

#old is beautiful



CAIRNS

Older Cairns residents share wisdom on beauty and ageing

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Gimuy-walubarra yidi peoples, the Traditional Owners of Cairns
We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture.
We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Contents

Foreword,

Geoff Rowe CEO ADA Australia 3

Portraits and messages about beautiful

Alison Worrell 4

James Keightley 8

Jan Bevan 12

Barry Bevan 15

John Austin 16

Swaran Austin 17

Nancy Hunter 18

Chris Boyle 19

Amelia Wah Day 20

Mina Cortesi 21

Project overview 22

Aims 22

Participants 22

Activities 23

Learnings/insights on cross cultural respect 24

Useful information 25

About ADA Australia 25



Please take a few minutes to give us feedback about this resource/project. Scan the QR Code or email: admin@celebrateageing.org



Project partners

The Old is Beautiful, Cairns project was hosted by ADA Australia and facilitated by Celebrate Ageing Ltd

About the authors

Dr Catherine Barrett: CEO of Celebrate Ageing Ltd; Narelle Kerr, Marketing and Communications Officer ADA Australia and Matilda Marsh, Community Development Officer ADA Australia.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Cairns residents who participated in the project, we are grateful for your generosity and wisdom.

The #OldisBeautiful, Cairns project is one of four hosted across Queensland by ADA Australia in 2025. The #OldisBeautiful project is an initiative of Celebrate Ageing Ltd.

Special thanks also to photographer Leigh Harris for the stunning portraits

<https://indigedesignlabs.com.au/leigh-harris/>

Contact ADA Australia

Narelle Kerr,
Marketing and Communications Officer
email: narelle.kerr@adaaustralia.com.au
post: 121 Copperfield Street,
Geebung Qld 4034
web: www.adaaustralia.com.au

More info on #OldisBeautiful
www.celebrateageing.com/beautiful.html

Suggested citation

Barrett, C; Marsh, M; and Kerr, N (2025). Old is Beautiful, Cairns. Cairns residents share wisdom on beauty and ageing. Published by ADA Australia, Queensland. Available at: <https://adaaustralia.com.au/>

Foreword

Geoff Rowe CEO ADA Australia

Some people may be challenged by the assertion in this resource that old is beautiful. Others may be surprised to learn the *Old is Beautiful* project is an approach to preventing Elder Abuse in Queensland. I hope this resource helps to build a shared understanding of how powerful this approach is in helping to prevent Elder Abuse - before it starts.

As the CEO of ADA Australia, Queensland's aged care advocacy service, I know firsthand the extent of Elder Abuse. The National Prevalence Study estimated 15.9% of older Australians experience Elder Abuse. That's around 150,000 older Queenslanders every year.

The social and economic costs of Elder Abuse in Queensland are significant. Elder Abuse can destroy the lives of older people, shatter families, devastate communities, consume health services and drain our economy. We must prevent Elder Abuse from happening in the first place.

The World Health Organisation notes that Elder Abuse prevention must recognise that ageism is significant risk factor and prevalent in around 50% of the population. We need to build cultural beliefs and practices that value older people; and we need to value our own ageing.

We have partnered with Celebrate Ageing Ltd to roll out the Old is Beautiful project in Queensland. The project facilitates workshops for older people to build their knowledge of internalised ageism, Elder Abuse and how to protect themselves. Workshop participants were also invited to document messages about what beautiful means to them, and what makes them beautiful. These messages, and portraits of older people are shared in this resource.

As James, one of the participants, suggests – maintaining a healthy sense of ourselves as we age requires 'work', particularly in an ageist world. This is important work to help ensure older people live their best possible lives and are less vulnerable to Elder Abuse.

The #OldisBeautiful project is a powerful primary prevention approach, helping older Queenslanders build a healthy sense of self.



Geoff Rowe
CEO ADA Australia



Alison Worrell

My father was Sri Lankan, and mum was from the Seychelles. During the British Empire days, the British recruited manpower from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and India to develop their colonies. My father, an accountant, was from this group. He sailed from Ceylon on a ship that stopped in Seychelles, on its way to Mombasa, Kenya. During the stop-over in Seychelles, my father met my mother. My mother followed my father to Mombasa with her family where they got married. My Father located to Eldoret where his work was, and that is where I was born. Culturally our family were from two distinct cultures, which was wonderful. But it created issues in a British colony.

The population here were classified and services provided in this category.: European, Asian (from India) and African. We did not fit into these categories, so could not access education.

We could not be accepted into a school because we were not pure Asian and not pure African and not European. So, my mother educated us at home. We were a large family of seven. A few families like us also joined the class. My mother was very creative. She made us feel good about ourselves and made learning lots of fun. She didn't make us feel negative. We didn't belong to any social group, so she made our lives full of fun. She made us feel that we were all very important. She helped us to make meaning out of our lives. All members of my family developed professionally. I went into nursing and specialised in community health.

What matters most is how people relate to each other. Your body shape is not what makes you beautiful. You are important. Be positive about yourself.

Alison Worrell

I worked till I was 72. My last work was as a teacher in nursing at James Cook University in Cairns. The retirement age was 65, that was the system, but I wasn't ready to retire. The teaching went online, and I didn't agree with it. So, I retired. I now volunteer full time and enjoy it immensely. I work very hard, and I am the President of our local Cairns and District Senior's Citizen's Association. I am an innovative person, like my Mum. We run a busy centre with lots of colourful events, well attended. I do it because I get a real rush from seeing everyone enjoying themselves and keeping fit. I enjoy what I do. It satisfies me. I am also a dragon boat paddler, and paddle twice a week for an hour and a half. All this helps me stay fit.

I didn't think of my parents as old. They were very intellectual, fit and active and they passed that on to the family. You

could talk about anything with them. I grew up in Kenya and the Seychelles. My father would walk the 20 mins each day down to the bus stop to get the bus into town and meet all his buddies after he retired. Afterwards he would walk home. He did that every day until he died at 84. It was a very hilly and rough road down to the bus stop. My parents were into everything. They were political and did voluntary work too. It was a very stimulating household to grow up in.

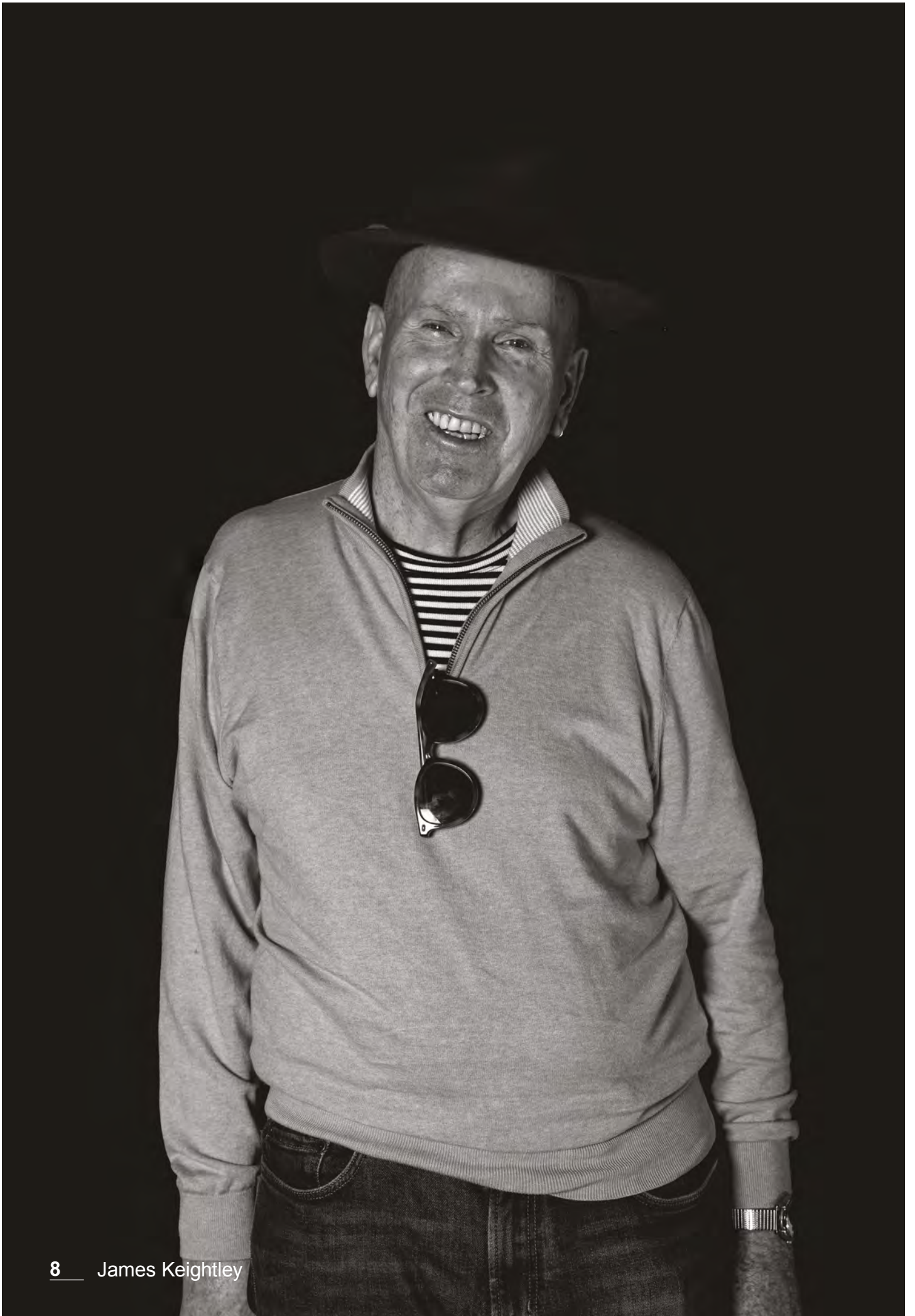
Beautiful encompasses the personality of the person. It's about how a person communicates. Are they warm? Are they friendly? Are they generous? Do they want to share things? Are they not selfish? I have had mates who have ended up with children who are far from caring, and it ruins the whole relationship. Beautiful people are generous and understanding.

I think what makes me beautiful is that I am very generous and a very caring person. I have no expectations of others. Some of my friends are getting increasingly disabled and so I take them out and keep the friendship going. I volunteer at the senior citizens club. I spend a lot of time there. I get a lot of satisfaction seeing that what I am doing for older people benefits them. It makes them happy and that makes me happy. I am currently organising a bus trip to Port Douglas. I organised a raffle to raise money for the bus. Within two days, the bus was fully booked.

I have a daughter, and she treats me with a lot of love, affection and respect. She asks me for my opinion. She looks up to me. If she is applying for a new job, she will ask me to look at her job application. I have friends that have the opposite with their children. It is vital and important that the younger generation see that we have a lot to offer, because of our world experience. They can learn from us and broaden their outcomes

My message to younger people is that appearance is not the most important thing in life. What matters most is how people relate to each other. Your body shape is not what makes you beautiful. You are important. Be positive about yourself.

No matter what shape you are, you can dress up. It can help you to feel good about yourself. This helps. It can show how you feel. Wear different colours. It doesn't matter what your body is like – you can look beautiful no matter what shape. Be positive about yourself. Dress to feel good about yourself and to say, this is me. Feeling good about yourself can change how you look and appear to others



James Keightley

Beauty is elusive. It feels like I recognise and affirm it in others but am much less practised at affirming the beauty that dwells within. Beauty is when you are interacting with someone, and you get a sense that what they are saying aligns with who they are - its authenticity. Beauty is less about physical appearance and more about the kindness and compassion that someone displays. As a same-sex attracted older man, masculine beauty expressed as gentleness, thoughtfulness, open-heartedness and vulnerability is much more compelling to me than its opposites. My challenge is to be those things myself in order that I might love me as much as or more than I might love Mr Wonderful who brings all those qualities to the table. That would be truly beautiful!

When I speak to others as their equal, look to highlight their positive attributes and not think of and speak of them in negative terms, my beauty is amplified.

James Keightley

What makes me beautiful? That is a deeply challenging question. My capacity to hold space for someone, to bear witness to their struggles as well as their triumphs and reflect to them that they've been seen, heard and supported is part of what makes me beautiful. The fact that I'm not that person always and that sometimes I present oppositely, speaks to the elusive/ephemeral nature of beauty, though I hope the scales are tilted in favour of this beautiful self.

When my actions align with my values, I am the most beautiful version of myself. When I speak to others as their equal, look to highlight their positive attributes and not think of and speak of them in negative terms, my beauty is amplified.

My willingness to speak honestly and openly about my struggles more often than I speak of my triumphs in order that it supports others in their struggles, is an aspect of self that I think of as beautiful. When I am centred, speak calmly and reassuringly to people they react positively and these support the notion of a softly natured yet strong and undeniably beautiful self.

I am not so naïve as think that I'm not also capable of the opposite of those virtues, and thus the daily dance between my beautiful and the not-so-beautiful selves puts the Cha in my Cha Cha Cha!

When asked whether I have a body positive message for a younger person, it brings up the dissatisfaction I have with my own body. Given my earlier expressed virtue of my words being congruent with my thoughts and actions, I'm not well-placed to be giving body positive messages to anybody, including younger people.

What I could say to them is that body positivity isn't a given. It requires the ability to listen and attend to one's thoughts and feelings, no matter how uncomfortable. Better to do 'the work' required to have a healthy sense of self, including one's physical self, early in life, before the negativity gets hard-wired in the brain and is difficult to re-frame.

Based on my own lived experience of body dysmorphia, I'd offer a message that achieving and maintaining a positive attitude to one's body is work required across the lifespan, as the body and one's acceptance of their body changes with time. I'd use the example of my exceedingly lean and fit endurance runner's body that I enjoyed up to my 50's but which has sadly deserted me in my 70's, suggesting I have work to do to address the beliefs, attitudes and expectations that may be fuelling my current dissatisfaction with my more rotund 70 year old body. The helpful takeaway: body positivity i.e., 'the work', is never done.



Jan Bevan

What does beautiful mean to me? That's a difficult question. Beautiful is a word that has so many strands of meaning. How we look is just the skin we wear and that doesn't define who I am. Beauty is something that comes from deep within ourselves. It is linked to how we think about other people.

Recently I saw an old frail lady in a wheelchair, coming out of the hospital. Her son was pushing the wheelchair and as they went past, I heard her say it was her birthday and so I wished her a happy birthday. Her face lit up. She told me her son had flown in from Adelaide to be with her. She was feeling beautiful because she felt loved and wanted.

I think we have to have a sense of self-worth. We have to be sure of who we are and what we are and where we are. We have to be ourselves – without putting anyone else down. We have to be sure of our own place and where we fit in the world.

I think beautiful is having a role in society that keeps me going and adds lustre to my life. I'll give you an example. I provide some of the music at church on a Sunday morning, and as part of that I listen to what other people have to say – whether they like the music or not. I have a role and it adds lustre to my life.

Beautiful is a multifaceted word that means so much. It has a depth beyond physical beautiful. I don't think of myself as a beautiful woman. I don't think I have ever been physically beautiful – but I am not an ugly woman. I am attractive in a way.

What makes me beautiful is my ease of interrelationships with other people. I know that is a funny concept of what beauty is. It's about being with other people when they need a chat, even when I am in a hurry, I make time to stop and listen to what they have to say.

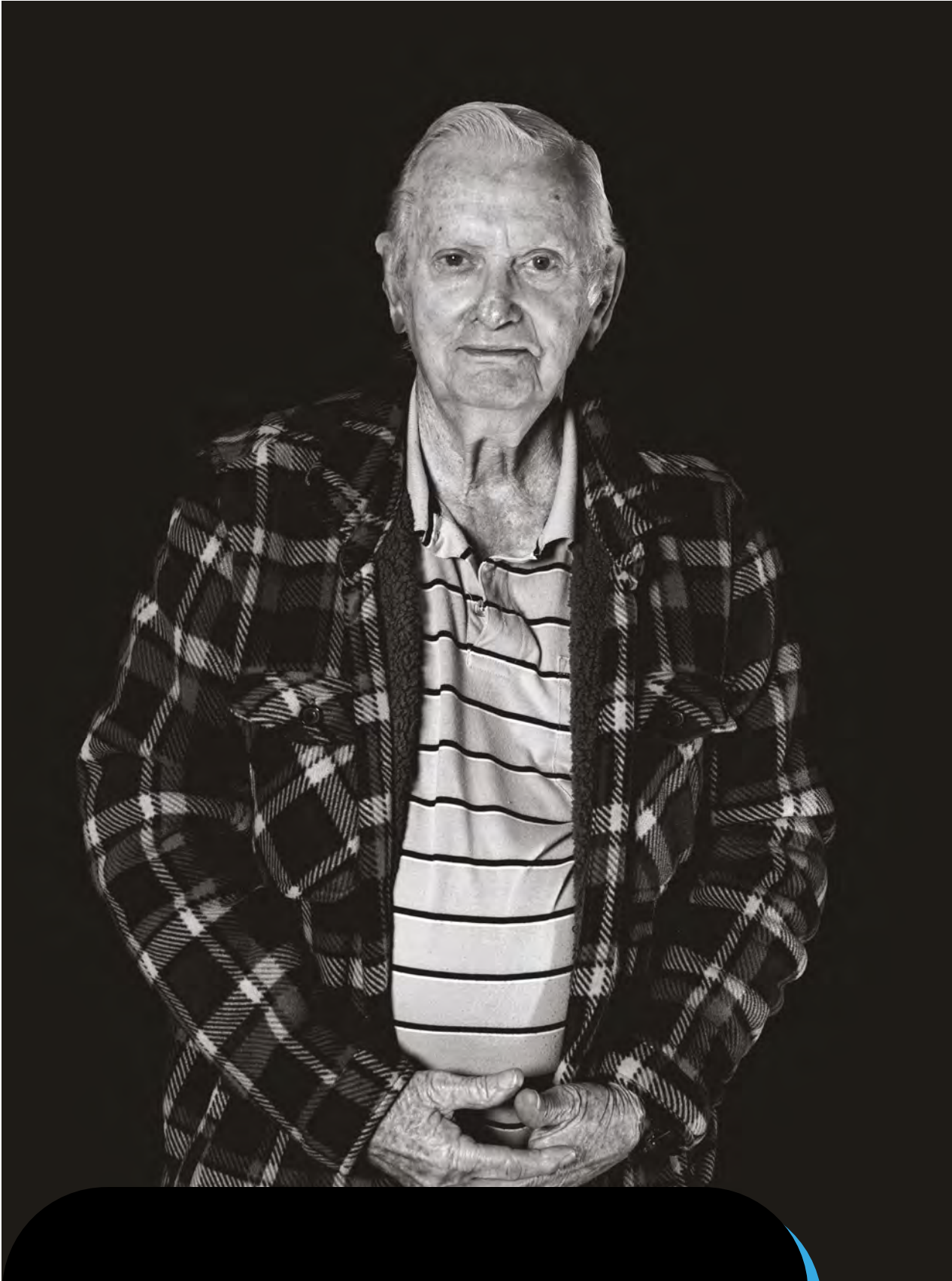
There seems to be an awful lot of people lately who want to stop and talk. There seems to be a lot of lonely people in the world and if I can have a word here and a word there and a smile – it can make someone else happy. Sometimes it's about giving way to an older person, letting them go first. It can make a big difference in another person's life.

Being beautiful is about having an openness to accept people. I might not like who they are or agree with who they are, but that doesn't make them less. Respect for others is essential. I don't have to like them, but I must respect them as a human being with a soul and a spirit that needs to be nurtured with my generosity.

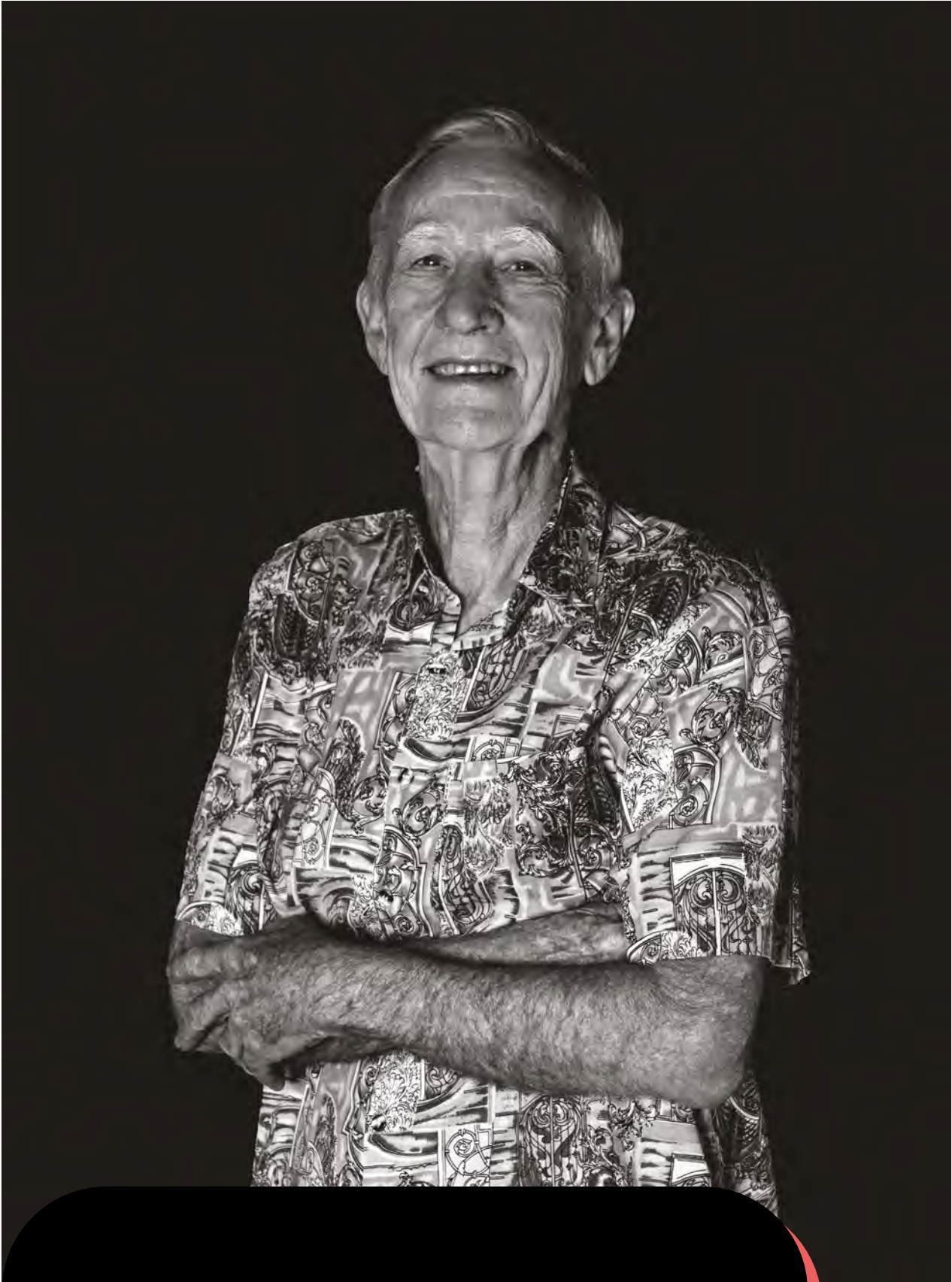
To a younger person my message would be to have a sense of right and wrong and have a sense of yourself and your worth. Be happy with who you are, be in your own skin. Understand your self worth and know you are loved and that there is always someone that will be there for you – even if you can't always see them.

There seems to be a lot of lonely people in the world and if I can have a word here and a word there and a smile - it can make someone else happy.

Jan Bevan



Barry Bevan



John Austin



Swaran Austin



Nancy Hunter



Chris Boyle



Amelia Wah Day



Mina Cortesi

Project overview

The #OldisBeautiful Queensland project was led by ADA Australia in partnership with Celebrate Ageing Ltd. This section of the resource provides an overview of the Cairns project, which was facilitated in August 2025.

Aims

The aim of the #OldisBeautiful Cairns project is help combat ageism and Elder Abuse, through the following activities:

- a workshop for older people to build their knowledge of internalised ageism, their rights, support services and how to protect themselves from ageism
- sharing photo portraits of older people and their messages about what makes them beautiful as older people - to help build intergenerational connections and promote respect for older people.

Participants

A call for project participants was disseminated by ADA Australia, Celebrate Ageing and local health and aged care service providers. Ten Cairns residents participated in the project – and were provided with an information sheet and consent form, which was signed by the participant or a family member.

Activities

Prior to the workshop, participants were invited to participate in a phone interviews began the process of exploring what beautiful means to each participant, and what makes them beautiful. Four interviews were conducted; three participants were unable to participate in interviews and three declined. One interviewee was unable to verify their interview notes, so their story was withheld from this report.

A two and half-hour workshop was facilitated, simultaneously with the photoshoot. The workshop was modified to promote participation by three people living with dementia and to promote cross cultural learning.

The notes from participant interviews were transcribed during the interview and emailed to participants for verification following the workshop.

Being beautiful is about having an openness to accept people. I might not like who they are or agree with who they are, but that doesn't make them less. Respect for others is essential.

Jan Bevan

Learnings/insights on cross cultural respect

This culturally diverse group of people reflected on beauty and respect for older people. There was a consensus that Western cultures are 'youth obsessed', while respect for older people was a critical or core element of many other cultures, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Eastern and European cultures. It was noted that in some cultures the good of the family or group or community comes before the individual, as one participant reflected:

Respect is different in different cultures. In eastern cultures elders are revered. Grey hair and wrinkles are accepted. I know this is shifting – our young people are becoming more individualistic, more focused on looking out for themselves.

It was noted that in some cultures, family bonds are so close that families live together - and this intergenerational connection cements a shared history and respect for each other's experiences. This was also reported to be shifting, as one participant noted:

We now have nuclear families, so younger people don't have as much contact with older people – so they are not as connected to older people. We are losing the art of communicating with each other

The group discussed what beauty meant to them and what made them beautiful, agreeing that:

- We are taught to avoid looking our age
- We are taught that successful age is not looking old
- We fear the vulnerability that comes with looking old
- We may try to avoid looking old to avoid the invisibility of old age
- Beautiful is saying I am what I am
- How I look on the outside is not who I am in reality
- We should be happy with our appearance, it's a gift from God

Reflections on the word beautiful were summarised by one participant in a way that resonated with the group, as follows:

Life is an on-going dialogue with oneself about how we present to and in this life. The goal of complete self-acceptance isn't achieved in a single conversation, rather it's a daily dialogue that continues across the lifespan. (James, project participant)

The diversity of the Cairns workshop provided valuable opportunities for cross cultural learning about respect for older people and valuing ourselves in an ageist world.

Useful information

About ADA Australia

Aged and Disability Advocacy Australia (ADA Australia) is a not-for-profit, independent advocacy and information service supporting and improving the wellbeing of older people and people with disability in Queensland. Our services are free, confidential and independent – and include the following:

Aged Care Advocacy & Care finder

- Assist with accessing and getting the most from your aged care services, including help to access support through the care finder program
- Support to express your views and wishes and to work through care related issues with your aged care provider
- Assist you understand aged care provider agreements and costs.

Elder Abuse Advocacy

- Help to address issues of elder abuse in aged care.

Disability Advocacy

- Assist with accessing disability support services, including the NDIS
- Support to work through issues with your service provider, the NDIS or other services
- Assist with disability discrimination and unfair treatment
- Disability advocacy support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders with disability.

Community Legal Service

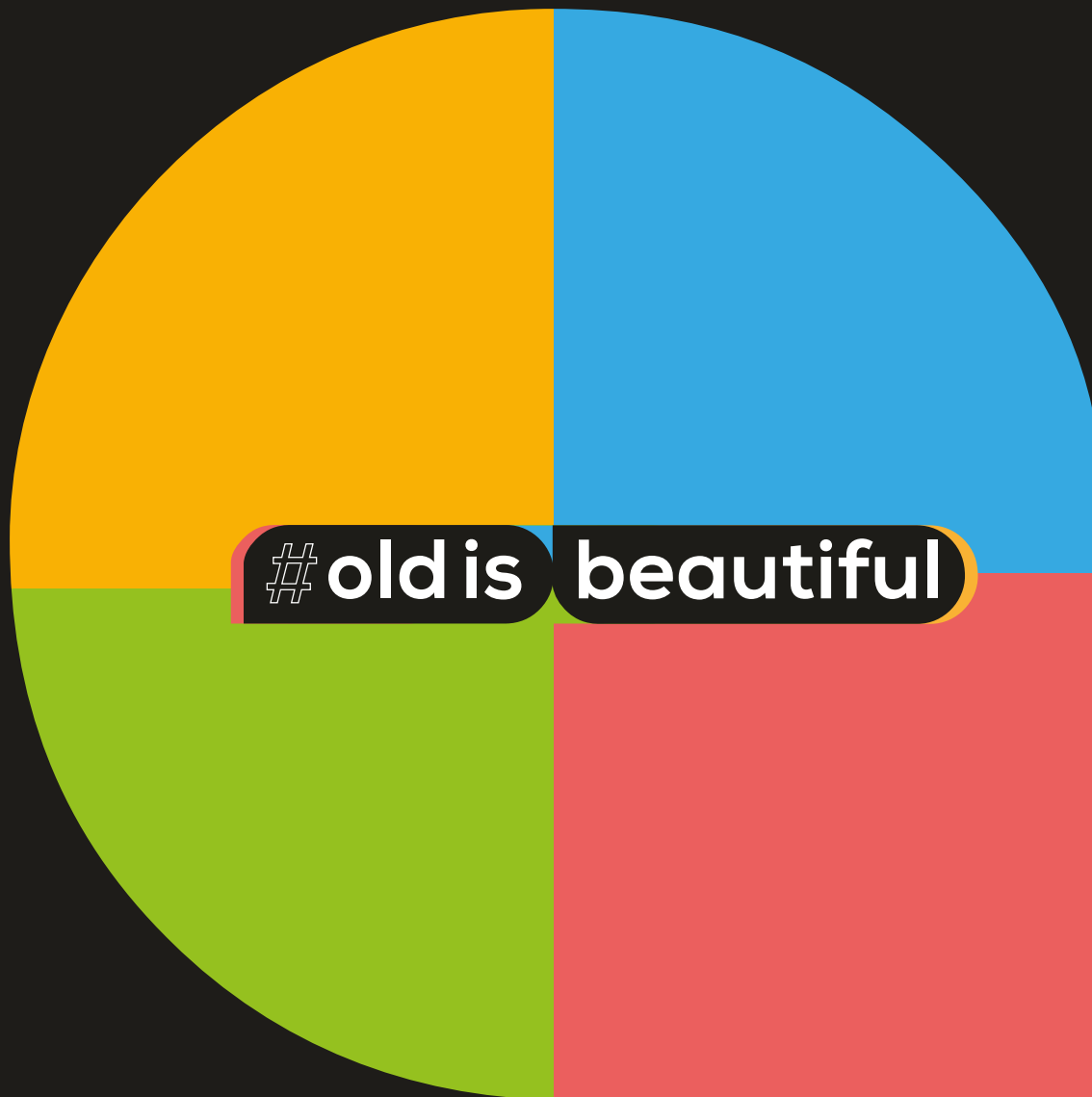
- Help with Enduring Power of Attorney, guardianship and administration matters
- Help to resolve issues with your Attorney/s
- Representation at the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (QCAT) and the Mental Health Review Tribunal (MHRT)
- Legal support to people with mental health conditions to navigate the justice system
- Seniors Legal and Social Support Service providing access to legal advice across outback Queensland.

Contact details

Phone: Call 1800 700 600 Aged Care Advocacy Line

Hours: 8am – 8pm Mon – Fri | 10am – 4pm Sat

Website: <https://adaaustralia.com.au/>



Old is Beautiful is an initiative of Celebrate Ageing Ltd
© Celebrate Ageing Ltd

<https://www.celebrateageing.com/beautiful.html>