

Left Write Hook arrives in Whitehorse

Agustina Mariani

A survivor-led trauma recovery program that combines creative writing and non-contact boxing will launch in Whitehorse this April, offering a new pathway for healing for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and gendered violence.

Expressions of interest are now open for the eight-week Left Write Hook program, which will begin on Saturday 11 April in Forest Hill. Supported locally by Whitehorse City Council, the initiative aims to help participants rebuild strength, connection and a sense of agency through storytelling and movement.

We spoke with the program's founder, Donna Lyon, about how the program began and why its approach is resonating with survivors across Australia.

A program that combines storytelling and movement

Founded in 2019, Left Write Hook brings together two practices that might seem unusual together: writing and boxing. According to Dr Lyon, the combination offers a powerful way for survivors to reconnect with both their stories and their bodies.

'Trauma often leaves people feeling powerless and disconnected from themselves,' she said. 'The program is about creating ways for people to rewrite their narratives, reclaim their bodies and build community.'

Dr Lyon explained that the idea for the program emerged from her own experience as a survivor. During her recovery journey she began to feel intense anger related to her past abuse and searched for a constructive way to process those emotions.

'I realised I could do something with that anger in a positive way, and that's how I discovered boxing,' she said. 'Very quickly I found that boxing was less about anger and actually a very mindful, visceral form of exercise. It helped me feel strong in my body again.'

In 2019 she started a small grassroots program at her local boxing gym in Ferntree Gully. She wanted to connect with other survivors and find a way to release and express trauma through writing and boxing.

In 2020 Dr Lyon began working with researchers from the University of Melbourne to study the program's impact. Early research showed participants experienced reductions in depression, anxiety and stress, as well as improvements in emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Since then, the program has continued to grow. The first book of participant writing was published in 2021, and by 2022 Left Write Hook had become a registered charity delivering community programs for survivors.

The project also gained international attention through a documentary that premiered at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2024 before later becoming available on Netflix. The film follows women and gender-diverse participants as they explore trauma, identity and recovery.

The documentary reflects a broader conversation about how survivors understand themselves. 'The terminology is complex. People can be victims of violence, but surviving is also about adapting and finding ways to move forward. As people begin

to reclaim themselves, there's an opportunity to move beyond those identities and begin to thrive', said Dr. Dona.

In that journey, storytelling plays a central role in healing. 'Having a story that makes sense to us can be incredibly important, creative storytelling gives people the opportunity to reconstruct a sense of self after trauma.' she said.

Participants follow guided writing prompts during the eight-week program, moving through stages that include grounding, exploring the impacts of trauma and imagining new narratives about themselves and their futures. The writing process runs alongside non-contact boxing training, helping participants rebuild physical confidence and strength.

The group environment is another key element. Participants often discover that experiences they once carried alone are shared by others. 'When survivors come together, there's a real sense of realising you're not alone,' Dr Lyon said. 'That can be incredibly powerful.'

While justice systems play an important role, many survivors struggle to access formal pathways or find they do not fully meet their recovery needs. 'There's no single integrated solution for trauma recovery,' she said. 'But research increasingly shows that creativity, body-based practices and lived-experience leadership can play an important role in healing.'

Demand for the program has grown rapidly, with more than 800 people currently on a waiting list across Australia.

For Dr Lyon, recovery ultimately comes down to rebuilding relationships with both oneself and others. 'I think recovery for me means a process of beginning to love myself and love others,' she said. 'It's about connection — with yourself and with other people.' She added that working alongside other survivors has been transformative. 'I learned how people who have been abused are often rooted in shame and guilt,' she said. 'Listening to others helped me develop empathy for them, and also empathy for myself. In many ways, it sounds a little cliché, but it has definitely opened up my heart'

Bringing the program to Whitehorse

The upcoming Whitehorse program will run for two hours each week over eight weeks, starting on Saturday 11 April in Forest Hill.

The workshops are open to female and gender-diverse survivors aged 18 and over. Fitness levels are not a barrier, and participants do not need prior boxing experience to join.

Readers who would like more information can also visit the FAQ section on the Left Write Hook about the eight-week program, including who it is for, how the workshops work, what the writing and boxing sessions involve, and how participants are supported throughout the process. It also provides practical details about eligibility, readiness for the program and how to submit an expression of interest.

Left Write Hook is not designed to replace therapy or professional mental health support but to complement it as part of a broader wellbeing journey.