

My Space Darren Williams



DARREN Williams was probably not the only local to have walked past the old Newport substation and imagined what might be. The building had stood derelict since the late 1960s, when it ceased functioning as a power source for the adjoining railways and became a haven for vandals and graffitiists. When it became clear to Williams that no one else was showing signs of taking on the massive task, he set about realising his dream of converting this commanding, industrial structure into a multi-purpose arts centre. This month, the glazier and now president of the Hobsons Bay Community Arts Centre was on hand as hundreds of locals celebrated the official opening of the Substation Community Arts Centre.

Tell me about the building.

For many years local gangs and kids saw this as a bit of a cubby house. I drove past this building every day on my way to work in Werribee. Every single window was smashed. I thought, someone has to do something with that building. Architecturally, it's so beautiful. But nothing ever happened. I guess someone had to make the first move. We had to tender for the building from VicTrack, then it was a case of getting a community organisation up and running and getting support from the local council and State

Government. We've had 100 long-term unemployed people on job programs here, so they've had full-time wages and training and 80 per cent of them have moved into another job. There have been some great social outcomes, along with the artistic outcomes that we've had along the way. Everyone who comes in here thinks it's an amazing space. From kids through to the elderly, they all love it, because it means something different to all of them. Some of the older people remember seeing it working as a substation. Some people who were homeless at the time lived in here over the summer. Lots of people in their 30s or 40s come in and say: "I remember throwing rocks at the windows."

What will this arts centre bring to the community?

I think it will revitalise this area of Newport. It will bring people not only from Hobsons Bay but from all around Victoria. And I hope it will be a great place for artistic expression and for cultural exchange, which is the main aim for me. We have cultures within our community that are quite isolated. . . . We have a big Lebanese community, Islamic community, and we're starting to have an influx of Sudanese. The general population doesn't understand their cultures, so this puts their cultural diversity on display. I've also got a little daughter, she

was two years old when I started the project. I wanted somewhere that she could learn music or drama or perform inside a place where she was safe. There wasn't really that place in Hobsons Bay. Now that she's 15, she'll probably be running the programs.

Was there a model for how you went about the project?

Not really. We just looked at the structure of the building, and that was a limitation in some ways and an opportunity in others. We had to build upon the structure and be as creative as possible with the spaces. The idea was to make them as multi-purpose as possible.

So did you have an arts background?

No, I'm not artistic at all. I'm just a local tradesman who wanted to fix the place, and really, I thought that was the best outcome because there are a lot of sports facilities in our area but there's not so much for the arts. I wanted to create a sustainable model where we have a mixture of commercial and community projects so we're not reliant on government grants. If we can be independent, the community can choose the path we take.

How does it feel seeing it now?

It's hugely satisfying, having created something from a derelict shell — seeing year 12 artwork displayed, seeing groups perform . . . all of our committee take pride in the achievement. Over the years,

I probably invested 25 to 30 hours a week in the project, and when you invest that sort of time in something you take away from another part of your life.

How does the energy change with the different functions?

Everyone who comes in is in awe of the size. They bring their own excitement into the building, because they're excited about performing or exhibiting in the space. Everyone wants to get involved. On opening day, I had people coming up, saying "I'm going to do this within the space", or "I'm going to do that". It wasn't that they were asking permission, it was taking ownership. I was happy . . . to know they were going to run with it.

What do you hope people take away from here?

The cultural experience that they've taken part in, but also the sense that anything is possible if they're prepared to work hard. I see this as being a cultural change within the state. The substation will be the vehicle for people to showcase what they can do. In the near future, it will be someone else who will drive the substation into areas that I, as a local glazier, would never consider. This is going to have a life of its own.

theubstation.org.au
INTERVIEW: LINDY PERCIVAL
PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER