

Tamworth First Light

The Bulletin

Issue 24 | 27 November 2024 | Meeting 1729

This Week

- Showcase Weekend
- Visit from past exchange student
- Look who ran into on Fish Friday!



Rotary Year 2024 - 2025

RI President: Stephanie Urchick

District Governor: Bruce George

President: Sue O'Connor

Secretary: Courtney Priestley

Treasurer: Dennis Maunder



Sue's Spark of Rotary Inspiration

Quote of the Week: We can't help everyone, but everyone can help someone. Ronald Reagan

Joke of the Week: Joker Card, thanks James.

Notices:

- A big welcome back to Kaisa, our YEP student from 7 years ago. It was great to see her and hear about her journey since her time with our club.

- Marina, Simon and Ela reported back about the successful Showcase event in Forster on the weekend. Marina spoke about the plans for District Conference in Narrabri in March, it would be great to have lots of members attend this. Simon filled us in about the next level of the public speaking that was held at Showcase.

- Terry spoke about his experience last week with a heart problem that resulted in an operation to put in a stent immediately. He urged us to treat any heart symptoms as a matter of urgency as the promptness of his treatment in Sydney may well have saved his life. Very glad that you've made such a good recovery Terry.

- RCTFL, including the Interact Club, and the Community Garden will be setting up stalls at the Tamworth Regional Council Volunteer Expo at the Town Hall this Sunday 24th November. It runs from 9-11am, so setup will be at 8.30am. Please let me know if you are interested in coming along and helping with this as it's a great way of promoting our club to the community and prospective members.

- Glenn informed us of the first Science & Engineering Challenge meeting, to be held next Wednesday, 27th November at 5.30pm at TCBC. All welcome to come along.

- Mitch is taking names for our Christmas Party on Thursday 5th December, at the Kootingal Hotel, from 6-9pm. He's also seeking more volunteers for the Santa Crawl on Friday 20th December. Please help out with this if you are able.

- Please let me know if you've decided that you can help with billeting musicians participating in the CMAA Senior Academy, from 6th - 16th January.

Guest Speakers: Can't thank Gai Phanoraj enough for coming and sharing her incredible and emotional life story, about living in a concentration camp in Laos to settling in Tamworth as a refugee. Thanks also to Dennis for encouraging your amazing colleague to come and share her story, and for bringing along Bec (who does a great job with our bookkeeping) as well for us to meet.

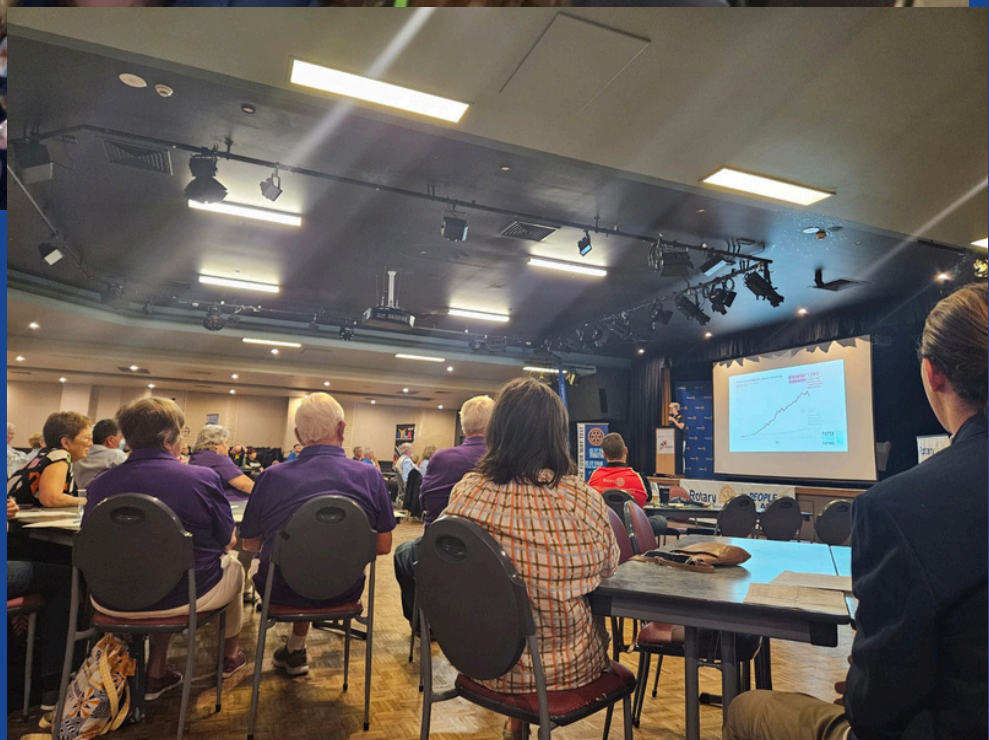
Sue O'Connor

President 2024/ 2025

Showcase Weekend!!!

Simon Guest - MC of Public Speaking
Ela - NBN interview
Public Speaking finalists
Marina Hearne - MC Sunday sessions





Showcase dinner
Di Morressy
Exchange Student
gang
Presentations

Join us!!

If you are attending the Christmas party, please lodge your RSVP to Mitch on 0401719332, or by paper form at our breakfast meeting. This helps to ensure we have sufficient seating at the venue.



Guest Speaker - Gai

Guest Speaker - Gai Phanoraj 20 November 2024

Our guest speaker was Gai Phanoraj, a refugee from Laos who arrived in Australia in 1986.

LABOUR CAMP

·Following the takeover of Laos by the Communist government, Gai's father, who was a colonel in the old military, was taken to a camp along with the royal family and other highly ranked military officers and educated men.

·In February 1976 Gai's mother received an invitation from the government to join Gai's father with the promise of an early release. Gai's mother, two older sisters, an older brother and Gai joined the camp with their father expecting to stay no more than six months.

·Life in the labour camp was tough and many died from hunger, sickness or just gave up on life.
·Gai's older brother passed away in May 1976, from pneumonia. The doctor and nurse ignored her parents plea for medication.

·Following this her parents caught malaria and spent over two months in hospital.
·All the adults were expected to do hard labour work from 7 AM to 5 PM five days a week building roads, houses all with simple tools.

·During this time, they lived in a bamboo hut which caused problems during the monsoonal season, and the dry season due to fire.

·There was no formal schooling but Gai's mother, a teacher, informally gave lessons to the children with very basic materials.

·The two older sisters were sent to another camp after they reached 10 years of age.
·In May 1979, when Gai was 7 years old, a baby brother was born. Gai was given the task of looking after him from dawn till dusk while the parents were away doing manual labour. There was no baby milk powder or food, and it was very difficult to feed the baby. Thankfully, her brother to this day is perfectly normal.

·In June 1981, Gai's mother with her little brother were allowed to leave the camp for three months to visit Vientiane, but Gai was not allowed to leave. However, it was arranged that an elderly man who had been released that was on the same flight would take Gai as his child to get her onto the cargo plane. When this plan looked like failing, Gai raced to the back of the plane and hid among the animals.

·Gai was reunited with her mother and brother after landing in Vientiane.
·Gai lived in Vientiane for another three years, attending school. Her two sisters were released in 1982 and 1983.

LIFE AT THE REFUGEE CAMPS

·the family (without their father who was still in the labour camp) escaped from Laos on 26th of March 1984 on a two-person canoe across the Mekong River. This was a dangerous manoeuvre as they could not swim.

·They made it to the Thailand side of the river and hid until morning. They then presented themselves at a police station where they stayed for two weeks.

·They were then moved to a UN run refugee camp in April 1984 where they stayed for another 19 months.

·Accommodation was basic in a small room with a tin roof, concrete floor and paper walls. Fire was always a risk and they took the precaution of having a small bag of essential documents ready to grab at any time.

·Gai attended a few very basic English lessons and learned the alphabet and simple words like hello and goodbye. Gai taught herself to read and speak in Thai during this time.

·They had the option of going to either the US, New Zealand or Australia and thankfully chose Australia, as her mother's family were already settled in Australia / Sydney since 1976.

·They moved to another refugee camp for three months awaiting a trip to Sydney.

LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

·Gai and her family without their father flew to Sydney on 26 March 1986. While they are in economy class it felt like first class after the cargo plane. Gai had one small suitcase, the small cardboard box and was too scared to eat anything offered because they thought they had to pay for it and they didn't have any money.

·They arrived at Villawood Resettlement Centre (now called the Villawood Detention Centre) and were reunited with relatives.

·They came to Tamworth a week later where they had relatives, liked the area and decided to stay and start a new life.

·Gai and her sister went to Peel High School and her brother Tamworth Public school. She found communication with other Australians difficult however her brother being younger was able to pick up and have a proper conversation more quickly. Apart from a new language, Australians have a lot of slang words like BBQ, BYO and G'Day mate.

- Schooling was difficult and Gai would copy exactly the notes presented by the teacher then go home and translate them to Thai and then to Lao, consider the subject and then translate from Lao to Thai and then Thai to English. No wonder it was difficult. The school provided a 2 hours per week with the special English teacher named Mrs Libby Buckland.
- In January 1988 Gai received her Australian citizenship from Bob Hawke the Prime Minister at that time, although Gai did not realise his importance.
- Gai completed a TAFE course and then went to university at Bathurst but it was a struggle and managed to graduate with Distinction and some awards.
- In May 1995, with no accounting experience she joined Hancocks accountants with Dennis Maunder as her boss. She worked for him for 27 years until he retired two years ago. She has been working with Bec Davis for over 15 years.
- Her father was released from the labour camp in June 1989 after 13 years (he was one of 3 men group to be released last), and arrived in Australia. He was no longer the military man full of confidence and strength but now a weak and scared man. He continued to have nightmares about his ordeal.

NOW

- Gai's younger brother graduated from Southern Cross University and works in IT, is married with two daughters in Sydney.
- Gai has a married sister in Sydney with two kids, one of which is a police officer.
- Gai no longer lives with fear and is proud to be an Australian citizen. Gai's mother lives with her in Tamworth.
- While they have been back to Laos several times, Australia is their home.
- Gai and her family are grateful for the opportunity given to them by Australia and for the welcome that they have received. Their lives are now full of hope and happiness, and with no fear.







Past Host families



The Funny Elbow



Important Info

[Tamworth First Light Webpage](#)

[District 9660 Webpage](#)

[Rotary International Link](#)

[DACdb Link](#)



Join us
every 3rd
Friday of
the month
at The PO
Hotel

5 DECEMBER 2024 - TBC RCTFL XMAS PARTY

20 DECEMBER 2024 - SANTA CRAWL

14 - 16 MARCH 2025 - DISTRICT CONFERENCE

MARCH 2025 - S&E CHALLENGE

13 & 14 MAY 2025 - NWRCE

ASSISTANCE REQUIRED:

24 NOV - TRC VOLUNTEER EXPO

20 DEC- SANTA CRAWL VOLUNTEERS

Roster

Date	27 Nov	4 Dec	11 Dec
Topic	Ela Fiserova	AGM	Salvo Army XMAS Appeal
Location	Tamworth City Bowlo	Tamworth City Bowlo	Tamworth City Bowlo
Guest Speaker	Ela	Sue O'Connor	Salvo's
Sergeant	Brian Logan	Steve Martin	Steve Martin
Corporal	Bruce Hemmett	Naomi Blakey	Brett White
Meeter & Greeter	Glenn McIntosh	Michael Smith	Helen Tickle
Door Team	Hannah Woods Charlotte Moore	Steve Hawkins Helen Tickle	Vicki Cooper Bruce Hemmett
President Assist	Richard Hardwick	Laurence Hearne	Peter Johnston
Guest Speaker Intro & Visitor Assist	Grandpa Joe (Hugh Radgeever)	Nil	Brian Thompson
Bulletin Notes Vote of Thanks	Louise Matthews	Board of Directors	Mitch Soree

POST OFFICE RAFFLE – FRIDAYS – 6:00 – 7:00PM

-	29 Nov	6 Dec	13 Dec (last one)
-	Hugh Raadgever Vangel Christov	Vangel Christov James Treloar	James Treloar Bruce Hemmett

Any changes to the roster, please let the President Assist know the morning of the meeting that you are replacing someone.

Reminder that it is up to members to find your replacement if you are unavailable.

Email Leave of Absence to the Secretary

Birthday, Anniversaries, and Inductions

Members Birthdays	Anne Jacob 3/12
Partners Birthdays	Nil
Club Inductions	Nil
Anniversaries	Nil

Attendance	76%
Visiting Rotarians	-
Visitors	Ela Fiserova (YEP RC First Light), Malin Breivik (YEP Student RC Tamworth), Kaisa Kousenen - (Former YEP Student) Helmi Kulmala, Susie Stevenson
Heads and Tails	Peter Leonard
Chook Raffle	James Treloar (free breakfast the following week only, cannot be claimed at a later date)