

Case study

artsQueensland

Dress the Central West - telling the region's stories with wearable art

Central West residents and artists create works of art and connect regional communities in an ambitious project for the Regional Arts Services Network

What

Dress the Central West, a large-scale creative wearable art project, was developed by Red Ridge as one of the first major initiatives to roll out as part of the Queensland Government's Regional Arts Services Network, a new model for arts collaboration.

Red Ridge worked in partnership with Central West Hospital and Health Service, the Central West Aboriginal Corporation, artists, and people in drought-affected communities in Winton, Barcaldine, Longreach and Blackall to tell the region's many stories through a collection of wearable art.

Dress the Central West grew in scope from its inception, adding momentum and evolving from its original concept as a fashion show (presented in Blackall and Longreach in May and June 2019), to a presentation at regional arts conference/festival [Arts Ablaze](#) in October 2019 and a garment on display at the State Library of Queensland's exhibition *Spoken: celebrating Queensland languages* and with future plans to exhibit the wearable art collection at regional galleries.

The project kicked off with a series of workshops in which 70 participants used locally sourced and recycled materials to create fashions that represented aspects of their towns' cultures and stories.

Mental health and community support were integrated into the workshops, with spokespeople from Queensland Health's Tackling Regional Adversity Through Integrated Care program giving talks.

The two fashion performances in Blackall and Longreach involved local models, hairdressers, make-up artists, the Blackall School of Dance and Longreach School of Dance.

Dress the Central West was a collaboration between [Regional Arts Services Network](#) (RASN) service provider Red Ridge (Interior Queensland), Central West Hospital and Health Service, Blackall-Tambo Neighbourhood Centre, Central West Aboriginal Corporation and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) through the Tackling Tough Times Together program.

Outcomes

Workshops and performances brought community members together supporting social connection.



I just needed an out from the daily grind of living through the drought, the monotonous load of caring for our property's stock and my family. – Workshop participant



I just fell in love with the project, amazed at what 'us' as a community were creating, and just wanted to keep coming along. – Workshop participant



This project was therapeutic and working on my design took my mind away from the daily grind and the stressors of work life and the drought. I found confidence I never believed I had, and I gained such pride and enjoyment from being a part of the production. It has encouraged me to be more innovative and creative in my daily practices and proud of my community. I am just so glad I participated! – Workshop participant



Attending the workshop has given me connections to the wider community in the Central West and definitely gained more friends. – Workshop participant



Making new networks. Making new friends. Knowing people enjoyed the show gave me a warm fuzzy feeling inside. Great project for small county town that hasn't thought BIG before or hasn't had anything that big before. Puts the town on the map. – Model

Where and when

November 2018 to June 2019 in Barcaldine, Blackall, Longreach and Winton.

October 2019 – Arts Ablaze, Beaudesert and Boonah, Scenic Rim

Investment

Dress the Central West was supported by the RASN Western Queensland service provider, Red Ridge.

RASN is an initiative of the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland. The Queensland Government committed \$6.5 million to RASN from 2017-18 to 2020-21 to build capacity, support collaboration, and leverage the value of the arts to achieve social and economic outcomes.

Dress the Central West also received funding from the FRRR Tackling Tough Times Together program, which helps communities access resources to support one another through the ongoing effects of the drought.

Outcomes cont.

- Integration of mental health services with workshops increased awareness of the health services in the region. The project was a perfect exemplar of how arts can help people with health and wellbeing. A dress was made from Beyond Blue brochures and was a showcase garment.
- Local makeup artists and hair stylists were trained in avant-garde makeup, design and hair styling. These new skills will enable local practitioners to be involved in creative opportunities in the future.
- Dance students in Longreach and Blackall had an opportunity to perform in front of large audiences. For Blackall School of Dance, the performance was the second opportunity to perform together as a dance school.
- The presentation at Arts Ablaze conference in October 2019 was completely reproduced into a new cultural production called “Thuntha Wadhunu – Garments from Country”. This performance was completely Indigenous led with the garments that were designed, made and performed by Indigenous artist giving ownership leadership and creative direction and expression of Central West Aboriginal communities. Four young Mununjali dancers also performed with this *Dress the Central West* presentation which made it a powerful and emotive performance inclusive to the wider Aboriginal community.
- Since its initial incubation, *Dress the Central West* has unlocked the potential and possibilities within the region across all Local Government Agencies. It has allowed Red Ridge as a leading arts and cultural organisation, build upon long term relationships with community organisations such as Central West Aboriginal Corporation, Central West Hospital and Health Services, Blackall Neighbourhood Centre, along with local artisans to strengthen outcomes for the whole of the community and facilitate further and future partnerships and collaborations

Reflections and learnings



This project has gone way beyond just creating wearable art – it has brought our communities together, inspired creativeness, innovation and meshed together the vibrancy, uniqueness, resilience and available support mechanisms as a community collective to deal with the strains of the long impacting drought that has burdened our local communities. – Andrew Martin, Red Ridge Chairman



I came to a Longreach Dress the Central West community workshop because I had moved to Longreach 3 months prior and was struggling to meet anyone socially.... Not only did the workshops create a platform for me to meet new people, but I am in awe of what we all pulled off – such an inspiration and definitely can't wait to be involved in more Red Ridge projects – Liza Cameron, Longreach (Garment Designer)



Attending the workshops and seeing the show come together has inspired me further more to achieve anything in life. It has also given me relief and enjoyment from dealing with the daily drought chores – like the relentless feeding of stock, – Virginia Wacker, Blackall (Grazier, Garment Designer & Creator)



The show was way more than what I imagined what it was going to be. I went along to support the community, but I was blown away by what I saw – It was magnificent, so entertaining and world class, it exceeded my expectations and I couldn't believe what local people created and were capable of – Rebecca Manns (Blackall Sport & Recreation Officer)



DTCW has brought regional cultural groups together and has taught young people to embrace their culture and have more confidence in the public eye - Wayne Kite (Aboriginal Performer)



Outback Wedding Gown, designed by Blackall resident Virginia Wacker. Model: Jemma Mobbs. Photo: Matthew Gianoulis Photography & Design

Outback Wedding Gown

“Salvaged from the dump, I was given the Top Country bulka feed bags from Forest Park Santa Gertrudis Stud. Dirty and still containing feed remnants, first job was to gurney them! A tetanus shot and many hours later, the bags had to be unpicked, cut, washed some more, Napisan-ed, sewed, ironed, zippy tied and hot-glued. Under Claudia's guidance and with the help of fellow local creators, along with additional assistance from the Lost Arts team and Scobie Saddlery, the Outback Wedding Gown came to life.

The flowers on the bodice and headpiece are made from the tops and bottoms of the bags and have been hot-glued in place. The skirt was created from the belly of the feed bag and the handles from the bags have been sewn to create the belt and bow. The narrow tapes top and bottom of the feed bags have been used to lace up the back of the bodice and skirt. The large flowers on the skirt are also made from the main belly of the bulka bag.” – Virginia Wacker

From Louise Campbell, Manager, Red Ridge (Interior Queensland)

The key benefits and powers of utilising a ‘network’, was highlighted throughout the project, with DTCW production involving so many other aspects of the local arts sector – such as regional dance studios, Blackall Men’s Shed and Job Seekers (creating props), Blackall Workcamp (Stage and Hall setup), Sound and Production (Outback Sound & Production), CQ Stage Hire, other community groups such as the local football team and Music Makers also were involved in ushering, operating bar, local CWA (catering). The networking through regional community groups is what also encouraged participation in the project, proving ‘word of mouth’ is still one of the most powerful forms of communication and networking in regional Queensland.

The community pride and identity that stemmed from this project was incredible. Through its inclusiveness in delivery, Dress the Central West created social and cultural bonds within the communities. Through this it also promoted cooperation, awareness of local issues (i.e. Mental health impacted by drought), and the reduction of social isolation. It acknowledged different community identities, enabling communities within the region to embrace diversity, creative expression and cultural activity, uniting the region as a whole

Without the Regional Arts Services Network the project would never have been resourced to its full capacity. The presentation at Arts Ablaze conference was completely reproduced into a new cultural production called “Thuntha Wadlhunu – Garments from Country” Dress the Central West “Thuntha Wadlhunu” performance was completely Indigenous led with the garments that were designed, made and performed by Indigenous artist giving ownership leadership and creative direction and expression of CW Aboriginal communities. 4 young Mununjali dancers also performed with this Dress the Central West presentation which made it a powerful and emotive performance inclusive to the wider Aboriginal community.

This is a great RASN outcome giving creative expression for Aboriginal artist to evolve their own works of arts into a production that shares and celebrates the stories of their culture, completely owned and led by them. This has been the most rewarding outcome of Dress the Central West and RASN KPI to create opportunities for Indigenous Artists.

Dress the Central West has proven that while the grassroots, regional arts sector may be amateur, they are certainly not amateurish. This has been a project that has cut across the divides of class, ethnicity, generations, gender and culture and encompassed multiple key deliverables of the RASN program in just one project.

Tips for others

Louise Campbell, Manager, Red Ridge (Interior Queensland):



Follow an organic process and allow the leadership to come from within along with the guidance and skills from a creative director.



A co-design process with service providers in the beginning incubated the initial project, which was allowed to grow as the community energy built.



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Image 1: Designed and painted by Aunty Joyce Crombie (Anpanuwa), Traditional Owner and Elder from Birdsville. Photo: Matthew Gianoulis Photography & Design. Models: Yarryn Lewington, Yasmin Weldon

Image 2: Walking on Country, designed by artists Joyce Crombie (Anpanuwa) and Jean Barr Crombie (Aulpunda) as Two Sisters Talking. Model: Suzie Herman. Photo: Matthew Gianoulis

All photos courtesy of Red Ridge.

What next

Planning is underway to exhibit the wearable art collection at regional galleries.

Dress the Central West has been the first of many multi-art projects planned for the Central West Queensland region through RASN.

It is followed by [Trailblazing the West](#), which is transforming water tanks into public art in nine locations: Mount Isa, Dajarra, Richmond, Windorah, Jundah, Stonehenge, Augathella, Charleville and Cunnamulla.

Key stats [Nov 2018 to June 2019 phase]

- 34 models
- 14 makeup artists and hair stylists
- 70 workshop participants
- 34 youth dancers from the Blackall School of Dance and Longreach School of Dance
- 35 garments made
- 450 audience members

Find out more

[Red Ridge – Dress the Central West](#)

[Regional Arts Service Network web page](#)