



Stories of belonging

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art therapist



I first did a degree in journalism and after studying creative arts therapy, I was working in aged care as a diversional therapist. I loved it but I found the silence in the groups really eerie. The residents would sit in a dining room or in a lounge room next to each other but never talk. It was like they were so incapacitated by being in this institution that they couldn't actually relate to each other, only to the staff members.

I kept wishing that I was an artist there instead of a therapist because I was thinking of the ways that the arts might get the residents together and foster a sense of community. I have always thought that arts therapy didn't have to be so intense or deep. I thought a lot of people's issues could be resolved if they just felt they belonged to a group. It could be just fun and relational. Engaging in the arts could bring people together to enjoy each other's company.

The Elms is a residential aged care facility in the Macedon Ranges and when I approached them about what I was planning, they were so encouraging. They wanted to support me. They were interested in what I was doing. To be honest, I was absolutely blown away by their eagerness.

I went each week for four months. There was no funding but I was reimbursed for my petrol costs and the supplies.

The first stage involved building relationships. I was going in and chatting to the residents and each week I'd ask if anyone would like me to draw their portrait. They were always keen. And then we'd have lunch and some sort of group session in the afternoon. My ideas didn't always interest them. I remember once I thought they'd be really keen to talk about old sayings and customs in their families. But no, that didn't take off at all! But then, another time I said, 'Let's talk about what you've achieved.' And I'd brought in some templates of certificates so they had something to start off with and encouraged them to say what they would like to be acknowledged for.

So they made certificates for each other and then had a little ceremony where they presented them. It was just so beautiful. We also made a communal time-line running from before the first one was born until now. And I encouraged them to not just fill in significant times in their lives but to add someone who had a significant impact. Or, to mark turning points. It was lovely to watch them. They would add an event and then they would start chatting, telling each other about it. And it was no longer about me facilitating the activity. They were starting to share with each other.

From the beginning I'd said to them, 'We'll see how it goes. We can make an art work and exhibit it at the end if you want.' And that idea just took off. I used the portraits that

we sketched and different bits and pieces from the sessions, the certificates, old photographs, their names in their own handwriting and so on and we made these four massive panels, linked up the top by the time-line. Another artist called Tilla Buden, and I literally stitched the paper like you would fabric. It was a really delicate thing to do.

For the second phase of the project we hung the panels at the facility. Once they were up, we called everyone and they did this mass exodus out of the room they were in to come and see. And they became really excited and proud of their artwork. 'My word, I'm famous!' The staff told me how family members would come to visit and the residents would send them straight to the artwork. 'Go have a look! My portrait's there.' And now there are plans to do similar projects in the future.

Another lovely thing is that the project gave me the opportunity to reawaken my own creative side and my artistic practice. Finally I could actually create *while* working. And I could see the improvement in my work. This was really so exciting.

Stories of Belonging has been exhibited at the Burrinja Community Art Centre in Ferntree Gully but I'll be returning it to The Elms. There's space for it as a permanent installation and I'll hang it again. I'm always happy for an excuse to go back.



RIGHT:
Pencil sketch of Hazel
PHOTO: CATHERINE DINKELMANN

OPPOSITE:
Panel details
PHOTO: CATHERINE DINKELMANN

