

# An evaluation report - Flem-Ken Festival of Arts and Ideas 2018: a summary

**The Flem-Ken Festival of Arts & Ideas 2018 was initiated by Flemington Rotary in response to issues raised at a Community Connects Forum in October 2017. Many issues were raised that highlighted the challenges faced by local residents revolving around age, diverse languages, sociocultural background, mental health, plus educational and employment opportunities.**

At the heart of many of the issues were feelings of isolation experienced by many as social disconnection and exclusion. The artists and musicians who attended the Community Forum also spoke of issues related to a lack of opportunities to foster their own arts practices and connect with a wider local audience. Although many art forms were represented locally, artists felt that a lack of accessible venues, structured networks, funding and commercial opportunities were forcing them to consider moving to more supportive and creatively rewarding neighbourhoods.

It has long been recognised that the arts encourage social inclusion and connection and can provide a vehicle to bring about change through community engagement. As a result of the Community Forum a small group of artists and community members initiated a grassroots community arts Festival. The Festival concept was simple; the arts would provide the vehicle to bring local artists and the community together with the aim to connect, collaborate, create and celebrate the rich artistic and cultural diversity of the area.

The Festival design was structured to provide opportunities for both established arts based events and new artistic endeavours to come together under one promotional banner and while Rotary took the lead in initiating event, a number of other local service groups and organisations come together with Rotary in a productive community partnership to plan and implement the Festival.

Grant funding was provided by Moonee Valley City Council and local businesses also entered into sponsorships which enabled the inaugural event to support and present a wide ranging program including visual arts, music, performance, dance, workshops, arts projects, discussions, curated exhibitions, literary and vocal presentations. Over fifty events were held, across twelve venues over three weeks. The Festival involved over eighty artists/presenters attracted a direct audience of approximately two thousand and provided ongoing benefits for many more community members. Twenty five volunteers contributed well over two thousand hours across a range of activities to plan, implement and evaluate the Festival and its outcomes.

## **Key findings**

### **The arts and creative activities provided opportunities to address isolation, dis-connection and equity. The Festival program:**

- Provided ways to connect and share experiences for individuals who would not normally meet or engage
- Provided ways for individuals and groups to express themselves and be heard, fulfilled and validated
- Helped people to share their stories about the past, present and future. These stories presented diverse experiences that help to promote understanding and develop avenues for inclusion.
- Provided accessible and inclusive opportunities to connect, collaborate, create and celebrate for residents of all ages, cultures and skill levels.

### **Community arts based initiatives can have long-term engagement and impact:**

- The arts proved that are multifaceted. A number of programs were designed, developed and delivered to engage with both specific and wider audiences.
- The arts activities offered opportunities to engage with questions of difference and inclusion that introduced people to new experiences and promoted new understandings.
- The Festival program proved that the arts are flexible. The program was up scaled, stretched and extended to increase its reach, durability, duration and partnership opportunities.
- Through the arts the Festival has left a valuable legacy, such as new skills, improved networks and cultural change that is having and will have a long term impact on social development and inclusion.

### **Artists have begun to develop partnerships with a wide range of organisations for financial support:**

- The arts – and artists – are more visible and more valued in the community as a result of the Festival.
- More artists are now looking to partner with community / social organisations, Councils, and commercial entities to access funding, venue and in-kind support.
- It has been shown that by partnering with different organisations, artists can access more resources to develop their work, improve their reach and have a greater impact in community.
- Artists are now talking more of developing stronger local arts networks to share professional skills, i.e., presentation, marketing and promotional aspects of their practice.
- Artists can now look to sharing their skills with a broad range of people in a safe and non-judgemental environment.

## Background

The outcome of the Community Connect Forum and other supporting evidence contributed to the wider recognition and support for the Arts to provide a vehicle for connection between diverse sectors of the community. This led to Flemington Rotary developing partnerships with other community organisations including the Flemington Association and Moonee Valley City Council to initiate the Flem-Ken Festival of Arts and Ideas. This led to the development of further partnerships and collaborations between the artists and community and also between the many health and social support organisations that provided multiple services within the community.

The inaugural status of the Festival brought a number of key challenges:

- It was the first such event held in the area and no benchmarks existed for budgets or planning, and no obvious arts based networks were evident. Both factors made planning time consuming for a small group of volunteers.
- Due to a number of community, historical and geographical factors the Festival stretched across two communities who see themselves as 'one community' yet are run by separate Councils and present demographically as almost opposites in makeup. This 'unity despite divisions' presented both positives and negatives.
- Due to the lack of arts 'visibility' in the area or an obvious arts network, early questions for the organisers revolved around 'are there artists out there?' – if so 'who are they' and 'how do we contact them?'. The answers came first as a trickle and then grew into a tsunami, again bringing positives and negatives in its wake.
- Funding presented some challenges for planning. Community members who initially participated in the planning were insistent that the Festival bring together not only the residents in Flemington but also embrace the Kensington community as 'one' community. Consequently the fact that each neighbourhood fell under two different Council jurisdictions raised issues of demarcation as the Moonee Valley Council contributed Grant's funding while funding applications to Melbourne City Council did for Kensington based events were not successful.

## How the Festival events promoted connection and inclusion.

Developing avenues for participation was the initial challenge in a community that had cultural barriers, less visible arts networks. Initiating connective discussions relied on finding the key individuals who knew about and enabled connections between diverse cultural groups/artists/performers and Festival organisers keen to develop a program of individual exhibitions, performances and group collaborations.

## Participation

The Festival ethos to accept all requests for participation eventuated in an expansion from 10 day to 18 day event encompassing over 50 events. These events were facilitated or presented by over 100 artists, authors, textile artists, photographers, performers, musicians, dancers, and singers, across 12 community and commercial venues. These events attracted audiences of over 2,000 mostly local people from both Flemington and Kensington and 35 volunteers gave generously, investing over 2,000 hours of their time, energy, and skills.

The inaugural status of the Festival carried with it a great deal of uncertainty with respect to the possibilities of participation of both artists and audience. It was found that the early concerns of Festival organisers, premised on the initially slow response rate by local artists, ultimately proved unfounded as the hidden creative wealth in the community emerged more rapidly as the Festival dates approached. This 'wealth' ultimately exceeded expectations as it brought together both artists and audiences across a broad range of ages and art forms.

*The Festival of Arts and Ideas began with a blank canvas. It was like a giant fact finding experiment that tested different models of organisation, different activities and events and different venues. All offerings were accepted into the program in the spirit of community inclusion.*

(Member of Festival Steering Committee)

The innovation of a Festival Hub contributed greatly to the festival participation opportunities and showed the value of having a community space dedicated to the arts. This was borne out by the numerous activities that were held in the space and coincidental collaborations that occurred and

led to ongoing participation in further creative endeavours.

One important aspect in terms of attracting participation was the management's commitment to provide industry standard payments for artists who were often expected to offer their talents at community events for free. Another was to provide good venues and professional set up and equipment, particularly with regard to sound.

Unfortunately not all the efforts to encourage participation were successful. Although the organisers spent many hours talking to coordinators at community centres about participatory opportunities for their communities, the ultimate level of cross-cultural participation was much less than the organisers had hoped for. Organisers were often greeted with smiles and general agreement but no substantial outcomes resulted from numerous conversations that may have led to greater participation and opportunities for inclusion.

It was also found that this inability to connect and deliver positive participatory outcomes was also experienced across all sectors of the community with respect to the audience expectations and it is a key area of discussion for future Festival planning.

It was found that regardless of the cultural background to achieve a broader participation it was imperative to locate and connection positively with key individuals who then enabled greater connection to particular sectors of the community.

Attendance at events was mixed: support from the schools and preschools ensured strong attendance at the children's events, especially those held at the Festival HUB.

Attendance at the spoken word events drew strong support from the 35+ age group, daytime events drew many from the 50+ and older. Weekend events were positive for all age groups. Night time events drew more adults, women and couples.

Sponsors also responded generously to participation through financial and in-kind support and over 40 individuals participated in a voluntary capacity and contributed over 2,000 hours of in-kind support across planning, implementation, management, presentations, infrastructure support, facilitations, plus promotional and marketing activities.

## Partnerships

Partnerships were key to the success of this Festival event. By partnering with community associations, service organisations and Moonee Valley City Council Rotary was able to support and enable artists to access more resources and to engage with a wider audience for greater impact.

Importantly, partnerships did not only involve money, but also includes access to networks, technology, venues, materials and equipment, information and exhibition spaces.

## The Goals Connection and collaboration

Creating opportunities for connection and overcoming isolation for members of a very diverse community lay at the heart of the concerns raised at the Forum. The Festival of Arts and Ideas was conceived with four main goals: to connect, to collaborate, to create and to celebrate the rich creative and cultural diversity in the Flemington-Kensington area.

*The Festival Hub contributed greatly to the festival and showed the value of having a community space dedicated to the arts.*  
(Jennifer Gullivan – Flemington Association)

The Festival Hub was a pop-up space in a very accessible location in the middle of the business precinct. This was the location that provided the greatest opportunities for artists and community to connect, collaborate, create and celebrate. The Hub provided a space for the community to come together in countless ways through different events, rehearsals and workshops. A place where all age groups, backgrounds, abilities and interests came to work together, share skills and experiences.

*It was such a delight to be a part of [the Festival] and meet such fantastic people in the process. I had such incredibly positive feedback ... from the students about how healing and restorative the drumming sessions were for them.*

(Simone Lang - Drummer Girl)

Programs that brought artists and community members together prior to the Festival through a range of art forms were instrumental in successfully connecting and collaborating with community members. One example: an experienced artist/curator worked with four young street artists, five artists who were challenged by

mental health issues and a group of local potters struggling with a recent exclusion from their community centre workspace and loss of kiln access. Together they presented an exhibition entitled Tall Poppies. The young street artists have since been involved in discussions with business owners re: commissioned wall art in the area. The pottery group continues to search for a permanent work space.

*This has made such a big difference to our son. Having Julie-Ann take such an interest not only with his art but to involve us as family has been a very positive experience. We have seen a big change in his confidence coming here (the exhibition). I would love to be involved next year to help with the whole thing.*

(Parent of exhibiting artist)

The arts give a voice to the community by enabling individual expression and communication that can be shared and engaged in with others.

## **Create and Celebrate**

Collaborations encouraged creativity and celebration during the Festival. This was particularly evident in serendipitous connections made in the Festival Hub.

The Kensington Children's Community Cooperative created an installation that was displayed in the Festival Hub. They, along with parents and staff, visited the Hub often during the Festival. Senior students from Mt Alexander College also came to the Hub every day for a week to dance, draw and create with textiles. On more than one occasion the pre-schoolers and the senior students unexpectedly came together in the creative space leading to collaborations and enriching experiences for both groups.

A similar sense of collaboration occurred in like circumstances with the unexpected meeting of students from Kensington Community High School and an arts group of elderly, less abled, individuals. Together they created a collection of images that were then exhibited in the Hub. Exhibiting ones work is recognised as a form of celebration through recognition. This experience spurred several of the students to create their own works and return to display them in the Hub as part of the Festival. This led to some students selling their works.

Local businesses collaborated with organisers and artists to display art works entered in the Festival Poster competition and add hanging rails to wall to

enable exhibitions to be mounted in a professional manner. In all 8 venues opened their premises to display works by local artists. This Gallery Walk, so named because it encouraged people to walk from one venue to the next to view the art, proved very popular. Openings were held for exhibiting artists at each venue in the spirit of inclusion and celebration. Celebration was a key goal of the Festival concept. In the words of one community advocate:

*It will be wonderful to have something to celebrate for a change – all we seem to do is fight against developers and those who would destroy our neighbourhoods.*

(Member of the Flemington Association)

Celebration during the Festival took many forms. The Return to the Doll House project spoke of women from many cultural backgrounds each creating a doll that told their own stories and celebrated their cultural diversity.

A Gala event held to celebrate the opening of the Festival with art, performance and dance proved popular and set an enthusiastic tone for the Festival overall:

A group of friends, family and community members came together to honour and celebrate the life of a dearly loved member of their community by working with artists to create two memorial panels to sit either side of the gateway to their new community garden.

A long-time resident of the local Chinese community who had been involved in rehearsals in the Hub and performed in a community choir at the Sounds of Flem-Ken concert celebrating the richness of local voices remarked:

*This is the first time I have felt like part of the community*

(Choir member)

## **Outcomes**

A number of outcomes have been documented including:

- the initiation of an online arts network to assist greater connection between, and provide information for, local artists.
- the development of ideas and events via cross-cultural groups for future festivals.
- greater appreciation and recognition of the true value of the arts and local artists to the community

- a springboard for developing greater recognition and arts based careers by and for local artists.
- development of stronger links between community service organisations.
- higher profile and opening up of new and existing venues for art exhibitions and creative workshops.
- young people facing challenges in normal school settings were able to display their art works and find recognition for their talents and skills outside of the classroom.
- the clear recognition that the Flemington - Kensington community is home to a number of widely recognised creative individuals whose practices stretch across literature, journalism, music, dance, photography, visual arts and textile arts.
- a young and enthusiastic intern was able to use her volunteer experience with the Festival to enhance job application which secured her a position with Council.
- the emergence of new initiatives bringing together various arts providers, individuals and groups to develop and deliver important community health and wellness programs underpinned by the arts.

The creative and artistic richness of the area, until now largely hidden, had finally become visible in all of its wonderful colours, layers and textures that had been showcased and celebrated through the Festival.

## Legacy

Based on numerous anecdotal reports and survey feed-back it is clear that the Festival achieved its key objectives, the community connected, collaborated, created and celebrated in many expected and unexpected ways, and they want to do it all over again.

*The Festival hit a nerve in the community, it has brought us together and this is just what has been needed.* (Lesley McCarthy, President Flemington-Kensington Rotary)

Sustainability is an important factor in planning and implementation of Festival events.

In the wake of the Festival a number of positive developments have begun to emerge. Flemington Rotary has now incorporated Kensington into their Club's name. Now known as Flemington-Kensington Rotary the Club is discussing a number of possible arts based projects with artists, other organisations and Councils. This reflects the Club's increased focus on providing greater

support for local community needs and activities underpinned by the arts.

Artists and arts groups have continued to embrace local opportunities via access to new exhibition venues, attracting new clients, discussing the development of stronger arts networks and developing their community profile.

An example of the Festival creating new opportunities is highlighted by emergence of 18 Anthony Street Kensington (known as Kensington Neighbourhood Centre or Senior Citizens' Centre) as a venue for arts based activities involving future cross-generational programs.

A similar situation has evolved with the Crown Street Stables in Flemington as a centre to enable arts and cultural workshops and programs facilitated by local artists. Surprisingly it was discovered during the Festival that both of these very well established, accessible and community based venues were little known to the arts and general community prior to the Festival.

A number of these organisations are now are gearing up for a resurgence of interest as a number of community groups, until now restricted by limited venues and spaces, consider programs and activities that could be delivered at these venues.

*This is a great venue I had no idea it was here... Such a great community asset...what happens here? Do they run programs...?*  
(Audience member at 18 Anthony Street)

*So this is Crown Street Stables ...it is a lovely space for workshops upstairs ... I didn't know this was available...a real hidden gem...*  
(Artist/teacher participant in Festival)

What has also becoming evident in the wake of the Festival event is a surfacing of the deeper issues contributing to a sense of isolation and adversely affecting individuals and the community as a whole. A sense of isolation and feelings of separateness can have many root causes that are not always visible to the casual observer. A legacy of the Festival process, and particularly the daily activities that occurred at the Festival Hub over almost 30 days, was the opportunity to carry out some focused observation.

The Festival coordinator is a researcher with an ethnographic approach. A field journal of practiced observations was kept during the Festival with a focus on community engagement

through the arts. Observations and issues that emerged over the life of the Festival have become a focus for ongoing conversations for programs in 2019 and beyond.

Some arts related issues currently under discussion in the community include:

- the need for a dedicated community arts space or permeant Arts Hub that is accessible to all and supportive of all arts.
- creating a safe place for women to explore their creativity as a way to provide opportunities and programs to learn new skills, practice english speaking, learning to be the first educators for their children, and accessing information related to health, mental health and domestic violence. It would be similar in concept to the Men's Shed but with a focus on women's issues. A safe place where women of all cultural backgrounds can gather safely and find empowerment.

Community access to the arts; safe opportunities for social inclusion; and the challenges faced by mental health, across all sectors, have emerged as important issues in post Festival community conversations.

### Hours and dollars:

Over the course of the year leading up to and following, volunteers contributed in excess of 3,500 hours which calculated at a base rate of \$25ph equates to over \$90,000.

The most hours were outlayed by Festival Chair Anne McMahon together with her team, but there were over 50 people who actively assisted in the planning, organising, implementation and management.

### Recommendations

The Festival planning and implementation process presented major learning curves for the small voluntary management team.

*The greatest strength of the festival was the building of community. Many co-operative working relationships were forged and people of all ages came together to deliver and attend activities and events.* (Festival Hub - administration volunteer)

Findings from the data collected and analysed suggests adjustments should be made to a number of areas to ensure future Festivals are both successful and more manageable. These

areas include: technology, management, promotion, programming, volunteer status and infrastructure.

**Technology:** Expectations for a slick online presence are high in today's world. A number of volunteers generously provided their time skills to help the Festival develop a website, graphic design for promotional flyers, upload social media posts, set up events through Eventbrite, and the like. While this enabled a number of platform operations to be provided, variations in software experience and gaps in the availability of these volunteers produced a number of issues and a mixed reception by the community.

*...I truly believe professional needs to be employed in the social media space to give the festival the social media exposure it deserve.*  
(Musician and volunteer coordinator)

**Recommendation:** Sufficient funding be sought to employ a professional individual/organisation to provide assistance with all things related to technology.

**Management:** A number of issues arose for the volunteer management team. These primarily revolved around the scale and scope of the Festival related to the number of events and venues that required promotion, coordination, set up, and supervision vs the number of volunteers available to implement and manage the programs. This issue was canvassed in the post Festival surveys with mixed feedback.

Surveys comments showed some thought the idea worthy:

*...these crucial elements (management and organisational responsibility) ... should be handled by professionals. Others may help but ...don't have the responsibility and accountability and have the option to limit their contributions. ... being responsible for a 3 week festival with over 50 events is beyond what should be expected of a volunteer*  
*Festival Director* (Volunteer administrator)

*Comes down to dollars – if reliability and commitment is required.*  
(Exhibiting artist and workshop facilitator)

Others, while in general agreement, expressed concerns about the possible threat to the 'grass roots community' nature of the Festival if positions became 'more professional'.

*I think the community aspect behind this festival is what held it together.*

(Performing artist and program facilitator)

And...

*Do we need to employ a festival person to manage admin? -I am not sure that this would be best however it needs discussion.*

(Exhibiting artist and Rotary volunteer)

*If possible I think it should be volunteers but if not possible a paid position*

*[paid position] ...may be the way to ensure festival sustainability however when volunteers run it you know the best interests of the festival are being addressed ... a paid person may not be automatically contributing as needed.*

(Rotary volunteer)

Management issues also reflected the administrative matters that impacted the management team. One particular concern related to the lack of appropriate project management software to guide the management team decisions related to the budget

**Recommendation:** Given the mixed feelings on this topic, all stakeholders need to be involved in discussions about the pros and cons of offering paid positions or stipends for one or more of the management positions. The outcomes of such discussions will impact the scale and scope of future Festivals.

**Promotion:** Festival marketing and promotion were also implemented by volunteers. While major efforts were made to cover all promotional bases the outcomes were mixed for users and festival management. Likewise the volunteers, although generous with the time and skills they had available, lacked the professional experience and necessary contacts to develop and carry out an effective campaign.

*I don't think the festival was promoted well enough...*

*The posters [didn't] give the community enough of an idea of what the festival is about...[to be successful] It needs a much larger presence on social media platforms*  
(performer / member of organising team)

*However I think that there could be improvements on the web site.. It needed a*

*more user friendly interface allowing users to plan attendance to events more easier.*

(artist / member of organising team)

**Recommendation:** That for future festivals funding be sought to pay for professional services and assistance in website software and maintenance, graphic design, marketing and promotion across all media platforms including radio, social media and print.

**Programming:** The Festival grew from a 10 day event to 18 days with over 50 events implemented across 12 venues that presenting over 100 artists who attracted over 2,000, mostly local audience. While this extension of time and programmed items satisfied the community requests to participate, it stretched the ability of the small voluntary administration team to manage the events appropriately. On occasion mistakes were made which led to some complaints and disappointments for artists and audiences.

*I believe it was too long.... Even though there were a lot of events which filled the time frame allocated, the amount of volunteers/ staff available to assist with all aspects of the event, was minimal. This resulted in a small amount of people doing a large amount of work.*

(Administration team member)

**Recommendation:** A number of changes may need to be considered such as a reduction of venues, a shorter timeframe for the Festival or attracting increased numbers of volunteers. This is an issue for early stage planning and decision making. The scope of the Festival and the number of volunteers needs to be balanced in future Festivals.

**Funding:** Funding was provided by: Flemington Rotary, Moonee Valley City Council, and sponsors Nelson Alexander, Bendigo Bank, McManus Lawyers and Pepper Café. In total \$35,000. The Festival was left with a credit of \$6,918.00. While on one hand this may be viewed as a positive outcome it also represents a weakness in the management of the budget.

The fear of over reaching the budget without real time tracking of expenditure meant that more promotional and technological work was taken on by the small overstretched management team instead of paying professionals for a better outcome than was achievable by volunteers.

*Despite Rotary's strong backing and the generosity of sponsors and venue owners, a shortage of funding underscored the entire*



*Festival. Some plans had to be curtailed due to lack of money. Applications for grants in the future should be able to more compellingly put forward a case for more funding.*

(Administration volunteer)

**Recommendation:** That Project Management software be funded and available to management team and a professional accountant/bookkeeper be brought into the management team.

**Sponsorships and Partnerships:** The generosity of local businesses and organisations was one of the central pillars of the Festival success.

*I think the community aspect behind this festival is what held it together. It was great to have the financial support from local businesses and there was a real drive from local artists to make this festival work.*

**Recommendation:** The sponsors and partner organisations should continue to be included in ongoing conversations between Festivals to encourage a continued commitment.

**Volunteers:** This was one area that was under estimated in both need and organisation. Unfortunately, while the growth of the events was expedient, a similar growth of volunteer numbers was not forthcoming. There were many issues related to attracting and organising volunteers. Helpful information came to the surface during the Festival in regard to sourcing volunteers and this can be tested before the Festival planning begins.

*Support by local community groups and volunteers could greatly improve. A lot of people said that they would volunteer their time and or expertise throughout the Festival however the number of people who did offer their time was minimal.*

*Volunteers are crucial to the success of a community run project.*

(Administration team member)

*Very important to obtain greater physical/time support prior to growing the event. Difficult for those who are working and /or have other commitments.*

(Rotary member / volunteer)

**Recommendation:** That information received be followed up and University's be approached to provide student volunteers as this has worked well for other Festival organisers.

## Conclusion

The Flem-Ken Festival of Arts and Ideas 2018 was a wonderful success for the community. It has created ongoing benefits for individuals, artists and residents. Such was the enthusiasm that community calls of "Encore! Encore!" began even before the last event had ended.

While so many aspects of the Festival worked well there are also a number of lessons learnt and 'take aways' for consideration by the organisers of the next Festival.

The core aims of the Festival were achieved in expected and unexpected ways. As revealed in the words of one of the administration team noted:

*The vast range of events and activities was effective in bringing together a diversity of community members who ordinarily may not interact with each other.*

*The existence of the Festival was instrumental in bringing the arts to the fore front in the wider community, creating an excitement and enthusiasms to further promote the Arts on a regular basis.*

*The Festival has also promoted an awareness of the scale and diversity of the Arts as well as what the Arts are to different people.*

(Administration team member)

And another comment by the coordinator Flemington Community Centre

*Wow! Big congratulations to all those involved in pulling the Festival together – it was epic! Thank you so much for involving the Flemington Community Centre throughout the programming; it was such a great opportunity to have a wide representation of the community involved.*

*Looking forward to the next one??!!!*

Holding true to the legacy of a grassroots community art Festival it is now up to the organisers and the community to decide the next steps from here.