

Cultural Development Network *Cultures Communities Councils*

“Communities, Accessibility and the Arts: Responding to and embracing difference in arts and cultural contexts”

One day conference at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, May 7, 2008

Presented by Cultural Development Network in partnership with the City of Ballarat, Department of Human Services: Grampians Region, RuralAccess, DeafAccess and McCallum Disability Services.

This one day conference sought to increase opportunities for people with disabilities to be involved in creative arts activities, by inspiring and challenging participants about possibilities for their own context. 80 delegates from sectors including state and local government, disability support organisations, schools and other education organisations, community and arts organisations, as well as artists, arts program participants, students and artworkers gathered for a full day of discussion, debate and workshops on the topic 'Communities, Accessibility and the Arts'.

A diverse range of speakers, opportunities for discussion and a range of workshop options offered participants a range of different experiences, to ensure that they would leave the day enthused and encouraged, with useful new contacts and ideas.

Keynote speaker Ross Barber, Executive Director of Arts Access Queensland shared his experiences and successes in his work, inspiring attendees with his speech *Creative Pathways: Opening the Door to More Inclusive Arts*. The achievements of Arts Access Queensland both in its functioning and philosophy as an organisation and through its work in the broader community offered lessons and ideas for Victorian artist, support workers and organisations. Participants described Ross as 'inspiring!', 'excellent' and 'wise on tap'.



Peter Rademaker, Community Engagement Manager from the Department of Planning and Community Development in Grampians region spoke of his experiences of the power of art-making, especially through the medium of story-telling. This idea resonated with many of the audience with lots of enthusiasm generated for a local event, perhaps a festival, featuring story-telling, that was inclusive or specifically focussed on people with a disability.

Cathy Horsley spoke animatedly about the successes and challenges of inclusive arts projects at the City of Port Phillip, describing a range of projects that her council supports including theatre companies *Just Us*, *Rag* and *Rawcus*. Kate Sulan, Artistic Director of *Rawcus* gave deeper insight into the creative processes and achievements of her award winning company that develops works primarily with

members who have intellectual disabilities, and in partnerships with a range of other arts organisations. They featured a recent partnership with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, showing a DVD of beautiful and successful collaboration. ?

A panel of locals followed the lead speakers, describing their practice and the opportunities and challenges they experience; Felicity Morton, a Masters student from the University of Ballarat who is investigating depictions of people with Down syndrome in art throughout the ages, Pam Farey, a visual artist who paints with her mouth, and Joel Gills, a young artist with an intellectual disability who is involved in several local groups including Brrr Theatre. These three and earlier speakers then responded to questions from the floor about the issues they see in access and engagement of people with a disability in the arts in their local communities.

Artistic performances were a highlight of the day, with local group Brrr Theatre welcoming delegates with a series of performance pieces throughout the gallery and conference space. Sweet Justice Choir from Daylesford entertained after lunch with lively music, including some participatory songs in the unique space of the Mining Exchange.



The afternoon program included a choice of workshops. Jodie Ahrens from Roundangle Theatre Company led a multi-sensory workshop where blindfolded participants retold fairytales using taste, touch and smell; Kate Sulan introduced the Rawcus Theatre process and approach in a hands on experience and Amanda Lines guided delegates through a creative arts therapy workshop.

Some participants attended a focus group to contribute their expertise to a statewide research project on increasing participation of people with a disability in the arts. The Cultural Development Network are undertaking this project for the State Government through a contract with the Office for Disability, Arts Victoria and Department of Human Services. This conference was part of the first stage of collection of information about the experiences of people about arts and disability across Victoria. This topic engendered lively discussion and many excellent ideas and shared experiences.

Feedback from participants indicated that overall they found the event to be useful, interesting and relevant. Participants were *'most appreciative of the day'* and *'got a great deal out of it'*. More than 90% of those completing feedback forms rated the overall quality of the event as *'Excellent'* or *'Very Good'*. More than 70% of participants found the day *'Very'* or *'extremely useful'* and that the workshops were *'very'* or *'extremely relevant'*.

'Fantastic!! Great opportunity for ideas and meeting people',

'helped with establishing new networks... [workshops] very creative and details, allowed for individuals to express themselves'

'very inspirational speeches... theme of narratives very powerful'

Speakers were described as *'encouraging'*, *'inspiring'* and *'powerful'*, with comments such as: *'enjoyed Kate's inclusive theatre workshop and hearing how she starts the*

creative process', 'The Port Phillip presenters were most encouraging. Ross was useful in explaining 'the journey'

Outcomes

In addition to the experiences on the day, the steering group are keen for evidence of changed practice or new connections and ideas as a result of the event. At this early stage, already some new initiatives has come to the attention of organisers. These include:

Ballarat Arts Foundation who, with new found knowledge and inspiration, intend to make their grants process more accessible;
an offer of volunteer support between a person wanting to learn more about working with arts and disability and a program manager keen to have more assistance,
enthusiasm for a storytelling festival engendered by Peter Rademaker's talk about the value of storytelling.

Overall the steering group's feeling was that the conference was successful and worthwhile, engendering new partnerships and energy around accessible arts in the region. One area for possible improvement was the involvement of people representing mainstream arts organisations. While there were a few such groups represented on the day, there were many more who were not. This may be a challenge for the future activities for both areas.

Ideas, issues and possibilities raised on the day and responses to the question: 'In an ideal world, what would you like to see happen?'

Ideas about events or new initiatives

- A story festival for Ballarat: Stories and Storytelling; digital, photographic, oral, visual – broad! To include diaries, dialogues, experiences, sharing stories and narratives. Need a business model. Creativity and sharing stories as nourishment. Perhaps funded by City of Ballarat community grants?
- Arts and disability event in Wimmera region
- National Theatre and Circus group for people with disability
- National performing arts company staffed by people with special needs which tours nationally. Amateur and semi professional companies exist which could do this
- Awakenings Festival for Ballarat – could be called the 'New Beginnings Festival'
- An inclusive theatre company in Daylesford
- Future Films Group – partner with The Other Film Festival to show a FFA film
- Something on December 3rd – International Day for People with a Disability

Ideas for professional development and organisation within current resources

- Arts and disability learning circle
- Skills Audit: Increase awareness of skills and knowledge already in the community.
- Sharing, partnering and connecting with other marginalised communities.
- Keeping the conversation going.
- Mutual support is the key to success - a broader vision to support each other in various projects – sharing knowledge and communication.

Ideas about places

- Arts precinct: building dedicated to community arts
- Use of the University of Ballarat arts precinct by special needs people and groups.

Ideas about money

- More funding for inclusive arts projects, especially funding that is accessible and flexible and does not involve lengthy applications
- More Money! Lobbying funders to change perceptions about 'excellence' and what constitutes a regional community.

Advocacy

- Recognition of people with a disability in local, state and federal government policies. The national agenda needs to include local solutions.
- Taking advantage of technology but retaining face to face sessions.

Where to next?:

If you are keen to get together and discuss these ideas some more, please contact the people below

Suzannah Burton, Department of Human Services, Ballarat, re regional community development initiatives and re possibility of Wimmera region event
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Sahn Cramer, Arts and Cultural Development Coordinator, Ballarat City Council,
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Deb Whitecross, RuralAccess, Ballarat City Council and Golden Plains Shire,
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Fiona Strahan, RuralAccess Moorabool and Hepburn, Hepburn Health Service, Daylesford, re Daylesford local activity, on 5348 2523 or fionas@hhs.vic.gov.au

Gilda McKechnie, Rural Access, Northern Grampians, Ararat Rural City and Pyrenees Shire Rural Access gilda.m@gchc.org.au or 5352 6200

Peter Rademaker, Department of Planning and Community Development, Ballarat re storytelling festival or other activity peter.rademaker@dvc.vic.gov.au

Project partners:

