

# **A new normal**

## **Community, arts and evaluation after Black Saturday**

### **Nillumbik Shire Council**

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## **Abstract**

The Bushfire Recovery Arts Program has evolved as a part of Nillumbik Shire Council's broader recovery program. The arts program takes a non-invasive approach to recovery in that it decentralises the subject of the bushfire from the activities at hand.

Council officers have taken an alternative approach to outcomes evaluation due to the burden of documentation on the fire affected communities. Insurance, compensation, rebuilding and recovery processes have resulted in an overwhelming level of bureaucratic exhaustion within the community. As a response, Arts Officers have moved away from formalised program evaluation in a concerted effort not to re-traumatise for the sake of completing a form.

Outcomes of the program have been reported anecdotally to Council staff and this process has been supported by reports and informal discussions with individual families, parents, schools, community groups, recovery committees and other service providers.

Officers have adopted an outreach and responsive approach to programming and funding.

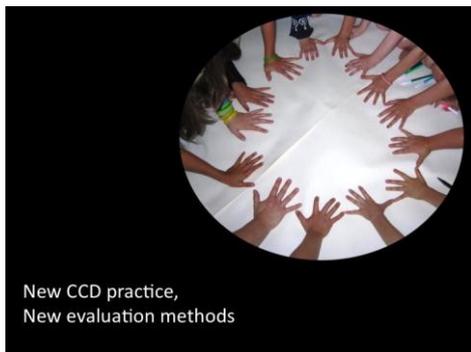
The evaluation of the arts program continues to be flexible and informal. We value the professional expertise of school principals, teachers, artists and arts therapists in their recognition of improvements in recovery.

Considered observation, ongoing communication and responsiveness to advice have been vital tools in the design, delivery and evaluation of the program.



## **A new normal**

In the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires nearly one quarter of the Shire of Nillumbik was destroyed. In its wake, a new genre of community arts and CCD practice emerged from devastated towns such as Strathewen, St Andrews and Christmas Hills, and with that came new evaluation processes and indicators.



This presentation will outline how the Bushfire Recovery Arts Program of Nillumbik Shire Council worked with the impacted communities to devise and implement targeted arts programs as an integral part of the recovery plan. We will discuss our approach to the programs, what has driven the changes to methodologies and outcome evaluations, and what we have learnt, and are still learning, through the processes of working with the recovering communities.

This presentation is based on the arts program and the story of the recovery

because that has determined the evaluation methodology.



## **Reconstructing identity**

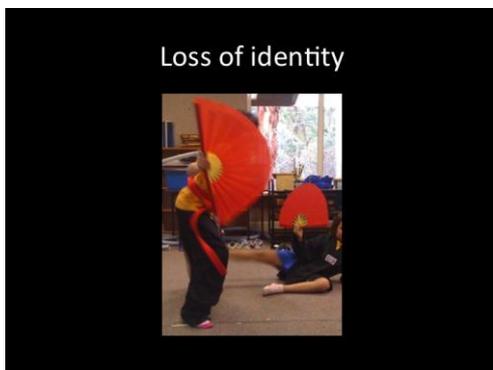
Many people from bushfire-affected communities were left with nothing but the clothes they were wearing on Black Saturday. But what does that really mean?

Black Saturday survivors have reported that the loss of family, friends, material possessions, community, sense of safety and for many a lifetime of work, left them with a great sense of the loss of their identity. Have a think about that for a minute... it's not just the stuff or even precious loved ones... for some people it was every tangible expression of their life.

Just as an example, imagine losing your husband whom you have shared the last thirty years with, your home that you have built with your bare hands in partnership with your husband, all of the possessions that you have collected in



a lifetime together, some or many of your friends, every piece of art you have created in a lifetime of art making, or the PHD that you have spent the last four years working on, all in one day. On that day the person that you become is not a wife, not a homeowner, not an artist, not a student, not a homebuilder, not a friend and not someone who lives in a beautiful environment surrounded by familiar people.



In other words, you become something that is not at all the person or the life you have been building towards for your entire existence so far. This is the space that many people have been trying to come back from for the last three years, trying to rediscover and re-establish identity: the individuals' journeys of recovery.



The communities with townships destroyed, found themselves fragmented and physically disconnected from each other. Alternatively, those townships that were partially destroyed experienced a further sense of division. The burnt and the not burnt. The green and the black. Physical relocation, dislocation and rebuilding contribute to this sense of a new normal that has been thrust upon them.

### **The arts response – community and Council**

In Nillumbik we feel very lucky as arts workers. We have a disproportionately large arts community. We have a long-standing and embedded art culture particularly in the visual and ceramic arts, several residential artists' colonies and a high level of civic engagement. Our work-life balance, economic security, sense of wellbeing and health, and safety are some of the highest in the state.



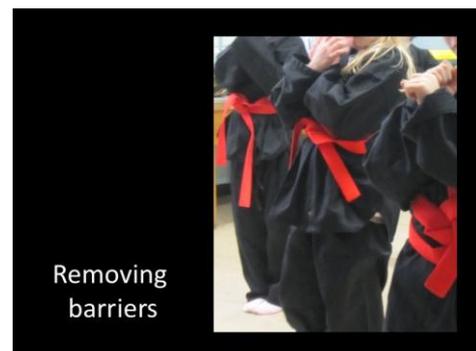


A creative response to Black Saturday emerged almost straight after the fires and continued to grow within parts of the community. The simple act of getting together to create something became more than replacing lost household items – it was a process of rediscovering self and reconnecting with community. Participation in creative endeavours served to break down barriers and inhibition. It invoked a new dialogue and provided renewed strength, resolve and purpose.



It was through the close working relationship between Council's Arts & Culture Coordinator, Irene Pagram, and the Cultural Development Officer at that time, Catherine Dinkleman (our

predecessor), and the bushfire-affected communities, that the communities' various needs were recognised early in the piece. They quickly identified that using the arts as a recovery medium had already been adopted by sectors of the community. While Council resourced Regional Arts Victoria's *Arts Recovery Quick Response Grants* on behalf of these groups, there were many people who were not yet ready to engage. However, an opportunity was identified for a dedicated arts program to assist the children of the bushfire-affected communities, while simultaneously supporting the schools in their recovery process.



Implementing an arts-based recovery program for the schools was easier said than done. School principals and many of the teaching staff were themselves directly affected by the fires, having lost their own family, friends and homes. While the children had needs that required attention and support, in some instances it was necessary to wait until the whole school community was ready



before we could begin to have conversations about programming.

The Bushfire Recovery Arts Programs have evolved in such a way as to be responsive to the communities' needs.

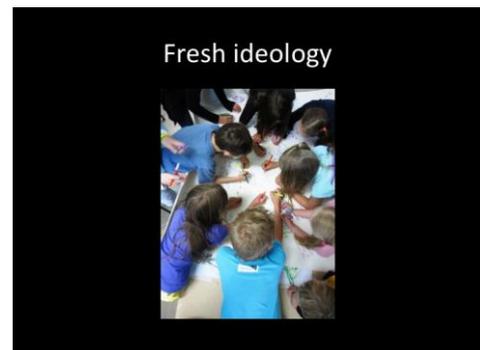
This methodology is supported by Council policy through the *Nillumbik Bushfire Recovery Plan 2009-2013* which prioritises a community-led recovery, in particular:

- recognising differing community needs and working in partnership with the community in developing sound processes that are flexible and adaptive to the changing needs of the community
- recognising that different people will be at different stages and that decision making involves grief and will take time
- making available diverse opportunities and choices for people at different stages of the grief and recovery process.

### **Grants process**

It was immediately apparent that the paperwork burden on this community was immense. The average family has had to complete the equivalent of around six archive boxes of paperwork to get through the last three years – the first two boxes in the first six to eight months. “Porridge and paperwork” was

the standard morning. Continuous re-traumatisation through re-living their situation and recounting their loss was commonplace. Constant comparison of loss so that funding bodies, insurance companies, Centrelink and other government agencies could calculate entitlements contributed to the traumatisation and has slowed the healing process. Paper, paper, paper!



It was obvious that if we were going to have an ongoing arts recovery program, we needed to remove the burden of paperwork. It was equally obvious that we had a community that to a large degree had adopted the arts as one method of their recovery journey, and that to many people this was very important. We certainly didn't have to go out and convince people that these activities could contribute to the healing and community building. All we really had to do was remove the barriers and say yes.

When these observations were made to the Arts and Culture Coordinator, Irene



Pagram, and in turn to the management team at Council, we had full support to adapt the granting process and acquittal process to make it easy for people to access Bushfire Recovery Arts Funds. Council worked hard to identify funding sources to support the Arts Officer role and the arts programs.



The grants process that we followed was based upon best practice social change philanthropy. That is high engagement, minimal paperwork and a lot of flexibility to change projects as the needs of the community changed.

We supported the application process through lots of meetings over cups of tea. Applications weren't accepted unless they had a good chance of going ahead (we didn't want to say no). We worked with the applicant to ensure that budgets were robust, community support was strong and usually the facilitators as well as the participants were from the local community. We adapted the grant panel to become a grant advisory panel, that is, the role of

the panel was not just to approve but to give advice on how the project might be sustainable (if needed) or easier to manage, basically using their expertise in arts programming to assist the applicants.

We accepted applications from individuals as well as organisations, reminding ourselves all the time that this money had been donated for these communities and individuals, and that we were simply holding it in trust. We accepted verbal applications and completed the paperwork ourselves if need be, always checking in with people that we were remaining consistent with their ideas. We trusted them to know what they were doing and we responded to need. We also kept the grant amounts reasonably small and operable because funding, insurance and generally managing money was a source of stress for many people. Sometimes we funded a project in sections to make this attainable.



We didn't require any reporting through the life of the project, though we would meet up with the participants to catch up over a cuppa. We were also frequently invited to take part in workshops or get-togethers, which to us was a sign that we were doing our job well. Some projects required more involvement than others. Some projects just needed to be left alone to do their own thing in their own time.

So you can see the pattern here: it's all about relationships and trust, not about risk management. We had tremendous support from Council to do our work in this way. "Just say yes and sort the rest out later" was our mantra.

Similarly our evaluation processes needed to be adaptable – minimal paperwork, simple acquittals with support to complete them, and many more cups of tea.

With these strategies we were able to keep the arts programs going throughout this recovery period. Even when everyone was tired of doing everything else there were still art programs running. Some have been going for more than two years. Many groups have stayed together and just moved on to new projects. Many are moving out of private homes and

planning to move into the new community spaces that are currently being built.

### **Project examples and stages**

Out of loss, creativity stemmed. For example, the need for a new letterbox inspired people in Strathewen to come together. These were not ordinary letterboxes. They were large handcrafted mosaics that told individual stories and offered colour and promise to the blackened properties. The Letterbox Project gave participants a safe space to re-establish their identity and reconnect with their place. They were symbolic of the fact that one day people would come back to Strathewen– that there would be houses to come back to. For many residents it was the only opportunity to go to Strathewen as a large part of the community was displaced. The letterboxes have provided an avenue for communication between residents and they brought the postal service back to town. For some time Strathewen had more letterboxes than houses.



Another early project was the establishment of the Butterfly Studio. This was an initiative of three women from Christmas Hills, who initially provided a felting circle workshop. This was so popular that they realised there was a place for a permanent arts space and regular workshops such as painting and drawing. Again, more than just meeting the practical need, the Butterfly Studio provided the opportunity to craft a new possession important to the rediscovery of self. It gave space away from the toil of rebuilding and provided solace, companionship and teamwork.



The Letterbox and Butterfly Studio projects are just two examples of early CCD practice emerging in its most raw and pure form. These projects and others took advantage of early support from Council, together with other funding opportunities, sponsorship and donations. The project outcomes signified the potential that the communities could achieve. It is important to note however, that there was no long-term planning in many of

these projects. People just got together and decided what they would do. Once they started they just wanted to keep going. Nobody anticipated that these projects would be so long-lived and significant.



#### Four phases

The Bushfire Recovery Arts Programs can be divided into four phases:

##### Phase one: individual identification

of needs and working directly with those needs. A pilot art club program was facilitated in schools by an art therapist and visual artists. Also, theatre workshops were facilitated by a youth theatre company experienced in trauma recovery. Both school programs focused on the notion of change.

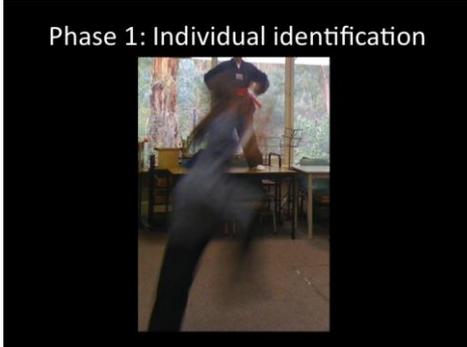
#### Exploring the notion of change

- What changes us
- What does change feel like
- When change doesn't give us a choice
- Feeling out of control
- Change is stressful
- Looking forward.



During art club, the art therapist identified a number of children and their families requiring further support outside the schools program, which was then made available.

Phase 1: Individual identification



During this phase, many adults were just starting to get together in their own homes. The Letterboxes, early days in the Butterfly Studio and the chook knitting project all began without funding. Our work was to identify how to sustain them.

**Phase two: Rebuilding** of physical spaces. Strathewen Primary School was completely destroyed. Most of the students were displaced from the town and the school was hosted by another local school The Cubby Project provided an opportunity for the children to contribute to the rebuilding of their own school space – albeit remotely.

Phase 2: Recovery and rebuilding



For adults in the community, projects such as the ever-present letterboxes, the mosaic seats and the felting and knitting groups were all working on things for home. There were also Christmas decoration workshops to replace items lost in the fire.

### **Phase three: communities**

**reconnecting** and moving forward.

While children were seen to be re-engaging on a general level, teachers and parents in the bushfire-affected communities began to report the desire to build stronger connections across the communities. Schools embraced the idea of running joint programs in order to connect in a broader context.

Activities were scheduled after school so that they were accessible to children outside the host school. In this way schools worked together and invited one another to share the creative space.





At the second anniversary, Council and community instigated a major exhibition for artists to respond to the experience of the fires and the recovery. The exhibition, *Symbols of Loss and Recovery*, adopted the mantra of just saying yes and the result was an exhibition that represented more than 40 artists and 12 groups and was held across four venues.

This exhibition brought the communities together. It brought the groups together and for many artists it was the first time they were able to look outside of their own work – recovery and response – and to recognise that they were in fact a part of a community of artists.

#### **Phase four: providing art experiences for all**

We are currently in a transition period. State Government funding for bushfire recovery ended on 30 June 2011, however Nillumbik Shire Council has recognised the value of continuing with the programs beyond that date. During

this period, regular workshops or activities are being offered to schools and we are working with longer projects that are partly subsidised by the Recovery Arts Programs, partly self-funded by the users and in addition we are assisting groups to source other funding.



During the rest of this year we will be working with the long-term groups on developing small, manageable arts co-ops to ensure that their activities can continue into the new community space. The transition process will involve working more directly with the school staff and local clubs and associations to enable them to continue using the arts and mentoring them as to the availability of resources and funding opportunities. We will focus on capacity building in the art community by holding grant writing and funding resource workshops and monitor the transition of the recovery work back into mainstream Council processes.



## Evaluation principles

- Observation
- Communication
- Relationships
- Outreach



### **Outcomes evaluation – or, more cups of tea...**

How did we evaluate? Mostly we used our eyes and ears and we drank many more cups of tea over kitchen tables, mosaic tiles, paint pots, singing sessions and pizza nights. We got out from behind our desks and asked people what they were doing, how they were going, if they wanted to make changes or were happy with the project.

Our four principle methods were:

- observation
- communication
- relationships
- outreach

We fed back information to the funding bodies. We mediated on the communities' behalf if projects needed to change or grants needed to be extended. Funding criteria were moved if need be. The process of evaluation was adapted to suit the community need.



We relied on the professional expertise of the school principals and teachers in their recognition of tangible and intangible improvements in their students' recovery processes. We valued the professional expertise of the artists and arts therapists engaged to work with people. The success of the program lies in the ability of the Bushfire Recovery Arts Officer, working at the coalface, to develop strong relationships in the communities and be responsive to receiving and interpreting the advice and anecdotes provided.

Over the last two and a half years, the Bushfire Recovery Arts Program has supported more than 40 projects, 11 in schools and 30 in the wider community, plus two significant exhibitions all at the initiation of the community. That is a lot for one part-time officer role and the vital key to delivery has been the community-driven content. Active support from the arts team, the Bushfire Recovery Team, the Arts and Culture

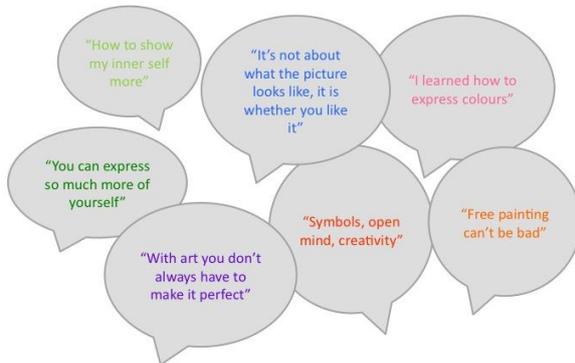
Coordinator, Management and Council has also been crucial.

In discussing alternative methods of evaluation, we take you back to the very first after school drama clubs and art therapy programs. When asked what they learned from the pilot programs, these were some of the children's responses:

**What I learned in afterschool drama club:**



**What I learned in afterschool art club:**



Remembering that two years is a relatively short time in a trauma recovery process, it is a long time in the life of a child of six or eight years old.

Those same students have now gone on to produce an animation, *Wild Dog Ride*. While it sounds aptly named, the film takes its name from a local street and focuses on the town's history and heritage, with the students interviewing local elders. Moving on from the horror and danger that they experienced within their natural environs, the animation affirms the children's positive sense of place and demonstrates the progress of the recovery journey.

**Critical learning**

The critical learning from the Bushfire Recovery Arts Program is the need to be responsive rather than planned, with a move towards a more strategic framework as the recovery progresses. Additionally, the need for sensitivity rather than adhering to formal process, and employing a practice of advocacy over bureaucracy, have been key factors in the successful delivery of the program model.



## Critical learning

- Evaluation is a constant cycle
- Measurements can be a moveable feast
- Space for responsiveness is crucial
- Advocacy over bureaucracy



Forefront in the planning is an awareness of the multiple challenges facing the bushfire-affected families and developing relationships with these communities. Council's initial mandate was to work with the communities in the fire-affected towns, however, many families had relocated. It's a challenge to ensure that people have access to recovery programs. It requires an outreach approach, which can be resource heavy, and the Bushfire Recovery Arts Officer has found it essential to work with neighbouring schools and communities to where people may have relocated.



The program has focussed on centralising the experience of art-making, rather than the experience of the fires. With responsiveness being a core action of the program, it has evolved as a true reflection of the community's needs.

The achievements of the program can be measured through the positive re-engagement of children and adults and the new dialogue that has opened up within their communities. More so, the content of the various artworks produced during the program reflect the re-establishment of identity, and re-identification with place, which in turn has reconnected the community and enhanced the collective ability to move forward.

