

## WHAT LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY FACTORS ARE INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCTION OF A METROPOLITAN INDIGENOUS FESTIVAL PROGRAM?

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#### **Abstract: Producing an Indigenous Festival Program**

*The Yalukit Wilam Ngargee: People Place Gathering is Indigenous festival that opens the annual St Kilda Festival program. Produced by the City of Port Phillip, Yalukit Wilam Ngargee presents a main music festival day and a series of satellite programs that have included visual art exhibitions, theatre productions, forums, workshops and cultural heritage walks. Held in a metropolitan area with a large non-Indigenous support base, the last four festivals have developed over three years. They attempt to incorporate employment initiatives, training and development and the celebration of Indigenous Bay Culture. This presentation looks at how local government can develop stronger bridges through celebration and begin to break down the barriers of difference blindness.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous festival, Port Phillip, local government, difference blindness.

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I would like to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Wurundjeri and Yalukit Willam people of the Kulin Nation, pay my respects to their ancestors and to their leaders of tomorrow.

As the Indigenous Arts officer for the City of Port Phillip, a Victorian local government authority, a part of my role is to produce the *Yalukit Willam Ngargee: People Place Gathering*, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander festival that opens the nine day St Kilda Festival program. The next Yalukit Willam Ngargee, on 6 Feb 2010, will be the fifth festival I have produced for the council. As the festival producer, I look for ways to create an enjoyable atmosphere in which people can experience Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance, presentations, ideas and interactions. Alongside of this experience, the festival aims to act as a catalyst to break down the barriers of difference blindness, and to maintain constructive bonds between the community, the council and local residents.

The *Yalukit Willam Ngargee* is a temporary structure on the public landscape. It appears in a finite space for a period of time, drawing people in from their daily routines and then it seemingly disappears until next year. Within that brief public interaction, the festival serves as a vehicle to entertain, advocate and educate. A free local metropolitan festival, held in a significant contemporary meeting place for urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, the *Yalukit Willam Ngargee's* main festival day attracts an estimated flow through attendance of 10,000 people with an estimated core attendance of 3,000 people. In a survey of 130 festival patrons conducted by Top End Arts Marketing

- 12% of survey participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 88% non Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 32% of those surveyed indicated that their main reason for attending the Festival was because they were 'interested in Aboriginal culture'
- 29% went 'to see the bands'.

Creative programming partnerships construct an environment for urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians, artists and market stall holders to showcase and present their work to a broader audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. By creating a space of interaction with access to culturally relevant information and recognizing contemporary urban perspectives, the *Yalukit Willam Ngargee* offers a place for the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities to have a voice.

Recently I began a PhD by Project at RMIT on the festival, and in my reading, discovered the term 'difference blindness', a term used by the National Health and Medical Research Council in their publication *Values and Ethics in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*. This term describes a researcher's ethical relationships when taking into account the principles and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. It states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have sought the elimination of 'difference blindness' so that their cultures can be appreciated and respected (p. 14). An ethical relationship is a space between two people or parties built on understanding, trust and valued exchange. As a researcher, I regard the *Yalukit Willam Ngargee* festival structure as a space for creation and maintenance of relationships between the City of Port Phillip, the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and extended supportive networks. When I first read of the term 'difference blindness', its meaning resonated for me as a sense of respect and the celebration of cultural diversity. The term 'breaking down the barriers of difference blindness' described and recognised some of the effects of internalised racism or the suffering of trauma at the lack of sensitivity people or organisations can display when conditioned or lacking insight into the complexities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lives, values and principles.

The festival is one significant practice involved in the greater whole of the council's relationships with the community. This is intended to heal the effects of internalized racism, trans-generational and systemic trauma that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who reside in urban environments may often feel due to questioning of their authenticity, stereotyping, racism and marginalisation. To quote Professor Judy Atkinson on Dadirri or Deep Listening, from her publication *Trauma Trails*, 'it is not possible to know what healing is unless it is experienced and understood in the inter-relationships of diverse cultural protocols and practices' (2003, p. 17).

So how does the *Yalukit Willam Ngargee* begin 'Breaking down the barriers of difference blindness' and provide a practice where people can begin relating on a deep empathetic level, through listening and exchange? Language loss has a profound impact on Indigenous and minority communities and revitalization and maintenance efforts by concerned people can make a big difference in the way the community values not only its language but, even more, its entire culture (MIT Indigenous Language Initiative, n.d). The festival report indicated that less than two percent of non-Indigenous people surveyed knew the traditional name of the Yalukit Willam people or Boon Wurrung language group which they belonged to.

The reintroduction of language into an urban metropolitan environment is one of the first ways the festival works towards 'Breaking down the barriers of difference blindness'. Naming the festival

*Yalukit Willam Ngargee*, suggested by a Boon Wurrung elder spokesperson at the first festival community meeting held in 2005, celebrates the identity of the Yalukit Willam one of six clans that make up the coastal Boon Wurrung language group. Ngargee is the Wurrung or tongue for gathering, localising the broader more accepted term Corroborree. Further to the initial naming of the festival is the inclusion of one of the six seasons. The festival is held in *Bullarto Nyoweenth* or 'plenty sun', reshaping the environmental imperialist idea of four measured seasons. Finally, the festival location Euro Yroke, named after the regularly traded 40 million year old reddish brown grinding stone found in what's now known as St Kilda. *Yalukit Willam Ngargee Bullarto Nyoweenth Euro Yroke: People Place Gathering Plenty Sun St Kilda.*

The inception and naming of the festival has influenced the council and its staff to recognize difference, language and acknowledging the Yalukit Willam people of the Boon Wurrung language group and the Kulin Nation. For council and community relationships, the *Yalukit Willam Ngargee* can represent an annual opportunity to update and review its policies and programs around community engagement and maintaining substantial community relations. These may include cultural awareness training sessions for councillors and staff, the re-negotiation of council service agreements with traditional owner representatives, and initiatives such as the Boon Wurrung Foundation for consultation and civic ceremonies, Inner South Community Health Services Indigenous Health access program, 'Our Rainbow Place', and support for the Port Phillip 'Citizens for Reconciliation' group. If urban councils can look beyond their own borders and acknowledge that they sit within larger sovereign boundaries, they can begin to 'Break down the barriers of difference blindness' at an institutional or systemic level.

The provisional festival program is developed from a range of observations, recommendations and creative programming partnerships presented to a community advisory body. Council forms of community engagement for the presentation of the festival's provisional program have been shaped over the last three years. These have changed from formal meetings to casual BBQs and now working with the LIN (Local Indigenous Network) group. The LIN group is a regional body set up by the Victorian state government to report to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on local issues. The St Kilda LIN Group consists of traditional owners, community elders, members of the community and Indigenous access workers from the local Inner South Community Health Service. Each of these members are in regular contact with each other and the council outside of the scheduled LIN meetings.

The conception of the creative programming partnerships idea began in 2006 when a community member suggested painting a community mural to be launched at the 2007 festival. The mural wall is situated on a pathway that is regularly used by pedestrians especially those going to the football field and monthly farmers markets. Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay/Gummaroi stencil artist Reko Rennie was contracted to paint a Boon Wurrung language map, with clan group names and eagle and crow moieties. He worked in collaboration with community artist Camel Monet who organized the painting of colourful pieces by members from the Winja Ulupna women's drug and alcohol recovery centre, Galliamble men's drug and alcohol recovery centre and local community members. The mural has contributed to a sense of place and inclusion for the local community, often commented on by local residents during the monthly Farmers' Markets and included in the council's tourist maps.

Creative programming partnerships have progressed into relationships with organisations and emerging small businesses bringing added value to the festival program. The partnerships

showcase the work they've been conducting throughout the course of the year with Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and community groups. They help lighten the workload of the small festival team through assisting with artists' agreements, promoting the festival to their networks and managing any specific needs of artists.

Creative programming partnerships for next year's *Yalukit Willam Ngargee Festival* include:

- Indigenous small business *Djaban: Slippery Eel Event Productions* will manage the *Wominjeka Willam: Welcome Place* main stage
- Non-Indigenous community cultural development organization The Torch Project will program manage the dance performance program and *CONFINED: Indigenous Prisoners Visual Art Exhibition*
- local non-Indigenous small publishing company Ilura Press will run an Indigenous youth mentorship program in publishing. The publishing of Etchings Indigenous journal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander short stories, essays, arts and poetry will be launched during the main day of the festival.

Due to the short-term nature of events, the festival production provides limited employment, training and development opportunities. The festival has partnered with other organisations to facilitate a Certificate 3 Indigenous Media Scholarship, Certificate 2 live Indigenous Roadie School event production courses and professional development workshops for musicians and artists during the festival program. The festival has been working for the past three years to try and set up an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led security team. This year's festival in January worked with the Collingwood and St Kilda Parkies, to do the festival security and marshalling. This process has created a push for local leadership and training for the members of the local St Kilda men's group to manage and co-ordinate their own security for the festival main day. This move assists in a further sense of local ownership of the festival, a sense of place, development of local leadership skills and provision of employment prospects beyond the festival security role.

It is my hope that after the 2010 *Yalukit Willam Ngargee*, the local community and creative programming partnerships will take on board more of the festival programming and production in partnership with the council and continue to celebrate the adaptable, vibrant, resilient and authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in an urban environment.

I would like to conclude this presentation with a quote from Ricky Maynard's recent *Portrait of a Distant Land* exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art that inspired me

*It is my wish that viewers identify, in these pictures, the existence of struggle below the surface. To see things that are not immediately visible and to understand that what things mean have more to do with you, the observer. To know the meaning of culture you must recognize the limits and meaning of your own. You can see its facts but you cannot see its meaning. We share meaning by living it.*

And finally we hope you come to the Yalukit Willam Ngargee next February and check the St Kilda Festival website for further details [www.stkildafestival.com.au](http://www.stkildafestival.com.au).

Thank you.

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**Biography:** *Bo Svoronos works for the City of Port Phillip as the Indigenous Arts Officer producing the Yalukit Wilam Ngargee: People Place Gathering Festival 2006-2010. He recently embarked on a PhD research project based on the festival and reciprocity at RMIT's Globalism Research Centre. In 2008, Bo initiated an Indigenous Media Scholarship with OPEN CHANNEL, SKYS and NITV. The partnership received a SpArtA Indigenous Vocational Training Initiative of the Year award for the 'Living in Two Worlds' student documentary. Bo was the founding producer and co-director of the St Kilda Writers' Festival 2005-2006, founding director of Small Change Theatre 2005 - 2009, and is a writer, performer and retired ronin chef.*

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