



Strong Culture Strong Community – The Narrogin Stories

5th World Summit on Arts & Culture, Melbourne 2011

Tuesday 4 October, Roundtable: *Rebuilding Communities*

Presenter: Pilar Kasat, Managing Director, Community Arts Network WA

About CAN WA

Community Arts Network Western Australia (CAN WA) is the peak body for community arts and cultural development in Western Australia. We inspire and mobilise communities to explore and express their own unique culture through art production, cultural programs, skills development and funding opportunities.

We are driven by the knowledge that culture and the arts play an important part in shaping our communities. We understand the need to involve the community in processes that help them track the past, understand and explore the present, and use their imagination to help manifest the future.

Context

In 2008 there was a spate of youth suicides in Narrogin where six young Noongar men took their lives. This left the community shocked and ill-equipped to deal with such a collective grief. During 2009 family feuds ensued, exacerbating an already complex and delicate community situation.

The town of Narrogin is situated 190 kilometres south east of Perth in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. Narrogin has a population of approximately 4328 people; 300 of which are Aboriginal, with the majority being Noongar.



In 2009 CAN WA was approached and encouraged by a local development organisation to undertake some community engagement initiatives with Aboriginal people in Narrogin. For three years prior to this, CAN WA had established an Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Development Unit in Kellerberrin, situated in the Eastern Wheatbelt. From this locally-based Aboriginal hub, a series of successful arts and cultural community building initiatives took place.

I was very aware at the time that Narrogin was a very complex community; there had been numerous media reports about the youth suicides, and more recently, about family feuding. Despite the recognition CAN WA had received in their previous work with Noongar people, undertaking similar community engagement initiatives in Narrogin was a different matter. In fact it could have potentially been beyond the capacity of a small organisation like CAN WA.

CAN WA began a process of dialogue and trust-building with community members which took approximately eight months, after which we began a series of community arts projects. Engaging a community artist who could work in a community that had experienced trauma required careful consideration. We brought in photographers, musicians and a theatre worker.



The brief to the artists was simply that this project needed to help create a new narrative in Narrogin. The current narrative was about pain, suicide, violence and family feuding. How could this project help to draw out a new narrative from the community?

Storytelling

What resulted from the small informal gatherings in the bush with artists and artswriters, Noongar Elders, men and women, were a series of individually recorded conversations and interviews. These community conversations happened for over a period of approximately 10 days.

Each of these interviews was based around a key question: *How can the community move forward?*

The question was aimed to create an open and honest conversation about what was happening in the community. It was intended to enable people to express their views in a safe environment and without judgement.



Some key themes emerged during this process; the first being a sense of family, culture and community, the second was the sense of loss, hurt, and forgiveness experienced by the community, which was a result of the suicides and family feuding. Finally there was the community's hope for the future, mainly symbolised by the young generation- the children - and the capacity for people to exercise their own choices.

From these overall themes three theatrical elements were identified. The first was the association that Noongar people had with the good times spent with family and friends playing cards games.

Another theatrical element emerged from a conversation with a woman in the community who said, *'It's about turning the light back on in Narrogin and encouraging our people to come back home.'* The concept of "turning the light back on", together with the invitation for people to come back "home", would form part of the second important element featured at the community gathering.



The third element was the concept of fire, family and food fusing together to form one powerful image, representing how these prominent aspects of the Noongar culture enrich each other.

These three theatrical elements formed part of a ritual, which was to be developed to accompany the cornerstone of the community gathering - the soundscape. Our aim was that the community gathering would be an opportunity to reflect their own story back to the community.

The date for the celebration was scheduled for June 24, 2010. At this event CAN WA would launch the *Voices of the Wheatbelt* publication - a collection of photographs taken by the community representing a sense of place and belonging. It would also bring together all the community arts projects and the participants who had come together to produce a series of outcomes, including hip hop songs by young people and a series of public art sculptures in the form of seats depicting the six Noongar seasons, located at the Gnarojin Park.

These community arts projects had attracted a significant amount of positive media coverage both in print and television. This was in stark contrast with the media coverage that had depicted Narrogin since the family feuding had escalated just a few months earlier.



The Gathering

24 June 2010: the day of the launch had arrived. It was a very cold, crisp and clear winter morning. A number of CAN WA staff were already in Narrogin and had been there for a few days working towards the event. CAN WA had done all it could to facilitate Noongar people to get there; two buses were picking up people from the surrounding towns, and a mini-bus would do the rounds of Narrogin. All we needed was for the people to get there.

And they did! Over 230 Noongar men, women and children and a few non-Aboriginal people (Wadjellas) arrived at the John Higgins Centre in Narrogin that evening. The venue was packed and the atmosphere was truly extraordinary. People laughed and people cried.



*'This is tremendous, to see all the Noongars together like this...it's just blew me away...that's why I become a bit emotional.
Last time I came up here they were so split ...
But tonight seeing the faces of all the people who were so against each other and seeing their children all mixing up on the floor...
...to see the way they were tonight.. it blew me away.'*

Janet Hayden, Noongar Elder

I have never felt so humble and so proud of the work I do. That evening was so meaningful and I truly felt we had made a difference.

For more information:

Visit the CAN WA website: www.canwa.com.au

You can also watch a 14 minute documentary titled '[Strong Culture, Strong Community – The first steps...](#)' which captures the first twelve months of the Strong Culture, Strong Community program depicting how the projects gave a voice and responded to the needs of the Southern Wheatbelt communities through the arts.

Other related videos include:

- Voices of the Wheatbelt: *Koorliny Noonook Boodja* (Back to Country) [Narrogin, Brookton, Wagin](#)
- [Narrogin Stories community soundscape](#)
- [New Balance 'Come Along'](#)
- Voices of the Wheatbelt: Wheat Beats [Behind the Scenes, Quairading, Narrogin, Kellerberrin, Brookton](#)

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inspiring ARTS that reflect local culture and identity

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