



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

**OFFICIAL OPENING OF
THE JONA CHILDREN'S SENSORY GARDEN
Wednesday 31st May, 2017**

Ms Mary Sayers, President QEC

Ms Athina Georgiou, CEO QEC

Cr Jim Memeti, Mayor City of Greater Dandenong

QEC staff, volunteers, distinguished guests , ladies and gentlemen.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and to any elders who are with us this morning.

Tony and I are delighted to be here this morning to celebrate the opening of the Jona Sensory Children's Garden. And to continue a connection between Government House and QEC, that began in 1922 with the patronage of the Countess of Stradbroke, the wife of Victoria's 15th Governor, the Right Honourable Earl of Stradbroke KCMG CB CVO CBE VD TD, of what was then known as the Victorian Baby Health Centres' Association.

When QEC started 100 years ago now, infant welfare services were virtually non-existent in Victoria, and a high infant mortality rate saw almost 8% of infants dying within a year of being born.

Across the century, QEC has answered the call to support and guide young families in caring for their babies.

This organisation shares traits that I see across the successful organisations that support our State and the well-being of our community. It has core values from which it has not diverged. The focus has always remained the same. For children to get the best start in life.

But the organisation has moved with the times. As the infant mortality rate is now 3.3%, proudly the lowest in the country, QEC has recognised and risen to the contemporary challenges: whether it is poor attachment to a parent or carer, delayed social and emotional development or neglect and abuse.

QEC has responded to these challenges by developing new programs, in particular, Parenting Assessment and Skills Development Programs, and Bumps to Babes and Beyond.

In 2015-2016 alone, over 3000 families participated in a QEC program, and its work was recognised by the Royal Commission into family violence.

Your ability to adapt to the needs of your clients is evident. Thoughtful touches, such as transforming the 'Welcome Room' with calming colours, or painting the corridor ceiling with clouds, help make people feel welcome and comfortable in what can be a distressing and difficult situation for them.

I am familiar with QEC's wonderful work from my time as a Children's Court magistrate, and later, from my many years as a Family Court judge. There was always a sense of trust that I felt when I heard that a mother and babe had found their way into QEC's care.

The creation of this garden is the finest example of the way you are responding to the contemporary needs of our families. Creating a space where children and their parents can play and develop their relationships, provides overwhelming benefits of calm and well-being.

Special features of this garden demonstrate the care and thought that has gone into the planning and design of this project. I particularly liked the dry creek bed, where you can turn the tap and watch leaves float by, the interactive instrument wall where you can learn about different sounds and rhythms and the spaced logs for stepping stones to improve balance.

The future development of the your kitchen garden and woodlands will no doubt enhance community access and benefit young and old alike.

I must acknowledge the generous bequest from the Estates of the Hon Walter Jona AM and Mrs Alwynne Jona OAM which has enabled this idea to come to life.

When Walter Jona assumed ministerial responsibilities for Victoria's Maternal and Infant Welfare Services in 1976, he became aware of the exceptional work of QEC.

As the founding Chairman of the Queen Elizabeth Foundation in 1988 he was able to lend further support to what he saw as a world class maternal health and welfare service.

Mrs Jona was also a Member of the Foundation and joined the QEC Foundation Board as a Trustee in 2008.

This innovative project and magnificent sensory garden could not be realised without their generosity.

It could also not be realised without the vision and work of so many people.

We congratulate your President, Mary Sayers and her Board, as well as the dedicated team of staff and volunteers lead by CEO Athina Georgiou.