

# The arts project tackling Armidale's alcohol issues

By JANENE CAREY

## 1. Just One Less

Coming soon to a public space near you, some dark evening in early July - an extravaganza of light and sound designed to make you stop and think, projected onto a tree, or a bridge, or the side of a building.

The startling outdoor screenings, based on stories collected from the local community about risk-taking behaviour in young people, binge drinking, and alcohol's place in our culture, are the culmination of a six-month project spearheaded by community arts organisation, Beyond Empathy.

They've been deliberately crafted to grab attention first, and raise awareness second, says Kim McConville, Beyond Empathy's cofounder and executive director.

"I call it the Wow factor," she said. "Where people go - WOW! What was that?"

The Just One Less project is trying to kick-start community conversation about a topic that is often dismissed as somebody else's problem.



Craig Walsh's digital projection 'Humanature', Gladstone Qld, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist



The 'Just One Less' mobile video booth, with project coordinator Narelle Jarry and lead artist Jonathon Larsen



"We're not trying to dictate to anyone about alcohol," Kim said. "But what's evident is that the problem belongs to everyone in the community. It's not just teenagers. It's also a parental issue. There seems to be some kind of blind spot that parents have around their children drinking."

Content for the screenings comes from the 250 personal stories

collected by the mobile video booth stationed around town in February, and also from artworks about alcohol created by local high school students.

These include a short drama called 'Smashed' by students from TAS, PLC and NEGS; clay animation films from O'Connor Catholic College; a documentary from Armidale High School and a mash-

up film by students at Duval High School.

The giant outdoor projections planned for July 1-3 will be staged by internationally renowned artists Craig Walsh and Hiromi Tango as part of the Museum of Contemporary Art's touring project, Digital Odyssey.

## 2. Agent for change: Kim McConville

In 2006, Kim McConville was named Social Entrepreneur of the Year for her work with Beyond Empathy, a community arts organisation dedicated to tackling tough social issues and raising awareness about problems faced by society's fringe dwellers.

She runs it from the downstairs floor of her home in north Armidale, but with an annual turnover of \$2 million it is a substantial non-profit enterprise, employing seven full-time and three part-time staff, and contracting work to a pool of about 70 artistic professionals.

It's called 'Beyond Empathy' because its mission extends past audience enlightenment into the realm of action.

"The arts are a wonderful tool for empathy," Kim explained, "but in order to change people's lives you need to go beyond that and build skills, capacity and capability in the community."

Like many of the people whose lives are influenced by Beyond Empathy, Kim knows about pushing boundaries, taking risks and steering dangerously close to the edge.

"I think you do need to know," she said. "The best workers in this organisation have a sense of what it's like on the margins."

Her own experiences have certainly taught her some lessons about surviving hard times and dark places.

After finishing school and moving to Sydney at 18, she ran off the rails for two years, living every parent's nightmare.

"In late 1984, my life came to a grinding halt. Unable to really hold down a full-time job, I got the sack and faced some tough decisions about trying to get my life back on track," Kim said.

Her father, Ken McConville, Head of English at The Armidale School, commanding officer of the cadet corps, and the coach who'd just led the school's First XV rugby team on

a triumphant tour of the United Kingdom, convinced her to return home and start afresh.

Experienced at working with challenging young people, he offered her a simple choice between training to be a teacher or training to be a nurse - simple choices were the only kind she was equipped to deal with at the time -

rehabilitation, travelling from Armidale to Brisbane each weekend for six months and taking a teaching job in Moree to be near him when he went back to his family's farm at Croppa Creek.

Sam defied all the odds to become a farmer, pilot, author and inspirational public speaker, but those first few months on the farm

she enlisted the aid of local Aboriginal men from a band called Black Impact.

They held a series of music workshops and got everybody writing songs. It was hugely successful; the whole class participated.

Next, she roped in Aunty Paula Duncan, a local visual artist, to run arts workshops for them.

"We had this pumping class of kids that were turning up, who were fully engaged, who were learning things, who were deeply respectful," Kim said. "These kids were inspirational. To me it seemed like a no-brainer."

But although the students' academic results improved, teaching through an artistic, creative lens was well outside the box in the 1980s and Kim's methods received little appreciation.

She resigned her position after a year and spent much of the next decade in Sydney working behind the scenes in Aboriginal education,



Kim with her son in Moree during the 'Connections' project, 2008. The artists pictured are Adam Rish, Aunty Paula Duncan and Garry Shead

and she opted to follow in his footsteps and enrol at Armidale Teachers' College.

Three weeks later, in what could have been a crushing blow to her plans to remake herself, her father was killed during an abseiling exercise with the cadets.

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"In Kim's third year at the teachers' college, tragedy struck again. This time it was her boyfriend Sam Bailey, a former TAS student who'd been one of Ken McConville's rugby players on the UK tour.

He was working as a jackeroo in the Northern Territory when a car accident broke his spine and left him a quadriplegic.

Kim supported Sam through his

were his lowest ebb, and one of the casualties was his relationship with Kim.

Meanwhile, she was facing her own challenges at Courallie High, as the newly appointed teacher for kids with learning difficulties. It was called the OA class; she can't remember what the letters stood for, but everyone knew it as the 'Only Aboriginals' class.

On her first day she realised the most pressing issue she faced wasn't literacy or numeracy, but getting these wild, tough youngsters who hated school to actually turn up and feel good about being there.

"These were the kids that nobody else wanted in their classrooms," Kim said. "They were tough because they had to protect themselves, the system was failing them. It was about creating a space that they actually wanted to come to."

"I applied for a grant from council and I got \$1500. We painted a lot of the light poles in the town, and I



Kim McConville, Executive Director of Beyond Empathy, the organisation behind Armidale's Just One Less project

developing resources, policies and courses.

In 1997, suffering postnatal depression, she moved back to Moree with her husband and two daughters, and found the Aboriginal kids she'd taught previously were still on the fringes of the community, but now they had children of their own, so she began developing arts-led community projects to engage them.

"Kim has a marvellous ability to galvanise and motivate the support of investors and the people whose lives she seeks to improve," said Jan Owens from Social Ventures Australia, announcing that Kim McConville had won their Inspirational Social Entrepreneur Award in 2006. "She represents a new kind of leadership - we need more Kims."

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