

## ABSTRACT

# Latrobe Youth Film Festival: promoting the voice of young people through film

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## Introduction

In February 2014, the Hazelwood open-cut coal mine in the Latrobe Valley, 150 kms east of Melbourne, was set alight as a result of embers from nearby bushfires. The eastern and south-eastern batters of the mine as well as the floor were on fire and more than 7000 fire services personnel from across Australia fought the blaze for 45 days. Finally, on 25 March 2014, the fire was officially declared extinguished (Teague, Catford & Petering 2014). During the fire, a significant amount of ash was produced that caused physical and mental-health issues for surrounding communities. These issues arose while the mine fire burned and remained during the subsequent investigation and inquiries. In response, the *Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry 2015–16* (Teague, Catford & Roper 2016) recommended that the Victorian Government must work differently with Latrobe Valley communities to address these issues. Importantly, the Inquiry highlighted the need to involve communities in decisions to enhance their long-term health and wellbeing and re-establish the lost trust between residents and government officials. In response, Latrobe City was designated a Health Innovation Zone by the Victorian Government. The Latrobe Health Innovation Zone is the first of its kind in Australia. It has two key structures being the Latrobe Health Assembly (Assembly) and the Latrobe Health Advocate (Advocate). Together with the Assembly and Advocate, the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone creates opportunities for community members to voice their aspirations in the planning and delivering of better health and wellbeing outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

Good health and wellbeing are not only important for people to live full and active lives, they are also critical factors in enhancing people's resilience. At the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, the World Health Organization outlined that 'Health and disaster risk reduction are deeply connected; healthy people are resilient people and resilient people recover more quickly from disasters' (UN News 2015). The results of the conference and the subsequent *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030* (UNDRR 2015) led to a much greater focus on people's health and wellbeing in disaster risk reduction compared to that of the *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015* (Aitsi-Selmi *et al.* 2015). It is therefore not surprising that Cutter (2016), through a review of existing tools used to assess community resilience, revealed human health to be a key measurement category.

A disastrous fire at the Hazelwood coal mine in 2014, and subsequent government inquiries, revealed the inequalities and disadvantage experienced by communities in the Latrobe Valley. Following the inquiry, the Victorian Government implemented a place-based approach to support people's health and wellbeing, particularly the Latrobe Valley's youth. In December 2019, a six-month project culminated in the inaugural Latrobe Youth Film Festival Red Carpet event. The Latrobe Youth Film Festival project is a collaboration between Latrobe Youth Space, We Are Latrobe and the Victorian Government Department of Health and Human Services Latrobe Health Innovation Zone team. The project's primary aim was to promote the voice of young people in matters that are important to them. This paper outlines the development and implementation of the project.

<sup>1</sup> As mandated in the Latrobe Health and Wellbeing Charter at: [www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/latrobe-health-innovation-zone/latrobe-health-and-wellbeing-charter](http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/latrobe-health-innovation-zone/latrobe-health-and-wellbeing-charter).

To these ends, this paper outlines the development and implementation of the Latrobe Youth Film Festival project. The project was conducted to improve the health opportunities for youth in the Latrobe Valley and provide policy makers with youth perspectives. The project may also guide people wanting to develop similar youth-focused participatory film projects.

## Project purpose

Recognising the important role that young people have in communities, the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone established the Latrobe Youth Film Festival project with aims to:

- promote young people’s voices in matters that are important to them
- raise awareness about health and wellbeing opportunities in the Latrobe Valley
- strengthen young people’s confidence in advocating for social change.

The project was not established as a research undertaking. Rather, it draws on participatory video methodologies as described by Haynes and Tanner (2015) as a tool to develop a youth-led, adult-guided program through Latrobe Youth Space.<sup>2</sup> Participatory video projects are designed to empower youth in research and advocacy and promote the voices of young people in policy debates; an area where they are often not heard. This aligns with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) in that children have valuable knowledge and ideas, they have the right to share their knowledge and ideas and be involved in decisions that affect them. Through participatory video projects, young people can gain greater knowledge and awareness of issues as well as increased confidence in questioning policy makers on underlying social causes and possible solutions (Haynes & Tanner 2015). To achieve this, a critical component of the project was linking in with and creating dialogue between youth groups and health and wellbeing advocates, practitioners and professionals (i.e. the Assembly, Advocate and others working within the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone). Furthermore, by engaging and supporting Latrobe Valley youth in developing short films on their interpretations of what health and wellbeing means to them, the filmmaking process provided a clear, accessible and entertaining way to communicate improvement opportunities. The findings of Haynes and Tanner (2015) that youth styles in creating participatory films are ‘emotional, credible, reliable and encouraging’ (p.367) have significant potential to drive social change. However, it is not only the end-product that facilitates social change but also the filmmaking process. Through film creation, showings and community dialogue, policy-makers can gain an in-depth understanding of how young people view critical issues within their communities (Haynes & Tanner 2015).

## The process: development and implementation

The project adopted a five-stage approach (Table 1). The description of each stage is not exhaustive and it includes key ingredients for success as viewed by the project team, participants and their families. This anecdotal evidence has been drawn from discussions among the groups during the filmmaking process and Red Carpet event.

**Table 1: Latrobe Youth Film Festival project five-stage approach.**

Stage	Brief overview
Garner commitment, develop and refine the project plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• secure support from youth groups and key institutions and agencies</li> <li>• refine and confirm project plan</li> </ul>
Develop awareness and upskill, ensure safeguarding protocols are in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• garner understanding of the issues and opportunities youth groups face and see</li> <li>• create dialogue between youth groups and health and wellbeing advocates, professionals and practitioners</li> <li>• youth groups to undergo specialised filmmaking training</li> <li>• ensure participants understand the need for a safe environment and adhere to relevant safety checks</li> </ul>
Shape ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• youth research issues of interest and identify and workshop particular issues that they would like to focus on in their short films</li> </ul>
Create content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• youth create content through filmmaking and editing</li> </ul>
Launch films	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hold community screening events in locations around Latrobe Valley</li> <li>• publish films online through all available platforms</li> </ul>
Support dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support dialogue between the film makers and decision makers to address the wellbeing concerns raised in the films</li> </ul>

### Stage 1: Garner commitment, develop and refine the project plan

The festival project was a collaboration between Latrobe Health Innovation Zone and partner organisations. Discussions with We Are Latrobe (the social marketing

<sup>2</sup> Latrobe Youth Space is led by the YMCA as part of a consortium of organisations providing activities and services to young people in the Latrobe Valley.

team positioned with the Assembly) revealed that they and Latrobe Youth Space (a YMCA youth-led, adult-guided initiative for young people) had raised the creation of a youth film festival as a possible, positive experience for youth. This arose at the same time as a recently established Movie and Drama Club at Latrobe Youth Space. Considering this, a project team was developed and a draft plan was created. The draft plan was critiqued and subsequently fully endorsed by the Latrobe Youth Space Youth Governance Committee.<sup>3</sup> This was an important step to ensure young people were part of the decision-making process. Without their approval, the project would not have proceeded. To promote a participatory two-way learning process, commitment (in terms of access to health and wellbeing professionals) was also garnered from the Advocate<sup>4</sup> and from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

A call for Expressions of Interest was sent to four local film production studios in early 2019. Local organisations were approached to keep the project in-line with DHHS place-based requirements (DHHS 2018) and to strengthen local partnerships and support local businesses. One of the challenges for responding film producers was their capacity to provide training and resources to a group of (at that stage) unidentified participants. As such, a studio that could offer flexibility in responding to young people's capabilities, interests and schedules was preferred. The successful applicant was Nanoo Nanoo and they were brought into the project team to refine the draft project plan. The team met regularly to ensure the project met its core deliverables while exercising flexibility around structure and timelines based on feedback from the young people participating. This feedback, consisting of written submissions and verbal communication, was collected by a YMCA mentor from Latrobe Youth Space.

The project team agreed that rather than applying strict guidelines around film production, participants would be encouraged to share their personal perspectives particularly around:

- what health and wellbeing in the Latrobe Valley means to them
- the issues they face and opportunities they see in terms of health and wellbeing
- the actions they would like to see to help improve the health and wellbeing in their community.

A critical aspect of Stage 1 is to identify a single coordination point. Due to work commitments, the project team shared responsibilities throughout the project. This caused some confusion in relation to who was taking ownership of what. This role should be clearly defined at the start of the project and maintained throughout.

## Stage 2: Develop awareness and upskill, ensure safeguarding protocols are in place

Potential participants were invited to attend a two-hour introductory session using radio, newspaper, social

media, flyers and by word-of-mouth. Through the very nature of the Latrobe Youth Space programs (Rainbow Club, young parents group, multicultural street games and study group) and its consortia (Berry Street, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Quantum Support Services, National Disability Condition Officer, The Gathering Place and Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency) a wide diversity of young people was invited to participate. The session was hosted by Latrobe Youth Space with DHHS providing context of the project and Nanoo Nanoo leading discussions on filmmaking. During this session, the project team identified the areas of interest relating to filmmaking that would form the six, three-hour training sessions on acting, animation, camera skills, directing, editing and script writing.



The young participants learning the art of acting.

Image: Latrobe Youth Space

A critical part of these training sessions was to ensure each one was a safe environment for participants to ask questions and explore ideas. A 'My Pledge' was signed by participants (and their guardian if they were under 18 years of age) at the start of the project. The group work enabled participants to form friendships and discover each other's talents and areas of interest.

*With the acting workshop, the feeling of emotions that we expressed through personal thoughts and experiences while also imagining what they may be like, it felt really good to experience that and its definitely something you can take away and use.*

(Jordyn, participant)

Ethics standards were important to ensure all adults had a Working with Children Check and had completed the Australian Childhood Foundation's Safeguarding Children and Young People training course (a critical component

<sup>3</sup> As noted by Erin Byrne in the 'Latrobe Youth Space ... our first year' booklet (p.5), 'Our Youth Governance Committee is made up of young, passionate individuals who collectively represent the young voices of Latrobe Valley'.

<sup>4</sup> The Latrobe Health Advocate's role is to provide independent advice to the Victorian Government on behalf of Latrobe Valley communities on system and policy issues affecting their health and wellbeing.

of the YMCA Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy). This is also in line with the safeguarding principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations 1989). Adequate time had to be allowed for these checks and measures to be in place. Without them, the project could not proceed as planned.



During scriptwriting sessions, participants learnt about character- and action-driven stories, motivations, obstacles and artistic methods of script writing.

Image: Latrobe Youth Space

### Stage 3: Shape ideas

Although ideas shaping is listed as Stage 3, participants had begun shaping ideas at the announcement of the project, or even in the months before. Throughout the project, participants continually explored their topics of interest by researching and bouncing ideas off their peers and the project team as well as accessing information from health and wellbeing advocates and professionals. This was an important step as it encouraged participants to think holistically about the issues they wanted to focus on. Flicker and colleagues (2008) note that the process of holistically envisaging better health outcomes can have a far greater impact on young people than singular health-prevention strategies alone. This is achieved through greater learning, where young people identify the key issues they would like to prioritise for investigation, debate these issues with their peers and undertake further research to solidify the message they would like to communicate through their films (Haynes & Tanner 2015).

While peer-to-peer support was evident during group discussions, participants did not request access to other service providers (e.g. Headspace). Rather, they chose to draw from their own experiences, debate these issues with each other and conduct their own research. However, the project team was on hand to provide guidance as needed. This maintained the project's youth-led, adult-guided approach.

My Pledge,

I, \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_ hereby make the following pledge to the Latrobe Youth Film Festival project:

To myself, I commit to maximising this opportunity to try new things, test ideas and to live with occasional discomfort as I develop new skills. I will persevere and have fun along the way.

To my team, I commit to making time to ensure we get the most from our film project, I will prioritise my personal commitments to the team and I will be present and supportive during our time working together.

To the cohort of film makers, I commit to making this a safe space, to share doubts and concerns, to suspend judgement and to recognise that everyone's journey will be different.

To the Latrobe Youth Film Festival project team, I commit to be an active part of this learning environment and to provide constructive feedback on my experience.

I understand that the intellectual property rights of each of the films produced during this film project will sit with the Latrobe Youth Space.

I understand that I will be acknowledged for any significant contribution I make to an individual film. This acknowledgement will be included in the end credits of the film.

I understand that individuals will have the right to use all or part of the films they have made a significant contribution to for use in job applications or on their resumes or as part of an application for further education within a related field of study.

The 'My Pledge' was signed by participants at the start of the project.

Source: 'My Pledge' was modelled off that used by the States of Change program (Barling-Luke 2019)

*My initial ideas have transformed into something much better than what I could have come up with alone.*

(Brad, participant)

To help finalise the shaping of ideas, three pitch preparation sessions were conducted involving discussions on themes, storylines, genres and opportunities. During these sessions, the 35 young people in the program<sup>5</sup> formed six groups varying in size from one to three people undertaking the writer and director roles with remaining participants adopting acting positions.

The shaping of ideas culminated in a Pitch Presentation session where the six groups presented film ideas to a Pitch Presentation panel consisting of a Youth

Governance Committee member, the Latrobe Health Advocate and the DHHS Manager of Place Based Programs. They considered all pitches worthy to progress to Stage 4.

*We did the pitch presentation, finally. It took me a lot of nerve to get up and everything but I felt pretty good once I started doing it.*

(Dean, participant)

[After the Pitch Presentation] *I felt really confident, it made me feel really good. I didn't 100% know what I was looking forward to but after seeing everyone on that night, everyone having a good time, it sort of showed me that this is going to end up being something great.*

(Connor, participant)

### Stage 4: Create content

Each film team designated itself as a production 'studio' with a designated Studio Head (a Latrobe Youth Space staff member or volunteer) to help coordinate film-making activities. Each studio team developed their scripts, narratives or story boarded animations. This work coincided with location scouting, film scheduling (over days, nights and weekends) and booking actors who commenced work on character development.

Filmmaking support was provided by facilitators during all activities and social support services were on-hand for health and wellbeing advice as needed. Even though participants were exploring issues of bullying, diversity, mental health and social isolation in their films, they did not approach these services for assistance during the project. Nevertheless, it was important that these services and trained staff were available. As such, the designated Studio Heads were all trained youth workers or staff from the social welfare sector with knowledge and expertise in working with young people. Studio Heads maintained connection with their groups throughout stages 4 and 5 and liaised with Nanoo Nanoo to check that participant needs were addressed and key tasks were completed on time and within budget.

The filmmaking needs of each group was quite diverse. While some studio teams were keen to do all their own camera work, others called on Nanoo Nanoo or other participants to help out. This highlighted the supportive connections established between the participants where skillsets could be shared. This became an important aspect for producing six films among a cohort of 35 participants. External in-kind support also helped the teams meet their filming requirements. This included support from local makeup artists and costume designers as well as cafés, schools, shops and sports facilities offering their space as film locations. Having a single coordination point is critical at this stage to oversee proper timetabling of activities between and within groups to ensure everyone has enough time to complete filming without unnecessary pressure.

Table 2: The six films produced by young people who participated in the project.

Film	Credits*	Description
<i>Broken Mirror</i>	Director: Jacob Writers: Jacob, Angus Actors: Angus, Jordyne, Kenzie, Riley, Scott	Imagine a world where your physical body can live forever but your mental health is not talked about. <i>Broken Mirror</i> is about a person living with mental illness and the realities of what this might look like.
<i>Clicker Troubles</i>	Director: Quinn Writer: Quinn Actor: Harry	<i>Clicker Troubles</i> is about a man inside a computer who prefers solitude and gets disturbed when the computer is turned on.
<i>Deviant</i>	Directors: Brad, Megan Writer: Brad Actors: Alana, Lucas, Allourah, Angus, Ashleigh, Brenton, Britney, Dancey, Danica, Emerson, Harry, Jason, Jay, Megan	A futuristic world where android robots are forced to work in factories as slaves. <i>Deviant</i> is about being unique and breaking free from expectations.
<i>Empty Inside</i>	Director: Connor Writer: Dean Actors: Alicia, Andrea, Grady, Sean	<i>Empty Inside</i> is a story of overcoming social isolation, where social media is the focus of the main character's life.
<i>S.A.D.</i>	Directors: Hollie, Megan Writer: Catherine Actors: Daved, Harry, Hollie, Jay, Paige, Scott	<i>S.A.D.</i> (Sad, Angry, Depressed) is a film about bullying, unity and acceptance. The film has two intersecting storylines of a boy who comes out to his high school friends and a socially isolated girl who is being bullied.
<i>Timeless</i>	Director: Jordyn Writers: Jordyn, Madeline Actors: Angus, Kimberley, Madeline	<i>Timeless</i> is a time travelling love story about falling in love across time and space.

\* Full names of participants withheld.

5 On project completion, total participants numbered 32.

The editing process began as soon as the first filmed scenes were ready. Some teams opted to edit their own films while others requested assistance. Where possible, assisted editing was carried out in the studio between the young people and film editors. Where the young people were unable to be in the studio, all edits were critiqued and approved by the film's writers and directors before being finalised. This involved considering aspect ratios, vision choice, audio editing, colour grading, titles and final output.

*Together we worked out a way to flip the scene around ... it worked out so well.*

(Megan, participant)

## Stage 5: Launch films

Table 1 lists the project's six short films that ranged in length from one and a half minutes to just over nine minutes. These were showcased at the Red Carpet event and local media and photographers along with parents and friends cheered on the participants who arrived in limousines. Participants had requested they all be transported together in limousines, an opportunity they had never had before and may not ever have again. The expense was met by Latrobe Youth Space with in-kind support from the limousine company.

In addition to the short films, a documentary film was made of the film festival project process covering the training activities, participant motivations and the film-making process. Short snippets from each film as well as the final Red Carpet event were included. The purpose of the documentary was to record the purpose and process of the project to inform future work. It is due for release during 2020.

## Stage 6: Support dialogue

As a final (continuous) step, it is critical to follow up on the films' themes to check that ideas are creating dialogue between the young people and the people who can respond in meaningful ways to address youth health and wellbeing, especially in times of recovery.

## Health and wellbeing outcomes: benefits and opportunities

At the time of publication, an outcome evaluation had not been completed to assess the degree to which the project had met its intended goals. Therefore, this paper does not provide a rigorous review of the benefits and challenges of the project. Also, this paper does not delve into participatory filmmaking theories and does not critique the use of film in participatory research nor does it explore the participatory process of filmmaking. Milne and colleagues (2012) can provide detail in these areas. Nevertheless, this paper provides a reflection on the three aims of the project in light of anecdotal evidence from the filmmaking process and Red Carpet event.

The completion of the six films is a significant output of the project that promoted young people's voices. Their voices reached much further than anticipated, through interactions and discussions with their peers, including family and friends, as well as health professionals during the filmmaking process. The Red Carpet event that featured the six films was attended by around 100 people as well as the Advocate, who actively supported the project throughout its duration.

The young people's voices extended beyond the Red Carpet event. People across the Latrobe Valley could tune into the live broadcast on Gippsland FM Community Radio. This shows the value of developing partnerships throughout the life of the project, which provided a greater reach of the films beyond the festival screening.

A key outcome of the project was the connection between the young people involved and the Advocate (who reports directly to the Victorian Minister for Health and provides advice to health services and decision-makers). The strengthened relationship has developed trust and young people have the confidence to approach the Advocate and discuss the issues that are important to them and advocate for social change. The project also allowed the Advocate to gain a better understanding of young people's priorities in the Latrobe Valley as well as their skills and expertise.

*I expect a lot of these young people don't get the opportunity to have a voice and what a great way that they are able to provide a view on what their experience is and through that they are showing how society needs to respond.*

(Jane Anderson, Latrobe Health Advocate)

The project adopted processes that helped young people develop social skills and overcome social isolation. The project participants used leadership skills through the filmmaking process and that built confidence in other aspects of their lives. The project offered a safe environment and many participants gained confidence to be themselves. Strong friendships have evolved, with one participant saying 'we have found our people'.

There is evidence of increased interest and participation in other Latrobe Youth Space activities. Film festival



Participants received a standing ovation at the Red Carpet event.

Image: Latrobe Youth Space

participants have signed up as new volunteers and there has been increased participation in other youth programs. This has the potential to expose them to other health and wellbeing opportunities available in the Latrobe Valley.

The completion of the project in creating films for a festival focused on youth health and wellbeing is credited to the ongoing participation and motivation of the young people involved. Critical to this was having committed partners, such as Latrobe Youth Space, whose staff and volunteers supported the participants to produce the high-quality films. To help youth continue to represent themselves, two film kits have been donated to Latrobe Youth Space for young film makers to borrow and use.

## Conclusion and next steps

This paper outlined the methods of the Latrobe Youth Film Festival project. The project was an initiative developed by practitioners and government officials working with marginalised young people to help identify and articulate their perspectives of issues relating to health and youth identity. While the issues raised in the resulting short films are prevalent in mainstream discourses, it is important to ensure these young people had and continue to have opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas on matters that affect them. This project showed that Latrobe Valley youth are concerned about bullying, stigma associated to diversity, mental health and social isolation. Importantly, they have the courage to share these concerns with their family, friends and health professionals, including the Latrobe Health Advocate.

The Latrobe Youth Film Festival participants and the project team are planning a film festival roadshow during 2020 to promote health and wellbeing opportunities. It is hoped the next cohort of participants will be enticed to participate in the 2020 film festival project. Latrobe City Council have expressed interest in showing the short films at other locations during 2020 Youth Week celebrations. The short films will be available through Latrobe Youth Space's social media channels. The LYFF project team agreed this was an excellent outcome for the talented young people who participated in the project and for the overall health and wellbeing opportunities for youth in the Latrobe Valley.

## Acknowledgements

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