

Spring 2025

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Garden Village hosts Australia's *first* VR intergenerational PROGRAM

Program participant Hazel is enjoying the Virtual Voyagers program.

Collaboration with SiVR Adventures takes off

With boarding passes in hand and virtual reality (VR) goggles in focus, seniors and students are traveling the world virtually from Port Macquarie to Paris, thanks to an innovative project powered by SiVR Adventures. Each week laughter fills the room as retirement living residents and secondary school students travel the world, transported by the power of technology while remaining in the comfort of Garden Village. From the Eiffel Tower to the African plains, they are part of Virtual Voyagers, Australia's first VR intergenerational program.

Launched by Garden Village in partnership with InterGen Connect and Heritage Christian School, the eight-week program creates opportunities for friendships across generations. With Australia's over 65 population set to double over the next 30 years, and one in four older Australians reporting feeling socially isolated, it is likely we will see feelings of loneliness among older people continue to rise. This means programs like Virtual Voyagers will become more important than ever, especially in a region like Port Macquarie which is home to a high proportion of people aged over 65.

Casey Baldwin, founder of InterGen Connect – a purpose-driven initiative dedicated to creating age-friendly communities – was delighted to be part of the Garden Village project. "By embedding SiVR Adventures into intergenerational learning, we're positioning Port Macquarie on the map as a leader in intergenerational best practice," she said. "We've seen magic happen, stories shared, laughter across generations and new friendships, so it's a win-win."

Casey is an intergenerational practitioner who has completed studies with the Australian Institute

for Intergenerational Practice and Griffith University. Her intergenerational programs vary in scale and design, with costs reflecting the level of facilitation, resources, logistics and technology involved. Her contribution was made possible thanks to the generosity of local sponsors and Garden Village Auxiliary volunteers, which fundraises to bring new programs to the village to enhance the quality of life for residents.

The team effort transformed the dream of 'armchair travel' into the impressive and groundbreaking Virtual Voyagers intergenerational initiative, with Year 7 to 10 students from Heritage Christian School willing participants. "We're proud to lead the way using innovation to connect people of all ages," said Garden Village CEO Craig Wearne. "Intergenerational programs offer a space for both generations to step outside their everyday lives, share experiences and enjoy good company. Residents have loved virtually exploring the world and we're excited to take this journey even further."

The program was co-created with Garden Village's Community Engagement Manager Jo McNamara and aligns with their vision to build inclusive communities where all ages feel valued. Every week, students take on the role of digital travel guides and seniors share real world wisdom from their life experiences. "Past and future are colliding in amazing ways," said participant Jeni. "What age gap? We're learning from each other." Another resident, Rex, who also ran a poetry writing session with the students, said, "I don't have grandchildren so being around the students is something really special." While a third resident, Hazel, said the students filled a gap in her life. "I missed out on watching my grandchildren grow up. This program gives me that chance to connect," she said.

In one session the group visited ancient Greece, exploring the Acropolis, the Parthenon and the Temple of Olympian Zeus. Inspired by their digital adventure, they brought the Olympic spirit to life with a mini Olympics event at Garden Village. While in the fourth week of the program, they took a virtual kayak through the stunning Gorges du

Tarn in France, which then led to groups teaming up to build miniature boats and float a tiny wooden passenger down a cascades water feature. Creativity, collaboration and communication skills were on show throughout the activity which was a platform to practice problem-solve together. "So much frivolity with homemade boats had me in tears of laughter," said resident Phyllis, who loves the program because it brings out the child in everyone.

Week five was all about bridging the generational gap, challenging stereotypes and reducing ageism. Participants shared their real age along with a story about the age they'd most like to be. The seniors offered reflections filled with honesty, wisdom and humour, while the students shared their hopes and dreams. The session highlighted that students are navigating major life decisions that will shape their future, and many seniors are facing significant transitions, such as adjusting to life when a partner moves into aged care. Though different, these moments of change are united through the significant impact they can have on emotional wellbeing.

"I'm thrilled to see the thoughtful way Garden Village has extended their campaign into a meaningful

intergenerational initiative," said Colin Pudsey, Founder of SilVR Adventures. "This aligns perfectly with our mission to foster connection and joy through technology." The program's success earned Garden Village an invitation to present at this year's Future of Business Technology Summit at Charles Sturt University, demonstrating another way the aged care provider is breaking down barriers, by showcasing the sector in a different light.

Wellbeing surveys conducted at the beginning and end of the program highlighted its impact to future funders, with the benefits clear at both ends of the age spectrum. Feedback from families is overwhelmingly positive, with one parent, Rochelle, saying, "My son Ash looks forward to every visit. It's such a wonderful opportunity for both generations." For providers interested in learning more about the potential of international programs, the Australian Institute of Intergenerational Practice will host a national conference in February 2026, promoting evidence-based programs like Virtual Voyagers that drive real social change. ■

Garden Village Port Macquarie
gardenvillage.com.au
silvradventures.com.au
intergenconnect.com.au



The miniature boat building exercise was a lot of fun.