

Partnerships in child and adolescent mental health: healthy communities through arts and health

Vanessa Gaston, Royal Flying Doctor Service Central Operations

FACILITATOR: The next presentation is from Vanessa Gaston. She is from Adelaide and she works at the Royal Flying Doctor, Central Operations. She's got a background in nursing and a degree in health science – health promotion and she wants to complete her Masters in Public Health and continue to work with the RFDS exploring prevention and early intervention, which is a bit outside the traditional scope of the Royal Flying Doctors. And her presentation is about partnerships in Child and Adolescent Mental Health: Healthy Communities Through Arts and Health. Welcome to Vanessa.

VANESSA GASTON: Thanks, Bec. I can't promise anything quite as entertaining as Marissa, but we'll move right along anyway. Many of you or most of you are familiar with the traditional services offered by the Royal Flying Doctor Service and while these remain our core business, opportunities have arisen from time to time for the Royal Flying Doctor Service to develop initiatives which encompass our primary health care role.

Today I'm going to talk to you about one of those initiatives which has proven to be worthwhile and effective with young people in the remote areas of South Australia. In 2003 we were approached by a company called Henkel Australia Limited. Now, Henkel approached us because in the realm of the work that they do, some of the moneys they raise goes towards very specific projects in areas of need throughout the world and they approached RFDS with a sum of money and said, "Here, basically we want you to do something that revolves around Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Remote Communities".

RFDS Central Operations were given the opportunity to put together a proposal. We gave it to Henkel, they were really excited about the concept which revolved around a much larger project that we had hoped to get off the ground at one point in time which was a healthy communities project and we extracted elements of it and gave it to Henkel and they said, "Yeah, this looks really good".

So, who are Henkel? And I think you will all be surprised when you find out who Henkel actually are. Henkel are a multi-national company based in Germany. They manufacture brands of a variety of products, consumer products, the Schwarzkopf range of haircare products, they produce durable goods like dryers and washers, a lot of components for electronic machinery, industrial machinery, maintenance parts for vehicles, trains, buses etcetera.

They also produce the Pritt line of adhesive glues and highlighter pens. So they produce a whole range of products. A large part of their profit goes back into communities, they're very much an entrepreneurial orientated company.

In developing this project Henkel Australia Ltd were very keen on targeting child and adolescent mental health within remote Aboriginal communities. Royal Flying Doctor Service presented the proposals and it was accepted by Henkel initially to run over two years and as I move through the presentation, you'll get an idea of just the scope of this project and how

much it's grown, certainly since it's been operating over the last 18 months and it is now an ongoing project.

The project itself has very much targeted building relationships that both promote and provide support to young people in remote communities. We build partnerships with existing services to provide ongoing infrastructure and support to communities with RFDS is very much acting as administrators for the funding and promoting community ownership of the activities. One of the really important elements for us is not to go into communities and say "Here, we have this money and we're going to do this for you". It was to go into the communities and say, "We've got this money, what is it that you want us to do, what is it that you see as essential to your community that we can contribute to in a positive way that's going to help the children within your community and the young adults?"

And from that point, we've been able to build more and more on those partnerships, not just within the communities but regional health services, schools, a whole variety of people that have come on board that has actually made this project extremely exciting along the way. The whole idea of the project was about team building, increasing self-esteem and increasing cultural awareness.

We know about mental health issues that are associated with young children and adolescents in Indigenous communities and most of the work that's been done within the realms of this project has been very much with them at the forefront and them as part of the consultations so that the young people all the way along have been allowed and invited to give their feedback and tell us what it is that they want.

The project strategies – very much consultation orientated. Community councils, stakeholders such as Regional Health Services, schools, getting the work out. A lot of it has been word of mouth. Community workshops mentoring feedback at each workshop to ensure content remains need orientated and certainly relevant and that's why it has been very important to get the children and participants to feed back to us exactly what it is that they want. And certainly inclusion of community leaders, parents and other key stakeholders as observers and all the way through we've invited key people into workshops and to the activities to observe what's happening, what the children are saying, what's being fed back, so that everybody is aware of just what it is that the young people want.

The consultation process included the Northern and Far Western Regional Health Service, the community councils, schools, community members, community youth workers, Arts SA, and Kurruru Indigenous Youth Performing Arts Incorporated. Kurruru Indigenous Youth Performing Arts Incorporated has been our strongest partner in this project and I'll talk to you more about Kurruru in a little while.

We're talking about regions, the shaded region here is the region that's covered by the Regional Health Service and you can see the locations that we've actually targeted for this project in its initial stages, Marree, Oodnadatta, Neppabunna/Iga Warta, Yalata, Marla, Mintabie and Oak Valley. It's a very large area. Now, the first community to actually benefit from this project, through word of mouth, Diana Murphy from Oodnadatta contacted us and said, "We've got this project that we've been wanting to get happening in Oodnadatta for a long time that is Northern and Far Western Regional Health Service have been wanting to get it happening, but they didn't have the funding".

That project revolved around rebuilding the Oodnadatta drive-in picture theatre. The drive-in picture theatre is a very important part of that community. It's the central point of meeting and certainly for this project it was an opportunity for us to provide a venue for the children to use as part of a bigger project which was happening at the school at that particular time which

involved the children keeping video diaries. They did a trip to the snow and kept diaries of their trip and they wanted a point of contact where they could show the community just what it is that they had done.

We also were planning to develop a performance space on that site so that the children were able to get out there and do their performances and it regain the site as a community point of meeting. And we said, “Yeah, look, this sounds great, Dianne”, so we tapped into that. We provided the funds and that was really a launch pad for this project. We put aside a day and launched the bigger project in Oodnadatta.

We invited key stakeholders from the community, from all around. We had the Managing Director of Henkel from Germany came out with his wife to visit Oodnadatta to meet the people, to meet the children particularly. They toured the Health Service, they had a chance to look at one of our aircraft. The town put on a barbecue for us and Henkel also provided some backpacks for the kids, full of haircare products and hair gel and various other things. So by the end of the day, we had about 35 kids that had spiked their hair and they had a wonderful time and they all had their backpacks on and they were going to take those to school.

So that particular day led to a lot of other opportunities for this project and if it hadn't been for that launch, the networking that resulted from that launch, the next stage of the project wouldn't have happened. We made contact with Kurruru Indigenous Performing Arts Group at that point in time and we had discussions in the local general store in Oodnadatta and we talked about all sorts of plans and all sorts of ideas and Glenys Coulthard, who was also there in the day, talked to us about some of the issues that she saw as significant and from there it just rolled on.

So, the next step in the project – that's the fence. I must tell you a bit of a story about the fence here. The drive-in picture theatre is on a huge big – it's just a big block of land. Surrounding it is this massive fence, it was huge. That morning at 6 o'clock, Brendan Eblen who is also on the Royal Flying Doctor Service Board of Management, travelled to Oodnadatta and had sprayed the entire fence blue so that the kids could actually get up there and start doing their mural.

Now, every school holidays the children are out there doing something else to the mural and you could see some of the girls there painting their flowers and the picture on the far corner there was actually the day of the launch and those children had had a wonderful time. They had put hand prints all over the fence, all over themselves, all over rubbish bins, all over anything that was standing still. So they had a fantastic day.

We also had Channel 9 there with some media coverage and the children had a fantastic time with the reporter and where he got off the aircraft in his three piece suit and his shiny shoes, he got back on the aircraft looking like he'd had a pretty rough day and the kids gave him a pretty good time.

More about Kurruru Indigenous Youth Performing Arts. The next stage of the project was really exploring some workshops in performing arts with the young people. Now, Kurruru Indigenous Performing Arts Group are based in Port Adelaide and they were formerly known as Port Youth Theatre. The troupe are made up of Indigenous youth, both talented and experienced in workshopping, mentoring and developing projects addressing the health and well-being needs of young Indigenous people.

Kurruru have many partnerships which have developed through consultation, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Relationships Australia, The University of South Australia, Nunkawarranyunti and Drug and Alcohol Services Council. After discussion, it was decided that the second part of the project would include Neppabunna/Iga Warta, Marree and

surrounding areas. We held our first workshop in April and participants travelled from Marree Aboriginal School and from Leigh Creek School to Copley.

We have 45 participants on the day ranging in age from 9 to 21 years and participants were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The participants, as we moved through the day, were invited to make out a wish list and they wanted to learn singing and song-writing, they wanted drama, dancing, including rap and hip-hop, and they wanted to learn guitar. They were invited to feed back to RFDS and Kurruru via butcher's paper. We actually had sheets of butcher's paper all the way around the room and we said to them here are some of the issues.

We gave each piece of butcher's paper a heading and the children, in their own time, were invited to just make notes and that was probably some of the strongest feedback that we were able to get from these children. They were not intimidated by it, they just were very comfortable in the fact that it wasn't confronting and they could just tell us what their issues were.

That really built a very important partnership for the Royal Flying Doctor Service with Kurruru. We were able to plan in the long-term for some very exciting workshops. We knew that this is what the children wanted and each workshop proved to be different from the previous one. There were five artists for the first day and each with expertise in a wide range of skills. Most importantly, these artists were training in mentoring. They made friends, they built relationships and these are ongoing relationships with these young people.

It was also the first time that Kurruru had ever run workshops outside of Adelaide, so it was very much a learning curve for them as well. We were very fortunate in that we had people like Diat Alferink and Auntie Josie Agius who travelled with us and were from the area. I don't know if anyone's been to Lyndhurst, but Diat Alferinck's father is Talc Alf from and they were able to travel with us and without them, we really would not have been able to make a lot of the contacts that we did.

We had song writing in the bakery at Copley because there weren't a lot of venues there. Saine, was the instructor or the tutor for that particular session, she travelled from Sydney to run the workshops for Kurruru and Saine was actually performing in Sydney at the time with her band. Raff and Matt were from Adelaide, they were the rappers and the break-dancers and they worked very closely with the boys who had spent a lot of time writing their lyrics. These were very confronting and we allowed them to take their lyrics home with them because they were very personal and very private.

The hip-hop dance troupe, was led by Nicola who took two through hip-hop dance. We had children at the beginning of the day who did not want to be part of this and just wanted to get on the bus and go home and by the afternoon, they were part of the group and they were having a great time and laughing and carrying on as well. So, it was drawing the kids out.

The feedback from the day from the children – these were issues that were really important to them, they were concerned about teenage pregnancies, about racial problems in sport, the need for them to rekindle traditional cultural values. They were also concerned about boredom and what they were getting from these particular workshops gave them inspiration to create further dance options and further performing arts options within the community.

The outcomes of the workshop, community interaction, opportunity to explore issues through song and dance, whole of school activity promoting teamwork of course, generating interest in forming a youth advisory group and that was very much generated on the day as the children wanted to get a youth advisory group together again because they wanted to have the opportunity to feed back to everybody what it is that they wanted and they felt important.

They developed a lot of new skills, a lot of dance skills, increasing physical activity, participating in a group activity and certainly improved inter-community relationships through an ongoing performance.

From this project from that particular day, probably the most exciting outcome was the establishment of the Marree Circus Troupe. The Marree Circus Troupe is students from Marree Aboriginal School. The children had come away thinking yes, we want to do this, we want a circus. They had already had this vision from quite some time before that. Their youth worker in the area was supportive and behind them and they were able to make contact with Brewarrina in New South Wales who sent tutors to Marree. So for four days those kids had an intensive circus workshop. They learnt all the tricks, including drumming, they did it all.

From that evolved a performance, they marched in the pageant, they performed at Crocfest and the kids were actually riding their unicycles to school, not their bikes. They were also walking to school on stilts which created a few problems. They had children as young as four on their stilts. The children actually make their own tricks, they plan their own tricks, they plan their own performances, they even plan their own music. They have a little band that goes around with the troupe, they're travelling on a small scale at the moment, but these children are travelling regularly to Adelaide to watch other performers, to learn more about their skills and certainly to learn more about presenting to communities.

Major outcomes so far. Okay, we've had 50 young people from across the communities continuing to work with Kurruru. The Kurruru tutors are actually travelling regularly to the area to workshop young people just prior to any performances they might do and there's been a lot of performances happening. The dance troupe have already performed with Jay West, they performed at the Crocfest. Arts SA have also looked at what has been done and what we've been working on and they've said, "Look, this is fantastic".

They've matched us dollar for dollar so we can actually – this project is going to run for a further two years, so we'll have a four year project, not a two year project which is really exciting for the young people because we've still got more communities that we want to access. And the Marree Circus Troupe continues to practise and perform and fund themselves to travel to Adelaide for other performances.

Continue to prepare for performances, the feedback that we've had from the parents and from the community themselves is saying, "This is great for the children, they put so much time into it, don't stop". And I think all of us have had experience with projects that have small amounts of funding, they go into a community, they set something up, it's fantastic, then they walk away and leave it and it's gone. One important aspect that we're really keen to do with this and purely and simply by communicating in more of a consultative process, is that we are enhancing the opportunity for sustainability because it is very much a community-owned project. The parents want to do it.

We had an evening at Neppabunna where we went out to actually show the parents what it was that the children were doing in Copley on that day and the children got up and performed for the parents and the parents got up and performed for the children. And we had a really wonderful, wonderful community evening where we had guitars and we had singing and we had dancing and it went on and on and on and it was fantastic and it's a very positive thing and that's certainly coming from the community.

What next? The workshops are continuing. We've got another round of workshops coming up very soon which are going to target Yalata and Oak Valley. Kurruru are going to run workshops in Yalata and Ceduna. Along with this is another very big project that Henkel are wanting to support us for with children and that is a work experience project which is

hopefully going to get a handful of young people from the communities and take them to Adelaide or to Melbourne or to Sydney and to experience some of the work opportunities and some of the other opportunities that are out there that they might want to tap into or show some interest in as they get older.

Finally, people I have to thank, acknowledgments. Auntie Josie who – without whom we couldn't have gotten into a lot of these communities. Felix, who is a tutor, has travelled tirelessly backwards and forwards to the communities to mentor and to workshop the young girls and has had a wonderful time. Diat Alferink who is the artistic director of Kurruru, has put so much time and effort into it. Without her it wouldn't have happened either.

I have to thank Ron Johnson, or acknowledge Ron Johnson who is the youth worker for Leigh Creek and Marree, he's actually the brains behind the Marree Circus Troupe. And Dianne Murphy from Oodnadatta who was the brains behind rebuilding the Oodnadatta picture theatre and of course, Eberhard Buse from Henkel, who is the Managing Director there who has been so supportive and has had a wonderful time travelling backwards and forwards from Germany to Australia and has been very supportive and positive about future funding as well.

Basically, we're about brokerage approach, collaborative, building partnerships and it's about building self esteem and positive mental health in children and adolescents. Thank you.

PRESENTER

Vanessa Gaston has worked for the Royal Flying Doctor Service Central Operations for three-and-a half years. While Vanessa's primary role with RFDS is co-ordinating the Rural Women's GP Service, she also has a background in nursing, a Degree in Health Science (Health Promotion) and is presently completing a Graduate Diploma in Public Health. She would like to complete her Masters in Public Health and continue to work with the Royal Flying Doctor Service, exploring areas of prevention and early intervention not normally seen as part of RFDS traditional services.