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ANZJAT

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The art of recovery: One day at a time

A therapeutic street art project initiated by VincentCare’s Quin House and RLAD (Reconstructing Lives After Dependence), April–June 2017

Carla van Laar

Overview

During the last week of June 2017, Melbourne train commuters, cyclists and pedestrians witnessed a group of community members create a colorful multi-media mural at Jewell Station, in Brunswick, Melbourne. This was the outcome of a therapeutic street art project, carried out by men who have accessed support services at VincentCare Victoria’s Quin House and RLAD program. They are on journeys of recovery, from homelessness and dependence into clean living and independence. Their artwork tells a story about these journeys from despair and ‘lost-ness’ to hope and connection.

This mural of hope and support was painted as a way of building bridges between the wider community and people who are experiencing homelessness and dependency, with the intention of creating a community of care and collaboration. The artists wanted the mural to reach out to passers-by in the community, to engage them, and to encourage people to stop, look and reflect.

Creative workshops ran over ten weeks during April to June 2017, and the process of painting onsite took place across the final five days of the project. The artwork was created using multi-media methods, including brush-painted art, sprayed graffiti art, paper stickers, and prose created by the group during the workshops. A celebratory launch was held onsite on Thursday 29 June 2017.

Project narrative: ‘One day at a time’

Quin House initiated the mural project with project funding from VincentCare. I was approached to work on the project, which

Statistics at a glance – what was involved?	
Quin House and RLAD participants	14
Community Development Officer	1
Art therapist	1
Community volunteers	12
People attending the launch	40
Hours spent planning, promoting, seeking and obtaining a wall	8
Hours of developmental workshops at Quin House	40
Hours of painting on site	30
Hours hosting the launch	2
Moreland Leader print story	1
Melbourne street art blogs giving social media coverage	3
Viewers of the mural	1000s

included firstly securing a wall site. My early work involved writing letters and meeting with developers, NeoMetro, to gain their support in donating the use of a prominent wall. This wall was selected because of its location at a train station and the potential to be seen by thousands of commuters.

Before the workshops commenced I visited Quin House and was introduced to residents who were potential participants. I chatted to them about the project and showed them photos of the wall. I also asked them about their creative interests and looked at some of their own artwork, including sketches, tattoos and graffiti art.

The project commenced with a field trip attended by eight participants, the Quin House Community Development Officer, and the art therapist – me. We walked through the Melbourne

suburbs of Fitzroy and Brunswick, looking at the street art, noticing styles and techniques, and discussing what we liked and disliked. We visited the wall at Jewell Station and got a feel for the size and shape of it (Figure 2).

On our way back to Quin House, we discussed how we could create a mural that would tell a story of recovery in a way that would be both genuine and engaging for the community.

Metaphors emerged as ways to tell the participants' stories. Landscapes were described as ways of reflecting experience, body language was used to show emotional journeys, and mindfulness was identified as an important part of taking recovery 'one day at a time'.

The phrase 'one day at a time' resonated strongly with the participants as being true, and we realised that these five words would fit into the five panels of our chosen wall.

In the subsequent workshops, we explored the phases of the participants' journeys from despair towards hope. We identified that in the middle of each journey there was a significant moment of making a choice, and for many this moment was symbolised by the act of walking in the door of Quin House.

In their artistic exploration of their journeys, the participants embodied gestures that expressed each phase. These were photographed, printed, and used as source material for a series of drawings created by participants (Figures 4, 5 and 6).

Once the phases had been identified and embodied, the group brainstormed words to describe what each of the characters shown in the drawings was experiencing. Key words and phrases were compiled to tell the story (Figure 3).

I created an artistic response to the stories and ideas generated by the group. This was a series of painted panels representing the wall at Jewell Station, which were to provide a background for the participants' images and words. I used streetscapes observed from the local area, to locate the story in familiar settings and places that I hoped both participants and audiences would recognise. I painted the sky transitioning from darkness towards light as a metaphoric mirror for the journey of recovery (Figure 7).

In the following workshops, these panels became an anchor for refining ideas, and a way of imagining how to incorporate all of the content



Figure 1. Art therapist Carla van Laar, and volunteer art therapy student Ashley Ogilvie, who digitised the paste ups.

into the final mural. Each week they were laid out on the table-tennis table in the courtyard at Quin House. They became a meeting place for interest, sharing stories, discussion, collaboration, colour planning and poetic refinement of the emergent themes.

Creative wordsmithing among participants resulted in a consensus that these words 'rang true' to describe their unique yet shared journeys towards recovery:

*Lost in a tunnel of darkness. Trapped.
Holding the key to hope. Tightly.
Every day a new horizon. Free.*

With our mural model and story decided, we were now ready to approach the wall. We calculated the wall size, bought paint, created a schedule, and invited community contacts from VincentCare staff, our friends and family, and art therapy students to help with the painting over the weekend. We managed to block in 60 square metres of wall over the first two days – an impressive achievement! (Figure 8)

On Monday and Tuesday the participants with graffiti experience came to add in the words.

By Thursday, we had the 'paste-ups' ready to apply. These were digitised by a volunteer art therapy student from the participants' original pencil drawings, and printed on large-scale paper for gluing to the wall with a flour-based paste.

The launch occurred moments after we had applied the finishing touches, and was supported by 40 people, including the participants, family and friends, VincentCare staff, NeoMetro directors, and volunteers.

One of the participants made a speech on behalf of the Quin House and RLAD members. He shared the story that the mural depicts, and confidently spoke about issues such as homelessness and addiction, seeking and accepting help, and feeling connected to a community of support.

He also spoke about his personal experience of being involved in the project, saying,

When I first heard about this art project, I thought it wasn't for me... but now that I've been involved, I've surprised myself how much I've enjoyed it. I've really got a lot out of it.

A Melbourne street art photographer, who received a tip-off to attend, wrote in his blog of his experience in witnessing the project:

I met some extraordinary people today that are the true essence of hope and what it means to be free. I was given a tip yesterday about some street art being done in Brunswick and I ventured to Jewell Station expecting to see a run of the mill street art piece.

I was humbled to come across a community based piece, completely orchestrated by Quin House Fitzroy. An organisation that helps and supports men with substance abuse issues and homelessness. I met many of them today, they inspired me and they're turning their lives around for the better. This community project was their first and it was a great success, some of these men were graffiti writers previously and this was a way to express their independence from their former lives.

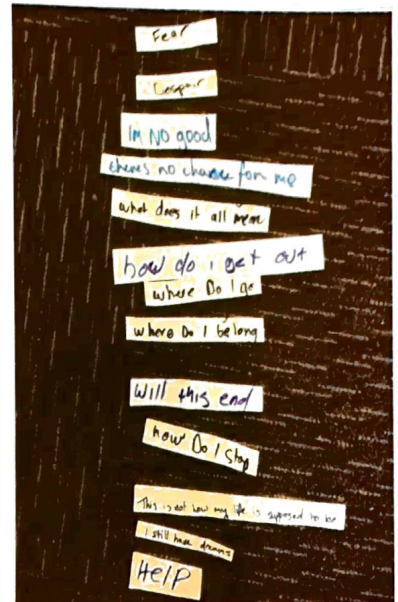
The whole piece has been painted by the group and had the mission statement of: 'One Day at a Time'. Very fitting for anyone trying to regain composure. These gentlemen were now free, they had beautiful smiles and adulation for each other.

As the art therapist working on this project, part of my challenge was balancing the expectation of producing a public outcome while offering a process that was participatory, inclusive and therapeutic.

The first activity of the project, our outing to look at street art together, was chosen as a way of using sensory stimulus from the environment, and some shared experiences, to start building the relationships that would support the emergent structure of the weekly workshops.

I offered a variety of ways to engage, especially for participants who were not confident with visual art. These were often improvised and in response to prompts from the men who were there each week.

The strongest impression that I am left with is that of the mural project becoming a community and a meeting place. In this community, all of us were able to share stories, laugh, create, experience success, and feel connected to each other.



From top to bottom, left to right: Figure 2. The wall at Jewell Station, Brunswick. Figure 3. The cluster of words describing participants' experiences of homelessness and substance dependence. Figure 4. Despairing and lost. Figure 5. Making a choice. Figure 6. Reconnecting. Figure 7. Creating an artistic response to the participants' journeys. Figure 8. Participants working on site during day two. Figure 9. The completed wall, photographed by Melbourne street art blogger Kevin Vo.