

**A new arts company
in the North West is
'turning on the lights'
for young people ...
and it's already
winning awards
for its work.**

LATE LAST YEAR THE FOUNDER OF BEYOND EMPATHY, KIM McConville, got a call from some midwives in Moree who had an absence of young women at their ante-natal classes and a pile of community development money – but no idea what to do with it.

Together with her colleague, Denni Scott-Davis, Kim sat down with the midwives to create an arts project that would put the young mothers-to-be and midwives in touch with each other. They called it **Mubali**, which means 'pregnant' in the Kamilaroi language.

Jo Davidson, a professional artist from Wauchope, was brought in and she and Denni showed the midwives how to make plaster belly casts. Before long, 23 pregnant girls were turning up each week to paint casts of their babies. While the young artists and their mothers and aunties painted the casts, they were joined by the nutritionists, the dental health experts and, of course, the midwives who talked about the birthing process, baby care and the importance of breastfeeding.

"It was a kind of subliminal thing", says McConville. "You're learning when you don't think you're learning and in this relaxed environment, the health providers were able to get across their messages. The girls in turn became educators as they shared their knowledge within their community."

McConville believes young Aboriginal people are among the most resilient groups she's ever worked with. But she says strategies targeting them have tended to want to 'fix' a problem whereas in her experience, Aboriginal people don't want to be 'fixed'.

"BE takes a quite different approach – it works with the individual's gifts, the things they can do."

Twelve months on and many in that first group are still breastfeeding and the average birth weight of their babies is considerably higher than those who weren't part of **Mubali**.

The plaster belly casts form a popular regional exhibition at Moree Plains Gallery and the project was recognised at the recent Baxter 2005 NSW Health Awards, winning both the Consumer Participation in Health Care Award and the Ministerial Award.

But most important of all, **Mubali** now has a life of its own in Moree. It is a win for everybody.

Mubali was Beyond Empathy's launch pad. Hand-in-hand with award-winning filmmaker, Phillip Crawford, and Slippery Sirkus founder, Denni Scott Davis, Kim pulled together the threads of her work with Big hART, the arts group run by well-known playwright Scott Rankin, and decided to form a new organisation based on the belief that the arts was a very useful tool for telling a young person's story, but that you needed to go beyond that story to make any lasting improvement to their lives.

Beyond

by VIVIENNE SKINNER

Encouraging people with multiple layers of disadvantage to tell their stories, either through film, theatre, music or art and presenting them to the broader community, is a great way of attracting understanding and building empathy within the wider community, says McConville.

"If you learn that Kane found his father hanging from the kitchen ceiling when he was 10 years of age, you'll understand why he's cranky with the world. If you hear that Christie's injuries from a family bashing were equal to being thrown from fourth storey window, you'll understand why she's homeless and an alcoholic."

"Their stories are powerful ways of attracting community understanding but to change the individual's their view of themselves, you have to move beyond empathy. We want to help them find a better way forward than conventional welfare."

"There's a great silent population that live on the margin – I believe they're really misunderstood by the mainstream population. I'm talking about Police Priority One kids, kids that misuse drugs and alcohol, with mental health problems, that are homeless – people who live outside the place where most of us function."

"Art is a vital point of way of engaging them. Through Beyond Empathy we want to help them move on by increasing their

December – January

26 – 31 December

 60th Australian Jazz Convention
A week of jazz performances across
LISMORE Tel 02 6622 8147
Website www.lismorejazz.org

27 December – 16 January

 *A Passionate Collection* Australian
Ceramics from the Permanent Collection
of Greg Daly. **COWRA** Art Gallery
Tel 02 6340 2190 Email
cowraartgallery@cowra.nsw.gov.au

29 December

 Twilight Jazz & Blues Featuring
Short & Horny & The Stingers at Hindmarsh
Park, **KIAMA** Tel 02 4234 3555 Website
www.kiama2000.com/kiamajazz

1 – 16 January

 Stamping Ground Festival
10th Annual dance festival, focussed
on the action arts in **BELLINGEN**.
Tel 02 6655 2472
Website www.stampingground.com.au

choices. If you have choices then futility is lessened. You need to be able to create alternative pathways for participation. Whether it's going to TAFE or working with other artists, we want to help them learn skills that take them beyond their story."

Take 22 year old Nathan Brown. When he first came in contact with Kim and Denni four years ago he was on a good behaviour bond following several years of low-level crime. He was encouraged to make a short film, 'a light went on', and he decided he wanted to be a filmmaker.

Through BE's mentoring process he's now a busy cinematographer, is a mentor to other would-be filmmakers, and was selected to present a paper at this year's International Youth Conference in Adelaide. Through that conference he met Jessica Machin from CARCLEW, a South Australian-based youth arts company, and worked on a two week multimedia project in the Central Desert.

At the same conference, Nathan also met acclaimed documentary-maker, David Vadivelloo (Us Mob) who has invited him to work

organisation that pairs groups such as BE with high quality mentors from the corporate, social and government sectors. Kim McConville was paired with Anna Buduls, a highly-experienced board director, who, said Kim, she'd sometimes phone up to five times per week. "Anna was an exceptional mentor. She really helped straighten out critical things such as governance and the business side of the company. I am so pleased she's now an actual member of our board."

So what now for BE? The next big project is **Message in a Bottle** where BE and Arts North West will work with young people and their families in eight rural communities across north western NSW over the next two years. It will address the effects of alcohol misuse and its impact on relationships, health, employment and recidivist behaviour. **Message in a Bottle** has already received \$250K from the Alcohol Education and Research Foundation and BE is now seeking matching government funds.

There's also **Connections – Healthy Families, Healthy Communities** in the Moree region which, in a similar way to **Mubali**, will use arts techniques to build parenting skills and support the transition through the early childhood developmental stages.

And critical to BE's work is the continual process of raising the skills of the young people who have already graduated from a BE program, the alumni. This process is called **Pathways** and it is central to the philosophy of BE – it recognises that these young people are the best teachers of all.

Funded through the Coca-Cola Australia Foundation for two years, **Pathways** harnesses the experience of the alumni by engaging them on new arts projects, mentoring other young people who are dislocated from family and community because of their disadvantage. In other words, helping others who have been where they themselves have been.

Pathways means that via the continuing work of the alumni, the arts intervention process can reach many more young people.

"You have to be fearless in this game and trust in the process," says McConville.

"I don't know any kid we've worked with who doesn't want things to be better, but how do you do that? What's the first step? How do you eat an elephant? I just say one bite at a time. And through BE, hopefully we help people take that first bite." ■

Vivienne Skinner is a Sydney writer and a member of the board of Beyond Empathy. She was until recently an adviser to former Premier Bob Carr.

Cherilda Murray with her painted belly at the Mubali exhibition at the Moree Plains Gallery. Photo: Denni Scott-Davis



on projects in Central Australia. Nathan is also employed by BE on projects and – oh, yes – he has not reoffended and his good behaviour bond was shortened by six weeks.

It is a mark of Beyond Empathy's perceived potential that it has been selected by Social Ventures Australia (SVA) as an 'outstanding social entrepreneur'. SVA is a not-for-profit

January

1 – 21 January

👁️ *The Shape of Christmas*
An exhibition of Christmas trees with a difference! Cooee Heritage Centre, GILGANDRA Tel 02 6847 2104

1 – 30 January

👁️ Sand Modelling Unique and public work at **OLD BAR** Beach Tel 02 6552 1988

3 – 16 January

👁️ Art & Craft Exhibition 21st Annual Exhibition, Sunshine Bay School, **BATEMANS BAY** Tel 02 6496 2094

7 January – 20 February

👁️ *Reflections on the Built Environment*
Glass works by Judy Elliot Narek Galleries, **TANJA** Tel 02 6494 0112