



Conversation piece: The Talking Park Bench, part of the 2016 Seniors Festival. Photo: Eddie Jim

Carolyn Webb

Sunday
Age 2/16/16

When you talk to a stranger on a park bench, anything can happen, from a pleasant time-passer to the start of a lifelong friendship.

Maureen and Tony Wheeler famously met on a bench in 1970 in London's Regent's Park, fell in love, and later founded the Lonely Planet travel guides.

Claire Dixon just wants people to look up from their phones and talk to one another.

A chance meeting on a train inspired her to invent the not-for-profit Talking Park Bench scheme.

Its pilot during the 2016 Seniors Festival, from October 2 to 9, will



see three benches outside Melbourne Town Hall in Swanston Street allocated to encourage strangers to sit and talk.

There are laminated conversa-

tion starters, such as "what's the kindest thing anyone's done for you?" or "describe a memory of a taste or smell and what it evokes for you".

You may also talk about your pet axolotl or your passion for Thai food; just remember to also listen to the other person; to ask open questions and to keep an open mind.

One Friday last month Ms Dixon, 37, who has two infant children, was taking the train from Clifton Hill to the city for a rare night out with friends when her iPhone battery died.

It upset her: she'd been looking forward to idle Facebook and text-

ing time "which I don't tend to get with the kids during the day". The phone refused to work so she decided "to make the most of the 10 minutes on the train and go and search for conversation".

She chose Valerie Mills because she was the only person in the carriage not on their phone. Ms Dixon told Mrs Mills that her mother-in-law was a keen knitter.

Ms Mills, 60, said she lived in the CBD and had just had drinks at a Clifton Hill pub with teachers she had worked with at a local primary school.

Ms Dixon said her children will attend the same school, and they talked about the school fair.

After they parted, Ms Dixon felt buoyed. "I was reflecting that I'd been at home with a baby and a toddler for the past 12 months, and it can be quite isolating and you don't get many chances to have a deeper connection with people in public places."

She wondered "how we might create more conversations like that in the world, where strangers come together and share something".

She is raising money through crowdfunding to run Talking Park Bench. If the pilot is successful, it could easily be expanded.

Participants can share experiences and connect further on the website and Facebook page.