



VicHealth

# SUCCESS STORY

## Glen Eira Junior Soccer Club

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

### Kicking the Goals that Count



(Picture: Valeriu Campan/News Ltd.)

**A group of parents were really angry. They knew the time had come to do something completely different. Fed up with their previous soccer club's indifference to juniors, a handful of true believers struck out on their own. They had a vision. They wanted to create a soccer club that had a focus on juniors and fun, and was truly inclusive to all people and all abilities.**

In 2002, the Glen Eira Junior Soccer Club kicked its way into the footy world after they convinced Football Federation Victoria to give them a go.

"Getting a new football club up was a pretty intense process. We had a lot of conversations with George Angelopoulos from Football Federation Victoria about our values and ideals. We were determined to establish a club that people of all abilities would be able to join. We didn't want to be elitist. George listened to us and took a punt on us I think because our ideas were different," Mary Weerdenburg, club registrar and assistant secretary, remembers.

The rise and rise of the Glen Eira Soccer Club is phenomenal. Hoping to get 120 members in their first year to recoup the money the handful of founding members had contributed from their own savings to start the club, they instead had 249 members.

"We couldn't believe it. We recruited about 60 from our previous club; actually a whole team crossed. Most of them knew we were determined to bring about change," Mary says.

They also did a leaflet drop in the local primary and secondary schools inviting children down to the club.

"I was just a mum at the other club – I wasn't a committee member or anything, but I was passionate about not allowing the juniors to be forgotten. I had been involved at my children's schools on parents associations. The one thing about women is that they are brilliant networkers and they make things happen and we have some great women in our club!"

Once the club started training on its own grounds at Mackie Rd Reserve in Bentleigh East and Duncan Mackinnon Reserve in Murrumbeena, people started taking notice. Soccer teams had never used the grounds before. Because the ground only had AFL football goalposts, Frank Weerdenburg (the club's grounds and facilities manager) built soccer goals in his own backyard. Frank now oversees the clubrooms, the equipment, the goals and draws the white lines on the grounds each weekend.

Now bursting with 420 members, 18 junior teams, six girls' teams and two wheelchair teams, the membership is now so large that the club's presentation events have to be spread over two days. Its motto: Friendship, fun, family and football drives all of its activities and values. Determined to be a club for all, in the second year, the club approached Football Federation Victoria to say they were very keen to welcome disabled players. The club now fields two teams which play at an indoor basketball centre with one team recent state champions. Once again Frank's skills came to the fore.

# Glen Eira Junior Soccer Club

Discovering that the ball sometimes got stuck on the front of some wheelchairs, Frank built kickboards that clip on the front of the wheelchair to allow players to have greater control of the ball, thus allowing them to enjoy the sport even more.

"If you are an inclusive club that means all ethnicities, religions and abilities are to be welcomed. We have special needs children and children with autism for example. One 14 year-old boy has a heart defect and came to us as no-one else would let him play," Mary explains.

Current secretary, Daniel Levy was a dad on the sidelines until he too realised that the club was offering something special and decided to get more involved. Daniel says he was initially, like many parents, reluctant to put his hand up.

"Most people have been under pressure all week at work and just want to relax on the sidelines and watch their kids play. Who wants to be thrown into an unfamiliar canteen, have no idea where anything is and feel dumb? I think most people are pretty shy but are happy to help if they are asked. Once you are thrown onto barbeque duty you realise pretty quickly that you can make a contribution," Daniel adds.

Daniel observes that as a young club, most of the work falls onto the founding members and specifically Mary and Frank. The club has the advantage however of having a large pool of parents from which to recruit more help.

"Not only do Frank and Mary do 75% of the work, but they contain 75% of the knowledge. It is very difficult to delegate tasks of enormous responsibility until people become more experienced and gain the knowledge of the club, otherwise it would all fall apart. It is now getting to the stage where we are actively trying to change this and we are lucky enough to have a large membership to draw support from," Daniel says.

The Socceros qualification in the 2006 World Cup has seen a huge boost in interest in the sport especially at the junior level.

"To be a healthy club everyone has to share in the ownership. We recently had a juniors' presentation day and there were over 250 parents there. We had so many people coming up saying 'What can I do to help?' Parents are beginning to own the club. More people are willing to volunteer for the Goalkick program and this is great as volunteers then become coaches and that keeps the flow of coaches coming. We need more people to volunteer to be part of the committee though."

As a new club, Glen Eira was able to start with a clean slate and was not bogged down by "people saying things like this is the way we have always done it". Everyone is invited to attend committee meetings and questions are encouraged. The club's treasurer has recently resigned after three years' service at the age of 84.

The Glen Eira Junior Soccer Club has an enviable reputation of a club that values and respects its members and opposition. Match reports on the club's website all feature encouragement and the promotion of the team spirit above all else. It believes winning isn't everything and that many things in life are of much more value.

"I have met the most beautiful people and the most stunning kids, it is very humbling for me to be part of this club. When one of our teams went over the centre line for the first time, one of the kids did cartwheels on the field at the end of the game he was so excited, even though the result was a nil all draw. The opposition coach was really angry because they expected to beat us easily. Four parents from the opposition club approached me afterwards to ask about our club as they couldn't believe how different the responses of both clubs were. Two joined up as new members," Mary says.

There is something about the Glen Eira Junior Soccer Club that can't be put into words. So popular now that they have two playing grounds and a separate training ground, the club's dream to be a welcoming place for all has well and truly come to fruition.

"When my children were young we were involved in lots of activities and there was always someone there for them. This is our way of paying them back for being there for our children; we are now there for every parent that needs us," Mary adds.

## For more information

Glen Eira Junior Soccer Club at [www.gleneira-jsc.com.au](http://www.gleneira-jsc.com.au)

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## VicHealth

15-31 Pelham St, Carlton 3053  
PO Box 154, Carlton Sth 3053  
Phone: +61 3 9667 1333  
Fax: +61 3 9667 1375  
Website: <http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au>