

Case Study 6

Growing community arts

Victoria Park Centre for the Arts in partnership with Nulsen.

For nearly a decade the Victoria Park Centre for the Arts has been including the work of artists with disabilities in their community projects through a partnership with Nulsen – a not-for-profit organisation supporting people with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. The partnership grew organically after Nulsen came to the centre to hire space.

Through a series of projects, workshops and collaborations within the Arts Centre, Nulsen residents have thrived in the arts community and found a place in the larger Victoria Park community.

Rowena Skinner of Victoria Park Centre for the Arts and Patti Ferber of Nulsen tell of their mutually beneficial partnership and how it has developed.

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The partnership between Victoria Park Centre for the Arts and Nulsen was not part of the DAII Pilot Project, but is an excellent example of an innovative partnership between an arts and a disability organisation.

“We came in at the end of the DAII Pilot Project, but it worked out well,” explains Victoria Park Centre for the Arts’ treasurer Rowena Skinner. “We didn’t structure it; it just went that way. Our partnership is an organic process.”

Strong partnership

The organic growth of the partnership has ensured its strength. It began with the idea of getting the residents of Nulsen integrated further into the community.

“We’re a residential facility,” says Patti Ferber of Nulsen, “so our aim is to have people getting out into the community for their arts and cultural experiences. That’s where the partnership began with Victoria Park Centre for the Arts because we initially started by just renting a space for a couple of hours for a young man to be able to go there and practice his art. That was about nine years ago.”

Rowena Skinner continues. “Patti Ferber wanted a space separate from Nulsen, a separate space in the community. She started hiring our Arts Centre space and running courses. Then she offered to be a volunteer and spent a bit more time here and we ended up having a few more people from Nulsen coming in and then had a few combined exhibitions.



Photo courtesy of Victoria Park Centre for the Arts

“The Arts Centre and Nulsen have also applied for some combined grants for a couple of community projects doing a water fountain and mosaic, and that worked out really well,” Rowena says. “There were also music workshops held here that we worked together on, and some of the Nulsen residents have entered artworks into our annual art award. There’s been a lot of cross assistance programs and shared smaller projects over the last seven or eight years.”

The structure of both organisations and their individual focus on inclusion within the community only made the partnership stronger, easier and more viable.

“There’s always been a bit of an ethos at the Centre,” says Patti. “It’s actually built into their constitution that there is an element of community inclusion and access for all - it’s been very willingly practiced.

“The management at Nulsen right from the very beginning, were really willing to support the Centre because of the way it supported our people and the recognition for equal opportunities in the community.”

Patti Ferber’s increasing presence at the Art Centre helped in the initial stages of the partnership.

“I began to put in a few hours as a volunteer at the Centre and would support whatever project was going on at the time, providing help as needed,” says Ms Ferber.

“We began to use the Victoria Park Centre for the Arts and their artists as tutors through an Australia Council grant in 2000

and it’s just kept evolving from there. I think all the projects I’ve been involved with since then have had a component of Victoria Park Centre for the Arts involvement, whether it’s been using the space, hiring artists or working together on community projects - there’s been a linkage from that time on.”

Project collaboration

The partnership between Victoria Park Centre for the Arts and Nulsen has been based on continued support and development in the interests of Nulsen’s residents. They have also collaborated on several projects.

Patti Ferber explains, “There was a joint project about two or three years ago between the Centre and what was then ACROD (Australian Council for



Photo courtesy of Victoria Park Centre for the Arts

Rehabilitation of the Disabled). We did a community ceramic and garden project. The Nulsen residents who hired the space at the Centre hosted the ceramic project, and we invited a number of different communities in, including Kent Street High School. The wider community was then invited in through the Arts Centre.

“So these different local community groups would come in at different times and work alongside Nulsen residents and together they created a water wall.”

For Patti Ferber, the question of inclusion as opposed to dedicated projects for people with disabilities comes down to two levels of inclusion.

“I think this varies depending on the different disability organisations, but for Nulsen, most of the people I have worked with over the years have severe and profound intellectual disabilities so for me there are two levels of inclusion.

“First is the opportunity for residents to sit amongst a community like that at the Arts Centre and be a practicing artist within that community and be accepted for being an individual.

“But for us I think there is also a second level need to be able to work in a dedicated small group within those situations, because it’s very difficult for a person who has severe intellectual disabilities to sit in a mainstream workshop and not be filling a token position. At the end of a two-hour workshop, that person won’t have been able to move at the same pace so there isn’t necessarily any ongoing value for the person other than being in a mainstream space.

“So being able to work at the Art Centre and develop skills and learn from skilled artists at a pace that’s dictated by the person with the disability, they sit alongside each other. What I’ve found over the years is that being able to move at their own pace enables them to then move into mainstream spaces like the Victoria Park Art Awards. If someone is just going to a workshop, unless they have a dedicated artist that is able to work with them, they would be left behind and I don’t see that as a profitable experience,” Ms Ferber explains.

Community involvement

The collaboration and partnership with the Arts Centre has allowed the residents at Nulsen to discover and take on a larger role in the community.

“They’ve actually met and associations have been created with the Arts Centre and other artists. There are Nulsen residents that have from time to time been members of the Arts Centre when they’ve been involved with projects there”, says Ms Skinner. “The artists that dropped in to the Arts Centre, especially in the days when the Arts Centre was growing, would comment on the work and support what the residents were doing.

“We put on our first public exhibition at the Arts Centre in 2000 and we’ve held three others since then and it’s been very well supported. The residents have been able to move into an arts community and have their work recognised and valued,” says Ms Ferber.

The partnership has delivered more to the participants than physical outcomes like the fountain and garden projects. The enduring relationships are prized beyond that. The

movement into the larger realm of the community and further artistic opportunities are other obvious outcomes. This increased profile then leads to further developments made with people with disabilities in mind.

“Volunteers have come into the space and been quite nervous about associating with people with disabilities because it’s not something that’s been a part of their life before. Two volunteers in particular have formed really strong relationships with Nulsen residents. There have been friendships built as well as artistic and learning opportunities,” says Ms Skinner.

“Artists have also been informed by the way they’ve seen people working, just things like how people bring colours together or the way they work adapting to their disability. Artists have actually spoken of how this inspires them.

“It’s been like a shared education and journey for people. It’s an equal learning opportunity and I think we’ve been able to bring insights around the issues of access.

“There were some renovations done at the Art Centre and the outcomes were built around the ideas of disability access,” explains Ms Skinner.

“We had our third exhibition in December last year and that was open to tutors, friends and Nulsen residents so that was the first time we’ve held an exhibition that was actually not dedicated to people with disabilities only. This was really well received and because of that exhibition it’s going to be an annual event at the Arts Centre. Over the years four people have entered the Victoria Park Art Awards because of their direct involvement with the Arts Centre,” Ms Skinner says.



Photo courtesy of Victoria Park Centre for the Arts

Outline of project

An ongoing partnership between the Victoria Park Centre for the Arts and Nulsen designed to enable Nulsen residents to thrive in the artist community and find a place in the larger Victoria Park community.

Partners

Victoria Park Centre for the Arts

aims to provide people of all ages, cultures and economic backgrounds with a supportive, cooperative environment in which to appreciate and present art.

Nulsen is acknowledged as a leader in Australia in the field of caring for people with profound and severe disabilities.

Outcome

The partnership between the Victoria Park Centre for the Arts and Nulsen has resulted in ongoing projects, relationships and collaborations which bring the general community and the residents of Nulsen together in a more inclusive nature.



Photo courtesy of Victoria Park Centre for the Arts