From all sides podcast transcript

Episode 21, Elissa Scott, CEO Blue Light Victoria

Speaker Key:

IV Tom Craven, Director of Cube Group

IE Elissa Scott, CEO Blue Light Victoria

Episode Transcript

IV Hello, it's been a while since we've released a podcast, but I promise you it's worth the wait. For this next series, we're moving towards talking to organisations that work across boundaries, across silos, across portfolios, and work with different partners to create new opportunities and new ways of realising public value. And we've got a great person to kick us off. Today I'm talking with Elissa Scott, who is the CEO of Blue Light.

IE We have to be really clear about that shifting direction, that we want to honour our history, but we really want to make sure that we are relevant and moving with what the needs of young people are today.

IV Blue Light is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation that works to shape the lives of young people and to strengthen their participation in communities. They're run in local communities right across Victoria, each made up of their own independent branch, but with close partnerships with the wider Blue Light network, and with Victoria Police and other local community members. We're delighted to have Elissa Scott with us today.

IE Pleasure, thanks Tom for having me.

IV Where are you speaking to us from? What is your hybrid working life like? How are you finding the new normal?

IE Today, it is very much hybrid. I'm working from home. And generally, that's fantastic, because all of my family are not around. Today, we have my husband working from home, and also my son doing some online learning. It's always a tricky space to navigate who's going to sit where and how that's going to work. But we've just made that work over the course of the pandemic, which has been great. Now it's fantastic to be able to have that mix where it's a bit of time in the office, and then a bit of time at home. I find certainly at home generally; I can have time to do more of that dedicated thinking work. So, it's been good.

IV Let's talk about Blue Light. Blue Light is a pretty small organisation, but you are very well known. I know in this operation for this conversation, I was remembering my childhood in the 90s Blue Light discos in Wangaratta. I also had the embarrassment of recognising that that doesn't reflect much of what Blue Light is today. Why don't you start with telling us a bit about Blue Light, where you've come from and where you’re headed?

IE Blue Light was founded back in the 1970s, so 1976. And it was founded by Victoria Police. And it was a group of police officers out at Mooroolbark, who were really keen around youth engagement, but providing a drug and alcohol-free space for young people and so, they created the discos. What then happened from certainly the first disco is, we saw that these discos were rolled out across the state. In any one year, up to about 20,000 young people or more were actually attending these discos. It was this amazing – it became basically an iconic Victorian event, I suppose.

For all of us who are probably in our 40s or 50s or 60s and maybe 70s. We've had probably some connection to Blue Light Discos. Jump forward a number of years and about 15 years ago, Victoria Police and Blue Light entity became separate. Blue Light has been its own independent charity since about then. Blue Light now looks for its funding in a whole array of areas. Victoria Police no longer fund Blue Light. And so very much, Blue Light is its own standalone charity.

We have really morphed and become more than just a disco organisation. And probably that should be our tagline, ‘we're more than just discos.’ Over the last 15 years, we have been really dedicated to looking at what else young people are wanting and needing in this space. It looks at engagement. And so, we have been looking at working with young people in an array of activities based from in schools’ programs, to events and activities that might be skate days, or creative arts or social enterprises or camps. There’s a whole array of things.

Blue Light today looks like 24 branches across the state, all the way down to Portland and out to Bairnsdale up to Mildura. They have dedicated volunteers overseeing each of those branches. Some Victoria Police members are also involved in those branches, but otherwise it's also members of the community.

And then we have a state office. So, that's what I'm CEO of and we have a number of paid staff. We are the ones generally responsible for running the in-schools programs. We have two really big in-school programs that we run. One is a Year 7 to 9 program called Blue EDGE. And we're in about 15 to 16 schools this term. And the other program is called DASH. And that is a program for Years 5 and 6 students.

We've just been successful in securing some federal government funding to roll that out into the North Western part of the state. Very much moved from that disco history, to working with young people in new and creative ways. But still in a good year that's not COVID impacted, probably assisting about 20,000 young people. It's a great state wide organisation that has the potential to have huge positive impact.

IV I imagine lots of organisations would kill for instant brand recognition like Blue Light. Just reflecting on the story you've just told, it's probably a mixed blessing for you shaking the, tell us about the experience of having such a strong brand but actually something that perhaps is dated or not where you need to be in the future?

IE Yes, it's a really good point. I think we have got this amazing heritage and we really want to honour that heritage. As you said, so many people just know us. But they know us as being about discos. And they know us as being almost partners and being run by Victoria Police. What does that mean for us now moving forward? Well, it's a couple of things. One is to ensure that we get our communication and our public relations right around, we are more than discos because a lot of young people aren't really into discos these days.

We know that we run discos in some of our country locations, because they don't have access to those type of things. It probably only makes up about 5 to 7% of our work. Looking at how is it then that we shift our brand to be more recognisable for young people today, because it's been a while since I've been a young person, so I might recognise the logo and know what that might mean. But young people today will not have any clue about our history in discos, and the types of engagement work that we've done.

We do need to be really conscious about that, because we are an organisation for young people. The other thing that our history does is this; people make assumptions about where we get funding from. And that can be really complex for us, because people assume that we get funding from Victoria Police and we don't. People might assume that we get funding and base funding from perhaps areas of government that we just don't.

We're like any other not-for-profit. We are chasing money from donors, and sponsors and brands and a whole array of areas so that we can continue to work with our partners, and Victoria Police is still very much a key partner for us. But also, so that we can diversify the people that we work with, and look more to emergency services and other community agencies. We have to be really clear about that shifting direction, that we want to honour our history, but we really want to make sure that we are relevant and moving with what the needs of young people are today.

IV Honouring our past, but sort of look into the future. It's such a common challenge for so many public purpose organisations. What does that look like for you? Where are some of the difficulties and challenges in doing that? Obviously, that history of connection to police. Tell us a bit about how that balance between the honouring and looking into the future, what does that feel like?

IE I think there's a couple of things in it. One is around making sure that we understand our purpose. Who is it that we exist for? I think because we had that deep history in Victoria Police, in fact, we probably were doing things that were more of assistance to police. We were thinking that, that's how we were designing things. Even though we're designing things for young people, we still had police front and centre.

One of the things that we've really focused on as part of our new strategic plan is this, who do we exist for? Is it police or is it young people? And very much the board has determined, we actually exist for young people. If we exist for young people, then there's a nuance in that. There's a nuance in how we communicate that. It means we have to be really thoughtful about how is it that young people want to engage with people like police, or like emergency services or other community agencies?

We have to think about our communication strategy, and how we communicate that out more broadly. And then, where we seek funding from. Perhaps more youth orientated spaces that we might look for funding from, as opposed to some of those historical areas that we've looked at. We're really about engaging young people so that we can increase their protective factors, and protective factors so that they have better mental health and wellbeing and resilience, for example.

If you increase protective factors, then by that very nature, that will help with things like crime prevention, but it's almost a secondary outcome. And so again, I think our initial focus was just on crime prevention, and that is still a big part of the work that we do. It's now through increase in protective factors, so that shifts the way that we think about funding and where we actually look for other people to partner with us and to support us in the work that we're doing.

IV Of course, it goes to your relevance, right? For you to be that critique, for you to address those crime prevention factors, you need to have that relevance and connection. I imagine also, there’s a bit of a journey perhaps for some of your stakeholders, maybe volunteers of the organisation who have heavily invested in the past. How do you go about taking people on that journey?

IE I think we're just beginning to do that, actually. I've been in the role now for 12 months, and you almost need that first 12 months to get the lay of the land, see where things are at. We've just put into place a new strategic plan that Cube helped us with actually, towards the start of the year. Now we're starting to communicate more broadly about that. And where the board has sat in terms of some of the priorities with that, so around diversifying our partners

Again, there's a bit of a shift because a lot of people have just seen as being tied to Victoria Police. It's communicating that police are still a key part of the work that we do. We actually think that we can assist young people in a far bigger way if we start to engage with emergency services, and other community agencies.

We've really been focusing on the communication about that and how we're going to do that, and bringing people along with the journey. So, to talk about too some of the recent research about what young people are wanting, the fact that young people have been really disconnected and isolated as a result of COVID. And what it is that they might need, to be able to feel more connected in community. And at the very heart of what we do, it's around community engagement and connection.

It's great that we can use Victoria Police as role models in that space with young people. We also think if we want young people to be connected, committed to community, we want them to be connected to a whole array of other communities, leaders and community role models as well. So, that's really the story that we're actually starting to push out across not just the state office and the work that we do, but across our branches as well.

IV That's wonderful. And your observations about the challenges for young people of connecting in the past couple of years provides a real opportunity for the Blue Light to be a part of that in a positive way. And now some of, like myself, is still struggling with your earlier comment that young people aren't into disco so much anymore. Turns out the 90s was quite a long time ago.

IE It’s a shock, isn't it, for both of us.

IV Sorry to hear. Let's hope these things come full circle. In the meantime, clearly a big part of your opportunity there, is the voice of young people and hearing from them being led and guided by them. Tell us about some of your thinking about that. What does Blue Light do today, in terms of empowering that voice? What are you thinking about, about other ways to have the voice of young people in your organisation?

IE We've really been trying to, over the last 12 months, strengthen how we obtain and gain feedback from young people. And that at the minute, is actually done via feedback surveys, by focus groups. Not just with young people, actually, but by some of their extended families. So, they might be parents or caregivers. We're having greater conversations with schools, particularly teachers who have been engaged in rolling out some of our Blue EDGE programs.

We're starting to be better at actually collecting that data so that we can interrogate it and really learn that way. One of the things we would love to do is actually have a youth advisory group. We're really passionate around actually using young people and bringing their expertise in paying those young people to actually provide their opinions and their voice to us, because we know that really about youth participation, and doing it in the right way.

We're currently in the process of trying to seek some funding for that. We haven't been successful yet. We're not going to give up, we're going to keep trying because we do think that hearing those voices of young people and having them deeply embedded in our program design is absolutely critical. We also think that young people could have a really strong voice back into Victoria Police, for example, and probably other emergency services too, in that police need to learn as well from young people around what it is to engage with, and what are some of the points of real distress for young people? What are the needs?

If we were to establish a youth advisory group, we think that certainly Victoria Police would benefit from being able to use that voice as well. So, that's something we’re really passionate about. It's in our strategic plan. We're hoping that we'll be able to land that in the next 18 months. For now, we look at using other means to get the voice in. Ultimately, that's where we want to move to.

IV We've had previous conversations with this podcast with, you might remember our conversations with Liana Buchanan, Commissioner for Children and Young People, and just the power of young people articulating for themselves what they need from those services. And just the insight, the maturity and the power of that. It's a very powerful thing. How have you found that so far through the methods that you've currently got? The surveys, feedback, other ways in focus groups. How have you seen that voice in what you're doing?

IE We've certainly proved in our ability to capture that. We've got a bit of a way to go, if I'm honest. We know that there's so many amazing stories out there from young people, whether that's stories of them going through our programs and what they've learned and what they've achieved as a result, or just listening to what else is actually impacting them in their local community.

The beauty of the Blue Light model is this, we have the 24 branches across the state. It's place-based, and therefore it's not just someone from Melbourne going, ‘We think this is going to work. You can roll that out in regional Victoria and that's going to be amazing.’ It's actually people in those local areas telling us what they need. We're learning more about that from our branches as well. And branches are speaking with the people that are involved in their different programs. And trying to capture that and then think about how we can implement that as part of our program designs.

Ultimately, we'd love to be doing more formalised co-design with young people, when it comes to programs. We're not quite ready yet. It's because primarily, we just haven’t got the resources internally to be doing more of that. As I said, it's in our strat plan. We're really keen to move to that space because we want to increase the level of youth participation. Not just the fact that young people are accessing our programs, but actually we've co-designed that with them so that it's meeting their needs out in those different places where we have our branches, and also in the schools that we're servicing across the local areas, certainly metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

IV I wonder if I can shift gears a little bit now, and talk a bit about more about you as an organisation. You mentioned earlier, something like 20,000 kids involved in your program. 24 branches across the state for what is a pretty small org on paper, at least, a pretty small organisation.

I imagine a big part of your story is partnerships. I'd love to hear some reflections on that, particularly I'm thinking about what it's like for a relatively small organisation, at least in a funding sense, but obviously not in terms of footprint and impact. What's been the experience of Blue Light and your partnerships? Who are your key partners? How do you go about leveraging those resources for such a large impact, for such a small organisation?

IE I think partners are absolutely critical and key. Again, that's reflected in our strategic plan. We need to strengthen who we are partnering with, and really work together in terms of some of our initiatives One of our key partners is Victoria Police. We’ve had a really long association. We're talking over 45 years now. And Victoria Police are a really big organisation. And you're right, Tom, we've only got a couple of paid staff at Blue Light.

Then you've got police who have got thousands upon thousands of members across the state. It's interesting, and it can be challenging at times. The great thing about Blue Light it's small, it can be agile, it's in the not-for-profit space. If you created an interview, something like Victoria Police, there's lots and lots of different layers. And layers of decision making and approval.

It's actually remembering that you need to be diligent about going back into all those different layers and having multiple conversations before you can actually probably get traction and with where you need to go. We're very fortunate that we have the Chief Commissioner as our patron of Blue Light, so that's been fantastic. He's very supportive of Blue Light and the things that we're rolling out.

If we're running a program in Mildura, for example, the chief may know about that, and think that is fantastic. We need to go down through all the other levels to make sure that operationally, we can have some police involved in, for example, our Blue EDGE program, which means that they need to be involved for a couple of times a week. So that can be challenging because police have got millions of different priorities. They need to uphold the law clearly and provide different resourcing on the ground operationally. So, that can impact on whether we can actually roll out a program on any one day or not.

It's around how do we hold the Blue Light priorities, in the same way that Victoria Police want to hold them. We have to have lots of conversations. We need to have lots of conversations, at lots of different levels. We're really fortunate in that we have a number of people on our board who are either serving or previous serving Victorian Police members. So, that helps us as well because it means that we can ask questions about who actually we'll be talking to about here, or where's another part of Victoria Police that needs to help us be involved or who else could help leverage us into this space?

So that's been really, really beneficial for us. I think that long history again, also helps us. We also know that police members themselves think that we do lots of discos and not so much of the other work. There is a piece for us there again, around that communications and PR so that everybody's on the same page. The other thing about working with partners like Victoria Police is this; our programs clearly benefit young people. We know that through the evidence. We know that through our evaluations. They also have a really big value for Victoria Police members.

I think what happens with police is that, they work in the most critical of spaces. They've been called into crisis upon crisis. And that's really hard work. If they become involved in our programs, and they're working in a positive sense with young people, it can really help their mental health as well. It gives him a different perspective on young people around the absolute amazing abilities of young people and their wealth of knowledge in a whole lot of different ways as well.

We know from the police members who have been involved in our programs, that has been incredibly beneficial for them. And has allowed young people to see them in a different light. Also just has provided a little bit more balance from continually dealing in that crisis spot day in, day out. They're a key partner and some of those messages, we are keen to roll out more broadly to some of our other partners because we think there's benefits for young people and also those frontline staff to try and help balance some of that really hard work that they that they face.

We are looking at diversifying from just working primarily with Victoria Police, to broadening who else we work with in emergency services. We're rolling out our DASH program in the North Western part of the state, starting in Term 4. If I think about that program, we're looking at working with people like Parks Victoria, ESTA, CFA, SES, DELWP.

There's a whole lot of people that we can actually start to partner with in different and creative ways. So, that's fantastic for young people, because they really get to see other members of their community and different roles that they can be involved in, and really learn from their wisdom as well. For us, it's around strengthening some of those relationships and some of those partnerships so that they can be of benefit to young people.

So, that's a new space for us to be in. We've always been very wedded to Victoria Police. We will want to continue to have a strong relationship with Victorian Police, but diversify and use some new and different partners as well, so that we can really engage them with young people.

IV For you to working with young people, and particularly improving young people's opportunities to engage with services, you mentioned crime prevention. But so many organisations have a have a stake in the welfare of young people. Our education system, our health system, our justice system. There are so many overlapping beneficiaries, if we think about it that way, of the work that you do and the and the overlap that you do.

How have you gone about partnering with those wider group of stakeholders? I know that conversation we had a moment ago is probably looming in the background of they’re Victoria Police. And that history and legacy. But also, there's a story there about recognising the joint benefit, the joint interests, the joint beneficiaries from the kind of work that you do. How have you found that? What sort of things do you do to help your partners see the joint interest and therefore the opportunity for joint activity and joint investment?

IE It's a good question, because it can be actually a little bit tricky. The niche for blue light is this; we work in the early intervention and prevention space. Sometimes it takes a while before you might see the actual social impact of our work. How do you sell that back to your partners? What we do is now because we've been around for such a long period of time, we draw on our history and we say, back when we did x, this is what we actually found. And guess what? Our evidence shows that even through to this date, that is still of benefit to these young people.

What we know about Blue EDGE is that we evaluated that back in 2020. We then did some longitudinal work looking at the impact for young people. What we know is, even six to 12 months after being involved in a Blue EDGE program, for example, that those benefits are still apparent to young people. So, that's what the message is back out to our partners. It may not be as readily easily for you to see that right now. But actually, this is what the evidence shows us.

We know, for example, with Blue EDGE, that we've got young people who are far more engaged in school, once they've done one of our programs than they were at any point in time prior to being involved in that. Look, the partners who we were working with in our programs can see the progression for a young person over that over the term of that program.

It is the longer-term impact that actually we're really interested in capturing, in terms of the social impact that for us is still a work progress because of that early intervention space. And around creating protective factors that will then allow somebody to transition through those really critical years of being a young person, and hopefully to be able to make some wiser and smarter choices along the way.

IV You’re a small organisation. You mentioned being quite nimble and responsive. And the opportunities that come along with that. A lot of your partners may be less so. Victoria Police very big organisation. Quite procedural, quite legislative. And you mentioned schools also, can be often quite procedure and less nimble. I'm sure local government is part of that story as well. Have you got any experience or wisdom you can share with folks about how you go about as a small organisation engaging with some of these bigger, more conservative or bigger organisations? What's that experience been like for Blue Light? Any wisdom you can share there?

IE I think one of the most powerful things that we've been able to do is actually share young people's stories. If you can actually sit and hear young people or a young person talk about what they have gained from their experience with Blue Light, then that is incredibly powerful. We had a situation earlier this year where we had a young person's story captured, that was essentially he had been involved in Blue Light, and one of the local Blue Light branches for quite a number of years.

He had been disengaged with school. He had been very much, probably starting to make some choices that weren't in his best interests, became involved in a Blue Light branch, did a number of Blue Light activities. The support from that local Blue Light branch to help him get his licence, to get work. Now we've got a young person who is working full time, who's in the disability support service area, and he's had this amazing story.

He would have otherwise probably have been a young person that would have come to the attention of police in a different way, who probably would have taken a very different path. You can see that that actually starts to resonate, with people in big organisations that you want to partner with, because they’ve able to grasp that story and go, wow, that's the impact. And that's a long-term impact that Blue Light can have because of the way that we're structured.

So really, that's very much what we're focused on capturing, some of those amazing stories that come out across the state. And actually, really feeding them back into those organisations that we partner with. Organisations that we're really keen to partner with to say, this is what you can be part of. One of the other partners that we're really focused on is actually in the corporate space.

Looking for corporate, or businesses that are keen to partner with us to say, if you volunteer some of your time, this is impact that you can also have with a young person. This is the impact that, that young person might also have on you in terms of your learnings about community and how they see things. It's around connection to story. And its connections to those stories of hope and transformation, I think, that always land really well with partners. Doing more communications, from our point of view in terms of what our purpose is, how we get there, sharing our evaluation results. There's a whole lot of different things that we're trying at this point in time, to really get that message across about impact.

IV I wonder if I could shift to talking a bit about you now and your experiences. As a leader, you're in an exclusive club of people who took on significant leadership roles during a global pandemic, so congratulations. Tell us a bit about your experience coming in. I’d be interested in that story around, what's it like to join a new organisation in a period such as this. But also, the change that is reflected for you, coming into a CEO of a small organisation and share us a bit of your journey.

IE Perhaps I'll start even earlier with a little bit about my background. I started my career as a Social Worker, and had done a little bit of work in the not-for-profit space when I was a Social Worker. Then joined somewhat the dark side and became a Criminal Lawyer and worked in the criminal law space for a long period of time, working at Legal Aid. Then transitioning across to the Magistrate's Court in some leadership roles there.

I was at the Magistrate's Court when the pandemic hit. I was actually in the CEO role as an acting CEO at that point in time, while they were recruiting for a CEO. I sat in that space in courts for about eight months. And learned a lot around leadership in a pandemic. Had been thinking about prior to being asked to take on that role, moving actually back into the not-for-profit space.

It was great when that was over, being able to transition into something like Blue Light. I brought some of my learnings across from the court in terms of leadership, and leading in a pandemic into Blue Light. What I will say is, I think a smaller organisation is far better placed at being able to be more agile and flexible during a pandemic, because working in courts, courts are big. They're based on some archaic kind of processes. It was really hard. It was a hard space to be in, to try and move everything online.

Then I came across the Blue Light and just went, wow. I actually think that, it's been a really tough gig for a number of our staff who've been overseeing programs that are in-school. And of course, schools have all gone onto online learning and our programs work better if it's face to face, or what does that look like? The resilience, the tenacity that I saw still within Blue Light, despite the impacts of the pandemic was actually remarkable. For me, I was really buoyed by that. And to go, here is a group of people who have just continually worked, and to make it work in a really hard space.

IV I suppose another big change for you is moving from within a large organisation, where you were working for and advocating for policy change and improvements, moving into a role as a not-for-profit, and a leader of service movement, and a provider of programs and services. Tell us about that shift for you too, that shift in the nature of your role. And the way that you need to interact with some of these bigger services and systems?

IE Coming from the courts. When I was in the acting CEO role there, which probably had 1200 staff that I've had responsibility for. And moving into Blue Light, there was a small team of about four paid staff at the time. It felt really unusual and a little bit strange when I first moved in going, hang on a minute. I don't have anyone who can just do that for me. I need to do that for myself. I need to be thinking that through differently. But I actually have really loved it, because what it's required is to continually be able to shift between the operational and the strategic.

We've grown and developed. We now have far more paid staff than when I first arrived. But it's that continual being able to shift between the operational and strategic. I very much enjoyed that. When I was at courts and other areas of my career, generally your funding is set. You’re still advocating for new initiatives as part of your funding. But there's a whole lot of baseline funding, that is there that covers your operations. That's very, very different to the not-for-profit space. What it's required me to do is to use my transferable skills from what I've learned in leadership in the legal sector, and bring it into the not-for-profit space in a different way for advocacy.

It's almost moved from previously advocate for people in court and held those roles. And now it's around advocating for an organisation, and why people should actually partner with us. And why they might like to fund us to do certain initiatives. It's still using the advocacy schools. But actually, it's also around positioning and probably selling almost what it is that we do now in the not-for-profit space, so that people also capture those visions and capture what our vision is and go, yes, we want to be part of this. This sounds really interesting.

We think that there's real benefit in that for the community. I'm continually advocating for funding, looking for where we're going to get the next dollar from for grants and looking at who else we can partner with in terms of corporate sponsors or philanthropy or business. And that is a very different move for me. And it does require some different skills. It requires you to be able to still have those conversations that are based in integrity, but you know that you’re also needing to be asking for possibly some donors to come and sponsor you.

Whereas previously, I wouldn't have needed to do that. It would just be around a policy position. So, that has been a shift. At times, it's felt uncomfortable because it's new and different. And I still think I'm working on that. I think there's a bit of room for me to even improve in how I do that. It has certainly been, it's been great I've had that advocacy background so that I've been able to bring that in. But I think I can still do better at it.

IV Our guest today has been Elissa Scott from Blue Light. Elissa, thanks so much for being part of this conversation.

IE It's been a pleasure, Tom. Thanks for having me.

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