



KELLIE WILLIAMS

Director of Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, Townsville, Queensland

I was born in Brisbane, the eldest of three kids. My parents both grew up in Brisbane - Dad grew up on a dairy farm in Wynnum and Mum grew up at Darra which at that time was used to home immigrants. I can remember hearing family stories about the Vietnamese community and children of Polish Jewish refugees who'd moved from Europe to re-settle after the war. Mum is one of nine children; Dad is one of seven - I have over sixty first cousins and twenty-six aunts and uncles and we're still all very close and gather regularly. That closeness and family community feels like a village – and they say you need a village to raise a child. It's been a huge influence on me growing up. Every year we all still gather together –usually a minimum of one hundred people for a chaotic family Christmas.

We take turns to meet in each other's back yards – everyone brings a plate and we all share Christmas dinner together sheltered by the Queensland sun under tarps. We usually do Mum's family for lunch and Dad's family for dinner, so it's a long day with ongoing festivities. I know there's a lot of us but we all know each other intimately - I've changed lots of the

nappies of my younger cousins, and some of them have changed mine.

I went to primary school in Alexandra Hills and to a Catholic girls' high school in the city. Although Dad and his siblings had a wonderful time growing up on the dairy farm, none of them had been given the opportunities of a formal education. Even though Dad is the currently editor of three Fairfax media newspapers (the Redland City Bulletin, Jimboomba Times and the Beaudesert Times), it still concerns him that he hasn't had a formal education! So Dad and Mum were very keen for their own children to have a formal education; they pushed us hard because they wanted us to have opportunities. However, the down-side of this was that Mum and Dad weren't too keen on me following my own passion: art. Because they'd come from poor backgrounds, they were very concerned that their children would be capable of making a living for themselves.

At high-school I had a wonderful teacher in Miss Artuso. I can remember coming to her crying explaining

that my parents were not going to let me take grade eleven and twelve art classes. She looked at my 'spares' in my timetable and told me, "Kel, you're doing well at art – in those spares come into the art classroom and I'll take you through the course whether you get marked for it or not." So I actually got to do those classes anyway. My brain didn't work 'naturally' for maths and science, but I stuck it out and went on with the kind of dogged determination I've probably inherited from my parents, and after high school I graduated from the University of Queensland with a Bachelor in Environmental Science (Ecology) (Hons). While I was undergoing my university studies I'd continue to draw all the time – in order to take in the concepts that were difficult for me I'd spend hours and hours doing drawings and mind-maps and memory-diagrams - drawings of cells and plants and botanical details and anatomy ... I just kept drawing the new knowledge into my own framework of understanding.

At the end of that degree I came across another wonderful teacher, Dr Daryl McPhee, who helped me to realise that what I was good at was working with people – that I didn't have to sit in a lab to qualify as a scientist – that I could apply science knowledge to working with people. So my Honours involved working with a group of commercial fishermen in Moreton Bay who were trying to prove that their fishing practices were sustainable. I spent a year working with them evaluating their outcomes, and the success of that thesis catapulted me into a career; It made me very employable.

My first job as a university graduate was work for 12 months as a Research Officer in a science legislation branch of the Queensland government, working under lawyers to draft legislation. It was a great entrée to becoming more familiar with the machinery of government and with the processes of community consultation. Not long after my honours year, the Federal government invested in a pilot program about the viability of environmental management systems being adopted by commercial fishermen, and I was hired to manage the scheme for Queensland. During that time, I was invited to present my findings to the Fisheries Managers of the United Nations World Food and Agriculture Organisation in Rome. In the three years during which I worked on this Queensland Pilot Project I split my time by spending two weeks in Cairns and two weeks in Brisbane because I was working with two core regions –the Great Barrier Reef and the other at Moreton Bay. Out of that work I got incredible training in participatory approaches to managing people and the environment. This was the time I first started falling in love with tropical far north Queensland.

Towards the end of that period, the Moreton Bay group of fishermen invited me to continue working with them. I took a risk and worked out of my lounge room for six months to set up a new not-for-profit membership-based organisation comprised of commercial fishermen who were prepared to demonstrate that an environmental management system was working in their own business. I received a range of government grants and was able to secure rental on an office above a seafood shop; we hired staff, and we ran the organisation for three years. Although it was always a humble operation, we were awarded a United Nations World Environment Day Award for the work we'd done in introducing sustainable practices into the fishing industry. This period involved years of blood, sweat and tears working for the cause. But it was starting to wear thin – I was spending all my energy on someone else's cause and I really felt like I somehow had to find my way back to my art.

Around the same time I married, and we took a year off and travelled, with the intention of working overseas for two years. But by the time we landed in the United Kingdom the GFC (Global Financial Crisis) had hit. Even though the professional job market had dried up, I managed to get work in a pub in East Sussex where I had plenty of time to slow down and think. All I did during that time was work in the pub, keep drawing, and also work as an au pair in return for board. Although we'd planned to spend two years there, a number of events had 'plotted against us', and we returned to Brisbane after having spent four months in the United Kingdom.

Money was the main driver in the job search after that time when I returned to Australia, so I used my government and science skills to get a job in the Queensland Government's Office of Sustainable Transport for two and a half years. After working there for a couple of years I applied to study a visual arts degree. The voices of my parents were still ringing in my ears, so I initially applied for a Bachelor of Creative Industries. After 12 months however, I moved into taking a number of studio-based subjects and my grades immediately jumped higher - it certainly seemed to me that this was the most enjoyable study I'd ever undertaken. When she surveyed my studio outputs, one of my lecturers – Dr. Courtney Pederson - encouraged me to swap into the Bachelor of Fine Art degree; at last I'd arrived at where I really wanted to be. The Creative Industries studies hadn't been a waste of time, though – there were lots of art history studies I still draw from. I completed an additional six semesters over three years – a total of four and a half years of formal study. I have to say that throughout my working life I'd never completely abandoned studio art studies – I'd trained at the Brisbane Institute of Art in silver-smithing for two years at night classes and also had taken Fashion



Design for twelve months at TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) while I'd been working. So in fact I'd been fitting it in wherever and whenever I could manage it. But during my period of full-time study my marriage broke down. The financial responsibilities, and all the things that go with leading a responsible adult life, made that period very difficult. However, my lecturers were totally supportive, encouraging me through the struggles I was having during this time. I was given support and understanding by the institution and in the end, I achieved several Dean's Commendations for consistently high Grade Point Averages, and was eventually issued an invitation to membership of the Golden Key International Honours Society for my grades.

During the final year of my studies I worked for Arts Queensland as a Senior Investment Officer for one of their major funding programs; they supported me by allowing me to work a nine-day fortnight and I was therefore able to use the other days to focus on my practical studio areas of my degree. In the second year of my degree I'd also taken on a year-long internship at QAGOMA. I graduated in 2016; at the end of that year my new partner, who is in the army, was posted to Townsville. I was keen to look around for a good job in the arts, so I applied for a new role that had just been created by Dancenorth as a Company Manager – which in dance-world-speak means a 'producer'. At first I was concerned that I was going towards dance rather than fine art, but I was immediately impressed about the fact that every member of their board was a woman. That fact, and also the sense that the feeling around the company was very positive, made the role a wonderful fit. I worked there for eighteen months, after which I applied for the role as Acting Director at Umbrella Studios. During that time the board offered me the Director's position permanently when previous Umbrella Director Jonathan McBurnie confirmed he was taking up the position of Director at Perc Tucker Regional Gallery.

I'd spent a great deal of time visiting Townsville over the years, but I'd never really counted on falling so much in love with the place in the way that I have. I'm an outdoors person – I love hiking and camping, and my photography is inspired and engaged by the kind of uncompromising landscapes typical of this region. I'm really impressed and enamoured with the people here too – I've spent fifteen years traveling the world but now I can get to work in a five-minute drive. I now get the chance to really connect with people in more meaningful, slow ways, instead of rushing. I just feel there's more capacity, possibility and potential in the regions for experimental ideas. In the big cities there's all the competition and clamour around 'great ideas' whereas up here there is actually space and time for innovation and the building of great ideas, rather than

the act of paying lip service to them. And with that there's more of a feeling of solidarity and support. I love that.

© Images and text copyright of the artists and *The Partnership Project*. Background image: Lisa Garland *Mr Irby's Boat* (detail), 2017.

