Podcast Transcript

Creative Responders: In Conversation with Amanda Lamont

June 2020

Scotia: Hello, 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 front lines of the arts and emergency management sectors as they prepare, respond and recover from disasters.

For those of you who might be joining us for the first time, you might like to know about the Creative Responders documentary series which was released in October 2019.

If you go back through your podcast feed, you'll see those earlier episodes.

Each episode covers a story or case study about the power of the arts and creativity in disaster management:

We explore the role of young people and children in building community resilience through the case study of Strathewen Primary School and their award-winning bushfire education program following the Black Saturday bushfires;

We investigate how a First Nations community in North Queensland galvanised a community in the wake of Cyclone Yasi and hear about the connectedness of arts, culture and country and their ongoing role as leaders in emergency response.

We visit South Australia to talk to farmers impacted by ongoing drought to hear how creativity is bringing their communities together amidst the challenges of isolation, severe weather events and financial hardship.

And we also visit Western Australia's Understory Art and Nature Trail to turn the microphone back on to the artists working with trauma impacted communities - to look at what artist's can do for themselves, but also what structural changes we need to see in the sector to make practice safer and more sustainable.

We are currently working on more stories for Season 2 of the documentary series and can't wait to share those with you later in the year.

In the meantime, I'm so pleased to be connecting with you all here through these monthly conversations and I have to say it's been great for me to get to spend this time catching up with some of the key leaders and thinkers in our sector, despite the physical distance we have all been experiencing.

Today, I am thrilled to share with you a conversation I had recently with Amanda Lamont.

Amanda is a specialist in stakeholder engagement, partnerships and relationship management, with a focus on disaster resilience and disaster risk reduction.

Whether it's in her capacity as a volunteer firefighter, a lawyer, an international aid worker or as the founder of the Australasian women in emergencies network - the constant thread with Amanda, is her deep passion for social justice and her immense drive and capacity for leadership to make improvements to people's lives.

The perspectives Amanda shares in our conversation about the "cascade of disasters" so many communities are facing at the moment, and her insights about the bushfire royal commission feel especially poignant as we work through Covid-19 while looking ahead to another challenging summer here in Australia.

We started this series with the goal of furthering discussion and deepening conversation around the issues facing disaster impacted communities - and Amanda is someone who can always be relied on to bring curiosity, deep thinking and loyalty to the work.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Creative Responder, Amanda Lamont.

Scotia: Welcome, everybody. I'm here in my home studio today with Amanda Lamont on Zoom with me who is going to be our guest speaker today. So I'd like to welcome you, Amanda.

I'm on Jaggara Turrbal Country here in Brisbane, Queensland. Where where are you?

Amanda: I am on the lands of the Wurundjeri People in the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria.

Scotia: I met Amanda a couple of years ago now at a sector meeting and came very quickly to realise that she is quite a force within the disaster management sector. She's a specialist in stakeholder engagement, partnerships and relationship management. And she got a strong focus on disaster resilience and disaster risk reduction and comes with a extraordinary range of experiences and quite an adventurous life through all sorts of aspects of disaster management. Would you give us a bit of an idea of your journey so far Amanda?

Amanda: Thanks Scotia. How it feels to me is I've ended up at a destination that I never really had in mind, that that's where I was heading. And it feels to me like my life has been at all a bunch of jigsaw pieces coming together for me to be where I am today.

So I actually started my career as a as a corporate lawyer in a big corporate law firm in Adelaide, going through law school, having an economics degree, thinking that I wanted to make a lot of money, have big shoulder pads and carry a briefcase.

And I was following my peers and three years into my career as a corporate lawyer, I really found this humanitarian social justice value inside of me that that made me think I was on the wrong side of being on the side of the corporates and that I was really driven by my social values and my my desire to really work in the humanitarian field.

Subsequent to that, I left that job and I've pretty much been working in not-for-profits and NGOs and in government roles ever since I travelled and lived overseas for quite a long time. And I've actually travelled to over 60 countries.

So I was then exposed to poverty and hardship and that sense of social justice really grew inside of me. And when I returned to Australia, I was really committed to pursuing a career that revolved around supporting people, vulnerable people, people experiencing hardship and I ended up in a role at World Vision Australia, working in the international programs department, supporting communities, part of the World Vision programs all around the world.

And so I really then sort of grew on my personal experience as a backpacker with a professional connection, understanding of community development and how people are being supported and how we enable people to support themselves.

After that role in international development, I got a job at Australian Red Cross and that role was actually in emergency management and that was the first time when I had sort of that emergency management response / humanitarian aid role with the Red Cross and that coincided with me moving to a bush property in the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria.

And so what came together was this personal living scenario in the bush - really high bushfire risk where I live - also with my career that had now been formed around working in disaster relief and response and recovery that I became I a volunteer firefighter as well. So the combination of that personal value system around social justice and humanitarian work, coupled with my overseas experience and now where I live, has meant that my life is one big disaster, as I say.

Scotia: One big disaster, particularly when you think about tinder dry, beautiful bush that I know is around your house. So you kind of talk about the cycle of how you got into here, but also that work has engaged you in lots of areas of what we call the “disaster management cycle” and different people play different roles at different times when we think about the work of disaster or emergency management. Can you explain a little about what we mean by that disaster management cycle?

Amanda: I think most people would understand that there is a before bit, and a during bit and and after bit and so in “EM speak” we talk about preparedness, mitigation, adaptation in the before phase and then during a disaster we talk about relief and response and then afterwards we talk about recovery.

That all make sense as phases if only it were that simple and neat and if each of those would just neatly fit into a lovely little bucket and we could say “we're doing preparedness today and next week we'll be doing response and then then the week after that will do recovery and then it will be over and we'll wait for the next round”.

Well, you know, the world has absolutely changed. It was never that simple. It was never that simple. It's even more complicated and less simple now, because our experience in the last six to nine months in Australia has been that we have experienced starting, you know these, we had bushfires on the east coast of Australia starting in September last year, near where you are, Scotia.

So for the last nine months, we started experiencing bushfires out of season in our winter. This was on top of many areas of Australia that had been in drought for three years. So drought people they were very much in a response phase, but also preparing for future years of drought and recovering from past years. So they're experiencing those phases together.

And then we have these massive bushfires that are hugely disruptive and traumatic to people that are already experiencing their trauma. So the bushfires come on top. We fighting bushfires all down the east coast, across the south coast and the west coast. You know, every every state in Australia was impacted over summer with bushfires on top of the drought.

And so in those bushfires, they went on for such a prolonged period of time. I was working in New South Wales in the South Coast in January, and we had transitioned from that response and relief phase into recovery. Those bushfires came back and impacted that same community that was journeying into recovery. And we had to go back into relief and response and shut down recovery centres and re-open evacuation centres. So these cycles of before, during and after are coming over the top of each other.

Just to make things even more complicated and traumatic for people, we are now in our recovery from those bushfires. Some people in recovery since September. Some people are really only getting into recovery since March when those fires were extinguished.

Now we have limitations on how we can support recovery because of Covid-19 so people now in a response phase with respect to Covid, recovery phases at different areas with respect to the bushfires, we've got storms and floods now impacting those communities.

So, yes, there are different phases. We can rally around all of those different phases but inherently, we need to see these disasters holistically in all of these phases happening together, because that's that's exactly what's happening now. These disasters are cascading over the top of each other so we are supporting a

community in recovery in northeast Victoria and they're actually in response for Covid and they've been in recovery for years for other things. It's incredibly complicated.

On top of that, people experience those different phases at different times. Some people would say they're still in response and relief phase for the bushfires. Many would say we've been waiting for months, we've been in recovery for months and nothing's happening yet, so responding to the different needs, it's incredibly complicated.

So I don't I don't like to really talk about the different phases in a siloed approach that we are constantly moving between all of those phases and that people that work in this space and communities experiencing disasters really just need to be prepared to bounce backwards and forwards amongst all of them.

Scotia: Yeah, there's no there's no sense of kind of a linear timeframe either, and I think one of the, we often talk about the challenge of time and how we understand and and work within a timeframe that isn't restricted in the sense of this will occur over the next two years and then we're finished.

And you you're right, it's the intersection of all of these different impacts that we're experiencing. we could say right now that we're sort of at our penultimate learning experience around that intersection of multiple disasters and yet we've seen a kind of response and recovery frame that isn't suitable for for that.

And interestingly, you know, we're just going into what is being triggered in the political cycle around a review of what we did over the summer holidays, the Bushfire Royal Commission, that's starting to look at, well, what do we learn from this experience?

And from my understanding, there's no relationship in that royal commission to see it in the context of the impact of Covid on top. So it's kind of interesting that even when we're planning to build a better future in terms of how we manage, we're still not looking at the layers of complexity.

Amanda: I think that's right. First and foremost, disasters are complex.

Recovering from disasters is complex and they're complex because they involve people, and that is always going to complicate phases and silos and a sort of systematic policy approach to how you use support people.

So it's really complicated and the best recovery would be down to a really individual level so that each and every person that's been impacted, whether that's directly because they lost their home or whether that's indirectly because they've lost an income, or they're suffering from post-traumatic stress as a result of what they experienced or a near-death experience.

If recovery for every individual could be for them, for their individual circumstances, that would that would be great. But the reality is that we work with communities in recovery at all different levels - at a household level and then at a local community level and certainly at a state and a national level.

And the royal commission is coming together to explore, you know, how how is our response to what they have phrased as a as a natural disaster and perhaps I could segue quite quickly to talk about, you know, there is no such thing as a natural disaster. We have natural hazards. Disasters come because they impact people in terms of directly or what we value.

So even the fact we have a royal commission into natural disasters is really missing the point that the disasters related to people, the natural bit is related to the hazard. And the first point would be to disconnect those two together.

The risk, of course, is if we talk about natural disasters, the easy response is, well, it's natural, what can we do? There's nothing we can do about that. But in actual fact, in a disaster and how it impacts people, there's a whole lot we can do to minimise the pain and suffering that people experience as a result of disasters so just a bit of an aside about that royal commission.

We've had royal commissions in the past. We've had inquiries. We've had lots of research done in relation to disasters in our preparation, our response and our recovery, but not really our recovery. Not really our preparedness.

You know, we focus on how many how many boots on the ground and how many helicopters in the sky and how many trucks did we have rolling along the road. And we keep looking at that and we keep looking at that. And of course, we want to have more resources and more firefighting ability and more people to sandbag in the case of floods and tarp roofs.

The reality is, with the changing climate, we are going to experience more extreme weather events. They are going to expand across a longer period of time, not traditional three months summer and three months winter for storms. We're going to see these things crossing over. So that's gonna be complicated. And we really need to invest our time and resources, I believe, in understanding that complexity and understanding how we can better prepare and mitigate what is the disaster, which is the pain and suffering caused to people and our environment, because that's, of course, something we value and unless of course we can stop these fires - and you ask a firefighter, a commissioner who was responsible for that incident management - those fires were unstoppable. There were no amount of resources that could be put towards those fires so I would love to see a royal commission into recovery to work out what are we doing, how have we done it in the past and how can we learn from our previous experiences and take that forward into the next one.

And on top of that, all those royal commissions, have we implemented all of the findings and recommendations from past royal commissions and inquiries into our current processes? Or are we just

doing another one and we're gonna come up with another list of recommendations that will be really nice to think about. But when the fire happens, we still do the same thing and we go into recovery. Yeah.

Scotia: Yeah, so how do we how do we broaden the conversation so there's action orientated taken out of that?

And I'm interested in how you frame that idea that a disaster is what has happened in the human context. And I think from our perspective that the arts bring in to this disaster management management area are a real way to engage with the human elements that we are working with at an individual and a community and a state and a national level. You are rightly saying, we are dealing with people and lives and emotions and how we deal and think about our place in our landscape. Where do you think that the voice of the arts or culture should sit or could possibly sit within this process?

Amanda: Isn't it a shame, Scotia, that you're talking about where could it sit and we're not having a conversation about where it is absolutely sitting right now in our context of recovery from the bushfires and this response phase that we're with respect to Covid.

But we're still talking about it as something that might be a good idea or that it might happen. I wish we was so much further advanced because of what we've learned and that we were talking about "Let's talk about what is actually happening right now".

Look, I guess what I when I think about the role of arts, I think about some of the work that I do as a volunteer with the Red Cross. I do a lot of work with our volunteers and directly with communities on supporting them through what we call psychological first aid.

And this is a this is something that we use to support people who are suffering an immediate trauma to support them and instill hope and calm and alleviate whatever immediate suffering that they're going through. As part of that training, there's a strong element of self-care that we teach our volunteers. And I talk to I talk to people that I train about stress, what causes stress, and I talk to people about what they do to alleviate their stress. And guess what is a common theme amongst everybody that I talk to about what they do when they're feeling stressed? It's art. A lot of people have an art project or an art idea or art influenced theme that they turn to when they need to relax, reflect, recover, de-stress, unwind. So we know in a normal situation, people turn to the arts professionally or personally, a craft project at home. They turn to that to feel better. And that exact same scenario can apply to communities that are recovering. So when we talk to communities in their recovery, we talk to them about what is that that they normally do to to feel better and to relax and to de-stress and really have some time out for them to make sense of everything. That's where art comes in. That is where art is really important because it brings people together around a common love. It enables people to have their own self reflection time if it's something they're doing for themselves.

And and as you and I both know, art can play a really key role in creating memorials and ways for a community to remember what they have experienced together and that united them and to have some some ongoing memory of what they experienced. And this can be through the arts so, yeah, art’s important. We actually all know that already. And the fact that we're not actually working harder to make sure this is a really integral part of our our programs, certainly in recovery, but sometimes art in recovery it's really organic and it happens and it should be really spontaneous but that doesn't mean there can't be a lot of things that we can do to to set the scene now in what we call our preparedness phase in communities and understand what the arts culture is like in a community before a disaster and then working about how we can bring that back and actually make that even much stronger in a community. I think that's I think it's essential.

Scotia: Well, we think it's essential too. But I’m, I'd like to pick up on what you say that it's often seen as recovering, I think we don't have to sort of argue our position there too much. But I'm really excited about the potential of what we can bring in to the other phases of what we're talking about as the emergency management cycle.

I think that the capacity for the arts to being a creative lens into understanding complexity is something that I don't think we are recognised for, certainly not when we're talking about working across sectors and certainly not within the government but potentially the creative brain has ways of looking at problem solving and planning and future thinking in a way that would be really useful into what is a very complex scenario.

Amanda: I think one of the challenges that we have in that context, Scotia, is a lack of understanding about what you mean, what we mean or what we think when we say the arts.

Scotia: You think about people who run festivals. They make a city overnight and often it's much more inviting and creative and vital and place of peace that people want to go to other than an evacuation centre that is often seen to be cold and harsh and dehumanizing.

So what could we bring in just, for example, in that space?

Amanda: OK.

So, for example, in a cold, wet, dark, scary evacuation centre that has no power because the power’s gone and when the circus is in town down the road and the circus carries its generators across to the evacuation centre and lights the place up, we're not we're not talking about entertaining or performing - we’re talking about exactly what you said, the ability to create a safe space, that can be that can be set up in a matter of time.

We saw that happen this summer. That was exactly what happened when the circus was in town. People were evacuated that not there was no power.

The circus rallied and they brought across all of their equipment and resources and enabled that evacuation centre to have some power and some light. So that's a real example. That's not that's not what people would think when we talk about the arts.

And I think you're absolutely right, because sometimes I think you talk about often in a community that's being devastated and recovering. They would think, well, the last thing I want right now is the ballet in town. I haven't got time to watch the ballet. I've got work to do. I don't think people fully appreciate how much arts is a part of their life.

And a lot of these communities, these regional communities that are being devastated, those festivals, those iconic festivals that they have rolling out in their communities year upon year, they are key. Those towns packed out. They bring people into town and they also give the town a chance to show off and still feel real pride about where they live in and what they represent. So there's so much sort of so much underlying just an arts performance to make people feel good for half an hour. It's so much bigger than that. And I love the way you talk about the arts enabling people to understand complexity and to understand systems and processes. I think it can certainly do that at all levels.

Scotia: Well, we've got we've got a long and keen road ahead of us to keep working together more collaboratively, and I'm pretty excited about that.

There is another area that - I first met you, Amanda, at a breakfast in Brisbane a couple of years ago now, I think. And you were there, I had heard about you but I was very keen to see you around the table at what was the first Australasian Women in Emergencies network meeting for Brisbane. And we started to become friends after that because we had quite a heated conversation around Yuval Harari's representation of the evolution of the human species.

So can you tell us a bit about that network? I found a real connection there in terms of the efforts for people well and women in emergency management to talk about the role of leadership, because I think it's a common conversation that we have in the arts where a lot of the work and the evolution of our arts sector occurs through the energy of women but we have very little representation within the kind of key leadership positions and one of the key roles of the Australasian Women in Emergency's network is around how do we build the voice and the contribution of women more effectively?

Amanda: Yes. So, just over two years ago, this idea was formed. Two colleagues of mine in the emergency sector and I were at a breakfast for International Women's Day.

And what we realised was there was no there was no network or or organisational group for women who work in an emergency context.

So we sat around a coffee table over the course of a couple of months and came up with a vision and a strategy and an idea. We tested it. It was sound. We were inundated with “go for it, This is fantastic, Where do I sign up?”

So two years later, we have over a thousand members. We've expanded from the Australian Women in Emergency's Network to the Australasian Women in Emergency's Network. And we have women from all around the world keen to set up something similar, all be sort of hybrid members of that network because they're not geographically placed here.

So. So we really hit on something.

And some of the key things we talked about early on were around supporting, promoting and recognising and celebrating the role that women play in emergencies. And and as you did, and I'll just pick you up - you put the word ‘management’ in there and we very, very purposely are not about women in emergency management.

And that's really important because women play really important roles in an emergency context that you would not describe as part of emergency management, because we do have women who are employed in emergency management and emergency services as members, absolutely, and that extends from firefighters to emergency services and health workers who have a first responder operational role.

But women have such a such a huge role to play beyond what we normally see in lights and sirens and uniforms. Women who run community libraries, neighbourhood houses, local arts centres, women that are really integral parts of the family and the household structure in terms of the support that they provide their family and their neighbours.

And what we wanted to recognise was because disasters and emergencies can impact every element of somebodies life,

It's not just you have a fire, it's put out and then you carry on. There's so much more that is impacted when a disaster impacts just at a household level. But more so in a community and at a state level that women play a really important role. And we want that to be recognised. The role that women play going about, often what they would say is is a role that has nothing to do with emergencies and disasters. Teachers, for example, the role that they have in supporting kids in the disaster resilience education. So we wanted to make it really open that it wasn't about response and it wasn't about lights and sirens and we thought we could replicate in the network this multi-sector approach to disasters where we bring around the table all the people that have a role to play that we would like to also see roll out in a disaster in all those phases.

So we do have people that we can transport teachers, students, researchers. We have firefighters, emergency services, health workers, doctors, defence. We have all of the players that have a key role to play in that holistic support to a community, plus community members, by the way, in the network and that

sort of replicates how you'd like a really great emergency management scenario to look with all of those players well represented around the table.

So we're all about celebrating and recognising and building on that once we actually get the message out that women are here, too. And, you know, I want to just say that message and I've said it many times, I get asked in the context of the network, what is it that women do better than men in emergencies or what is it that we do that men can't do? And the answer is absolutely nothing. It's not that women do things differently or better or instead of it's it's more about, you know, what I've said, it's sort of "hashtag us too". Women do all of those things as well and we just want that to be recognised and celebrated.

And because we bring such, such a wealth of life experience that is different and recognising the diversity that women bring to a conversation, you know, we really advocate for women to have much more presence in leadership roles in an emergency in all phases.

We've seen some progress. We're still far from where we need to be. And I would suggest that an at a national level, people would be possibly patting themselves on the back to say we've done a great job in having equality in our recruitment and women firefighters and women on the frontline.

Here's my problem with this leadership. Women… inherently roles in disaster recovery are held by women. So in the normal course, outside the activation side of a disaster, those those roles that are seen as disaster recovery roles, supporting communities in that long road to recovery are usually held by women.

And when we have these disasters and we appointed people to oversee the recovery operations, those appointments have all been to men. So we have women with all of this wealth of experience and an ongoing day to day understanding of the complexity and the connections that the women have. All of a sudden, when you appoint someone to a senior leadership role at a state level or a national level, you look at all those roles, those appointments that have been made. They are to men. And I think that lacks lacks the growth and the evolution that that we would have hoped to have seen. And I think we can do better. We just have to do better because we're not recognising what is what is playing out on the ground when we have all of these leadership roles, the positions that hold on in.

Scotia: It's interesting, too, that in the kind of international conversation at the moment around the response to climate, there's been a lot of talk about the different sensibility in terms of how women leaders of the world have managed the situation.

And maybe it goes back to what you were saying earlier about the complexities that we're looking at in terms of these multiple layers of impact on people's lives. And inevitably, you know, someone who who is in a leadership position that perhaps who has a sense of that's through every layer of their life has a better capacity to bring that to leadership.

It's not to say that men don't have that, but more importantly, perhaps, people who have stepped into these certainly higher level kind of leadership roles have more of a command and control kind of background. So that doesn't invite you into looking at multiple levels of complexity with such ease.

Amanda: I'll share with your reflection. And I'm working with communities in north east Victoria at the moment and I am asked in that role a number of times to tell people how many, for example, properties were impacted. And they expect that to be an easy number to share and it's it's going to be a number and it's just there on a spreadsheet ready to share.

My response is always, what do you mean by impacted?

Because we can look at direct, tangible impact. You know, this many people and families have lost their home. So I'm assuming you mean those. Do you mean the people that lost fencing? Do you mean the people that had their paddocks burned and their cattle and stock destroyed or injured? Do you mean people that lost crop? Do you mean people that had a lot of smoke damage to their assets? Do you mean people that lost access to their homes in or out? Do you mean people that suffered a horrendous near-death experience and trauma of this fire just circling around for days and coming and going?

So when we talk about how many people were impacted or how many properties were impacted or what was the impact? It's not that simple.

And if we can really fully understand the the the roll out of layers upon layers of impact on an on an on a family, it's it's much harder to answer. And I know there are times we need to simplify it but it's it's not simple.

I didn't even mention then the economic costs to people that potentially not even impacted by the fire directly at all, but their business is now shut down because there are no tourists in the area, access to roads was shut for a long time and coming into a peak period now for skiing in the high country and in the Alpine region is in southeast Australia - these businesses have been absolutely directly, directly impacted by the bushfires, but people won't necessarily see that. And this is this is somebody's potentially livelihood, something that a business that somebody has spent their lives building together is lost.

So so impact is complex. And to have diversity in decision making really, really important.

And I I don't disagree with you. The men that have been appointed to these positions have a lot of experience. They've got lived experience in various capacities. I have no doubt they are empathetic and sympathetic to what they're seeing and the role that they play and the responsibility that they have.

But they they can only see things through their lived experience and through what they know and what they feel. And there's things that they have never lived or felt they can only hear.

And so I think it just it's just a gap. It's just always going to be a gap unless you have somebody sitting around the table who can speak from a personal perspective through through their eyes and experience that is very different and diverse from the person sitting at the head of the table, I think we're going to have gaps.

Scotia: When you talk about having the voice of that experience in the room, often we contextualize that with the idea of a "community led recovery" or the idea that the community voice needs to lead any decision making because they are the ones that sit in that complexity and have a capacity to see it collectively as well.

So what is that how you framed community led? Because it's a big term that's being used a lot in the policy documents and in the kind of hallway conversations "we're doing community led recovery now"… but what's your understanding of how we might work within a context of community led processes.

Amanda: Yeah, they are two big words, aren't they? What does it mean? What does community mean? I have, as you know, done a lot of work in developing national publications and we used the term community regularly. Quite recently, I stopped using the word community and replaced it with communities to to be less specific and more inclusive because there's sort of never such thing as one community, and I say that because the challenge is to talk about community led recovery gives the impression that there is one community with one view and that all of the needs are the same across that community. So one of the things I say, it's communities. So then you have is some sort of Venn diagram or hatched sort of community levels.

And people belong to a whole lot of different communities. And so you have representation from all the different types of communities, whether they be geographic or interest or gender biased or location or sort of business interests.

So for a start, to recognise that community led recovery means lots of different communities, potentially from the same place, not one community from one place. So we want to recognise communities and all the different interests that a community will have.

And then to have the voice of the community represented. It's hard because you almost - going back to that recovery at a household level - every single person should have a voice. And how can we ensure that of a person that is representing the communities, representing all the community equally? Although we haven't created a scenario where it's the loudest voice speaking on behalf of the community, but not necessarily so it's it's incredibly challenging but it doesn't mean we should stop and say that's too hard. Let's roll out a cookie cutter blanket approach to how we support communities because it's a bit easier. So I think we need to just get comfortable in the challenge and the hardness.

Scotia: And again, that's the place where we bring a lot of experience because a lot of the work of artists who work within communities context have tools and capacities, create spaces to be safe, to raise those

different voices. And you're already in a heightened emotional space when we're talking about disaster impact and recovery but the arts have a capacity for us to work through that in safe and meaningful, trustworthy ways.

Amanda: So when we would talk to somebody who would put their hand up to say, hey, I would like to be a community representative in this in this process, we would we would ask them, how are you representing the community and what mechanisms and tools do you have in place that enable you to connect in and understand what the community need is and then to present that through to other audiences and forums.

So so certainly if if there was a space or a tool or a mechanism or a framework and I hate those words because they sound so jargonistic, but creating the space for lack of a better word for those people to be able to tap into to a way to engage with their community would be really helpful, because when we ask that question, it does stump some people.

They think that they've chatted to their neighbour and therefore they know what what needs to be done or they think because they feel that they need this or that, that they feel that they therefore represent the community because that's what they need.

Scotia: Yeah. And in this instance, they might feel safe to be able to voice that but there are a lot of people who have deeper and richer voices that don't feel safe to step forward. So it's again, another layer of complexity in terms of how we are working.

Well, we've talked a lot about how you frame and understand the complexities, but I suppose more from a personal level. Amanda, do you have any experience you can share with us where you've seen or felt the value of your participation in the kind of art creative process or have had a touch of what it could bring into this space?

Amanda: I have seen in my professional roles many fabulous examples of how the arts has supported a community at a really important time and and in many cases, no one ever would have envisaged that would have been the thing that made people feel better.

So my first my first reflection is for it to be agile and organic and respond to the community and often it's something that the community often will drive itself.

From a personal perspective, I had these really, really interesting experience. I as you know, you're well aware of the tree project that was associated with the communities recovering from the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 in Victoria.

I attended the the unveiling of that tree with a lot of people from the community. And it was a real occasion. It was a fabulously celebratory occasion. And they had lots of market stalls.

One of the things they had this this tree as you know, it's got leaves made from blacksmiths locally and from all around the world. These metal leaves, they had a stand set up and they had some women blacksmiths who were actually making leaves for people to purchase at the time.

And yeah, so I bought I bought three leaves and that was one for me and one for each of my sisters. I hate to say I have all three still because I think they look beautiful together on my necklace. So I have a beautiful memory, which is so beautiful and I love wearing it.

But the other leaf that I bought was one that I had engraved with a message and I sent that to my father, who lives in Western Australia now. But he has had a lifetime of firefighting experience as a volunteer and as a park ranger working in national parks.

And he has many stories that he's told about his experience as a child living in the bush and then as a firefighter and and his near-death experiences and his exposure to the trauma of seeing other people lose things.

So I decided to send him a leaf with with some words engraved that basically said that I was so proud of everything that he'd contributed to that's know in the in the space of bushfire, living it and and fighting bushfires.

And so through arts, I have been able to share something with my father. Now, being a firefighter, we have this sort of connection. I was able to share something with him through the arts that gives him something to say, you know, he doesn't have medals in the context of how he works he doesn't get medals and doesn't stand stand in line and get to shake hands. It doesn't work that way for him.

But now he's got something that says, hey, you know, you did a great job and you contributed to something really important and you should be proud and I was able to say that to him through a piece of art that I probably wouldn't say say something like that to him otherwise.

And so so personally, I have these beautiful stories about how the arts have one, given me something to really treasure as a memory of some, you know, devastating bushfires that here in my neighbourhood.

And then also give something to my father to say, you know, we see you and we thank you for everything that you've done.

Scotia: What a beautiful story, and that's the, one of the great things about creativity we can make tangible what is often a very intangible thing for ourselves, our emotions or the ways that we want to share what is very vulnerable places for ourselves.

Thank you so much, Amanda, for such a great conversation. I always appreciate my talks with you and the exchanges that we have and certainly for me in this growing and learning space that I sitting working within,

you know, a really broad and complex sector that I haven't been in for a long time, it's really great to sit and reflect with you about different ways and ways that we might think into a really rich future and ones where arts and artists as active citizens play a really strong and impactful role.

Amanda: It's been really nice chatting with you. Scotia and I do fondly remember the day that we met and the conversation we had about the history of humankind. And I love that we're still talking about it. And talk to you today about something that you and I are both passionate and committed to - supporting people through traumatic experiences and particularly through looking after themselves, through through art and culture and something that's come from the community, for the community it's close to my heart. And I love that that you and I can continue to have these conversations so thanks very much for the chat. I really enjoyed it.

Scotia: My pleasure. And we look forward to working with you in to that great rich future. See you.

Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders: In Conversation and a special thanks to Amanda for sharing her many insights.

We have another great conversation coming up next month. If you haven't already, you can subscribe for free to Creative Responders in your favourite podcast app or connect with us on facebook, twitter and instagram to hear about upcoming episodes and other news from the network.

Creative Responders: In Conversation is produced by me Scotia Monkivitch, with my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson.

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