

Aboriginal Belly Casting Workshops and Exhibition

Final Report

17 November 2017

Submitted by Bianca Williams and Rosanne Kennedy

Stated Objectives

Transport a group of up to 7 women from Moree NSW to the ANU for 5 days for the following activities, designed to raise public salience about issues affecting Aboriginal Women's maternal health and wellbeing and to foster connections in the broader context of Reconciliation:

- A workshop hosted by the Moree Elder where she describes her participation in the *Mubali* project over the past 14 years and the benefits she has seen from the program. At this event, create a belly cast for a local Canberra mother.
- Pop Up exhibition of pregnancy belly casts.
- Memory workshop (closed event) in which Moree women share stories about pregnancy belly casting with local women from the ACT and surrounding regions who have made belly casts.

Overview

Five women and one baby travelled down to the ANU from Moree between 12 October and 16 October 2017. They participated in a number of events designed to raise salience about Beyond Empathy's *Mubali: Sea of Bellies* belly casting project in which they were involved. The women broadened their social networks by meeting people in the ACT region. This event received additional funding from *ANU School of Sociology, ANU School of Literature Languages and Linguistics* and the *Mental Health Community Coalition of the ACT*. Below, the three key events are discussed individually.

Belly Yarn Talk



Images by: Kate Mitchell (left)

Denise Ferris (right)

This event consisted of a yarning circle in which women fielded questions from the broader community. It was attended by about 25 people both from the academy as well as from the Community Sector in addition to members of the general public. This event went extremely well, despite not running exactly to plan: The Moree Elder could not attend at short notice due to health concerns. However, with the blessing of the elder, it was decided to press ahead and run the event as the Moree women were also transporting the belly casts down for the exhibition which was due to start the following day. We had also already committed to a number of fixed expenses (eg. Accommodation and transport.)

The absence of the elder provided an unexpected opportunity for the women of the community travelling to Canberra to speak up at the event and take on a broader role than they had initially expected. At least one of the women reflected that it had been a significant development opportunity for her.

The event was held during National Mental Health week. A Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony was performed by Matilda House. Matilda gave a very moving speech about the importance of families and the belly casts as symbols of the future generation. Bianca Williams provided an overview of the importance of the arts and yarning to Aboriginal wellbeing, highlighting belly casting as one communities' innovative solution to a social issue. The women from the Moree community then answered questions from the audience on issues ranging from maternal health and wellbeing, to the inclusion of fathers, the translation of the programs in different localities and empirical evidence of the success of the program. The women also made a belly cast for a Canberra mother. The mother was very grateful for the opportunity.

Feedback on the Belly Yarn Talk:

Thank you so much for hosting such a wonderful event today! I really learned a lot and enjoyed it immensely. - Member of the Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement

Just a short note to say how wonderful I thought the talk and exhibition were yesterday. It was such an achievement to bring the Moree ladies to Canberra and well worth the effort. You facilitated the event superbly and the conversation was sensitive and insightful and beautifully teased out the ladies' stories. - CEO Families Australia.

Evaluation

A key strength of the event was to serve as a forum for a discussion and cross fertilisation of ideas between various sectors of the community interested in Aboriginal Maternal wellbeing. This event drew in a number of individuals from the broader community including those working directly with mothers, community sector workers as well as everyday mothers themselves.

The Belly Yarn Exhibition



Images by Anna Trundle, Dionysus Events

Initially we had planned a pop up exhibition in the Tjabal centre which would only last one day. However, in the intervening months we were able to secure a space in the

new Prompt Gallery in the ANU Pop Up village, this enabled us to run the exhibition from 13 October to 5 November. We were also able to use this opportunity to expand the scope of the exhibition from simply being a display of Aboriginal belly casts to placing the Moree women's program in the broader context of other instances in which pregnancy belly casting has been used as a feminist icon. On Monday 16 October we hung the final piece in the exhibition, a big belly threaded with yarn, created by the participants of the Memory Workshop. This symbolised the 'yarns' that had taken place at Sunday's Memory Workshop.

Feedback on the Belly Yarn Exhibition:

Thanks for your presentation and the exhibition last Friday it was really good.
- ANU Post Graduate Student

Nice to see you again today, and congrats on such an engaging exhibit. I've spoken to many people – students, staff and the general public who were admiring the bellies in the gallery and reading some of the notations. Some of the feedback I received was "Wow, this is incredible" "What a great project" "Such a good space for this kind of exhibit." Always nice to hear positive feedback! - Lavana Neal, Place Manager, Dionysus events.

Evaluation

This event exceeded expectations. On the opening day we had the approximately 25 people from the belly yarn talk view the exhibition plus an additional 10 people who attended the exhibition launch only.

We had much positive feedback, both on the day and afterwards. It was a way of raising salience of the *Mubali* project in both the ANU and broader ACT community and we were very grateful for this opportunity.

Memory Workshop



Image taken by workshop participant

A Memory workshop was held on Sunday 15 October 2017 in which 5 women from the ACT and surrounding regions who had made belly casts shared their memories of pregnancy, birthing and motherhood with the 5 Moree women. This was a closed event, meaning it was by invitation only and not broadly advertised. Matilda House also attended this event and spoke about her own family history. She also placed the belly casts in the broader context of the Stolen Generations. The women's personal stories were therefore, framed in the overall context of a people's reconciliation.

Feedback on the Memory Workshop

Thank you again, I really enjoyed today and appreciated the opportunity to meet everyone and listen to their stories. Memory Workshop participant from ACT.

Another participant posted the following on Instagram:

It was an honour to be invited to contribute to the Belly Muster today, a project between the ANU and Beyond Empathy where women came together to share stories about birth, motherhood, connection and reconciliation. A special thank you to Bianca for bringing us together and the Mubali Moree mob for travelling all the way to Canberra, cooking for us and sharing your story.

A senior member of the Moree Community wrote:

I was in Moree and the girls said they loved the trip. Thanks for getting them down there. It has empowered them.

Evaluation

Perhaps the best evaluation of the Memory Workshop, and indeed the whole project, is to be found in the words of Matilda House herself who, reflecting on the concept of Reconciliation at the Memory workshop, stated:

Everybody is doing their bit just like what is happening here on Friday and today and what is carrying on you know with these young and all of us being together and sitting around there, having those yarns, those belly yarns. You know so it is, it is out there. People get disappointed because, "oh there wasn't much" but there was, because you're going to go somewhere and have a good yarn with people as well.

Here Matilda emphasises the importance of grass roots and 'kitchen table' conversations (which the women were quite literally seated at) to Reconciliation.