

Council program provides 11,000 meals Helping feed hungry kids

OLIVIA REED

HUNGRY youths are flocking to a free Geelong Council program, which provided 11,000 meals to young people last year.

Providing the equivalent of 211 meals a week, the Norlane fOrT youth centre also hosts cooking and nutrition classes.

Council community life director Robyn Stevens said the number of meals distributed at the fOrT had remained steady, with a slight year-on-year increase due to more programs being offered.

"Attendance numbers for our youth development programs generally peak in March and November and are consistent for the rest of the year," she said.

"We are fortunate to have a dedicated youth space in Corio but we also facilitate drop-in programs in other areas which also provide meals."

Ms Stevens said the free meals were part of a number of support programs the council

offered to young people in Geelong's northern suburbs.

"These programs aim to support social and economic disadvantage experienced in parts of our north," she said.

"They include providing free healthy meals, five days per week, for young people who attend drop-in programs at the fOrT.

"The purpose of these programs is to improve social and community connections for young people as opposed to simply providing free meals."

The city's youth development program has had 14,500 interactions with young people, facilitated 132 drop-in sessions and held 127 education programs since the start of the year. The council also delivers the Cancer Council of Victoria's achievement program, with a focus on schools in our north.

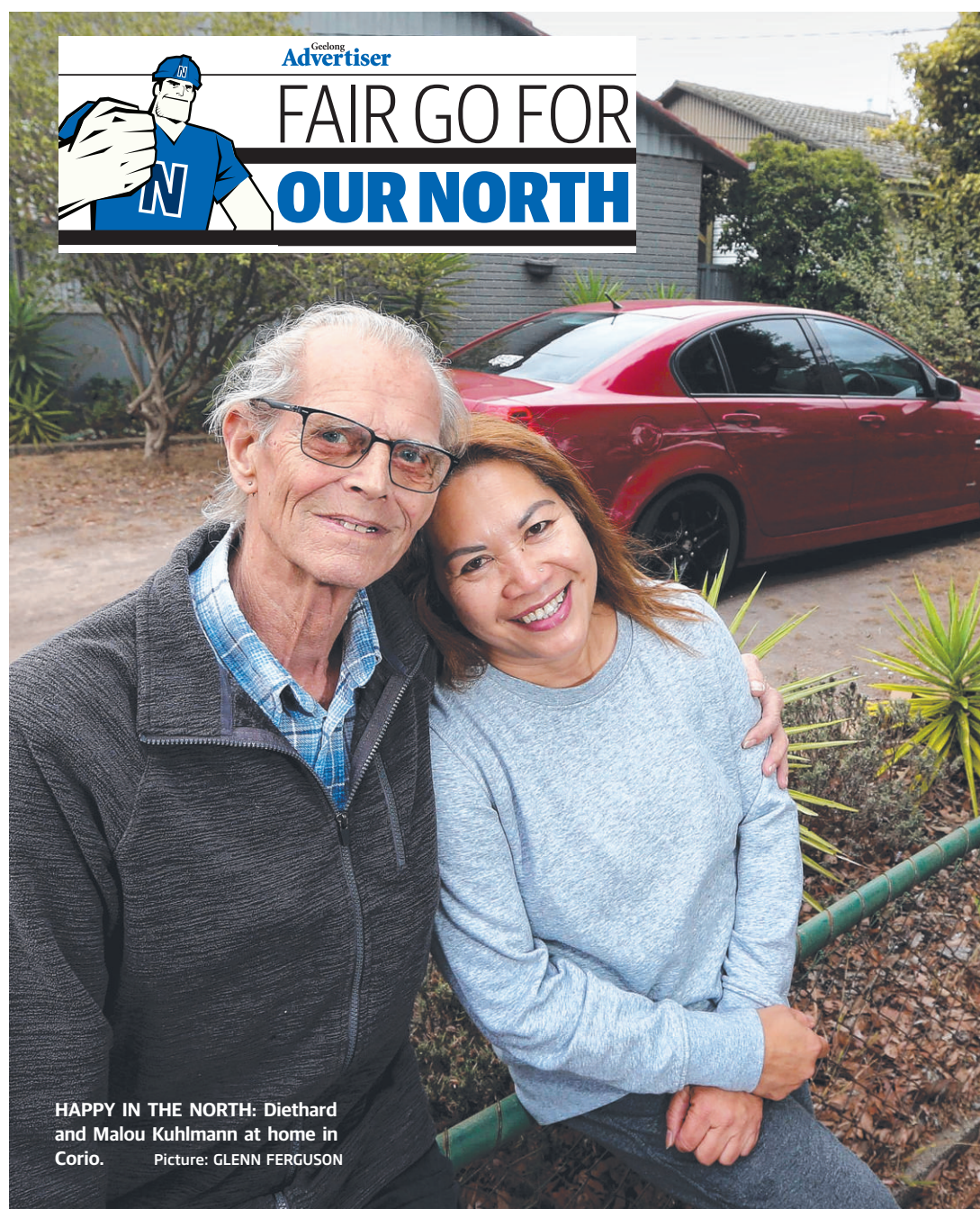
Meanwhile, the Geelong Food Relief Centre has seen a 47 per cent increase in overall distribution compared with February last year. The centre has two outlets, one in North

Geelong and one in the city centre, where people can come and use vouchers provided by social services to get food.

And the spike in demand comes after Give Where You Live's *Food for Thought: A Snapshot of Food Assistance in the Geelong/G21 Region, Victoria* report last year conservatively estimated that 717,883 meals a year — the equivalent of about 2000 a day — were provided by the food-assistance system.

"The Geelong/G21 region is home to some of the most disadvantaged communities in the state and the country. Colac East, Corio, Norlane and Whittington are ranked as the 2nd, 26th, 3rd and 18th most disadvantaged communities respectively in the state," the report said.

Give Where You Live Foundation CEO Bill Mithen said underemployment, low wages and the Newstart payment being "below the poverty line" contributed to people leaning on emergency food relief.



HAPPY IN THE NORTH: Diethard and Malou Kuhlmann at home in Corio.

Picture: GLENN FERGUSON





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