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Creating our Place in the Community

Creating Our Place through Stories

This is a story about a fantastic program in a wonderful library in an amazing town in the Kimberley called Kununurra.

Breathtaking, rugged, beautiful, stunning, challenging, exciting, adventurous, isolated Kununurra, Western Australia “The Last Frontier”. Kununurra is our place where the Kununurra Community Library has established itself as the cultural hub of the community, as a place where people gather.

I commenced the position as School Community Librarian in Kununurra in 2001. The library is a joint-use agreement between Kununurra District High School and the Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley. As we do in all new situations we have a vision or aim to make a difference in our new work environment. As a librarian in the Kimberley, I recognised the advantages of having access to the school and the community to work towards providing opportunities to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together in a shared environment where they positively interact with each other. It became very obvious at this time the only Indigenous people using the library were students who visited the library as part of the school curriculum. It was widely known in Kununurra that Indigenous people saw the library solely as a “white man’s library”.

So this was my specific challenge I had given myself – how do I create a place where Aboriginal people feel welcome?

In 2003 I attended the WALGLA conference in Fremantle. Participation in the conference became the inspiration for where we are now at Kununurra Community Library. Some of you here today may remember a paper given on a bilingual storytelling library project where a program had been developed involving Vietnamese and Caucasian participants. While I was listening to this paper I was thinking about Kununurra and the Aboriginal culture we have in the Kimberley I was also thinking about the library’s hugely successful pre-school storytime program . Could I apply similar ideas to the Vietnamese project using Indigenous storytellers in the library. I was inspired.

Back in Kununurra soon after I noticed an article in the local paper about a “Living in Harmony” Grant, an initiative offered by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). The main aims of projects considered for a grant needed to

- Promote community harmony
- Reduce racism
- Increase confidence when interacting with another culture

I felt very confident that all of these criteria would be addressed by a program featuring Indigenous storytellers in the library. However could a library apply for this grant and would storytelling be considered an appropriate activity for a “Living In Harmony” Grant? When I called DIMIA, the Grants Manager was quite surprised at an enquiry from a librarian – “not the skateboard ramp or concert requests we usually have” he said, “anyway give it a go”.

Obtaining the funding was one step in the process, however how do I make the links with Aboriginal people in Kununurra?

My first thought was to approach the Indigenous Language Centre in Kununurra. Fortunately I had a connection there, as a former teacher at our school was the acting linguist at the time and I knew the former linguist as she was a Mum who attended the library’s storytime program. Working with the Language Centre we developed a submission called “Sharing Our Stories”. Language workers, interpreters and the linguist were to be involved in the project and the Language Centre would provide the storytellers telling creation stories for our project. It was an advantage having teaching experience and collaborating with another teacher who had worked with the Language Centre and understood particular issues of culture and protocol.

The project was shortlisted to 40 of over 600 applications received Australia-wide and finally \$14,688 was granted for “Sharing Our Stories”. What an exciting result – I was so thrilled about not only the project, but that a **library** had been chosen for a “Living in Harmony” grant.

The excitement was short-lived however when the Language Centre withdrew from the project due to political issues related to land rights.

So, there I was, with \$14,688, a project called “Sharing Our Stories” – how was I going to link with the Aboriginal community, run a storytelling program, including a Living in Harmony Day (more on this later) whilst holding down a full-time library management position.

Thinking, thinking, I thought there are still so many stories to be told out there – contemporary stories, life experience stories, growing up in the Kimberley stories. “Sharing Our Stories” was still a fantastic opportunity for the library to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together in a shared environment where they positively interact with each other. Networking with the community was clearly the key.

The information about the library being successful in obtaining a “Living in Harmony” grant was featured in the school newsletter during this time and one of the Mother’s who attended our storytime program with her pre-school daughter approached me about being involved in “Sharing Our Stories”. Jenny Hunter is a teacher, graphic artist and passionate about opportunities being made for young people and adults to interact with positive Indigenous role models in Kununurra. A keen library user, Jenny and I discussed a role for her as the co-ordinator, using her contacts, skills and experience to put the project together. “Sharing Our Stories 2004” was underway.

Contemporary life stories were told in the library once a month, between February and July by positive local Indigenous role models with different experiences. Audiences included, years kindergarten to year 3 from both schools in Kununurra, Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people and adults. Stories were oral, written, music and dancing. Each storyteller was profiled before their monthly session and author posters were produced for use in the classroom and for displays in the library.

In addition a Living in Harmony storytelling day was held in March. On this day we showcased our storytellers, provided interactive activities and enjoyed refreshments of damper and barramundi cooked on campfires out the back of the library. 400 children and adults gathered at the library – this day was fantastic.

In particular students who attended Sharing Our Stories from the ELAN group (English Language and Numeracy) who are largely Indigenous had the following outcomes:-

- Increased confidence in using the library
- The program was a springboard for further reading and writing activities in the classroom
- Improved literacy levels
- Oral presentation(storytelling) encourages listening and learning
- Language use – code switching between standard Australian English and Aboriginal English
- Recognition of familiar people from the Aboriginal Community in the library
- Stories told inspired the writing and illustrating of a book called “The Magic Boomerang” by the ELAN children which was awarded “Book of the Year 2004 for the library’s Make Your Storybook competition.

The support from the library and teaching staff for Sharing Our Stories was very important to the success of the project. As mentioned previously to take this on in addition to our library work, our nine Meet the Author evenings held this year, our 40 -50 children attending storytime each week and the 500 students who are timetabled into the library each week was a big ask for library staff. The Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley library staff had major roles in the project - videotaping all the storytelling sessions, assisting with the preparation of the art and craft activities, and displaying work produced. On the Living in Harmony day with 400 children through the library, shire library staff played a major part in the planning and organisation of this day.

Successful outcomes from Sharing our Stories project include:-

- Building on the profile of the library as a place in Kununurra where everyone is welcome and a place where stories are shared and enjoyed
- Aboriginal adults joining the library and borrowing books regularly
- Valuable links between the schools, library and wider community both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.
- The breaking down of attitudes, in both children and adults, that were previously based on generalisations of a cultural group leading, in many cases, to strong racial prejudice.
- Increased confidence by adults and children to interact with another culture.
- Increased awareness of Indigenous culture delivered by enthusiastic and generous Storytellers who have become positive role models in our community.

Due to the incredible success of the 2004 program a Sharing Our Stories is now proposed for 2005 at Kununurra Community Library. Next year we would like to share the program with other major centres in the Kimberley – Wyndham, Halls Creek, Warmun, Fitzroy Crossing Derby and possibly Broome. The plan is to tour Sharing Our stories therefore value adding to a developed program and showcasing a project that makes a difference(this would be a major storytelling one day event, like

Living In Harmony, in each town). Although the library will continue to be the central venue we would also like to incorporate field trips so that the Storytellers can share their knowledge and culture in their own context. The 2005 project will also offer “other culture” experiences in the form of dance, drama or music delivered by professional non-local performers. One idea is to include a Maori storyteller to show children that there are other Indigenous cultures apart from our Aboriginal culture.

For all the recognition that Sharing our Stories has received, however, I believe that a program such as this can only be successful by firstly establishing the library as an integral part of the community.

It is not an easy task networking in the Indigenous community, learning Indigenous protocols, building the trust required to enable Aboriginal people to feel comfortable and welcome in a “white man’s building”. Bridges have to be built, not only with the Indigenous community but in the community as a whole. You need to establish your library as a focus, as I said before, a place where people gather. Even though many of the storytellers had not been in the library before this project, they all had an awareness of the library in the community. This has been made possible because of the library’s programs reaching out and embracing the community. Visiting author programs including Indigenous authors, Boori Pryor and Nova Peris, photographic exhibitions including the Gidja people, storytime programs featuring the School Principal, the Police, the Garbage Man, Kununurra Bananas in Pyjamas B1 and B2 – taking every opportunity to draw people in.

Creating the environment in the library has been another very important part of creating our place in the community. Indigenous art, displays, including murals of our town, the Ord River and a cattle station (all local images that children and adults relate to), children’s craft work and a bright friendly welcoming atmosphere all ensure the library’s status and that it is recognised in Kununurra as an attractive place to visit by locals and tourists alike.

We also welcome every opportunity to reach out into the community – teddy bears picnics at the local park, storytelling at the Agricultural Show, displays and information at the Youth Centre Design day – you name it we are there!

So, “creating our place in the community through stories” has been made possible in Kununurra by having a passion about what a library is to the community. “Sharing Our Stories” gave us the opportunity to embrace the Indigenous community. As a result we now have Aboriginal families including the adults using the library regularly. This is a fantastic outcome and one on which to build on and strengthen our ties with Indigenous people. We have facilitated links between teachers, classrooms and students with Indigenous storytellers. We have helped change attitudes of non-Indigenous adults. We have truly created our place in the community through stories.

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