



## **Podcast Transcript**

### **Creative Responders: in Conversation with Vivien Davidson**

**October 2020**

Scotia: Welcome to Creative Responders: In Conversation; I'm Scotia Monkivitch and this is the last instalment for the year in our monthly interview series where we've been hearing from people working on the front lines of the arts and emergency management sector.

Next month we'll be back with the new season of our Creative Responders documentary series, with four in depth stories about the power of the arts in disaster management. We can't wait to share those with you - stay subscribed to Creative Responders and follow us on social media for more updates on that.

Today's guest is Vivien Davidson and this is a really special episode that I'm so pleased to share with you all.

Vivien reached out to me earlier this year to enquire about collaborating with Creative Recovery Network on our Love Boxes project - you'll hear all about it in our chat - Vivien's story is all about community, connection, and the power of thoughtful gestures of solidarity.

Vivien's commitment to reaching out to bushfire affected members of her community to let them know they have not been forgotten is really extraordinary and I loved hearing about their dedicated team of knitters and weavers who worked throughout the Covid lockdown, and also some of the really heartfelt feedback that came in from the recipients of the Love Boxes.

We also hear about Vivien's upcoming plans to commemorate the one year anniversary of the Currowan fire and how she continues to use creativity and the arts as a vehicle to share, focus and connect.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Creative Responder, Vivien Davidson.

Scotia: So thank you, Vivien, for joining us on our In Conversation series. I'm speaking to you from Jaggera Turrbul country here in Meanjin, Brisbane, in Queensland. Can you tell us a little bit about where you live Vivien, how long you've been in the area and the property you and your husband live on?

Vivien: Yeah, we live on the south coast of New South Wales in the Shoalhaven region. And we have a small acreage up in the hills behind the coastal resort town of Ulladulla. We have it's part of a subdivision off an old farm and it has a bit of remnant bush, a small creek and a wonderful view of Pigeon House Mountain. We are the classic baby boomer tree changers we ran away from the city in 2009. And I've always wanted to live close to nature. That's always been important to me. And so we spent all this time building the property up the gardens and trying to restore it to something that would make really good habitat for all the local flora and fauna. I am particularly fond of birds and we have all the birds come out of Morton National Park, which is very nearby, and come and visit us. So we've learnt an awful lot about growing natives and supporting the fauna and flora.

Scotia: Sounds like a paradise

Vivien: Our visitors think so, yes.

Scotia: Well, that whole South Coast region was significantly affected by the bushfires that came through the area last summer over the Christmas New Year period. It was a pretty traumatic time. What was it like for you and your community during that time?

Vivien: I guess it would have to be the most devastating thing that our community's ever experienced, both at the personal level, the ecological level and again, economically. We were harassed by the Currowan fire, which became a massive fire. It started in in late November, about eleven kilometres from our place. It then spread out over two months right across the Shoalhaven area, burning out five hundred thousand hectares of countryside.

Scotia: It's extraordinary, when you have it in numbers like that, isn't it?

Vivien: Absolutely. We we were just sort of in shock. But we were also stressed because it really did feel like this monster was stalking us continually.

The fire directly threatened our property on three separate occasions, one in the first few days because it had started fairly close - the second time just before Christmas, when the fire actually did reach our property and burnt part of the bush and burnt a lot of areas around us but the thing that kind of saved us them was that they had, it was the southerly change that blew it up onto our property and that meant it was a cooler burn. So the tree canopies around us were intact. And that actually is what helped save our particular animals, as well as making it easier for our buildings.

So in the collection of houses in the part of the street where I live, we all did survive with our properties and buildings intact, even though there were partial burns all around us. And then the fire kept raging through the district and then on New Year's Eve, when it was particularly hot with westerly winds, it came back and took out so many more of the coastal villages, including Conjola, where more than 100 houses were were burned down in the most horrific fire that went right through the canopy and left nothing but sort of bare tree trunks.

And four days later, it came back up from the coast, up this ridge line to where we are. Again, it came brought by the southerly change. It was really frightening then because the it was a firestorm, it...the wind turned into a whirlwind and it was spewing fire and branches all round the place the spot fires were opening up. The road was became impassible. We couldn't drive out. It was far too dangerous. But again, because it was a southerly change, the spot fires were able to be put out and our neighbourhood, again, survived. So we personally have an awful lot to be thankful for. But two kilometres away, that's when some of our neighbours again lost their houses on the third wave of fire front and they they really suffered severely and lost their homes.

The next morning when we went out, we couldn't, we were able to get back into town, but we couldn't go and visit people nearby because the roads were blocked and we didn't really have any idea how they were getting on.

Scotia: It's amazing, isn't it, that I think just the longevity of the fire process this season was so extraordinarily wearing on people, not ust the impact that you experience from the burn, but the continuation of that over such a long period of time.

Vivien: Yeah. I think we were all very stressed. I think that was the hardest thing. Keep thinking, when will it end? How many times do I need to pack up? We camped even away from the property during the worst weeks. And, you know, we didn't sleep at the property. We would go away in the evenings. Everybody was stressed. We would, you know, obsessively look at the Rural Fire Service app to see what the fire was up to next and the smoke - you know, we couldn't see the mountain for a month at a time because of the smoke. So, yes, we were we were I think the whole community was quite exhausted and the fire didn't get extinguished till about February the 8th.

So it was a long season.

Scotia: Well, it's interesting thinking into the future. You know, they talk about the impact of high performance activity, and that's really what that is. You're in a kind of high state of activated performance psychologically and physically and emotionally, you know. How do we how do we maintain that? And if this is going to become regular, that's a huge pressure that we're all going to have to to manage into the future, isn't it? This idea of cascading impact.

Vivien: I think it is. I think there needs to be a lot more thinking about the fact that this isn't going to be the only time this kind of thing happens. And to be quite honest, those of us who've been through this one are thankful that this summer isn't looking as bad, because I don't think any of us really are really ready yet to go through that all over again and have months of sort of the anxiety of living with something like that again.

Scotia: No. Everyone exhausted, isn't it? Everyone is exhausted with Covid on top hasn't helped that at all. So, you know, we have to be thinking about how do we offer nurture? And in some way, that's how I came to know you, Vivien. In the months following the bushfire, you reached out to us about our Love Box project, which is very much about trying to offer small ways to nurture ourselves.

You and your friends at the Murrumurang Spinners and Weavers group had some thoughts about reaching out to those in your community who had been affected. Can you tell me how the project came about? And describe the process of how you got your key team of creators on board?

Vivien: Yeah, sure. Look, my background is as a professional psychotherapist, I was a social worker who did extra training in psychotherapy and I was actually a trauma therapist while I worked in Sydney. I had a private practise. I closed that down when I moved down here so I'm very much into retirement, but of course, all that part of me just clicked on in this fire season.

And I was sort of my head was spinning with all these different thoughts about how can we help each other as a community, just get through all of this, including the aftermath. And because I have developed some artistic interests and involvement, too, I was also thinking about creativity and art and how that figures. So I was sending off letters to the council community development office, saying, oh, we could do this and that and the other.

But I also had spoke to another friend who's a textile artist and also a practising therapist. And she did a did a bit of Googling when I asked her about art therapists and she came up with Creative Recovery Network. So I looked on your website and read the the section about the love boxes. And I thought oh, this is a brilliant idea.

One of the things that I guess really impressed me about the concept is that even though I've dealt with trauma at the professional end, one of the things that I really know and very convinced of is how much caring community can really make a difference to people's ability to recover from trauma and disaster.

So to me, it's vitally important that the community be able to find ways to express its support and connection to people who've lost an awful lot in the fires.

So I thought the Love Boxes would be an excellent way to mobilise people in the community to be able to do that. And there were several things, I guess, in my mind that were important to me about the Love Box project was that it was an opportunity to involve people using their creativity.

I belong to the Murrumurang Spinners and Weavers group, and even though there are a lot of them are really quite elderly women, they're very talented spinners and knitters and felters and dyers and there's a potter and a watercolour artist all amongst this same group of women.

And so I brought the idea to them and I said, look, during the crisis, there was a torrent of second hand goods and foodstuffs arriving in the district and it became a bit of a problem, particularly some of the poorer quality stuff. And I said I wanted to ask to be able to make things that are handmade and special and things that are worth treasuring so that we could actually show people that we actually respect and care for them by

giving something that is worth keeping, that has some value to it and that expresses our love. So they all came up on board with the idea and we agreed that perhaps we could try to make 50 boxes, which really was only part when you think there are over 300 houses lost in the whole district it's not a lot, but that was quite a sizeable amount for a bunch of elderly women to to put together.

So we agreed to do that. Some of us did the dying, others - we had bought merino yarn from Bendigo Wool Mills, lovely undyed pure merino and we went to work and we dyed it all up.

We got hold of raw silk and the happy ties silk. And we put together people who could do shibori dyeing or eco dyeing and we got some beautiful scarves happening. And we also felt that it was important to involve some of the local businesses because they were also suffering not only because of Covid, but because the whole tourist season had come to a halt because of the bushfires and all the tourists were evacuated and sent home and told not to come back until the fires were over.

So rather than actually ask people to donate, what we did was we managed to get hold of a government grant specifically for community groups to use in bushfire recovery and that was able to fund our project and we were able to pay the local soap maker to make soap for us. It paid for the chocolate factory to make chocolates to go in the boxes, and it allowed us to buy coffee vouchers from the cafes around to be able to put in there as well. So that's how the idea came together.

Scotia: So beautiful and so many so rich with the layers of connection and support that come through that.

Vivien: Yes, it really was something that we could draw on different people across the community.

Scotia: I think it's I think it's really interesting that we talk about ~~showing~~ this respect and care to people through offerings of beauty and connection. And I think often donations are kind of random without much sort of thought about the people who are receiving them. And this shows kind of deep thinking.

Vivien: Yeah, I think that as you said we saw the sort of the worst of it. Yeah. As you said, sort of random giving to to something. And we did as the project suggested that we hand wrote inside cards that were handmade with watercolours from our watercolour artist of nature scenes. And we wrote to the recipient. So we said to them, look, we know and understand how isolated you've been over the past few months. We haven't forgotten you. We want to know that we're trying to express our concern and support for you as you continue the process of building your lives and one of the things, I guess, was in my mind when I started the project, it was deliberately timed for winter because I knew that in the immediate crisis time when all the community services, the mental health, the government services were all frantically busy helping people just survive the initial disaster. I knew that all that would eventually evaporate and people would be left to keep struggling on by themselves. And usually winter and full of all the delays of trying to clear their blocks and get going again, I knew winter would be a particularly difficult time for people.

Scotia: A layer of cold and dark,

Vivien: Cold and dark and loneliness and goodness knows whether they still haven't had any decent heating and whatever they were living in. So for me, it was quite strategic that we planned the gift boxes to be distributed at the beginning of winter.

And that turned out to be a very important thing to do. So we had several months to get it all together. And then, of course, Covid hit, which made things kind of interesting

Scotia: Yeah so all of this work was happening with the lockdown. So many of the knitters you were doing that you had kind of brought on board all of your co collaborators were in their own homes, in their own little bubbles. Did you get any feedback from them about this and what the layer of the project added to them in this time?

Vivien: Yes, I did quite a few of them. We not only recruited because we ended up making actually 75 beanies. We recruited other knitting groups in the community, the knitting groups attached to some of the churches and the shop in town, the wool shop.

And so there was a whole army, really, of elderly ladies, some of whom were in retirement villages and what have you who were often very isolated because, again, the emphasis was making sure that old people didn't get Covid.

So we actually were giving them something quite meaningful to do. And a lot of them would, you know, do 10 beanies or something for us. So what the more able of us did was we'd parcel up some balls of yarn and ring people up and say, we're going to drop it at your gate at a certain day, and they would come out and pick it up some time, and then we'd come back and pick it up from their front gate two weeks later.

And some of them just really said they appreciated the opportunity to contribute in spite of the fact that they were so isolated. So it really was great for all of us doing it. Some of us learnt new dyeing techniques. Some of us just had the chance to do something creative during a difficult time of lockdown. So I think those of us who got involved were really just got the benefit of doing it, as well as the recipients.

Scotia: The participatory process is generative unto itself, isn't it? So once you got all of the items together, how did you organise the distribution of the boxes? Who did they go out to like was there a process that you had around that?

Vivien: Yeah, there was two aspects.

First, we sat down between us and figured out how many people that we knew as within our group who had lost their homes. And we came up with a quite a few names and families. And so we were able to parcel up boxes and because we knew them, some of them, we we could sort of try to guess what kind of colours they might like and we did that and put names on that.

And then we had one or two of us would go round and drop them off to the various destinations. And then we had about at least 20 of the 50 boxes that for people who we didn't personally know, but we knew that the ongoing mental health team for the bushfire recovery would be making contact if they hadn't already.

So we said to them, would you be interested in distributing the rest of the boxes for us? And so in conjunction with the Conjola Recovery Group, because I guess the community of Conjola really had the worst and biggest number of people with losses, they got together and they came up with people that we could, they could deliver the boxes to. So in that way, we not only covered the people that we knew, we also made sure that we're also covering people for whom it would be very emotionally significant because the mental services were aware of the extent of losses and and trauma for some of these families.

Scotia: Well, the one year anniversary of the fires is coming up. And you've now turned your head to another creative project, Vivian, a little bit bigger in scope than the love boxes, but can you tell me about what you've planned to commemorate the anniversary?

Vivien: Yes, it is. I'm planning a community recovery art exhibition, and I'm timing it for the first week in January, which is really the anniversary of the worst of the fires in this district. I guess what went on for me was that since the fires, I've been doing my own artwork, in a sense, my own recovery process.

I've been commemorating some of the burnt trees and branches and and leaves even from off my own property in and around about me, and combining them with some of my felting to make artwork about that. And I've also been doing other sculptural felting. So I've gone through my own process of using art to express my own reactions to what's happened. And I spoke to some other artists friends who've been doing similar.

But I'm also aware that we were dealing with our own, I guess, what you'd call eco grief. But there are other people around in the community who were really struggling with that hugely, those who have chosen to live here because the bush is really important to them, both within the indigenous community and amongst a lot of other nature lovers and nature groups.

And because I'm connected with those, I thought that I wanted to do three things, if possible, in this art exhibition. One, I wanted to find artists who've experienced the bushfire season and could tell their own story in an artist's statement, as well as contribute artwork or maybe nature photography to the exhibition; that I would recruit things like Bird Life Australia, the local branch, local branch of wildlife rescue and maybe the Landcare services to give a component that we can integrate into the exhibition around what's happened to the fauna, the flora, the birds, because there's been so much interest now, I guess it takes a disaster for people to realise how much they actually value the bush habitat and how devastated they were at the loss of all the birds and animals and the concern really.

Scotia: But that's a really beautiful outcome, isn't it? An unexpected. But it is, yes. Long, long reaching finger in terms of the broader care for country.

Vivien: Yes. Yes, exactly. And I think that finally we are realising that the Australian bush is human habitat, it's not just there for birds and animals, people don't notice. We're suddenly realising that we need the habitat as much as, but we also need them. And really, what's the point of living in a beautiful place down here if there's nothing around us?

So people are far more awake now to that. So basically what we're trying to do is, is come on the interest and keep encouraging that.

But also look at the resilience in nature, look at the recovery and the incredible regeneration happening and document that and help that inspire us as humans as we struggle with trying to recover. So there's a kind of a two way thing. We look and want to respect and support the recovery of nature. But nature is also helping us in our recovery and inspiring us and and giving us something, in a sense to work towards, which is mutual survival in the future, I guess.

Scotia: Mmm, such beautiful poetics in that, Vivien.

Vivien: Mm hmm. And in addition to that, I guess there's also to build on that as well I wanted to have interactive workshops using art therapists and children's workers, so we'd have some workshops for adults and some for children. Again, linking into the nature theme. You may be using natural objects and things to make or using clay and giving people an opportunity to have a hands on and creative experience.

And because the mental health services have been saying, you know, we've got the anniversary coming up, we need to be able to sort of tap into what's going to go on for people emotionally, Lifeline has actually come to support and fund this project that I've been sort of developing and provide a lot of the publicity back up for me, as well as helped me have trained volunteers, because my idea is that while the exhibition is on and will be on for about a week, we'll have people who can just be present at the exhibition who are trained kind of listeners who will allow people to talk about their story as they look at what's on the walls around them and react to that saying, oh, yeah, that's like what happened or yes, that means something to me or what have you.

So again, allowing people another opportunity in this anniversary time to talk again about what what happened and what it's like for them now and and give them an opportunity to feel like maybe somewhat even more empowered to keep going on that we're all connected in with this, we all feel the same way, we've all struggled over what's happened and we can all keep supporting each other into the future and work together for nature's regeneration.

Scotia: Yeah. And such an important aspect of bringing in and creating collaboration across the different services. Yeah. Acknowledging the place and the need for the sharing, sharing of that space.

Vivien: Yeah. So we are really, really hoping to connect so much of the community together in even just putting this on, if we can get our act together and get it done.

Scotia: And it's been held in what was the evacuation centre at the time?

Vivien: Yes, exactly.

It's it's very strategic. It may not be the world's best gallery space, but I decided emotionally it's probably the most appropriate place. So it's the Civic Centre, the council civic centre, which is right at the harbour. It was where the evacuation centre was on and the evacuation centre then became the recovery centre where all the government departments were there for people for several months there. So it's a place people already know that was at the hub of support.

And we're using Lifeline and Red Cross and Anglicare people again to be available. So it'll be familiar faces that people may have even spoken to and even tourists coming through if they're coming back again. We think of the tourists who got stuck here and had to camp at the evacuation centre and how traumatised they were. And we may even have a chance to connect with some of those people again.

Scotia: I think that's one of the missing links, isn't it? Because recovery efforts are generally very place based but we don't necessarily travel those with those people who were there for which was, you know, a life changing experience and then left and they didn't have that linked relationship to the healing of the community around them.

Vivien: Yes, that's right. So I think they may have missed out. So we would, again, hopefully find a way that they can feel connected in. And because it's so central and easy to find. Yeah, it should. It should provide something for them as well.

Scotia: So what do you think it is about the arts, Vivian, that that supports people, whether it's knitting or weaving or exhibitions or other sort of creative engagement? What do you think that is key to that work? That's supportive of a recovery process.

Vivien: I think there's two things. One, it it take. It extends you and gives you something else that you become in the creative process that can take you out of the often somewhat depressed or that sense of lostness into something new that's being created.

If you can understand what I'm trying to say.

And I've watched people who have creative outlets compared to people who who don't. And people with creative outlets are able to fill in and find a way to focus in something that they can feel good about.

And the other thing is that artwork and creative things are usually meant to be shared, whether it's music or poetry or visual arts. There will always be some kind of audience, which means there's a connection and there's often a resonance between the person who's made the art object and the person who's looking at it or receiving it. And and that's one of the wonderful things, I guess, is that connection or that shared thing that you can identify with or that the person looking at your art can also identify with.

For example, I've made a felted sculpture of of a tree or part of the tree on our property. It it was completely burnt on the outside. It's quite a big, mature tree and it had a bit of a hollow on the inside and it burned. The fire burned inside that tree for two weeks after the rest of the fire was extinguished. And yet that tree is still alive, never stopped producing leaves.

And it's kind of like it's had its heart burned out, but it's still going. It was so extraordinary. I just had felt it. And so I felted it. The black outside and and and the fiery red on the inside.

And I guess it I wanted to honour that. And I wanted to be inspired by that. And I want to share that with other people who would have seen a similar phenomenon and thought about what, you know, what's it saying? So it's it's I guess it's those messages that we we can transfer as well as that, as well as have something that that as I said extends who we are, we've become someone who can produce something that is perhaps worth treasuring.

Scotia: Beautiful. So you. You got some feedback from the love boxes. And would you care to read some of the messages that you receive back from your community?

Vivien: Yes, I'm happy to do that. Look, we were kind of amazed at the feedback, I guess, really. We underestimated how much people were touched by these, how significant it was for them to receive something from their own community this way. So I'll just read you some of these responses that kind of blew us away.

The first one. Thank you all for the beautiful love box. Upon receiving and opening the box early one evening, I was in awe of what was inside. I picked out each item and felt so much love through everything I touched. All the gifts were so beautifully made and donated to us fire victims. I have contacted those who supplied the addresses for personal thank you's and thank you again as a group. I wear the beanie most days and I did run into Julie who knitted the beanie and somehow she knew green is my colour. The silk scarf hangs over a lounge room cushion to admire when I'm not wearing it. The very fragile teabag leaf sits on the windowsill, ready for its job and well the simply delicious chocolate did not last long. Kelly's soap is only used in the bath so I can soak up the natural blends. And Belinda's bookmark is where it belongs lovingly and goombah the koala is alongside my collection of native animal magnets. Diane's stunning painted card is always on display and the green harvest seeds will be spread lovingly on our land very soon. And when I have my coffee from Empower, I will think of you all. My empty love box will be used for a special purpose. I will never forget the feelings that came over me that night. My heart was full. Very grateful to each and every one of you.

And another one...

Hello all. It's some time now since I received the love box. I want to thank you all for contributing to it. It's a wonderful gift and the love and support it represents is particularly appreciated. I thought you might like to know how we are managing since the fire took our house and little forest. Our house was on a hectare of land. A distant friend gave us the use of their house in Mollymook as soon as they heard of our plight. I've enjoyed living here, going to the beach, looking out the window at fully healthy unburnt trees. My husband was keen from the start to go back and convert our surviving garage into a place of residence. We needed a small shed to be erected first to house the workshop equipment that was in the garage. That took some time. But fairly soon he was out there together with some friends and often on his own, lining and insulating the garage, building and installing a bathroom in the space. Installing a kitchen, a fire heater and so on. In a couple of weeks, we should be able to move back out there. I was at first reluctant to go back out to the place, but eventually the call of the trees was hard to ignore. There was a patch of scrub on the land which was quite densely vegetated, and I didn't venture in there much while the fire cleared a lot of that away and new leaves and branches were beginning to grow back in place of what was just burnt sticks a few months ago and also lots of plants that were taking advantage of the increased sunlight with the reduced upper canopy - Banksia, Lobelia - I decided to influence the regeneration of that patch such that small flowering plants can survive in there to benefit birds and insects and other wildlife. I've been on a steep learning curve about what has to be done to achieve this and how to go about doing it. Assistance from friends has been appreciated. I enjoy working in that patch now. Well, that's our story so far. We are in good spirits. The amazing community support certainly helps. Thank you all again.

And another one here...

Dear all at Murrumurang spinners and weavers, I'm writing to thank you for your generosity in giving us a Love Box after the recent fires. We were overwhelmed by the gesture. I'm most grateful for the lovely array of gifts in the box made by local artists. All would be put to good use by us - beanies and a scarf against the



cold, chocolates to warm our hearts, seeds for the future and lovely specially handmade items to brighten our lives. One of the bright spots after the bushfires for us has been the care and support that we've received from the local community and we've very much appreciated this. It has been so important to us as we've come to terms with the aftermath of the fires and start rebuilding our lives. Thank you so very much for your thoughtfulness and care. It is very much appreciated by us all.

And I also have someone who was able to put their response in verse. So he's a little poem:

To the spinners and weavers, Your Love Box gifts are quite a treat, the chocolate heart so yum to eat, I love the scarf and beanie too and tealeaf bag for morning brew. Soap smells gorgeous, artwork great, will frame the picture and can't wait. Your thoughts and words are very kind, we will always keep them in our mind. Thank you all for what you do, your hearts are generous, special too.

Pretty amazing.

Scotia: Pretty amazing. How gorgeous. And what a warm, warm sense of love coming back to you all for such generosity and beauty.

Vivien: Yes, it was. And we certainly had a great sense of satisfaction that we were able to do our one small thing to to just relieve some of the stress in our community.

Scotia: Well, thank you so much for sharing your stories. Vivian, it certainly evokes a very rich connexion. And, you know, the work continues and we hope that we can continue to support you in any way that we can. And I think the what you're doing is pretty extraordinary. So thank you for sharing those stories with us.

Vivien: It's been a pleasure.

Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders: In Conversation and special thanks to Vivien for taking the time to speak with me.

If you would like to be involved in the Love Box project, you can find more details on our website at [www.creativerecovery.net.au](http://www.creativerecovery.net.au) under the Key Projects section, we'd love to hear from you.

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. Special thanks to Jess O'Callaghan and the team at Audiocraft.

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Thanks for listening.