

A caregiver receives some special pampering



Kelly is thrilled with the first glimpse of her new haircut

WHO CARES?

Who cares? The good news is ... lots of people do!

When Mooroolbark resident Lisa Currie decided to organise a special day of pampering for those who look after loved ones with a physical or intellectual disability, she was inundated with offers of help from people in the local community.

Lisa runs the Ripple Kindness Project¹, a community and school program providing opportunities to help people practice kindness toward others. She began planning an event to recognise and reward caregivers after she observed the struggles of her sister's family. Lisa has a 6-year-old nephew with autism and has seen firsthand the strain caused by providing constant supervision and help to disabled relatives. "I have come to learn what these families go through," said Lisa. "What they go through to get through every single day ... it's amazing, it's traumatic, it's devastating, and sometimes triumphant – and sometimes so exhausting that they just can't function anymore."

Unfortunately, government funding is not nearly enough to cover the cost of all the therapies that many disabled children need in order to integrate into society, so families struggle to pay for therapies on their own. In addition to lack of money, most carers of the disabled just don't have time to spend looking after themselves.

Lisa envisioned an event at which carers like her sister could relax and be pampered, at no cost. Irabina Childhood Autism Services in Bayswater was happy to provide its premises for the day, and Diane Ryan of Irabina quickly became Lisa's invaluable friend and colleague on the project.

Once people started hearing about the plans, offers of help came pouring in. Dozens of people contacted Lisa and offered services such as makeovers, hairdressing, massage, yoga, and counselling. A few businesses helped with promoting the day, and other companies and individuals gave generously to provide items for goodie bags, prizes and gifts.

After four months of planning, everything was ready, and the doors of Irabina opened to carers on Sunday November 17th. Caregivers could choose from a range of activities including art therapy, massage, yoga, relaxation sessions, meditation and craniosacral therapy. Bingo, musical entertainment and card-making were offered, and carers also had the chance to be pampered with makeovers, pedicures, manicures, and even a hairdressing session. Tea and coffee had been donated, and a delicious range of home-baked cakes and slices, provided by volunteers, was available all day.

Among the helpers at the event were Lisa's husband, two sons, and her parents. The event was filmed by Ian Skurrie of Videocentric, and Nikki of Nikki Parawahera Photography volunteered her time to take dozens of photographs of the occasion. Our cover photo and the pictures on this page were all taken by Nikki.

One of the most popular activities of the day was hairdressing, and one woman added to the spirit of giving by having her long hair cut into a new short style and donating her long locks to the Pantene Beautiful Lengths program, which collects hair to create free, real-hair wigs for women with cancer.

Kelly Jarvis-Clark was another grateful recipient of a new haircut. Kelly's son Shaun, 25, was diagnosed with autism when he was a young child, and Kelly has been a single mum to Shaun and her other two children – Ben (29) and Hailey (14) – for most of Shaun's life. Kelly describes her son as high-functioning, but he is still very dependent on her and will need her care for the rest of his life. Kelly had never attended an event that honours caregivers, and she felt very emotional talking about just how special the day made her feel. "Even though Shaun is my son and my responsibility, I felt as if the community was recognising that I did OK with him and was thanking me for it," Kelly said. "It was one of the best days of my life."

Lisa knows that the day benefitted both the volunteers and those who enjoyed the therapies. Some volunteers commented that they had previously felt that they didn't have anything to offer others. Once they learned that they could contribute, they were excited about the prospect of continuing to do so. "It was a day with different objectives and outcomes for lots of people – it wasn't just about the carers," said Lisa. "It was about people who were giving of themselves – sometimes for the first time."

Many years ago Kelly Jarvis-Clark wrote a poem about her desperate need to connect with and protect her son Shaun. It begins, "If I look hard enough I'll find you; and I'll search forever more ..." The poem is a touching testament to a mother's love and the daily challenges of coping with a child that she can never completely understand. For those like Kelly, taking some time to relax and forget about their daily struggles was a real gift – a taste of luxury provided by Lisa's team and the dozens of volunteers who have shown that people really DO care!



Participants in the art therapy sessions released both buried emotions and expressions of creativity

Janet Van Dijk

¹ ripplekindness.org; facebook.com/RippleKindnessCards