

**COMMUNITY ARTS NETWORK WESTERN AUSTRALIA —
VOICES OF THE WHEATBELT PROJECT**

Statement

HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural) [10.04 pm]: Tonight I rise to bring members' attention to a project run by Community Arts Network Western Australia or CANWA. CANWA describes itself as an organisation that inspires and mobilises communities to explore and express their culture through art production, cultural programs, skills development and funding opportunities. It has run a "Voices of the Wheatbelt" program for the past three years. The first two phases of this program were about engaging communities in the Wheatbelt through photography and film making to create projects that captured local stories, colour and place. It produced two wonderful coffee table books that capture the essence of the Wheatbelt. I have both of those publications and they are just wonderful. The process that the community went through to develop those books, to look at their own place and their own sense of being in their place, is wonderful and is definitely reflected in the publications.

I attended a function a couple of weeks ago in Fremantle for the launch of the third phase of the project. Unfortunately, my diary did not allow me to attend the launch in my electorate but they decided to put a show on at the Fremantle Arts Centre to launch the DVDs, which was the final phase of the project. I would like to tell members a bit about the project. The final phase of the project was called "Wheatbeats". It was slightly different from the first two. It was specifically to engage with young people in the eastern and southern Wheatbelt towns of Kellerberrin, Quairading, Brookton and Narrogin. It involved skills development in hip-hop dance and music, traditional Aboriginal dance, filmmaking and photography, and melding them together. There were three facilitators involved in the project plus a couple of assistants. From my perspective, the three facilitators were key to the project because I could see the young people involved immediately engaged with them and what they were trying to impart. Scott Griffiths, or Optamus, from local hip-hop act Downsyde was the first act. For those members who do not know, Downsyde really led the charge as a Western Australian home-grown hip-hop talent. They are now highly awarded in Australian music circles. It is hard to describe how the kids reacted to Scott. He was very natural and he was really keen to engage with them on a range of different levels.

Olman Walley is an acclaimed traditional Aboriginal dancer and didgeridoo player who grew up in the southern Wheatbelt. He brought his skills in these areas to the team. Mat de Koning is an awarded young Australian filmmaker. He filmed the entire process. The project was in two phases. A documentary of the final production was made so that people can watch as they learned how to hip-hop, produce videos, film, choreograph and all the rest of it. Then there is the final production; the finished product. Groups at each school were tasked with writing, recording and mixing their own hip-hop songs, choreographing and performing a dance performance using hip-hop and traditional Aboriginal dance, and creating a music video. The workshops were filmed, as I described. Although the hip-hop productions were absolutely amazing and the final productions fantastic, the documentary showing the kids engaging with each other and their facilitators was equally amazing. The transformation of the young people involved in these projects as they learned to express their own stories and those of their place through hip-hop, working together on lyrics, choreographing and developing their confidence, was absolutely remarkable. Credit has to go to the facilitators and CANWA who were what I would call "real" with the kids. It was palpable in the room where they were showing the video—this is probably one of the nicer moments in the documentary. During the lyric-writing process there were early signs that the kids were trying to copy American gangster rap. Scott Griffiths explained to them that Aussie hip-hop was about explaining their stories through reflecting everyday Australian life. The way the kids responded to that was to write some truly amazing lyrics. How they were produced is a reflection of life in the Wheatbelt and a remarkable melding of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives. The young people were genuinely talented. I encourage anyone to grab a copy of this publication—it is free. Members can read the lyrics but it also has two DVDs in it—the documentary and the final productions. The outcomes were far more than just this. The teachers involved report back through the documentary about the group's confidence and cooperative skills. They learnt things about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids. I could see the Aboriginal kids were proud to be teaching their non-Aboriginal friends more about their culture and their dance, and vice versa. On the launch night there was a panel of some of the participants. They told the gathering that they had forged new friendships and understandings with people in their class and town who previously they had had nothing to do with. Some of the towns these were held in—Quairading, Kellerberrin, Narrogin and Brookton—have had some troubles. This has certainly brought these kids together. What a fantastic outcome for the project!

It is hard to single out anyone in this, because all the kids were involved, and it was definitely a group production. I had the privilege of meeting Raymond Storey and his brother Juwan Storey from Narrogin. These two provided the rapping and the MCing for the production, and they were just fantastic. Karlee Barr and Thomas Hadlow from Quairading were also outstanding. They sat in front of a group of adults at the Fremantle Arts Centre and spoke about their experience as a panel. They did very well.

As someone who grew up in the Wheatbelt, I was proud to have talented young people telling a story about where I come from. I thoroughly commend CANWA for the program and encourage members to take the time to watch the documentary and the final production and get involved with what this organisation is doing. It is absolutely remarkable.