

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript In Conversation with Darren Moffitt November 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 Darren Moffitt.

Darren is a Bidjigal man who joins us for this episode to talk about the work he has been doing in Victoria's North East through his role with Bushfire Recovery Victoria as their Recovery Coordinator for Aboriginal Culture and Healing.

Darren: I think the more connected a community is, the easier the recovery is to implement, because if you go into a place and the community disconnected or fractured, you know, to get the community, the community, you really need to be empowered to be a part of their own recovery and when they are, they get they get the best outcomes from that.

Scotia: The work that Darren has been doing as part of the Black Summer recovery is among one of the first examples of State government funded programs dedicated specifically to Aboriginal Healing within disaster recovery...

...and as you'll hear from Darren, it marks a significant shift in the way Aboriginal Healing is positioned within the traditional four pillars of recovery.

I'm so pleased that Darren could join us to talk about the importance of ensuring that Aboriginal voices have a seat at the table when it comes to recovery planning...

and the benefits this process can yield - not only for disaster recovery but also for overall community connectedness.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Creative Responder, Darren Moffitt

Scotia: Welcome to Creative Responders. Darren, I'm speaking with you today from Meanjin, Jaggera Turrbal Country here in Brisbane, Queensland, where are you today?

Darren: I live in Albury, so that's on Wiradjuri country, and most of my work is obviously in Victoria. But yeah, I actually live across the river in New South Wales.

Scotia: Could you start off by telling us a bit about where you are from and about the area where you live and work at the moment?

Darren: Yeah, sure. I'm a Bidjigal man, so I'm from a place most people have heard about Botany Bay on the northern peninsula of Botany Bay. There's an Aboriginal mission which is still there

today. That's where my mother grew up. That's where her mother grew up. And I think another generation of the family also grew up before that, they were obviously on Country. On the other side of the bay is where Cook landed that's Gweagal, that's where the Gweagal clan come from so we're Bidjigal, so Bidjigal and Gweagal were the two main clans of the Bay Area. And so they're my mob. They're part of the I guess it's the Eora people or some people call it Eora nation. Most of the clans around the Sydney Basin, you know, kind of all the way up to the Blue Mountains and down south towards Wollongong and sort of north towards the Hawkesbury River are the Eora people or clans it's about 26 or 27 different clans that make up that those people, depending on who you talk to, obviously, but that's pretty much I grew up early stages of my life to was about nine. I grew up pretty close to La Paruse we call it Lapa. My my old man, my dad was in the Navy, I shouldn't call him the old man, but he was in the Navy. And so we lived at the place called Little Bay which wasn't far from Lapa. We moved away from there when I was about nine at Penrith, which is, I guess, considered out in the sticks in those days. So from the age of nine until 17 grew up, around Penrith area went to high school there and I joined the army at the age of 17 and I was in the army for twenty seven years. So I got out of the army in 2012 and landed a job in the public service, and I've been in the public service ever since.

Scotia: So you now working up in the north east region of Victoria, can you tell us a bit about some of the challenges that your community in your region of facing recent years in terms of natural disasters and the ongoing impacts that have occurred? So your role is working in that space currently...

Darren: Yes. So my my role is Recovery Coordinator, Aboriginal Culture and Healing. I work for Bushfire Recovery Victoria. Bushfire Recovery Victoria have only been around for 18 months to two years now. They were established on the back of the 2019 2020 bushfires that came through from New South Wales and ended up going all the way down into Gippsland. So they they actually went through the North East parts of the North East known as the Black Summer Fires. But the North East is pretty prone to lots of natural disasters, so if it's not fires, it's floods or sometimes both. There's obviously we've got the pandemic that's covering everybody at the moment, but we seem to have our fair share of fires and floods in the North East. And so my role is about ensuring the Aboriginal voices are at the table when it comes to recovery planning and processes. And the focus of my work in the last 18 months has or 12 months has been in two local government areas, in particular and that's Towong and the Alpine local government areas, which were the two LGAs that were most directly impacted by the fire event of 2019 2020. A lot of the other LGAs around were also impacted, but not directly. There was a lot of damage from smoke, you know, to wine crops as an example, but certainly all the other LGAs around were impacted indirectly by that event as well.

My role really involves ensuring that Aboriginal people in community are a part of the recovery process. Very difficult in this part of the country because there has not been a lot of engagement in the past with the Aboriginal community. Certainly what I found when I hit the ground in this role, and I mean, that goes back to a lot of historical events that have happened in these places. There are not very many traditional owners that actually live on Country in these places for those historical reasons, I would imagine. And so I had to come up with a strategy, I guess, on how I was going to bring those Aboriginal voices to the table and and ensure that they are part of the process, that they have access to recovery opportunities like the rest of the community. And in that process, I think we've been able to which I guess we'll get on to - we've been able to make some headway in engaging Traditional Owner groups and actually identifying what are the recovery priorities and making sure they're elevated into the relevant bushfire recovery plans. You know, from the community level all the way up to the state recovery plan.

Scotia: Yeah, massive job. So let's talk a bit about that idea of leadership because it's a kind of interesting. Way that we we frame leadership and this idea of self-determination for communities, for First Nations communities is an important one, but. So for example, last year, Victoria implemented the bushfire recovery grants for Aboriginal Communities, it's a programme which saw \$4 million of funding towards Traditional Owner led projects that address cultural healing, resilience and wellbeing. So from what you've seen of your work on the ground and the role that you're playing trying to elevate the voice of First Nations peoples, is this kind of targeted support working and along with the funding, what other support do you think is needed for First Nations communities to be able to lead in their own recovery projects or get an understanding of where they can fit within the kind of machinations of disaster recovery?

Darren: There's a few parts to that question. So I guess the short answer is yes, it's working. So funding was put out the door relatively quickly in the early days and and that was great. Obviously, you know, just over \$4 million, as you mentioned.

But the problem with that is is only really the high profile groups and the groups that were actually able to, I guess, have an understanding of what was available were able to access that money. It is a competitive process and in in the landscape that I'm working in, we have a situation as let's just maybe focus on the Traditional Owners as an example - we have in Victoria a situation where you've got Traditional Owner groups that are formally recognised by government and they're used to dealing with government and engaging with government agencies and departments. And for those particular groups accessing funding of this nature and even knowing that it's available isn't usually an issue.

But then we have another category of Traditional Owners and they are the groups that don't have any formal recognition by government. So they are there. We know they're there. Because they don't have any formal recognition, Government departments and agencies and even local government like councils, they don't have a legal obligation to engage these groups. They do have a legal obligation to engage, in fact, they're compelled to engage with the registered Aboriginal parties, those groups that have formal recognition. So the ones that don't have formal recognition in this case kind of slip through the cracks unless they have a high profile and they are and some groups are actually quite active and do have a profile. So they're not formally recognised, but they're quite active in the space and usually they don't have too many issues, you know, accessing funds of this nature. But there are other groups that don't that aren't active and they do have challenges in being able to access recovery funding.

And so that was kind of the heart of the problem for me and and was the basis of, you know, the plan that I developed to engage these other groups, the ones that don't have formal recognition to ensure that their priorities were identified and elevated and to ensure that they had, you know, the same kind of access as other groups to address their recovery, you know, priorities. Without being able to level the playing field, so to speak, you know, the groups will just continue to fall through the cracks and government likes to hang its hat on principles like self-determination and it's really difficult to, you know, see that play out when when the groups that I'm dealing with are kind of forgotten about sometimes because, as I said earlier, there's no real legal obligation to to engage these groups.

Scotia: And as you say, they don't necessarily have the capacity in order to escalate their voice on their own, given those situations.

Darren: that's for sure.

Scotia: It's a vital role like this is the first time a position such rules has been activated isn't it in Victoria or in Australia, actually, so, you know, pretty vital reasons.

Darren: It's definitely the first time in Victoria that for a recovery initiative like this, that Aboriginal Culture and Healing has been identified as its own line of recovery. So, you know, we have the framework that was set up for the recovery under Bushfire Recovery Victoria. There are five lines of recovery or five pillars that the recovery, you know, is kind of aligned to.

And and that's how funding is obviously funnelled, you know, to address those particular lines of recovery. So you have the normal ones that you've seen, you know, in previous recovery operations where you've got the business and the economy is is a line of recovery. You've got people and wellbeing, you've got the environment and biodiversity and you've got the built environment. So they're the four main ones. And for the first time as I said in Australia, Bushfire Recovery Victoria has included Aboriginal culture and healing as its own line of recovery, whereas in previous recovery initiatives that has generally fallen under environment and biodiversity or people and wellbeing. But we found, you know, in in this particular recovery that Aboriginal culture and healing actually has, it can be across all those other pillars. You know, we have people who have Aboriginal businesses. So there's business and economy, obviously a lot of the Traditional Owners have, you know, a real emphasis on healing country, so, you know, that's the environment and biodiversity covered. Healing, just just people dealing with trauma and Aboriginal people have been dealing with trauma for a long time and then, you know, then comes along another event like this is just it just goes on top of everything else. So, you know, that's that's people and well-being.

Scotia: it's about seeing things with that holistic lens, isn't it, rather than a departmentation?

Darren: Exactly. And part of my role, obviously, is to also make sure that where there is alignment to other pillars or lines of recovery, that that that was, you know, something that was identified. And you know, I've spent a bit of time and effort building the capacity and awareness of people within our own team in the North East. So I mean, I'm a coordinator for Aboriginal Culture and Healing and is actually a coordinator that's been employed to address each of the other pillars. So essentially, there's another five coordinators. One of them does two roles, but the idea of having a coordinator for each line of recovery is a pretty good idea, I think, and it allows that focus for those particular lines of recovery to be brought to the table.

Scotia: Yeah ensuring a kind of coordinated overview like, connecting you all. I mean, the role of Community Recovery Officer is beneficial in its in its nature of trying to build long term relationships between local government and communities and diverse communities, and developing a deep understanding of the different layers within a community and we're seeing more and more support for ongoing community recovery positions.

But there's still many cases where that either doesn't exist or gets funded for a very short period of time, and it's a constant argument in disaster management that we need to see recovery as a long term lens rather than a time specific.

Can you describe what you see as the benefit for a local government having positions and funding for ongoing recovery officers

Darren: The whole idea around recovery is and in the way that we've set it up in Victoria is that local government and councils, they actually drive recovery. And so you've got a state government agency like Bushfire Recovery Victoria. We've come in and we also have a federal agency which is called the National Recovery and Resilience Agency (NRRRA). Government agencies have come in

to places that are going through recovery to support essentially local government to enable that process because it's a it's a short term thing. Recovery for different places will go on for a time, but it's not a permanent arrangement. And so as recovery goes through its different phases, you know, those agencies will slowly drop off according to the needs and requirements of the communities. And basically, councils will be left to, you know, finish up that recovery process. And so it's really important to be able to scale up when, when required to to respond to those disasters. And, you know, governments have worked out I think that we to do it effectively and need to be able to have local people on the ground who are part of the community as well. And so having workers not only from local government, but even state government agencies have kind of also pivoted and scaled up the number of personnel they have that are focussing on recovery to be able to respond effectively to that whole process. And it's important it's it's a mechanism that has worked well. I think for us in the North East and I'm sure in Gippsland, but I haven't, I mean, I can't speak for them. We have dedicated recovery workers and councils. We have dedicated recovery workers in some state government agencies and you have an organisation like Bushfire Recovery Victoria, where we part of our main role is to actually, you know, commission and sort of join the dots. We're not the do-ers - we don't do the recovery work. Our job is to actually bring parties together, state government agencies, federal government agencies and the local government agencies to ensure there's a little bit of coordination in that and for the Aboriginal Culture and Healing line of recovery, one of the biggest challenges is that in these two particular local government areas of Alpine and Towong, there's been a lack of engagement in general with the Aboriginal communities that live there. And there's only I mean, the numbers are low when you look at the stats and we only have access to the 2016 census data, but it tells you roughly and this is just off the top of my head. So roughly there's 100 Aboriginal people living in Alpine could be a bit higher, a bit lower and roughly a hundred in Towong. Let's just say, for argument's sake. Now when you look at the population of those two places, it kind of reflects roughly, you know, it might be a little bit above average, I think across four for the state of Victoria. So for the for the number of people living there, the number of Aboriginal people kind of, you know, meets the mould for what's happening in the rest of Victoria. You have pockets of Aboriginal people in in places like Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton and some other regional areas, but certainly not in the high numbers, for Towong or Alpine. So we've got low, relatively low lying numbers.

The problem is, as I said, there's been no engagement in the past. And so when a recovery operation of this nature happens and we go, well, we need to talk to the Aboriginal community, you can't just rock up, you know, in Alpine and say, OK, let's get all the Aboriginal community together, and let's have a talk about recovery because they keep a very low profile for one, and there's reasons behind that, I'll go to in a minute.

But because there's been no engagement previously, there's no where to start, there's no starting point. And the legacy that Bushfire Recovery is going to be able to leave for Towong and Alpine councils is that because of my role being established and because of the the nature of the plan that where we've developed and the strategies we're using to try to bring Aboriginal people to the table, part of that is to well I identified early on that there's been no engagement and that's a big problem for us because we've got no starting point.

If there's not been no engagement locally, then that means we have to start the engagement, which is not part of our role. But if we want to get bushfire recovery priorities on the table, someone needs to go and ask the Aboriginal people what their recovery priorities are. So that's what I've had to do, and I've done that with the Traditional Owner groups or tried to with some Traditional Owner groups. But that process has actually created an environment where the councils and the health services, any other stakeholders like DELP, have had an opportunity to be a part of that engagement process and actually start building their own relationship and network with some of

these Traditional Owner groups that they haven't been able to do previously in the past. So as an example, both councils, both councils have been able to commence the development of reconciliation action plans. Now, if they did that five years ago, you know my role coming in to engage people would have been a lot easier because there would have been some engagement that they had had started.

We've got two major health services, which are two of the biggest employers in the region. So you've got Corryong Health and Alpine Health are also both keen to start the development of their reconciliation action plans as an organisation because they've been wanting to develop, you know, a reconciliation action plan but they've not known where to start. Who do they talk to, where's the Aboriginal community because they're largely unseen.

But now those four organisations have started that journey and have started developing reconciliation action plans. And when BRV eventually leaves this region, at least that'll be a legacy that we leave so when the next disaster and when the next bushfire comes through, nobody has to start from scratch again. And at least there's been some engagement of some elements of the Aboriginal community.

But the community and I said I'd come back to this, they keep a low profile, mainly because and this is just anecdotal evidence there's no real data that, you know, backs this up.

But you know, if you talk to Aboriginal organisations that have tried to do outreach services into these areas, they'll tell you the same thing. Aboriginal people keep a low profile in these areas because they don't feel culturally safe to identify as an Aboriginal person because of the perceived backlash from the community.

They are light skinned Aboriginal people. They've probably been, you know, keeping that, I guess under wraps, not letting people know that they're Aboriginal because for fear of what, what, what might happen if people know they're Aboriginal and, you know, people need to know that that's the situation, and that's only going to change over time when we have organisations, leaders in the community like councils and health services are prepared to get behind a reconciliation action plan and actually implement that, implement that plan and do the things they say they're going to do, engage with Aboriginal community and Traditional Owners initially, start doing cultural events in their local areas and eventually that'll draw out the Aboriginal people that live in these communities and make them feel like they're part of the community and make them feel a bit safer around identifying as Aboriginal. And, you know, might take a few years, but you've got to start somewhere. And so hopefully this is what we've started, BRV.

Scotia: So I suppose, Darren, any disasters, open up opportunities that are good, bad and indifferent in terms of how we want to perceive our future as individuals and communities. And that's such a great step to see these instances that level us as a community as being a way to start relationship building in what's quite a difficult and complex environment.

Darren: Yeah I agree.

Scotia: You know, there's a term that's called shock doctrine that that Naomi Klein kind of touted in one of her books about this idea that when disasters happen, it's an opportunity for people to come in and institute change that is potentially negative. She talks about it from a point of view of destructive change, where people don't have the capacity to be able to fight they're too tired. But it also is an opportunity for us to make positive and beautiful change, and that's potentially what

you're seeing in your role. This opportunity to build relationships in a way that about long term commitment and connection and the possibility of growing from there.

Darren: Yeah, well, that's certainly. You know, that's what drives me, I guess knowing knowing that I'm leaving this role fairly soon, is the legacy that we've left and the relationships that have started to form actually between, you know, as an example, the CEOs of the Councils and some of the Traditional Owner groups that we're talking to. And same as the CEOs of some of the health services that are engaged in this process and the TO's as well. They will be able to continue engaging outside the process that I've set up with BRV and continue working on the development of their and implementation down the track of their reconciliation action plans. So I see that as the silver lining in all of this, and definitely it's a legacy that I'll be proud to leave behind.

Scotia: What about back to into the infrastructure of BRV, that sort of state level? What what sort of legacy do you think this role will leave there? Like, has there been any change within that institution about how they perceive work moving into the future or the way that they structure their capacity?

Darren: Really good question. BRV's undergoing some changes right now, actually. You know, we we have had to scale up in other parts of Victoria in response to now that BRV has actually been endorsed as the lead recovery agency across the state, not just bushfires, but in any disaster. We've already responded to the storm and flood events that happened in other parts of Victoria you know, a couple of months ago, and we have staff that have been, I guess, redeployed and new staff brought on board to to undertake recovery in those particular areas. So I think we learnt a lot, you know, from establishing BRV in response to the bushfires. And I think we've, you know, the way we're set up, we've got a central team which is kind of the heart of the organisation and we have regional teams who are on the ground in those particular areas. I think I think that formula is a good formula. I don't know that the public services actually, you know, set up for that because it's a bit like, I mean, I just go back to my army days. It's a bit like being on standby ready in case something happens. And then when it does, you've got people there, you know, immediately to do it. That's kind of that's kind of the model. And I mean, it seems to have worked so far. I'm sure there's going to be improvements. We just had the you know, the huge enquiry, the inspector general's emergency management enquiry into the whole Black Summer bushfires and the responses and all that. So I mean, there was a bit of deep diving in processes and better way to do things. And and I think there'll be a lot to learn out of that. And and I'm sure Victoria, as a state will probably be implementing some of the recommendations out of that to make sure that responses to future disasters are are handled even better than we did this time around.

Scotia: And so your role or the position or representation around that activation level will continue with BRV?

Darren: Yeah, so I leave on the third of December and my role will be back filled for at least another 12 months is my understanding. And then it will depend on where things are at, I guess in our line of recovery, whether or not that role will get extended. But but you know, as I said at the very early stages, the nature of this role is temporary because recovery is, you know, it only goes for a finite period. And really, the community determines helps determine really what, when, when we reach those different phases and when things need to scale up or scale back accordingly.

Scotia: As you know that our focus at creating recovery network is how arts and creativity or culture can be harnessed as a tool for being for bringing communities together, building community resilience and this is particularly relevant in First Nations community, where arts is an integral part of indigenous storytelling and culture. Do you have any examples of projects you've worked on or

or or representations that you that would illustrate how culture and the arts can be utilised as a stabilising force for social and emotional well-being or for recovery building?

Darren: Not not really in this current role, because obviously my focus has been to, you know, engage those groups and identify the recovery priorities I haven't seen any projects that have you know, being implemented around the arts, but I do see a lot of potential for that, particularly since now we have we've got four main organisations in these two regions now that are in the very early stages of developing a reconciliation action plan, and they are going to be looking for opportunities in the future to bring the community together. And I know, you know, the best way to do that is through cultural events. You know, you've got NAIDOC week, you've got National Reconciliation Week to kind of cornerstone culturally significant dates or periods during the calendar year. And there's other little ones around that can be capitalised on. But I see potential and opportunities there for Creative Victoria to, you know, be involved and engaged actually with councils to help drive, you know, some of those initiatives or help develop some of those initiatives to do that, and I see Traditional Owner groups that I've been working with, you know, although their focus is on healing and probably Healing Country moreso than healing people from from what I've seen. And so they are engaged in wanting to be engaged in projects that really focus on the environment more so than than people at the moment, but I'm sure I'm sure that other priorities will come through and you know, as those projects are kind of seen through to fruition that that the other part of healing will come into play. But I just haven't seen it in the short period of time. I've been involved with BRV at this stage.

Scotia: and many people talk about Healing Country is to heal people. So it's sort of one one flows to the other.

Darren: Oh, for sure, I think it's a process in itself, and although the focus might be on healing Country, I think when Aboriginal people are given an opportunity to do that, that definitely has a part to play in in their own healing as well. You know, they're being respected and acknowledged and being given an opportunity to do stuff on country that they previously haven't been able to do before. So that's a good step in the right direction and certainly will have some impact on their own, you know, emotional wellbeing.

Scotia: So you're a visual artist. Darren, as well, should what have you been working on currently like, how do you use your practice and how does that influence the way that you work more broadly?

Darren: I haven't painted for a couple of years now, probably three, maybe, but look, my I started painting back in 2000 and it actually ended up being a bit of a therapy for me. So towards the end of my military career, you know, I ended up having some mental health issues and spent some time in hospital. And part of that healing process for me was, you know, picking up the culture again and using that as a bit of a tool or a mechanism to focus my energy, you know, into something and do something outside of the military, I guess. And so for a while, I was a bit of a prolific painter, and that was just, as I said, part of my healing.

And it wasn't, it was kind of by chance. See, I started painting and then I just ended up putting them under the bed because you have to store them somewhere I didn't put them on the wal, and then my we had some people over for barbecue, and my wife pulled some paintings out and laid them all over the bed and I was cooking the sausages on the barbecue and everyone was disappeared and I didn't know where they were. So I went looking for them and they're all in my bedroom looking at my paintings.

Scotia: The inaugural first exhibition?

Darren: Well, that's it. And you know, a couple of days later, someone who was at that barbecue sent me an email and offered me some money for a painting. And that was the that was the first time I ever even considered, you know, I would, it was a bit like when you're an artist, it's a bit like baring your soul, letting people look at your artwork and, you know, to then have someone want to buy it off you is a big deal. And so I went through a bit of a process to kind of I didn't know how I felt about that initially. But anyway, that's how it started.

And then, you know, I started painting and people would see someone else's, you know, go to someone else's place and see one of my paintings on the wall and then ask them. And so that's how people would ring me up and say can you do me a painting and they give me their ideas. And so that's that's how I started kind of developing my, I guess, own practise as an artist. And it was just a hobby, really. And towards the end, I painted because it was good for me and I like and I enjoyed it. But towards the end, it ended up being a bit of a like a job, and I didn't, and I didn't enjoy it as much

Scotia: a different focus

Darren: because I was painting for somebody, and it had to be done by next Saturday. And so it just didn't feel the same. So I kind of did all those things and then I did a couple actually for Defence. They wanted me to do a couple paintings and probably one of the best ones I did was for the Navy actually, as it was, the Navy turned 100 in 2011, about a year before I got out, and they had this big, you know, big ceremony around it and I was on leave, and it must have been January or December, and someone rang me from Canberra and said, because I'd been working with the army, you know, and doing some defence pathway programmes for Indigenous kids wanting to join the army. And I did a bit of artwork in that. So I've got a bit of a reputation, and someone in Canberra rang me and said, Do you know anybody in the Navy that's an artist because the Navy want someone to paint something for their 150 centenary thing. You know, they're going to do a big thing about I said, No, I don't know anybody, really, but I said that's a good idea. Anyway, they rang me back a week later said, we've tried everywhere, we can't find anybody and the Navy want something and they want to know if you want to do it. So anyway, cut a long story short. I give them a couple of concept sketches and they said, Yep, we like this. Can you do it? So we negotiated a price and I did it for them.

And then then it was it was actually unveiled or, I guess, launched at this big event, and they invited us to this place in Sydney, where they did a big the Navy band did this big recital thing on the 100 years of the Navy, and they unveiled my artwork at that.

And then the Governor-General was there with all her entourage and we were we were getting up to leave and this navy dude comes with all his stuff on his uniform, he said, The Governor-General wants to see you. And I said, Oh, does she? It was Quentin Bryce at the time and I had kids everywhere and people and I said, Well, she's going to have to wait till I round everybody up because half of us have already left. So we went up to the VIP room and she was waiting for us and the artwork was there and she just said, Oh, this is beautiful, can you tell me about it?

And so anyway, that's where we got a happy snap with the Governor-General. That's the only famous photo I've got. But anyway, that's that's probably the the best story around the defence kind of artworks that I've done. And I think that's probably the one I'm most proud of. And that's hanging up at the recruit school back down in HMAS Cerberus at the moment. Yeah, but not painting lately. I don't have any time.

Scotia: Oh, well, maybe after December, you'll have a few moments.

Darren: Maybe

Scotia: So, the current environment, Darren, of cascading disasters, you've seen that a lot in Victoria, particularly with these last storms that have come through. I mean, it requires a level of resilience and response, it's much more complex than perhaps we've been required in the past and certainly will be growing as we continue down this path of climate impact. From your experience, what do you think is the most effective way to build a strong foundation for ongoing community resilience? So what do you think we need to do more of or to support more in terms of communities and this new landscape?

Darren: Well, I mean, just from my own experience, I think the more connected a community is, the easier the recovery is to implement, because if you go into a place and the community disconnected or fractured, you know, to get the community, the community, you really need to be empowered to be a part of their own recovery and when they are, they get they get the best outcomes from that.

So it's a bit like self-determination, but for the whole community.

So, you know, for me and particularly for the Aboriginal community, the best way to, you know, kind of prepare them for the next event is to make sure they're engaged at a community level as much as possible and feel like they're a part of the community. Because when the event happens and an organisation like BRV comes in and says, okay, we want to talk to all the Aboriginal community, there's a starting point, you know, because there's been that engagement previously.

And you know that engagement that happens, you know, I guess it'll be organic for every particular place, but the more genuine and the more you know, the more efforts that are put into these type of things, then the better the outcomes will be.

And, you know, I've seen it in other places like, for example, Wangaratta, there's a there's an Aboriginal community that lives there. I used to work in Wangaratta and then. There was never any Aboriginal organisations, there was just a network of Aboriginal people, but now we've got an organisation established in Wangaratta called the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, or VACA. So they're a pretty big organisation across the state, but they've got a, you know, an office in Wangaratta. They've opened an office in Wodonga. They're kind of expanding there. They've employed a lot of Aboriginal people.

And you know, back when I started working in Wangaratta and that was back in 2012, in the last couple of years, like, you know, 2011, 2010 probably was the first time they ever had a NAIDOC week event in Wangaratta.

But that was on the back of the Aboriginal network being established. So they've had a NAIDOC week event there ever since. And that's just grown in size and popularity, and obviously it creates opportunities for the Aboriginal community to come out and connect with each other. And so if you don't have these type of events or opportunities, the Aboriginal community you know, they'll stay, they'll keep a low profile like they've done in Alpine and Towong and you won't see them.

So that's I think, the only way forward to make sure the communities is as connected as possible and the only way to do that for the Aboriginal community, because these are people who are not

living generally, they're not living on their own country, then they generally in these places anyway in Alpine and Towong are Aboriginal people that have moved into the area and you know, who just don't feel connected or safe enough to identify as Aboriginal, and there's no opportunities for them to connect with other Aboriginal people in the area.

Scotia: Thanks, Darren, that's that's a big journey, isn't it? Always one more little step

Darren: I've really enjoyed this little interview, I've enjoyed my my time with BRV and the work I've been doing. It's challenging and it's, you know, there's no kinda end to it, really, it's it's just work that just needs to be done and it will it will result in better outcomes for the community if if people are more connected.

But, you know, I think the communities of Alpine and Towong have just been lucky that BRV give me I guess a free licence to undertake this engagement plan. If I just kind of rigidly stuck to the original position description you know didn't talk about anything around engagement or facilitating workshops or connecting, you know, people to do reconciliation action plans. It was just a plan that I come up with in my own head because I saw that there was a need for it. And I knew that if it had done before I got there, it would have made my job a lot easier. So we just had to go back and reverse engineer all of that stuff.

But I've enjoyed it, but there's a lot of work to do to keep moving forward.

Scotia: and you have to move in with a sense of responsiveness and flexibility and knowing that you have to start from the strength sort of already there. And that's a true learning for all through recovery programmes.

Darren: Yeah, exactly.

Scotia: Thanks, Darren. So lovely to talk to you again. Always a pleasure. All the best with your next venture, and thanks again for joining us today and sharing so much great words of wisdom and experience.

Darren: No worries.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders, in Conversation and special thanks to Darren for making the time to speak with me and reflect on this important work he has been undertaking over the past year.

If you'd like to access transcripts and research links related to the topics we cover on the podcast, head over to creative.recovery.net.au where you can find all of our past episodes and materials relating to each one.

If you're interested in hearing more about Indigenous leadership in disaster management, I'd suggest you check out our documentary series if you haven't already - just scroll back in the Creative Responders podcast feed where you'll find several episodes exploring this topic.

We'll be back next month with our final conversation for 2021, 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 Glen Morrow and original music is composed by Mikey Squire.

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Thanks for listening.