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## Group gives strength to survivors

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A workshop to help male survivors of child sexual abuse is about to be held in Newcastle, and Peter Russ says he is living proof it can make a difference.



Healthy Growth: Peter Russ, a participant in SAMSN, a support group for male survivors of child sexual abuse, in his garden in Newcastle. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

Peter Russ has the green touch. He loves gardening, helping plants to flourish. Yet for years, he nurtured his garden in a way that he seemed incapable of doing for himself.

“I guess it was proof that I could do something worthwhile, because all my life I thought, ‘Why am I here?’,” Mr Russ recalled.

Peter Russ felt he was wilting on the inside because of a secret he held. Mr Russ said he had been sexually abused as a high school student. Forty years later, feeling fragile, with his marriage gone and his job as a secondary school teacher on hold, Mr Russ read about a workshop for men run by a group called Survivors and Mates Support Network (SAMSN).

“I suppose I went to SAMSN thinking ‘this won’t make a difference’, but it has”, Mr Russ said. “It’s been life changing for me.”

Mr Russ said the eight-week workshop helped him realise he was not alone, and “there’s a real bonding thing that happens”. He said it also gave him the strength to give evidence last year at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. He told the commission he had been sexually abused in 1975 by a brother at Marist Brothers High School, Hamilton.

“I went from being this person who felt he didn’t have anything to contribute to finally saying ‘no, I will put my name to this’,” he said.

SAMSN was formed in 2010 by a group of male survivors of child sexual abuse. More than 200 men have participated in its workshops, including two that have been held in Newcastle. Former participants also meet once a month to talk and have dinner.

Tony Phiskie, SAMSN’s principal social worker, said it had held groups in Newcastle only for the past two years in part due to limited resources. He hoped the Royal Commission would lead to more funding for support services in regional areas. “We’ve certainly seen Newcastle is an area where services are very much needed,” Mr Phiskie said.



Finding Serenity: Peter Russ in his garden. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

SAMSN’s third workshop in Newcastle begins on Wednesday. Peter Russ is

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attending. “I’m living proof it does work,” he said.

While he still spends time in his garden, Mr Russ has returned to work, helping students develop life skills.

“Life is feeling really good,” he said.

Visit [samsn.org.au](http://samsn.org.au) or phone 1800 472676.