Reflecting on the growth of arts and health

Lisa Philip-Harbutt
Community Arts Network SA

First I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on today, The Kaurna People and I pay my respects to their elders.

Hello my name is Lisa Philip-Harbutt

After 35 years as an artist, 25 years of work in Arts & Health and 10 years as the Director of Community Arts Network SA, I stand before you in a reflective mood.

I’m here to tell you a story of Arts and Health. This presentation will use spoken word and abstract video projection. I don’t like power point, so have been exploring alternative modes of presentation. The trainer in me has always been interested in ways of opening up people’s minds to explore their own connections to stories being told. You know the right brain stuff of turning off that rational left brain so you can allow your creativity to respond. But it is the artist in me that has for the last 15 years pursued this format both here in Australia and overseas. I have used some images from previous National Rural Health conferences as part of the collage you see on the screen. They aren’t necessarily in any order, I have played with them a bit and attribution is pretty tricky, so thanks in advance to those who have previously allowed their images to be used for documentation purposes. They can all be found in their original form on the website. So, I ask that you sit back and get lost in the imagery as you listen to a story of Arts and Health.

In 2003 I was talking about Arts & health at a local government conference in Queensland and a very wise woman called Lillian Holt was a key note. She spoke of the importance of introductions, of telling your story and of hearing others story too. Every speaker that came after her, spoke in a different way to their audience. They started with their story and built out to their topic. So here goes.

I was brought up travelling the outback. No house. My parents were prospector/miners and my sisters and I spent a lot of time sleeping on stretchers or in swags and travelling on the back of trucks. I go right back to my childhood for this introduction as it lets me tell you about my parents. Those that have come before are very important. My mother liked to make things and my father liked to blow things up (this was ok as he had legitimate reasons to work with explosives (and a powder monkey ticket). These construct / destruct influences are very evident in my approach to life. I am into both art making and critical analysis. I was brought up outside the mainstream, connected in very conscious way to the land and aware of its effect on my families health and wellbeing. If we didn’t pay attention to nature, the conditions in which we travelled could easily have taken our lives. So I learnt to notice what was happening around me. But I was also a keen to find out more about what occurred in the places that I was not. Aware of “others” and being “other”.

I have spent 35 years as an artist exploring the overlaps between visual, performing and community arts. My passion is initiating cultural development (and that thing called) social change through arts practice. What does that mean? What do I actually do? I have designed sets and costumes, painted murals, made sculptures, puppets and temporary installations, created plays and short films, taken photos and edited videos. I use the most appropriate artform to tell the story of the people I am collaborating with.

Over the years I have found myself contributing to art, health and wellbeing in a variety of ways.

- I spent 12 months as the first community artist at Flinders Medical Centre (in the infancy stage of the successful program) now run by Sally Francis.
- I have designed puppets for a community health centres positive health initiative.
- I worked on a forum theatre project Mermaids with the Dale Street Women’s Health Centre.
• At Southern Youth Theatre I worked on Incubator with some teenage Mums.
• In Cultivating your Palette multicultural groups explored the overlap between food, culture and wellbeing.
• And have created a video called too old for the playground too young for the pub with young people in a rural community who were worried about their high youth suicide rates.

I have been the Director of Community Arts Network of South Australia for nearly 10 years now. CAN or CAN SA, is a membership based organisation that is working toward ... Invigorated Communities fuelled by arts practice. We do this through strategic work with a diverse range of artists, organisations and communities.

I was introduced to the National Rural Health Conference in 1999 when the it was here in Adelaide. This conference was called Leaping the Boundary Fence: Using Evidence and Collaboration to Build Healthier Rural Communities. The conference participants had a great time painting a collaborative Mural. There were performances by arts companies such as the Yura Dance Troupe, Silver Sirens, Playback Theatre, DesertAcrobats and DFaces Youth Arts. And there were shows such as Might and Power which addressed manhood, parenting and men’s health issues and Blood and Bone—menopause the time of your life—(You reckon?)

I was then lucky enough to be the co-ordinator of the Arts & Health stream of the 2001 conference in Canberra. It was called Good Health ~ Good Country from conception to completion. Every morning started with Vox Pop interviews from conference participants put together by a video team and projected onto the big screen. In Arts and Health, speakers discussed both the theory and the practice. (Community Choir leader) Fay White led singing workshops on different days. There were also exhibitions including memorable work curated by Nikki Fallon and Zoe Scroggings from the project (that had the confrontational title of) Labelled a Freak drawn from a series of workshops they ran which addressed eating disorders in young women. And performances that included Alan Hopgood For Better, For Worse which looked at the effect of a diagnosis of prostate cancer on a relationship and Vital Statistix performance of Titbits! A lively cabaret about breast cancer.

Since that time the practice has developed, topics and style have changed and (I thing importantly) evaluation methods have evolved. I am now asking myself and others what are the significant changes over the years and where is the practice headed?

I tried contacting some of the artists from 2001 to see how their arts and a health journeys had developed.

Louise Moriarty greatest memory of the conference was the way that the young people she had bought with her from (Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation in) the far west of NSW were embraced, and they had engaged with the conference. She has said that “It felt like the beginning of a time where young people were being treated seriously.” And that “We were beginning to find out what their actual health issue were and how that impacted on them from their perspective.” Louise and the young people presentation was called Playin’ up—people play up.

Louise now works for a program called Confidence at Play. This is another preventative program which is taken into schools in Sydney. She says “By building creativity and resilience into all children we are equipping them with tools to have the social and emotional and community building capacity that are needed in these fast changing times.” Louise’s greatest concern now is that health education and prevention is becoming more mainstream and formalised.

Annie Bolitho remembers the 2001 conference as she used the experience in a chapter of her doctoral thesis. At the conference her session was ‘New dimensions in water conversation, the health of water in
handmade books.’ She also fondly remembers the session on choirs. She is now a consultant in the field of stakeholder engagement.

She says that she now sees food becoming an increasingly important topic,’ and she is glad to see that ‘hospitals are now a site in which community art is ‘at home’.

Stewart Roper showed wonderful Images of the Pitjantjatjara Lands in 2001 and told of the life of a remote area nurse. And he is back this year delivering “Palya: good. Acknowledging achievements in Aboriginal health and welfare in central Australia”

In the 2001 conference Sally Clifford’s presentation was called ‘In response—the Australian arts and health industry’

In the early 1990s Sally and Jo Kaspari had set up the Australian Network for Arts and Health ANAH and her memories are that by 2001 “rural and remote areas were already using arts and making them their own. She felt it was no longer seen as just some hippy experimental thing.”

For 7 years Sally worked in the Kimberley desert at an Aboriginal art centre where she saw unlimited potential for Arts and Health and did many great things. But says that the reality of addressing the wellbeing issues of the communities was hard. She now in Darwin and works for a national consultancy company called Matrix on Board which provides support for non-profits.

My most vivid memory was of a very young women I mentioned earlier. Her name is Zoe Scroggins. A poem from her and Nikki Fallon’s presentation has always stayed with me. It goes….

I don’t even know who I should be
I don’t even know who is me
Am I real
Am I thin
Maybe I’m hollow (1998:41)

I have caught up with Zoe a few times since. She went on to work in the highlands of Thailand, was the Artistic Director of Contact Inc, was Director of Holy Cow Creative and recently I heard she had a gig at the Australia Council for the Arts. She is doing really well.

When I ask myself what are the major changes that have occurred in the field of Arts and Health I tend to think of the journey.

In the eighties it seemed like we were spending a lot of time Introducing ourselves and justifying the connection between Arts and Health

In the nineties we were laying the foundations and establishing the mechanisms to allow the field of practice to grow.

And in this century I believe we have made great inroads into encouraging change at a policy level. I understand that it is a bumpy road and the loss of a key supporter such as our local former Minister of Health John Hill can cause great set backs on the journey but when you stop and reflect on how far we have come I believe we need to remember to celebrate.

At CAN SA we now support Arts and Health from a distance (~ we are not required for the up close work ~) great organisations and people from both arts and health now do it themselves. My role tends to be advisory- on committees and consultations or in the area of advocacy or training. But we are still working in the broader area of Wellbeing. For example exploring ways that stories can be told by people who have experience of homelessness or in the growing new area of creative ageing—for many of us this last one is getting pretty close to home. In these new contexts we are back at the beginning making
introductions and justifying the connections between what some people think are disparate sectors. I am so glad I can bring to this new work what I have learned from all you good people in arts and health.

Thank you