

THE HISTORY OF OM:NI

October 2011

This is the story of the development of the OM:NI movement involving the establishment of groups for older men. In this document the focus is on New South Wales and developments relevant to Victoria are covered in detail separately.

1996 to 1999 - It appears the original idea for structured groups for older men was Jack Zinn's. Bronwyn Bishop, Minister for Aged Care in the Howard Government, made a speech early in 1999 to a conference in Sydney and stated "*Now there is a new group that has been formed in Sydney called OMNI – Older Men, New Ideas and is the brainchild of Mr Jack Zinn, a retired business executive who genuinely wanted to offer his professional skills to the community as a volunteer or part time worker.*"

Jack Zinn and Walter Black are regarded as the founding fathers of the OM:NI movement. Both were highly intelligent men. Jack was a scientist with a BA in Psychology and had a very friendly personality. He emigrated from South Africa to Sydney, Australia, in 1990 and when his wife went off to meetings of the Older Women's Network in 1995 Jack couldn't find an equivalent for men. He met up with Walter Black around 1996 who was also interested in developing social activities for older men. Walter was a retired dentist and was highly motivated to tackle the problem of depression and suicide among older men. Walter appears in a photo that claims to be the first OM:NI meeting in 1996. Jack and Walter took their idea to COTA (NSW) around 1997. Subsequently meetings of men were developed and by the time of the official launch in 1999 there were two active OM:NI groups - Chatswood and Paddington.

From the 1998/9 COTA (NSW) Annual Report "*OM:NI (Older Men: New Ideas) was established in 1997 as an initiative of COTA (NSW). The drive to form OM:NI stemmed from the identified need for a specific organisation dedicated to the health and social wellbeing of older men. Funding to make OM:NI a reality came in the form of a two year sponsorship grant from the NRMA in July 1999.*" Additional funding came from a number of sources over following years.

Clearly Jack and Walter did a lot of work developing the OM:NI model in the years from 1996 to 1999. Early in 1999 it was reported "*COTA (NSW) is extremely fortunate to have a very committed group of older men developing this initiative, led by Jack Zinn and Walter Black.*" It has been suggested that the OM:NI acronym "*Older Men: New Ideas*" was Walter's idea.

In 1999 COTA (NSW) agreed to auspice the formation and launch of Older Men: *New Ideas* (OM:NI) in Sydney. COTA (NSW) were to provide OM:NI with office facilities from 1998 to 2007 when OM:NI became independent. The official launch of OM:NI was held at the Sydney Town Hall on 19 October 1999.

1999 to 2000 - Michael Keats (COTA NSW Policy Officer), teamed up with Jack to assist in the development of OM:NI in 1999. By the end of 2000 there were eight OM:NI groups operational. These were Willoughby (previously Chatswood) and Paddington as mentioned already plus Canterbury (established late in 1999), Charlestown, Drummoyne, East, Hornsby and Leichhardt (later Glebe).

Following a disagreement with the auspicating entity, COTA (NSW), in December 2000 over the timetable for developing OM:NI as a separate organisation, Michael and Jack left the project to pursue their respective interests.

2001 to 2004 - In 2001 Bill Whitting was employed by COTA (NSW) as a Project Officer and began establishing more OM:*NI* groups. Also in September 2001 Dr Ray King and Bill Whitting set up the first OM:*NI* group in Wagga Wagga. Ray began establishing more OM:*NI* groups throughout the Riverina using his contacts in Rotary.

The other groups established in the Riverina by Ray King during this period were Griffith (November 2002), Narrandera (2003), Wagga Wagga 2 (August 2003), Hillston (September 2003), Wagga Wagga 3 (June 2004) and Temora (September 2004). Bill Whitting and Ray King helped bring OM:*NI* to Victoria in 2004. Development in Victoria is covered in more detail in a separate document.

Around 2000/2001 an OM:*NI* group was established in Hobart within the existing TasMen organisation supported by the local Health Department. Alistair Carmichael, a founding member of the Charlestown OM:*NI* Group moved to Tasmania and attended the second meeting of the Hobart Group.

Other groups to be established during this period were Adamstown, Albury, Bingara, Botany, Central, Epping, Gymnea, Hawkesbury, Moruya, Northern Beaches, Nundle, Tamworth, Tomaree and Toronto.

Jack Zinn published his book 'Older *Men's* Business' in 2002.

By the end of 2004 there were 27 OM:*NI* groups in metropolitan and country New South Wales with two in Victoria and one in Tasmania.

Bill Whitting resigned from COTA (NSW) in June 2004 and a Management Committee of OM:*NI* men was set up to guide the OM:*NI* movement. As well as the office facilities provided by COTA (NSW) for OM:*NI*, financial and in-kind support was received from Pfizer in Sydney.

2005 – Ray King established the Leeton OM:*NI* Group in March 2005. This group has since become a church group.

Jack Zinn died from cancer in 2005 at the age of 76. Another book he co-authored with Helene Gonski 'A Gong for Grandfathers' was published in that year.

2006 - Ray King, with the help of local men from Rotary, set up the Tumbarumba OM:*NI* Group in October 2006.

2007 – By now there were 32 recognised OM:*NI* groups from a total of 40 groups that had been established throughout New South Wales since 1999, some groups having ceased and others having followed a different path. By late 2007, following advice from COTA (NSW) that they were unable to continue auspicing OM:*NI*, most of the viable groups divided into two separate collectives which became independent bodies. Some groups joined the Older Mens Network Incorporated which was established in 31 May 2007 and they became OMNi groups. Others continued to negotiate with COTA (NSW) and became the official OM:*NI* organisation.

2008 – 2011 - With the agreement of COTA (NSW) the governing body, Older Men: New Ideas (OM:*NI*) Incorporated, was established in June 2008 to cover New South Wales OM:*NI* groups. Meetings were held early in 2008 to arrange incorporation.

The first Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held at Temora on 15 August 2008 with representatives from Griffith, Hillston, Holbrook, Temora, Tumbarumba and the three Wagga Wagga OM:*NI* Groups. Ray King, Herb Sowter and Alan Raby recruited existing groups to join the new body. Ray King was appointed Public Officer and acted as Secretary and Treasurer. Laurie Hull was appointed Chairman.

The second AGM was held in Goulburn on 21 August 2009. This made travel easier for groups from the north and delegates from Canterbury, Charlestown, Glebe, Tomaree and Willoughby attended as well as from the Riverina groups. Four OM:*NI* men from Victoria also attended. Subsequent AGMs have been held in Goulburn in 2010 and 2011.

As a result of the changed arrangements a number of groups became independent of either the official OM:*NI* body or the OMNI group. In 2010 OMNI claimed to have nine groups within its organisation. The official OM:*NI* body had 13 groups affiliated under their banner in 2011. These are Canterbury, Charlestown, Glebe, Griffith, Hillston, Holbrook, Temora, Tomaree, Tumbarumba, Willoughby and the three groups in Wagga Wagga. It has not been possible to ascertain the number of groups still operating independently of OM:*NI* and OMN.

Acknowledgement

My thanks go to the many people I contacted who were so generous with their information and assistance, in particular Dr Ray King, Herb Sowter and Tim Martin. I accept full responsibility for the content of this document and would welcome any additional information or comments. I'm aware there may be errors and omissions and hope these may be eliminated from future editions with help from readers.