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Biography

Anne Devenish first trained as a Library Technician, and then as a Teacher Librarian in Victoria. Anne has been the School Community Librarian at Kununurra Community Library for five years. Previously in Kununurra Anne was the librarian at Kimberley College of TAFE Library and the Department of Indigenous Affairs Library. Anne has worked in public, special and education libraries and lectured at TAFE over a period of 25 years. She has worked extensively in the East Kimberley to promote literary, cultural and literacy programs with non-indigenous and indigenous young people, visitors to the region and community members. Sharing Our Stories, an indigenous storytelling program, and the Kimberley Writers Festival are significant innovative events Anne has initiated at the Kununurra Community Library.

Kimberley Writers Festival

Abstract

In 2005 the Kununurra Community Library hosted the Inaugural Kimberley Writers Festival (KWF), providing a significant literary event for the young people, adults and visitors of the East Kimberley. The library was selected by the WA state Literature Centre due to the success of its unique visiting author program where "meet the author" events over the past 4 years have attracted as many as 200 audience members, easily outstripping similar events in metropolitan venues. The Inaugural festival was a huge success with high attendance at all events involving 900 students and 500 community members and visitors to the area. In particular the collaboration between visiting authors and local writers on Indigenous issues was a highlight. A second KWF is planned for June this year. The continuation of the festival as an annual event in Kununurra supports the local community by providing artistic engagement, cultural development and helps reduce social isolation. The 2006 festival includes a leading fiction author, an Indigenous award winning author, two picture book illustrators, a young adult author, two songwriters who are a musical duo and a leading publisher. Local Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and historians will feature on the opening evening. A literary lunch, literary Ord River cruise and celebrity chef literary dinner are all a development from the 2005 festival. The festival is a wonderful opportunity to promote libraries, literacy, literary activities and readership of Australian books. Kununurra Community Library has frequently been described by locals and visitors as the cultural hub of the town.

Introduction

Kununurra, located in the magic country of the East Kimberley, Western Australia has been the linchpin, background and reason that the Kimberley Writers Festival has become a literary event that conveys a message of natural beauty, pristine environment and inspirational creativity. This amazing part of Australia provides a

perfect backdrop to not only attract authors, storytellers and songwriters, but creates a special sense of intimacy and sense of country for the community and visitors to the area. Remote Kununurra, frontier land where stories abound about Indigenous culture and pioneer experiences as the East Kimberley has grown and developed.



The Kimberley Writers Festival has arisen from a strong desire in the community for local people to engage in literary and cultural activities. The Kununurra Community Library, a partnership of Kununurra District High School and the Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley commenced a visiting author program in 2001. Adult and children's authors through programs such as *Writers on The Road* (Writing WA) and *Children's Book Week* (Children's Book Council, WA) travelled the 3,500 km to Kununurra from Perth to provide the

students and community with 'meet the author' workshops.

Role of the Library

The library facilitated the visits with timetabled sessions for students and evening community wine and cheese events. Attendance numbers were high and enthusiasm from the community was strong, with local people delighted to hear the author's stories about their lives as writers and the creative writing process. On reporting back to the funding organisations on these

community events I was surprised to learn that our attendance numbers far surpassed similar events in metropolitan areas, with the exception of perhaps some of the dedicated writer's centres. This feedback, to the organisations responsible for the authors travelling to regional and remote areas, was on reflection, an extremely important factor to the future of the library's author program and in the longer term, the development of a writers festival.

Visiting author program

Equally important was the way in which the library was able to take full advantage of the authors visit due to its role as a school and community library. As a teacher librarian and public librarian and having experienced throughout my career library positions in both areas, I had the perfect opportunity to make the authors visit valuable to the whole community. I have observed through speaking with library colleagues it is sometimes difficult to achieve the levels of participation we have achieved in Kununurra with a visiting author program when the links with the school, from a public libraries perspective may be difficult, and vice versa with a dedicated school library. Being responsible for both areas I am always able to make the authors visit worthwhile in terms of planning a program that works in with the students and members of the community. In terms of numbers for funding bodies we always have a captive audience as classes are timetabled to participate in the meet the author sessions and creative writing or illustrating workshops. Kununurra District High School is the largest District High School in regional WA and encompasses children from

kindergarten to Year 12. Young families feature prominently in the demographics of Kununurra with many families moving to the area due to work available at surrounding mines in the East Kimberley. Visiting children's authors and illustrators are therefore a key part of our visiting author program, providing inspiration for reading and writing to our young people as well as their families.

Student participation

Indigenous students comprise about fifty percent of the school population and the visiting author program plays a key role in promoting literacy and books to our Aboriginal students. It is recognised by educators when working with Indigenous students that visual learning experiences are very important to achieve the level of engagement to make that learning experience worthwhile. We have found in Kununurra that actually meeting an author and hearing from them about the making of their books, has led to the desire by many students to read that author's books. In some cases our students have never been interested in reading until they meet a particular author who has been able to spark interest and connection and therefore that desire in the students to want to read their books. The role the library plays in this is significant, as whenever possible we carefully select the author or illustrator that we feel will be appropriate for the school community, and take into account the demographics previously mentioned, such as young families with the Indigenous component an important factor. As a further development of the visiting author program the library provides a writing illustrating competition called *Make Your Own Book* where students have the

opportunity to use their own skills inspired by our visitors to demonstrate some of the outcomes of meeting an author has inspired. We find the level of participation in this competition increases when it links with a visit by an author or illustrator.

Library links

The library's links with the school is also an advantage when connecting the community with an impending visit to Kununurra by an author. Teachers at such a large school are a vital part of our community and all have the opportunity to "meet the author" during their class participation in the sessions at the library. This often provides wonderful professional development for teachers and as community members is a valuable link to promote the library's activities to colleagues, friends and members of the Kununurra community.

When the visiting author program commenced it wasn't immediately acknowledged or realised that children's authors and illustrators would be of interest to the general public and attract an audience to an evening at the library. It was a realisation I achieved however, while spending time hosting our visitors and participating in the student sessions. The fantastic stories I heard by spending time with the authors were a privilege. I was inspired to share this experience with our adult community by providing meet the author or illustrator events in the library. This has widened the visiting author program to achieve the levels of participation previously mentioned and been an important part of attracting funding for the library.

For the visiting author program community events to be successful in

Kununurra the library has worked very hard to put in place a marketing and promotional program. Personal invitations are sent to an extensive mailing list, which is continually increasing and changing with the ebb and flow of Kununurra's transient population. Newspaper articles, school newsletters, shire news, school assemblies, radio promotion, bookshop advertising and continual word-of-mouth in our close community promote these events in Kununurra. Equally the library is a place the community loves to visit 'after hours' - glass of wine in hand, cheese platters available and an atmosphere where people can meet and make new friends.

Aesthetics

The aesthetics of the library also contribute to the success of these programs. We have worked very hard to make the library a welcoming place with colour, furnishings and artwork with a Kimberley touch. Visiting librarian's have frequently commented that our library displays a true sense of community and does not evoke either a straight school library or a public library. This has been achieved by carefully arranging the shelves, collection and furniture to provide appropriate spaces for primary and secondary students, the public and to enable community events to be held. This is not an easy task, with the arrangement of the numerous school and community collections an important consideration!

However, it is not just a matter of simple arrangement. The importance of public spaces as meeting places, opportunities for new experiences and building a sense of belonging and community is well documented. Our library is a

welcoming space for learning and leisure and is the only place in town with a free couch space accompanied by beautiful Balinese cushions and a cup of tea for the stayers, factors which represent libraries and Kimberley lifestyle at its best. Other important spatial features include:

- an entry area that 'draws' people in to an open light filled space with a view of all the library has to offer;
- the use of collections to designate areas in a flowing manner rather than 'blocking';
- the use of colour;
- the arrangement of furniture, open plan layouts with large work desks, casual comfy chairs, the lounge corner with its garden view, and student areas towards the light filled back area, drawing in the students to resource collections and learning areas whilst maintaining community or public areas that are subtly separate;
- local art works; and
- profiles of local Indigenous storytellers.



These techniques are not unique or new, but the challenge we have overcome is to put it all together and convert a 1980's building into a space of learning, leisure and lifestyle for community members and visitors to experience Kimberley culture. This was achieved with vision rather than dollars.

In addition, the effective aesthetics and space for our staff members creates harmonious working relationships, productivity and initiative with a sense of

pride in the workplace that flows on to committed customer service and the promotion of our region. Students also gain a sense of pride and connectedness to the library as they relate to the space as a special Kimberley, visually appealing place to visit. Many factors have contributed to the success of the visiting author events as described previously, but I think that the main contributor I need to acknowledge is the priority the library places on its role as provider of literary

and cultural experiences for the community and visitors to Kununurra. Our philosophy at Kununurra Community Library is that to be a valuable library for our school and community we need to engage with people, make connections, and provide opportunities for people to interact together in a positive environment, an environment of literacy and learning. We know that we can organise resources, collections and information and make them available to our school and community.

We feel very strongly however that we have an important role to play in Kununurra to engender the level of interest in books, reading, literary and cultural activities. Through this role, library resources are utilised to a greater capacity and library activities and events contribute to the community's quality of life in a remote regional place like Kununurra where cultural pursuits and events are often not as available as in metropolitan areas. Our library, and any library, is a perfect venue to draw likeminded people together in our

communities and to attract others to the world of books and reading by participating in events such as *Meet the Author*, and wine and cheese evenings.

Our list of visiting authors to the library, in a town of only 7,000 people, is remarkable and include Robert Drewe, Kate Grenville, Andrew Daddo, Nova Peris, Boori Pryor, Libby Gleeson, and Alison Lester to name a few travelling the huge distances from the Eastern States. We have been fortunate to link with significant "local authors" who have drawn large crowds to the library, such as Marlee Ranaher (of Bullo River Station fame) and Terry Underwood.

Visitors to Kununurra have been delighted to have the opportunity to meet our 'locals' as they read their books about living in remote north Australia. We don't really know about queuing in Kununurra, but on the occasion of Marlee's "meet the author" evening, with almost 200 people in the library, we had underestimated our capacity to attract interest in authors, especially local authors!



The *Kimberley Writers Festival* has arisen out of the solid base and hard work of establishing a successful visiting author program in Kununurra. The inaugural festival in 2005 was the second writers festival to be initiated in WA and four years after the success of the *Albany Sprung Writers Festival*. Writing WA (formerly WA State Literature Centre) is a key literary organisation in WA promoting creative writing, reading, and authors. Writing WA was well aware of the success of Kununurra Community Library's visiting author program with constant feedback, photos and statistical information from the library following their author events. When the funding opportunity arose Writing WA was well placed to offer the Kununurra Community Library the opportunity to introduce a writer's festival to the region.

The *Kimberley Writers Festival 2005* was a partnership between the Kununurra Community Library and Writing WA, to provide an opportunity for the community of remote northwest Australia to participate in literary activities. Kununurra Community Library held the inaugural *Kimberley Regional Writers Festival* in July 2005 with great success, featuring four visiting authors and five local writers and storytellers. Over five hundred community people and visitors to the area participated. Nine hundred students from three East Kimberley schools had the opportunity to meet authors who always provide positive role models for our young people. In particular the collaboration between the visiting authors and local writers on indigenous issues was a highlight.

The Festival was scheduled to coincide with our dry season, the tourist season,

when the population of Kununurra increases significantly. This capitalised on participation from visitors as well as the local community. Visitors had been frequent attendees at previous visiting author evenings and therefore promotion of the 2005 Festival included tourist accommodation places and visitors' centres. The target group included Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, young people, the local East Kimberley community and visitors to the region.

Coordination

Coordination of the festival was provided by the Library Manager and five library staff. The success of the 2005 Festival can also be directly attributed to the support of over 20 volunteers from the community. Visiting and local authors were carefully selected with demographics and connection to the region in mind-

- Steve Kinnane – grandson of Jessie Argyle, who's award winning book *Shadowlines* is Jessie's story of being removed from Argyle Station near Kununurra and sent to Perth.
- Rob Hirst – musician and songwriter of Australian band *Midnight Oil* and recently prose writer of *Willies Bar and Grill* a story about touring in the US post 9/11.
- Libby Gleeson – award winning children's picture book and junior fiction writer.
- Alison Lester – children's picture book illustrator and author and winner of CBC picture book of the year 2005 for travel book *Are We There Yet?*
- Reg Birch – indigenous author from Wyndham.

- Ambrose Chalarimeri – Kalumburu community elder and author.
- Norma Wainwright and Howard Young – Kununurra historians and published authors.

Outcomes

Outcomes achieved at the inaugural festival include:

- provided an annual literary event in Kununurra for the Kimberley region contributing to sustainable cultural development in the region;
- established contact with authors and writers for young people and the local adult community;
- assisted with links between indigenous and non-indigenous people and provided a positive forum for people to interact to aid community harmony;
- provided positive Indigenous role models in our community;
- provided a Kimberley regional venue to promote Australian authors and readership;
- assisted with the promotion of Kununurra and the Kimberley region as a destination and a place for cultural and literary activities;
- assisted with dispelling the sense of isolation of living in a town like Kununurra, by providing a cultural festival;
- provided an opportunity for local authors to participate in professional development opportunities supported by visiting professional authors;
- assisted in the development of cultural networks in Kununurra and surrounding areas and facilitated information exchange between

writers, historians and other artists; and

- raised the profile of our regional and remote artists and promoted readership of their books.

Due to the success of the inaugural *Kimberley Writers Festival*, it was planned to maintain a similar format for the 2006 Festival. The 2006 program included:

- Di Morrissey – Australia's leading female novelist.
- Kim Scott – award winning Indigenous author from the Albany region of WA.
- Leonie Norrington – NT young adult author, ABC TV presenter and author of gardening book *Tropical Food Gardens* growing food in the north of Australia.
- Shaun Tan – WA award winning children's picture book illustrator and author.
- Craig Smith – character picture book illustrator of notable authors Paul Jennings, Mem Fox and Libby Gleeson.
- *Backsliders* musicians Dom Turner, Rob Hirst and Ian Collard – Sydney blues band and songwriters.

The 2nd *Kimberley Writers Festival* 2006 provided a development of the inaugural festival in 2005 with events extending to a third day of the festival including a literary boat cruise and a Blues on Sundown music concert. This gave the community the opportunity to participate in a significant literary and cultural event not only in the environment of the community library but in the context of the magnificent Kimberley scenery the festival is set in. The community

response and participation was outstanding with numbers doubled from the first year for the opening evening and all community events. Ticketed sessions were booked out well in advance and tickets were sought after as the word spread about the festival and its popularity. Attendance figures exceeded 900 community people. Local authors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous participated in the opening evening and visiting authors, musicians and songwriters featured throughout the festival. Over 900 students from both schools had the opportunity to meet and listen to professional authors and musicians, with illustrators conducting visual learning workshops for year 1 to year 10. Children and adults from the remote East Kimberley communities of Halls Creek, Warlawurru and Wyndham travelled to Kununurra to attend workshops at the festival. Many community members who participated at the 2005 festival commented on the growth and development of this festival and how pleased they were to be able to continue to be involved in literary activities in Kununurra. Local people from Wyndham and Halls Creek in addition to visitors to the region were evident in the crowd. Book and artwork sales increased from the previous year and special edition signed *Kimberley Writers Festival* posters sold out quickly.

The 2006 festival hosted by the Kununurra Community Library:

- Provided a literary event in Kununurra for the East Kimberley region contributing to sustainable cultural development in the community.
- Extended the range of writers, storytellers and musicians catering

for young people and the adult community.

- Increased attendance with ticketed events booked out in advance.
- Extended the events to include venues in a Kimberley setting, taking advantage of the environment as an inspirational influence to creative pursuits.
- Facilitated a new audience by providing a songwriting workshop
- Provided a music event where local people had their songwriting work showcased.
- Catered for adult interest with a literary lunch event
- High volunteer participation continued, contributing to the success of the festival.
- Increased participation and support, contributing to community well-being.
- Increased sponsorship and support by local government, local business and individuals.
- Facilitated substantial sales of books, CD's and artwork by visiting authors and musicians and local authors.
- As indicated by the letters of support continued to provide an enjoyable, informal and intimate atmosphere where the community had the opportunity to engage with local and visiting authors in conversation.
- Provided professional development for local authors and engagement between visiting professional authors.
- Showcased the Kimberley as a place where cultural and literary events are valued and keenly anticipated.

- Raised the profile of local Indigenous authors and stories about the Kimberley.
- Extended the audience to include children from remote Indigenous communities.
- Facilitated visits of authors after the festival to remote community schools.
- Inspired children's participation in creative writing and illustration and reading.
- Provided a forum to showcase and acknowledge young local talent – young poet reading and interstate writing competition winner recognised.
- Facilitated a link between a new author and a publisher.



Conclusion

The continuation of the festival as an annual event in Kununurra supports the local community by providing artistic engagement, cultural development and helps reduce social isolation. The local community anticipates events such as Writers Festivals and the *Kimberley*

Writers Festival has gained momentum and is being recognised around Australia with many participants planning their trips or visits to the Kimberley to time with the festival. The library is proud to be the place where the festival has grown and developed and is particularly thrilled to hold a

literary festival in an environment of books and reading.

The promotion of books and reading is of course a school, public and community library's main focus and so a Writers Festival seems to be an obvious event for a library to host. There are however, not many libraries in Australia organising such events. I am concerned for our library profession that perhaps we have spent many years focusing on the technology our libraries have to offer, in the quest not to get left behind in the race for technology. It has been very important that we are up-to-date with the latest methods of accessing information as this is also an integral

part of a library service. This work will continue and will support our organisations in terms of the systems we have in place to function as a library. Writers Festivals however, are a wonderful way to engage with our community and provide that link between people and books. They are also a very visual and recognisable way to represent to our governing authorities the impact the library has or can have on a community and the various roles we play, intergenerational, multicultural, social, mental health and of course literacy. Kununurra Community Library is frequently described as the cultural hub of the community, a reputation we are proud of!