

PROMOTING HEALTH AND WELLBEING

THE ARTS RIPPLE EFFECT
VALUING THE ARTS IN COMMUNITIES



PROMOTING HEALTH AND WELLBEING

There is evidence that participation in arts-based activity can contribute to strengthened social relationships and networks, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of good mental and physical health and wellbeing.⁴⁴ As a former editor of the British Medical Journal has commented:

“If health is about adaptation, understanding, and acceptance, then the arts may be more potent than anything that medicine has to offer.”⁴⁵

There is now considerable evidence that the stronger a sense of belonging that people feel, the healthier they are.

“Cultural celebrations and events may promote cooperation, bring new skills and capacities to communities, promote awareness of local issues and reduce social isolation, while promoting economic development. All of these outcomes are clearly linked to individual and community health”⁴⁶

The arts are a powerful mechanism available to us to create an inclusive sense of community wellbeing; since time immemorial people have turned to the arts to celebrate, to commemorate, to protest, to heal, and to unify.

⁴⁴ Wilkinson R & Marmot M. (2003). *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

⁴⁵ Smith, R. (2002). ‘Spend (slightly) Less on Health and More on the Arts.’ *British Medical Journal*. (UK) 325 (7378):1432-1433.

⁴⁶ McQueen-Thomson D, James P & Ziaguras C (2004). *Promoting mental health and wellbeing through community and cultural development: a review of literature focusing on community festivals and celebrations*. Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES: HIGHWATER THEATRE RURAL YOUTH PROGRAM

HighWater Theatre Rural Youth Program started out of concern for the increasing numbers of young people who were not attending school in the Albury/Wodonga region. It is an intensive, arts-based education program for teenagers who no longer participate in the formal education system. It is long term collaboration between the arts, health and education. The three key players are Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company, Gateway Community Health Service and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Professional artists and post prison-release women work with participants to produce high quality theatre that gives voice to their stories. Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company has extensive experience working in women's prisons and staff include ex-prisoners who can personally relate to issues of violence, substance abuse and self-rejection. In the early 2000s when HighWater Theatre was getting started the Wodonga area had one of the highest instances of youth substance abuse in Victoria, was equal highest in terms of anti-social behaviour, and had one of the highest instances of reported suicidal behaviour in Australia.⁴⁷



HighWater Theatre 'Who Owns Me Today' (2011)
Source: Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company



The program provides an environment where young people feel free to share their experiences, confident that other participants will be able to empathise and relate to the challenges they face. Often, belonging to HighWater becomes a strong, stable point in the lives of participants – a secure thing they can rely on.

A 2007 evaluation of the program found that all participants in the program at that time reported either stopping or substantially reducing their use of drugs and alcohol during their time with the program. Fourteen of the young people had been in trouble with the police on a number of occasions before being referred to the program and only two had re-offended. In addition to positive outcomes related to improved engagement with formal education, participants also reported improved self-esteem and confidence, greater will to live, stronger commitment to school work, and a greater sense of connection to others and belief that people care about them.⁴⁸

One 15 year old male participant explained, "I haven't been drinking as much and getting into fights. I guess you could say I feel cared about. I actually want to get up in the morning and be on time for HighWater. I have something to look forward to."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Osmotherly J. (2002). *The HighWater Youth Arts Program* Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company. Paper presented by Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company at the *Role of Schools in Crime Prevention Conference* convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology, Melbourne.

⁴⁸ Osfield Consultants. (2007). *Highwater Theatre the Partnership – Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company, Upper Hume Community Health Service*. Victorian Department of Education, p 14–15

⁴⁹ Ibid p 19.

CASE STUDY: ARTFUL DODGERS STUDIOS

Artful Dodgers Studios (Dodgers) is an innovative program established in 1996 by Jesuit Social Services for young people aged 15–27. Participants work alongside professional artists and musicians in a safe and vibrant arts space that encourages the development of artistic skills and offers holistic support.



Flybz performing at the Napier St Block Party (2013)
Photo: Jesse Sullivan Source: Artful Dodgers Studio

The **Dodgers** vision is to engage, transform, and strengthen young people through involvement in the arts. This is facilitated through increasing social connection, self-esteem, positive mental health as well as foundation and vocational skills. The creative program helps to validate them as important cultural contributors and the studios help them to explore artistic skills and identity beyond the risk factors in their lives. Many participants face barriers to education and employment.

The **Dodgers** is all about art and music. Participants can choose how they will engage and this is integral to their sense of empowerment as they maintain control over their own stories, artistic output and solutions. **Dodgers** artists work with young people to encourage them to strive for artistic excellence and participate in exhibitions and performances.

“We’re here to unlock the arts for young people who would not ordinarily be given access. It’s about stimulating people through art, not placating them. The greatest thing we can offer is the opportunity to locate their unique voice, validate their creative choices and share it with others.” (Forest Keegel, Community Cultural Development Artist)

In 2013 the **Dodgers** music studio helped foster a collaboration between young participants and ex-child soldiers turned hip hop artists ‘FLYBZ’ and legendary Australian song writer Paul Kelly. Producing, managing and releasing the track ‘Child Soldier,’ the **Dodgers** were able to help the newly arrived Fablice and Floreni fulfil their musical

ambitions. This resulted in national media exposure, airplay and paid performance opportunities for FLYBZ. They now use music to tell their stories to school and community groups and have won an African Australian Award, a National Youth award and a Victorian Refugee award. Fablice also received Multicultural Arts Victoria’s first Arts and Cultural Development Scholarship for Refugee Youth in 2014.

Rudder Exchange Visual Arts Mentoring Partnerships (REVAMP) is another program provided by the Artful Dodgers Studios’ and is for young artists with experience at the studios and who wish to further their art practice. REVAMP matches established visual artists with young people to exhibit together. Alumni of REVAMP have transitioned into tertiary study and exhibiting their work professionally. For example, a recent graduate won a scholarship of \$8000 for one year’s tuition at the Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School in NSW.

“Participating in REVAMP and working alongside my mentor and the other artists has made me realise that I am just as able and just as entitled to express myself creatively as anybody else. I’ve expanded my appreciation of the art world and feel freer to express myself without harsh self-criticism. My confidence has grown phenomenally. You can see it in the way I carry myself and interact with people. I feel so well. This is a wellness that the hospitals can’t give you. This is a wellness that you can only get by being included back into society.”
(REVAMP Participant)

**"Since time
immemorial people
have turned to
the arts to celebrate,
to commemorate,
to protest, to heal,
and to unify"**