

# LUCKY

## SUMMARY

*Lucky* was an innovative intergenerational crime prevention and community development project conducted by Big *hART* on the North-Western coast of Tasmania which had its beginnings in 2005 and concluded in 2009 with several legacy projects extending the project's scope well beyond the official funding period of 2006-2009. It has been deemed very successful by participants, evaluating bodies, critics and audiences alike and was lauded for its innovative arts-based approach in community development. *Lucky* was made up of three interlinked projects which all focussed strongly on the recording and sharing of oral histories: *Radio/Drive In Holiday*, *This Is Living* and *Drive*. The project targeted four marginalised groups that most cultural workers have found hard to engage with: struggling teenage mothers and their children, elderly people living in isolated circumstances and young men at risk of embarking on harmful trajectories. These groups entered the project at different stages: 2006 saw young and isolated teenage mothers and their children engaged in early childhood- and creative workshops, continuing Big *hART*'s pilot project *Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday* by cross-collaborating with shack communities. This three-generational exchange was widened in 2007 to include elderly people who lived in rural and remote areas. The young mothers interviewed and photographed the elderly participants, and employed their new creative skills to shape the enthralling life-stories into intricate mirrors of the Tasmanian community. Their work formed the basis of the major stage performance *This Is Living* which also enlisted the support of a group of teenage skaters from Burnie which had been loosely linked to Big *hART* through lobbying for a new public skate park. All three groups worked closely and with great success on the production that addressed issues of isolation, aging populations, crime, fear of crime and alienation between the generations but at the same time represented in its fabric a way to overcome and re-imagine these paralysing complexes. Binding the group of young men closer into the project, the third official year of *Lucky* fully developed the new strand *Drive* which inquired into the many recorded cases of 'autocides' – single vehicle, single driver fatal crashes – on Tasmanian roads. Young men associated with this hazardous practice and deemed at risk by community workers, engaged in digital media workshops and produced an acclaimed in-depth documentary revealing the toll every single one of these

needless deaths has on families, friends, service providers and the community at large.

*Lucky* addressed at its core issues of isolation and disengagement from community. Big *hART* successfully set out to assist participants in giving shape and voice to their own stories, in diverting them from criminal trajectories, in developing new skills to re-imagine alternative pathways and in (re-)connecting with each other and the community at large. A strong media strategy ensured that the project's reach exceeded its immediate audience and opened up possibilities for participants' continued evolution in the arts sector, while at the same time raising awareness of issues like the changing nature of land use (*Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday*), the ageing population (*This is Living*) and the harmful trajectories some young men are committing themselves to in remote areas (*Drive*). A major legacy of the project remains a model for community development based on creative arts practice which Big *hART* continues to make widely available to the public.

The project received its main funding from the Commonwealth Government's Attorney General's Crime Prevention Programme as well as complementary grants from the Department of Transport and Regional Services, the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Australia Council for the Arts and several foundations.

## **BIG *hART***

National arts and social change company Big *hART* was founded on the North-West coast of Tasmania, and seeks to tackle social disadvantage by supporting social cohesion through actively involving people in "creative expressions of their life and identity within cultural and arts practice". The company conducts long-term projects in struggling communities across Australia. Its work is not based on a welfare model – but rather seeks to encourage people to reflect on their personal trajectories and their relation to the wider community in order to build productive, healthy self-supporting futures. The adopted approach follows a socially inclusive, asset-based community development model that focuses on strengths and skills already present but unacknowledged in the respective communities and seeks to develop and build on these qualities. The key to achieving a high level of engagement and maintaining artistic excellence lies in building strong personal relationships with participants and their community on the ground and in linking individuals with professional artists and cultural workers across a wide range of creative workshops.

Big hART's projects work on four levels:

- *Individuals* – (building social and economic participation)
- *Communities* - (building connections and capacity for change)
- *Nation* – (contributing to social policy change)
- *Art* – (creating exquisite, high calibre art outcomes for national and international festivals)

In the particular instance of the *Lucky* project, Big hART harnessed the interest of the young target groups in expressions of youth culture to capture their imaginations in forms that were automatically meaningful, familiar and accessible to them and were easily awarded cultural and social relevance. At the same time, staff took care to improve access to workshops and to remove any inhibitors to participation. In the workshops, genuine interest is taken in the participants' stories, personalities and development which promotes an atmosphere of mutual respect. Facilitating exchange between participants from different walks of life but with same experiences of marginalisation helps to dismantle stereotypes, promotes empathy and situates individual experience in a social context which lessens feelings of isolation and re-engages people with their community. The small group-focus (often even a one-on-one mentoring process) facilitates an artistic exchange with regard to personal stories, their meaning and how they can be translated into high-quality art while encouraging individuals to expand their social and professional skills in a supportive environment. This approach is grounded in the belief that every daily act contributes to the constant construction of personal identity and that imagination is essential to this basic selfhood narrative. It allows for critical perspectives on choices, for trying out new models of living and opens up alternative pathways while equipping the individual with purposefulness to organise his or her life and relationships in a more healthy way.

In presenting the artwork to the general community participants experience a positive form of attention and appreciation. The performance creates a communicative environment and challenges audiences to reflect on preconceived ideas pertaining to the persons involved. In seeing the 'everyday life' performed as art, audiences are invited to identify with the narrations of 'the Other' and to allow the individual a place to belong amid the community.

To amplify the influence of the project and to enable sustained change in the community, Big hART actively seeks to partner with local institutions, organisations,

individuals and government bodies. Exchange of knowledge and the development of an arts- and culture-based model for sustained community development are key objectives for these partnerships.

The presentation of the artwork to a wider, national audience in mainstream venues offers a new domain of experience to the individuals, while at the same time raising awareness of issues facing disadvantaged communities. This awareness and public profile is then used by Big *h*ART in the political domain to push for a policy change which will support the community to better tackle its problems and create follow-on effects for other communities facing similar issues.

## **BACKGROUND**

Tasmania is one of Australia's smallest and economically weakest states. With the Bass Strait isolating it from the mainland, its soils and natural resources beautiful but only allowing for limited utilisation, and its scarce and ageing population hardly adding up to form a sustainable local market, the state has a long history of economic hardship and ensuing social problems. In 1992/93 the North-Western coastal town of Burnie experienced additional upheaval as the old-established local paper mill 'The Pulp' was sold and radically downsized its personnel after plunges in profit margins and repeated industrial disputes. The town's already high unemployment rate subsequently soared dramatically and many people found themselves all of a sudden relegated to the very margins of society. Frustration and general disengagement were strong follow-on effects of these events and prompted local artists to establish Big *h*ART in order to counteract the dispersal of communal integrity. The overriding objective has since been to model new approaches for rebuilding and sustaining the social and economic potential in regional and remote communities under threat from poverty by developing and raising the quality of life through artistic practice. Although quickly embracing the national landscape, the company has since retained a strong presence in Tasmania, conducting projects on a regular basis with people who experience disadvantage and trauma at the fringes of society. The *Lucky* project was part of this continuing presence and encompassed five years' work on the North-West coast of Tasmania responding to social developments which saw dramatic changes among the local youth with soaring rates of suicide, drug abuse, reckless and violent behaviour and an increasing number of teenage pregnancies painting a distressing picture for the region's future. Big *h*ART addressed those issues with the conviction that young people choose their pastimes according to the choices and opportunities they are

given – with the logical conclusion that an improved, vibrant living environment will ultimately alter adopted trajectories and result in a healthier community that enjoys a jointly appreciated quality of life.

## **THE PROJECT**

Big *hART* took a first step towards creating such an environment by setting up their base in a disused marine shed on the outskirts of Burnie harbour and turning it into the 'Creative Living Centre' – the company's continuous headquarters and major workshop space for the duration of the project. Rather than using council amenities, the shed allowed for a fresh beginning providing a blank space for the young target groups which they could make their own. The open plan areas allowed to even accommodate the recently exiled skate community who were on the lookout for new premises after Burnie City Council had closed the public park in favour of auspicious investment plans. Staff members of Big *hART* assisted the teenagers in designing and building a preliminary park while also providing guidance with regard to lobbying and communication strategies for the fight to win back a public park. The degree of generosity and acceptance that Big *hART* showed in this partnership resulted in a positive image for the company among the young target groups, nurturing curiosity and helping to draw in curious participants for the project. Teaming up with local service providers like Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation, No 13 Youth Centre, Community Corrections and Job Net Burnie also directed staff towards young people who were believed to benefit from participation in the project. These prospective participants all came equipped with an array of social and personal problems which had severely affected their self-esteem and had caused hindrance to their productive involvement in the community, at times even leading them onto criminal trajectories. Big *hART* set out to provide these teenagers with opportunities for personal and social development by way of enhancing community and civic participation, through offering training and education in the arts and arts management as well as facilitating employment where possible. A key defining factor in Big *hART*'s work on *Lucky* was that young people were given the opportunity to rise to occasions, being awarded responsibility in spite of their troubled records thereby giving them the chance to achieve without the burden of a past dragging them down in the esteem of their co-workers.

### ***Radio Holiday / Drive In Holiday***

The project's first stage saw Big *hART* providing support measures for isolated young single mothers and their children by offering workshops in early childhood

education in which the mothers were able to learn about all aspects relevant to the healthy development of their children. A major focus was laid on facilitated play sessions in which creativity, trust and bonding between the generations was actively aided. In the belief that healthy families start with strong and self-supportive parents, Big *hART* ensured that the teenagers found a supportive environment in order to develop social and professional skills which form the base for strong choices regarding parenting, education and economic participation. Jemma, one of the regularly participating mothers, testified to this approach enabling participants to redefine their identities when she remarked to an outsider: “They treated us like equals and looked past all that other ‘stuff’ [that everyone notices].”. Finding acceptance and genuine interest for their situation and wellbeing among the Big *hART* crew gave the mothers a feeling of visibility which they had lacked before. The project provided them with purpose, diversion from harmful everyday routines and with understanding company that buffeted negative energy – all positive effects that already in themselves helped create a better living environment for the mothers and the people surrounding them. 28 young mothers took part in the early workshops which covered artistic fields like movement and drama, photography and portraiture, textile design, sewing and jewellery making, song writing and sound recording; as well as practical guidance in nutrition, cooking with and for children, early childhood resilience and games. To increase bonding and trust between the young mothers and their children Big *hART* took care to offer a wide variety of playful, fun activities that promoted a close interaction between the families like for example toy making, sculpture slams, creating family histories, painting, cartooning, print-making, dancing, lullaby writing and storytelling sessions. The art of play was at the centre of these activities fostering the development of imagination and resilience in participants and preparing them to engage in widening social circles. Communication skills aiding professional development were additionally focussed on in separate sessions including areas like public speaking, voice training and interviewing techniques.

The mothers were given the opportunity to directly apply their new skills by joining Big *hART* artists and other teenagers who were working on the *Radio Holiday* project with shack communities across the North-Western coast of Tasmania. Linking the mothers in artistic practice with a social group that shared similar experiences of alienation on the outskirts of society quickly yielded a lively dialogue from which sprang forth a compelling array of oral history accounts that captured a lifestyle under threat by the island’s changing use of its public lands. The mothers

and other marginalised teenagers conducted many interviews with 150 'shackies' from five communities and assisted Big *hART* artists in creating a series of radio plays which were presented to great acclaim at the 'Ten Days on the Island'-Festival in 2005. To re-create the unique and rugged atmosphere of the shack communities, Big *hART* and participants framed the presentation with visual arts installations mounted in six vintage touring caravans from the 1960s and 70s – each catering to different themes and styles, housing artworks, poems, photos, films and stories – while also performing live music and sound effects from the community. Apart from touring the island as part of the annual festival, the show also played in the communities themselves and was broadcasted nationally on ABC before featuring at two festivals on the mainland. The objective for the artistic output of *Radio Holiday* was to pilot the making and branding of a tourism product which would attract people to remote Tasmanian communities, thereby enabling these communities to sustain their idiosyncratic lifestyle in the breathtaking Tasmanian scenery in the face of the ever resurfacing commercial investment plans. Due to its wonderful success both in process and outcome, Big *hART* ensured that the constructive connection between the two target groups was reinforced in a second working phase which put a stronger focus on the intergenerational aspect of the joint work and sought to create a more empathetic understanding of the needs and struggles of the involved groups. The series of interviews was continued, this time in a more dialogical format with some of the 15 mothers assisting with the filming of five 15 min films that included among others also national film stars, and which later on played to packed audiences at the 'Melbourne International Festival of the Arts' (2006) on Federation Square in the heart of the metropolis and in a special outdoor screening as part of the touring circuit of the 2007 'Ten Days on the Island'-Festival. Aside from the deepening connection between the young mothers and the 'shackies', *Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday* also provided ways of social and professional engagement for other struggling teenagers. For example, it greatly aided Bruce, a young man suffering from Autism Spectrum Disorder and greatly at odds with formal education settings, to discover for the first time in the arts a social space that was capable of accommodating his needs. In an intensive mentoring process he sponged up knowledge about editing film and audio as well as producing his own music which he then performed as part of the project's team at the 'Melbourne International Festival of the Arts'. The beauty of Bruce's story and development shone in his own words when he stated: "I now have other goals in my life, I want the world to know me not as a stupid person, but as a unique person

who is capable of doing things they aren't capable of doing. I have a lot of perspective on life. I have high expectations of myself. I want to be known as someone who is capable of doing a range of different things." Apart from the immaterial successes of *Lucky* (stronger bonding between families and raising the teenagers' self-esteem), participants generated a range of products which testified to their active involvement in the project, including the magazine 'Scream Zine', a website and blog, and silver 'pasta'-jewellery that the young mothers presented in 2009 to the Tasmanian Premier and Cabinet in a bid to draw attention to the necessity and value of good service provision for the state's fragile families. Along with this precious tangible token of the dormant potential that can be unlocked within the next generation, the mothers entrusted Federal Justice Minister Senator Chris Ellison at a panel discussion on crime prevention with a policy document that outlined their ideas for a social policy reform. The fact that the mothers had been capable of drafting such a document and of presenting it with such gracefulness in a high-profile context testifies to the outstanding success of this first year of the *Lucky* project.

Already in those early stages, Big *hART* took care to establish a broad base for the project's sustainable outcomes by setting up and maintaining strong networks to local governments, councils and service providers, inviting them into the project and keeping them up to date with the project's progression. This bond ensured that participants gained a positive profile not only with their immediate audiences, but also with local bodies and organisations which in some cases led to employment opportunities for the teenagers. A community organisation worker expressed her bafflement at the rapid change she saw in the teenagers after a relatively short time of working with Big *hART*: "When I first met with many of these young women the subject matter of their conversations was going out and getting pissed and doing other stuff that just crushed your hopes for them ... now I see them and they talk about going to music festivals, arts exhibitions and their latest show. These are the most far-fetched changes in aspirations and life worlds you could imagine." The overriding success of Big *hART*'s approach also reflected in numbers: None of the constantly involved mothers re-offended and 80% of participants either joined the workforce or enrolled in further education while many also joined other service-related groups and activities that aided in overcoming the isolation which had previously driven them towards harmful trajectories.

### ***This Is Living***



In 2007, the second year of the main funding period, Big *h*ART expanded the intergenerational focus of the *Lucky* project and established contact with a range of elderly persons who lived in regional, rural and remote parts of Tasmania. Members of this group had expressed a feeling of disconnection from the general community which had led to pronounced feelings of vulnerability and fear of becoming the victims of crime. The idea to team them up with the young mothers in order to record their life-stories was based on two underlying assumptions: First, that the direct contact with assumed perpetrators would reduce the diffuse fear of the elderly and second, that this intergenerational interaction would open lines of communication between the groups and create a better understanding for the needs and struggles facing the other group. Consequently, Big *h*ART staff arranged meetings in five nursing homes, several seniors' groups and in the houses of some of the elderly – taking the young mothers out of their usual environment in order to meet their new collaborators. In interview- and photography sessions facilitated by the young mothers, over one hundred elderly people relived their most joyous, fearful, rewarding and defining moments, capturing the breadth and breadth of lives lived to the fullest. The effect these meetings had on the teenagers were very profound, reversing stereotypes long held and creating a tentative bond between the generations. One young woman described the effects these workshops had on her: “I used to think that old people smelt bad ... people think they are just waiting to die. Now I know that they are lovely people with so much to tell ... they're just like young people wanting to get out there. They have so much respect. Now I can't wait to be old.”

After postproduction of the interviews was finished, the teenagers mounted a photographic exhibition in the Burnie Nursing Home which attracted much interest with the local community. Some of the pictures were published in the regional newspaper which made the fledgling artists and their subjects immensely proud. The profile generated from this also brought interested people in from the community for other reasons than purely the duty of care, which in turn alleviated the feelings of isolation many of the elderly had previously expressed. Nursing home staff were very pleased with the impact the project had on their residents as they seemed to improve their mental capacities through recounting their most cherished memories and also became much more energetic and lively through the creative processes – 29 of the elderly joined in the photography workshops to learn a new craft, 11 formed a mentoring group for the young mothers and 14 took part in oral history workshops.

The main output of this second stage of the project was, however, the stage production *This Is Living* which saw 144 elderly people, 40 young women and 30 young men forming Tasmania's largest theatre company to explore the issue of quality of life in an ageing population. The press release for the show described it as "a dark comedy, [which] weaves together the complexities of life and love with local histories of intimacy, photographic memorabilia, haunting music, a layered text and the kinetic art of skateboarding". The young mothers' role in the project started to shift at this stage from one of creating artistic output to one of mentoring the other participants on creative processes as well as assisting in the production and presentation of the show. The interviews from the collaboration between the young mothers and the elderly served as stepping stones to model a story of love, loss and humour onto the stage which was further amplified in its local grounding by the use of archival material supplied by the elderly people who also performed as chorus on stage along with three professional actors and a group of skateboarders. The skateboarders had first been drawn into the project through a range of IT workshops in the marine shed focusing on the technical aspects of mounting a theatre show, but as the ideas for the stage production matured, a kinetic stage design was agreed to be a suitable backdrop for the show. Different ideas were played out and in the end the show was framed by local boys from the age of 12 to 19 crisscrossing the stage on their skateboards, performing elaborate tricks on the way and presenting skating as a complex art form – contrary to the widespread assumption that it was a dangerous and damaging pastime for rowdy and disrespectful kids. The focus, precision, discipline and cooperation necessary from all participants for the successful performance were clearly appreciated by the rapt audiences that started to give credit to the locally known rogues for their skills rather than their deficiencies that had been the focus in everyday life.

The media strategy followed by Big *hART* paid off well with an overall of 31 media stories appearing in local and state newspapers and on the web as well as broadcasts on ABC local and national radio. Here again, the skateboarders assisted the profile of the show by tying in the promotion of the show with their successful lobbying efforts for their new public skate park which yielded features on Triple J local- and other commercial radio stations for the *Lucky* project. The overwhelming reviews of the show had a huge effect on the self-respect, confidence and self-esteem of many of the participants who saw their socio-cultural capital enhanced by something that they had dedicated themselves to. *This Is Living* had its premiere in 2007 at the Burnie Civic Centre as part of the 'Burnie Shines Festival' which all in

all saw an audience of 400 local people enjoying the four performances, including some of the elderly people who had contributed material to the show, but who had chosen not to take on a further role in the production. Despite the strenuous voyage and hurdles that they were faced with (bad acoustics and access problems) seeing their perspective on life reflected on a big stage imbued them with great pride and joy. The show was such a success that it scored the 'Burnie City Council Award for Event of the Year'. It then went on to perform at the Senior Citizens Week, at Wynard High School and at the Waratah Wynard Council AGM before heading off to a regional tour of Tasmania accompanied by a professionally designed exhibition of the portraits which was shown in aged-care facilities, council buildings and the Wynard High School. To raise public awareness of the issue of the ageing population and the political and social repercussions this has, Big hART also organised a discussion panel which brought local politicians, nursing home residents and project participants together while also ensuring that the project was presented at the annual LGA managers conference. In 2008, the show underwent a throughout development and was invited by the 'Ten Days on the Island'-Festival in 2009 to tour the state. Funding for this tour was leveraged from the Tasmanian State Government, the Tasmanian Community Fund, the Australia Council and Tasmanian Regional Arts.

### ***Drive***

Drawing young men at risk into the project became a major objective throughout 2007. With the skaters joining *This Is Living*, an early base was established that continued to widen over the course of the year. With multi-media workshops taking place in the marine shed and the preliminary skate park on site, a lot of contacts evolved organically while some referrals also came from peers and local service providers that worked closely with Big hART.

As some of the skaters were already working on a film that portrayed the local skate scene by documenting the lobbying process for the new council skate park, a general sentiment was that work on a second film should engage with a different aspect of Tasmanian youth culture. A consensus was found in the courageous decision to explore the issues of male adolescence in remote areas and the high statistics of 'autocides' on Tasmanian roads. A core group of 36 young men spent the third year of the *Lucky* project producing a 55min experimental documentary and a website with supplementary reference material and 69 additional short clips. The films investigated the fine line between healthy risk taking and dangerous

behaviour that many of the participants were treading on a daily basis while growing up in an area that offered only a very limited range of inspiring pastimes. The proposal for this third phase of the *Lucky* project was received with great interest by local and state sources who supplied additional funds for the film production. 96 young men who were all residents of Tasmania's North-West coast and who were all intricately linked to the subject they were studying, took part in 257 task-focussed workshops which imparted skills in sound recording, film making, interviewing, storytelling and digital media production. These workshops were conducted by a wide range of artists, including film makers, skaters, beat boxers, sound artists, designers, illustrators, dancers and musicians who all added their own signature to the colourful mix that informed the final outcomes of the project's last phase. To shed light on the impact the deaths of their friends had had on the community and to bring their stories to the big screen, the young men interviewed over one hundred community members that had been affected by road trauma, including mothers, police officers, counsellors, other young men, car manufacturers, emergency officers and five families that generously opened up about the turmoil they had gone through in the last two years after having lost someone to suicide. These encounters had a profound effect on the young men and challenged them to consider the wider repercussions of their own behaviour. Reflecting on issues of identity and rites of passage, many of the participants gained a greater sense of self and the responsibility they would have to take on as adults. The final cut of the film was launched in the second half of 2008 in Burnie to an audience of over 100 people of all ages. It was then shown in several local screenings to an audience comprising peers of the young men, school children and members of the local communities in rural and remote North-Western Tasmania. Following 12 high-profile promotion events, it was distributed nationally, shown at festivals – including Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney Film Festivals – and broadcasted on the ABC, receiving outstanding feedback and critical acclaim.

On the policy level, Big *hART* used the presentation of the film to set conversations in motion with educational departments, policy makers, police, emergency services, health services and mental health services in a bid to develop early response patterns that would help young men at risk to deflect from their trajectories.

A special merit that made *Drive* yet another successful part of the *Lucky* project was that it challenged the young men to be seen and heard, actively encouraging them to reflect on their trajectories and to make strong choices with regard to their future. That many benefited from their involvement with Big *hART* was clearly visible in the

wrap-up of the project which saw 13 young men who had formerly been at the brink of dropping out of the educational system strongly recommitting themselves, five participants returning to school, two enrolling in the army, 11 gaining casual employment in the media sector and some securing one-off employment with partnering agencies and councils. Some of the young men remained in close contact with the Big *hART* team and acted as regular mentors to high school students in the legacy project *Love Zombies* which together with partner events like *Mad Month of Making* exerted a positive influence in invigorating the cultural landscape of remote parts of the North-Western coast of Tasmania even after Big *hART*'s exit-strategy for *Lucky* had been completed.