**Interview with Dr Anthea Skinner and Liz Wright**

Liz

This is a Women with Disabilities Victoria podcast.

We acknowledge that these podcasts were recorded on the traditional lands of the First Nations Peoples of this country. We acknowledge their Elders, past, present, and emerging. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded, and that this is, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

From the Outskirts is a series of podcasts featuring women with disabilities who live and work in regional Victoria.

I’m Liz Wright, a disability activist and advocate. I’m also the Manager of Community Inclusion and Women’s Empowerment at Women with Disabilities Victoria.

All the interviews were recorded in each person’s home or workplace, so from time to time there is unexpected background noise.

We hope you enjoy.

Dr Anthea Skinner is an ethnomusicologist and McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow at the Victorian College of the Arts.

In this podcast, Anthea talks about her life, passion for music and her current research project, the Adaptive Music Bridging Program which is changing the lives of kids with disability.

There is reference to mental health and suicide in this episode. So please take care when listening, and if you need support, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Anthea

Hi, I'm Dr. Anthea Skinner from the University of Melbourne, and we're on Wurundjeri Country.

Liz

What's your role here at the VCA Anthea? Hello and welcome.

Anthea

Hi, thanks, Liz. So, I'm a McKenzie Postdoctoral Research Fellow and I'm here to work on a project with Melbourne Youth Orchestras to make their programs more accessible for students with disability.

Liz

Firstly, tell me what a McKenzie Fellow is?

Anthea

So, that basically means that I'm hired to do research. I have a specific project which I work on, which is with the MYO, and basically, I have three years to make that happen and the university funds me to do that. And it's named after Dr. John McKenzie or Professor John McKenzie, who is a wonderful scholar over in our Faculty of Science, who's now retired, and he had a real passion for research and for interdisciplinary research I guess, so, which is why even though he's in science, he started a program that goes across the entire university. So, whatever faculty you're in…

Liz

Oh, that’s unreal.

Anthea

You have a chance to put to put your best foot forward and to say, this is the project I'd like to work on for three years.

Liz

What a great philanthropic kind of mind to think further than just your passion, across a whole university. Like, that's terrific.

Anthea

And he, he really was – is - he's retired.

(laughter)

Liz

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Anthea

You know, a great thinker. He comes and gives us talks at the start of the year to, you know, explain to us why what we're doing is so important. And he's yeah, very inspirational. I feel very, very privileged to have this opportunity.

Liz

Oh, that's wonderful. So, Anthea, tell me about the project with the Melbourne Youth Orchestra and working with young people with disability around music. It seems like a really… I don't mean this in any understated way, but a seems like a beautiful project. Everybody loves music or music can touch you in many ways, and it seems for some young people daunting if you've got a disability.

Anthea

Absolutely. And for their parents too you know, musical instruments, musical instruments are expensive and, you know, putting them in the hands of a clumsy kid with cerebral palsy can seem counterintuitive. But actually, when you're a musician, you understand that they are actually quite hardy, and they can be easily repaired. And there are, you know, ways to protect them.

But I guess growing up, I couldn't play sport, not even parasport, and school bands and orchestras were my team and I loved it. But I was almost always the only obviously disabled kid in any band I was in.

I myself am an alumni of Melbourne Youth Orchestras so I used to go along every Saturday morning with my double bass and play with them and I loved it and I'm very aware that they’re really proactive with inclusion and certainly the students I'm working with are not the first disabled students they have…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

But I guess they just have slightly higher support needs, you know. So, what we're doing is we've developed basically, we call it a bridging program. So, to join Melbourne Youth Orchestras, you need to have one to two years of experience playing your instrument. And we, we and MYO recognise that for some kids with disability, that's inaccessible, you know, finding a) an instrument and b) someone who's able to teach that instrument or who's confident to teach a child with disability is not always easy.

Liz

Are you doing this on your own? Do you do the teaching of children on your own, or are you in a team?

Anthea

I'm in a team, so I run the team and we have Zoe Kalenderidis, who is a wonderful music therapist, with disability as well. And that's actually - it's been a conscious decision to hire folk with disability because it's really important, we think, to show the kids that there is a pathway.

Liz

Yeah, yeah.

Anthea

We’re professionals with disability who work in music, you know, and, and they can be too one day.

Anthea

And we also have Dr. Leon de Bruin, who runs our Performance Education Masters here. So, he basically teaches music teachers to be music teachers. And so, he's very interested in, you know, learning more ways to, not just support disabled students but to train teachers, to support disabled students.

Liz

It sounds fabulous.

Anthea

Yeah, and of course, then we've got the MYO team who back us up as well. You know, who are there every Saturday and work with the sort of larger groups.

So, the idea is that our kids will spend some time with us, we’ll help them… and we're in the very early stages right now. We've just had come and try day a couple of weeks ago. So, we had…the kids tried out all the instruments and they're in the process of choosing them at the moment and we'll get them in the classroom soon.

Liz

How many kids came along?

Anthea

Eleven.

Liz

Oh, fantastic.

Anthea

And that's as many as we could fit. We have a waiting list of almost the same size as well, which is frustrating because we're a small group and we can't you know… I would love to say yes to everyone, and I'm hoping over time we will be able to. But, you know, it's a pilot program. We only have, you know, one room and three people.

Yeah. So, the idea is that the students will start with us and then have the opportunity to move up into the mainstream parts of the orchestra, or if they discover a passion for heavy metal or whatever, we can find, you know, a pathway that might suit them better.

Liz

Yup.

Anthea

Yeah, we recognise that not all students, you know, will be able to reach that stage. And so, we're sort of looking at multiple pathways. But yeah, basically the idea is that it's a pathway into music education, just giving them that ground floor, you know, where they often miss out and setting them up with teachers.

Liz

How do you find your students? Where do they come from?

Anthea

We did a big call out late last year. And like I said, we got more students than we could handle. And it really was, you know, it was through the MYO website and then a few other people picked it up, I think Limelight from the ABC magazine covered it, and we had a few things in the disability press.

You know, I'm a researcher, I've worked on lots of research projects. This is the first one where, you know, we didn't have to try hard to get people in, people very excited. And I guess the kids fall into two groups. You know, they're kids who either they or their parents have always wanted to play music but haven't had the chance. And then we've had a couple who either are playing music, but it's kind of starting to hit a wall. Which is…was very much my experience.

Liz

Which is about the limitation of their disability or the limitation of the teaching?

Anthea

It's a combination of technology, teaching, and disability. You know, some instruments are better for some disabilities than others, so you can sort of start on one instrument and then suddenly, you know… so for me I'm hyper mobile, so I'm very bendy. So, when I started playing clarinet that wasn't a problem. And then it started…just the weight of it started to become a problem, so we got me a brace so I could hold it. And then as my disability developed, it just reached the point where that was not something I was able to do anymore, and I had to go and look for another instrument.

So, one of the things we're trying to do is look into the future with these kids and say, we want to set you up with an instrument that you can grow up with, that will continue to meet your needs.

Liz

OK.

Anthea

You know, in my case it was about my disability getting more serious, but it's also about, you know, the needs of a beginner clarinet player or trumpet player are different to someone who's about to audition for university. And, you know, so, someone who can handle at that early level, for example, someone who has cerebral palsy might be able to hold the trumpet fairly well at beginner level.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

But once you're doing really technical stuff, they might find their hands just have a little bit too much shake for that kind of thing. And so, we're trying to sort of look at those things before they hit that stage.

Liz

Yeah, Yeah. So, you're trying to introduce them to something that they can have a lifelong relationship with.

Anthea

Exactly. Exactly.

Liz

So, how's it going? You've had the come and try day. So, then the kids will come back, and you'll match them with their instruments…

Anthea

And that's also a decision that they need to make too. Often there are two or three different options, and you know, their parents and, you know…it's funny, disabled or otherwise, most kids, when they pick up the instrument they like, they know. You know?

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

I want to play trombone, not flute. You know, there is a sort of personality…issue that goes…that goes along with it. You know, some kids, you just walk in, and you go: Oh, look there, he's going to be a trumpet player. You can see it immediately.

(laughter)

So, there's…you know, it's not just about disability. You know, this is something that all kids go through, but we just have a few more criteria we need to think about. And we also have a couple of students who were playing and then developed a disability and then were suddenly cut off from that instrument because of that. And we're finding trying to find ways for them to re-engage.

Liz

There is a grief when you can't play, and you love to play and have to give up something.

Anthea

Absolutely. You know, and I've been through those stages. My disability is repeating, remitting. So, I've gone for years without playing and you kind of write it off at first, but when you get back into it, you suddenly realise how many of your friendships come from those things, how much of your sort of social life, and also I remember I have a very clear memory, you know, after about five years off playing percussion, I, I guess when I go through relapse, it's a little bit like having a new brain injury every time. I kind of have to relearn things afterwards.

Liz

So, do you have an ABI?

Anthea

Ahhh, I have a neurological condition that was caused by an ABI, if that makes sense, it's a little complex.

I got a virus in my brain as a child, it's not… it doesn't affect me like a traditional ABI, I guess it is more like a chronic illness or neurological condition, but… because the brain is complex and there's a lot of ways it can go wrong.

(laughter)

Liz

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Anthea

But I remember, you know, after not playing glockenspiel for like five years, going along to a community band, and I remember standing in front of the music and looking at it and looking at the glockenspiel and going: Oh my God, I've forgotten how to do this. I don't…the dots and the things don't make sense to me. And I went: Oh, I'll take a deep breath, I know the music's about to start. And I remember just starting, and it's the only time in my life where I felt like I could actively feel the connections in my brain being remade in real time, as I was playing, it started to make more sense. Like within five minutes, and by the end of the song it was like, oh, that's right, I know how to do this.

And for me, that was one of the most profound, you know, musical experiences I've ever had, even though it certainly wasn't by any means the concert platform or anything anyone would want to go and see. But it became…it made me very aware of how important it was for me and for the way I think and, for the way I operate in the world, I guess.

Liz

What else do you play besides glockenspiel?

Anthea

So, I started out as a clarinet player as a kid. And then…

Liz

Double bass?

Anthea

Double bass. Yeah. So, I'm six foot tall and have been since I was 12. So, the school kind of handed me a double bass and said, What do you think? And, you know, it looked pretty cool. So, I played that for a while. And then as I've gotten older and the sort of movement in my hands has become more difficult, I moved to percussion.

And look, I will never be a great percussionist. I don't move smoothly, and I never will. But it… I play well enough to please me and I play well enough to…to I think create something that isn't virtuosic but is certainly good music and tells a story. So that keeps me happy.

Liz

So, who do you play with?

Anthea

So, I play with an all-disabled band called the Bearbrass Asylum Orchestra. Our lead singer is named Jess Kapuscinski-Evans, and she is just a force to be reckoned with. Those of you who've seen us pre-lockdown would know Tim Hackett, our guitarist. But over lockdown, he moved…well, just before lockdown he moved to Darwin, so he managed to miss all of that bit…

Liz

Yeah.

So…but it did mean we had to find a new guitarist. So now we have Zoe, who also helps me run the MYO program.

Liz

Has Bearbrass started playing again?

Anthea

We had our first concert back in…I think it was November down for Melbourne City Mission and that was really exciting. We had to lockdown down really hard, both Jess and I. You know, our immune systems are basically decorative.

(laughter)

Anthea

So, until we were fully vaccinated, you know, and for Jess, even beyond that, we had to look down very, very hard. So, we'd meet over Zoom and we, we used the opportunity to do a little bit of song writing together and just to get to know Zoe and all of that kind of thing.

And so, we had our first gig back in November, so it's nice to be back in the saddle and we're hoping to start putting…laying down some album tracks…but of course, you know, when you have a new band member, there's all that sort of…we need to get to know each other first before we, yeah, inflict ourselves on the world. But you know, Zoe’s been fantastic.

Liz

So, besides song writing over Zoom, were you practicing with each other musically over Zoom? Or is that too complicated?

Anthea

Look, a little bit just between Jess and Zoe. Zoom has a lag, so it's actually quite hard to do it musically. There are other applications, but they're quite fancy and they're often expensive to operate and those kind of things. But I think, you know, and I wasn't there for a lot of the stuff that Jess and Zoe did together, but, you know, it just it gave them a chance to…for Zoe to understand Jess’ vocal range, for them to get their vocal ranges together because Zoe does backing vocals, but you know, I don't sing…. let the drummer sing, said no one ever.

(laughter)

Anthea

And I respect that. So, it gave it just gave them a chance to sort of start blending their voices. But certainly, anything that involves any kind of rhythm or timing is just really difficult over Zoom.

(Music playing)

Liz

Can you talk about the adaptation with the instruments that you've got and what that means?

Anthea

Yeah, sure. So, I guess we've got three types of instruments. There's the, you know, normal quote unquote, standard instruments. And that's…and actually, to my surprise, the majority of the kids who've come to join us will be playing pretty much standard instruments.

It is more about the teaching and the patience and all of those things. And just belief, I guess, you know, that it's all going to be OK. And if it's not, that's OK too. So that's most of the kids.

Then we have some who are playing, I guess, standard instruments with adaptations. So, we might change the fingerings a little bit on an instrument, or we might find a lighter version of the same instrument, or we might put it on a specially made stand or brace for them so they can hold it more easily. But in all other ways the instrument is played perfectly normally. They might look a little different.

So, there's one kid, for example, who only has use of… good use of one hand and wants to play the violin, and it's the wrong hand for playing the violin. So, we have just reversed the violin. We just took off its strings, took off its bridge, turned everything upside down.

Liz

Oh wow.

Anthea

And now she plays…well she will…play it with the other hand…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

And then we just need to find a glove or something to help her hold the bow a little more easily. And. And she's off, you know.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

So, quite minor things. And then we have…

Liz

But quite minor things, but with really exciting outcomes.

Anthea

Yeah. Yeah. You know, and, and a lot of people just aren't aware that you can do it so easily, you know. So, you know, this child and their parents have been wondering how they could get back to playing the violin. And you know, we would say: Well, did you know we can do this? And so, they went to their violin teacher said: Could we do this? And she went: Yeah, of course we can do that. And I think within a week they had the violin swapped over; you know.

Liz

Wow.

Anthea

And that was… to me, that was just a beautiful thing because, you know, you have a child who thinks she's not going to be able to do this again, and now she can.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

And then we've got sort of the next level up of adaptive instruments, which are instruments that are specifically designed for people with disability or in some cases are just designed by wackadoole musicians who want new ways to make music, who happen to work for us well, because they bring the keys closer together or whatever.

And that can range from a midi wind instrument that looks like a saxophone but is much lighter, right through to an instrument that you can play without… you know, you can blow on, but plays a bit like a harmonica, you don't need your hands at all. So, if you're a quad, that's really great…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

That’s the Magic Flute. And then we have like, things run off eye gaze, so you don't need to touch it at all. Literally, where you look on the computer is what note will play, and you can control the volume in that, and you can combine those two things together so you can put a midi wind thing onto your eye gaze so you can control when the note starts and ends and how loud it is with your mouth.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

And you can change the pitch with your eyes, you know? So, it's all about working out what movements the kids have, and what works best for them, and just sort of jerry-rigging something together or finding what's available on the market. And in some cases, we're going to be putting kids into our motion capture lab to really understand that, you know, especially kids with cerebral palsy where…

Liz

OK, explain the motion capture lab.

Anthea

Motion capture lab. So basically, it's like we have, like 12 cameras, and they film the child in 3D and then we can analyse that, and we can see exactly how they're moving, and we can see exactly which movements are very controlled and, you know, are happening at a speed that is appropriate for playing music, and which takes them longer or is less precise.

We have one child who, you know, will probably end up playing an instrument with her feet and we will put together switches and things like that and gestural controllers so that as she moves her feet, she can control which note she's playing and how loud they are and those kind of things.

Liz

And what sort of sound would it make?

Anthea

Well, that's the lovely thing about electronic instruments, you can program them to sound like whatever you want them to…

Liz

Oh amazing.

Anthea

You know….so, we've been doing a project with Dr. Melinda Smith, who is a dancer here. She's our dancer in residence at VCA this year. She has cerebral palsy and she's been working with a gestural controller…now we started working…

Liz

Break it down. Gestural controller…

Anthea

Gesture controller, basically where you point and where you move it, it changes the note.

So, it's like a little box. Often, they're tied to a drumstick and as you shake that drumstick or you know, it affects where it is. And you can change what the sound is and how the movement changes, you know, depending. So, if you've got very small movements, you can really refine it down. So just a tiny twitch will change the note. But if your movements are all uncontrolled, you might want to have a much bigger space so that you not accidentally setting off notes just because of…

Liz

The sweep of your arm, or the arc…

Anthea

Exactly. So, we can make it play any note or any kind of music, drums, piano, harp, whatever we want, we brought Mel into the process. Mel can speak, but she is quite difficult to understand if you don't know her well. So, she often uses…

Liz

A communication board.

Anthea

A communication device. Yep. So, we went into this thinking we were making her a musical instrument and we were. And the first thing she said was: Well, could I put poetry into this? And we hadn’t thought of that, and said: Yes, you can!

(laughter)

Anthea

So, she ended up on this performance where she would point, would deliver different lines of the poetry that she spoke. And then she… we had this wonderful thing where, OK, so she wanted to do it in her own voice, which is quite hard to understand.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

And then we could layer that with her electronic voice so she'd point in one direction, and you'd hear her say the line in her voice, and then she'd move it slightly and it would say it in the electronic voice. So, the audience could get this…it actually started to translate it for them. And once you've had that practice, you can start to understand her voice in and of itself because you've got that practice.

So, it became this…yes, it was a music and dance piece, but it was also poetry. And yeah, it really confounded what our expectation was. And that's one of the wonderful things. So, when you say what can it sound like?

Liz

Anything. (laughter)

Anthea

Anything. Literally anything, you know, we could make all those videos where cats’ meow at pitch if you wanted to, though I'm not going to recommend it.

(laughter)

Anthea

Oh yeah, we're very lucky. A) we’re a lovely combination of, you know, performance practice and research. Not that those two things are necessarily separate, but often they do get separated, you know? So, we've got wonderful performers and wonderful researchers, which we need both for these projects obviously, you know.

But also, you know, our new head of VCA here, Emma Redding, a lot of her background is in professional disabled dance. The head of dance here, Professor Carol Brown, she was involved heavily with Touch Compass dance in…which is New Zealand's premier integrated dance company. And they're fantastic. And I know that that, you know, going to see a performance of them in a workshop with them was one of the things that got Melinda into professional dance and understanding that this was a pathway that she could go down, and now here she is.

So, look, it's been a… just really good timing, I think. But generally speaking, people are also very supportive of it because…

Liz

It's amazing.

Anthea

Because you can see how important it is…

Liz

Yeah, you absolutely can…

Anthea

You don't need to write a really long, you know, thesis proposal to explain why it's good to have kids playing music, whether they're disabled or not, you know? So…

Liz

It must be such a joyous process though, like…

Anthea

I love it. And it's also very emotional. I do cry occasionally, but in a good way. You know, like, you know, when you see a kid who's really wanted to participate and has always thought they couldn't or their parents have always thought they couldn't…in the sort of original interviews we did with kids to work out how best to support them, one of the questions I said was, well, what are your musical goals? You know.

And we had a little boy saying, you know, I've got two years left of primary school and I want to be part of the Christmas concerts, because right now I sit on the teacher's lap and smile when everyone else sings, and that's all I do. And I'd like, you know, and the parents, the teachers are supportive, they just don't know how to include him in in those activities. And so, it's like, well, we can start to find ways…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

Yeah. So that's…

Liz

That's a great goal.

Anthea

It's it a great goal?!

Liz

It's a fantastic goal.

Anthea

From the mouths of babes…

Liz

And it’s sensible, you know? I've got two years to get to this point.

Anthea

Yeah.

Liz

And I want to participate.

Anthea

Yeah. It's not, you know, I want to be a rock star and make a million dollars, which, which is valid too, you know…

Liz

Yes.

(laughter)

Anthea

But it's a lot more achievable for us with the three-year project. (laughter)

Liz

Yeah, absolutely.

(Music playing)

Liz

What else is going on for you in your life Anthea, outside of here?

Anthea

Not much, really. (laughter)

Anthea

It's one of the things I think about being a professional musician and music researcher is, you know, music has always been my hobby, so I do struggle a little bit with work life balance now because I'm doing my hobby as a job. But, you know, it's good...

Liz

But if there’s pleasure and enjoyment in the work…

Anthea

Exactly…

Liz

Then that's the work life balance.

Anthea

That, that's exactly right…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

That is exactly…it doesn't always feel that way, you know, 8 o’clock on a Friday when you're still at work, but…no, I mean, there's the band, I'm also doing some projects with the Indigenous Knowledge Institute here who I used to work with here at the University of Melbourne.

Liz

What do they do?

Anthea

Broadly speaking, they're there to facilitate cultural knowledge.

So, you know, elders to, to participate in, in research and in the University’s program. So, they've brought on three Senior Fellows, so they’re at professor level who are all senior elders in their various communities.

So, these are people who, you know, by Indigenous cultural standards have PhD’s, are professors are, you know, have that level of knowledge, but often didn't finish high school, whitefella fell away, you know, all those kind of things.

Liz

Yes. Yeah.

Anthea

And so, it's really acknowledging that they have a huge amount to bring to our research but that they sometimes might need a bit of support with English or with just understanding the university systems because…I've worked in universities for a long time, and I still need help understanding university system sometimes. (laughter)

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

So, yeah, so and it really is about, you know including and recognising those kind of knowledges within our research and making sure that this isn't just, you know, whitefellas saying what they reckon about other cultures, you know.

Liz

Yeah, yes.

(laughter)

Anthea

So, I've been working with Professor Brian Gumbula and Professor Aaron Corn and Professor Marcia Langton and Professor Lisa Palmer, and like a whole bunch of professors I’m the junior one in the team…

Liz

Now, now I am worried about your work life balance, really…

Anthea

Well, they’re all together. It’s one project.

(laughter)

Liz

Yes.

Anthea

Which makes it less…but no, we've just gotten back from Indonesia, where we've been looking at Makassan Yolngu contact before white settlement.

So, a lot of Indonesian Makassan sailors would come to the northern parts of Australia to trade mostly trepang, which is sea cucumber, which they traded with China.

So, we've just come back from Makassar where we've been learning about that. Professor Gumbula is from the part of Australia where those Makassans first came, so he owns a lot of that lore and that discussion.

So, we went over and spent some time in Macassar with…basically bringing together Bugis Elders from Indonesia and, Yolngu Elders from Australia to sort of learn more about that history. And it was wonderful.

You know, Brian's wife has Makassan cousins because the trade is that recent, and we were able to find…they hadn’t seen each in years…we managed to find…track them down and you know, it was yeah, it was a wonderful trip.

So, and that's the reason I guess I'm involved in that sounds quite separate from what I do with disability although there are disability links which I won't go into in detail, but it's a whole other long story. But my grandfather was actually a leading scholar in sort of Makassan history and translated a lot of the traditional texts into both modern Indonesian and into English.

So, I guess I've been brought on to…well, I was originally asked: Well, who else is picking up from your grandfather's work? And I was like: oooh… I could…(laughter)

Liz

Yeah. Wow. Yeah.

Anthea

So, I did five years of reading and, you know, and, and stuff that I always knew, I guess from my childhood because I grew up in that sort of milieu.

So, I've been working on that and putting my knowledge of 17th to 19th century Malay trade routes to good use. (laughter)

Liz

You’re a very interesting woman Anthea…you really, really are, seriously.

Anthea

But it was a great trip. It was wonderful. You know, it was one of those research trips where just every day you came back going: Oh, wow, I didn't expect that to happen. So yup, like I said, we got to go back last week, so, we don't have…you know, I can't really talk about it maybe detail yet because we've got…

Liz

Yes.

Anthea

Got to talk…you know, we need to discuss with our various elders what we can and can't talk about publicly and all of those kind of things. But yeah, I guess watch this space. That will be one of the things we're doing later in the year. It's really exciting.

Liz

Your life seems pretty exciting.

Anthea

I…you know…

Liz

It really does...

Anthea

I feel pretty privileged, yeah, yeah…

Liz

You're saying, here at work, you know, late at night sometimes and things like that. But the intersection with kind of joyous children and interesting history, other things linking it all up. You must be, like, overstimulated.

Anthea

A little bit sometimes it feels like a bit too much. And my supervisor is constantly like: You sure you don't want to narrow it down? But it keeps me very interested in the world. It's a good reason to get up in the morning.

Liz

Yeah, absolutely.

Anthea

You know, with my particular disability, you know, mental health issues and even, you know, suicide are a massive issue.

So, I guess one of the ways I was raised was to, you know, well, to be a) constantly optimistic, but b) to privilege quality of life as a really important thing.

And so, I do this job because it makes me happy. Yeah, it pays me and that's great, you know, and I'm very lucky to be in the position I’m in, but honestly, if they weren't paying me, I'd probably still be doing similar things…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

Just with less budget (laughter)

Anthea

Because, you know, it makes you want to wake up in the morning and get out of bed. And it's that's really important.

(Music playing)

Liz

What's your projected outcome for this project that it becomes something sustainable that, that more about disabled kids become part of mainstream orchestras or bands or whatever, and it just becomes the norm?

Anthea

That pretty much sums it up. I guess there’s you know, there's multiple levels of, you know, from what do we want to do tomorrow to total world domination.

But I guess in the short term…and one of the things I'm starting to think about now because I'm a year into a three-year project, is to make sure that at the end of the three years, we just don't suddenly pick up and leave the MYO and leave all those kids that we've been supporting for three years in the lurch.

So, we need to make sure that… that we find a way to fund that. So that's one thing I'm looking at. And then also, you know, MYO, a) it's only in Melbourne, b), we can…we only have one Saturday morning a week you know…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

That’s always going to be a limited number. So, we have a grant application at the moment that would allow us to run these coming and try days across the state. We would do them in regional hubs.

So, the idea would be…that we've sort of pitched, is that we're working with sort of five local music organisations, and we'd come in for a week and we'd do some like professional development with the local music teachers. And then on the weekend we would run come and try days, so that by the end of the week you have a bunch of teachers who are slightly trained and have somewhere… they know they can come to us for more training or for more advice if they need it.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

And we have a bunch of students, and we can kind of match them up in any given area.

So, that's our aim to be able to do that across the state. And then, you know…but really, I look at it, I think of it like the Paralympic model, you know, where you have kids come to come and try day, and it is this…and they see it now as a professional pathway.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

You know, it's not just come along and kick a ball around. They actually, you know…and talented identification and all those kind of things. And look, honestly, I think music is a far better fit than sport…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

Because we don't need a whole separate para anything…

Liz

No.

Anthea

Because we're not competitive.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

You know…and even with…you know…I said earlier I never played sport as a child…well I played a little bit of sport, but I didn't have a great access to sport, even para sport wasn't open to me because I have the wrong type of disability for para sport, because it has to be categorised to make everything even.

But with the arts you don't need to do that, but what we do have in common with sport is that unlike most other forms of art, learning a musical instrument takes a good ten years minimum.

So, if you finish school and then go into a day program where you're learning music, you're already, regardless of any disability, behind the kids who started when they were seven.

Liz

Yes. Yeah, yeah.

Anthea

So that's really what I'm looking at is that sort of early development to put people on the same track. I very much see it like the Paralympics. There's no reason why kids can't be doing this on a on an equal footing…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

And in fact, on a more equal footing than they do in sport.

Liz

If kids are learning instruments at an early age and using their fingers, their feet, their eyes, whatever they're using in this program, that training becomes cellular. Do you know what I mean?

Anthea

Absolutely.

Liz

It's like, you know, it's embedded in your cells.

Anthea

And like I learned to read music at the same age as I was learning to read English. So…or any written language, and English is my first language. So, I read it with the same fluency that I read English…

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

Had I started playing, say when I finished school, it would have been a very different learning experience, you know?

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

So yeah, there is…it's embedded in me, and I will probably always be a musician now because I've been a musician since I was little, you know. And I…you know, it wasn't like my parents were like, you know, over the top violin parents who, you know, wanted to insure my hands, you know…I played recorder at five. (laughter)

Liz

Yeah, yeah.

Anthea

You know, it was perfectly age appropriate. But it just… it gave me that background, you know. And I guess that not being…people seem to be often very scared of playing music and of the notes and of the written part and of the technology we use. There seems to be a sort of a psychological barrier that I think doesn't necessarily exist with writing poetry or getting on a stage to act or there is this idea that some people can play music and some people can't.

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

And it's not true. Certainly, the work I'm doing with indigenous communities, they know that…you know, music is lore. Music is how you tell stories. Music is how you remember things. It's really vital to being human. You know, making music is what humans do. So, cutting anyone off from that is, I don't think, a good idea.

Liz

I think the project sounds amazing and I have really loved talking with you about all the work that you're doing, and it's made me feel really excited for the future and I just really hope this funding comes through for the regional projects because, I mean, there'll be kids out there who will just be desperate to meet you and see the team and learn stuff.

Anthea

Absolutely…

Liz

And it will be great.

Anthea

And that is why we sort of start looking at the regional project. It wasn't my idea. It was because teachers in regional areas said: I've heard you’re running this program in the city, you know, will, it suit my kids? I'm like, can your kids come to University of Melbourne once a week? You know?

Liz

Yeah.

Anthea

We could certainly run them through a come and try day, but they would need the support back home…

Liz

Yes.

Anthea

To do that, so that's really where that idea came from. So yeah, yeah, it's, it's exciting.

Liz

Yeah, it is.

Anthea

And I feel like I'm at the start of something that could take multiple lifetimes to do and that's great. So, you know, I just need an apprentice now…(laughter)

Liz

I think, congratulations. You're doing a beautiful job, and it's been lovely talking to you. Anthea. Thank you.

Anthea

Thank you so much, Liz.

(Music playing)

LizTo find out more about Women with Disabilities Victoria go wdv.org.au