

THE NGARRAKEETON MURAL STORY

BY DEBBIE CLARKE AND NATHAN NICHOLSON



Debbie wanted to consider the dream of the two communities of Framlingham and Warrnambool coming together and living in harmony.

Prior to the 1970's, people from Framlingham were forced to remain separate from the Warrnambool white community and were not allowed to enter into the town centre. This is something Debbie's family actually experienced first hand.

Debbie's wish is for the white and black worlds to come together and be one.

Debbie's artwork depicts the Framlingham forest, which is very important to her people whose ancestors, long ago, lived off the land and from the river, residing in bark huts, which were their traditional homes.

She has painted Kangaroo tracks, snakes, cockatoos (black and white), crows, the river, eels which they used to trap for food using grass reeds and sometimes sell in the town, and hand-woven baskets. Basket weaving is no longer done but is a skill that Debbie wants to relearn. The forest that earlier indigenous people new as thick bush and scrub has been cleared over the years and some has been sold off to white people for farming so that it looks very different these days.

Debbie says that the mission and its dwellings have changed over time from a community of families living in the bark huts to thirteen modern homes shared by families and the community. They now have a community centre based at Framlingham with visiting doctors, maternal and child health workers and other community services.

To find the Framlingham mission, everyone goes by the phrase "turn right at the water tank", and this is also featured in Debbie's painting as a land mark.

Debbie came to Framlingham knowing that her own mother had been brought up there and is actually living with her children in a house which is located only metres from a tree marking where her mother's family lived before her. Debbie is a member of the stolen generation herself and uses her art to convey messages and tell stories about that and its impact on indigenous people's lives.

Nathan and Debbie had not met before getting together for this special project.

Nathan says that he very much wanted to demonstrate his view of the ugliness of the modern development of the city of Warrnambool compared to the natural beauty of the bush and countryside surrounding the Framlingham community. He would prefer to always be able to view natural landscape instead of built up structures made by man.

Nathan's artwork depicts lots of activities and sites that were important to him as a child growing up in Warrnambool. He has included Penguin Island and the main beaches where he spent so much time as a boy during the warmer months. The train is significant because he was once caught displaying his graffiti talents on its carriages and was caught by the local constabulary. His stepfather Roy Reekie was also instrumental in

taking up the fight a few years ago and lobbying to keep the rail service running in the south west for the benefit of all communities, something Nathan is very proud of.

Also included in the mural are Warrnambool College where he attended, the skate bowl where he and his friend Mat spend many hours perfecting their skills, Wolloston Bridge where he would jump from into the river despite being warned against it, and Community Connections, which assisted with this project.

Around the boarder of the mural are many images of people in various costumes and poses who represent personalities and roles in the community. A police officer, a singer, his brothers Josh and Zac, a disco dancer, a muscle man (friend Judda) and a punk rocker (friend Duncan) and Tom Waits, his favourite musician.

There is a red cross on the chest of one man and it appears again in a field heading in the direction of the township of Portland. This cross is special to Nathan and is symbolic of his biological Dad's passing. Nathan's Dad was an indigenous citizen from Portland whose original country was in southern Queensland. Nathan wears a red-cross tattoo on his back to remember him by since his passing almost two years ago.

Nathan says that he learned much from doing the project, particularly about traditional art. He points out that while Debbie used the beautiful dots in her work, he used a similar approach using more modern stripes and splats.

It was intriguing to note that even though they worked together on the design, they did most of their panels of work separately and yet the significant lines and borders on the different sections of the picture actually ended up being perfectly aligned. Neither of them can explain why this happened and are excited that they were so 'in-sync' with the picture they both had in their minds. The pair enjoyed doing the mural together so much that they plan to continue working together on similar projects in the future.

Banjo Clarke always said that he wanted the two worlds of black and white to come together and merge as one community or, as he called it "one mob". He said the bush was his cathedral and anyone was welcome there at any time to share it with him.

Debbie says that she can still feel and hear the spirits of past Framlingham people crying in the bush and once actually heard a woman "screaming for her stolen children".

Debbie's dream is for the two communities to move forward in coming together and sharing this country and their lives together.

Nathan's dream is for people to stop using the word "Fram" as the butt of every joke they tell. He would love to say to an Anglo Saxon person "go talk to a black person and ask them to tell you a story."

Thank you Debbie and Nathan – you make us proud.

The "Ngarrakeeton" Project was the development of an art piece, a community mural, via a partnership between Community Connections, two local artists, Debbie Clarke and Nathan Nicholson, and a number of local organizations, local government and philanthropic bodies.

The Koori word "Ngarrakeeton" translates to "the coming together of family and community", and is representative of the project's aims and objectives, which were to stimulate thinking around building better relationships between the various cultures in our south western communities, using art as the medium. The mural is a combination of traditional Aboriginal dot art and modern art, both styles coming together in the middle with the joining of two hands that represent the indigenous people and the white people of the region. It is filled with images of local landmarks and significant sites that are unique to the district and, when studied carefully reveals a proud sense of belonging and identity that leaves the viewer with a feeling of recognition and having some ownership of "place".

Debbie and Nathan have written the 'story' of the mural so that its origin and meaning will be recorded and kept for future generations.

The mural was sponsored and supported by Local Learning & Education, the South West Area Consultative Committee, the Ian Potter Foundation, the Regional Arts Foundation, and Michael Gray Builder.

It is currently on display here at the premises of Community Connections at 135 Kepler Street, Warrnambool, and, because it is modular in its design, can be transported to other venues for display at community forums and functions.

Community Connections encourages members of the community to visit and view the mural, and will be contacting other agencies, schools and organizations to invite them to use the mural for their studies, community events and as a backdrop for any type of artistic or community development forum or festival. This very successful project is part of a commitment from Community Connections to incorporate culture into developing strategies for alternative approaches to addressing community and social issues, and encouraging community members to participate in strengthening relationships between diverse groups within the community.