Health promotions and lifestyle Shoalhaven, South Coast NSW

Joanne Buckskin
University of Wollongong, buckskin@uow.edu.au

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JOANNE BUCKSKIN
Project Co-ordinator, Shoalhaven Story Telling Project

Health Promotion and the development of resources was the inspiration for this community based Shoalhaven Story Telling Project.

It was envisaged that the resources produced from this project would be used in Health Promotion and reconciliation activities throughout the Illawarra. The main outputs to this project included:

• A publication based on 30 interviews of non-Indigenous residents living in communities along the South Coast
• Visual art pieces produced by local Indigenous artists depicting the lives of six of the non-Indigenous residents
• A 16 minute documentary developed and scripted by Indigenous short film maker Tom Avery to complement the project, artists and interviewees stories.
• Educational Kit based on the resources developed to be used in Health Promotions
• Oral History workshops, including the techniques and approaches of interviewing and recording stories.

Offered to Indigenous students enrolled in the Environment and Site Management course at the Illawarra TAFE Bomaderry Campus, auspiced by Illawarra Area Health Promotions Unit.

The aim was to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to share their stories about health and personal well-being. Throughout the interviews people identified what health and personal well-being meant to them, spoke of what health challenges they and their families faced and what they did to improve and maintain their health. Often these stories centred on comparisons with living in cities or inland and the particular qualities of life on the coast.

The project offered Indigenous artists Eileen Hampton (Jervis Bay), Ben Brown (Nowra) and Tom Avery (Ulladulla) the opportunity to share their ways of telling a story through a visual arts medium.

Six stories were selected and these became the basis for the visual art. Each artist was allocated two stories and met with the interviewees to exchange ideas and stories to develop the visual art forms. This enabled the artists to establish a personal relationship and gain a more in-depth understanding of the interviewee’s stories.

The thirty stories were edited and incorporated into a publication that highlighted issues and experiences around the interviewee’s health, lifestyle and community. The participation of the residents in the Shoalhaven community was inspiring. At first it was difficult to persuade people into sharing personal information. Eventually a number of diverse and interesting stories were gathered. It was important that a variety of people be approached including youth, elderly people who practice complimentary medicine, and others with alternative ideas about lifestyle and health.

Many of the important outcomes of the project were intangible, that is the mutual recognition and sharing of stories and laughs were not recorded. The experience of meeting and listen-
ing to people with dramatically different cultural backgrounds and life experiences was a very enriching and positive experience.

Many of those interviewed described their health in very broad terms. One interviewee commented that her health included:

"...the whole physical side, the environment and the mental, emotional and social well-being of you and your family"

Another defined health to mean:

"Well-being on all levels, psychological, emotional and physical. Health is something you have to actually cultivate by creating a health environment around you and inside you"

Others described living on the South Coast was central to their health;

"Here on the coast I can do things that are good for me, but also pleasurable; walking on the beach with the dog swimming in the sea and just being able to do lots of things where you’ve got very dramatic scenery and lovely places to be that are themselves treats"

One of the most impressive stories about the benefits of exercise was a masters swimming group coached by a seventy year old nun who met twice a week at 6am. Those who were in the group were women in their sixties who compete regularly (and successfully) and all enjoy the pressure to perform as well as the shared social interaction.

The project identified many shared similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of living for example; Many of the interviewees named there families as there most crucial support service. Sometimes this meant children or a partner, for others a wide extended family circle that gave a strong sense of connectedness and security. An elderly lady commented;

"I can stay on in my home so long as my daughter and her husband can back me up when things get hard or when I need their help ... family is why I am here"

Others told me that while they did not have kin locally, they had built up a circle of friends who acted like family. They would meet regularly to socialise and support each other in practical and emotional ways. Such local networks were seen as absolutely crucial to a strong sense of well-being and resilience.

One of the issues this project identified was out ability to participate in such community activities depends on our health, especially mobility and motivation as well as transport and opportunity. In particular the frail aged are often extremely isolated as are many of our young people. Unemployment and access were serious issues however the emphasis on individuals telling their own stories as part of a process of self awareness about their health and lifestyle choices in essence taking control of their lives. Participants had the opportunity to identify what they did or could not do to promote their health and well-being. Others became more aware of the benefits of living a rural/coastal lifestyle and the impact this has on their own lives.

The employment and training of Indigenous people on mainstream funding was excellent and an unusual outcome. Far too often the participation of Indigenous people is thought to require the support of Indigenous funding bodies or special purpose grants. Illawarra Area Health and Marama Warren the initial founder of this project are to be congratulated for their insight and support of cross cultural based projects.

As the project co-ordinator, I became involved in its first consultation stages and was on the original steering committee. Given the nature of the project I could use my networks and community development background amongst the community to engage Indigenous participation. The project needed to be steered by the local community and that the community establish a sense of ownership for the project. I was able to facilitate for this process and subsequently the project evolved and became much more than an Oral History Recording. The flexibility and the process of adapting project to suit community needs allowed for the development of these innovative resources.

The dissemination of the resources is currently being developed and workedshopped amongst the Shoalhaven community. The resources will be developed and utilised as a Health Promotions Kit that Health Workers could utilise as a resource for promoting Community Health.