

‘Meet, Meld, Merge’ Forum – A Great Success!

**Yea Golf Club, Yea, September 1, 2006 presented by
Berry St Victoria and the Cultural Development Network**

The Meet, Meld, Merge Community Cultural Development Forum held at the Yea Golf Club on Friday 1st of September was a resounding success. The day provided the opportunity for an amazingly diverse group of people to come together to explore the concepts of cultural development and community art.

Many local organisations were represented including Yea Men’s Shed, University of the third Age, Yea Historical Society, Alexandra Singers, St. Luke’s Church, Yea Steiner Play group, Bud’s and Blossoms, Berry Street Victoria and Integral Evolution. Many artists and musicians from across the Shire of Murrindindi and beyond also provided a wealth of interesting ideas and experiences.



The forum also attracted people from across the state; with representatives from Tolmie, Beechworth, Euroa, Mansfield, Ferntree Gully, Warburton, Melbourne, and Shepparton. There were also representatives present from the Mansfield & Mt Buller Shire Council, Yarra Ranges Shire Council, Knox City Council, Arts Victoria, Cutting Edge, Vision Australia, Shire of Strathbogie, Cultural Development Network, Melbourne Grammar School, Mansfield Arts Council and Indigo Shire Council.

As the day was all about the arts, proceedings started with a song by local musician Adam Dennis which set the mood for the day. Organiser of the event Lisa Rudd from Berry Street Victoria, and project manager of Yea Community Shed, welcomed everyone and acknowledged the traditional custodians of the land. Kim Dunphy, the manager of the Cultural Development Network, who was the facilitator for the day, encouraged the audience to consider the arts as she spoke about engaging leaders and communities in new ways.

The day focused on small group discussions as those present started to think about possible ways that their organisations could utilise the arts to benefit them and their communities. This process was supported by the artists and industry workers who offered their advice, encouragement and enthusiasm.

An interesting and passionate range of artists and artworkers spoke about art projects that had long lasting community impact. Santha Press, Musical Director for the Warburton Winter Fest and community artist, spoke about the Winter Fest and ‘Burning Sensation’, the company she is involved with in the creation of large-scale, outdoor community arts events. Santha described her journey from being a musician with little community experience to being the musical director of very successful large scale outdoor events. This struck a chord with some attendees, especially people who were as yet inexperienced in community based work. Santha’s example was inspiring as she didn’t have all expertise she needed before she started, but by having courage and good partnerships, great achievements were made.

Tess Noonan-Egan shared her experiences as project co-ordinator of the interesting and

innovative 'Spin' Community Dance Project in the Strathbogie Shire that was initiated by Arts Access. Tess especially focussed on the factors she believes contribute to making a great project that has lasting community impact.

Cultural Planning Officer from Mansfield & Mt Buller Shire Council, Liz Webb, spoke about her work that focuses on creating greater community awareness regarding the benefits that people can gain through active participation in arts, culture and heritage.



Local guest speaker Sam Hicks, who was the project manager of the 2004/2005 Art In Our Environment Project, showed a fantastic photographic presentation as she spoke about this large scale project. Art in Our Environment was a collective effort from four funding bodies, three local artists and three communities that resulted in three wonderful public art sculptures across the Shire of Murrindindi.



Sam's motto is "Creativity, passion and commitment to arts, tourism, culture, community and their linkages.....ensures personal accomplishment in making a difference"! Sam's motto really encompassed what the 'Meet, Meld, Merge' Forum was all about.

Lunch was served in the sunshine on the golf club balcony and featured Amanda Hard's delicious homemade pumpkin soup, local cheese, bread and smoked meats; the compliments from the participants was worthy praise of Yea's great local produce. A mosaic project was also offered throughout the day and it was wonderful to see people gathered around, talking and connecting as they participated in art. The good food, sunshine, wonderful views and mosaics could have made it difficult to resume the day's activities but Santha Press brought everyone together again with an enchanting group music singing session of a Finnish reindeer calling song. This surprised a lot of those present as they were all asked to join in the singing but it was fun and woke everyone up as the interesting afternoon session began.



David Hall, from Berry Street Victoria spoke about the many activities that Berry Street provides in the Murrindindi Shire. David emphasised the importance of the 'whole of community approach' that the Connect for Kids initiatives take. Some of the activities and support offered by Berry Street Victoria include Elf Reading day, 'Show Your Face' Youth Arts Festival, Fame or Flop Show, Youth R.A.P.T (Recreation & Arts Project Team), Yea Community Shed and the education projects – STEP Ahead at Yea High School and ARC (Alexandra Real Connections).

The final guest speaker for the day was Ruth Whittingham, the artistic program manager for Arts Access, who spoke about her organisation's work and possibilities for including people with disabilities in community arts activities. The emphasis of Ruth's work is to respond to identified levels of needs within the arts and

work towards sustainable, accessible community owned arts initiatives across the state.

At the end of the day participants reported back on their small group discussions. Jane Finlay, Michelle Moon and Kate Heston have exciting plans for a music festival in Yea early next year. There was talk of exciting activities at the Yea Men's Shed that will be initiated by John Czerny, Ian Purcell and the other enthusiastic Men's Shed members. Joan Canning and Judy Crozier aim to enlist the help of local youth so that members of Yea Historical Society and U3A can learn the art of digital photography. There are big plans afoot for the Yea Toilet Block – to take it from the current eyesore that it is and turn it into something that people come to Yea to see and not just to use!

The forum was sponsored by VicHealth and conducted through the generous and much appreciated support of the Cultural Development Network; whose Manager Kim Dunphy put a lot of time and effort into the planning and presentation of the day.

The aim of the Meet, Meld, Merge Project was to bring people together through the arts and the forum definitely made this happen. Strong networks have been established and some groups attending the forum have already started making plans for future arts based projects.

Evaluations indicated that people found the day valuable, especially the opportunity to meet like minded others from the area, and dream up new projects. As one participant said “I walked away from the day having learnt a lot, but more importantly I felt really excited and good in myself. It was great to be able to talk at the forum and know that people were genuinely interested in what I had to say”.

If you would like to know more about the forum or about the next initiatives of the Meet, Meld, Merge Project contact Lisa Rudd at Berry Street Victoria 03 57 972 088 or email <lrudd@berrystreet.org.au>.

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