

**The latest BIG hART
Drugs Misuse Project
in the Arts North West
and Outback Arts regions
is sure to dramatically
highlight the power of
the arts to make
a big difference
to young people's lives.**

by ROD AINSWORTH
+ JACK RITCHIE

IT IS NO SMALL UNDERTAKING. OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, THE Drugs Misuse Project will be rolled out across 11 communities – Armidale, Tamworth, Narrabri, Inverell, Gunnedah, Moree, Lismore, Walgett, Nyngan, Cobar and Coonamble. It will see Arts North West and Outback Arts working with the Premier's Department's Drugs and Community Action Strategy. It will involve people from areas as diverse as the police, Juvenile Justice, Community Services, Corrective Services, youth centres, youth refuges, health, education and drug action groups – not to mention the targeted kids themselves, the project coordinators and the artists.

The project, which has a budget of \$388 000 – a grant from the Police Department's Confiscated Funds Program – will employ the well-established BIG hART model, which brings people together from across a range of key agencies to formulate appropriate local strategies before embarking on arts workshops with the kids.

"The value of a project like this lies in the connections that are made in communities," said Annie Fraser, Project Manager for the Drugs and Community Action Strategy for Western NSW.

"Using the arts gives a whole range of people, who wouldn't normally work together, to do this in a creative and interesting way people in communities wear a number of hats and the BIG hART process gives people a way to work across all of their areas of interest."

Like all BIG hART projects, the Drugs Misuse Project will engage artists and local leaders to address the cause of problems, rather

than the effect, in innovative and proactive ways. It will place the highest value on the lives and the stories of the target group, in a bottom-up approach, where the young people decide what's important to them rather than being told what is important and how to "change".

A broad range of community members will be given the opportunity to be involved in managing the project. The idea of any BIG hART work is that young people themselves make decisions about artistic expression. Those with professional skills merely guide the delivery of the process.

The project will build on previous BIG hART projects implemented in the region: the violence prevention youth project, which led to the award winning film *HURT* and the intergenerational addictive behaviour prevention project which overlapped with the *kNOT@HOME* project.

The process involves the formation of BIG hART advisory groups, made up of representatives from community service organisations such as the police, Juvenile Justice, Community Services, Corrective Services, youth centres, youth refuges, health, education, drug action groups – which refer local young

people to the project. The target group is young people who might be engaging in drug use or who may be at risk of going down that path. But as Scott Rankin, Artistic Director of BIG hART points out, these are often kids who experience multiple levels of disadvantage, *"...the young person is on the books of a number of agencies - they might be in trouble at school, the Police, Juvenile Justice and may have been in detention."*


The advisory group's role is as a collective mentor, or safety net, for this group – which often includes only a relatively small number of young people. It's an approach that encourages the formation of ongoing relationships with people, rather than fearful bureaucracies, and leads young people to have better access to relevant services.

Annie Fraser says the Drugs Misuse Project is *"going to be a huge benefit to the regions because it links specifically with the aims of the Community Drug Action Teams (CDATs)."* A bit like the BIG hART Advisory groups, these teams have been created *"to give local people the opportunity to develop ideas and processes which both make sense and are relevant to them."* The Drugs Misuse Project *"is a way that also allows young people to engage in processes that are appropriate and meaningful to them."*

The outcome of the Drugs Misuse Project will be an arts product (perhaps a performance, or a website) which will also be an advocacy tool. The project methods are designed to promote the valuing of young people's lives and the stories they have to tell. The experiences of the group become expressed in

July


4 July - 3 August

 *National Photographic Purchase Award.* Variety of works from some of the best photographers in Australia and the region showing the diversity of approach in contemporary arts practice. **ALBURY** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6051 3480 www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au/gallery


5 July

 The Shoalhaven Youth Orchestra supports the Beatles at **MOLLYMOOK** Golf Club during Tabula Rasa. Saturday 8pm. An evening of generational appreciation and fun. Further details on the festival website www.ulladulla.info/tabularasa/welcome.html

5 July

 *Two Decades:* National Photography Symposium 10.30am-4.00pm **ALBURY** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6051 3480 [Website www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au/gallery](http://www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au/gallery)

6 July

 The Shoalhaven Youth Orchestra performs an evening concert at the **NOWRA** School of Arts for the Masonic Lodge . Contact Juan Alvarez Tel 02 44 460567

personalised ways and the reasons behind particular actions are revealed. The audience for BIG hART productions is broad – ranging from young people, parents and carers to service providers and government agencies.

By engaging with young people in this personal way, and by assisting the target group to create what to date, in all BIG hART projects, has been amazingly high calibre work, the process ensures a sense of achievement, a boost to morale, improved mental health and a capacity to transform skills into employment.

As Annie Fraser observes, *“In my three years as the Drugs and Community Action Strategy Project Manager, I’ve found that the thing that is most effective in delivering drugs misuse and harm minimisation messages is where young people tell their own stories through the arts.”*

The Drugs Misuse Project builds on relationships that have already been developed in these communities. Many of the young people

involved in 1998 and 1999 BIG hART projects have worked on other projects, mentoring new participants. They have also presented their work at the Melbourne Festival (last year), the Adelaide Festival (in 2000), at film festivals and at presentations to Government. *HURT* has screened to critical acclaim on SBS and the work *kNOT@HOME* will screen on SBS this year.

Communities have long recognised the great need to re-engage with their youth at risk, but in the past the only options have involved the judicial system. An initiative like the Drugs Misuse Project offers new ways of engaging with these precious individuals. Government and arts partners are working closely together to ensure that it remains ongoing, developing community capacity, providing effective support for the target group and promoting long-term outcomes for young people at risk. In each community, the project will deliver an ongoing mechanism to ensure young people are not left out in the cold and we can thank the power of the arts for that. ■

Valuing your story Valuing your life



Steering Group members. Left to right: Jack Ritchie, RADO, Arts North West; Lee Richardson, BIG hART Regional Coordinator, Outback Arts; Rod Ainsworth, RADO, Outback Arts; Kim McConville, BIG hART Coordinator; Andrew Parker, Snr Project Mgr, New England CDAT; Charlie Trindall, BIG hART Regional Coordinator, Arts North West and Matthew Priestley, principal artist.

Absent: Danni Scott-Davis, principal artist.

Photo: Noni Rutherford from the Moree Champion



Meet the artists

Denni Scott Davis of Slippery Sirkus is the principal CCD worker on the BIG hART Drugs Misuse Project. Highly skilled in the area of community development, arts practice and working with marginalised young people, Denni has been working on BIG hART legacy projects across northern NSW for a number of years. Denni found a natural synergy with the BIG hART way of delivering projects and is utilising the opportunity to build regional networks, connecting young people at risk with artists across the region.

Matthew Priestley has been working as a principal artist on BIG hART projects since he co-directed *HURT* in 1999. Starting out with BIG hART as a young mentor, this is Matthew's first solo project. Having worked in communities across Australia, Matthew is passionate about providing opportunities for young people to tell their stories and in doing so connect with themselves, family and community. Utilising cross-form art, from photography across dance, performance, music and film, Matthew will mentor artists across the two regions producing material that reflects young people's experiences of drugs misuse.

July

6 - 7 July

👉 Arts Action Outreach, Linocut workshop **BEGA** Regional Gallery
Tel 02 6499 2187.

7 July

🎵 Hastings Youth Choir in concert with special guests Brisbane Birralees Voices 7pm,
PORT MACQUARIE Uniting Church.
Contact Robyn Tel 02 6582 7802

11 July

👉 National Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Day Celebration (NAIDOC)

12 - 13 July

👉 10th Traditional Craft Day and Lifestyle Weekend featuring the International Year of Freshwater Exhibition. Contact Cobargo Business and Tourism Association
COBARGO Tel 02 6493 6572