

CREATIVE RESPONDERS

Podcast Transcript

In Conversation with Louise Scheidl

April 2021

Scotia: Hi I'm Scotia Monkivitch,

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

Today's guest is Louise Scheidl who is the Mental Health Promotion Officer at Albury Wodonga Health in Victoria.

In this episode, we're continuing to explore two areas we have been covering over the past two years - mental health and the wellbeing of young people and their families impacted by natural disaster.

I have been collaborating with Louise on a project called 'My Place, My Home', that you'll hear us discuss in our conversation.

It's a project focussed on young people affected by bushfires in the Corryong area just over a year ago and it brings together local organisations, health services, schools and artists who are working together to support the Corryong community through a community-based arts project.

We've supported the project development in partnership with John Lane from the Royal Children's Hospital's Festival for Healthy Living

Overwhelming local support has connected us with a group of health and education professionals from Corryong Health, Albury Wodonga Health, Gateway Health, Creative Recovery Network, Towong Shire, Bushfire Recovery Victoria, Regional Arts Victoria, Catholic Education Sandhurst, NSW Department of Education, Corryong Neighbourhood House, Beyond Blue's Bushfire Response Program and The Royal Children's Hospital's Festival of Healthy Living.

We are just concluding the first stage of what is planned to be a longer-term creative recovery strategy for the students, their families and communities.

The first stage included a four day program where four local primary and high schools participated in a range of creative workshops facilitated by local artists from the Corryong, Walwa, Cudgewa, Albury and Wodonga areas.

The emphasis of 'My Place, My Home' is on engagement, joy and idea generation through a series of artist-led workshops with groups of students.

Workshops included visual arts, cartooning, drama, circus, drumming and rhythm, script writing, soundscaping, cartooning and shadow puppetry.

Artists plan their workshops led by the question – how does creative engagement help us share stories?

I sat down with Louise in person in her lovely home in Yakandandah and we chatted over cups of tea on a beautiful Autumn day.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Creative Responder, Louise Scheidl.

Scotia: Thanks for joining us today, Louise, and thanks for bringing me into your home. I'm sitting here in front of Lou's beautiful wooden heater with the view of her yard and her chickens and the glorious bush around us. What a beautiful place you have.

Louise: most very welcome, Scotia. Most very welcome.

Scotia: So before we talk much about 'My Place, My Home', which is how I met you, Lou, can you tell us a little bit about what you do - like what was the journey that took you to where you are working now? So, Louise, is the Mental Health Promotions Officer working in early intervention and capacity building teams as part of Albury Wodonga Health, that's your current role, but tell us a little bit about yourself.

Louise: Well, just I guess I can I've been working in this role in particular for about 14 years now, and it's a great role. We have a very large footprint up in the north east of Victoria. And we go a little bit across into the north, into the New South Wales border, across into Albury and in and around that little local area.

And then up in the very north east, in the high country, in the upper Murray, we go across over to Khancoban as well. So we have a very large footprint. And I get to know and meet a lot of people in different communities in through my role.

My profession is as an occupational therapist and I've been working in mental health, I've only ever worked in mental health as an OT since the mid 80s. So I'm one of those dinosaur OT's, but I have always worked in mental health and I've worked in the whole range of of people going through their mental health crisis or growth, depending on where they're at.

And all the way through that. I was very fortunate that I my, my, my teachers that were part of that process used creative therapies throughout the whole, the whole part of our therapeutic approach and support for people. And we had a really - looking looking back at it and then looking at currently now with mental health, the the the approaches of mental health, which is all around recovery and really empowering a person to find their own journey and to support them in their journey, that's what we were doing back then, which was fantastic.

You know, we just didn't have the evidence. But creative therapies was a huge part in enabling people to find their own sense of creativity and to actually find their own sense of hope for themselves. And so that was wonderful. So that's always been part of my work. It's always flowed through - the use of creativity and the impact that can have on someone's health. Yeah.

Scotia: So your community here, the north east and East Gippsland regional Victoria, were significantly impacted by the bushfires of 2019 and 2020 at Christmas and into the new year period. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience for your community?

Louise: Well, it was there was many different, I guess, experiences from different parts. So the north east has got quite a lot of different areas within it. The particular area that was most dramatically impacted by the fires was in the very upper what we call the upper Murray. So very high up into that part of our catchment area.

And the fires started across on the New South Wales side of the river and and spread across. And they they were ferocious and they really, really, just really impacted, it just went through small communities, places were razed and there was just this whole whole sense of, I guess, destruction around four parts.

Some of the impact of it was that also the communications went down. And so what that, that ended up resulting in is that a lot of a lot of people and communities couldn't connect with each other. So, you know, you can imagine the distress that that would cause to people not knowing and not being able to contact relatives or husbands or wives or who were separated due to their due to the fires.

The other impact that it had was the electricity or went down as well. And so, for example, the whole town of Corryong basically had to be evacuated. And so, you know, they they just all had to leave and just go and the stress and the dislocation and I guess also that anxiety that comes with people being left behind, but then not being able to contact them because there was no phones.

So there was just it was just a real extreme situation that was caused there and some of the stress, I would say, is not only not necessarily because the fire impacted them or burnt a house or a property, but, you know, it was just the fact that they were so had to be just separated and didn't know what was going on and were sort of caught in that that that whole really surreal space of not knowing, but just completely overwhelmed with anxiety, t

Scotia: That notion of taking any connection of what we see as safety being removed.

Louise: Oh, yeah. And and just that sense of connectedness, you know, you just don't realise how important it is to be able to you know, I've just spoken to, you know, my loved one and I know they're all right or I know what's going on for them. But not knowing is is is so distressing.

The other thing is, I guess there was a lot of smoke around and there was a lot of that, the whole living with that whole aftermath of it was was also very stressing for people who had impacts on their on their health as well.

And then not long after, there was another another weather event with a lot of rain and actually sort of some flash flooding. And that also really, really impacted communities as well, especially the farming communities where already and I guess I didn't cover this before, but the farming the a lot of the fires went through the farming areas. And so, you know, the whole destruction of of herds, of of cattle, of of sheep, of all their fences and just, you know, and all the stock and all the feed, I should say, you know, just just the enormity of of what of what they were left with. I think that that's also so, you know, the people in the town also suffered financially and all the stress that comes from it. But there was also this other layer with the farmers of this enormous amount of work that they needed to do, which was only compounded the stress of all that was only compounded by the fact that Covid came in.

So just as people were starting to wrap their heads around and going, okay, now we need to you know, we had fire blaze [Blaze Aid] coming up to help. And, you know, there was sort of starting to get some rebuilding going on or at least trying to contain what was going on and looking towards how do we look after the well-being of our of our community emotionally as well. And then all of a sudden when Covid came in, that just stopped. And so this was another insult, if you like, or not insult but assault to the whole mental health and wellbeing of those communities up that way. Yeah. So it's it's been a big impact. Very big impact.

Scotia: And we connected in, I think in early 2020 with conversations around how we could help, particularly at that point around children, young people and, and the connection into the schools. And so began this process which has come to be called 'My Place, My Home'. Yeah, I can you tell us a little, Lou, about what the premise behind that project and how it's evolved and what its kind of goals are?

Louise: Oh, look, it's just it's it's been fantastic. It's been firstly, can I just say how fantastic was and how wonderful it's been to have this other, you know, have your input to have the Creative Recovery Network, you know, lending its lending, its support to the sowing of seeds and and then the, you know, the germination of an idea all the way along the way.

And we've also had some great support as well from the Royal Children's Hospital through the Festival for Healthy Living and John Lane was involved in that, too. So there's been a feeling of this real brains trust and a bigger picture being able to look at the big picture so that that's that's been really so not only inspiring, but affirming and reassuring for me and given me the ability to be here on the ground to throw these opportunities or possibilities out to others that I have got connections with.

So my role in here in in this area is over the years I've created a lot of relationships with people working in a whole lot of different organisations. So I work from a mental health area. But because my role is around capacity building, I'll work with the youth sector, I work with the education sector, you know, family violence sector, working in with the police, with general health of children, children and families work. So always keeping those relationships going. This has been, you know, an opportunity to just pull those guys together and say, let's have a think about something. Let's let's throw the possibility, what would it be like if we just started to contemplate using the arts or evolving the arts in a really dedicated way to being part of a recovery process?

And it's nothing new. But I think it just needed that first question. And and I was very lucky that I had a lot of people that just answered the call. It was really just would you like to come and talk to these couple of really great people being John Lane and yourself to just consider this as something to think about? And, you know, we were struggling up here, not struggling, I don't know if that's the right word, but it was stymying through Covid because the stuff that we would really want to be doing to get the community together, to feel that to build that connection or to reinforce the connections, we were stymied. We didn't have any thing we could do because of Covid. So I think the curiosity was there of, oh, yes, let's let's let's consider something different. And there was some space for us to consider that and I think it just happened to be serendipity.

Scotia: Yeah. And I think there's something very important in this work around that potentiality of collaboration and how we do have a real need actually to come together to share ideas and resources. And that was really important in this process.

I think often in in the process of recovery, we can be quite siloed in the work that we're doing but the importance of somehow finding avenues or opportunities to bring the collective wisdom or the collective resources together to try and build a stronger base for everyone really is is a really important step.

Louise: Yeah, that's so true. I think, you know, and the people that came to this meeting, like when when I tapped a few people on the shoulder and invited them along, I was trying to throw a broad as cast and cast the net as broad as I could because there was a lot of people that did have bushfire funding that were tasked with responding or being the agency to do this, this and this.

And and it can be very much about people going off and doing your own thing. But we all knew and we all know that sort of mantra of we need to respond to what the community's needing, but it was like, how do we how do we keep doing that? How how can we make sure that we're all on the same page?

And there were some groups that were pulled together and that was all fine and good. And they're still going and doing some great work, looking at all the ranges of well being. But this one just seemed to resonate. This one just seemed to pull together and it was almost like we turned it back around.

Here was the the idea and the thought and the angle of how to approach things and all these people that had a bushfire filter, you know, of recovery work came along and considered it. So it sort of it just brought everybody together straight away rather than the other way of. So, yeah.

Scotia: So tell us a bit about 'My Place, My Home'

Louise: So my place my home started off very, very loose with just really looking at here's the idea. Have a think about using how can we how can we best incorporate the use of arts and culture in the recovery process up in that Upper Murray area.

Let's let's have a look and see how could we do that, what can we come up with? And John Lane being working for the Royal Children's Hospital and myself working mostly targeting, supporting young people between the ages of nought and 18.

So young people is my sort of target group, if you like, if you if you want to put it that way. We sort of thought that might be a good place to start with, but yet we were open to any of those people sitting around the table. If there was some ideas that they thought would go and respond to different parts of the community in the population, that would be fine.

But we actually came up with the idea that it would be good to focus on schools because we get not only do we support young people themselves and help them with their sense of agency and empowerment, but we also there's also the adults around those kids.

There's the teachers that have all gone through, some of them had gone through their own own sort of experiences of bushfire, as well as just supporting the kids there. And so they get they get the they sort of get the benefit of of of some sort of a creative approach to this recovery project. And then around them that flows on a little bit further.

The organisations that all came and sat around, they were local organisations. They had people that were on the ground as well and parts of those communities. So we could sort of see that if we if we sort of targeted the young kids in that area through the schools, it was a great way for us to really focus, I guess, give some focus on a project without it being too descriptive.

So the other thing that we we sort of came to know is there wasn't a lot of voice of young people in a lot of the recovery conversations, the planning and the feedback and all the agencies that got together were very adult focussed - talking on behalf of young people, of course, but it wasn't actually their voice in their saying this is this is what's important to us. And this is what we think might be useful to happen around here for us to make it more meaningful where we live.

And so we were really, I guess, talking around that and then coming up more and more, it sort of started to evolve into why don't we create, first of all, an opportunity for kids to experience different art forms and art mediums that they may not get because it's a fairly isolated area up that way. So there's not a lot of a lot of things that go up there in terms of, you know, travelling plays or a lot of different the arts community, there is an arts community up there, but it's it's it's still quite small in some ways and not necessarily highly established in terms of other people being able to be involved in different activities or events.

So there was that part of that was let's get the kids, let's give the kids an opportunity to have a try, because they need to know something. They need to know what it's like to see if that's what they want to do more of. So that was one part of it.

And the other part was, well, let's let's also try and elicit what do they like, what's the what's not only what do they like, but what's their idea of what's going on? What's their experience like? How can we understand and start to hear their stories?

And so that's when it started to gel a little bit more, we had a couple of local organisations that had funding bushfire funding that said, yep, we'll throw money in. And so all of a sudden, you know, we had one meeting, it was fantastic because one person representing a local organisation said, yep, we'll throw some money, we'll throw X amount of dollars in. The next person said yep, we'll throw some money in too and we'll throw some money and by the end of it, I think we had about 20,000 dollars at the end of one meeting. It was like, oh, my God, that's fantastic. You know, this is people wanting, so the curiosity to start with, but then also this no, we're committed, we're going to throw in and give this a go and support the idea. And then it just kept growing.

And we ended up with a very short window of opportunity to run this because we had to try and work with the four schools that are up there. And that's always, trying to juggle schools is not easy.

But we we managed to get we managed to get that happening. So, you know, we were able to, we had a very short time then between getting some funding, getting some local funding, and we decided to create four days for workshop days where students could get an experience of different art forms with different artists.

And then we would also be gathering some information gathering and listening to what stories they had and and then doing an evaluation of it. So sort of like a big scoping project from this.

We are now putting together the data we've gathered from those days, and we will come up with a report and we'll put that back to the working party. And the working party will then decide where do we want to go from there? And hopefully we are hoping that they will want to incorporate in a more long term or medium term to actually be delivering more, more art based projects.

So the four schools that we we had involved in this project, three of them were primary schools and one of them is a, you know, not only primary school but a secondary school as well.

So the four day workshops, we we split them up into two days being for primary schools only. And that was basically for two hundred and three kids. So the first day of the workshops for the primary school, we had the artists go out and deliver their workshops in the schools. So they got a a real sense of the place for each of those schools. And some of the schools are tiny, like they've got nine kids in the school. So, you know, they're they're really tiny little schools. So it's wonderful for the artists to go out and experience that.

And then we also had on the second day for the primary schools, we had all the primary schools come together and be there at one school, and we had all those kids broken up into different groups and they rotated then and got an experience of the artists through the day. And we had a book end of the day with all the kids coming together, breaking into their groups, and then at the other end of the day, sort of sharing a little bit of a show and tell about what they did. And it was just lots of fun, very high energy.

The artists were all very buzzed and were able to share some of the different different sort of processes that had come through and some of the themes and the the outcomes that the kids came up with in their workshops. And and then for the second part, for the second part of the the two day workshops, so the final the third and fourth day, they were specifically for the high school.

So we just stayed in the one place and the students between grade seven and grade ten, they all got a chance to have a workshop with every different artist. So they got it, they got a chair, so the students got a chance to have a workshop with every different artist. So that was fantastic.

Scotia: So one of the important things about this process was how we bought the kind of collective team together to work in those schools. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Louise: Yeah, this is just I think this is what makes it really magic. Not only did we manage to bring together a fantastic group of artists that, you know, really got this whole idea about supporting and helping the community through their art and really facilitating that with the kids and with the others around it.

But also, we brought in another aspect, which there was a group of people that were mostly from health backgrounds, and they came in and we called them the 'wellbeing angels'. And so the idea was that an artist was teamed up with a wellbeing angel and they were part of facilitating to a group of kids

Scotia: in conjunction with the teachers...

Louise: ...in conjunction with the teachers there as well. So in each group of students, they had an artist, they had a health worker as a well-being angel, and they also had the teacher all there supporting and surrounding those kids in their creative process.

And, you know, that's one of the I think one of the magical things about this particular project is that we've brought together, if you can think of a Venn diagram and you've got, you know, your health circle, you've got your arts circle and you've got your circle of education and teachers and where they meet, where they all intersect, that's the magic.

And that's what 'My Place, My Home' is. It's that space where we're all coming together and and sharing and inspiring each other and supporting each other and energising each other to help support the kids. So, yeah, it's great. It's fantastic.

Scotia: So where do you go from here?

Louise: Well, we where we go from here? We hope that this is just the beginning. As I said, we really were thinking of these four days in this particular part of the project as a scoping project.

So we were gathering as I said, we gathered information, feedback from kids, from the kids, from the teachers, from the artists and also from the well, from the working party group that actually have enabled through their funding and support for this to occur.

And we're putting that into a report. So we're taking that back to the well-being to the well-being group, the working party group, I should say and then we will see where to from now and our hope is that from the feedback we got, people are very energised and really want to keep this going and can see the benefit of it for not only the young kids, but in the community, but other parts of the community potentially, too.

So there's definitely a resolve and I think it's galvanised that. And so we're looking for further funding and looking at medium to long term projects, which we know is the way we have to work when we're looking at recovery work. We cannot do short term. We need to be looking at longer term projects. So that's where we'll be heading, that's our angle.

Scotia: I mean, it's interesting because you mentioned before all the layers of impact that have occurred, drought and fire and flood, then Covid and that's going to be the continual landscape that we're working with, isn't it? So where do you think from your experience, that there might be changing notions of leadership or ways that we might start to rethink about bringing in alternative ways of working, like a creative responder kind of process or other alternative ways than the traditional recovery programmes?

Louise: Well, I think from a localised point of view, the experience that we've got going on up in the Upper Murray in terms of this project and the impact it's had and the impact it's had on the relationships of all those communities, not only the communities but the services working to support those communities - that gets fed back, that's getting fed back higher up.

And I do believe that that's where it's going to go, that this is a sort of a structural change that needs to happen where this will be incorporated into, you know, the broader strategies and the broader sort of sets of responses.

I'm hoping that the new agencies that are being developed up through federally and and at a state level, that from a grassroots point of view, like the project we're running, that we're able to to to be able to pass on these messages back up there and in such a way that we can we can actually have them incorporated into longer term approaches and approaches that are not just written down, but are actually resourced, that resources are actually allocated as much as they're allocated to other parts of a response that resources, not only human resources, but, you know, you need financial resources that that is allocated as well. And that's part of it.

Scotia: And what about you? Like, if you think about your own practice, where does creativity in the arts sit in your in your world

Louise: As a professional?

Scotia: Well, as a professional, as someone who works in this as a profession but also for yourself personally. What's an experience that you could share that shows, you know, some some importance around the impact of involving creativity?

Louise: Oh, well, look, I think in my in my professional work, when I've done, you know, the therapeutic work, both individually and group work, it's it's just a no brainer.

And we have more and more we have more and more current research that's that's sort of providing good evidence for it. But, you know, the right brain, we've we live in our bodies, we feel we have emotions and we not always switched on in our cognitive.

And I find that art is just and art based therapies and art based approaches is all, as I said earlier on, is really about encouraging someone's individual creativity, whatever that means in their life, whatever is meaningful for them.

And it's also about creating and affirming that sense of hope for someone for themselves. So that's where I come from. And to me, the creative arts is just that way that just helps enable that to happen.

And it's it just creates a really wonderful horizontal relationship with people as well. You're not becoming an expert or any of that type of power. It's all about actually just being side by side and just walking along with someone and maybe helping support them when they need it or point things in differ-

ent directions and say, hey, look, let's try that, you know, and just actually being sort of like therapeutic companions as well.

Scotia: Beautiful. That was really beautiful Lou. Well, we're looking forward to supporting where we can walking along this journey with you, with the 'My Place, My Home' project. And I think, as you said, the value of that long term view is so vital as we continue as a community down this journey of recovery, but also how we build resilience into the whole cycle of preparedness.

Scotia: Absolutely. I think that's the thing is definitely in that mental health promotion and that whole sense of, how we say, sort of social capital within a community that, you know, what happens at this point in time is just the warmup for what happens next.

And so there will be natural events that will occur. We live in a country where we just know that something will happen down the track again but it's about the connectedness and it's about the relationships and it's about the wisdom that the community can have. And I think the arts is a way of actually engendering that. It's a way of actually reflecting that back out in some form you know whatever the form is, the creative form is. And I think it also just helps nurture and somehow feeds that sense of creativity and that sense of agency in communities. So so, yeah, I think it's yeah, I think we just have to keep working on that one.

Scotia: Beautiful, thanks Lou.

Scotia: Thanks for joining us for another episode of Creative Responders in Conversation and many thanks to Louise for making the time to speak with me about 'My Place, My Home'. We look forward to sharing updates on this project with you as we move into the next phase.

If you're interested in hearing more about young people and disaster management, you might like to go back to Episode 1 of our documentary series - if you scroll back in your Creative Responders podcast feed it's our very first episode called "A Sense of Safety: what young people are capable of in the face of Disaster".

For that story, we spent some time at Strathewen Primary School in Victoria to hear from their Year 6 students and Principal, Jane Hayward, about their award winning bushfire education program developed after the Black Saturday bushfires.

You might also be interested in one of our earlier 'In Conversation' episodes with Kate Sulan where we discuss her wonderful cubby house installation project - it was developed as part of the Refuge project at Arts House and is a powerful example of the meaningful intersection of creativity, young people and the emergency management space. That's episode 9 of our first season if you'd like to go back and listen.

All of our episodes are available to stream directly from our website - creative recovery dot net dot au and that's also where you can find transcripts for each episode and other resources relating to the topics we explore.

Creative Responders In Conversation 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 the team at Audiocraft.

We'll be back next month with another Conversation, I hope you can join us then. Thanks for listening.