



Arts for healthy communities

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It was my first day on the job, managing the Indigenous arts and culture programs here at Carclew Youth Arts. I got a call from a person working out of the APY [Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara] Lands Council. Petrol sniffing had really hit the news. It was in all the papers. This person was another blackfella and he had a very frank conversation with me.

Basically he said... and I hope you don't mind me swearing... but he said, 'What the f*** are you going to do for the young people out here?'

The APY Lands are 1,600 kilometres from Adelaide and cover over 103,000 kilometres of country. It's a harsh and really challenging environment and when the opportunity came up for some funding through the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation, I pushed and gunned for some real money. My experience over the years told me that it was going to be a very expensive place to work. Mainly because of the remoteness. The costs are unbelievable. And I knew we had to be fully resourced, absolutely resourced because one thing I've maintained is that we are not going to go into a community, sucking up resources when that community is stretched out already. It's so poor there. We didn't want Carclew to be seen as burdening it in any way, including placing more time demands on Anangu and non-

Anangu people. Many of them sit on so many committees already and travel incredible distances to do it.

Our project *Working Towards Celebrating Healthy Communities* was essentially about capacity building through the arts. We wanted to improve the possibilities for young Anangu people who are especially vulnerable to substance abuse.

Everyone had an idea of how that should be done and as an Indigenous person and an arts worker, one of the greatest struggles I have is about people not listening and making assumptions about what people need. Understanding doesn't have to be a battle. It shouldn't be a battle. Just opening up to another way of thinking is a good start! And I tell you what; if we do that someone might actually teach us how to do something different. We might finally learn something bloody new!

So our first step with APY Lands was to listen. We spent over a year sitting down with people, young people, community members and stakeholders and then a draft program was developed and approved by the community. It's a mentoring program with workshops in contemporary dance, music, film and digital camera. After each stage we evaluate and make the changes we need. There are so many issues out there that challenge a project like this: hunger, illiteracy, overcrowded housing and so much more.

We've broken the project into phases and each phase is marked with participation in an event because to keep young people engaged, we have to have tangibles along the way – little key milestones. So, for example, contemporary dance. It's not really a strength but there's a lot of interest

there. So we say, 'We'll bring people up and do the workshops and then you can come down to *Blak Nite* and perform.' But then, when we get to *Blak Nite* they hadn't been rehearsing. I had someone living up in the community who was a contemporary dancer doing rehearsals but the kids wouldn't show up to the rehearsals. All of that stuff.

Other groups are rehearsing for 12 months. Anyway, the kids get onto the stage and they think, 'Oh my God!' They knew. Back in the dressing room they're saying, 'We did that really badly'. And I said to them, 'Why do you think it was like that?' And they say, 'Because we didn't rehearse'. And the next thing they say is, 'We're not going to do that next time. Next time, we'll rehearse'. Now I call that a learning curve. That's fantastic. That's learning.

I think what people don't understand is that if we're doing songwriting, then we're doing literacy. If we're doing film, we're learning visual literacy. Schools are designed for children but what about all these young teenagers out there and the young adults? How do we engage them? How do we empower them to be equipped?

We're hoping when this project ends that we have a group of young healthy leaders with skills and confidence to help the community forward. Last week I saw this young 19 year-old just hanging around and I said, 'What are you doing?' and she said, 'Nothing'. And I said, 'Why don't you come with me to some meetings and hang with me for a while?' I was going to meet someone from the Department of Family and Communities about a TAFE idea for developing rock bands and then to the arts centre and then to see the head nurse. I wasn't thinking this girl had to contribute to these meetings. The purpose of me taking her was so that she could hear a working dialogue. And that's the start. If we're to survive in this world as Indigenous people, we have to be equipped with the tools to converse with non-Indigenous people. That's what the mentoring and the cultural experience is all about.

When I'm up there I'm always blown away when young women come up to me and say, 'Are you the boss?' They see I am leading non-Indigenous people and they can't believe it. They say, 'But you're black!' And I say, 'Yes I am.'

How do you write that in a government report? How do you write the need for Indigenous people to be in leadership? That's where it starts.



ABOVE:
Manu at Carclew's *Blak Nite 07*

RIGHT:
Tapaya Edwards at Carclew's *Blak Nite 07*

