

Regional Arts Development Fund Final Report

Please give a brief description of the main activities undertaken

This arts programme involved people with mental illnesses working with both clay and ceramic tiles to develop artistic abilities, express their feelings about life's journey with mental illness and to increase the artistic awareness of the people attending the programme. The programme engaged people living with mental illnesses and psychiatric disability in the Thuringowa area. The theme of the programme was "journeys", with the finished ceramic tiles representing individual personal journeys and experiences at various stages of living with mental illnesses. The programme reflected the cultural policy of the Thuringowa council by fostering a partnership with a particular societal group living in the council area. It also assists council to gain knowledge and understanding of those persons in the council area who are recovering from mental illness. The programme ran for 8 weeks from July to September 2005 and attracted a group size of between 15 and 25 people each week. Fiona Banner is well known within the local art community and was employed by the programme to teach and guide participants in designing, developing and completing their art works. The participants were encouraged to visually depict such experiences of their own lives with mental illness as they felt comfortable with. Such experiences as memories of childhood, experiences upon diagnosis with mental illness, experience of recovery, and goals for the future were suggested as a guide.

Aims / Goals Attained

- To bring people with mental illness together in groups in order that they can learn from each other and enjoy positive experiences in a safe and friendly environment.
- To increase general societal awareness of those suffering from mental illness
- To increase personal confidence and individual self esteem among those living with mental illness
- To increase awareness and acceptance of mental illness among the artistic community within Thuringowa and Townsville
- To provide a positive experience on which participants can reflect at later dates
- Provide an educational opportunity for a social work student from Monash University to participate and understand the need for promoting awareness of mental illness within society, and in particular the Thuringowa area

Level of Success of Aims and Goals

The programme achieved its aims and goals through utilising an open and inclusive approach to participants and workers at all times, allowing for the free flow of information and ideas between all those involved in the programme. Promoting self esteem, encouraging social interaction, giving individuals and groups a sense of purpose and meaning, and encouraging the development of creativity were important parts of the

practical nature of the programme. Secondary results included the enhancement of control over fine and gross motor skills, as well as encouraging alternative means of communication and increasing "on task" behaviour. Importantly, the programme has demonstrated that the Thuringowa council is committed its cultural policy of reflecting the diversity of the community and demonstrating support to cultural development as and integral part of community life.

4. Were There Unexpected Results?

The programme provided a distraction for those with mental illness. It provided an activity which encouraged total immersion in a single task requiring mental and physical concentration and imagination on the project to the exclusion of other less positive influences. The programme generated significant interest from people with mental illness which caused a degree of "word of mouth" advertising among this societal group. This resulted in a full group each time a session was conducted.

Participants shared their knowledge in teaching others how to produce their art works. Individuals with greater levels of experience were seen to be teaching those with less experience or knowledge of art and techniques. This resulted in a comfortable environment in which to express their emotions and personal experiences of mental illness.

The programme produced an environment for participants to embrace a series of informal debriefing sessions established and conducted by the student social worker. These debriefings enabled participants and workers to reflect on the session, discuss changes needed and to develop a methodology for developing personal stories as part of a successful community based arts programme.

Who participated?

- People with mental illness
- Employees from Sussex on Quinn Day Therapy Centre
- SOLAS workers
- Student social worker from Monash University undertaking placement at Mental Illness Fellowship North Queensland Inc

What did people think about the projects?

All those who participated expressed their enjoyment after each week and this was supported by comments from individuals recorded in the programme "comments book" provided by the programme for feedback. Copies of selected comments are attached to this report. Comments which give an over view of the quality of the feedback provided by participants include:

- "my work today was rewarding"
- "a real joyful, fantastic day. I made two snails"
- "a good idea.....money well spent. Intelligent idea"

These comments by participants of the programme demonstrate that Thuringowa council is committed to promoting and developing opportunities for skill development in the area of arts and culture within society.

Was There any Media Coverage? If so, what?

While media coverage has not yet been a facet of the programme, there is significant potential for ongoing media interest over the short and medium terms. This will arise from eventually displaying the ceramic tiles as a part of the Thuringowa "Therapeutic Garden" development project. Significant media interest could be developed through the potential for reporting on the programme, its aims and achievements at The Mental Health Services Conference to be held in the Twin Cities during 2006. The programme may also attract media attention during "Mental Health Week" in October 2005, as a project assisted by the Thuringowa Council taking an important step towards making the Twin Cities a more inclusive society for all peoples. The programme has the potential to be demonstrated pictorially through use of the many photographs that have been taken of the project throughout its duration, involving participants, teachers and workers involved in producing art works.

How did the project meet the vision of your Council's Art and Cultural Development Policy?

This type of programme has the potential to increase understanding within the community of mental illnesses. Likewise it also has the potential to demonstrate Thuringowa Council's ongoing support for, and commitment to, people with mental illness and arts development within the Thuringowa area. This is particularly important given the nature of Australia's multicultural society, the importance of art in societies such as the indigenous community and the fact that mental illness can strike any person, and indeed is estimated to affect at least 20% of the total population. Through its support for this programme Thuringowa council has been able to show that it values the creativity and cultural impulses of the community to ensure that new expression is encouraged and the programme is sustained. Further, council has assisted directly in the development of opportunities for community members to participate in a community based arts and cultural programme.

Chronology of Events

Melanie Coleman (Monash University Social Work Student)

Note. All sessions involved the taking of photographs to pictorially demonstrate the achievements of participants.

Some writing styles may appear similar. This is because participants requested workers to write for them whilst they continued with developing their art works.

July 5 2005

Art programme commences at Sussex on Quinn. All participants were introduced to the art teacher Fiona. Several participants already knew each other, which made it relatively easy to “break the ice” and introduce those participants who did not know anyone to others. This session progressed relatively fast according to several of the participants. I agree with their opinions.

July 12 2005

Most people who attended appeared to commence activities immediately upon arrival at the session. Many seemed positive about the programme based on their initial involvement last week. They appeared to be looking forward to finishing some of the work commenced the previous week. Some participants stated they were happy that they were able to undertake the art programme as they “felt good about what they were achieving”, and the programme was demonstrating to them that they could achieve something; something that they had created on their own.

July 19 2005

Today there were many happy faces as some completed their first works of art. Some were “simply amazed” at their creations. Participants expressed their beliefs that the programme was a “great idea” and enabled them to express their emotions and tell others about their experiences through their work. Some stated that the programme allowed them the choice to permit others to look into their lives, which was not always easy if you were not in control of the situation.

July 26 2005

Today we introduced the ceramic tiles. Each person was asked to use three tiles to describe their “life”. The tiles should represent the past, the present and the future, in accordance with how the programme was designed initially by the occupational therapy student in her initial planning of the programme. Many people found it easy to do this, and felt that they were able to articulate their experiences.

August 2 2005

Participants were this week helping each other to create their works. Many were demonstrating significant kindness to others. Many were readily forming new friendships despite being “strangers” only a few weeks previously. Some people were commencing second and third works of art while others were still working on their first piece. Those working on second and third pieces were offering support and ideas to those not at the same level.

August 9 2005

Participants commenced their works of art almost the instant they arrived. Many demonstrated pride in their work and were clearly and intensely happy to have achieved what they had. Some participants stated that they were really happy to have been given the opportunity to create these works. Others stated that they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on their life during their period with mental illness.

August 16 2005

A sense of unity has formed within the group. Even though many have learned the basics of creating ceramic art works using the available equipment, others are struggling. Those who have mastered the basic techniques assist those who have not. Some photos have been returned, pictorially demonstrating the achievements and industriousness of all those participating in the programme.

August 23 2005

Some tiles have been completed and kilned. One person who had completed two tiles stated “I’ve only got one tile to go and I have completed my journey”. This person was delighted to have the opportunity to show the important parts in her life and the achievements she had accomplished.

August 30 2005

Today involved a visit to the Pottery Association where people had the chance to use clay, in combination with a Potter’s Wheel, to continue the work that they had already commenced. Many people expressed that they wanted to continue with a programme such as this one, after this programme had finished. It is my understanding that the staff at Sussex on Quinn will attempt to continue the work of the programme after the official programme has finished.