



RE-IGNITING COMMUNITY

Steve Payne, Director, The Torch Project

Summary

Re-Igniting Community is the main activity of The Torch Project. Over the past six years it has evolved as a community cultural development model that uses the arts to mobilise communities around issues that fall into the 'too hard basket'; including racism, substance abuse, family violence and disability. These issues are addressed in an on-going inclusive process using community consultation, workshops, activity in schools, theatrical and artistic expression, and ongoing community development activities driven by the local communities and involving hundreds of volunteers. In the course of this 'whole of community' process, Indigenous people and organisations, migrants and youth, disability, health, religious and arts groups, businesses, schools and Local, State and Federal government agencies come together. They work through the steering committees and working groups, increasing coordination of service delivery and identifying gaps, developing leadership skills and strategies to tackle disadvantage in their area.

Aim

To increase local capacity to lead and manage diverse communities.

Objectives

Community Building

- bring together a diverse range of community members into an inclusive forum that encourages discussions relating to issues of history, culture, identity and belonging
- identify relevant community based social issues and needs
- enhance community leadership and management
- establish and develop community networks
- increase coordination of service delivery and identify gaps
- grow the voluntary capacity in communities by generating new opportunities for enjoyable participation
- foster and develop pre-employment skills and facilitate access to the training with the community development strategies to seek out solutions to the issues and needs that have been identified
- assist in the long-term development of sustainable local infrastructure to maintain and expand upon the issues raised and strategies developed
- increase awareness of diversity issues

Artistic

- develop a theatrical event with the community that incorporates local issues, stories and participants that will be ultimately performed for schools and the general public
- develop, celebrate and share with the community traditional Indigenous ceremony
- cultivate the participation of and respect for people of all cultural backgrounds
- harness and nurture local energy and talent by involving community members directly in the development of a performing arts event
- provide a skills development forum for local participants to work with professional actors, choreographers, musicians, writers and other artists
- promote local thought and talent encouraging a culture of self-efficacy
- create high quality, provocative and entertaining theatre that acts on the intellect and the emotions of its audience
- assist with resource and referral systems to facilitate the further development of local arts infrastructure

Stages in the Re-Igniting Community process

All of the stages listed below are covered by project activities but not necessarily in a linear fashion.

Initial Discussions: Community members and organisations talk with The Torch Project team about hosting the project. Contact is made with a range of community organisations and groups including indigenous people and organisations, migrants and youth, disability, religious and arts groups, businesses, schools and local, state and federal government agencies. A series of community meetings is held to determine feasibility.

Permission is sought from local Aboriginal elders to do the project. This ensures that indigenous people, who are generally marginalised, and indigenous issues are at the centre of the work.

Steering Group formation: Individuals and representatives from interested organisations across a broad range of areas and backgrounds are invited to form a steering group that will guide the project at a local level. Skills and issues workshops are run.

Identifying local needs, issues and stories: Through this steering group, an informal community consultation process begins in which community members are invited to share their thoughts about issues of concern in the community. Stories of the history and culture of the land and people of the community are sourced. Ideas for strategies to deal with the issues raised are explored. Lead organisations and significant schools are identified.

Script and event development: A framework script is written to reflect the ideas and concerns of the community, in consultation with the steering group. Other art forms engaged include visual arts, dance, music, poetry and story telling.

Rehearsal incorporating local artists and community participants: Workshops, discussions and rehearsals are held with all interested community members to expand on the script, and to further adapt it to the local area. Additional workshops are conducted with organisations focusing on developing long-term strategies to deal with critical local issues. Event dates are advertised

Performance and Event: The show is performed in schools and for the general public. The cast and crew perform the show in schools or with specific community members in the morning, rehearse up to 50 kids and adults into the play in the afternoon and perform with them for the school community that night. Larger public multi-arts events are built over a week or two, incorporating local artists and many of those involved in the schools.

Evaluation: The Torch Project team will undertake evaluation with participants post event to examine community and individual impact of project. Final facilitation with steering group and statewide project partners will assist in developing a local cultural development strategy and implementation process and examine ways of assisting in the region's development. It is planned that some of the projects listed will involve long-term evaluation with Effective Change, RMIT's Globalism Institute and Victoria University around community arts participation and its impact on community wellbeing.

Long-term strategy development: Community organisations work together on implementing strategies identified throughout the process. These may be cultural, business, education, policy or other strategies as developed by local organisations working together to address issues explored through the Re-Igniting Community process.

Community Issues

Re-Igniting Community provides a platform for marginalised communities and individuals who have little opportunity to express their needs and desires in a non-threatening public forum. Local social issues and related community needs are identified and addressed in an on-going consultation process.

While each community has its own unique issues and conditions, the following are some common themes that occur in all communities and continue to be addressed in the current work;

- a historical 'whiteout' relating to local Indigenous history.
- lack of a coordinated approach by community and government agencies
- a culture of defeatism and inertia
- lack of appropriate cultural opportunities and supporting infrastructure
- family violence
- substance abuse
- teenage pregnancy
- lack of employment opportunities
- poor public transport
- youth homelessness, health and cultural and family dislocation
- racism in schools and the broader community
- alienation of young people and the lack of structured activities

Projects have been conducted in metro Melbourne (1999, 2000), Shepparton area of northern Victoria (2001), south-west Victoria and East Gippsland (2002), north-west Victoria (2003), Bayside, Bendigo/Castlemaine, Doveton/Eumemmering and Frankston (2004), highlighting the above local issues.

These findings were incorporated into powerful and accessible productions that brought together members of Indigenous communities, homeless teenagers, school children, business and service organisations, people with disabilities, the Arabic, Tongan, Italian and Chinese communities.

Residual Outcomes (2001-2004)

The list below is included to illustrate some of the longer-term benefits to The Torch Project partner communities. It is not exhaustive and one of The Torch Project's main aims is to increase its ability to track the longer term benefits and support communities we have worked with in a more cohesive manner.

Re-Igniting Community East Gippsland Inc is to be officially launched on June 4th 2005. As a direct result of The Torch Project's work, the steering committee gathered by TTP in 2002 continues to meet on a regular basis, has become a fully constituted and incorporated body and secured funding for future projects.

Health

Policy: Community Connections in Warrnambool has initiated policy change in two health regions placing priority on the practice and reclaiming of Indigenous culture as central to improvement in Indigenous health.

Promotion: The Torch Project is one of four Community Cultural Development projects featured on VicHealth's video 'Creative Connections: Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing'

Presentation: Northern District Health (Kerang), the Allinjara Co op and The Torch Project are presenting at National Health conference in Alice Springs

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation(ANTaR)- Fanning the Flames:

As a result of ANTAR volunteers and staff engaging in the Re-Igniting Community process, a partnership has developed and ANTAR's regional projects are based in communities where The Torch Project has been. TTP provides ANTAR with links to networks – particularly host employment agencies such as Community Connections in Warrnambool, Murray Mallee Training Company in Swan Hill and The Smith Family in Bairnsdale. This is seen as an ongoing relationship that provides employment and follow up work.

Department of Human Services

Cultural Awareness Training: 12 DHS staff attended the performances of The Bridge as a result of the involvement of Wade Mahoney, the DHS Indigenous Family Violence coordinator in Mildura. In conversation post performance these DHS staff identified a lack of understanding of contemporary Indigenous life and history and their desire to rectify this. Cultural awareness training was organised for 18 people for the first time in recent memory. This outcome provided employment for Indigenous advisors and will have a significant long term impact on the way in which DHS staff deliver services to the Indigenous community.

Police in Kerang, Swan Hill, Robinvale and Mildura used the project for internal cultural awareness training, as did the Swan Hill and Mildura Councils.

Presentation to senior staff: Wade Mahoney and Uncle Bruce Baxter gave a presentation on Re-igniting Community North West to a statewide gathering of senior departmental officers designed to showcase projects that had been successful in engaging indigenous people.

La Mama mentorships: Through the relationship between TTP and La Mama Theatre, two young people involved in Re-Igniting Community Nth West have accessed mentorships with La Mama. This relationship is seen as a potential for future community participants and represents a support framework following the touring phase that allows participants to build experience, network and careers. Kristy Mitchell, a young Indigenous woman from Dareton, gained experience in performance and direction and Pez, a young Cook Islander man from Mildura, was mentored in photography.

Loddon Mallee Community Leadership Program: A steering committee member in Swan Hill, participating in this well respected Leadership program, volunteered to act as co-chair. She used the experience of the project to fulfill the requirements of her program and was so enthused by the experience that, when sharing it with other members of the program across the Loddon Mallee region, she encouraged a formal link with the future work of TTP. This resulted in TTP delivering some training for project participants in 2004 and securing highly skilled volunteers undertaking the Community Leadership Program to sit on a Bendigo project steering committee.

Study pathways:

RMIT As a result of the emerging relationship with RMIT several members of the community cast from The Bridge are being offered academic credit for the community work undertaken on the project. Participants will be credited with the completion of

several units towards a Diploma in Community Services (Community Education). Kristy Mitchell is now at Swinburne preparing to study the arts

Angie Lee Solomon (Re-Igniting Community 2002) is at VCA in preparation for the acting course in 2005

Networking across the region: As a result of the project launch for RIC Nth West in Mildura, participants across the region got together – many meeting from like organisations, community groups etc for the first time. This networking opportunity resulted in some strong outcomes for indigenous dance groups – the Latje Latje dance group based in Mildura have been asked to support emerging dancers in other towns throughout the Nth West. Indigenous elders from across the region are also seeking opportunities to meet on a regular basis to support initiatives across the region.

Youth Performing Arts

Shepparton: Following the tour, the steering committee in Shepparton applied for \$20,000 from the Australia Council for the Arts' CCD Board. They were successful, and the money was used to co-ordinate a performing arts group for young people, focusing on encouraging diversity. Two cast members from The Torch ran workshops in drama and hip-hop along with many other local artists, and the workshops ran in several phases over 9 months.

Warrnambool: young Indigenous people have developed and performed plays around domestic violence.

Mildura: We are supporting a teacher at Chaffey College who is developing a Youth Theatre

Steve Payne is Director of The Torch Project. For over 25 years, Steve has worked as a project manager, educator/trainer, performing artist and producer - in the community sector, private industry, tertiary institutions, the trade union movement and labour market program. He has worked with indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and people from other countries in many different contexts including: committees of management, paid and unpaid staff in community organisations, union trainers and shop stewards, owners, managers and workers in factories, local government workers and councillors and parents, teachers and students from kindergarten through to tertiary level.