

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript

In Conversation with Kellie Sutherland

July 2021

Scotia: Hi I'm Scotia Monkivitch, welcome back for another episode of Creative Responders: In Conversation; our monthly interview series where we hear from people on the frontlines of the arts and emergency management sector as they prepare, respond and recover from disaster.

Today's guest is Kellie Sutherland. Kellie is a Creative Recovery Coordinator, working with Regional Arts Victoria to support bushfire affected shires in North East Victoria.

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Scotia: Kellie is an artist and performer, well known for her role as a founding member and creative co-director of musical group Architecture in Helsinki. More recently she has worked in arts communication and cultural partnerships roles in the North East and Border region of Victoria, forming a strong understanding of community-led activities and engagement practices.

We wanted to speak with Kellie to shed some light on the great work she is doing with Regional Arts Victoria, and also to discuss the importance of the community and creative recovery officer roles and the local networks they operate within.

As we face a new reality of cascading challenges, these kinds of roles, when supported in an ongoing way, can make a significant impact in communities and provide a continuity between recovery, preparedness and response that is really foundational for building community resilience.

I sat down with Kellie in person in Beechworth, Victoria where she lives with her young family. We had just completed a weekend of creative recovery training with a group of ten leaders working across the North East shires which you'll hear us refer to a little in our conversation.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Creative Responder, Kellie Sutherland

Scotia: Well, thanks for joining us today, Kelly.

Kelly: Thank you, Scotia

Scotia: for our in Conversation series. And we're here on the beautiful country of Beechworth. What's this, can you tell us a little bit about this area?

Kellie: Beechworth is part of beautiful high country of north east Victoria on unceded Aboriginal land and a wonderful place to live and an incredibly dynamic and diverse creative community here.

Scotia: You've been living here for a few years now as a resident and you've been in service or working within the north east Victoria community for a period of time following and responding to the black summer season's fire as a creative recovery officer for Regional Arts Victoria. Can you

tell us a bit about what's been going on here and what's the breadth of the kind of work area that you're covering and working with?

Kellie: Yeah, sure. So Regional Arts Victoria, I was employed by them in August last year, 2020, and since then I've been supporting creative projects in response to the bushfires that came through the Northeast in the summer of nineteen / twenty.

So my area geographically covers five shires across the north east of Towong Shire, Alpine Shire, Indigo Shire, Wangaratta Shire and Mansfield. And over that entire geographical area there was incredibly diverse and different impacts, especially up through the Alpine and Towong regions. They experienced significant burn and loss of loads of land and livestock and an incredible disruption to their communities and throughout the rest of the northeast, other varied impacts.

So the first part of my role really was to support participants to the Creative Recovery Small Grant programme that Regional Arts Victoria got funding to administer. And that was a small five thousand dollar grant for creatives or organisations who wish to embark on a creative recovery programme for their community or for themselves as an individual artist.

And one of the wonderful things that was advocated for and included in that grant was for loss of materials. So that was a really new addition to most of the arts grants that are available. So we were able to support artists who had lost work, and I mean that by their creative work that they'd already produced and materials or tools for their creative making that they had lost in fire as well as then the other creative recovery projects.

And we were able to support I think it ended up being twenty four projects across the north east and that varied in what those projects were going to be. And so my role has been supporting those successful applicants and then also steering those who weren't successful in the grant to other funding opportunities and then keeping on connecting them with community and partnering them up with other projects that of a similar or different.

Well, it's just basically being an advocate for the work to continue. And so aside from having the small grant, my role in the north east was also to act as a bit of an agent of relationships between the local councils and potential projects or projects that wish to be introduced into a community but didn't have connections within that community. So sort of as a buffer between the community led responses that were going on and the projects that may be available for that community,

Scotia: I'm really interested to understand a little bit more that kind of, I suppose, buffer or advocacy role that you're talking about. Can you unpack a little that role that you have identified as a kind of advocate or a buffer in terms of the different services that are part of emergency management disaster recovery?

There are so many different collective roles that are played in that space, and we're one of many different service providers or supporters that come into communities or are part of communities in this time of recovery. What would you understand that role to be that you're playing or how do you perceive that its impact would be operating in that place of so much influence, really?

Kellie: Well, I think one of the greatest strengths of having a worker who is representing peak bodies such as Regional Arts Victoria, is that access to that sector knowledge and linkages to that knowledge, as well as local knowledge of knowing who all the creative people are working in the area and also being in the position where I'm at some committee meetings with a cross-section of all of those working within the recovery space, all the different agencies from health and wellbeing on social recovery committees, as well as LGA contacts. So I kind of have a foot in every corner, piece of pie, what's the saying? (laughter) ... and able to just bring a little bit of that expertise of how creative recovery approaches can be implemented within the space of recovery.

Scotia: What do you think is the the added or what do you think is different in what we might call a creative recovery approach to what might already be active within disaster recovery space?

Kellie: Do you know it's it's really funny. Mostly I think about creative recovery as creative responses to the recovery space. But more recently, I've begun to understand that it's about kind of flipping that where it's a recovery response to the creative space.

So I think just having having that knowledge, local knowledge, especially of what that creative space is and where within that needs recovering.

So we already know the incredible health, wellbeing benefits of the creative arts and how being involved in creative arts and arts participation leads to really positive community and community building outcomes. And so when a disaster strikes, it's just so often not thought of that the creative sector is actually completely disrupted in this instance.

Everything's been compounded by the pandemic and there had been zero opportunity for those community gatherings. So my approach has really been about how can we energise and how can we really focus on building what the creative arts and the creative elements within the community to regain some kind of sense of vibrancy that it once held within that community. So, yeah, that's how I can answer that,

Scotia: Mm..Continuing a capacity to contribute in multiple ways. It's a kind of that balance, which is in great conversation at the moment between understanding the weight of recovery comparatively to preparedness, whereas if we have strong structures, social ties, capacity at a local level as a continuum of growth, the impacts that we feel in a point of disaster can be mitigated more effectively.

Kelly: Most certainly, I think even within the communities that I'm working, there has been a real focus on not just reenergizing and reinvigorating that creative arts space, but actually reintroducing it into the community as a whole, where perhaps it wasn't as valued as highly in some of these more rural communities.

And now this is an opportunity to really see that value. And so it's it's capacity building at the same time as recovery. So there is a whole lot of preparedness work that I feel like the projects that I've been supporting has been able to make really, really involve themselves with..in

Scotia: for...with...to

Kellie: make significant impact, to / with / for / in / out.

What I mean is that the preparedness is happening at the same time as these projects, recovery projects are happening, rebuilding preparedness in a way that perhaps wasn't even there to begin with. But yeah, preparedness, especially creative, the creative arts role within preparedness is often overlooked and really significant, especially for the reasons that I was saying before. When you participate in arts projects or, you know, just gather as a group, then the really significant connections are built. And that's really what preparedness is based on or should be based on

Scotia: The challenges that individuals and communities are facing in the current environment of cascading impacts are growing at a kind of exponential level, our capacity to maintain our energy and our focus and our resources and the building of skills while repairing the weaknesses that have been opened up for us, what do you think we're going to be needing in this new landscape in terms of community and how, where do you think that we could start working on the building...you were saying that capacity is being built at the same time we're looking at recovery and there's a kind of sense of continuity in there.

But what do you think we could add into that mix that might be useful for this very unknown future that we're heading into?

Kellie: Well, it's really hard to not really frame this in a personal sense, but I think that something that's super beneficial is to be less structured in our understanding of what what normal or what what our recovery outcome needs to be. If that has flexibility, then we can approach, we can get there more easily.

Yes, so I suppose you can see that in the way that all of the creative industries have responded to the pandemic. And that being I'm trying to talk around the word pivot. (laughter) I'm trying not to say it, but yeah, really just having that agility. And how do you practise agility? You practise creative thought, you practise creative arts and yeah, so just reinstating or just introducing creative arts as a practise within community, normalising it and not othering it.

Community arts has a really incredible way of un-othering arts. So, you know, with partnerships with sports agencies or or community sports groups, you know, just simple projects like that are really significant and very identity focussed for that particular community.

So the community then gets to lead how then they respond so point being, community arts would be my answer to that. It's an incredibly egalitarian approach to practising a modality of art making within the community context that reinvigorates all of those ideas and skills in agility and pivoting and that's how we're going to actually be able to come out of this.

Scotia: Mmm. How did you get to this place in your career? Like what were the things that influenced you to find your way into this kind of work?

Kellie: I suppose... I think that just naturally in every piece of work that I've done, any projects, I kind of just am a bit of a moderator or conduit or bridge - it stems probably from my family. But my actual creative life was that I was in a touring and performing recording musical group for many, many years. And that band still exists. But moving regionally meant that I could focus on full time parenting for a while.

And you can't really tour the world and have a child, a babe in arms. That's not really possible. So then soon after moving up to north east Victoria, I started working for arts organisations. And that's just, you know, my passion for community has always been there. And my now I get to bridge my passion for community, my passion for creative arts, my passion for creativity, and also my passion for creative problem solving so, yeah, so now here I am in this role as creative recovery coordinator.

Scotia: So one of the challenges that we face in the position of disaster recovery is a kind of time limitation that comes from a whole raft of different influence of government policy and budget requirements, et cetera, et cetera.

So in your role, one of your challenges is you're about to finish this position. It's been a fairly tight turnaround time for you to able to invest and advocate for the local artists that you're working with and also the role of creativity into the community recovery committees and local councils that you're dealing with.

How do you think we could kind of better work in this space? Obviously, if we got more time, that'd be pretty amazing. But meanwhile, how do you what from your experience in this position, where do you see some avenues of opportunity where we can perhaps deepen the sense of longevity or sustainability in these roles?

Kellie: I guess it really just comes down to doing the work well enough to make the powers that be really take on the value of this work. I can't say, all I can say really is exactly what you've already

alluded to, just more time, a permanent position, especially in areas of the whole country, really, where these disasters are likely to happen again.

And we know, we already know. Regional Arts Victoria has been working in the Kinglake Ranges for 10 years since the 2009 fires so that's - and that work is still going and still needed. And this kind of recovery within communities impacted so severely from fire or other disasters is completely ongoing, so I think the positions need to be longer term, ongoing positions, or at least just read the evidence and all the reports that have come out that that it's not a sixteen month turnaround. It's not a 10 month, a 12 month turnaround.

It's like a minimum of three years that you need to be within communities from, and that's a direct impact from one single disaster. So I can't really answer the question other than just say it needs to be there all the time, and not just because I'd like to stay in the role but it's been a challenge really the last couple of months to kind of really strategically think about the projects that I can support in the time that I have left in the role, which is November this year.

And yeah, and that and that's that's a really, personally, that's a really challenging place to be in. But that's why within the package of my role was also some capacity building training, which was run by the Creative Recovery Network. So as you know, Scotia, because you ran the training, that meant that 10 creative leaders, arts leaders across the Northeast were trained within by the Creative Recovery Network. So we've we've done some kind of legacy work there as well that's been built into the role.

Scotia: So we have just done this training programme with representatives across the five shires that you have been working with. Where do you see a step like that leading into the future? What would you what would you like to see happen with this group following this engagement?

Kellie: Oh my gosh, I can see so many things coming out of that.

Well, one thing already is that I know that the group started networking immediately so those leaders already geographically across the northeast, there's connections so that's like that's deeply embedded after the dense training weekend.

So so that is most certainly a really significant impact, just the strengthening connections and strengthening networks. Amazing.

All of those practitioners, whether they were already working in recovery or or had their own studio practice or already ran community involvement, community arts projects, they've already started you know, the brains are working overtime, just coming up with ideas for future programmes and they're going to have more of a context in how to frame those programmes.

Really importantly, they're going to be focussing on their own self care and really strong messages about including that as part of their programme training. So I think that there's really fabulous long term benefits from that kind of capacity building of those 10 leaders, I don't know, hopefully without naming names, there's a few of them that I hope they get together and actually go ahead or put funding in for the programmes that they were just, you know, the ideation of that weekend, they were just there going absolutely berserk with their ideas. So hopefully something really exciting comes out of it.

Scotia: You've been involved in a lot of projects over the last few months and probably have a whole history of other projects that you're aware of. But can you give us an example of where you have seen this work really effectively in terms of the idea of collaboration across multiple aspects of the community and what the ripple on effect of a creative recovery project might be?

Kellie: Yeah, I can think of one example straightaway of an artist who had a studio practise and had done a couple of street murals, I think.

But they got funding that covered two murals in two separate communities. And so, well, first of all, that artist got to work in a way that they hadn't before really connected in with those communities and through the themes of psychotrauma, was able to connect to the schools and deliver education around what had happened.

And the themes of the work were around ecotrauma. So the artist worked closely with the Landcare group and also with local museum group and also with the primary school, the primary school. The artist was able to give talks to the students. There was, you know, so many kick on impacts from just a small grant where the artist developed their own work, had the opportunity to be involved in the arts, then able to use education to speak about their role in the arts. So just a whole stack of social connectedness and lots of networking going on and and also really vibrant, beautiful works up in the street, which which really has a really significant impact on people who are just, you know, just a casual impact. You know, to see vibrancy within your community is an inspiration. So lots of lots of really small steps, but really significant.

Scotia: This is probably a bit of a left field question but I'm kind of interested to know what you might say. But there's I think often in this, what we've experienced over this last year, particularly with Covid impact, that there's a real tension often in the way programmes or funding is given in the arts, in the the kind of tension between community need and tourism and economic development.

And what, where do you understand where the two might sit or what the tensions might be and how we might resolve some of those? That recovery is always to be focussed on community and place and purpose, comparatively, to kind of an outside inside need for economic revival.

Kellie: I'm not sure how I can talk about this without getting too political, but I have noticed that.

Scotia: We like getting political (laughter)

Kellie: I have noted that the funding for the creative arts across the whole response to the pandemic and I'm not just talking about regional arts, I'm not just talking about recovery, has really just been has been minimal comparatively to that of the money for tourism.

So and for me, that's a very metro centric vision. It's a very top down kind of decision. It's not actually what communities need, in my opinion. I know that the tourism providers across the state and the country have been significantly impacted by by the fires especially and then compounded by the pandemic.

But all of the economic stimulus has been really pushed towards the tourism sector. I think that the tourism, a cultural tourism and I think where the arts and tourism intersect is a really interesting space to be in and there's a lot of potential.

But when it comes to funding, funding, creative arts or creative arts recovery for that sake and that sake only just seems to be completely misplaced or not really responding to community need whatsoever. So there's a bit of tension there. That's that is the tension for me is frustration. That's what I recognise. But again, like I said, I do I do think that there's a really interesting intersection there. And those larger scale projects, creative projects, can be backed within a tourism context.

So it's really important at the same time for creative practitioners or people sort of stepping into that space to understand that that really that's where the money is, is is developing projects in that space of of tourism. So you kind of got to know it at the same time as um...

Scotia: understanding the need to have those tangible frameworks whilst dealing with and responding to kind of intangible needs of a community.

I'm just wondering, Kellie, given that this was a new role for you and it's still not necessarily a very articulate a place for creatives to see it, what might be some tools or hints or things that you've learnt that you would pass on to other creatives who might step into a role like you have?

Kellie: I think I think so much of my knowledge has come from research. Like I've just really researched this space through the lens of trauma-informed care and through, you know, just that sort of self care ethical lens.

It's a really strange space to be in because you're dealing with people who have been impacted significantly and as much as you need to be led by your intuition in that space, you also have to have a bit of oomph behind you.

So for me, that was through research and through some training and also through really strong support of from my organisation around self care. So that is my biggest tip for people stepping into the role of somebody who is creatively assisting or helping or promoting arts recovery.

You kind of really gotta love it. You've kind of really got to truly, deeply be an advocate. So I think it's also really important that the role has come from an arts organisation. And I suppose that's also to its detriment, there's still a lot of work to be done in terms of the sector gaining respect and the sector gaining the acknowledgement of its sophistication. But, you know, like I said before, you can only really prove that by actually doing the work and doing it well and making those connections and providing advice and advocacy of deep value. So that's always been sort of my remit to just do it well and do it with passion. Yep.

Scotia: Fabulous. Thanks so much for joining us today. And, you know, I really value your passionate insight and your contribution to this community so far. Great sharing that weekend of training with you.

Kellie: Thank you, Scotia. And to the Creative Recovery Network, you know, I said it on the weekend at the training, but there's such an incredible deep well of knowledge and resource that you bring to the space. And yeah, it was really beneficial for me as an individual, as a creative practitioner, and also for all of those wonderful arts leaders in the Northeast to to have learnt from you and the network. So thanks.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders: In Conversation and special thanks to Kellie Sutherland for making the time to speak with me. We'll include links in the show notes if you'd like to learn more about Kellie's work with Regional Arts Victoria.

You can also find links to many other projects focussing on community led initiatives and bushfire recovery in the resource library on our website at creative.recovery.net.au.

I'd also suggest if you haven't already listened to our documentary series, head back to episodes 1 through 4 in both seasons of Creative Responders to hear case studies and perspectives on a range of creative recovery projects.

All of our past episodes can be found in the usual podcast apps and also on our website along with transcripts for every episode and links related to the topics we cover. We'll be back next month with another conversation, I hope you can join us then.

This podcast is produced by me, Scotia Monkivitch and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson. Our sound engineer is Tiffany Dimmack and original music is composed by Mikey Squire. The Creative Recovery Network is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. Thanks for listening.

