



# 'It numbs what you don't want to feel'

Take away the interviewer and this makeshift video booth became a confessional on the untold impact of alcohol, writes **Adele Horin**.

**I**t turned out to be like a confessional. When the people of Armidale, NSW entered a mobile video booth, a disembodied voice asked them about the role of alcohol in their life, the life of their family and friends.

Over several weeks, 300 raw and personal stories emerged.

"We got these really honest accounts; people treated it very seriously," said Kim McConville, the executive director of Beyond Empathy, a community arts organisation that uses the arts to tackle social problems.

The group had a NSW government grant to address binge drinking by the young. It decided to start a community conversation about alcohol that involved all age groups. It called the campaign Just One Less.

"We were not telling people to stop drinking but to think of having just one less," McConville said.

The group converted a horse float into a mobile video booth.

## iPad See what people revealed in the video interviews

and over a few weeks took it to different parts of Armidale – to the main mall, the campus at the University of New England, and to schools, and left it outside a cafe and a live music venue.

People entered out of curiosity, pressed a button and poured their hearts out.

"A lot of people talked about their parents' drinking and the impact on their lives growing up," McConville said.

Anna Cater, the project's artistic director, edited the stories down to the most poignant 100 and then got permission from 12 people to put

their portraits and a snippet of their monologue onto individual posters. The giant posters have been plastered around Armidale as part of a multi-faceted approach that has also included high school students making their own movies about alcohol.

"After 30 years as a journalist and filmmaker, I was shocked that when you took away the interviewer how confessional people became in that booth," she said.

The final event happens on July 1 and July 2, when the project will be given back to the people. A projection artist, Craig Walsh, who works with the Museum of Contemporary Art, will screen an audio/visual work using 100 of the stories on the back of the grandstand at the Armidale swimming pool.

McConville says the project has increased awareness about alcohol's harmful effects.

"It certainly has started a conversation," she said.

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## Minna Jean Lethbridge

It's a filler in my life. It rounds out the edges and I use it for all the wrong reasons. It numbs what you don't want to feel and provides you with a false sense of security and self. I have learnt how to use it in this way by observing adults throughout my childhood. For my family it plays much the same role as me. But it's also an absolute depressant and brings a lot of sadness. It destroys trust, happiness, your sense of self and connections with others. You can't actually have a relationship with anyone else but alcohol. But the fact is, despite all this, it's so socially acceptable.

**Tell us about the role of alcohol in your life and your family and friends ... Minna Lethbridge recording her interview in the booth.**

Photos: Angus Mordant and Polly Armstrong

## Keenan Hillard

I've drunk probably from the age of 15; I am currently 21. [I'm] probably drunk every weekend, maybe bar a few since that time. Probably anything [that] has gone bad in my life in a dramatic way could be related to alcohol ... I have a few friends who are very heavy drinkers. I tend to drink more when I am around them. On the other hand, I also have friends who can drink moderately ... I crashed a car in '08 when I first got my licence when I was drunk; now I am in a lot of debt due to that. I ended up in hospital one night, lost a girlfriend; things like that tend

to be all related to alcohol. It's had a lot of positive but mostly negatives in major ways.



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### Kate Coward

I grew up believing alcohol was necessary to have a good time ... and I didn't question that until I had children. I realised that I was role-modelling drinking by having alcohol in the house and drinking every day. It was always something I was going to give up tomorrow and it took years before I finally made the decision this is not what I wanted. After I got to Day 3 it got easier. I had to change the whole pattern of the evening. I found I was doing more interesting things of a night. I was less tired in the morning. I still drink ... probably two days a week. I now realise what a problem alcohol is, especially for my age group who think that drinking every day is normal.



### Rani Gale-Driscall

My dad doesn't drink at all ... won't have alcohol beverages in our house ... He knows that young people drink a lot. I never used to drink that much ... I could go easily without alcohol and I know that I have an addictive personality so that's why I try to keep away from it, but it's hard at college. It's also hard because you don't have as much fun when you're not drunk which is bad. I know.



### Corey Kelly

Everyone around me drinks alcohol but me. I never understood the concept of drinking alcohol. I see them as party animals, who are only good for drinking. I want to get away from this town because of alcohol. I feel like nothing I do here will ever be good enough because I don't drink. I wish one day to make something of my life. A totally non alcoholic existence.



### Kurt Durbridge

Alcohol in my life is probably, maybe not a major part but certainly an enjoyable part. Good things can occur from it, like [you] get to meet hot chicks, get to go to the pub with your mates, run amok and have some fun. But on the flipside there's a fair few consequences, you can get busted by the cops drink driving or getting in trouble or just get in a fight.