

Beyond Empathy

influencing the lives of at-risk young people through the arts

Constant and recurring hardship produces complex and entrenched problems for many Australians. People who are unable to participate effectively in employment and other life activities – classified as ‘socially excluded’ – can become distanced and marginalised from mainstream life.

Those in Australia’s indigenous communities are particularly disadvantaged. They now experience the worst health of all Australians, their children are under-performing at school, their young people are unemployed and their communities experience high rates of crime and incarceration.

Armidale-based Beyond Empathy (BE) believes that in order to have a good life, one must give it meaning. Since its inception in 2004, BE has used the arts to deliver meaning, connection and a pathway to community participation for mainly indigenous people in parts of northern NSW and the Illawarra where police, health and community leaders have trouble tackling entrenched anti-social and criminal behaviour.

Most of BE’s work is with young people from deep within marginalised groups - many of whom have been scarred by horrific experiences and who are often beyond the reach of conventional welfare services. Its award-winning programs use art as the first point of engagement because it has found sharing stories within communities to be a powerful way to build understanding. BE uses film, theatre, music, dance, multi-media and visual arts to get participants to tell their stories.

Coupled with intensive individual mentoring, BE programs also encourage participants to build self confidence, interdependence and leadership. These skills help them deal with their issues and personal hardships and steer them on to a more hopeful path. Once on this path, young people are

more likely to move beyond what have often been life-long patterns of alcohol and drug abuse, homelessness and crime.

BE’s key programs include

- *Pathways*: A unique feature of BE’s structure is that many of its graduates go on to work as mentors on BE projects and show leadership within their own communities. Pathways is a three-year mentoring program involving young people the BE team has worked with before – some for more than seven years – that provides participants with leadership skills to build art projects for presentation to other at-risk youth.
- *BE Leaders Camp*: BE runs two leadership camps each year. Participants, emerging artists, professional artists and community support workers spend a week with BE working through an intensive program which has a deep focus on personal development and growth.
- *Mubali*: Meaning “pregnant” in Gamilaroi, *Mubali* works with pregnant indigenous young women at Moree and on the NSW north coast to give them better access to birthing and breastfeeding care. The program is due for roll out at Derby, WA, in 2008.
- *Illawarra Projects*: These projects focus on public space violence affecting families and young people in public housing estates. It uses art to help shift community perceptions of young people.
- *Message in a Bottle (MIAB)*: Reaching more than 1,200 primary and secondary participants each year, this program works to reduce the societal costs of alcohol misuse in 15 communities of north-western NSW by showing young people ways of buffering themselves against excessive drinking through education, developed resilience, skills training and improved employment opportunities.

- *Connections Family Strategy*: This program mentors about 20 young indigenous mothers (aged 14 to 24) each year about health, infancy and early childhood development and connects them, and their families and children, with the local community and local services.
- *BE wAy Tool Kit*: This tool kit and training program makes BE's approach available nationally to other arts and conventional welfare agencies initially to the Northern Territory, South Australia and Sydney's inner west.

WHY SVA BACKS BEYOND EMPATHY

SVA supports BE as an innovative arts-based program which not only uses the arts to engage with indigenous young people and lets their voices be heard, but also effectively uses this work to educate in the areas of health, family support, pre- and post-natal care and early childhood.

BE has successfully formed sustainable delivery partnerships with 85 organisations in the MIAB network, and a further 46 community groups directly involved in BE projects, of which 43 per cent use a sustained BE-supported delivery program.

BE is run by a strong leadership team, who have between them more than 50 years of experience working in traditional 'welfare' areas within Australia's regional and metropolitan communities. We believe BE has the capacity for high social impact and replication if it is able to scale its operations sufficiently.

GROWTH

To date, SVA has supported BE with portfolio management advice, mentoring, strategic planning, networks into the business community, financial management training and funding. Funding support from SVA, for example, has enabled BE to expand the Mubali project to three additional communities in rural NSW. And in 2007, it helped facilitate intensive interventions – meaning providing multiple programs – for around 400 people.

When it was first set up, BE's focus was young people aged up to 25 years. Over time, demand for new and innovative ways of dealing with growing welfare issues has driven an expansion of BE

offerings to more broadly help re-engage families and other people with their community.

PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

BE has seen outstanding results across all of its most recent programs.

Of the 375 people involved in workshops since November 2004, 90 per cent were aged between 12 and 25 years and 86 per cent were indigenous. Since taking part in BE programs, there has been a marked reduction in crime and alcohol misuse in the targeted areas, and 100 per cent of young leaders have articulated they have a new awareness of the positive possibilities life has to offer. Only three have reoffended.

All of the 10 original Mubali Moree participants are still involved (of which two are now employed) in reaching all Aboriginal groups in Moree. The program's been an outstanding success, significantly improving the average birth weights of babies born to participating mums compared to their peers outside BE support. And a high percentage of young Mubali mothers breastfed for at least 12 months.

WHAT'S AHEAD

The BE team continues to work on its business model and has developed a plan for program growth and replication over the next six years, particularly into the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It will work in partnership with local agencies to assist in the sustainability of the work in those new sites. BE recognises that the sustainability of its process lies in its ability to skill other artists, community-support workers and larger NGOs to use the arts as a non-welfare intervention with their most at-risk clients. The BE wAy Tool Kit, incorporating a training program, will enable this plan to come to fruition.

Although BE has secured some program funding for the next three years, there is still a critical need for funding to support ongoing organisational development and program expansion in 2008/09 and beyond.