



RECLAIMED VOICES.

DOCUMENTARY
EVALUATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reclaimed Voices began as a project that dared to assert a new perspective on the narrative that for years has dominated public discourse around the issue of youth crime. While South Sudanese-Australian young people remain the focal point of critique, for too long their voices have been side-lined while those of legacy media, politicians, community leaders and other commentators wield a monopoly on policy and legal responses.

Youth crime creates deep wounds for victims, perpetrators, families and our community at large. *Reclaimed Voices* is anchored by the weight of this reality. Its producers, five young people who grew up in the outer western suburb of Melton, Victoria, have been deeply affected by the prevalence of youth crime in their local community. They recognise that many young people entrapped in youth crime are often victims of trauma and systemic barriers themselves. We hope that through the medium of story-sharing and community-building, that *Reclaimed Voices* acts as a beacon of hope for these young people. We envision *Reclaimed Voices* as breaking cycles of despair and pain, and setting into motion new cycles of transformation and flourishing.

We are humbled by the reception of *Reclaimed Voices* by the Victorian community. At the time of writing, the documentary has been shared in over a dozen community and private screenings, reaching thousands of people. The movement we aimed to spark has truly ignited and is being carried forward by those who believe in our work and the power of bold, youth-led storytelling. This evaluation highlights that *Reclaimed Voices* has provided a critical platform for victims and young people with lived experience of the criminal justice system alike to be heard and understood. It has supported improved understandings of the complex root causes and drivers of youth offending and, importantly, brokered relationships between government, private and public organisations, communities and young people needed to form sustainable solutions.

We are immensely grateful for the generous support offered by Mark Yin over many months to create this evaluation report and allow us the opportunity to highlight and share the impact of *Reclaimed Voices*. We look forward to continuing this important work alongside you.

Robiel Abraham
CEO, ASPYA Foundation



ASPYA Foundation Board: Abak Dhieu, Malou Lueth, Robiel Abraham, Aken Angok, Sobur Dhieu.

Aspiring Young Africans Foundation (ASPYA Foundation) is a youth-led charity that was born out of the tragedy of youth violence. First established as the African Youth Initiative (AYI) in 2020, its founding members, Robiel Abraham, Malou Lueth, Sobur Dhieu, Abak Dhieu and Aken Angok mobilised in the weeks following the stabbing death of their childhood friend, Machar Kot.

Harnessing the largely untapped power of youth action, ASPYA Foundation was determined to disrupt cycles of disadvantage and disengagement contributing to increased antisocial behaviour in young people. Its journey started with running local sports and wellbeing programs and has since evolved to a full-service organisation offering school workshops, leadership programs for women and girls, weekly mentoring and case management support for young people at risk or engaged in youth justice across the western suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. ASPYA Foundation also proudly hosts and sponsors community events and cultural programs and partners with research institutions to drive better outcomes for young people.

ABOUT RECLAIMED VOICES



Reclaimed Voices is a powerful documentary produced by ASPYA Foundation in 2024. The film follows the transformative journey of Sabir Banek, a South Sudanese-Australian young man with lived experience of the criminal justice system in Melbourne.

Reclaimed Voices aims to expose the negative impact of recent media coverage on the South Sudanese-Australian community which has given rise to vilification and racialised policy debates on youth justice. By sharing authentic stories of grief, loss and redemption, the project aims to displace these harmful stereotypes whilst contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by the community and solutions to complex issues driving youth justice.

Sabir's story highlights both the cost of crime and the rehabilitative effect of faith, meaningful employment, positive peer influences and the support offered by community organisations following incarceration. *Reclaimed Voices* is intended to be more than a film, but a movement to 'reclaim' narratives and showcase the strength and potential within communities. It aims to foster understanding and bring a new perspective to reform in youth justice prevention and rehabilitation efforts.

EVALUATION & METHODOLOGY

ASPYA Foundation partnered with Mark Yin, a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, to complete this evaluation. The evaluation addresses the following questions, which we developed together:

- 1 What were the main impacts or messages of the film, including emotions invoked, in different audience groups?**
- 2 What role does collective storytelling play in intercultural settings?**
- 3 How can faith-based approaches be utilised in effectively rehabilitating young people?**
- 4 As a collaboration between a grassroots community organisation and governmental organisations, what facilitated or hindered the film's success?**

The evaluation then involved a mixed methods survey of audience members (n=21), which included asking respondents for their age (25+ or under 25/'young') and whether or not they had an African-Australian background. This was to capture different responses among different audience groups. Just over half the audience members surveyed were young (52.4%) and most were also African-Australian (61.9%).

The evaluation also involved interviews with cast and crew (n=4), and with people who planned screenings for their organisation (n=4). Interviews were designed collaboratively and then conducted by Mark and Masters of Social Work students on placement at ASPYA Foundation. We also held a workshop to discuss emergent findings, which also fed into this report.

FINDINGS

1. What were the main impacts or messages of the film, including emotions invoked, in different audience groups?

According to cast and crew members, the film sought to both acknowledge and challenge harmful media stereotypes which position young African-Australians as dangerous or criminal.

The media has given one voice to the story, and that's the fact that we're criminals, and that's it, you know. So Reclaimed Voices allows us to take back and to have ownership over our story. (Sobur)

Redemption. That it doesn't matter how far you've gone off, or how bad you think you are, you can be redeemed, and it's like, you're never too far gone. (Sabir)

Challenging these stereotypes in this way means the film's central message is one of potential and hope.

Emotional responses to this message were therefore central to its impact. The film elicited a mix of emotions from audience members: in the survey, the three most commonly selected emotional responses were positive ('hopeful', 'inspired', 'joyful'), but the next most common choice was 'sad'. One person added 'outraged when the media parts were played'. Survey respondents also said:

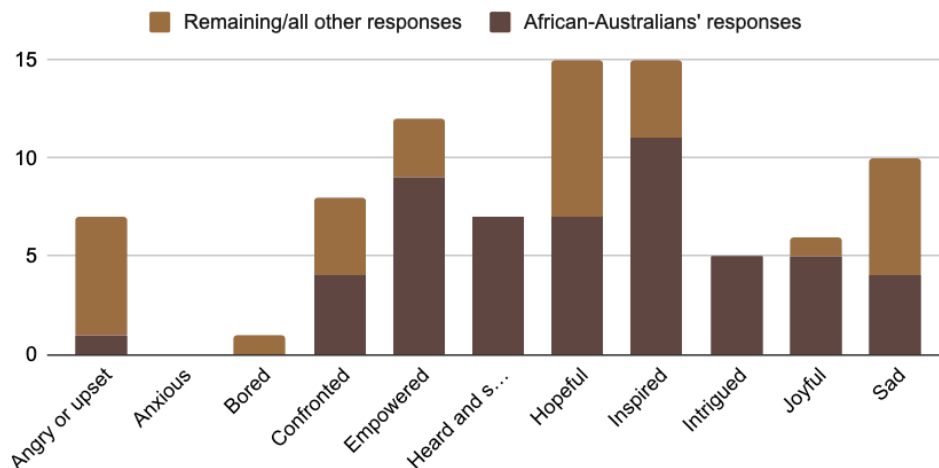
I expected the film to be very confronting but also uplifting about African youth crime for anyone involved directly or indirectly. (African-Australian under 25)

It was both distressing and moving to watch the film. (25+ non African-Australian)

A lot of mixed emotions due to the nature of the story. I saw a young person who fell through the cracks and found his way back from what could have been a long journey in crime and the prison system. I felt empowered to rise and contribute to change. (25+ African-Australian)

This range of responses aligns with the overall aims of the film.

It was noteworthy that African-Australian audience members tended to have more positive responses. They were more likely to have felt ‘empowered’, ‘inspired’ or ‘joyful’ than other viewers, and they were the only viewers who felt ‘heard and seen’.



This may be because, although parts of the film were sombre, there was an overarching sense of pride at being represented by someone from the community.

*Great to see someone who looks like you share their story of transformation.
(Young African-Australian survey respondent)*

*Seeing people from my own background up there telling their truth hit different.
(Young African-Australian survey respondent)*

There were moments where I felt (pause) I felt hurt. I felt excited. I also felt emotional at some points, because there were some really sad realities touched on, which we obviously have to face. I also felt proud for the overall thing that we have such a major thing coming out for us, for our community... proud was the main thing I felt. (African-Australian screening organiser)

Non African-Australian audiences still had positive responses to the film, but these were bound up in feelings of sadness or upset – perhaps because they are still learning about the depth of tragedy, hardship and necessary resilience within the African-Australian community.

A little bit overwhelmed at the depth of trauma and the depth of loss and grief that just seems to be in the South Sudanese community. (Non African-Australian screening organiser)

Great to see young people telling their own story. (Non African-Australian survey respondent, 25+)

(Summarising the main message of the film) Look what our community can achieve if we're not limited to our stereotypes. (Non African-Australian screening organiser)

Some screening organisers also shared positive impacts relating to their work, for example;

The documentary would have also given me a different perspective onto the needs of young people and their families and how to best address that. (African-Australian screening organiser)

I think when Sabir talked about, that really his turning point was that one person offering him a lift, I think that that was really powerful in just proving that showing compassion is extremely powerful.. I think that that's what our staff took with them in our service to our community as well. We have a lot of people that are experiencing quite a lot when they come to use our services... so just proving that, you know, showing compassion can really go a long way. (Non African-Australian screening organiser)



2. What role does collective storytelling play in intercultural settings?

As a storytelling project, *Reclaimed Voices* sought to bring a diverse audience along on the cast and crew's journey.

Everyone, everyone needs to receive this message, whether you're in the community, outside of the community, any sector. (Robiel)

Everyone and anyone who can hear, let 'em hear it. (Sabir)

That the film had the impact it did across different audience groups speaks to this intercultural dimension. Hearing young African-Australians' own stories from outside that community was described as a positive learning experience:

I think that the staff that did attend got a lot out of it as well, because it was just a different point of view and a different voice. (Non African-Australian screening organiser)

This had an especially noticeable impact when the film was screened in a setting where this intercultural dimension could be visible. One screening, for example, was held at a library, and the organiser described the impact of seeing young African-Australians in that space at a time when young CALD people are using libraries less and less:

It was a celebration of having so many people from that culture in our spaces, instead of like, well, why is there so many people from a different community, you know? (Non African-Australian screening organiser)

When asked about suggestions for future projects, many people suggested storytelling across cultures and communities. This was because of the potential for intercultural dialogue to highlight shared experiences, broach new stories, and challenge stereotypes that other communities may be facing:

I would also love to see stories of young women who experience the justice system. (Non African-Australian survey respondent, 25+)

A lot of these, I guess, stereotypes or things that we see in the media, yes, they apply a lot to us, but we believe they also apply to First Nations people and other marginalised or minority communities. And if we're living in a society that is as diverse as Australia, we have to have awareness of other people's experiences. So that's why I believe Reclaimed Voices is for everyone. (Robiel)

If different communities had something like this, touching on issues in their community could help bring light between the communities so we can have an understanding and more truth on what happens, why things happen, what we can do to fix them. (African-Australian screening organiser)



Lander & Rogers screening, September 2024

3. How can faith-based approaches be utilised in effectively rehabilitating young people?

One of the major themes of the film was the role of faith in rehabilitating young people and helping communities recover from tragedy. This was understood as a novel theme for the film to cover, for example a non African-Australian screening organiser said:

I don't know if in the justice system, there's an acknowledgement of faith and spirituality. I don't know much about that. [But] in the justice system, there's a need for them to, because we all have a spiritual being.

This was one of the reasons why some African-Australian professionals sought to organise a screening for their – multicultural and secular, it is implied – workplace:

As a team, we're always moving towards being culturally understanding, and I think this was like another way to build on that.. us being like a governmental organisation, we never really touch on different religions as much, just because it would be hard to keep up between all of them, but... we gained a lot of understanding around it.

This learning was echoed by non African-Australian survey respondents, and in one case produced a slightly negative emotional response. One respondent, who indicated they felt bored (among other emotions) by the documentary, said:

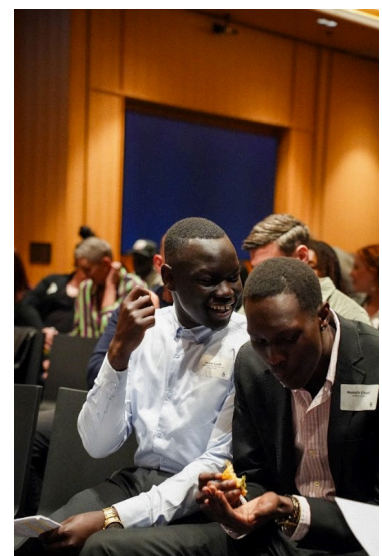
I did not realise faith was so important to some young people I was a bit disappointed that the film featured so much about the role of faith in rehabilitation as I couldn't relate to that part.

This response, however, shows that faith in the film – even if not relatable to all audiences – can still provide a point of learning. Faith was of course central to Sabir's story and his rehabilitation, but ASPYA Foundation also acknowledged that his is just one of many possible stories.

My main goal, my main objective, is to let people know.. who Christ is and what he's done in my life (Sabir)

ASPYA FOUNDATION

We didn't [set out to] emphasise the faith-based intervention. That was part of Sabir's story. It was open to him to emphasise. Sabir's story is so shaped by a lack of faith in his life and a lack of direction and trauma, and then finding his faith as being the anchor point in his transformation. I think he was looking at it from a very spiritual lens. (Robiel)



4. As a collaboration between a grassroots community organisation and governmental organisations, what facilitated or hindered the film's success?

A key factor facilitating the film's success is the emphasis on doing live, hosted screening events with the possibility of discussion (rather than making the documentary publicly available at the outset).

Part of the reason why we're still doing the private screenings... is because we want to be able to control how the documentary is viewed and engage with the audience at that level, instead of just sending out a random link. (Sobur)

This was important not only for ASPYA Foundation to maintain community ownership of the narrative, but also for screening organisers and attendees to see and participate in intercultural dialogue. Multiple screening organisers said the Q&A panel after the screening was a highlight of the event:

[Attendees] really liked the panel that was after, I'll say, where they had the opportunity to ask questions directly to Robiel and Sabir. (African-Australian screening organiser)

Sabir's engagement with the young people as well.. It was just, wow, that's the best way I can describe it because a lot of them, a lot of them were like, can I get an autograph from him or can we work with him more (African-Australian screening organiser)

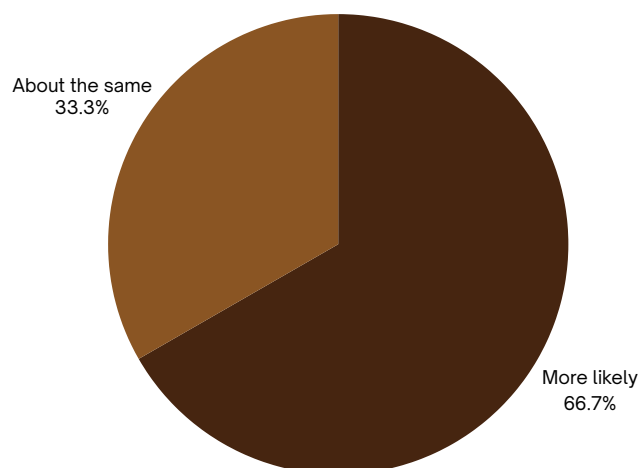
This screening organiser also expressed a desire for more workers to attend screenings like this, to be able to see how community members might engage with a film like *Reclaimed Voices*.

I think I'd probably want more service providers [to have attended our screening]. We didn't really advertise it out to service providers much, because we really wanted it to be community members attending, but I think in hindsight, um, I think it's a great thing to have... service providers, especially those that we collaborate with, to be in the room. To not only experience the film for themselves but also see the impact that it's having on those that are present. (African-Australian screening organiser)

Beyond the liveness of the events, screening organisers also raised ASPYA Foundation's professional reputation and social media profile as helpful – both to find out about the documentary and organise the screening.

I found out about Reclaimed Voices through some of the work that we've done with ASPYA Foundation (in the past) and also through their Instagram, socials, so the advertising and marketing they did for the sessions. (African-Australian screening organiser)

These factors are reflected in the survey result that two thirds of audience members felt more likely to seek out community organisations for partnerships after seeing the film.



And from ASPYA Foundation's perspective, what made the collaboration successful was the freedom to make an authentic story, without significant restrictions from funders or organisers.

We were actually very bold and confident in what we believe, and it's because we think that our message isn't contrary to that funding. (Marc)

They (the funders) were excited to see what the genuine stories would be. (Robiel)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Brimbank City Council
- City of Melbourne
- City of Melton Libraries
- City of Melton Young Communities
- Commission for Children and Young People
- Djerriwarrh Community College
- Grace Community Church
- Infrastructure Advisory Group (IAG)
- Jesuit Social Services
- Lander & Rogers
- Melton Christian College
- Melton City Council
- Neighbourhood Justice Centre
- River Nile School
- St Francis Catholic College
- Staines Memorial College
- Stary Norton Halphen
- Wyndham Youth Services

CONNECT WITH US

if you're interested in supporting the work of *Reclaimed Voices* or learning more about ASPYA Foundation, you can contact us below:



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