

## Pilar's passion for healing connection

In the Western Australian Wheatbelt, arts leader Pilar Kasat has watched art transform communities.



When Pilar Kasat made the 13,000-kilometre journey from Santiago to Perth in 1987, she escaped a brutal dictatorship that threatened her freedom.

Then aged just 21, she knew nothing about Australia and spoke no English. But the young Chilean activist brought with her two attributes that have guided her life and career ever since: a passion for social justice and an unwavering belief in the transformative power of community art.

Almost 25 years later, Pilar is managing director of Community Arts Network Western Australia (CAN WA) and a widely respected leader in the broader WA arts sector.

Under her leadership, CAN WA has launched several innovative long-term arts projects in partnership with the Noongar people of the southwest region of Western Australia, a region also known as the Wheatbelt.

Two CAN WA offices, or hubs, have been established in Noongar heartland—one at Kellerberrin in 2006, the other at Narrogin in 2010.

'CAN WA had tried different programs in the past, but what I recognised was that we needed a long-term, local presence in the community to transform entrenched social disadvantage,' Pilar told *Arts Yarn Up*.

'Today, we employ seven local Aboriginal people. Our commitment is to building ethical relationships within these communities and establishing trust. I think we've done that—touch wood.'

In March, CAN WA joined forces with the Kellerberrin Aboriginal Progress Association to host the 2011 Keela Dreaming Cultural Festival, a biennial Noongar arts and culture event attended by over 2,000 people.

But it has been a couple of community arts projects in Narrogin, in the southern Wheatbelt, that have drawn national and international attention.

As part of its *Strong Culture, Strong Community* program, CAN WA initiated *The Narrogin Stories*—a soundscape featuring the voices of the Noongar community in a moving account of their collective struggles and hopes for the future.

'In 2008 six young Noongar men took their lives,' says Pilar. 'The collective grief was exacerbated in 2009 when family feuds ensued. *The Narrogin Stories* project was the beginning of a much-needed healing process for the Narrogin community.'

The soundscape featured at the program launch last year, attended by over 300 Noongar people from a community of just 500.

The renowned Kimberley comedian Mary G, the alter ego of Dr Mark Bin Bakar (Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts), was MC of the event.

Following *The Narrogin Stories*, the *Yarns of the Heart* doll-making project emerged, with 40 Noongar women, girls and boys directly involved. The project has its roots in doll-making workshops first held back in 1994, also in Narrogin, by artists Nalda Searles and Pantiji Mary McLean.

The 1994 workshops reconnected locals with traditional Noongar craft practices, and the dolls were exhibited across Australia and in Beijing, China.

Noongar Elder, Janet Haydon, explains the doll-making tradition: 'I can remember making bush dolls out of pegs and balls and nuts from the Quandong tree. We used all sorts of things in those days. My mum used to help make clothes for the dolls. We loved those dolls. I'm 77 years old now and I still have good memories of those days.'

Nalda Searles returned to Narrogin in September 2010 with fellow artist Cecile Williams to lead a new round of doll-making workshops with support from Lotterywest and other state and federal funding bodies.

The 2010 project was a resounding success and 70 dolls are now being exhibited as part of *Yarns of the Heart* at the Western Australian Museum in Perth (until 31 January 2012).

Pilar recently spoke about these and other projects to arts delegates from 61 countries at the 5th World Summit on Arts and Culture in Melbourne in October 2011.

'The context of initiating our work in Narrogin was complex,' Pilar explains. 'There was a lot of grief, anger and pain in the community. I felt a huge responsibility to ensure we did the right thing by the community.'

She said the collaborative nature of these projects has been the key to an 'amazing healing process' that demonstrates how 'community arts can give beautiful meaning to otherwise silenced voices'.



Left: *Boodjarri Jija* by Emily Dalgety (Doll features by Cherie Abednego & Senema Kickett). Aboriginal sister growing up, she's young and pregnant and she's very proud.

Photo: Bo Won.