

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript: Season 3, Episode 1

[Acknowledgement of Country]

[Bush sounds and whipbirds]

Jessica: This is The Little Pocket, so we meet here on Mondays weekly and our little people in the community play in this lovely nature space.

Scotia: So beautiful look at that dappled sun.

Jessica: It is beautiful and we've created all these lovely little pockets of play, we've got our little mud kitchen over there, our fire pit here, where we do a lot of gentle work with the little people around fire. Fire safety, coming together to tell stories. That's our story tree over there.

SCOTIA: It's a beautiful Spring day in the South East Queensland mountain town of Beechmont. Jessica Brown is showing me around The Little Pocket - the nature play space she started from her home in 2019

Scotia: So what do you do with a story tree?

Jessica: Um, we sit together and we tell stories around, we call it ecological storytelling, and we use little props from nature and we make up beautiful stories with the little people.

Scotia: There's a kookaburra eating worms.

Jessica: We have so many beautiful birds here you would see the bower birds and the cat birds. We've got a little nest down there with some baby whip birds, and there's eleven little ducklings that have just hatched up here yesterday. So yeah there's lots of beautiful birds.

SCOTIA: Beechmont is a peaceful country village situated on a forested ridge that sits between the Lamington Plateau and Tamborine Mountain, part of what is known as the Scenic Rim.

The original inhabitants of the Scenic Rim region were the the Ugarapul people and the Mununjali, Birinburra, Wangerriburra, Kombumerri and other clans within the Yugambeh Language group.

You wouldn't know sitting in this tranquil bush setting surrounded by whip birds and kookaburras that the bustling Gold Coast is only 40 minutes drive away...

Scotia: So a lot of your work with the nature play is around resilience building, isn't it?

Jessica: there's such a beautiful connection with free and natural play and resilience. So nature play is about taking those risks, challenging yourself, understanding your limits in a free, unstructured way. And it just really lends itself so beautifully to resilience building in young people.

SCOTIA: When Jessica started The Little Pocket as a way to connect young families in the area, she had no idea that only a few months later, this network of community members would evolve into much more than their weekly playgroup gatherings as they collectively faced the impact of a catastrophic bushfire event that would come to mark the beginning of Australia's Black Summer fire season

[THEME MUSIC]

Scotia: Well, it's such a beautiful spot full of the sounds of so many comfortable creatures that live and inhabit here.

SCOTIA: I'm Scotia Monkivitch, and this is Creative Responders...a podcast from the Creative Recovery Network about how the arts and creativity can support and strengthen communities as they prepare, respond and recover from the impacts of disasters.

In this episode, we're exploring the process of activating a grassroots recovery project following a disaster. We'll be hearing about the integral role of local government in the recovery process and what happens when local councils work hand-in-hand with community members. What does an authentically 'community-led' response look like when it is implemented with meaningful local government backing?

And how can Councils support community members to step into positions of cultural leadership? Community members like Jessica Brown...

Jessica: We moved to Beechmont four and a half years ago. So my husband is a park ranger with Queensland Parks and Wildlife. And before we were here, we were based in Eungella, another beautiful part of the world where he was a park ranger up there in the Eungella National Park. I grew up in Brisbane, so after being up there for six years and having two young children, it was time to move closer to family and friends. So we came down here first for Todd to do a temporary stint at Springbrook, which is the sister mountain. And while we were over there, he got a job at Binna Burra. So then we moved over here and we were very fortunate to find what we now call The Little Pocket to rent. And after we rented for a year here, we bought and this has become our home.

My husband's a mountain man. He loves living on the mountains. He's from the south, very south south of New Zealand, so he's very comfortable in this mountain lifestyle, the cold winters.

I'm a saltwater woman. I love the ocean. So I guess this was a really lovely kind of compromise. When you drive along the ridge line, you can see the ocean and every morning the kids and I, as we drive, we look out at the ocean and we guess what color it is today, whether it's gold or blue or silver, and we can say "hello ocean". But we still have that kind of mountain landscape and the beautiful forests, also that lovely small community that we were looking for to raise our children in. And that lovely sense of belonging and connectedness you get from living in a small community.

The Little Pocket was established in March 2019 for the purpose of running weekly playgroups. So I'm a mother of three young children, all under the age of seven and sometimes living in a regional community it can be quite isolating. So we set up this group to bring mothers and children and fathers and grandparents and families together on a weekly basis. And the focus of our playgroup was very much around free play in nature.

Our little philosophy was is play, create, connect and learn. So we opened up the doors of our home, which we call The Little Pocket, and we created all these lovely little play spaces.

And we created a little bit of a headquarters, which is also known as our carport, where we had set up the urn so parents could sit and have a cup of tea and a chat, and we would make craft and laugh while our kids played.

SCOTIA: Six months later, in early September of 2019, Beechmont, and the towns of the surrounding area were on high alert. Rainfall in the region from January to August had been significantly below average and in many places the driest on record and maximum temperatures were warmer than average.

On September 6th, strong west to north-westerly winds produced extreme to catastrophic bushfire conditions in much of southeast Queensland. By the following day, bushfires were burning at Stanthorpe, Applethorpe, Springbrook, Witheren, Numinbah Valley, Sarabah and Beechmont and by the afternoon of September 8th, there were more than 60 fires burning across the state.

I'm here with Jessica at The Little Pocket on the two year anniversary of that day...

Jessica: So the the fires that came through Beechmont, it was in the first week of September 2019, so it became, I guess, kind of the opening chapter to what was Black Summer. I mean, it's yeah, it's quite emotional today to be talking about this because it's the two year anniversary, but it was a really it was a really big event for me personally, for my family, for my street. So I live in Timbarra Drive and we lost 11 homes in this street and the neighbouring street and up towards Binna Burra. And some of those homes belong to my best, bestest friends, and they have since moved on from here. So there's still a lot of rawness when I think about that event, especially today around the anniversary

and I try to understand why sometimes is there still so much emotion, I didn't lose my home. I was one of the people in my street it came to our back gate and it came to many people's back gates but I didn't lose my home.

And I think it's that it's that loss of sense of safety in your home that comes from something like that.

SCOTIA: The fire burned through thousands of hectares of what was once thought to be fire-resistant sub-tropical rainforest - through Lamington National Park, destroying the heritage-listed Binna Burra eco-tourism lodge, hectares of farmland and multiple houses and structures. Jessica's husband, Todd, was on the frontlines while she evacuated with their three young children.

Jessica: And those fires burnt for twenty three weeks. My husband being a ranger with parks, he was fighting those fires for 23 weeks. So over that period of Black Summer,

we were in that constant state of adrenaline fight or flight, I guess so our bags were packed from September to January and sat at the front door over there along with many other people who live this region.

And I think for me personally, it as I've kind of unpacked things, it was that separation of having to evacuate and leave for six days and my husband staying here to fight and I had to flight. And that feeling of being separated from loved ones, being separated from here, feeling helpless, feeling disconnected. Um yeah, it was a big experience.

SCOTIA: In the aftermath of the fires, Jessica turned to her creative practice as a way to process the experience...

Jessica: So on a personal level, whenever anything kind of big in my life happens, I always turn to art as a way to make sense of that.

So I'm a writer, so I think, you know, two weeks after when things were still really swirling through my brain, I I took myself to the beach and I wrote, I wrote poem after poem, after poem, after poem. And through that process of of creating or reflecting it really helped me to start to make meaning of the experience.

And then I could understand the role that art can play in that space of healing, but also the way that it can connect people like can bring people together.

So I think that my own personal journey and my understanding of that role of art and then that sense of helplessness directly after the fire, I had three young children. My youngest was 12 weeks. I couldn't be here. I couldn't cook for the fires. I couldn't help fight the fire. I couldn't. Yeah, I felt really helpless. So then I guess I thought what can I do? Well, I can do art. I can write art grants. I can do that. I can bring people together to create art. That's a space I'm confident in. That's something I believe really passionately in.

SCOTIA: Jessica realised the network that had already been growing around The Little Pocket could be harnessed for a larger purpose. Little Pocket's founding aim to reduce isolation and nurture connections between community members remained the same...only now, it would bring them together around their bushfire recovery

Jessica: And then we had a day here in November, two months after the fire called Regeneration Day, and the purpose of that day was to bring neighbours together to connect, to laugh. We cried. People read poetry. It was it was really beautiful. And at

that day we had three interactive art activities happening. We had a canvas where people repainted the the forests that have been lost. People repainted their favourite tree. We had a poetry where people were invited to write the things they were grateful for, the things that they loved about Beechmont and a leave now installation where we had little tags and people wrote down what it was that they packed. And through those those simple three little activities, we realised the conversations that we're having around those how people felt quite safe in that space to start to have those conversations. And I think that really cemented the vision that, yes, OK, a creative project can work in this space, that this is a good thing. And we all kind of saw that. And that's where the few people who who organised that day, we sat down afterwards and we said that, you know, that that was great. Let's build on this.

Jessica: And that's kind of where that that seed was planted. And then we just carefully nurtured that over the last two years to become the Regeneration Creative Bushfire Recovery Project.

Jessica: We sat down very early at the beginning with a project advisory group. We did a lot of community consultation, deep listening research into what other communities had done, and we came up with our core purpose.

And that was to have a really gentle platform to guide recovery and resilience for it to be community led. That was really important to us, that it came from community, within community, for community and run by community. That was a really important goal for our project, that it would build and empower community capacity.

SCOTIA: The advisory group was full of ideas and motivation - there was no shortage of potential projects. The challenge was to take the guiding principles they had outlined and use them to inform where to focus their efforts to best support each other and the community. They landed on four key projects...

Jessica: and that is the Mural Project, an exhibition, a publication and a documentary that captures the whole project.

SCOTIA: the next step was securing support from the local council..

Jessica: The Scenic Rim Regional Council has been fabulous and their support has been amazing. Bronwyn Davies, who's part of the cultural team there, has been an absolute champion in this project. So she actually was, I guess you could say, like the catalyst of this actually getting legs.

Bronwyn: My name is Bronwyn Davies I'm the coordinator of cultural services at the Scenic Rim Regional Council.

Bronwyn: I was actually at a friend's gathering on the Beechmont Mountain, where a lot of the people were coming together to look at the trauma that they'd experienced. And I met Jess at that gathering and she was telling me about her project, she was relaying her experience and the experience of others. And I thought, Wow, that's powerful, so that's how I first became involved with first met Jess, and then we met up and she started to talk about what she'd like to do

And we started to put the wheels in motion.

SCOTIA: Bronwyn joined the Advisory Group for Regeneration the following week and encouraged Jessica to put together a project plan to submit to Council for funding. It was around this time that I also became involved in my capacity as Executive Officer of Creative Recovery Network

Bronwyn: I connected her with the Creative Recovery Network because we'd been speaking about that in the past about what we could do for Beechmont and the time needed to for that community to be ready rather than us coming and say, "here, here's this thing, do this". It was more about waiting for them to come forward. And so I think it was just the synergies of putting the right people together in the right room and just watching Jess bloom and the community bloom and get behind this project and have a focus that wasn't all doom and gloom, I think that's been a really important part of it.

SCOTIA: This idea of waiting for the community to be ready is an important one - it's something that Bronwyn understands well from many years implementing cultural programs at a local level - and something that the Scenic Rim council and local governments across the country are focussing on in their efforts to encourage programs that are authentically community-led.

Bronwyn: I think for me, community-led projects in a recovery or disaster context mean that they come from the community itself. They're not imposed upon the community. From our position we work hand in hand with that, with the communities when they're going through a disaster. We've had floods, cyclones and fires and droughts. So we are fairly aware of the situation and the issues. But you can't impose your will or what you think is the right thing on a community that's going through a disaster situation. So what we will try and do is provide a platform for those in the community who are of a mind to do something, to find a way to support them to do that with their community. So it's reflecting the voice of their community.

SCOTIA: This support that Bronwyn talks about can take many forms - and is something that local governments are uniquely equipped to deliver because of their on-ground connection with the communities they live and work within.

Their local knowledge gives them the ability to identify opportunities for community members to emerge as leaders...and guide them through the steps to initiate and deliver recovery programs...

Bronwyn: Community leadership and cultural leadership is an interesting thing. It's important that we build skills for people in the community to come through and become leaders. So with this particular project with Jess, we're seeing her come through as a community leader. We're seeing a number of people who have been involved in that project stepping into that space. So for myself as a cultural leader in my role, it's not about leading the project, but providing a platform where those people can come up naturally and do their own magic within their own communities. And so that might mean support by funding, or it might mean support by mentoring, or it might mean support to connect them up with other resources or things like that

SCOTIA: This hand-in-hand approach is key to setting up projects in a way that allows them to achieve the best outcomes

Jessica: Bronwyn and Deb Moore from the Cultural Team and Councillor Virginia West have been fabulous. They've really trusted us, which has been really empowering to deliver...to give us room, I guess, to deliver something very community led.

SCOTIA: It's complex work and not without its challenges...

Jessica: Oh, there's been so many learnings in this project, for me personally and also about what it means to be part of part of a community and what community can look like in its best when it comes together to create something.

But then I there's also been some really challenging times. And I think that comes from when you're dealing with trauma as much as your intention may be with love or you might have the best intentions. There's no one size fits all approach to that recovery or trauma.

And it's such an individual, an individual road to recovery. And as much as you try to say this is community-led or this is a community project, there will always be people who it's

not right for or who it doesn't connect with or don't don't see the value. And that is OK, that is OK.

Yeah, it's complex, isn't it? It's sensitive, and it's complex stuff

SCOTIA: Councillor Virginia West agrees that empowering community members to lead their own recovery is the best approach.

She's the longest serving councillor in the Scenic Rim and is the member for Division 3 which encompasses Beechmont, Binna Burra and Canungra - areas that were all significantly impacted by the fires...

Virginia: I guess it's about communication really and in close communication really between ourselves as the Council on the ground, between the residents and between the Council Officers who are obviously finding the funding and helping to get various different groups in it is most important. And generally, I believe the community want to do things themselves. They just want a little bit of help along the way. And once they get cracking, that's it. They don't want council to be doing it all for them, but they want council to be alongside them walking along. Yes. Yes. And that's how I see our role really to be there if we're needed, but to encourage them to do this for themselves. Because I believe that is much more powerful and that's what we're here for is to empower our communities.

SCOTIA: A shift has been occurring in recent years in the approach to recovery programs at all levels of government...

In the wake of the 2009 Victorian bushfires and the growing understanding of our new landscape of cascading disasters...the establishment of frameworks like the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience and numerous enquiries into disaster response and recovery have been highlighting the importance of social capital.

Previously, recovery efforts were weighted heavily on buildings, structures and the economy and the efforts to rebuild and regenerate these very tangible things.

It is now being understood that while those areas are of course important, the key to building resilience in communities is social cohesion - and that when investment is made into strengthening the social fabric of communities, they will be better equipped to mitigate and recover from disasters when they occur.

This is where the Arts come in...

Virginia: I guess I have a much greater appreciation for art and culture in the recovery realms because it's certainly brought people together as a group. And I know, especially when we first started, there was still a lot of emotion there that had to be dealt with and everybody was very supportive of each other. But people felt comfortable to be able to express that emotion because it was quite hard for some of them. And its so very, very important.

And sometimes I think it's we don't put enough importance on the arts in our community development areas. I know we do here in Scenic Rim, but it is it is so vitally important.

SCOTIA: Bronwyn reflects on the capacity of arts and cultural programs to build social cohesion, not only to support recovery... but also to build community resilience for what the future may hold:

Bronwyn: In terms of disaster preparedness and recovery, the arts definitely has a role to play, and that needs to be integral to council operational plans and corporate plans and community plans or strategic plans in any way. Whether it's because of the impact in the tourism industry, in agriculture or whatever, there are ways that the arts can assist people to think differently about how they might manage, you know, environmental issues, how they're going to manage societal issues that are going to come up in the future, whether that how they're going to act together as a group when they're faced with these things. I don't know that governments of any stripe have actually fully realised that the power and capacity of the arts to harness cohesion in that space. I think a very forward thinking council would definitely embed the arts in all their disaster management plans and all levels of strategic planning.

SCOTIA: Jessica's submission to the Scenic Rim Council was approved for two years of funding support through the Category C Community Recovery Funds which was kindly auspiced by the Beechmont Country Women's Association.

This was supplemented by additional funding from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal Newscorp Bushfire Fund Grant, the Commonwealth Bank Bushfire fund, Bendigo Bank and a Gold Coast City Council discretionary grant.

One of the ways this support materialised was in a Creative Recovery training program, designed to set a strong foundation for the Regeneration team and leaders from other parts of the community...

Jessica: When we were researching and designing the program, we realised there was some really big gaps in our knowledge and our skills. That we didn't really have an understanding of that natural disaster space or, as much as we were passionate, we didn't really understand what it would really entail to run a creative recovery project.

Jessica: And then we, when we were successful with funding through Scenic Rim Regional Council, we were able to reach out to Scotia and the team at the Creative Recovery Network and invite them to come into the Beechmont community and deliver a three day training.

Jessica: It was in September 2020, so that was around the time of our one year anniversary, and we ended up having three days at the end of September with 25 people in the Beechmont community. So that included Councillor Virginia West and Bronwyn Davies from the Scenic Rim cultural team and other people running projects, non Arts related projects within the community and the disaster recovery space in our region.

SCOTIA: the Creative Recovery Training has been developed over the past 8 years and is a program we deliver around the country to communities and organisations within the arts, local government, health, education and other groups associated with disaster preparedness and recovery.

The idea is to prepare those wanting to work with trauma impacted communities so they have the skills and knowledge to do so in a way that is safe and productive.

It provides participants with an understanding of disaster impact and context and presents ways to work respectfully with communities to grow and connect through the disaster experience.

Jessica: So the learning that we received, I think the frameworks that we discussed in kind of the practical stuff of how to how to understand that post-disaster space. But more than that, it was the coming together. I think of having everybody in that space for the three days and the the way that Scotia held that space, and the deep connections that we were able to form over that three days. Has really become the kind of core of our project moving forward.

And I don't think I don't think we could have done what we have done without that. I don't think we would have had that collective kind of experience or that collective knowledge so I think it was, it was absolutely invaluable, really the training.

And then we ate beautiful food and we laughed and we cried. And we all came away feeling like we could do this. And I think it also established in the community a trust in what it was that our project was trying to achieve.

SCOTIA: It's a year after the training weekend...and two years after the fires...

The Regeneration project is now in full flight and has mobilised MANY community members working together across different project streams.

The advisory group have adapted their approach to meet the changing needs of the project during each phase with community consultation guiding the evolution each step of the way.

A group of local artists are busy preparing their work for the exhibition opening in a few days time, the documentary production is well underway...

and today, I'm back in Beechmont with Jessica, Bronwyn and Councillor Virginia West. They're showing me around the community murals that were created in the first phase of the project...

there are six of them across four sites in Beechmont.

Scotia: So the first one is over behind here

Virginia: Hmm. Just beautiful.

Virginia: Isn't that beautiful? It's gorgeous.

Virginia: Lovely, isn't it?

SCOTIA: We're standing in front of a brick structure that is part of the old primary school. The artwork, Birds of a Feather, was created through a workshop originally intended as a practice run for participants to learn the techniques needed to paint their own murals.

Jessica: And this is what we created in that day, so we couldn't possibly roll over it at the end of the day. And it was such a fun day. It really was filled with laughter. And I think from that day everybody had the confidence then to go off to do their own murals.

Bronwyn: I think with this particular project, it's it's a beautiful learning experience where everyone's in the same boat to start with, and they're all learners at the beginning and at

the end of it, there's something amazing and beautiful and transformative that they've created.

SCOTIA: We head to the next site where the local Landcare shed has been transformed with a giant, colourful painting of a Richmond Birdwing butterfly against the backdrop of mountains and the Beechmont sky...

Jessica: so this one is called Bird Wings, Take Flight, and this one is created by Samantha Campbell, a local artist. This is a really beautiful piece, this one.

I think it was two or three months after the fire there were birdwing butterflies in Beechmont everywhere. It was this really like, beautiful phenomenon I guess and everyone was on Facebook talking about it being one of the really positive things that may have come out of the fire. Yeah, it's a beautiful piece.

SCOTIA: we continue on to Rosin's Lookout - a popular spot with breathtaking views of the mountain ranges along the Queensland - New South Wales Border.

There's a picnic and BBQ area, a toilet block and a cafe nearby...two of the murals are here - one called HOME by mother and son team Nikki and Matti Tervo and the other called DIVERSITY AND STRENGTH by local resident Gary Bowler

Jessica: It was such a fun site, I think because they were in this area and on a weekend this is a really, really busy place and you've got the cafe across the road and you get a lot of visitors. So they really enjoyed the..there's people stopping and having a yarn. I think it took them quite a long time to get finished because there was...

Scotia: Too much chatter?

Jessica: A lot of chatter, but it was great. You know, everyone would ask, what are you doing? What's this about? And then, of course, you know, the conversations would start about the fire. And yeah, everybody had questions, you know about it. And how's the community now?

SCOTIA: Listening to Jessica, I'm reminded of this idea of social cohesion and how creative projects like this one enable opportunities for the community to connect as they move through the recovery experience.

And how the Scenic Rim Council's investment in the Arts as part of their recovery strategy has provided these experiences for people to stand side by side with

their neighbours and friends and also others from outside of the community who care deeply about the area...

SCOTIA: We continue on to the next piece - The Long Walk Home by Tanya Munster.

It's painted on the water tank next to the Beechmont Rural Fire Shed and is the artwork that depicts the events of the fire most directly....

Jessica: this is all based on photos from the fire experience. So the photo around the front is her best mate from primary school. So they grew up together and the photo is of him coming back and embracing his fiancée after being out on the fire front.

Councillor West lives in nearby Canungra. She was in close contact with the Mayor as events unfolded and was on the ground supporting evacuation efforts....while her husband was involved in the emergency response as part of his role with the Rural Fire Brigade...

Virginia: I was just going to say, especially having family members who were out fighting the fires down on Canungra and with the terrain that we have here and knowing Jess with her husband being out there, it was just every night it was awful because you didn't you could either sometimes you could get hold of them, sometimes you couldn't and you would have to go to bed not knowing where they were or even whether they were still alive, really. And it was just such a relief, that relief that you can see on the face of that fireman. It's just amazing that they're home and they're here and they're safe.

Bronwyn: And tired, tired after so many hours and all that pressure and, as you say, not being able to communicate with home, not knowing whether their homes were OK while they're fighting other people's properties in other parts of the mountain.

Bronwyn: It's empowering, isn't it?

Virginia: So empowering,

Jessica: so it's empowering in its process.

Bronwyn: Yeah, that's right.

Jessica: That people who, you know, have found that creative voice, or that way to express themselves. But then also it was such an empowering two weekends. Yeah,

yeah. The shed was opened and everyone was here painting together. And whilst painting this mural, I stood next to two rural fires who I hadn't had a conversation with before and they were actually on our street. And we stood here and we talked about that day. And that was the first time I'd had that conversation, like nearly two years after.

Bronwyn: About that day

Jessica: About that day

Bronwyn: Wow

Jessica: So it was here standing next to each other painting that we had the conversation

Bronwyn: See that's the thing, isn't it? While you're doing something here, you know, with being busy with your hands here, you can open your heart without having to sort of be sitting here having a psychology session or something. It's the counselling, it's an active learning thing almost isn't it?

Jessica: So I think there was like five people positioned around the tank all talking about that day, and we went through everyone's kind of different perspective and experience because you know, one was a fire, one was at home baking. They couldn't, you know, couldn't be out there, had their kids at home. And I talked about my process of evacuation. Todd was talking about how he stood here and saw the fire coming, and we realised that we were, you know, we all had the same experience, but through a different lens.

SCOTIA: Everyone in the region has their own recollection about what happened that day and in the following weeks.

SCOTIA: Councillor West reflects on the community spirit in the evacuation centre as events unfolded and volunteers mobilised to support those in need...

Virginia: it was just a hive of activity and there were people everywhere helping so much. And it was really great to have Moriarty Park, the council owned sporting ground as the recovery centre because people could come there. They were amazing. Those the women or the whole teams that got together down there, the church and the CWA and local women, they just sprang into action.

Bronwyn: And then afterwards, when that's all over, when you know, people go back to their houses and see...that's you know, that's when the real work begins, doesn't it? You've got that initial kind of springing into action, but it's afterwards the months and months and sometimes years when people are trying to recover. So, you know, Jess this project's been quite an extraordinary coming together, really, I think. Congratulations.

Jessica: Thank you.

SCOTIA: It's a few days after our visit to the murals and we are at The Beaudesert Arts Centre, its the arts and cultural hub for the Scenic Rim which houses a regional gallery, auditorium and a busy program of workshops, performances, screenings and exhibitions. The Council offices are located upstairs.

Bronwyn: Thank you, Aunty Geri, for your welcome. The Munanjali people have been so generous to us during my time working in Beaudesert, and we really appreciate the opportunity for us to share and gain an insight into your culture. We acknowledge the Elders and the Old Ones past, the Elders carrying cultural knowledge today and passing it on to tomorrow's leaders.

SCOTIA: We're here for the official opening of the Regeneration exhibition, surrounded by works from 18 local artists - a diverse range of pieces exploring themes of belonging, regreening, recovery, resilience, and regeneration. The gallery is full and bustling - it's a community celebration and the significance of the event, taking place on the second anniversary of the fires, is front of mind for most...Councillor West is opening the event...

Virginia: On behalf of the Scenic Rim Regional Council, I'm really honored to be here today to open this Regeneration exhibition. Casting our minds back our lives changed forever in the Black Summer bushfires of 2019.

To revisit these memories, even though they are very painful, it presents an opportunity to come together as a community, to share in the heartache and know that we're not alone in all of this. But there's a reason this exhibition is called Regeneration, because this is the story of what happened after - of our journey of recovery.

SCOTIA: Bronwyn is hosting a panel on stage with some of the artists...

Bronwyn: Today, though, it is my pleasure to welcome these artists who have participated in this exhibition to share their experiences. Please welcome Adi Brown, Dave Groom, Kuweni Dias Mendis, and Jessica Brown. OK, let's settle in.

SCOTIA: It's an opportunity for the artists to share their experiences of the fire and talk about how it impacted their artistic practice.

SCOTIA: As the panel goes on, audience members become part of the conversation and more stories are shared - about the fire, about the artistic process, about what has happened since - there is laughter and tears - all woven together in the community's shared experience of the past two years.

Jessica is also on the panel talking about her own artistic practice and the Regeneration project as a whole...

Bronwyn: So the most rewarding part of the project then?

Jessica: I guess things like this, so having these opportunities to have these conversations because, I don't know if there's been any other opportunity where I've sat with other people from our community and apart from the things kind of in this project where we did the Arts Dinner and we had the consultation days where we've actually really sat to listen to each other's stories.

To see people who are non artists, I think, or people who didn't see themselves as artists, create works or paint murals and that sense of growth or confidence. Like, I really love that. Being a teacher, you know, that's that's the, you know, they're the gold moments where people step up and do something that they didn't know that they could do.

SCOTIA: And looking around the room, it's clear that this 'little seed' planted by Jessica two years ago, and nurtured with the right support from the Scenic Rim Council and dedicated people like Bronwyn and Virginia who understand the value of the arts... has branched out and taken root in the community...

The exhibition opening is a milestone, but it's not the end of this project...Regeneration continues with the upcoming release of the documentary and publication...

And while their focus may eventually shift away from the bushfire recovery, the connections formed through the Regeneration project will continue far into the future.

SCOTIA: Back at The Little Pocket under the story tree, Jessica shares the story of The Little Seed, developed after the fires with the young people who attend the playgroup as part of their resilience through Nature Play program

Jessica: So we sit under the tree down there and we, we tell a story that's called Garragull, which is the Yugambah word for grass tree. And it's "little seed, little seed, where do you belong? Where will you put down your roots and grow strong? And the little people stand there and put down their roots and grow strong and stand as a grass tree. And the little seed's story, we wrote it around natural disasters.

Jessica: So the little seed goes to the desert, and there's drought, the sun's too hot and the sand is too warm and soon there is a big sandstorm and then he goes to the river "and the rain it began to fell the river it swelled, it swelled" and there's a flood. And then the little seed moves to the mountain top. And there he sees a a fire coming along the ridge line up the mountain spine. And being a grass tree, he realises that the fire is just what he needs for his seed to sow, and the fire is just what he needs to grow.

And the little people stand there with their hands up tall, with their feet in the ground. And so that's our story of fire belonging. So that came about here and that tree. So that's our little seed story of belonging and resilience. It's really beautiful. Yeah.

SCOTIA: Creative Responders is an initiative of the Creative Recovery Network hosted by me, Scotia Monkivitch.

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If you'd like to find out more about the Little Pocket and the Regeneration project follow the links in our show notes or go to the little pocket dot com dot au

Creative Responders is produced by me and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson

Our Sound Engineer is Glen Morrow and our Field Producer for this episode was Tiffany Dimmack

Original music composed by Mikey Squire.

If you are interested in supporting your community in challenging times, you can find out more about what we do at our website [Creative Recovery dot net dot au](http://CreativeRecovery.net.au) which is also where you can find transcripts for all of our podcast episodes.

Next month we'll be back for a Conversation with Sam Savage, Regional Coordinator for Red Cross Australia's North Queensland Emergency Services ...

And following that, we'll have another documentary episode coming up... this time from the Woorabinda Arts and Cultural Centre in Central Queensland...

Here's Uncle Milton Lawton speaking with me ahead of walking together on Bidjara Country in Carnarvon Gorge....

Uncle Milton: Our stories are not lost. They're just sitting there waiting for us to access them again. We're all born with this stuff. My Old People tell me. But it sits in the deeper recesses of our minds, and we need to go bush to find the keys to unlock it. You won't find it in the cities. You won't find it in the classroom. Culture is not meant to be taught in a classroom. It's meant to be, this is our classroom out here under the trees and the environments.

Thanks for listening.