

A Lifetime of Darebin

Tracing the threads between creativity, community and connection.

When we reflect on our lives, we often discover that the places we grow up in become woven into who we are.

The streets we walk, the schools we attend, the people we meet and the opportunities we encounter all leave their mark. Sometimes it is only years later, when we look back across the landscape of our lives, that we begin to recognise the thread that has been quietly connecting everything all along.

My name is Renae, and for me, that thread weaves back to Darebin.

This is the story of my relationship with a place that has helped to shape me across many seasons throughout my life. It is a story of creativity, community, belonging and coming home. As I have reflected on my own journey, I have come to see that many of the ideas that now sit at the heart of my work through [ART by Renae](#) were already taking shape long before I recognised them.

Before sharing my own story, I think it is important to acknowledge something much older and deeper: the relationship between creativity, community and place has existed for thousands of generations.

Across cultures and throughout human history, art has been woven into the fabric of community life. Research into arts, health and wellbeing, and into community arts and cultural development in Australia, supports what many communities have long known: creativity can help people express identity, build connection, strengthen belonging and make meaning together. It has lived through painting and drawing, song and dance, storytelling, weaving, carving, ceremony, the sharing of food and the many ways people express identity, knowledge and connection.

Art has always been a way for people to understand themselves, remember where they come from and strengthen their relationships with one another. Contemporary evidence also links arts participation with social connection, cohesion and wellbeing, including the social capital that can grow when people create, participate and share experiences together.

Here in Australia, I am mindful that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, creativity, story, culture and connection to Country are deeply intertwined. Country is often spoken of as far more than a place on a map. It is a living relationship: land and waters, people and community, ancestors and stories, responsibility and ongoing custodianship. I write this with respect for the diversity of First Nations peoples and with the awareness that the deepest knowledge of Country belongs with the communities who hold it.

This understanding of place offers a powerful reminder that our environments help shape us, and that belonging is formed through relationship - with people, with community and with the places that hold our stories.

When I reflect on my own relationship with Darebin, I see many layers of connection. The schools I attended, the people I met, the creative spaces I participated in, the communities I contributed to and the experiences that shaped me have all become part of the story I carry.

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For me, many of those threads weave back to Darebin.

Darebin has been a constant presence throughout my life. It is the place where many of my earliest experiences of creativity, community and connection began, and where many of the foundations of who I am today were formed.

I am now a resident and business owner in Darebin, although my relationship with this community began many years earlier.

My earliest days are connected to La Trobe University, where I attended childcare and kindergarten while my mother worked there as a desktop publisher. Perhaps without realising it at the time, I was already being immersed in an environment where curiosity, playful creativity and imagination were part of everyday life.

I attended Kingsbury Primary School before moving to Helen Street Primary School, and later Preston Girls' Secondary College (now Preston Secondary College), which I chose because of their renowned music program.

Strangers unmask and find themselves a hit

THE Masked Strangers are establishing a solid reputation for themselves before they tackle the mainstream rock charts.

This month, the band which consists of four Year 12 students from Preston Girls Secondary College, was the first all female group to win the junior section of the annual Preston Battle of the Band competition.

"We have played at school concerts, primary school band tours, VCE socials and the Royal Melbourne Show as part of the Next Wave Festival in 1992," she said.

This was the second year the band had tried its luck at the Preston Battle of the Bands competition.

Earlier this year, the band took part in a young women's project organised by the Next Wave Festival, which produced a CD.

The girls also performed on the City of Darebin's Preston Entertainment - Safe Train.

"The train was set up to make the train safer for women and children to travel on at night," she said.

"Every second Friday it leaves Epping railway station at 6.23 pm and departs Flinders St station at 10.23, on its return trip to Epping."



These places became the backdrop to my childhood and adolescence. They held friendships, challenges, discoveries and the early experiences that began shaping my understanding of myself and the world around me.

Creativity was always present.

As a teenager, I found connection through music, art and community participation. I became involved with a group of young people, supported by a youth worker at Darebin City Council, we wanted to create opportunities for ourselves and others. We called ourselves the Raging Youth Committee.

During the late 1990s, we worked together to create spaces where young people could gather, share ideas, express themselves and have their voices heard. Research into the benefits of the arts for children and young people supports the value of these kinds of creative spaces for confidence, voice, participation and development.

We helped establish youth participation events including Battle of the Bands and fashion parades and contributed to the development of youth spaces such as The Entertainment and Decibels Youth Music Studio, which is still a space of recognition and creativity for the youth of Darebin today.

The Entertainment was particularly memorable. A train carriage transformed into a creative space, with live youth bands performing to encourage young people to feel safe and comfortable travelling into and out of the city at night. It was such a unique expression of creativity meeting community, an idea that came from understanding young people and creating something meaningful around their needs.

Looking back now, I can see how much those experiences helped shape me.

At the time, we were simply young people who cared about creating something that mattered. We wanted to belong, to contribute and to make space for others to do the same.

Those early experiences became some of the foundations for the work I do today.

The arts have always been one of the strongest threads throughout my life.

Dance, theatre, then music were some of my earliest creative expressions. In 1994, my band The Masked Strangers became the first all-female band to win Battle of the Bands in Darebin, an achievement that was recognised in the *Northcote Leader*. We were later invited to help launch the new Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre, another connection between community and the arts.



At the time, it was about friendship, music, performance, the excitement of doing something new and creating something collective. Looking back, I can see that it also gave me an early understanding of what happens when people are willing to share their creativity, step forward and allow themselves to be seen.

My creative journey continued through studying Graphic Art at Northern Metropolitan Institute of Technology (NMIT), before beginning my career as a graphic artist in the late 1990s.

Over the years, my path took me beyond Darebin. I lived overseas, travelled to many parts of the world and experienced different cultures, communities and ways of seeing.

Travel has a way of expanding our understanding of ourselves. It gives us new perspectives and allows us to see familiar things through different eyes.

Eventually, my journey brought me home.

Returning to Darebin felt like reconnecting with a place that had been quietly present throughout my journey. I returned with new experiences, different perspectives and a deeper appreciation for the role that people, communities and environments play in shaping who we become.

Professionally, I spent many years working across government departments and organisations at federal, state and local levels, including a brief stint at Darebin City Council.

These experiences deepened my understanding of people, systems and communities. They strengthened my belief that meaningful change begins with connection, with listening, understanding and creating environments where people can participate and contribute. This aligns with broader research on belonging as a core human need and on place-based arts initiatives in Australia as ways communities can respond to social inequity, participation and connection.

Through every chapter, the arts remained a constant thread.

I have always been fascinated by the way creativity helps us connect with ourselves and with each other. Art gives us another language, a way of exploring ideas, expressing experiences and making meaning from the world around us. Research from VicHealth, NSW Health and Creative Australia also supports the role of arts and culture in wellbeing, health promotion and community life.

A few years ago, the different threads of my own journey began to weave together.

My experiences in art, community, leadership, human development and connection shaped a vision to create something that lived at the intersection of creativity and people.

That vision became ART by Renae.

Through art, workshops and experiences designed to support creativity, connection and human development, I continue exploring something I have understood throughout my life: Creativity is part of being human.

The ART we create reflects the ART we carry within us. Every creation begins somewhere within - an idea, a thought, a feeling, a belief, all waiting to be expressed.

Perhaps this is why art has always been such a powerful part of human experience. What we create often reveals something about the world we hold within ourselves.

Modern neuroscience offers another lens for understanding this. Our brains are continually shaped by our experiences, our attention, our learning and the patterns we repeatedly engage with. Through neuroplasticity, the brain adapts and changes over time, strengthening some pathways while allowing others to soften.

The beliefs we hold influence the way we perceive the world. Our perceptions influence the meaning we make. The meaning we make influences the choices we take and the way we show up in our lives.

In many ways, we are continually participating in the creation of our own experience. Our words, our actions, our relationships and the way we move through the world become expressions of our inner landscape, revealing the stories, beliefs and perspectives through which we experience life.

This is the deeper meaning behind The ART is You.

The child discovering creativity, the teenager finding her voice, the young person creating community, the professional working with people and systems, and the business owner returning home were all connected by the same thread.

When I look back across a lifetime of Darebin, I can see that this idea was quietly forming all along.

Perhaps we spend much of our lives uncovering what has been there from the beginning. Layer by layer, experience by experience, we reveal more of who we are and who we are becoming.

We are both the creator and the creation - The canvas, the colour, the story and the expression. A magnificent creation, a moving masterpiece - The ART is You.