



Nurturing artists in Wilcannia

PAUL BROWN
community member



I moved to Wilcannia about seven years ago from Sydney. My kids were grown up and the companies I'd worked with were being sold. By chance I saw a business that was for sale and I came out for a look. It was the Wilcannia Motel.

Fairly quickly I had people coming in wanting to sell art. It's like that with any business here because maybe you're someone who's in a position to buy. There's no outlets in town and other than a couple of the business owners or people who work at the hospital or the police, there's no-one much in a position to spend money to buy art. It was coming in on bits of fibro and timber. I found out they didn't have any source of canvas or paint so I started giving some out and it just progressed from there. I've never been an artist or involved in anything like that but I just really liked the art. And you could see where it could go.

Soon people were talking about having somewhere to paint. The Uniting Church had an empty building available in town and the flying padre was looking for something to protect it from vandalism. We got permission to lease it as an art centre for a peppercorn rental. We got community people involved and eventually we had it painted out and repaired and about the same time West Darling Arts applied for us to have an artist-in-residence program. So,

just as the place was finished and ready to use, the funding came through for nine artists over three years.

The artists are funded to be here for two or three weeks. They stay in a freestanding one-bedroom flat next to the art centre so they're on site. We've found a lot of interest from people just passing by. They'll drop in and have a look to see what's going on and we've been very lucky that the artists have been interested in showing their craft to others, passing it on and working with community members. So if a schoolteacher brings down a group of kids from the school, they've all been happy to stop their work and talk to them and show them what they're doing and even give them small exercises or get them involved. Whether it's cutting lino or a bit of painting or woodcarving. The key is the exposure that the local artists wouldn't otherwise get to different art forms.

The artists-in-residence have been stunned by the level of interest and involvement. Some have done their residency period straight so they're here every day. Others have done a week here and a week there. Our artist at the moment is a basket weaver who lives in Broken Hill and she's doing three days a week. It extends the period that someone is here and it's working really well. Everyone's entitled to drop in and I guess if you're going to drop in, you may as well try it. I must admit, I've taken an interest in all of the workshops myself and that's something I never thought I'd do. The residencies have really helped focus interest on the art centre itself and last year TAFE asked if they could use it

to run their Indigenous art certificate. The community now accepts it as an art place and feel more comfortable there than in the more regimented TAFE building.

We've got a lot of natural ability here, a lot of people with the creative spark who hadn't been able to develop the skills that go with it. Now the standards are rising and there's awareness of the talent here. The first time we put out some work for sale by some young artists, the people who were most astonished were the Elders and the older people in the town: they didn't realise the younger ones had the skills they have.

We have serious housing problems. There are no homes to rent in town, nothing available. So a lot of these people are well and truly socially marginalised. We're hoping that given the opportunity and the location we'll see our local art progress both as a form of income for people and a drawcard for the town.

And this might sound funny, but some of the most unlikely people are the most beautiful artists. They are doing extraordinary work. They'll sit down and do it for relaxation or they sometimes work communally. I'll often have a painting here that will have been done by an individual

and the kids will come and tell you, 'Oh that's Uncle So and So. I was there when he painted that. Look... I did that little bit there.'



LEFT:
Badger Bates
– woodcarving
workshops at art
centre

RIGHT:
Virginia Kaiser's
and Wilcannia
community
members' work at the
art centre
PHOTOS: BORIS HLAVICA

