

artwork

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The Community Arts Network of SA is a member based organisation. It forms part of a national network of sister organisations in most capital cities across Australia.

AIM

The Community Arts Network aims to support arts development and creative expression at community level towards the ideal of diverse and vibrant community cultures.

COMMUNITY ARTS

Arts practice and creative expression are at the heart of a community's vitality. People have always come together to sing, tell stories, enact rituals, to celebrate, to mourn and to mark significant events in their lives. Besides being able to see great art, people need to actively participate in these activities. This is what is meant by the term community arts, it might be a new name but it is not a new idea.

LOCAL CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

It is through the things we do together as groups and communities that we gain a sense of collective identity, a sense of place and a sense of belonging. When we value these things a positive concern for our social well being follows and we begin to take charge of our present and shape the future to meet our aspirations.

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Cover: Affordable housing using art as a pretext in Mexico. Photo: Michael Schnorr. See article page 6.

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our lives



The Nightflyers performing at Caberet Confere

our choices

more than just

your average

conference

CATH KENNEALLY

Cath Kenneally reports on the unique role of the arts in the SA consumer-led mental health conference, October 1996, Adelaide.

Everybody knows what a conference is. It's where experts in some given field gather together to tell other professionals and workers in the field what's going down. You have keynote addresses, lectures, slides, and perhaps question time after the lectures. You might get a set of conference papers to take home with you to study afterwards. But that's basically how a conference works, right?

Wrong. That sort of conference isn't going to work for some people, people such as consumers in the mental health area. And yet such people might be very conscious of the potential benefits of a conference designed by and for them, rather than an 'expert'-driven one.

In response to past state and national mental health conferences that inadequately represented consumers and carers a prominent South Australian advocacy agency Disability Action Inc worked with several consumers and carers to assess the need for a consumer-led mental health conference and to start the ball rolling to accomplish this.



Amaya Heywood. Dance and visual arts performance



Aviva Sheb'a. Vocal performance

Consumers and carers suggested that the arts would be an appropriate medium for involvement and participation for many people who have experienced mental illness. It was felt that the opportunity to stand up and speak or deliver papers in front of a crowd of people would not suit everyone.

Arts in Action Inc, South Australia's key arts and disability organisation, was approached by a delegation of consumers and carers to play a role initially in writing the application for the Health Commission grant. Because of their strong community base and past track record, Arts in Action was seen as an appropriate organisation to not only auspice the grant, if successful, but to take responsibility for coordinating the arts component of the conference.

Arts in Action have made quite a name for themselves in South Australia. They have been especially visible in a venture called Club Contagious, a showcase for artists with a disability that's acquired a reputation as a great night out, once a month at the Governor Hindmarsh Hotel. This is by no means all they do, as the booklet they recently launched, *A Creative Leap*, demonstrates. But one thing Arts in Action certainly know about is applying for grants, hence the request for their involvement in procuring conference funds.

The originators of the conference plan felt - and here they had experience of the usual kind of conference to reflect on - that it was beginning at the wrong end to start by approaching peak bodies in the mental health area for 'experts' to address their conferees. They wanted the conferees to be consumers as well as service providers. The mission statement they developed claimed that their conference (planned for Mental Health Awareness Week in late '96) would 'in a positive and creative way' foster 'self determination' and 'focus and amplify the voice of mental health consumers.' In pursuit of that aim, they determined from the start of planning that arts would feature distinctively in their conference program, not just as entertainment (though certainly that, too) but 'as a medium which injects life into advocacy.'

The organisers wanted a certain ratio of consumers and professionals. The opportunity for professionals to experience consumers not just at times of ill health and high needs but in a state of well-being and expressing individual and collective creativity would offer professionals a deeper understanding of the lives and aspirations of people who have experienced mental illness.

The conference grant application was approved in July 1995. Although the arts was seen as an appropriate and accessible advocacy medium by the SA Health

Commission project assessors, concerns at the executive level resulted in the need to finance the arts component of the conference from non-Health Commission sources. Arts in Action believes that this is a reflection of the lack of collaboration between the arts and health sectors in relation to disability in South Australia.

Although funding was approved in July, processing delays and the requirement to rework parts of the application and submit revised budgets resulted in a very late first grant instalment being received in February 1996. Once funds were on-line Joanne Petitt-damage of Arts Plus was brought in as conference coordinator and the steering committee was formalised and expanded. Both Joanne and Arts in Action's administrator Lorraine Denton believe that their lives would have been made easier and the conference even better had there not been the unexpected delays in receiving the first instalment of the grant. These delays exerted considerable pressure on the steering committee to fulfil the aim of holding the conference in October 1996 during National Mental Health Awareness Week, at that stage just eight months away.

The delay also meant that the consumer consultation process so central to the whole concept of the conference didn't begin to happen until early in the conference year itself. A steering committee planning day was held in