

Fire-door rules are a 'shut out' for gym

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

An all-abilities gymnastics club for 200 children has moved out of its 45-year home in Noble Park due to a bureaucratic impasse over a fire door.

In a heart-breaking decision, Koala Gymnastics Club has shifted to a Keysborough warehouse from its base at Paddy O'Donoghue Centre - named after the club's founder and great supporter.

The impasse revolved upon a fire door being propped open during classes so parents could see their children at all times - as part of Gymnastics Victoria child protection regulations.

The club had used a door stop for this purpose for the past 12 years.

Things changed at the start of 2019 when Greater Dandenong Council insisted the door being kept closed for fire safety reasons.

The club was founded in 1974 by Noble Park Public Hall Trust chair AJ 'Paddy' O'Donoghue. His passion was to create a low-fee gym club for children.

"His dream was to have a place for children of all abilities to have a place to gather to exercise and have fun," his niece Dawn Dickson said.

With not a lot of funds, the Trust gradually bought second-hand gym equipment. In the 1980s, it temporarily moved the hall burning down in the 1980s.

With loyal volunteers and coaches over decades, the club has grown to 200 children members.

Head coach Cathy Green started as a gymnast at the club when she was seven. She's remained as a coach and participant for the past 30 years.

Her late father was a dedicated supporter of the gym. Her sister Christine, her daughter Elizabeth and son Christopher are among the 12 coaches.

She said it was an emotional decision to move, but the club would still thrive in its spacious and well-equipped new base.

"The (Paddy O'Donoghue Centre) has been

my home since I was a child. It means so much to me and to my Dad.

"In the end I had to do what's best for the club and gymnasts. It had become too difficult to run the club properly with all the rules and regulations.

"We want people to know it's a new beginning."

Greater Dandenong corporate services director Mick Jaensch said the council had not previously granted permission for the gym to operate with an open fire door.

"This has only recently become an issue in the past two years due to a significant growth in numbers which saw the gym operate beyond the main hall.

"All Council facilities need to operate within the Building regulations to ensure public safety is maintained at all times."

Koala Gymnastics Club is open five days a week at 2/174-176 Atlantic Drive Keysborough. Details: koalagymnastics.org.au or 0449 844 249.