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The Mental Health Rural Art Roadshow: benefits, lessons learned and future potential

Heather Bridgman, Tony Barnett, Josie De Deuge

Centre for Rural Health, University of Tasmania

Background

It is well known and acknowledged that Australians living in rural and remote areas have poorer health and mental health than those who live in urban areas (1). Challenges to mental health support access include long travel distances, lack of transport options, costs, long waitlists, and lack of afterhours services (2). Social visibility and higher levels of stigma can also be barriers for mental health service access in smaller rural communities. Art programs have been suggested as having potential to address barriers related to stigma and mental health (3). Art has been shown to be beneficial to mental health and well-being and is acknowledged nationally through the Australian National Arts and Health Framework (4). Art exhibitions have been shown as a method to reduce stigma relating to mental health for exhibition viewers (5, 6). Exhibitions by people with mental illness have been shown to increase mental health literacy and improve community attitudes (5). Exhibitions have also been shown to offer a positive experience for carers of individuals with mental illness and offer social support in a safe environment (7).

The Rural Art Roadshow

Minds Do Matter is an annual art exhibition sponsored by Wellways, a not-for-profit mental health and disability support service in Tasmania (Figure 1). Wellways services span mental health, disability and community care, and reach thousands of people each year. Wellways works with a diverse range of people living with mental health issues or various disabilities, and their families, friends and carers, to bring about positive change and build good lives in their communities. Services offered bring together evidence from research with an understanding of people's lived experience—*what works for them*. Wellways mental health workforce includes clinicians, nurses, community support workers and 'peers'—those who have a lived experience of mental illness and recovery. Together, they create an environment that focuses on hope rather than illness.

Figure 1 Wellways Website



Minds Do Matter is held annually in conjunction with mental health week in Launceston, Tasmania. Community members affected by mental illness in some way can submit art works (Figure 2) and an artist statement about their work (Table 1). Each year the exhibition explores the relationship between art and mental health and celebrates the power of art to be life enhancing and life affirming. *Minds Do Matter* promotes the therapeutic and reflective process of art and aims to reduce stigma associated with mental illness.

Figure 2 Examples of art work and mediums



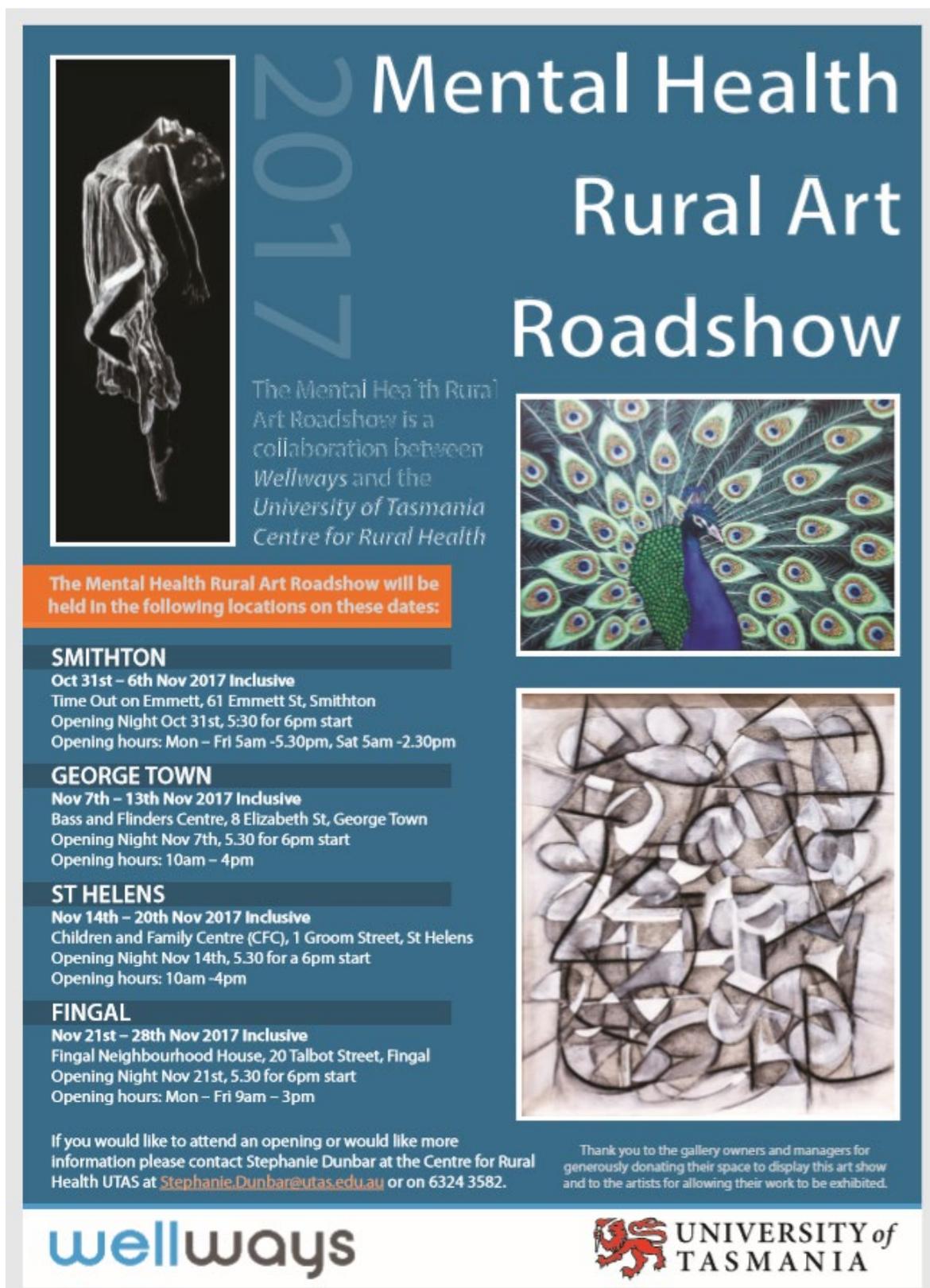
Table 1 **Examples of Artists Statements**

| Title of piece and medium | Artist statement |
|--|--|
| Loose Ends Paper and pencil | This piece Symbolises the treads of life weaving together to create a person’s individual journey. Living with Mental Challenges often leaves a person, feeling like there are more loose ends than completed tasks, and goals. The colour and textures demonstrates the Highs and Lows of emotions and lived experiences. |
| Helping Rodney Find Himself Watercolour Ink | I met a fellow patient in the psychology ward. He was in a silent world of fear and pain. I drew his shoe and then gave him a pencil and paper—he drew with me (It was a breakthrough moment). |
| Brando Acrylic on cardboard | I love the broody moods that bubble up from within us. We all have a darkness in us; we have to find a way to release it. Into the jungle... |
| External Passage Photo print on aluminium | In times of great loss and sorrow, it seems that only tainted stains would remain. Know from within, that you will find eternal light to guide you through the shadows and out of the darkness. For darkness and loss cannot exist without life and light. |

The *Rural Art Roadshow* is a collaborative project between the Centre for Rural Health, University of Tasmania and, Wellways. *The Rural Art Roadshow* takes a selection of artworks from the *Minds Do Matter* exhibition to between four and six smaller rural Tasmanian communities over a four-week period directly after the *Minds Do Matter* exhibition (Figure 3). Selection criteria includes the portability of the artwork, subject diversity, and residential location of the artists. The aim of the *Rural Art Roadshow* is to develop community resilience, reduce stigma and promote a positive image of mental health in rural Tasmania by promoting conversations about art and mental health. The *Rural Art Roadshow* seeks to offer rural communities an opportunity to access mental health promotion and opportunities to view art to which they would otherwise not have access.

The *Rural Art Roadshow* visited eight different towns between 2015-17 with populations varying from 316 to 4,347 residents. All communities are classified between 3 and 4 on the Australian Standard Geographical Classification–Remoteness Area (ASGC-RA) (1-Major cities of Australia to 5-Very Remote), and between 5 and 6 on the Modified Monash Model (MMM) in terms of remoteness. Communities were chosen because of their relative isolation and disadvantage in accessing mental health promotion services (Table 2).

Figure 3 Poster for the 2017 Rural Art Roadshow



2017 Mental Health Rural Art Roadshow

The Mental Health Rural Art Roadshow is a collaboration between Wellways and the University of Tasmania Centre for Rural Health

The Mental Health Rural Art Roadshow will be held in the following locations on these dates:

SMITHTON
Oct 31st – 6th Nov 2017 Inclusive
Time Out on Emmett, 61 Emmett St, Smithton
Opening Night Oct 31st, 5:30 for 6pm start
Opening hours: Mon – Fri 5am -5.30pm, Sat 5am -2.30pm

GEORGE TOWN
Nov 7th – 13th Nov 2017 Inclusive
Bass and Flinders Centre, 8 Elizabeth St, George Town
Opening Night Nov 7th, 5.30 for 6pm start
Opening hours: 10am – 4pm

ST HELENS
Nov 14th – 20th Nov 2017 Inclusive
Children and Family Centre (CFC), 1 Groom Street, St Helens
Opening Night Nov 14th, 5.30 for a 6pm start
Opening hours: 10am -4pm

FINGAL
Nov 21st – 28th Nov 2017 Inclusive
Fingal Neighbourhood House, 20 Talbot Street, Fingal
Opening Night Nov 21st, 5.30 for 6pm start
Opening hours: Mon – Fri 9am – 3pm

If you would like to attend an opening or would like more information please contact Stephanie Dunbar at the Centre for Rural Health UTAS at Stephanie.Dunbar@utas.edu.au or on 6324 3582.

Thank you to the gallery owners and managers for generously donating their space to display this art show and to the artists for allowing their work to be exhibited.

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Table 2 Communities visited by the *Rural Art Roadshow 2015-17*

| Towns | Population [] | ASGC-RA [†] | Modified Monash Model | Year visited | | |
|-------------|---------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|------|------|
| | | | | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
| Dunalley | 316 | 3 | 5 | | X | |
| Fingal | 336 | 3 | 5 | | X | X |
| George Town | 4347 | 3 | 5 | X | X | X |
| Queenstown | 1755 | 4 | 6 | X | | |
| Scottsdale | 2373 | 3 | 5 | X | X | |
| Sheffield | 1552 | 3 | 5 | | X | |
| Smithton | 3881 | 3 | 5 | X | X | X |
| St Helens | 1449 | 3 | 5 | | | X |

[†]Australian Standard Geographical Classification-Remoteness Area

An event management plan tailored to each individual community was developed by the project team to deliver the *Rural Art Roadshow*. The plan included details for securing an accessible exhibition space, strategies for engagement with local community groups and stakeholders, event publicity, catering for each exhibition opening and logistics for secure transport, packing and unpacking of the art in order to mitigate the risk of loss or damage.

In consultation with key community members the art exhibition was held in community-based locations such as cafés, art galleries and council buildings as to facilitate maximum exposure to increase the promotion of mental health. Local services and councils were also engaged to assist in promoting the event and empowering communities and opening night was held in each community with representation from local government, key community stakeholders, community members, service providers and local artists. The exhibition was free for community members and remained on display for one week. At each opening night (Figure 4) artists were invited to talk about their experiences of mental health and art to assist community understanding and promote a positive image of mental health and well-being.

Figure 4 **Opening Night at Georgetown (2016)**



Benefits

The *Rural Art Roadshow* was evaluated from the perspectives of community members (N-145) from 2015-17 using an anonymous survey available at each art exhibit. The exhibition was also evaluated from the perspectives of participating artists. Outcomes of the survey indicate a strong level agreement that the exhibition was welcome in each of the communities, increased understanding of mental health, may help to lessen stigma, should be repeated each year, was something that could help promote conversations about mental health and something that others would be encouraged to see. The outcomes of the artist interviews offered three major themes: Community Impact, Social Gain, and Personal Gain. and 10 sub-themes (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Perspectives of Artists



Overall the artists valued their experience with participating with the *Rural Art Roadshow* and saw benefit to rural communities. Examples of quotes from artists include:

Community impact theme

“I feel as though everybody is pretty supportive and actively trying to include people like me that maybe don’t push ourselves into the public space very often I guess, so it was really rewarding to be encouraged and supported to show my art in that setting and talk to other artists who have done a similar sort of thing.”

“I think it’s a really good way to encourage other people to participate as well and they’re encouraged because everybody can do art, I really believe that and I think, yeah, so it’s good to see all sorts of different stalls and things that people might look at and think oh, maybe I could do that”

Personal gain theme

“I think it highlights the wellness of all of us, as in mentally, and as a potential art therapy and contributing to that”

“(Art is) something that you can lose yourself in a bit and it’s a way of expressing how you feel so even if you don’t display you can put it all down there and just getting it out of yourself so that makes you feel a bit better.”

“I think that it’s (Art) taught me that hard work does pay off. I wasn’t able to ... like I honestly I couldn’t draw anything three years ago. I’m not saying that I can draw things well now but I basically started three years ago, or, like, three and a half I think, and through drawing”

“I’ve enjoyed getting back into it and I have my own mental health issues so I also recognise the therapeutic benefits of that. I’m actually quite interested in art therapy”

Social gain

“I guess it’s helped me to gain that confidence and to explore more my creativity and self-expression and in a safe environment with nice people.”

“Well, you meet other people and I think the important thing is you meet people out of your normal walk of life.”

“Well, I think for me the art has been something that gave me back a bit of myself. Most of my life was work, my children and doing everything that had to be done, not what I wanted to do and to have that escape and be able to do something that was just me was nice.”

Challenges

Several challenges have been associated with the running of the *Rural Art Roadshow*.

- Sustainable funding has been a challenge to secure. Multiple attempts have been made seek ongoing funding through community-based funding sources and philanthropic organisations, however these have not been successful. Funding uncertainty has impacted on continuity of the program and changes to the operational context. This has meant corporate knowledge year to year about *Roadshow* arrangements has been lost or disrupted.
- Over the three-year period several approaches to the travel and logistical arrangements have been trialled (selection of art, care of the works, pick up, packaging, unpacking hanging etc). Good communication with all stakeholders has been key to success with logistics.
- Connecting with and engaging local mental health service providers in each town has been challenging, often due to the lack of services available or use of locum or fly in fly out models. There has also been a lack of follow-up initiatives after the exhibition, especially where the event may have triggered something and identified a service need or gap.
- Ensuring the event is ‘inclusive’ of all stakeholders and community members (ie ‘hard to reach’ vulnerable groups) is an ongoing challenge requiring significant time to engage communities and understand the local context and ‘champions’ in each community.
- The timing of the *Rural Art Roadshow* has been somewhat inflexible due to the timing of *Minds Do Matter* and Mental Health week, which may not suit school timetables or may clash with other community events, however linking the *Roadshow* with other local events may be helpful in future.
- The final challenge has been trying to support the artists themselves to attend the exhibitions in more remote areas of the state. This has been challenging practically and logistically. There is potential however to use online digital methods to offer the experience of artists at more remote regions for community members to interact at a distance.

Lessons learned and future potential

We have learned several lessons in running the art show over a three-year period:

- Having everything well planned and documented (steps, pathway, contingency plan, contact list up to date) each year is important so it can be used/updated for following year has been vital in maintaining corporate knowledge in the event of funding uncertainties and project personnel changes. A dedicated project officer has been helpful to coordinate and provide oversight to all of the locations and events.
- Investing in time to engage with communities and engender local 'ownership' of the event by a group (eg. Rotary, the art community) has resulted in broader knowledge, awareness and enthusiasm for the event. Local knowledge and access to resources has been vital for publicity and promotion of the *Roadshow*. There is potential to even further transfer ownership of the event to communities.
- Regular, clear and open communication with all stakeholders involved in the project has very been important.
- There is potential to increase the involvement of the artists in the planning and facilitation of the event, to increase rural community opportunities to access conversations with the artists themselves. Future exhibition could trial audio narrative by the artists themselves alongside their art work. The artists have also recommended exploring the use of technology from online exhibition spaces or connecting with artists in virtual communities to further spread of each of the project.
- Having skilled mental health workers involved in the project from local communities and services, as well as part of the project team has added to the success of the *Roadshow* through local context and mental health knowledge.

Policy implications

The beneficial outcomes of the *Rural Art Roadshow* add evidence for the positive connection between Art and Mental health, particularly through connecting people, fostering conversations and delivering psychological benefits. The outcomes of the *Rural Art Roadshow* offer further evidence to support the development of a "Arts in Health Strategy to harness and grow the wisdom, resources and impact of the sector" and that "Health organisations should collaborate with funding partners, philanthropic organisations, arts organisations and local artists to grow the Arts in Health sector, with rigorous evaluation, to build and share the evidence base". The *Rural Art Roadshow* is a unique and promising model to offer positive mental health promotion in rural communities.

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Presenter

Dr Heather Bridgman is a Clinical Health Psychologist and Lecturer in Rural Mental Health at the Centre for Rural Health, University of Tasmania. She is interested in innovative rural mental health service delivery, improving service access, rural psychology workforce and interprofessional learning and practice. She provides clinical supervision to postgraduate psychology students undertaking placement in regional and rural Tasmania. Heather has a strong community engagement focus, has been the chair of the Northern Tasmania Branch of the Australian Psychology Society (APS) and served on the Launceston Mental Health Professionals Network (MHPN) committee. She has been involved with several funded multidisciplinary projects in rural Tasmania including "Epilepsy Connect: The Development of a Telephone-Based Peer Support Program for Tasmanians Affected by Epilepsy"; "TAZREACH Promoting Health Through Health Literacy"; "Recovery Camp Tasmania—An Experiential Learning Opportunity for Students of Health Disciplines and Mental Health Consumers"; "Evaluation of the Health and Resilient Communities Program in Rural Tasmania"; "Review of Clinical Model/Pathways for headspace"; and, "Establishing and Evaluating Bereavement Care Networks in Tasmania". Heather has a passion for applied research that can directly benefit local communities.