

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript

In Conversation with Natalie Egleton

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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 emergency management and creative sectors as they prepare, respond and recover from disasters.

Today my guest is Natalie Egleton, the CEO of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal or F Triple R for short.

FRRR is the only national foundation specifically focussed on ensuring social and economic strength in remote, rural and regional Australia.

Community-led recovery is something you've heard us talk a lot about through this podcast - Natalie is one of the people working on the ground with communities to build capacity in remote and regional areas.

As we all know, it's been a challenging number of years for these communities with the cascading impacts of drought, bushfires and floods. We wanted to hear from Natalie about her vision for the challenges ahead and the work F Triple R are doing on the ground to support the creation of vibrant, resilient communities.

Please enjoy my conversation with Creative Responder, Natalie Egleton.

Scotia [00:02:02] It's lovely to have you here with us. Natalie, I've been following you and the work of Triple R Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal for a long time. You've been there since 2015 and you've led the organisation through a period of significant growth and impact and also responding to what has been a very challenging time for regional and rural communities. For some of the listeners who may not know who FRR are, can you tell us a little bit about the organisation and the work that you do?

Natalie [00:02:30] Yes, sure and it's great to be here with you. FRRR has been around for about 22 years and was established as a philanthropic vehicle that could enable those wanting to give so private philanthropy, institutional philanthropy, corporates, everyday people to have a giving mechanism to support rural communities across Australia. So we, we also partner with governments to help with funding programmes, but also addressing key policy issues, and particularly with a focus on small and more remote communities that are often locked out of opportunities, but yet play a really critical role in the economic and social fabric of Australia. Since 2000, we've distributed about \$135 million in funding to about 12,000 initiatives, and a big proportion of that has been in both response to and preparation for natural disasters, including drought, which is, you know.

Scotia [00:03:29] A very big one and one that often doesn't get much of a say in it, doesn't it? Isn't it? So, Natalie, as you know, we at Creative Recovery Network advocate for the potential of arts led collaborations to inspire fresh approaches to challenges faced by communities. And I've been very fortunate to collaborate with you and if you are in recent years and certainly know that you're one of the key bodies that fund a lot of the creative recovery work that we've been following. So I'd like to say, Natalie, as one of the great champions of this work, because of you have seen firsthand how the arts can support and strength communities. So I'm wondering if you could speak to how you see the arts and creativity being utilised as an effective tool for support or change-making or communication or other things that are so very necessary in terms of building resilient communities. Either with a specific examples or just generally some of the impacts you've noticed over your time working with rural and regional communities?

Natalie [00:04:26] I mean, it's it's been really clear to me in the time that I've worked in this field just how powerful a role the arts can play. And my first engagement was probably around the Black Saturday recovery and supporting some arts led initiatives in that context. And what I really noticed was that in a recovery environment, it's really easy for some people to be missed or invisible or to not engage in mainstream recovery activities and potentially not get the support that they could benefit from, to help them in their recovery and the arts just has a really powerful way of fostering inclusion and participation and creating environments that are safe and that words are not the only tool that are used to express experience.

Scotia [00:05:19] Often we find it really hard to find the appropriate words don't we, these unimaginable situations that we find ourselves in.

Natalie [00:05:26] Yes, but we can we can express them in other ways. And it can help you to really process trauma and to to give shape and to find commonality and to share stories. So, you know, as a pure therapeutic tool. It's really powerful. But also, you know, some of the great initiatives that I've seen have been around placemaking and on post disaster, where it's about everything that comes with a destruction of place around you in terms of the physical destruction, if it's been a flood or a fire, for example, or even prolonged drought where the landscape is so scarred for so long, the ability to reimagine as a community and recreate that sense of place through physical markers as well. You know, we think about sculptures and art trails and things that immerse people back in their place with such depth and really foster different conversations about the future of the community and allow for that holding of history, but also, you know, looking forward. So, you know, they're all the really quite critical things, but they can be so intangible and there's really no other format that can foster that. You know, you can do all the planning process you like, but you never get there to those places.

Scotia [00:06:38] Well, it's about how we mark or understand our identity isn't it, which is why we live in the places that we do.

Natalie [00:06:46] Arts can be viewed as a, you know, a thing that's for some people - it can be seen as, you know, a particular art form or a, you know, a particular type of method, for example. But in a in a recovery context or in a disaster preparedness and community resilience context, it can actually be a bridge between parts of the community who might not have ordinarily spent time together or spoken to each other necessarily. You know, I think about things like mens sheds getting involved with, you know, the local kinder and maybe an environment group. And you get those different groups working together and

creating new, new spaces together, using arts as a platform. And that might be, you know, a whole range of different methods.

Scotia [00:07:30] It enables a kind of leveller, doesn't it? We can create safe places for what can be often very complex and difficult conversations to be had in terms of how we view our future or what our potential steps are in terms of our community's sustainability.

Natalie [00:07:48] Yeah, that's right. There is a piece about economic well-being in communities, particularly in a recovery context, and we really notice that there are few things that get communities going again. You know, one of them is running things like events that help people to come back to towns and spent a bit of money there. But arts is a platform that is, you know, often a really big contributor and particularly as recovery goes on, because you can keep on evolving the story and the offering for people to get involved with. And, you know, you can get all parts of the community involved as well. But the you know, the economic driver is really interesting, I think. And, you know, I think for rural towns generally, you know, that that's true. But in a disaster context, it's it's even more true because it's something tangible that the rest of the world can connect with and be involved with, as well as the local community.

Scotia [00:08:44] And offer a different kind of framework of support and encouragement. Well, this year it's already brought a lot of challenges to rural and regional communities facing impacts of serious flooding events. We're sitting in my communities in Queensland and New South Wales and of course this is coming off the back of COVID lockdowns and restrictions and before that the Black Summer bushfires. So, you know, we're living in a real experience of climate impact. What do you think are the major barriers in this current moment or these current senses within our communities for responding to disasters? Like what could we be working on to improve their capacity to prepare and respond effectively and have what can be safe and stronger futures?

Natalie [00:09:33] I think one of the observations that is becoming really acute for us is the level of fatigue in communities and that that successive, you know, that experience of successive and cumulative crises, you know, is a real and really it depletes. There's no break between. I think that's what we've experienced in the last couple of years. There's been very little break between to rejuvenates, replenish, reset. And so the challenges for doing this work for me are around how we how we look after people. Fundamentally.

Scotia [00:10:07] We have such a need for nurture right now, don't we? Like how we look at better ways to to nurture to so that we can recharge our batteries and hold together.

Natalie [00:10:18] Yeah. And keep doing the work that needs to be done. You know, there's only so many people. There's only so much anyone can do. And what we're experiencing is that the work to be done is so much more than we've ever had before. And the time between is so limited that there isn't that time to, you know, we're planning in layered ways as communities about what we're going to do and how we're going to prepare. And we're almost we're preparing in the midst of recovery, which I think is a newer context. It's not a surprising one. We've known that this is the experience that we would be having. But I think the thing I, I guess care about and and concerned about is the, as you've said, the need to nurture people, but also the need to resource people. We're asking a lot of people that are often not being paid for their work. You know, a lot of this practise happens with a few paid resources and mostly volunteer effort or mostly a lot of goodwill and a lot of collaboration and partnerships, which is incredibly powerful and important, but at the same time it can compromise wellbeing.

Scotia [00:11:27] Yeah, and particularly challenging in this day and age when the volunteer rate is decreasing, I'm just

Natalie [00:11:31] That's right

Scotia [00:11:32] Talking to a range of community members here in Orbost, where I'm at today, and this concern about the depletion of the volunteer source and no sense of how to find new energy. And and you know, I have to say, an increasing expectation, responsibility being put back on our volunteer groups like I mean, a key focus of your work is exploring how and to what extent we take on this notion of community led approaches, which I think has kind of a pendulum of how people understand that. But in order to have community led approaches to enable communities to be better prepared or to be better connected, I'm thinking of the Get Ready project that the FRRR undertook and what the pilot programmes across the communities developed. And I'm wondering if you can talk about what you learnt from this about leadership within communities and how we might support that growth of community leaders and enable more effectual or more kind of sustainable community led programmes, particularly with this view of tiredness and depleting volunteerism and the stresses that life is bringing to people now.

Natalie [00:12:39] Yes. So the Get Ready initiative was a partnership with the New South Wales Government and a number of private philanthropic partners that sought to pilot what we call the disaster resilient Future Ready Programme model. And we worked in three New South Wales communities and we're currently starting that in three Victorian communities. It started, you know, quite a few years ago with a, I guess a curiosity about how we might amplify the role of community agency and how we might formalise the role of community knowledge in formalised systems of disaster preparedness. And so it was really kind of that the model is about how we can help to facilitate wider cross-sector dialogue within communities and processes that actually bring community knowledge, wisdom, lived experience and practical insight into those formalised plans so that when a disaster does occur, the responses are fit for purpose, for that location. And, you know, that's down to very practical things like, you know, how do we communicate in our town? How do we get information from that person to that person? Is it a text message chain? Is it Facebook, those sorts of things that sometimes only emerge at the time of a crisis and they're very organic. So our thinking was, you know, we know that there are a lot of really effective things that communities mobilise around, but they're often done in reaction to the context that they're in or the crisis they're in, and they're not usually treated as part of the formal response system. And so there's a risk in that not being part of the formal system and communities going their own way without the support they need necessarily.

Scotia [00:14:23] Well, we've seen so much evidence of that in this latest flood impacts, haven't we? You know, the the good and the challenging. And, you know, if we can't address that more particularly now, then we're sort of missing such a major opportunity aren't we to address that.

Natalie [00:14:40] Yeah. And I think that sometimes we get into binary discussions about these things that it's good or bad to have, you know, community members and citizens driving local relief efforts. I think we need to acknowledge that the fact is, that is what happens, community members are the first responders. and so rather than debating whether that's right or wrong, I think we need to resource and invest in that level and provide, you know, the right capacity support for those people and and have it within the system so that it's not an and/or or a blame game, but a really embedded part of how we

deal with crisis in communities. And that goes for Covid, it goes for, you know, any any kind of crisis that's happening in a community. And so the Future Ready programme is it's really about that. And you know, I think I would talk about it's increasing the level of authority of community knowledge. And I guess the other part is about what 'community-led' means. And sometimes community led can be interpreted as being the community does everything. What we mean is that policy design or service design or any other system level design needs to be designed from the perspective of localised knowledge, experience, etc. and I think that's just common sense. But again, it's not a shifting of responsibility, it's an inclusion of responsibility.

Scotia [00:16:04] And a shared, you know, it's all shared responsibility in the end too it's interesting how we use language and that becomes kind of complex when we're trying to make things clearer.

Natalie [00:16:15] Yeah. Yeah. It can imply that community led means no one else should be leading. Yeah. And I don't think that's helpful either. No, but it is about just, I guess anchoring, anchoring the design from the place and from the people that know the context quite simply.

Scotia [00:16:34] Well, one of the things that we're working on with you currently, I suppose, is in the same vein, trying to look at ways that we can place within programmes and policies, so it becomes kind of part of the web of activity within disaster management is a National Taskforce for Creative Recovery, and it's it's a group that's founded on the idea that disaster resilience is collective responsibility for all sectors and that cross-industry collaboration is essential to finding effective ways and sustainable ways to face the challenges ahead of us. And particularly, we're coming from the focus of culture and the arts. So could you speak a bit about your experience of that? What was your experience of being in that conversation and why you think cross industry collaboration is important or how you think it could effectively resolve some of these? How it could resolve some of the issues that you've just been talking about in terms of shared responsibility or given given authority, I suppose, for people who do come with some sense of skill and understanding of working in this very complex environment.

Natalie [00:17:47] Firstly, it's a really excellent initiative and I've been really pleased to be involved and every conversation that we have in those forums enriching and insightful and that is I mean, that's the benefit of a cross industry and cross-sector forum like that is that you, you design from different perspectives and you know, getting that balance right so that you can actually build in different viewpoints about the role of arts and culture in recovery and in preparedness and thinking about the members of that group. You know, there are different perspectives, and you can see the way that those discussions can inform the practise of each of the members. And then obviously more broadly as the the work of the group lands and becomes more public, but thinking about, you know, government, you know, is setting policy and is setting programmatic initiatives or funding packages that really need perspective built into them. And I can see in those discussions how valuable the insights about the role of the arts and culture is to that and how, you know, it takes away the sort of what can be a simplified perspective of arts and culture into, you know, a deeper understanding of its role as a sort of developmental practise and therapeutic tool, etc.. So, I mean, really, it's the only way, isn't it? Any time we design anything, you just have to bring in diversity of perspective and you get better, better outcomes.

Scotia [00:19:22] Yeah and I think one of the benefits for us is, you know, we start to be able to share a common language because, you know, we come from different, different places. But it's not to say we're saying different things. It's just trying to find the language which comes becomes a kind of collaborative bridge for us to see, see value and see purpose in what each of us is doing from from our own perspectives.

Natalie [00:19:45] Yes. And a translation of sorts as well to different sectors, which sometimes is what's needed.

Scotia [00:19:52] Well, as we've discussed, the challenges ahead are not easy. I've got quite a lot of work to do and it we're really grateful to have an organisation like yours. I think it's so vital that you've you are able to encompass so many different voices and to really recognise the deep value of those smaller intrinsic places that make up the Australia, the beautiful country that we live in. FRRR has contributed so much in the research space and as an organisation, you've worked alongside communities and researchers to build a strong evidence base around a range of topics of importance to the rural and regional communities. Your most recent study is called Heartbeat of Rural Australia. Can you tell us a bit about that study in some of the top line outcomes of that research? It's a pretty important document to come out at this point in time, particularly when we're talking about tiredness and the need for reinforcing our community leadership.

Natalie [00:20:54] Yes, FRRR commissioned that study late 2021, we were noticing a lot of anecdotal themes about what was happening in rural communities, particularly in relation to the cumulative effects of successive disasters, including droughts, which a lot of regions have been in prolonged drought for a number of years and some, you know, going to a decade long drought. So we we were noticing some themes that related to volunteer fatigue, the ability to just apply for grants, we were seeing some things happening in terms of what we were receiving requests for. And we were really acutely aware of the impacts on isolation and, you know, the potential risks to community fabric in particularly regions that had experienced significant lockdown periods during the pandemic. So we worked with Survey Matters and Ciadana analytics to commission that survey targeting quite grassroots, not for profit organisations and particularly smaller rural and remote areas. And the top line findings, none of which were surprising, very much validated what we thought was happening, but nonetheless provides a good evidence base and we hope platform for organisations to use for themselves in their own advocacy. But really, you know, volunteerism is reducing. The study overall found that it's reduced by about a third across communities. So there's a story of less people actually doing more work. The work itself has increased and the complexity of the work has increased, particularly for those regions dealing with recovery context. There's also a bit of a trend around newer people moving to rural areas and, you know, a curiosity about how to harness that, how to bring those people into the community, how to kind of transition and reimagine volunteerism. And then there was a lot of top line insight about how unhelpful some of the funding systems and constructs are for not for profit organisations. So significant piece about the need to actually resource the capacity of the organisations themselves. So we heard from organisations who can't get grant funding to support insurance costs, for example, and without insurance costs that literally or without their insurance they literally can't operate and their fundraising capacity, so in many rural communities, events and in-person things are the primary channel for community fundraising. And so through the pandemic that was completely decimated and a lot of the organisations that responded literally lost the majority of their income source overnight with the pandemic and the sort of closure of face to face events, which meant that then seeking grant funding or trying to get support for their activities within programmes that had very restrictive criteria and guidelines, really

placed them at risk of being able to keep operating. So there's a I guess the thing about the viability of organisations and sustainability with quite narrow funding revenue streams.

Scotia [00:24:01] Yeah such key, such key information and in some ways not surprising. It's great to have it articulated so that we can agitate for some change. And in some ways it's not big things is it, it's just recognising reality and trying to manipulate the systems that we have without necessary to to toss everything out.

Natalie [00:24:21] Yeah. Yeah. And the report includes some very clear suggestions from respondents about what they would like to see. And so there's clear guidance, not a lot of it's very hard.

Scotia [00:24:33] Yes, It's a great report. And it's interesting. Like one of the things that we're always hearing, particularly in the recovery space, is that added overwhelm for even organisations that seem fairly stable in their community in terms of support to take on the extra requirement and the deeper work required in in troubled times just pushes them beyond capability.

Natalie [00:24:59] Yes. Yeah. And I think, you know, there have been assumptions about digital connectivity and the ability for those organisations and community activities to continue virtually, which we know is not the story in quite significant parts of regional Australia, let alone, you know, connectivity, capability and skills, comfort and access to hardware and equipment. You know, that's it's not an even playing field out there at all.

Scotia [00:25:29] I'd like to finish by asking you in the midst of all of these challenges and the huge job that you have, Natalie, it's pretty overwhelming sometimes. I think sometimes I look with very weary eyes and I wonder what gives you hope? Like, what are the things that keep you going? Because sometimes I think that's very difficult. And there's a lot of talk around at the moment around lethargy and incapacity to be able to see ways forward. So what's your key way of hanging on and seeing hopeful futures?

Natalie [00:26:01] Well, you know, working with people like you helps and others, you know, you know, you know, community of practice. So, you know, it's always better together. And, you know, there's definitely a collective will and, you know, it might feel slow, but I think we are having movement towards more community centred practise, if not community led all the time. But certainly, you know, I think different questions are being asked, different approaches are being tried and you know, there's a genuine, I think, move towards recognising the importance and value of this work. You know, we've certainly got beyond bells and whistles and building things when we're thinking about recovery. There's definitely a depth of thinking and practice that's evolved. So that gives me hope that change can happen.

Scotia [00:26:55] Well, yeah. Well, it's interesting. I've been listening to some conversations from scientists, climate scientists, and you know that there is a the kind of focus that they end up in with, you know, the most important thing for us into the future is people. These are things that give us purpose, but they're also the the network around us that will hold us when things become more difficult or more challenging or more beautiful or however you want to see it. And, you know, I think again, the work that FRRR doe is really focussed to focus on the strengths of who we are and what comes from ensuring people connect and start to build stronger relationship.

Natalie [00:27:41] Thank you. It is all we can do, isn't it? It is about people. We. We have the ability to change things. It does come down to for, you know, at the risk of a bit of a cliché, but it does come down to collaboration, which is far harder, as we know, than it appears. And

Scotia [00:28:00] Well, we're not taught that we're not taught that skill, are we? You know, we it is a new it's a skill that we have to learn. How do we do that and how do we do that with dignity and equality so that we all have a position to be able to hear our story and hear our voices in the decision making.

Natalie [00:28:19] So that's you know, I think that there is there is hope in the the collective process, I think we do experience through crisis. The I mean, I think there is a momentum around around action on climate change. We just have to really focus and put the money in the right places. And that's not easy. But we're you know, I think there's an urgency surfacing in the mainstream that's really important.

Scotia [00:28:50] Yeah. And maybe this is our opportunity. I suppose this is what keeps me hopeful that, you know, when we when we are looking at our future, is this our opportunity to really get back to the key notions of humanity and and how we engage with each other? And, you know, we've got a big cultural shift ahead of us, haven't we? Yeah.

Natalie [00:29:12] And I think the pandemic has helped in that way. There are some things that I'd like to see us hold on to.

Scotia [00:29:17] Yeah. So many beautiful things that have come out of it. And you just think, Oh, have we been sitting in and we've been sitting in that space long enough to understand the value? But, you know, it's fabulous. Like, even I have the privilege of meeting a lot of people through our training, which is about trying to build more connected communities and you know, the small, but such instrumental things that are happening at a local level, which you would see through your grant programmes, is so encouraging.

Natalie [00:29:46] I've got building going on.

Scotia [00:29:49] We're nearly there in the background. Have you? Anyway, so maybe Natalie, we say thank you here and it's so great to speak with you. It's such important work you and your team are doing at FRRR, and we really appreciate your contribution into into our space as well. And I look forward to working with you more into the future.

Natalie [00:30:13] Likewise. Thanks, Scotia.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders: In Conversation and special thanks to Natalie for making the time to speak with me.

We will include links in our show notes to the FRRR reports we've discussed and I strongly encourage you to head to their website to see the full range of resources available there.

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

This podcast is produced by me, Scotia Monkivitch, and my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson. Our sound engineer is Glen Morrow.

We'll be back next month with another conversation - I hope you can join us then.

Thanks for listening.