

Embracing Principles of Social Justice and Community Development through Music

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Abstract

This session will highlight the capacity of music and film to strengthen links between vulnerable people as well as offering those experiencing marginalisation 'a voice' to positively influence their personal and social environment.

Lifeline Community Worker and initiator of Sweet Freedom Productions, Brian Procopis, will outline the creative formulas and behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings essential to such 'productions' as:

- 'Aim High/From Little Things Big Things Grow' CD and the DVD film clip of 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', which harnessed the insights and talents of 225 primary school-aged children from the Zillmere State School who delivered an affirming message to their immediate communities and ultimately, via extensive radio play to the entire nation
- 'Scattered People' CD and the DVD film clip of 'Stand With Us' features asylum seekers, refugees and 'kindred-spirited' locals
- Alafiah 'Freedom — Voices of Survival, Voices of Welcome' features young refugees and their 'mainstream' peers
- Kidz2Kidz — Brisbane-based primary school children have put their hearts and talents into the composition and recording of five original songs of peace and connection, which have been given as a gift to Iraqi children.

"We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams... yet we are the movers and shakers of the world forever it seems" (Arthur O'Shaunessy).

Introduction

My name is Brian Procopis. I am a community development worker with Lifeline, Brisbane and am also coordinating the fledgling Sweet Freedom Productions — a record and promotions label for music and film that has arisen out of a community process with a social justice orientation.

Five years ago the agency I work for (Lifeline) decentralised — the Northside counselling and community development team moved to an area bordering the suburb of Zillmere. Our research revealed that the suburb of Zillmere is listed as being in the lowest socio-economic 10 per cent of the state, with high levels of public housing, unemployment and the effects of

this collective frustration — child abuse notifications, domestic violence, lack of multi-ethnic cohesion, etc.

Considering the nature of our organisation we made an appointment to meet with the principal and staff of the local primary school. We discovered that the school had a 30 per cent Aboriginal population, 20 per cent Pacific Islander (Maori, Samoan, Tongan, etc.) and another 12 per cent of children for whom English was a second language. The children reflected the struggles of their families and adopted for themselves a fairly precarious self image — some apparently were reluctant to admit they went to school in Zillmere.

We explained our family counselling services and offered them as a resource for the very dedicated staff and school committee. As we were leaving I casually asked the school principal if they had a school song. She said no and looked at me with a kind of bewilderment — I detected something unspoken like “in the midst of all of this heaviness, you’re asking me about music”. I said I’m not talking about the kind of school songs that we grew up with and that possibly still re-emerge in our nightmares — written by someone else and which the children were taught to sing at school assemblies. I’m talking about a song that all the children have input into. She was interested but checked with her staff and the children.

It was all systems go. We collaboratively came up with a proposal that became a funding application to the Brisbane City Council. We spread the word and engaged community interest. In the hope to further involve the Aboriginal parents we sought out Aboriginal recording artist and performer Kev Carmody and asked if he would be part of our team. He was keen and agreed to work with us in the hope, as did the Oti Brothers (Samoan boy band). Excitement grew. All of the children were asked what they thought was special about their school, what they valued about one another and what difference they thought they could make to the world.

The producer was once again engaged. Songs were recorded and the Aim High album was launched at a breakfast ceremony featured by 4KQ Brisbane radio. National radio play has been constant. People from all over Australia have telephoned the school and bought copies.

“I clock up many hours as an itinerant teacher travelling to support behaviour-disordered children. Hearing you children from Zillmere singing on Triple J was certainly a highlight of my week, indeed of my year. All of the social skills which I attempt to teach were beautifully demonstrated — co-operation, teamwork, inclusion, respect for others and a celebration of faith in, and hope for the future” (from Tuncurry, New South Wales).

The children have performed at a national conference on the Gold Coast — one hour away. For many of them, it was their first look at the ocean. They have since performed in many public events — the Sorry Day celebrations, and various national and international conference invitations including a World Conference on Diversity.

The children walk tall and became proud to identify themselves as being from Zillmere. An annual multicultural festival now occurs in Zillmere offering the opportunity for people from various multi-ethnic communities to showcase themselves and come together with one another.

It was a simple idea illustrating that music and other art forms can engage people in a non-intimidating way — a simple respectful participatory formula was applied, unplanned outcomes keep happening and none of us knew where the idea would go. It was to be a simple school song, and is now a school song 'out of control'. The children love to sing it — it's their own and it has helped them to construct a new image for themselves. It was the 'pebble in the pond' — it was the little thing from which a big thing grew.

Other projects have subsequently happened:

- Alafiah Freedom, with refugee students from detention centres together with mainstream high school students exploring together such themes as survival, welcome — using music as the vehicle to convey their insights
- Kidz2Kidz, in which children attending local primary schools worked with us in the composition of songs of peace, which have been given as a gift to the children of Iraq
- Red, which highlights the value of those with disabilities in nourishing our communities.