

STORIES IN A PARK

Reducing crime and stigma through community storytelling

By Wendy Sarkissian with Graeme Dunstan 2003

Stories in a Park in Eagleby, Gold Coast, was funded in 2000 by Queensland Health as a pilot participatory action research project involving local residents in planning and celebrating community and public space. It brought forth and celebrated stories of Eagleby's parks and their users, reinforced and extended networks of association among residents and added new depth to residents' perceptions and understanding of themselves, their neighbours and the natural environment.

This project is an example of Second-Generation Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED), which employs community participation, capacity building, local responsibility, integration with community safety initiatives, and community development. These approaches resonate with Community Cultural Development (CCD) — an increasingly popular and validated approach to enhancing the health and identity of an area.

Three components of the project are described below.

Storytelling: We argued that the stories people tell about their communities—the myths of a people and a place—determine how people interact, perceive and use public space. We reasoned that for people to undertake more incidental physical activity in their neighbourhood, they need supportive environments and, at a symbolic or archetypal level, the environment of stories is just as fundamental as the environment of physical amenity.

While the local stigma in this disadvantaged community was only a set of negative perceptions and stories, it influenced residents' expectations about public places. As restating the stigma gave it new life, the dominant story had to change. The cure, we argued, was to bring forth and celebrate positive stories about Eagleby.

This project culminated in a dramatic Community **Celebration**, focusing on positive stories, displaying local ideas for increasing incidental physical activity, and showcasing high school students' concepts for redesign of Eagleby's parks, as well as stories collected via interviews and videotaping.

The **animation** activity focused on the community artist's residence in a local park. This legitimate activity conferred safety on the park and encouraged people of all ages, including school classes, to visit and engage in creative activities there. As people prepared materials for the Celebration, their activities advertised the forthcoming Celebration and helped to demystify fears about park dangers.

Setting up his van and two shipping containers, Graeme Dunstan helped local people make objects for the Celebration. One hundred primary students made 400 paper lanterns for the children's parade and painted silk banners, pre-prepared by adult volunteers, with representations of Eagleby themes.

Early on, Graeme proposed that the Celebration culminate with burning the often discussed Eagleby stigma. Although everyone agreed about the existence of such a stigma, it was difficult to visualise it. Finally, a community member suggested, '*The thumb of judgement is keeping the eagle from flying.*' Following wide agreement, this vision of the *Stigma* was constructed from large cardboard boxes attached to a light wooden framework, carried on large bamboo poles. Construction and painting took about two weeks.

The Winter Solstice was chosen as an auspicious day for the Celebration that began with lunch and continued late into the evening. Many residents took the microphone to explain to the listening crowd how new stories could be created.

As night fell, everyone was touched as we watched the 400 bobbing lanterns snaking through the darkness. The storytelling was especially memorable to the younger participants, sitting spellbound in the candle-lit darkness as Graeme told stories of lost dreams, reconciliation and hope renewed. The final event—the burning of the *Stigma* to the chanting of a huge crowd—was seen by many as a dramatic cleansing and an act of renewal.

Via informal feedback and a formal evaluation, several residents explained that they could feel ‘tangible changes’ in people after the Celebration. Some felt more a part of the community following their involvement with *Stories*. Many emphasised the value of community arts, the Celebration and the festival atmosphere. A long-time resident explained, ‘We need events to be a community, to be people who know how to relate. There is a hunger within this community to want community; a hunger in community for community.’

New community festivals are growing up, including activities in several local parks. *Stigma* is shifting, with early evidence of social capital in the growing trust and communication among neighbours and their greater contact with a wider social world.

While other programs have contributed to the ongoing renewal of the Eagleby community, upgrading of parks and public places—and a reduction in fear of crime—have been dramatic outcomes of this creative project. Second-Generation CPTED has clearly paved the way to deeper forms of community renewal.

By Dr Wendy Sarkissian, FPIA,
with Graeme Dunstan, community artist