

The Batja Malnigan Journey

By Kate Stewart and Leonie Dyason

The Batja Malnigan Journey is the story of a group of Koorie boys, students at Mooroopna Secondary College, and the journey they travelled with support and assistance of the Mooroopna Community and the State Library of Victoria. One of the results of their activity was a book, the back cover of which reads:

These boys from Mooroopna Secondary College took part in a Wongi Boys Literacy Project which became a journey for them all. They documented their stories by writing and recording a rap and by keeping an illustrated journal of their experiences as they moved on to traditional dance and storytelling through dance. They formed a group – Batja Malnigan Dance Group – that now performs at community events in the wider Goulburn Valley region. This is their story. (from back cover of The Batja Malnigan Journey).

The history of the project began with a chance conversation between Leonie Dyason, teacher-librarian at Mooroopna Secondary College, and the Manager, Learning Services at the State Library of Victoria (SLV), Andrew Hiskens. More conversations followed. The conversations became more involved and eventually funding was sourced for a project to improve the boys' literacy. This grant would also enable the students to undertake some personal growth training; the result would be a book to be professionally published and distributed. There were 27 boys between years 7-10 at Mooroopna Secondary College at the time.



The SLV team (Andrew, and Paula Kelly and Sue McKerracher) came to Mooroopna Secondary College and spent some time with Lynn Emmerson, the Principal, Leonie Dyason and Craig Parker, the school Curriculum Leader, and a proposal was written. The SLV submitted the proposal to the Collier Charitable Fund. Their acceptance of the proposal led to the funding of a SHELL (Sharing Heritage Learning & Literacy) project at MSC. The following is an extract of meeting minutes from the early days:

Paula Kelly commenced the discussion with a brief outline of the genesis of the project. An extensive experience base of both Paula Kelly and Christine Andell with community focussed projects and a conversation with Lynn Emmerson had given rise to the idea to the project. This idea was followed by a successful draft proposal for funding which has enabled the project to proceed. The proposal is a conceptual design and the team is free to reshape the design to the interests of the boys and context of the boys' families.

Towards the end of term 1 2011 Christine Andell from SLV was appointed coordinator and the project began. At the school level Kate Stewart, the Koorie Programs Coordinator at MSC, was nominated the liaison teacher and along with the MSC School Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO) at the time, Katrina Muir and Shane Clarke, formed the project organising committee. Initial discussions amongst the group and in brainstorming sessions with students resulted in the adoption of the idea of documenting the life journey of the students or their stories and those of their families as well. The following questions formed the basis of the initial discussions of the project with the students:

- where are you from?
- where are you now?
- and finally where are you going?

It was considered vital to create as high a level of student engagement as possible and, to that end, the first activity arranged was a rapping event. Students were to compose a rap about themselves based on the above questions. The Melbourne-based group Indigenous Hip Hop Projects was engaged to work with the 23 interested students in a two day workshop. It was extremely successful and led to the professional quality, recorded MRP (Mooroopna Rap People) rap.

Our Koorie Rap

(The Batja Malnigan Journey, page 4)

*My name is Elijah and I'm furious
Me don't joke around cause I'm serious
Got a mean rhythm and I gotta mean flow
With the quick lyrics so here I go*

(chorus)

*When we are rapping my people start clapping
I'm never gonna stop coz I'm verbally attackin
Who are we? MRP
Who are we? MRP*

*Put your hands in the air when you hear Ryan
Put your hands in the air and I'll leave you smiling
Tag on the wall then I look at my wrist watch
Just keepin it gangster keeping it hip hop*

*I'm gonna train hard and I'm gonna sweat
And I can guarantee than I'm gonna be the best
I'm playing it hard and playing it well
You know that I'm talkin 'bout the AFL*

*When I get bored all I do is dance
In my hoodie, my bling and my pants
Bustin out my moves ho so deadly
Feel so good I put my rhythm in my melody*

*My name is LilM I play the PS3
My favourite game is called Assassin's Creed*

*Sound and graphics on a 50 inch screen
And when I'm playin no-one gets in front of me*

*You are gonna know Tristan is my name
Everyday I'm gonna train my AFL game
And when I get the game I'm gonna get the fame
And everybody in the wold be screamin my name*

*My name is Bettsy I'll be flippin
Ankle breading cross over I'll be trickin
3 pointed shot I'll be swishing
Think you better than me, you are wishin*

*They call me Pete
I'm raisin the heat
Never back down never fall to defeat
Put pedal to the metal like lyrics to instrumental
While I'm rockin lock poppin and doing it mental*

Staff involved were amazed at the level of engagement of students over the course of the rap activity and hastened to take advantage. The dance workshops began. Initially, KESO Shane Clarke had worked with the boys in the early stage of the project in a support capacity; accompanying them in their Rap workshops he continued with the ongoing discussion of the boys' heritage and other cultural aspect of their lives. It was decided to seek further resources for the project. Josh Wanganeen, working as a tutor at ASHE, the Academy of Sport Health and Education, was persuaded to join the project and assisted Shane in the weekly workshops. The boys absorbed aspects of culture and traditional ways as they learnt traditional dance step and dances and designed more of their own.



Early in 2012 Josh Wanganeen moved to Melbourne so had to leave the project. We were fortunate to have Corey Walker take his place and continue his valuable work in the program.

At this stage Christine Andell brought Victoria Ryle from Kids Own Publishing to introduce bookmaking to the group. The boys were exposed to a number of artists for inspiration, and were shown some book samples of similar projects. On the day of the visit they made 'hotdog' books and began the process of documenting their

journey. The ideas of life stories and life being a journey was encouraged and the students set about documenting both. They enjoyed making illustrations and putting together designs that would eventually decorate the final published book. By this stage the boys had also begun to document their progress in photographs and videos. Students in media and photography classes were recruited to help in this job.

As they grew in confidence the boys began to perform for local audiences. They gained some notoriety for their exemplary presentation, respectful attitude and their pride in their culture. They have become quite well known locally, featuring in the local paper and television news and online. Their self-confidence, pride in their work and attendance at the College has improved. Their self-confidence increasing with every performance; the boys were soon able to speak articulately and confidently about their dancing to large audiences, both familiar faces and strangers. At the same time their writing skills were improving. Drafting something and polishing a single line in the Hip Hop song was undertaken, and poetry finally made an impression on them.

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At different stages the whole school was involved with the boys and their project. We had teachers excusing the boys from class to attend workshops, classes often swapped rooms to hold a workshop, students went about with big cameras taking photographs and videos, students built their photographic and video expertise, taking 'green screen' photographs for the book.



As the publication date for the book drew nearer, activity reached a frenzy point; lots of decisions had to be made. What would be the best poses to strike for the individual portraits? An official Yorta Yorta linguist was consulted about the name for the group. They eventually decided on Batja Malnigan meaning younger brother's journey in Yorta Yorta. Nearly all the photographs used in the book and the included DVD were taken by Darryl McConnell, the school media teacher, and his students.

Several of the dancers and some friends burnt the discs of photographs, video clips and the recording of the RAP to go with the book. Each one took four minutes to complete as they designed and printed the labels for the discs as well.

The Shepparton Mooroopna Community were involved with the development of the group. The links established with the wider Koorie community were particularly valuable. We had a number of outside agencies such as the Rumbalara Co-op, the Yorta Yorta Land Council, ASHE (Academy for Sport, Health and

Education) at Melbourne University, Rumbalara Football and Netball group, and all the wonderful extended family that came along with the boys.

On Wednesday June 20th the book was launched amidst great pomp and ceremony! Various speakers addressed an audience of dancers, family, friends and representatives from the SLV, the Hume Regional Office of the DEECD and local community groups. The event was held at the College in the Westside performance theatre. It was some production! Everyone involved with the project was invited to come and we had a celebration of all the steps along the way, and a performance by the BATJA Malnigan Dance Group. We were all so very proud of how the boys have grown over the last year, and hope we now have our own Wongi leaders at the College.



So, where to after this? We are now implementing stage two of the project with the State Library of Victoria. The group of students will have regular fortnightly sessions on a Tuesday (approximately 100 min.). The curriculum will include learning the didgeridoo (didge lessons), learning extra dances that are from the local area, some with the didge and some without. We will be introducing the drum as an accompaniment for some of their dances, too. There will be a field trip with Corey, our Koorie Engagement Support Officer, to gather materials to make the student's own instruments, and to learn about their country. There is also the possibility that we may also involve some of our Koorie girls in the classes. We plan to commence this program soon and aim to have the project completed by end by the end of Term 1, 2013. Once again our record of the students' journey will be in the form of a book as wonderful no doubt as the last one!

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