is said by someone in a position of significance. I think you are the only person who can put Forest Farm in a reasonable position (NAA, M3596, 484, p.14).

Davies resigned from the Homeless Children's Association in January 1984 ('Hope for a troubled dream', Melbourne Herald, 20 June 1984, in NAA, M3596, 484, p.56). The Association continued with the Forest Farm project in 1984. In March 1984, Rod Blackmore (Vice President of the Association) wrote a letter to the Prime Minister with "information about the Homeless Children's Association, information about its relationship to Mr Simon Davies, and its intention to press ahead with the Forest Farm Community" (NAA, M3596, 484, p.43).

A publication from August 1984 referred to "some setbacks" the previous year, but stated that "Fortunately, however, it did retain the involvement of people with vision who were not prepared to allow it to die" (Choices magazine, August 1984). Tony McLaughlin took over coordination of the project after the departure of Davies, and with his wife and two of his children moved onto the Mangrove Mountain site in February 1984. McLaughlin said to a journalist, "We have achieved in six weeks what they've been sitting around and talking about for two years" (Melbourne Herald, 20 June 1984).

The Forest Farm Community being built in 1984 was much different to the plans that were launched the previous year. It was "much simpler and less expensive, and to the locals, less controversial than the original". The first stage was the construction of a 5 bedroom dwelling (Melbourne Herald). In August 1984, the Association reported that this house could be finished in 3 months and construction was underway by September (NAA, p.16).

From the research undertaken up to December 2022, It is unknown whether this building was ever completed. It is also unclear when the Homeless Children's Association ceased operations. No relevant records have yet been found dated later than 1984.

Later in the 1980s, a lease on the land at Mangrove Mountain was taken over by Wesley Mission and an entity called the Mangrove Mountain Homeless or Needy Young Persons Reserve Trust operated on the site into the 2020s.

Gallery



Model of Community Centre and Accommodation, Forest Farm Community

Description: This is a copy of an image that appeared on the front of the NSW Homeless Children's Association "Choices" magazine in August 1983. It is captioned, "Model of Community Centre and accommodation superimposed on the actual site at Mangrove Mountain".

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [New South Wales Homeless Children's Association \(1980 - 1984?\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Mangrove Mountain Crown Reserve for Homeless and Needy Young Persons \(c. 1988 - c. 2022\)](#)

Resources

- Clancey, Dimity, [A Current Affair: High-profile privacy advocate Simon Davies jailed for sexually abusing homeless boys at refuge](#), 23 November 2022
- [Kibbutz-style village for homeless children](#), The Australian Jewish Times, 14 October 1982
- [A kibbutz by any other name still smells as sweet](#), The Australian Jewish Times, 4 August 1983

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records held by other organisations

- [\[Personal records of Prime Minister Hawke\] Alternative employment, homeless children, kibbutz development \(1983 - 1984\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/forest-farm-community/>