



Exploring, trialling and widening horizons: tapping into community

A presentation by Emma and Rhiannon Brodie

Hi my name is Emma Brodie, I'm 23 and I love anything to do with the creative arts including, theatre, acting, dancing, films and music.

I'm also a worker, a frequent world traveller and a bit of a Masterchef!

This is Rhiannon. She is my sister and a great friend. She helps support me in having a life like she and all my family and friends have.

Rhiannon:

We're going to be talking about why we started exploring our community to see what was out there for us to get involved with. Emma will start.

Emma:

I wanted to meet new people and do new things but one of my problems is knowing how to make new contacts. I am not sure who to trust and how to approach people I don't know. It's a problem! I want to do things my way but I know that isn't always right.

I am lucky to have friends and family who encourage me in my interests and look out for things I like to do. They help me to do this, but now I am maturing I have to find ways to make my own friends and find my place in the community.

Rhiannon:

If I look at my own life, it's full of interests, roles, possibilities, friends, socialising, meeting lots of new people. Emma is a very much loved sister, daughter and friend but I noticed as she became an adult, that the same possibilities and experiences that I have in my life weren't happening for her.

My family and I really thought hard about what makes up a good life and what as individuals we find most important – sharing interests with our friends and family make up a big proportion of what contributes to us having an enjoyable and meaningful life. It helps us define who we are. With this in mind, we started to explore and pursue the interests that Emma had shown; looking at what was on offer in our community and the places where she could potentially meet new people.

Emma:

Rhiannon started looking at what was happening in our area and shared these ideas with me to see if I was interested.

Rhiannon:

We looked at the ordinary places where Emma could further develop her interests in the creative arts such as community colleges; we looked on the internet and also walked around communities that fostered the interests Emma has.

Emma does a lot of art already and this is great but the places she has been creating her art, although providing her with a space and encouragement to enhance her skills, haven't brought many people into her life.

We live in an outer suburb of Sydney and started our search close to home. It seemed practical and it was art focused.

Emma:

We found a mosaic course, which looked interesting. It was on a Monday night and it was fun. I met lots of new people and shared in their conversations. On the last night I made a fruit slice to share with my class. They loved it. I had a good time but next time I would like to have some young people to talk to. It did help me be more confident.

Rhiannon:

Yes, we trialled Mosaics as we just wanted to get started and be involved. We enjoyed it and met some lovely people but no real connections were made. As Emma said – the people were mostly older than her and this made it harder to connect. They were not the demographic that would typically be friends with Emma.

This insight made us think differently about priorities. It wasn't so important for us to be close to home. It was more important to find places where people of Emma's age and outlook would be.

It also made us think differently about how we would find these like minded people. I use technology a lot in my own life and decided to explore. I found a community forum to tap into. It's called 'Meet Up' and we found endless possibilities. There are groups that meet up during the week around a vast array of interests - from book clubs, drumming, archery and beyond.

Of course, we stuck to the creative arts and, in particular, a theatre group that meets up -usually around the city to watch small community theatre or, sometimes, even professional theatre. Often there are social gatherings involved with drinks, or a discussion group.

The get togethers are informal and it's your choice when you go but we have found that by getting along to something whenever we can, we have met a variety of people who share the same interests as Emma who we would have never met previously.

We recently attended an art opening at the Saatchi and Saatchi gallery that had been organised on Meet Up. At the gallery, we saw a few people we had met at a previous event. They approached Emma and talked to her about her interest in pop art - which was the theme of the opening. They had clearly engaged with Emma and had listened to and remembered her, as Emma's art interest **does** lie around pop art - particularly Zines.

As I listened to them speak, it really became real for me that we were on the right track. The more Emma was involved with what's on offer in the community and beyond, the more relationships and connections she is likely to make in her life.

Also, it became obvious that the more thought we put into finding places that were a good fit for Emma, the easier it would be for her to be herself and play to her strengths.

For Emma, who knows all the latest films, movie stars and their love lives, art lingo and dresses in a pretty trendy way then this environment was going to increase the chances of her relating to people and establishing some type of connection with them.

These insights led us to our next discovery; the art community in Newtown.

I started to ask around other young people and also people I knew who are creative, about where it was that other artists and young people went. I soon discovered Newtown was the place to be.

After a lot of browsing and searching I stumbled upon a community art studio which offers a space for young artists to come along and create art whatever their art medium is....

When I approached the person who oversaw the art space I explained who Emma was, her interest, her skills and her vision as a young artist. I also mentioned that she has a disability and has some support needs - but made clear that her approach would be the same as anyone using the art space. She really loves art and really wants to improve hers skills and get ideas from other artists.

The person I spoke to was positive and inviting.

An interesting aside is that another family had enquired about joining the art studio but had asked for 'art therapy'. As a result, the same person who was inviting to us had turned this family away as this is not something the studio offers. They just offer a place for creative young people to come together over a shared interest.

This is a good thing to think about. When pursuing and trialling interests and opportunities. The reception you get from others may be more inviting if you use ordinary language and talk about real interests. It made it obvious to us that we needed to avoid disability specific language and terminology. When seeking to do ordinary things we needed to take an ordinary approach.

Of course, Emma and I talk through this, what we'll do and how we think it went. What's your view about what we've been doing, Emma?

Emma:

I am enjoying the places we are going. I am happy about sharing my art and ideas with other young people. I like to go to art events and galleries and I like meeting trendy people.

Rhiannon:

So, what's next for you?

Emma:

I am going to look at joining a local theatre group, also joining my local gym. I love poetry and would like to write my own poems and decorate them with my art work. I want to join a poetry group. I would also like to improve my cooking skills. There are so many things I want to try and so many things I have to offer.

Rhiannon:

As we explore and trial more opportunities, we have become more relaxed. If we try something and it doesn't turn out as expected, we'll still learn something about ourselves and get more ideas for next time.

We are also more focused on what Emma wants to get out of something.

It is not about Emma producing the best made cake, getting the certificate in massage therapy, producing a poetry book that will be published. Yes, these may happen for her but if they don't, that does not matter as her experiences of being involved have enriched her life and given her a sense of belonging, brought new roles and given her new skills.

This is particularly important to keep in mind when perhaps challenged by others who may not see what people with disability will get out of an opportunity.

So, what has Emma gained out of our encouraging her to involve herself in her community?

Emma, do you want to share your thoughts?

Emma:

I am an artist, an actress, a chef, a theatre goer, a traveller, a social butterfly...I now talk more to people and tell stories about my life.

I am on this journey, which is taking me to exciting places.

I am starting to let go of the fears and open myself more to people and can see my confidence and courage grow.

Rhiannon:

Yes we are on a journey and it continues to develop. The more people Emma and we, as her support network, become connected to; the more ideas and possibilities become available.

We don't know it all. We have made mistakes in the past and will continue to do so. On many occasions we have had to revisit choices and question the opportunities for Emma and the value they bring to her life. Are they still positive? If yes, could they be more positive or more appropriate for her current age? Are they just time fillers or are they something that is meaningful to her?

The biggest thing we have all learnt is that potential barriers shouldn't limit Emma's opportunities for connecting to what is on offer in community.

Barriers are something we sometimes emphasised too much in the past and, through our trialling and widening the possibilities for Emma, we have learnt that what we thought would be barriers have not been the case at all. People have been welcoming and supports have been worked out.

We had to face the fact that in many cases, we were the barrier and this acknowledgement has allowed Emma to take more chances and make more choices, to try things out and reject them and it has given her the space to be her own person and to form her own relationships.

Have you got anything to add, Emma?

Emma:

Give it a go, try new things in your community, and discover what cool adventures and people are out there!

family

A D V O C A C Y