



# Mubali, a sea of bellies

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It was 2004. I was living in Moree when the community midwifery team approached Beyond Empathy. They wanted to find a way to engage the young Aboriginal women who weren't

presenting at the hospital for antenatal checks. They were seeing all the low birth-weight babies and the low rates of breast-feeding and they knew their conventional pathways weren't reaching the girls.

We were sitting around this table and I said, 'Wow, imagine a sea of bellies.' And they kind of looked at me and I said, 'You saw all those hands, the sea of hands, for reconciliation? Imagine if they were all bellies.' And then I told them about how I'd made belly casts when I was pregnant and what a great memento they were and how it's wonderful for your kids to look at them later on. And I suggested we could use this art as a soft entry point to engage these young women. The midwives thought we were mad but they trusted us because we'd worked in the community for a long time. So we literally went straight out and talked to the girls and *Mubali* was born (*mubali* means swollen belly in Kamilaroi, the local language).

And at first they were shy but it only took one girl to say, 'Yeah, okay. I'll do it.' We literally took her into the hospital and made her a cast and then the word went through the community, as it does, and more girls appeared. We taught the midwives how to make the casts and the girls knew they had to come into the midwifery centre to get one. And so this kind of momentum started. We were forging the sort of relationship that the midwives hadn't had before.

Then we got a room in the hospital and we brought in the elders who we'd always worked with. They sat with the young women and they painted stories onto the bellies. And they talked about when they were young and pregnant and they walked from the mission up to the hospital to give birth. And this sort of beautiful environment started to grow. We used two exceptional artists, Denni Scott Davis and Jo Davidson, to drive the whole thing. It wasn't about the midwives intervening or fixing a problem that the girls had. It was about the relationships between these women.

Then the dads turned up and they wanted to be part of it as well and so it kind of extended into the dads doing their own paintings. And it was in this non-threatening space, that the midwives were able to do all their antenatal stuff. We also brought in the dental health nurse and the mental health workers and Centrelink and all of those things that the girls weren't getting access to. And it was all enabled by the arts!

At the end of 12 months, the first group of 12 babies had higher birth weights and nine of the girls were still breast-feeding. And now, four years later, people in Moree know that you can go to the midwifery service and you can get a cast made and it's an ongoing thing. Even though the original midwives who were working on the service aren't there anymore, it's completely embedded within the culture of what that service delivers. And now, one of those original young mums, Cherilda, she makes the casts. And another young mum is doing the admin. This is a classic example of the Beyond Empathy model – using art to connect those two disengaged groups and then passing on the art skills, so we were able to pull out and it still continues on.

The art created was significant. The girls made these absolutely beautiful bellies and the dads painted paintings and the aunts painted paintings and it ended up as a regional exhibition at the Moree Plains Gallery. The girls ran the exhibition and launched it. We were out the back in the kitchen cutting up fruit while the girls were in the gallery introducing everybody. Talking about it. One of the dads talked about his experiences and a big wig from Health came up from Sydney. I've been going to the gallery for years and years and it was the first time I'd seen a really even mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people at an exhibition.

We never dreamed *Mubali* would be as successful as it was. Not in a million years. Last year we started it at Nambucca and in 2006 we went out to Narromine. This year it moves into Bowraville and we're looking at Kempsey and Tamworth and it goes to Derby in Western Australia.

A health worker came in from one of the outlying communities and said the best thing. She said that in her 16 or 17 years of working in Health, that she'd never seen this sort of outcome. And she'd never seen young Aboriginal girls so proud to be pregnant.



ABOVE:  
Mima Craigie's baby in her belly cast  
RIGHT:  
Full belly cast – Pauline Briggs (artist)

