

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned
that this thesis may contain images of deceased people.**

Chapter 2

Participants' Stories

Introduction to Participants' Stories

Participants' stories are a contemporary account of Aboriginal cultural survival. It is understood that the interview process generally places the stories of others' into an appendices but my agreement with participants' is for their stories to be seen in the main body of my work. This has been backed by official documentation with the Ethics Board of Newcastle University in the form of a signed declaration (12 June 2003), to accept the stories into the main body of the project within a chapter without analysis.

"The information in the written 'section' or 'chapter' from participants will not be analysed or interpreted by the researcher. The idea is to listen to what is being said. The interview "... text is used to display the data rather than analyse....." it (Lather, 1992:95¹)."²

"...the participant, maintain the copyright to the interview information within a chapter."³

The placement of these stories within the main body of the text is very important to this project. These stories are not subsidiary additions and to place participants' stories as an 'appendix'⁴ could be interpreted as marginalizing contemporary Aboriginal cultural stories. This same concern was highlighted by Julie Marcus⁵ who questions the placement of a work of art by artists Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence called "The Edge of the Trees"⁶. A series of poles represent trees and as you approach, Aboriginal recorded voices can be heard speaking in language. Marcus saw the setting aside of the poles to the entry of the Museum of Sydney, as marginalizing an original culture and suggests the empty space before the Museum

¹ P. Lather. "Critical Frames in Educational Research: Feminist and Post-structural Perspectives". Vol. 31 - No.2 – pp. 87-99. Theory into Practice. 1992 – p.95

² See "Application for Ethics Approval for Research Involving Humans" Section 15 Analysis - Ethics clearance H-606-0703 – July 2003

³ See "Application for Ethics Approval for Research Involving Humans" Invitation statement to Participants (*last page*) Ethics clearance H-606-0703 – July 2003

⁴ Appendix = subsidiary addition... The Concise Oxford Dictionary. 1982-p.41

⁵ Julie Marcus. "Erotics and the Museum of Sydney ": *The Museum of Sydney*". The Olive Pink Society Bulletin. Ed. Julie Marcus. Vol.8 (2) Anthropology, Race, Gender. 1996 – pp.4-8

⁶ Aboriginal Arts and Culture in the City. "Barani Indigenous History of Sydney City" pp.1-4. www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au - p.3

entrance be filled with expanding cultural meaning from “The Edge of the Trees”⁷.

Participants’ stories are the foundation of this project: They are cultural stories of people’s dedication, the enthusiasm was contagious, and the generosity of participants and their willingness to share was overwhelming. The stories arise from social and political issues, and as such generated further research and analysis concerning those social and political issues: This was done without disturbing or contaminating the stories. The methodology of ‘listening’⁸ proved a complicated and difficult task as I began to understand my position in the process and the history surrounding participants’ stories.

My intention was to give a physical presence to the stories as a ‘work of art’ to assure their uncontaminated inclusion in the project (*figure page 6*). This stems from understanding that it is only the ‘seen presence’ of the ‘other person or story or culture’ that changes perception. Participants’ stories are transferred onto white cotton cloth via computer technology, making the stories technically a ‘digital’ experience. A further reason for inclusion into the main body of the text within this exegesis is the adoption of the methodology of Noel Olive⁹ (1997) who brings together local Aboriginal peoples’ stories of the Pilbara area in Northern Western Australia. I found the Pilbara stories a good introduction to the region as the stories provided me with an insight which invited me to make further inquiries. Participants in Won:arua send out a similar invitation to readers of their stories: They became active in the collaborative ‘dialogical’¹⁰ process which is a well known practice in Aboriginal communities through the practice of ‘reciprocity’ and inclusion.

⁷ See chapter four, pages 210-211 of this document

⁸ It was difficult not to directly analyze participants’ stories. To take a step back from what was directly there in writing and ask, ‘why are these organizations needed?’ ‘Why are these stories important?’ This proved an exercise in inclusive sharing.

⁹ Noel Olive. “*Karijini Mirlimirli*” *Aboriginal histories from the Pilbara*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press. 1997

¹⁰ “Dialogical” = Relating to a dialogue. Dialogue = a conversation between two or more people. Dialogical art is an exchange of ideas based in a social process. The art of creative listening can be an extension to a social process. An analysis of ‘Dia-logic’ - Dia = diameter = the longest distance across the inside of a circle to make two halves. Dialogic = the logic of two halves.

Images of the Bayeux Tapestry¹¹ seen below, (*Plates 22 and 23*) are known to the English as the story of the Norman Invasion in 1066. I have used similar measurements to that of the ‘tapestry’ to construct a work of art to display participants’ stories which become connected visually and metaphorically to the images below.

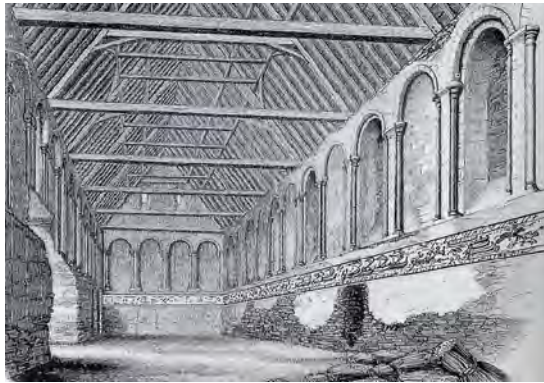


Plate 22 Bayeux Tapestry - Kent¹²



Plate 23 Bayeux Cathedral¹³

Naturally this has to be taken in perspective. The Bayeux Tapestry had many English artisans working on the embroidery at a national level over a ten year period. The tapestry is a story told by the Normans and was derived from the tradition of Roman triumph columns, but the English told their version of the story in the borders of the tapestry which related to the main narrative. Participants’ stories are made into a ‘connected community work’ which is executed by using computer technology transfers on to cloth using a hot iron. Participants’ stories are positive triumphs in the wake of unfair odds (*figure page 6*). As a non-Aboriginal person an awareness of certain Aboriginal protocol has been essential. Ethics clearance¹⁴ was approved for the interviews which are presented here unedited and in full.

¹¹ The Bayeux Tapestry (1077) tells the story of the ‘Norman (*Invasion*) Conquest’ (1066). This introduced an assessment of land usage (1086) called the “Doomsday Book”. French was the language of England for nearly three hundred (300) years. In 1215, twenty five English barons fought against old Roman law to set up ‘The Great Charter’ or ‘The Magna Carta’. The first Parliament address in English was in 1362. Chaucer wrote “The Canterbury Tales”, first published in ‘Middle English’ in 1385. Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org>

¹² David J. Bernstein. “*The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*”. Weidenfield and Nicola. 1986 –p.106
The Bayeux Tapestry imagined hanging in the great dinning hall of Dover Priory, Kent. Drawing by Dr. Barbett Miller - Plate 65

¹³ David J. Bernstein. “*The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*”. Weidenfield and Nicolas. 1986 – p.104
Replica of the Bayeux Tapestry displayed in Bayeux Cathedral – Plate 62

¹⁴ Ethics clearance H-606-0703 – July 2003



Exhibition “Relating to Country” 2006

Installation I “Guardians”

Participants’ Stories - Approximately 400h x23500 length

“Pre-school is the Place to Be – Education is the Key” by Linda Pont

Mindaribba

Local Aboriginal Land Council

Pre School

**Pre School is the Place to Be –
Education is the Key**
(NSW Aboriginal Early Childhood Unit)
By

© **Linda Pont**

Linda works in Won:arua Country but lives in
Awabakal area.



Linda is a Wonnarua
person from the St.Clair
area of Gringri.

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“Pre-school is the Place to Be – Education is the Key” by Linda Pont



NSW Aboriginal Early Childhood Unit

When we have our Koori studies we talk about traditional culture. A lot of our children have been brought up in towns or cities and don't have a lot of knowledge about the culture. So we felt it was very important for the children to know where they originally came from and the type of life style that was lived in traditional Aboriginal times. Because of this and because we are situated in Wonnarua country, we have some stories I can tell them from here, but we only have two or three families from that particular country who are traditional owners, the rest are Aboriginal people from many areas around the state, so we tend to do general stories, or dreaming stories for them and we recognize where they are from. If there is a story from Redfern then we say this is from the people of Redfern ... this is from the Kamilaroi people, we recognize from where that story comes so that they know and it is the same with our languages.



LINDA PONT
FIRST PRINCIPAL
of
MINDARIBBA LOCAL
ABORIGINAL LAND
COUNCIL PRESCHOOL



We sing songs with different words in them, from different language groups but we recognize where they are from so that the children then know that there is not just one Aboriginal language, **there are many**. At the moment we have been teaching them some Awabakal words but I think further down the track it may change to Wonnarua.

Dancing is absolutely wonderful. When I first went to the Pre School we used to dance in the last term only. We would practice for our concert. Then somebody from the community said to me, “...it would be far better if we learnt it throughout the year.” In that way if we had any visitors from ATSIC or perhaps anybody else that called in at the Land Council, then we could do a dance or a song for them.



Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council Preschool children 2002 at the launch of the Community Development Employment Project (*CDEP*).

So this is how we have gone and it is programmed regularly into Koori time. We sing Aboriginal songs of Aboriginal life but the dancing in particular is wonderful. The children get up and they are dressed in red lap-laps and the girls in leotards with Aboriginal colours and you can see when they stand up that they have pride in themselves and in what they are doing. They are enjoying it, it just comes from within. We will continue to do that ... it is a bit difficult at this age, we try to keep the dancing as simple as possible, the boys do the kangaroo and they do the shake-a-leg dance. The girls can collect berries and nuts and they can do the Emu.



Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council Preschool children 2002 at the launch of the Community Development Employment Project (*CDEP*).

The joy that you see in the children’s faces when they do the traditional dance, you look at them and their chests come out, they have a totally different persona once they get in their costumes and actually do the dancing, it is just brilliant to watch. When they are out there dancing they are dammed proud of who they are. I love it.

At Pre School we may have something out at the table, we then stand back and let them explore, you let them touch, you let them problem solve and they work it out for themselves and their learning is far greater if they can achieve that than you showing them how to do it. There may be some children who need to be shown but for some children that problem solving is a greater learning experience to do that themselves. So you stand back and watch and if someone needs your help then you slot yourself back in and help, but to stand back and watch is far better for their experience in learning.

The children dig outside the sand pit and there is this ridge of dirt, it’s a hard ridge for some reason and they dig down and they get very excited because it’s long and they use their imaginations and they often say to me, “There are Dinosaur bones out here.” Then we come in and read about Dinosaurs and other things Dinosaur songs, we can be Dinosaurs. We can do Dinosaur craft. I was hoping someone could get me some bones from somewhere and we could bleach them so they are nice and hygienic to cover regulations. We would actually bury them and let the children discover them and let them see how they discover a bone. Where did it come from? What animal is it from? It would lead to such language stimulation and curiosity, it would be fabulous. And you can do that with rocks and other things not just Dinosaur bones. Their brains take so much in. They are just like little sponges.

I said the other day, that in my school day we could play in the bush, they had ‘bush area’ in schools and they had trees that could be climbed, these days we have regulations on how they can climb, what they can climb on, what soft fall is required for underneath, for what height you are climbing. There are lots and lots of restrictions so – it does restrict the type of play you have and anything we do these days. We can’t have pets in the Pre School. One example is the local hatchery we used to be able to bring chickens in. I would ring up and say, “I’m having a day on such and such, could you bring the eggs in on this day”, and they would put them in the incubator for three weeks. They would deliver them and the chicks would hatch in front of the children’s eyes, absolutely fabulous. You now cannot do that because of health regulations. Even if you had the children wash their hands first, wash their hands after, that still wouldn’t be covered by the health regulations and that is a shame because most of the children here would never have seen a chicken or a duck hatch. I think they were mainly ducks. But a wondrous thing and they haven’t seen it and therefore they have missed out and that’s sad. We do have Bob Turner ... he’s the reptile man and it’s accepted for him to come. He brings snakes and lizards and frogs and the children can pat them. He has to perform his show on lino. After he has left we have to bleach the floor because the animals have obviously wriggled around on that so it has to be bleached with a certain ratio, for health regulations and all the children whether they have touched animals or not have to wash their hands thoroughly before and after. So far he is still allowed to do his shows but unfortunately the egg people can’t which is a pity because it should all be part of our childhood. Regulations get back to litigation.

Songs and Words

At Pre School when we are doing our songs, we have different ways of teaching three to five year olds. So what we do is we change the words to some of the songs. In one of the songs we do, we sing “If you’re happy and you know it” now this is a welcome song. So we will put “AH LAH” in and then I will tell the children that ‘ah lah’ is the Awabakal word for ‘welcome’. We can sing ‘if you’re happy and you know it’... sing “MIREMBEENA” and ‘mirembeena’ is a welcome word from Brewarrina. They then know that the word is from Brewarrina and there are quite a few welcome words we use.

“Pre-school is the Place to Be – Education is the Key” by Linda Pont

So we learn our languages that way, not just our particular language, but many languages. We use the words from perhaps the Gamilaroi (Kamila'roi) people and we tell them that ‘Yamma garoo’ is from the Gamilaroi people. The word for welcome in Wonnarua is “Ani gun ya”.

The Johnny Cake Project

We did the “Johnny Cakes” book for the Pre School with Phil Eulo and the children.



Photographs for the booklet taken by Narelle Miller



It was the first one we have done and I was very happy with the outcome. I would like to have another look at it to see how we could make it better for the next one.

Identifying through Books

There is a book called “Ten Little Jarjum’s” (Merrifield, 1997) and on the front cover depicts ten little children sitting around a fire, a burning fire, getting warm after obviously being in the river. So you open up the first page and there is a map of NSW. It’s got the town where this story comes from and it talks about the children who have actually written the story.



Photograph by Michael Riley¹

So the children learn about the map of NSW which is literacy and you can talk about these places and perhaps the children have been there. We can talk about Dubbo Zoo because a lot of them have been there, and where it is in NSW. We can also talk to them about a map of Australia.

We go through the book and we talk about one little jarjum in the river, along came another one and then there was two, so they are learning literacy and numeracy. They are identifying Aboriginal children from another area. “..are they the same?” “Do they look the same as us?” “Do they look different?” “Can we do this?” “.. are there any adults there?”



Photographs in book taken by Michael Riley:

¹ Merrifield, K. “Ten Little Jarjum” - Early Literacy Component and the Aboriginal Education Strategic. Project Officer: Sizi Williams. Editor: Kate Merrifield. Graphic Design – Anna Zmijewska – Aboriginal Curriculum Unit (BOS) funded by National Equity Programs for Schools –Initiatives Program (DEET) January 1997 – Photography ©Michael Riley. Thanks to Lesley Mills & Carmel McGrady - ©Board of Studies NSW & NSW Department of School Education. 1996

So there is a lot of learning concepts in there. We use books like this and at the back it shows Aboriginal words from that area, this book is a Bunjalung book, so they are using Bunjalung words. The children can identify them throughout the book. This is how we learn about words from other areas².

There is a set of books that are reading discovery these are actually for infant children. There is a lot of repetition in here and this one is called “Walk, walk, walk, walk”³. It is a story of children holding someone’s hand going up a long winding road. They walk and they walk and there is a hot sun and they keep asking how much longer. It’s a long way and they have the hot sun and they have sore feet. They talk about tired legs, hot sun, sore feet, aching back and heavy arms and finally they are there and there is the community to welcome them.



Illustrated by Shane Russell

Some of these stories are absolutely lovely ...

this one ... this one.... I know I’m raving on

but this one is absolutely fabulousthis one is called “Crossing the River”⁴ and the little girl is sitting down with Pop at the river bank and they are talking about how did we cross the river before we had bridges. We used the punt, and he explains what a punt is. “Hey Pop, how did we cross the river before we had the punt?” “We used the boat”. And he explains about how many went in the boat and safety and all the rest of that. “Hey Pop, how did we cross the river when we didn’t have boats?”

² ibid

³ Gray, J. “Walk, Walk, Walk, Walk”. Project Officers .. Sue Briggs-Pattison and Bev Harvey. Illustrated by Shane Russell. Reading discovery – Scholastic Australia Pty Limited. Edited by Julian Gray and Susan Hartley. Designed by Janice Bowles. 1999

⁴ Gray, J. “Crossing the River”. Project Officers .. Sue Briggs- Pattison and Bev Harvey. Illustrated by Karen Briggs. Reading discovery – Scholastic Australia Pty Limited. Edited by Julian Gray and Susan Hartley. Designed by Janice Bowles. 1999

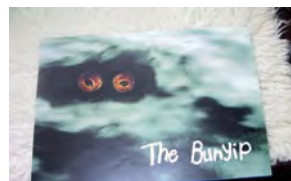
Oh! Pops scratching his chin ... “We used bark canoes to cross the river” and they talked about paddling and how they were made, there is a little dilly bag in there, so that was wonderful. “Hey Pop, how did we cross the river before we had bark canoes?” We swam across the river.



Illustrated by Karen Briggs

And look'ee here, they may be children but they may be Bunyips! I don't know about that! So there is a whole series of books and they stimulate language about traditional times and this child is asking her Pop about that. So that shows, family relationships, it also goes further back in time so you can talk about what we used to do.

There are many other books, now the children love this story “The Bunyip”⁵, it's a bit scary but the moral of this story is, you don't go in the swim hole without adults.



Photograph
by
Michael Riley



Pauline McLeod photographed by John Halfhide – Artwork in background.
“Bats on Hills Hoist” ©Lin Onus

⁵ K. Merrifield. “The Bunyip” - Early Literacy Component and the Aboriginal Education Strategic. Project Officer: Sizi Williams. Editor : Kate Merrifield. Graphic Design – Anna Zmijewska – Aboriginal Curriculum Unit (BOS) funded by National Equity Programs for Schools –Initiatives Program (DEET) January 1997 –Cover photograph by Michael Riley. Photograph on page 1 by Robin Gregor – Paintings © Harry Wedge – Dreamtime story ©Wiradjuri Nation (Narrandera) ©Board of Studies NSW & NSW Department of School Education.1996-7

You know she’s so..... look some of these are just brilliant. Expression is very important in Aboriginal culture⁶.



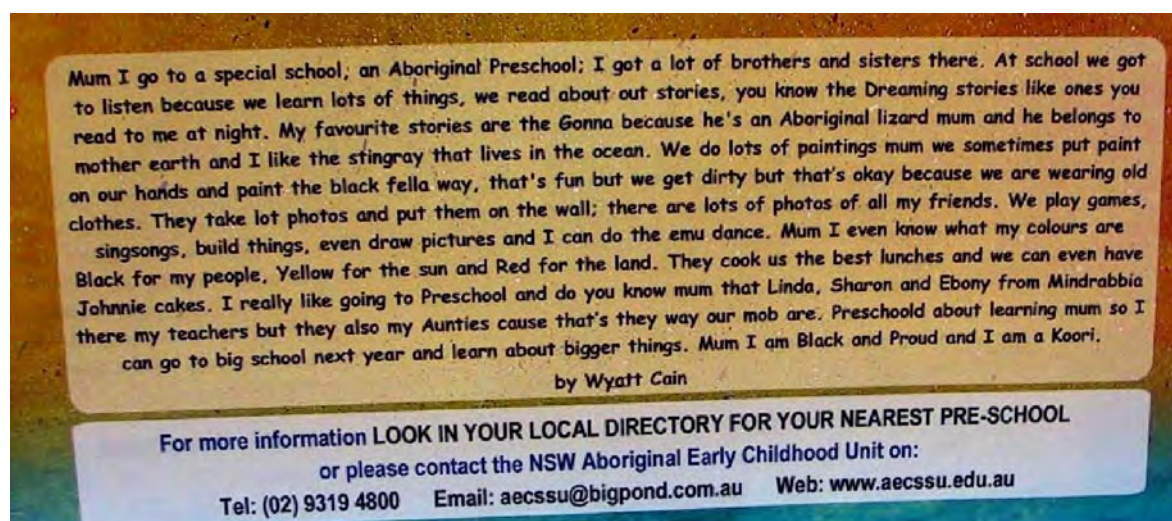
Pauline McLeod photographed by John Halfhide
– Artwork in background. “Bats on Hills Hoist” ©Lin Onus

We have books about a Museum and then we go across to Mindaribba museum. The things that are in the book are also in the Mindaribba, Henry Bolt museum. We can compare what they have got and we also take photos of them. Another thing with languages is we teach the children a song called “The wheels of the Holden”. They are travelling back home to see their mob up at Tabulam town. They talk about the jarjum’s in the back of the car are acting real ‘moogle’, that means they are playing up (*being silly and cheeky*) and Uncle says to them now ‘ninginah’ (*ning a ngah*) now, ‘ninginah’ now, and that means ‘don’t be silly’ (*be quiet, stop*). We sing this song and the children love the words, they love the actions, they love the role play that comes with it, because every child here has sat in the back of the car and played up.

⁶ K. Merrifield. “The Little Flying Fox” - Early Literacy Component and the Aboriginal Education Strategic. Project Officer: Sizi Williams. Editor : Kate Merrifield. Graphic Design – Anna Zmijewska - Aboriginal Curriculum Unit (BOS) funded by National Equity Programs for Schools – Initiatives Program (DEET) January 1997 – Background art work Bats on Hills Hoist” © Lin Onus – Thanks to staff at Kakundi (Lane Cove National Park Wildlife Shelter) Inside photographs by John Halfhide. Cover photographs by Suzi Williams - ©Board of Studies NSW & NSW Department of School Education.1996-7

So they can relate to that. That's another way of teaching them language through singing.parents, will say to the child 'Don't be moogole' so the words will be repeated. So that language, even though it's not from this area is reinforced all the time, but reinforced in a fun way, we don't sit down and do formal learning and say, "... today we are going to learn what an arm is, an arm is called a so and so". You do it through music, you do it through dance, you do it through talking and you do it through singing, things they really enjoy and they pick it up quickly because they are having fun. And that is part of the attitude that we want to instill with children here is that learning can be fun, it's not a chore. And it's really important that they have that attitude before they go to school. Learning is fun.

Below is Wyatt's story. His family took him to Awabakal Medical Service and was told he had 'Otitismedia'-known as 'glue ear'. Apart from an exercise he needed to do to correct his condition they recommended that he be enrolled in a Preschool. Wyatt is five years old.



We talk about the flag and that is reflected in the Pre School when the children do their drawings. If I give them red, black and yellow, they will draw, there is Jay's drawing up there

and it's a flag and I ask, “Jay what is the flag about?” ... and he says ... “It's black for the people – yellow for the sun and red for the earth” so we teach them the significance of our flag. There is a song red, black and yellow, it talks about the Aboriginal people throughout Australia, where they live and the name of the people for that particular area. But we are all red, black and yellow and we come under the Aboriginal flag. That's a way to reinforce both the flag and the awareness of Aboriginal people throughout Australia. Not long ago we took the children out to Wollombi, the Land Council had to raise the flag at the old fire station, one of our children actually raised the flag. It was a rainy day, it was pouring down but by the time we raised the flag the children cheered they had their own little flags to wave, it was wonderful.



Photograph from Linda Pont collection

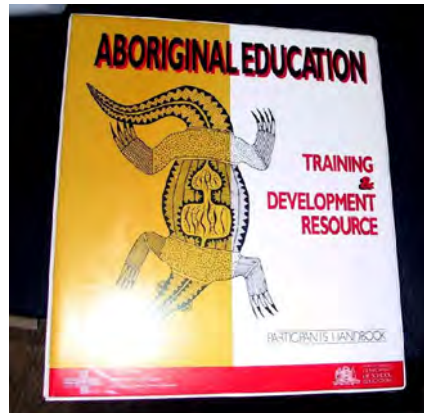
When we first started the Pre School I kept asking people, “... am I doing the right thing ... am I doing the right thing?” And the response that I got was ...”if you weren't, we'd tell you”. This was a bit of a problem because I found, if something wasn't going right they would tell someone else and eventually I would find out. There have been a couple of times when people have come to me and said or expressed their concerns about the Pre School. The message seemed to go through other people before it came to meand that's how it seems to work. That took me a while to come to terms with because I'm not used to that. I was used to people coming and saying: “Look, I would like to help you with this, perhaps you could do this, this or this”. Or give you suggestions or ideas.

When I was studying, I wondered how many schools were offering Aboriginal Studies as a course for High School. So I rang all the High Schools in the Hunter Valley. I went through the ‘phone book and rung them all and asked, “did they offer Aboriginal Studies as a course for their students?”

The responses were, most of them didn’t; some had offered it and some had not offered at all. So there wasn’t a great deal of enthusiasm, but I do realise having said that, you can’t give a course out unless people want to put their names down and say “yes we’ll do it” and then they’ve got to have the numbers.

I didn’t ask any further questions on that but I was just looking at how many High Schools actually did it in the Hunter area and it was about a quarter, at that stage.

We are looking towards educational outcomes that are the same for Aboriginal children as for non-Aboriginal children. Until all our children access a Pre School education first, before they go on anywhere else, it won’t happen. There are Aboriginal children who don’t access pre school education and they are starting behind everyone else when they go to school. That is a problem because you need to be on a level playing field before you even start school. The level playing field I’m talking about is just basic numeracy and literacy because that is where the statistics come from. The culture we give them, that is fine and I know that is ‘cut-out’ when they go to infants and primary. To me that is a negative thing in itself, but the basic playing field for our children to get through education is mainly numeracy and literacy and that is where we are falling down. Figures are improving but they haven’t improved up to equal numbers with non-Aboriginal children yet: Which is still an issue.



This document sits in many High schoolroom cupboards, never seeing the light of day. Yet there have been Royal Commissions recommending the importance of teaching Aboriginal Study courses in all schools.

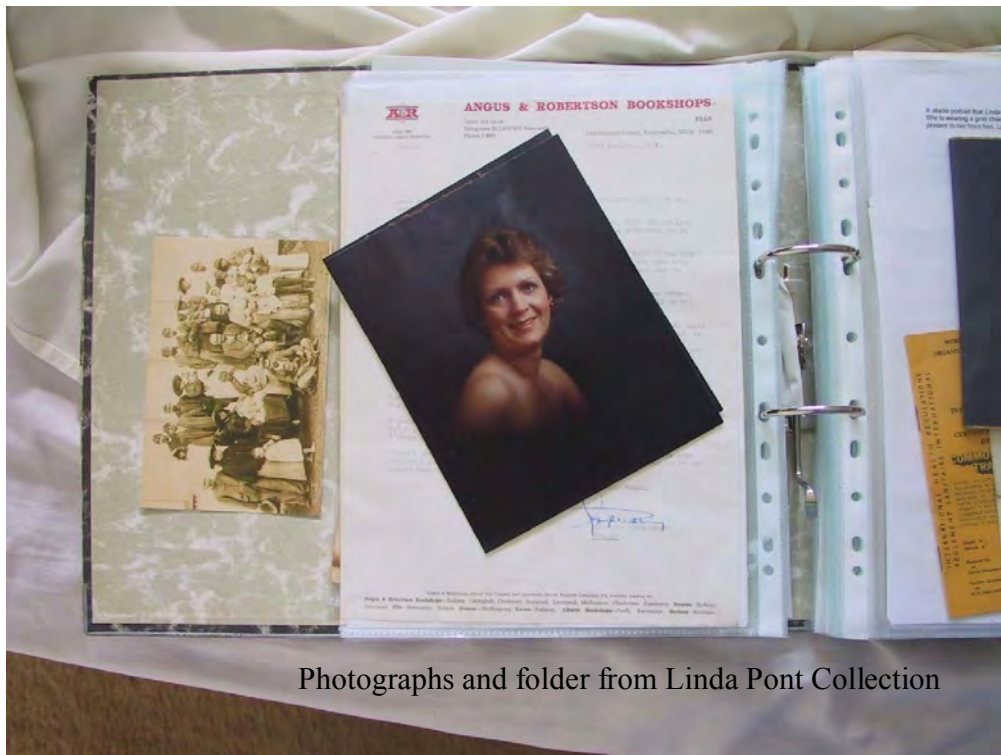
There is still that perception out there in the wider community of why Aboriginal people get ABSTUDY. If you're Aboriginal you get this, this and this.... and they have no awareness as to “why” this is there. Quite often people don't want to know of the inequalities and social injustices. They don't want to know about that, they just want to ask why we are getting this and why we are getting that. And they are not ready to listen to the answers. They just feel that's an injustice to them.

Education for Aboriginal people has always been different. It was believed many years ago that Aboriginal people only needed to be taught to the level of grade three or four because if you were going to be a domestic that was all you needed to do. Perhaps sign your name and do basic sums and that's it. Or if you were a stockman you would be lucky if you needed that. So the perception was there and then you had the racism in the schools. Whereas the Aboriginal people were often placed into schools but if someone complained ... they could be told to leave. I think a lot of people have problems, there was mistrust with the education system and I think that still exists today because of how Aboriginal people were treated. The rules were very unfair.

If you don't have a good education, and this is what we want for all of our children, you need education to go to school to learn and then go on to tertiary education. Perhaps to go on to University if you are capable of that or if not on to TAFE and that's a wonderful thing in itself. To do that you can gain employment and by employment you then have housing, all these things touch Aboriginal families and the Aboriginal community. Education is not the answer to everything but it is a major starting point for everybody. It covers housing; you could have good health services if you have the money. If you work, you can access those services a lot better than if you do not.

That applies to everybody, not just Aboriginal people. That's just the way it is. It is terrible. So to me education is terribly, terribly important.

“Pre-school is the Place to Be – Education is the Key” by Linda Pont



Photographs and folder from Linda Pont Collection

Very proud of my family background

I am a Wonnarua person and my people come from the Singleton area. My great, great, great Grandmother is Sarah Madoo and she lived just outside the St. Clair mission at Singleton. I actually have a file from Canberra where in the newspaper she was given land by the protection board outside of the mission. They have plotted where it is but I've never got back to see that land. I will have to interpret the map from the research in a document at home in the family history. I've been up to St. Clair but I would like to stand on the land that was hers. Sarah's Mother was a tribal woman of the Gringai group in Wonnarua country⁷ and her Father was Indian. There are a number of stories about Sarah being badly burnt in a fire because she appeared different. She was placed in the hot ashes and abandoned. Her Father rescued her and took her to a property called "Mondurah"; it is believed that this became her surname.

⁷ J. Miller. "Koori : A Will To Win" The Heroic Resistance, Survival & Triumph of Black Australia. Angus and Robertson Publishers. With assistance of the Literature Board and the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australian Council and the NSW Premier's Department, Cultural Grants Division. 1985 –p.12

Further records say she had a ‘skin discolouration’ and lived with her Mother’s people. Sarah married Harry Waters in 1869 and they had ten children. Harry’s Mother was Aboriginal, his Father was not. Harry drowned swimming across the Hunter River in 1880. Sarah died in Sydney in 1941 aged 94, her story is very interesting.

My upbringing is mixed. My Mother was Aboriginal, she identified with her family and the Aboriginal community at Windale. My Father was non Aboriginal and he was bought up in a boy’s home. He did not want us to go into a state home, because of the trends at the time; we could still be taken away. He did not want us to be known as an Aboriginal family. He knew that the Aboriginal children were at a greater disadvantage than the non Aboriginal population in a home. If for any reason the neighbours rang up and said, “there’s Aboriginal children next door and they are not being looked after”, his greatest fear was that they would take us and he knew what we would endure. So for many years it was there and we were aware of it but it was unspoken, it was like, when old people talk about skeletons in the closet that really was one of ours.

My Mother becomes involved with the Awabakal people

After my Father died, my Mother became heavily involved with the Awabakal people and she was looking for more than what she had, more knowledge than she had and to rekindle all those family Uncles and Aunties and people like that and extended family that she hadn’t had time to know over the years. As a child you have so much family around you but as you get older and have your own family those ties tend to slacken a little bit because everybody is so busy. My Mother needed to find herself and find out where she fitted in because she thought she had lost something.

She spoke to me about it for a while but it was hard because she was still trying to find herself and I didn’t really know what she was looking for and she died before I think she was coming to terms with a lot of things before she died. She died at fifty nine (59).

She had a massive heart attack and just dropped dead before we got to have that talk. There was so much we missed out on. That’s one of the regrets that you have because you don’t sit and talk about these things. When you’ve got younger children you are too busy and you get to a stage in your life when you want to know about your family and quite often it’s sad because these people have gone. To glean all that information from them and to fill out the missing pieces of your own life. I know when I was at Whitebridge Pre School we had some dancers come over from Gateshead. My Mother’s cousins from over there came and one of the cousins said to me, “I remember minding you as a child, and you used to draw and you were such a good little child when your Mother went off to work.” These were the bits and pieces I never knew. I never knew someone else minded me. I never knew that my Mother went to work. So other people saw little bits and pieces about your lives that maybe Mum didn’t think of as being important but it is to you as you get older, those things are important.



Margaret Joan Lester
and Burnum Burnum.
From Linda Pont collection

Schools which are culturally appropriate

When Mindaribba start up their “school(s)” our children can go from learning culture here, to learning culture in infants and primary education. I know it will grow, it will start out small but it will grow and it will be very successful. Culture will be carried through and that is fabulous. It is a dream; it is our dream for our children to have their own school which would be culturally appropriate. It would start at infants and then it would grow to primary I feel sure it would. You start off with a dream. You achieve that and then you look further down the track to look at the wider picture and say, “what’s next?” I can see a High School.

One of the reasons I was so keen for this to happen was because I had actually been up to Armidale to visit “Mininmbah School”. Di Roberts is the Principal. She had a dream and her story was how she talked about it and she worked towards her goal. One day somebody gave her a cheque for \$33,000 and said use this how you want but this is for your dream. So my understanding was that she went from a one room place on the mission to across the road where she purchased a piece of land for the school. She’s got the preschool there, she’s got classrooms. When I was up there they were adding two extra rooms. They had room for a cafeteria, they hadOh.... it was just wonderful they had Japanese lessons they had everything. There was so much offered to these children including three languages, three traditional Aboriginal languages and so motivated. Her dream is still keeping her going and motivated for future things. She is just brilliant to talk to, she’s building a diagnostic centre so people can come in and take the children and professionally test them there. A staff and volunteer building, a dome for elders, that is yet to be built. That’s what you can achieve.

You bring back that for other people to learn, to gain knowledge from. There is no point going if you don’t get something from it and to come back and share that knowledge with other people. It’s really important to share it. One of the really good things I liked about Di Roberts and Mininmbah School was, when I was talking to her, she said they don’t suspend children up there. What they do is, the children who have behavior problems or whatever, are sent to school and they then do lessons. I assume it is by themselves with supervision but not in the main class room situation. They have a Councillor come in and work through the issues that the child is having problems with. In our current school system, in mainstream, if you get suspended you stay away for two full weeks, but you don’t learn. You don’t go to school and if you’re staying home perhaps you could ride your scooter, play on the computer or play the play station. This to me is non-productive and they have already found that out. Mininmbah have done this and I think it’s absolutely brilliant. It is a great way of looking at a problem and coming up with a lateral answer.

I brought back photographs for the Land Council, showing how they were using the earthy colours in the building. They have paths that meander from one place to the other, lovely! The trees are everywhere.

Every so often you’ll come to a junction and there is a huge boulder and perhaps that bolder is there for a reason. There might be a little plaque on that so you have to look. There are little things everywhere. It is a very interesting place. They designed their pre-school for children with hearing problems by incorporating good acoustics in the ceiling. You can walk on the floor with high heels and you wouldn’t hear it. The whole room is kept very quiet, so that there isn’t any additional noise to impair any students hearing. I spoke to the Land Council about the school by showing them photographs of my visit. I had to show them something, because that’s how I am.

I know a lot of people who go to International conferences and I don’t hear too much back and I’m always disappointed because it must be wonderful to go to somewhere like that. I assume reports are done but I would like to read something because I would get so much out of it.

When we do “our school” we will have people like Di Roberts to consult with. And the added motivation of the Land Council will ensure ours will be of an excellent standard because we have communities to talk with, ‘to overcome’ many things ... we can learn from some of the issues they have had to sort out. It will be brilliant I’m really looking forward to that.

I believe in what I’m doing. I look at those children and it gives me such joy to see them there, it is an incredible feeling, it is a pleasure to be there. It is a pleasure to have them there, the children are wonderful. Parents have been very supportive and Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council has been very supportive. I’m very grateful for that. Anyone that comes to the Land Council, it doesn’t matter where they come from, is always shown the Land Council and part of that is the Pre School. So it has heightened the awareness of what Land Councils can do. So if anyone comes from another Land Council, we are saying, “we’ve got one, you too can have one for your area”. Just showing non Aboriginal people that this is our pre-school, this is what we can do and it gives us a sense of pride, it is wonderful.

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“Barkuma: Swimming Across the Current” by Debbie Dacey

Barkuma

Neighbourhood Centre

“Barkuma: Swimming Across the Current” by Debbie Dacey

“Barkuma: Swimming Across the Current”

By

 **Debbie Dacey**



Debbie is from Wiradjuri Country and feels she is swimming across the Welfare system.

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“Barkuma: Swimming Across the Current” by Debbie Dacey



**: Swimming Across the Current
by Debbie Dacey**

My culture came through loud and clear once I moved to Newcastle. I did a lot with the community in Newcastle and then it just became stronger once I moved to Cessnock. Basically there was a need up here and I spoke to a few people from the area. Most of our mob up here were unaware of services and rights and responsibilities and what was available to them. That was really the start of Barkuma.



Debbie Dacey at Barkuma – 11 March 2003
76 Lang Street, .Kurri Kurri NSW
Photograph taken by Steven Stewart

“Barkuma” is an Aboriginal word that is actually pronounced ‘Buck-oom-ah’ and it’s an Aboriginal word that means “assist and help”. When we had our public meeting to identify the needs for the community the name originated from our community who felt they needed a place of identity. Someone, who could help them and assist with their day-to-day living. So Barkuma was born and named and hasn’t looked back. Barkuma is ten years old next year. I grew up with my culture, I grew up with my mob to a certain extent, but I believe in the journey, for me as a teenager and growing up that was only the start of the journey. And now, where I am now with Barkuma it’s like... it will never be complete but it’s starting.

Our Identity

The first project was getting Barkuma its identity. So before we could give identity to our people and our community we had to give identity to Barkuma.

That meant the community had to be recognized. We had to get incorporated, we had to get insurance and all that stuff. And then we started applying for funds. Our very first funding was for Art and culture. And that was with ATSIC. The Art and Culture project was for the community as a whole and it was all ages. It was to give the community identity, their culture through art.

From the Kitchen to the Community Centre

I was living at Bellbird when Barkuma first started. It was in my lounge room and at the kitchen table. And when I built a house at Millfield, Barkuma moved to Millfield with me up to the stage when it just out grew my home and we needed, in order to secure funding, to put some distance between home life and the professional side. Contact was made with a lady by the name of Marilyn Hall, who was a HACC (Home And Community Care) Development Officer at that time. She was working out of Kurri Community Centre and she approached the management at Kurri Community Centre and they gave us an office. It was like, a tiny little office halfway down this corridor, with one light in it, no windows it was this little box with a door and a light. No ‘phone access, no nothing. So I used to run up and down the stairs all the time to take ‘phone calls.

So from the three years in my home, three years out of my kitchen and my cupboard, it did make a difference, taking it out of that well relaxed environment and putting it in office space. The office environment was really hard to adjust to. But we knew it had to happen, for our community and myself. I had always known that home environment, even with other Aboriginal services as a child, it’s always like that home environment. So to take it from a home environment into an office it was like, “Oh-gowd, how do we deal with this?” So for our community it was really hard to deal with. It was one very small black service, amongst lots and lots of mainstream services. But we managed to outgrow that office very quickly. The positive side of it was our justification for funding. I found, once we put it in an office environment people dropped off. Whereas people would just rock up at home and have a yarn about their issues and what was happening and what they needed help with. Once it was in the office then it was almost like I was isolated from our community and it was all done by ‘phone.

For the first twelve months hardly anyone came into the office. It was mostly by ‘phone and I used to go out and do home visits. That’s how home visits started with Barkuma. It was like the ‘big wall’ was up and nobody really wanted to come in but they still had a need and I was still there to do a job, paid or unpaid and to assist our community. So we started with home visits. People would ring-up. I’d make a time with them, and then go out into their homes and sit and have a cuppa’ and yarn. Then Barkuma, as much as it had office space, it became very much a mobile project. Then my car became ‘the office’.

A year and a half we were there without funding in the Kurri Community Centre. I nearly lost my house; the Bank was at the stage when they wanted to start legal action. Kurri community centre was good, they only charged us very minimal rent but we still had to come up with that minimal rent. It was out of my pocket and Kurri Community Centre used to donate us a lot of our stationary and everything.

We had a three-eight-six computer, a desk, a chair and a two seated lounge....and a filing cabinet if you could call it that. And that was it! I applied for funding with ATSIC and I was unsuccessful. It was ATSIC that said to me, that unless you get it out of your home and make it more professional you won’t get funds. So I did that. And it was like twelve months down the track we still hadn’t got funds so I went back to ATSIC and I wanted to know why? Because I had done what they suggested, so for me it was like I’ve done it, so now you have got to come to the party. And they rejected it again.

I then started lobbying everyone and anyone. Jimmy Budd was the Chairperson at the time and Jimmy Wright was a Councillor so I lobbied Jimmy Wright when Jimmy Budd was in Newcastle. He bought Jimmy Budd and I think it was Julie, and one of the other Councillors up to Barkuma. We were all sitting there having a yarn and everything and Robyn kept coming up and knocking at the door ... excuse me Debbie ... as soon as she said excuse me, I knew I had to take a ‘phone call ...so I’d say, can you just hang on a tick, I’ll be back in a minute. Then after the third time that I’d run outside, when I came back in Jimmy Budd said to me

“Why do you keep leaving the room?”
And I said, “Because I need to take a telephone call.”

He said, “Where’s the phone?”
I said, “Down stairs.”
He said, “You’re kidding me?”
I said, “No”
He said, “How long has this been going on for?”
I said, “We are coming up to almost a year and a half.”

I think at that stage it was like fourteen months or something. Then he asked me more about Barkuma, what I do, the population of the community, and then ... that was the turning point for Barkuma because that’s when they realised that it was a genuine service. It was a genuine need for our community, so they decided to lobby it at the council meeting and they gave us funding. Then we had another move once we got funding we went to another office in the Kurri Community Centre but we went to a bigger office. We could do this because we then had funds to pay rent. So we went to a bigger office and it was like ... we then seemed to be on a level playing field with other services so we were able to access more areas in the centre. Which was good for everybody, but you had the impression that they had to carry the black service; as much as they were good and they helped us and they gave us a start but it was always like... it wasn’t really a level playing field, it was a bit easier but it wasn’t level, not as far as I was concerned. So once we got funding and we moved into a bigger office and then

we just started to umm... well....

They thought we were starting to overtake everything because we have a bigger office and we started to access the gym area and then there was the communal kitchen area which no body used, except for one day a week. So we decided we’d just overlap into the communal kitchen area.... and then it was like ... she’s got the whole end of the top floor and then we got to the stage that we outgrew it.



The Olympic Torch comes through Kurri Kurri.
Steven Stewart and Robbie Upson flanked the
Land Rights/Aboriginal Flag with pride.

We were there for five years. Long time! It was hard to work with the schools when it was at my home. When we had the little office we did start to do some work with the schools but once we got the bigger office then we could utilize other areas.

Sorry Day

So then we started to do short term stuff with the schools, just promotional stuff. Then the kids Wednesday program just grew from that. Originally it was for the very first Sorry Day that we had. I think that was in '89. It was when the government first decided that they would have National Sorry Day on the 26 May and it would be a yearly event. So we did a six week program leading up to that, with the Aboriginal students from Kurri High and also with the boys out at Gu'dgodah.

We brought them into the centre and through their interpretation of what Sorry Day meant for them and meant for their families, we did art work. They interpreted how they thought Sorry Day should be and what it felt for them. They did all sorts of paintings and we had a big display and 'do' at Kurri Community Centre where we packed the hall. We had a sorry book. We had the newspapers there, we had the T.V. there; everybody was there. Donna Meehan came up as a special guest. Some of the kids had, instead of doing a painting some of the kids had actually made some things and some had done poems and what-not. Some prominent elders from the area and our elders from the stolen generations; they came up as our special guests. Some spoke on the day and some just came up and it was the kids and one lady in particular, Donna Meehan's Mum, there was a poem up on the wall and she read it and she said, you know that sounded just like her growing up. The girl presented her poem to Donna's Mum, and let Donna's Mum take it with her. Fay Moseley from Darkinjung Land Council, she came up as one of our guest speakers. So we had ... well it was great and the response from the wider community because the focus being the stolen generations and we had three, four hundred people come in on that day. So everybody signed the sorry book and ...umm... ...look for Barkuma, well professionally for me it was likeit was recognition for our community, it was recognition for past wrongs, but it was also a stepping stone to bridging the gap.

You know, to start the journey of healing. Personally for me it was quite emotional because my great grandma, Kate Handy, comes from that era so for me personally it was finally..... finally people start to understand how hard it was and what it was like. There were people from everywhere and when we went through the book there was, one lady there was from New Zealand, there were other people that came from Sydney, there were people that came from up north an’... and you think a little town like Kurri that it would just be locals, but it wasn’t.

After Sorry Day it gave us the opportunity to get a lot of recognition so whilst still on a high that’s when we started to lobby other services. We had a few donations from different people from the local community at Kurri. There was a business, the lady at the tobacconists out at Cessnock, she came to Sorry Day and she wrote us a note, she donated a hundred and fifty dollars to us. For her it was like we had uncovered the unknown. She was quite blown away by what had actually happened and for her it was like a whole new perspective on what you see on the telly and what you read in the news. We got cards thanking us for a good day and there was twenty dollars in it and ten dollars in it

... so all up we ended up with just

over five hundred dollars in community donations. For us, back then, it was like ..

Ohhhooo!!.. you know this is our rent for a while so we started to move in. It also uncovered some other issues because then Barkuma started to be a true identity.

So people started to feel

more comfortable and

started to speak out. A lot of

our community went to Sorry Day and they then realized that it’s O.K. to come in.



Up stairs at Kurri Kurri Community Centre 2000



Steven Stewart 2000

Then we started to get inundated with our community coming in, to the stage where Kurri Community Centre felt like the upstairs was all Barkuma neighborhood centre, instead of one little office. We tried to negotiate changes and we tried to negotiate more space but it just wasn't going to happen. So we then we decided ... it was actually the kids, because they used to sit in the kitchen for their Wednesday program and they had been saying to me for a while .. Deb it doesn't feel the same anymore we've out grown it here, it's not big enough, we need to move on. For me it was like Yeh, yeh, yeh... but I was so snowed under because I was the only worker. So I never really got around to it and then I think it was three of our boys came in one Wednesday

.....

....and they said, “Oh, Deb, we're here today but we're not going to be here.”
And it was like ... “O.K. what's going on?”
They said, “Ah.... no, we're going to find somewhere for Barkuma to go.
I said, “Alright then off you go.”

So they got on their pushbikes and they went to every Real Estate in Kurri and got a list of all the rental properties and they rode their 'pushies' all around all the streets looking at all these properties that were on these rental lists. In between, when they thought they had found something that was decent they would come back up to see me. They would say we have just found this house and this is where it is and I would say alright you need to check this, this, this and this. So they would go again and they would say ah... no, it hasn't got this or whatever so they spend the whole afternoon doing it. The following week, what they didn't get around to, they went and finished.

By about the third week, for me it was like these fellas are really serious, they want to do this. So...Oh! .. I'd better start looking. And then we came up with Deakin Street. It was up for rent. We had a couple of others that we put in applications for but people were reluctant to rent to an Aboriginal service, especially with the Aboriginal community coming and going all the time. So when Deakin Street came up, I knew the lady that was the agent, we put an application in. We didn't have the funds to move, but the kids were pushing it. It's like, well if we get it we get it, if we don't we don't, but we didn't think we would get it because of all our other rejections. So we put the application in and then the Real Estate rings up and says you got it. It was like ... O.K. where do we get the bond from, where do we get the rent..... and by this time there was me and there was another part time worker and we sort of looked at each other and thought well let's weigh it up and it came down to the kids or our pay-packet - so obviously the kids won. So the other worker and I we paid the bond. And Barkuma paid the two weeks rent in advance. So we just didn't have a pay for a week and those kids, when we got the keys, those kids had us moved in four and a half hours. And it was all up and down the stairs. The change in the community and the kids especially, it wasn't until we moved to Deakin Street that they really got their place of identity. And the programs just grew.



Wednesday meetings at Deakin Street

The kids from the primary school used to come and see us all the time when we were at the community centre and the kids at the High School felt they were left out. We were right across the road virtually from the kids at the public school. I wouldn't call it rivalry but when we went to Deakin Street, given that it was closer to the High School, then the High School kids were thinking now it's our turn... you had it up there now we've got it down here.

ASSPA Meetings

Once Barkuma was there and we started to work with the community and identify not only issues for them but also give them knowledge about what should be happening. That's basically when ASSPA meetings were born. Because a lot of people didn't know about ASSPA or what it was, this was a big start for us to introduce our culture into the schools. So we encouraged and supported our community to go to the local school where their kids are participating and encourage the Principal to start ASSPA. And we now today, when we look back on it we now have ASSPA meetings happening in every school in the LGA. ASSPA is probably the most successful because the schools get money, by identifying the kids. I think in primary school it's about \$110 per student that's identified. And in High School I think it's a \$130 per student. What ASSPA does is, the funds are spent in the school.



Luke Sandeman – Debbie Dacey – Jamie Sandeman – Melissa Stewart – Mayor of Cessnock, Councillor John Clarence – Steven Stewart and Robbie Upson; Presenting the painting 2001.

“Barkuma: Swimming Across the Current” by Debbie Dacey

It's not spent on an individual; just because a student is identified it doesn't mean all of that money is spent on them. ASSPA funds are spent on the kids as a whole and to assist our kids in a school environment. So ASSPA might pay for an Aboriginal performance for the whole school to see. It's all about bridging the gap and introducing our culture to the school to assist our kids with a better understanding. So ASSPA can do some individual stuff, and it does a lot of group stuff.



Mural



Kurri Kurri High School



Barkuma children
– Chalk day at Kurri Kurri High School

We're O.K. with that, whereas as much as the school gets the fund, it is really the students and the parents that can dictate how those funds are going to be spent. The committee is made up of, a student representative that is an Aboriginal student at the school: The Principal or it can be a teacher of the school and parents of Aboriginal children at the school. An Aboriginal person that lives in the community, but doesn't have a child attending the school can be a representative of the community with an interest in the community. It's good because 90% of the committee is Indigenous. Usually you go into meetings and you're the odd one out, as the Aboriginal person, whereas with this, the tables are turned and it's the teacher or the principal that's the odd one out. They get a better understanding straight-up for how it is for our community.

We move from Deakin Street to Lang Street

We were two years at Deakin Street, and then we moved to Lang Street. We felt we’d outgrown it and we couldn’t advance, we had got as far as we could. Once again we needed something; we would have loved to have bought but we didn’t have the funding to buy.



Barkuma - 76 Lang Street, Kurri Kurri

We kept the three bedroom home, the home environment but we felt that we were limited because it was a rental property but our landlord was really good but the owner of the property really limited what we could do. We needed something that was long term and something that was going to work to our advantage. So through the same Real Estate and she’s lovely, the Real Estate, she spoke to the owner of this place in Lang Street. He was prepared basically to give us free range with a five year lease.

Some of our grants have given us the opportunity to do some renovation, so because we are pouring money into his asset in turn he’s given us another five-by-five turnover. So he will give us up to fifteen years. We don’t own it but we do. We’ve pulled his old shed down and we have paid for the slab under a grant, and we are getting a new shed and that’s under our message prints project. Because our message prints grant money is finishing we want to be able to sustain part of message prints.

Message Prints

Message prints is the community painting community issues. We take art works and we turn them into different forms of promotional material. It's the community itself, making and raising the awareness of the wider community, about issues amongst our mob.

It started with workshops. A group will come in; we have the kids doing art work through our Wednesday group. Message prints outreaches once a month to Karurah mission. We do art work up there with them fellars. The community do their own individual art works and there is a message in the art work. From there we have started to do other promotional stuff. Some of the messages are becoming household names.

We are fully aware that a lot of mainstream services don't have Indigenous workers but our community still need to access some of those services. So what we have done is to take the original art works to be purchased by mainstream services, after we have taken photos and turned the works into promotional material,. The money we make goes back into the message prints program. A good example of it is “Maitland Domestic Violence” and “Court Assistance Scheme” both purchased a painting that was done by one of the young girls “Mum got strong, I got happy”.



“Barkuma: Swimming Across the Current” by Debbie Dacey

So the art work hangs in their office but we have utilized that art work for key rings, magnets and other promotional material. Our community can identify with the art work now that it's over there in those offices; it has our standard of approval. For our community it's “hands on cultural awareness training”. It says, these people, this service is aware of our culture; it is O.K. to access it. We've done it with the police service. We have our art work that hangs in some of the police stations. Refugees Court Assistance Scheme and slowly and surely it is starting to grow. Centre Link is another one and the Department of housing.

Message Prints is funded, it is a complete program. The funding comes from the ‘office-of-status of women’ because 90% of message prints is targeting violence in the home.



Message prints has worked with victims and perpetrators and the family unit as a whole. We have worked with perpetrators as young as thirteen years old and victims as old as ninety two. So message prints is the only program around that targets the wholeistic issue of our violence.

We call the program message prints and that’s how we applied for the funds but now the kids have changed it and they now call it “Message Prints: Stamping Out the Violence.” It started with violence in the home but through the violence in the home it’s uncovered a lot of other issues. What causes the violence? So it has also incorporated drugs and alcohol, low self-esteem, mental health issues, lack of housing, so now message prints is just out there. If it’s an issue, the community is painting about it and telling you about it.

Funding ...is a sore subject It finishes this month. It was an eighteen month grant so we got it for a year and a half. The program itself was probably one of the most successful for our community and for Barkuma. We’ve looked at funding elsewhere and it has been unsuccessful. People take the opinion because it’s art and a large portion of it is art work then it doesn’t really fit into the criteria of their funding guide lines. The other side of that is when you look at art grants. Because of the money that it costs to run the project and because there is a worker attached, it’s not really an art program that you would fund because it is really a social program.



Mural at Kurri Kurri High School

They’re saying this is a violence issue not a ... so you could go places that fund violence ... or this is more focused on women so you could go to places that would fund for women, or this is strictly Aboriginal so you should be looking at ATSIC to fund it. It just seems to be and when you’ve got one lady that we have assisted under this program, one of our Elders, who was in severe domestic violence at the age of eighty seven. She suggests that without this project she wouldn’t be here.

“Barkuma: Swimming Across the Current” by Debbie Dacey



Oral permission has been given to include Kurri Kurri High School Emblem (2004).



Barkuma community mural at Kurri Kurri High School

Then you have the other end of the scale where you have a little seven year old girl saying what happens, what happens now, what happens when message prints finishes, does Dad keep hitting Mum again? The impact for the community is major. The change the project has made for our community is far beyond our expectations. Here we are in March and its like what happens now? What happens?

I really struggle with it but we've put a small portion of it... Realistically it was a \$150,000 project but that was its set-up costs too. There was \$10,000 in the shed. So if you look at that, it's up with ATSIC small grants at the moment. It has got to have a worker attached. It's alright to say you can get the art work and you can promote it but someone has to be there to pull all that together. But to my thinking and I suppose that's because I'm a community person and not a funding body, when you look at the amount of people that have accessed message prints, and the amount of peoples lives it has changed, it works out for \$150,000, there's in-excess of a thousand people in the immediate LGA, that message prints has had an impact on. So what price do we put on our community and to benefit the whole community.



I have had a connection with Karuah that stems from when I was a teenager. We were all around in the days when Awabakal medical service had no funding. So we were basically there pitchin' in. I'd go to meetings with some of them fellas up there, so that affiliation has always been there. The justification and the reason behind us applying for funding to work in this area and to out-reach to Karuah was the level of violence up there. There were isolation issues, there was a lot of boredom and there was a lot of crime that was happening up there. And we wanted to deal with social issues and we basically asked them up there, "how can we alleviate it?" and one of the things was ... "give them something to do!" So for us it was, "what can we do, that the community as a whole can do?" And we can restore some pride in the community. So message prints was the way to go, message prints was the thing that could alleviate the boredom, could look at the issues and could restore some pride.

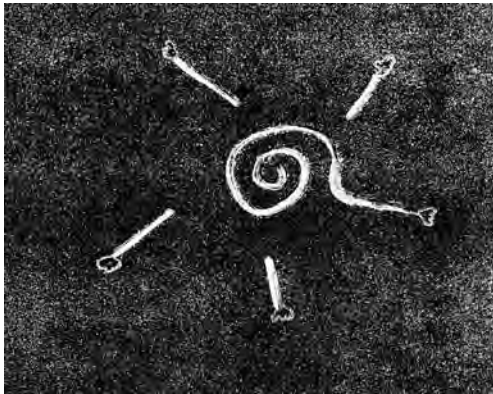
So through art work we did it. We went up there and we started. We had one meeting and we had a yarn to them. They had to clean out the hall because there was no pride, or very little pride. Joanne Perry from up the mission, she helped them all get in and they had a working bee, they cleaned up and we took the program up there and it was just an overwhelming the success. We then decided that we would go up there once a month.

Then it got to the stage where the kids looked forward to the project so much, they were starting to be sick the last Friday of every month. We used to go over from eleven ‘till six and work with the women in the community and the younger kids and then the other kids come home from school and they did the afternoon. Then it was like everyone started to get sick, so now we need to change it.

So we did; we looked at it and we changed it. We started to do some stuff in the hall so with message prints it’s not just a matter of painting a canvas and put it on other stuff, Message prints is about getting the whole community involved. So they started to take some pride in the hall and we did some stuff and we hung it up all around the windows and then we end up ... we did a mural. Now the kids were there with us doing this mural and we were doing the background, preparing it and one of the kids piped up and said, “Aunty Deb, do you know that wall that we’re putting that mural on, that’s our video wall Oh.. that’s where we watch all the movies!” It was like ohh O.. Oh..... Then they said “But it doesn’t matter ‘cause that looks better up there Ehh!” So it wasn’t a concern that we just destroyed their video wall because it was something they were really interested in. They all took bits and pieces away from it. Then the messages, that came out of the community up here started to flow and be reproduced up there. The messages from there ...it was visa versa, has come down here. So now everywhere you go, everybody is starting to talk about it and they all know it. These kids they’ve just.... one of the girls who was very reluctant to do any of it, she got right into it and she started by writing other peoples messages, what others around the community had written and then she started to get the hang of it and she started to get into it more. That’s when her messages started to come out.

My people are from the Peak Hill area – Wiradjuri Country

I’m from Wiradjuri (*War-aj aree*) Mob – My people come from Peak Hill, which is half way between Dobbo and Parkes. I’m a Robinson and a Sullavan, Aunty Francis still runs the Lands Council up there. My great-grandma, Kate Handy, comes from Bulgandramine Mission and it was the year before last that Bulgandramine Mission has just been handed back to our community under a land claim. It’s been an on going fight and a struggle for as long as I can remember. I was a teenager when they first started talking about it.



Drawing by Debbie Dacey 2003
for Joint Lino Cut.

Granny was taken from the mission as a child, they were put on the back of the cattle truck and she was sent to Trangy it is a little town, a main street and it has all of the facilities but 90% of the population up there is the Aboriginal community. It's home and I say it to a lot of people, you can live amongst the Aboriginal community anywhere and get

acceptance but....there is no place like home. I had gone back there for a work trip and it was very hard to come back here. I could have quite easily written my resignation from over there.

That's home. I own my own home or I'm paying my home off in Newcastle and I've got another one we're building up here, but it's only bricks and mortar, its material stuff. Home is in here, home comes from the heart.

I went there as a child, 'cause granny would never, ever go back there.

Once she was removed she could never go back there. My Nan used to talk about it but my Nanna wouldn't go back

there. I'm thirty four, and I went there as a child passing though and that's it.

So I never met my family and then I went back with a work trip and I'd never seen Aunty Francis and any of those fellas up there... and as soon as I walked into the Lands Council, and there was heaps of people up there, she come across the room and she picked me straight off.



Nanna Carolin Selina Robinson
Photograph from Debbie Dacey collection

So as much as I'd never, never known them ... they knew me. An' it's like... there is no place like home and even my kids.. Aunty Francis's grandson he was all of three and a half and Jake, my boy was five at the time, and they hit it off, they swapped shirts. We were there three days 'an they're in tears by the time we are leaving an'... as hard as it was, all our relies run the school up there. So you can go anywhere and you can become established and you think you've got a life... and you think it's home.... but there is no place like home.

We had a young fella that came through here, through the centre... he was adopted when he was six weeks old, and he was adopted by white people..... he never knew his family but he come from Burke. And his parents keep saying there is something missing.

He never knew his Aboriginal family, but he always knew he was Aboriginal. His adopted white parents treated him better than they treated their own kids. They never denied him his culture but there was something missing and they used to have a hell of a time with him. So did he, and I said to them one day ...”he needs to go home” and so we talked about it for a while.

It ended up, I bought him a one way ticket to Burke and I said to his parents.... “put him on the bus, and just let him go there he will find his own way.” They were stressed out ... because I didn't book him any accommodation and he didn't know no one an'... they didn't want him to do it. I said to this young fella, “Get on the bus and when you get off the bus head to the pub. An' have a yarn to who is ever in the pub and you will find your way around.”

And he's “alright ee'o....” he was a bit nervous at first but he did it... and the first night that he was up there.... his Mum and Dad rung me up at home and “Oh.. he went to the pub and the lady who served him in the pub is actually his cousin. She introduced him to his Aunty”. He was up there for six weeks or so and his Mother and Father started to say to me, he's never going to come back. He came back, but for this young fella, there was a lot of issues in his life there was a lot of violence and there was a lot of hatred.

Now what this young fella has he didn’t meet his Mum or his Dad.... but he met the rest of his family and he now has a place that he calls home and there’s no more violence.

This fella has just gone from someone that has been on the dole, just thought the world owed him everything. To now, he has met a girl, he’s settled down, got his own house, their having their second child, he treats his adopted parents with respect.

When he feels the need to go home, he goes home. Now Kurri is the only life that this fella knows, ‘cause he grew up in Kurri and he’s in his early twenties but it doesn’t matter where you go, where you settle, there is no place like home. That’s when we started this and I talked about your journey and through the journey of life, it’s like a circle an’ it’s like you move on and sometimes you might see or do the same thing a few times, but it’s never complete.



Shave or Colour for Cancer Research Fund raiser in Kurri Kurri at Deakin Street.
“Barkuma” photograph taken by Debbie Dacey (*insert*).

Ungooroo

Aboriginal Corporation

“Down the Track: Ungooroo”

By

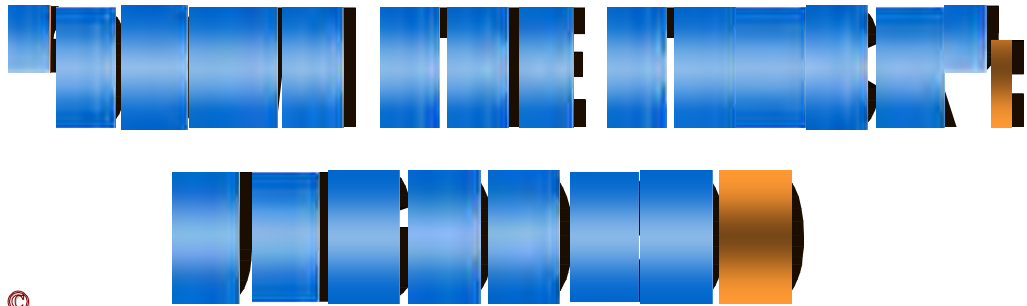


The philosophy at Ungooroo is inclusive.

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By

Allen Paget : AP

Graham Ward : GW

Denise Hedges : DH

Rhonda Ward : RW

AP The name “Ungooroo” it means “to give”. We were incorporated back in 1994 and registered with the Aboriginal Corporations in Canberra (*Allen Paget, 2003*).

GW Ungooroo was formed because there was a need within the community, as there was no service at all. We felt the name “Ungooroo” (*to give*) although it was a South Australian word it seemed to suit what we want to do for the community. There was another organisation in town that had been formed for a while but there was actually nothing for the Aboriginal community. We formed the organisation for the sole purpose of bringing programs in to support the community, things like Health. We made the initial contact with **Awabakal Health** and Awabakal Health has been coming to Singleton, I think for about eight years. Legal Service is offered at Ungooroo through **Many Rivers Legal Service** out of Newcastle. They have an Outreach Program up here where they give information and seminars and people with any dramas can go and have a yarn to Legal and get a little bit of inside information as to what’s going on. We have an association with **DOCS**. And DOCS uses these facilities for meetings and things like that. **Families First** they are an outreach here through Suzanne Lang (*Graham Ward. 2003*).

AP We are a community based corporation which runs programs from **Street Smart**” to “Families First” and people come in from the street to ask for help. We direct them to Government agencies such as **Centre Link**.

At the moment, we are running I think it's twenty two (22) programs. Sometimes people will come from out of Country from as far as Queensland. They just might be passing through and will ask a few questions. We had a few people last week that were going up North and they didn't have any fuel money so we went up to the Bank and cashed a cheque and gave them some fuel money just to get on their way. I think it was to go to a funeral service up North somewhere so we helped them out there (*Allen Paget, 2003*).

Our Aim is to say YES

GW Basically what the organisation will do - is anything that's within our capacity. If someone walks in and asks us to do something that we haven't done before, if we feel we can meet that requirement and do it for them or we will pass them on to, hopefully a Koori organisation that can do it. That is basically us in a nut shell. Anything we can do we will do (*Graham Ward, 2003*).

AP The other corporation in town had denied a few of our members, their Aboriginality to join, so we decided to start our own corporation. At the beginning it was a bit of a struggle. There was no funding for the first, I believe, first six years. So everybody had to put their hand in their own pocket to pay, the then CEO's, 'phone bill and just help with things like that (*Allen Paget, 2003*).

GW It started off in our lounge room because we didn't have the funds to lease a building, or rent a building. And we found it really difficult, we felt we did the right thing in submissions and we didn't think we were getting a fair shake. And Brian was standing there, and I told the members when we first formed that it would probably be a couple of years before we were taken seriously and we had to show that we were dead set in what we were doing. But when it got to the third and fourth year I started to get a bit toey.

Credit to the People that were there

I think we had about twenty, twenty five people to start with. And it was really hard and I've got to give credit to the people that were there. When we weren't getting funding at all, each member was dipping into their own pockets and pulling out their two dollars and five dollars to pay the phone bills and things like that. I've got to give an extra credit to Daryl Faulder who's the chair. Daryl bought our first computer, he bought our first answering machine and this is all out of his own pocket and there was never any chance for him to be recompensed for it. He was aware of that but he went ahead. His view was: "I was working full time and I can't go to these meeting and I can't have input, so I will put in financially." And I admire him for that. It's the same with all the members, you know. A lot of our people are on pensions and unemployment but they were still digging in for their two and five dollars. So where we are today goes down to them (*Graham Ward, 2003*).

DH I went to vote in the Aboriginal elections and a member from another Aboriginal organisation came up to me and said: "Why don't you join our group." So I did. And about two months later they come along and said: "No." Now I'm already a member but they said: "No, we are revoking your membership because you're not black enough." That was skin, he pointed to his skin. Now there was, 'big arguments' because half my family was in and half wasn't. And I couldn't see why. So we stood up and said: "This wasn't on." You are either Aboriginal or you're not and if you accept one of us then you accept all of us. And then we thought: "No, this is not good enough." If you're Aboriginal everyone has a right to join. You can't pick and choose who you want in your group (*Denise Hedges, 2003*).

RW It was very hard sticking up for your self. Coming out and speaking and letting people know you didn't agree, that was very hard. I think the fight made us appreciate it more because we had to fight so hard. Luckily we have had friends and cousins who passed the hat around, they all put in and helped pay for it. You know, they buy papers and stuff like that. We were lucky to have all them that helped us. They were really great (*Rhonda Ward, 2003*).

The Children have a Voice with Ungooroo

GW We have around fifty two members but in saying that I quote that we’ve got around two hundred because I class the kids as members. The registrar says you must be eighteen years of age to become a member. Well if you’re a member and we are running programs for the children, education programs and the Youth Access Programs and all that, you can’t say membership is fifty odd. If they are accessing it obviously they are part of it, they are a part of the community regardless, just because their parent are members here it doesn’t mean we ostracize them because they don’t have the power to vote. The children do have a voice with Ungooroo. And when they don’t have a voice that is when there is something wrong. Like with any organisation because that’s the whole idea of what we’re doing is to get things done so that they don’t have to do the hard yards when they come up to run the show (*Graham Ward, 2003*).



Flag raising day at
Mindaribba LALC.
The children from Ungooroo
16/7/2003

DH We do it for the children (*Denise Hedges, 2003*).

AP Considering we are a new organisation, I suppose everyone was very wary of us at first, so it took a little time for the friendships to be made over that period. By making contacts with Mindaribba LALC and the Aboriginal Community down South in the last three years we have kicked on with the office and new friendships have been made (*Allen Paget, 2003*).

GW We have a “**Cell Statement Watch**” with Singleton Police, which is, if an Aboriginal person is in custody, not necessarily arrested, but in custody that they call us. In the first instance they ask the person detained if they want Ungooroo present under the support mechanism.

The information mechanism is, if a person is in custody all the police are required to do is make a phone call and leave a message with Aboriginal Legal Service (*ALS*). And you would be surprised how many Aboriginal people don't know how to contact Aboriginal Legal, even though it is advertised everywhere. They don't realise it is there to assist them. What we do is, we fill out a report and fax it through to ALS and they make contact with the person and arrange an interview, here at Ungooroo hopefully. Our field worker Trevor Roberts comes up here regularly. Legal comes up on the Court date which is usually only ten minutes prior, that's why it's really handy to have Trevor come up beforehand and he gets the information and does up a report so that they've got a bit more information as they need it. Ten minutes isn't enough time to make a judgment on a plea or anything like that (*Graham Ward, 2003*).

RW I'm (*Rhonda*) involved with “Cell and Statement Watch”. “Cell and Statement Watch” is, when Aboriginal people go to the police station and they are being questioned and I go and sit there and listen, just making sure they are not harassed or worried, you are there to give them support. They ring you up and they tell you that ‘such and such’ is in custody and that you've got to go down there. One day I sat there from eleven o'clock until nine o'clock that night. I sat there all day with this person and didn't get a break or anything like that. Then sometimes, well there was a ‘young chappy’ we had to take to Maitland to catch a train, sometimes we have to do that but most times they're right, they just go by themselves. Graham does this too. It is whoever is available. Sometimes we go to court, to be there and help and stand with them if they need support.

We also help with the doctors who come up here once a fortnight. I do this with Denise, we share that responsibility. We drive around and pick all the people up and take them up to the doctors and then take them all home. When we first started off we went through three of our own cars. Ungooroo, now has its own vehicle, we have had it for about twelve months. We used to stay with the people visiting the doctor but now we just drop them off and go off and pick up another lot and take them up and take the other ones home and do it that way. We were always driving. They have blood test specialists, skin specialist, anything from a normal doctor, anything medical. They will talk about anything or will refer you to somebody.

This all comes from Awabakal, Newcastle once a fortnight. They park up at Singleton hospital. And the Optometrist will see people (*Rhonda Ward, 2003*).

GW We have been dealing with Awabakal Health for a long time now. They will run any program we request of them. It was originally once a month but the attendance is that good that we run it every fortnight now. The biggest struggle has been finance. It definitely has because, I’m seeing it with all organizations; everybody has projected to where they wanted to go and a time table to get there. I know the building is going to be a big expense.

Area Assistance funded us with this building we were looking for the cheapest possible venue. The chairman and I were wandering around looking at places and tell you the truth a lot of them were dilapidated things and we thought that was all we could afford on the money we’ve got to put on it. And the accountant said to us: “There is one across the road from where we are.” Which is here in the Terraces, we had already looked in here and thought it is going to be too expensive, there is no way we could afford that. So we actually walked away from it and went hunting. But the places we were seeing, as I said were fairly dilapidated and they were asking three hundred dollars a week for those. Four hundred dollars a week and they were in the CBD. If we could get one in the CBD it is easier access for the Aboriginal community to get here if they don’t have a vehicle and things like that. It is on a designated bus route. So just out of curiosity I went back and had a yarn to the accountant, and he gave me the peoples’ number. They were excellent and have been excellent ever since. I think we paid two hundred and fifty a week for it. It did surprise us because we had queried further up town and they wanted four hundred dollars a week. But this was privately owned. And like I said they are really good people.

We want a building better than Mindaribba’s. It’s a ‘have to have’ because how we got this was through Area Assistance. And my spin off Area Assistance was, Mindaribba has a cultural centre and you don’t have to be Aboriginal to access that. They know there is an Aboriginal community there. Muswellbrook has very much the same, although it is a building but they still have a centre that they can go to for information. They are two access points not only for Indigenous people but for non-Indigenous people.

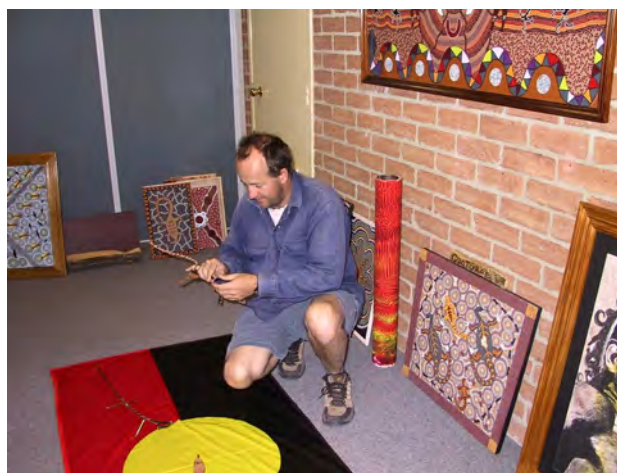
And the words I used I remember this as clear as crystal, sitting in front of the panel, I said: “People think they drive into Maitland and miraculously appear at Muswellbrook, and there is nothing in between”. And it must have worked because what I did say to them was: “Ungooroo was never banging on Council’s door for dollars or going to any other Services saying we need your dollars. We did it ourselves.” And I knew that day they were listening and they took it in. And when we got the funding we got this place. But in saying that, it was the years that we put in attending meetings, getting to know people. People like Trevor Patten, who has been great to Ungooroo. Rick Griffiths who was, when I first meet him, the General Manager of Mindaribba LALC he then became an ATSIC Councillor and is now Commissioner Griffiths.

Rick had seen what we were doing, because what had happened after the first six years is I went to the complaints unit of ATSIC about funding. The complaints unit said we were justified in lodging a complaint. I Spoke with ATSIC and ATSIC gave us six thousand dollars, which hardly covered ‘phone bills. But we were grateful for the six thousand dollars which meant people didn’t have to go digging in their pockets. That first funding gave us the opportunity to go to places like Mindaribba, where I first met Rick. Rick and I had a yarn and got on alright. He saw what we were doing in the community and what we were trying to do in the community. This was prior to Rick becoming a Councillor. And I felt he was the voice that put Ungooroo up front to the other Councillors, which has assisted us in gaining the extra funding to have these programs run here. It just goes to show if you get in and have a go and the community is dead set, the people that count do see it. In my eyes, Rick is good in that sense he can see who is genuine and who is having a go. And he can see who is playing games and just there for the sake of big-noting themselves.

It is not just Mindaribba that has supported us. In the first instance Awabakal was the first one on board, as far as Health goes. But this centre has been a God Send you know, the across the counter information is unbelievable. The amount of people that come in and out the door of the shop front it’s unbelievable. That’s why a Centre is so important. We can do so much more with a centre. It’s the ultimate goal. We know it is going to be difficult and we know it is going to take awhile.

As long as we’ve got genuine people in authority and are genuinely looking further down the track at who is producing and who isn’t, I think there is no reason why Singleton shouldn’t have a Centre. We want to bring cultural awareness to Singleton; we want to put a museum in our building. We want to have areas for programs and down the track, we are talking probably ten years, we want to have actually the same as Mindaribba which is the “Pre School”. This is how far we have planned ahead. The room we’re sitting in is going to be the education room where art classes can be conducted (*Graham Ward, 2003*).

AP I went back to school and did year nine and year ten certificate in ‘98. Part of the course with TAFE was a ceramics course. In ceramics, we did certificate one in Aboriginal Art and Culture Practices. It got better as we went. I have a creative mind but the ceramics planted the seed. We try to do everything from basic jewelry, relief printing, wood carving, drawing and a bit of painting. But my preference is ceramics, wood burning and wood carving (*Allen Paget, 2003*).



Allen in Ungooroo Gallery - September 2003

Denise talks about some of her art work

DH The Bats at Burdekin Park and the trees is one of my favorite things so I thought I would do one of the bats because it has been in the newspaper quite a bit. Up in the left corner, where the red dots are, that is the rose garden in Burdekin Park.



“Burdekin Park Bats”: 2002

“Down the Track: Ungooroo” by Graham Ward – Rhonda Ward - Allen Paget & Denise Hedges



This is my very colourful Bat.
Just to bring my culture into it.
A bit of both cultures here.

“Flying Bats 2” (*left*) - 2002

This one for anyone to look at, it just looks like a pattern. But it is really my family tree. Here, where the arms are coming out depicts my brothers and sisters. That up here is my brother and that, the circle depicts the children. Two girls then (*clockwise*) boy, girl and it goes right around. There is one that has no circles. That is my young brother who died when he was nineteen, he had no children.



“Family Circles”



“The Wanaruah Meeting Place” - 2001

The painting (*left*) is about my parents and the camping ground and the food and my beloved snake of course with the rivers running through. The river is done in the Aboriginal colours.

We do it for the children

The black area

The black area to the right symbolises my people and the children playing happily with the Kangaroo BC (*Before Cook*).

The white area

The white area to the left symbolises the children of the “Stolen Generations” and the tears they shed.

Foreground area

This area shows the struggle and the hurdles our people had to overcome, so we can receive the respect we need so we can unite with one another as we move forward into a better future

You do paintings so that people understand where you’re coming from.

Art, I have always said: “My art comes

from here, in my heart.” It’s something you feel inside. When you put it down on paper and you look at it and you think: “That’s a job well done.” Sometimes you do a painting and you think: “Oh well, I lost the plot that time.” But that is all part of art and I think if you can teach the kids it teaches them to understand, understand their culture a lot more without making it like school work. With art at the homework centre the kids really love it. I do cut outs to give them a help along with some of the art, just to give them some idea as were to start, but when they have finished you can see the glow in their eyes they light up and they think: “I have done this, this is really good.” And that makes me happy. The passion is for the kids. That’s what we work for.

I’m more interested in the Education part of it and that is why we do “Street Smart” which is going out on a Friday night, in a van, with cakes, tea, coffee, cordials. If we see a bunch of kids, say sitting outside Woolworth’s or sitting somewhere, you set up your table and you put your tea and coffee, biscuits and anything out away from them.



So that if they want to come over, they can come and they know they can come over and have a drink and something to eat, a chat if they are in trouble, if they need help or something like that. We generally go out about half past eight on a Friday night until... well I think the latest has been about one o'clock but it all depends how much activity is in the town, you might get home about half past eleven. And the kids know and they just wave to you if they want something or ... Last Friday night we were out and a kid comes running over and we said, “Yes what can we do for you?” And he said, “I’ve been to a show and I’ve spent all my money, can I get a drink and a cake an’ that?” And we said, “Yeah.. yeah.. it’s set up for yah.” And it is just another thing about helping the kids.



ASSPA ran art classes, the year before last, but they got a person in from Newcastle. I kicked up a fuss because I was on the ASSPA board. I went in and was talking to the person teaching us and she had only been painting for four months. And I was devastated. I’m pretty quiet usually but ... I went to them and gave them my thoughts:

“That this was not on because if

you’ve got people there from Wanaruah Country and you’re bringing in an Artist from Awabakal, we’ve got different totems.” And she was telling the kids: “Oh, yeah you can paint that picture as long as you change something in it.” And I’m going: “No, you can’t,” you can’t take somebody else’s work and just sort of change it or change a colour.



Photograph taken by the Singleton Argus in September 2003

I said: “That’s somebody else’s. That doesn’t belong to yah.” The reply was: “Oh, no it’s right.” Well I kicked up enough fuss because it wasn’t on.

I had volunteered at the homework centre with the High School kids two days a week. We’ve been doing that for eighteen months now. Ku-wal is the name of the homework centre that means Eagle-Hawk in Wanaruah. That’s our totem, some say eagle hawk, some say wedged tailed eagle. Some say it has a snake in its mouth. I love doing snakes
(Denise Hedges, 2003).



Denise (*back row, second from right*) with students from the “Ka-Wul” Homework centre where she teaches and encourages traditional art practices.
(D. Hedges collection)



Photograph of Japanese students with Denise
– August 2003 (D. Hedges collection)

ATSIC comes on board

GW ATSIC came on board for the rent for this side of the building and this is what I see as dead money although we are very fortunate to have it.

We are paying rent and it takes us to five hundred dollars a week that five hundred dollars could go into maintaining a building or running programs and thing like that once we get our own building. Now that's quite a lot of money when you work it out over a year. But that is something we will have to work on. We have actually approached the mines and seen the Council about putting a building up. It was a catch twenty two where Council was seriously thinking about giving us land if the mines will give us the money to build. And the mines were saying: “Well we've got to have the land before we can give you any money”. I was just hoping one of them would blink. And neither of them did it, it just sort of fell by the way side.

The mines went through and look I said: “Well, to access those sorts of funds it takes too much out of the support mechanism that they have there as far as funding goes for Indigenous peoples and groups.” And we see that as an out for the mines but you know again we're realistic. If there is only sixty or a hundred thousand dollars it would be unfair for us to go there and say look we need three hundred thousand to build and building and have nothing there for the three years for other groups to access, because they do support individual and other groups and things like that through their trust. And that's what we are doing now. We are actually looking around in the hope of grabbing hold of someone that's going to look seriously at building a building. The only way we are going to do that is through the mines. You can't get the mines to agree because, I've actually spoken to a couple of them and I've said: “Look,” because there is a multitude of mines in the Valley, and it's all on Wanaruah land.” And what I've said is: “Look, if you put it through each mine then that's X amount of dollars, it becomes tea money that you're getting off the mine, but it is quite a substantial amount when you look at the number of mines that were put in.” (*Graham Ward, 2003*).

RW I like doing site work and I do like the Bush. I get excited going out on the mine sites. We look for artifacts. Most of them are just on the surface and you just go: “Oh.. there's one,” and you put a flag in where the artifacts are. You might walk another step and there is another one and you just flag them like that and the Archeologists come behind and record them. We just keep going and we leave them there and we might later down the track like to collect them, so we go and collect them.

Most of the Archeologists we work along side are very good. There is a few I'm a bit 'iffy' about but most of them are really great. Really good to get on with and they explain how things are going and they show you the maps where you've got to go and how much you have got to do. I feel most excited when I find 'cores'. 'Cores' is where they break the flakes off. It's just a core and they've got a stone and they just hit it off. They break the flakes or the black blades for their weapons. Just to find any artifact tickles me pink. It really does (*Rhonda Ward, 2003*).



Rhonda and daughter out on site (*NMI3*),
flagging artifacts
McCardle, 2003:Photo.36.

AP We work with National Parks and Archeologists under a section 90 where we go out and identify the sites. The developer comes in and wants to put a coal mine or an industrial site or anything like that and we work with the archeologists to identify the artifacts. The archeologists send us back a draft report. They then get in contact with National Parks and the developer has to get in contact with NSW planning and the EPA and there is about another ten agencies involved with it. We are standing on Fern Tree Gully Road (*photograph left*) just east of Singleton, and I'm pointing towards the Gowrie Terrace where



Allen Paget
on
Fern Tree Gully Road.

there was an archeological dig to unearth fire hearths in the early seventies. And just where I'm pointing towards the Gowrie Terrace, on the right hand side is the re-habilitation where the mines put grass down and re-planted trees. When the consent is given to the developer to destroy the site we come back in with the archeologists and the artifacts. It is against the law just to pick up an artifact and to walk ten feet with it and put it back down.

It's destruction of an Aboriginal site. People fill out, 'care and control documents', Sometimes it will be that the artifacts go back to the Aboriginal Community or they are boxed up and catalogued and sent to the Australian Museum in Canberra or Sydney, Collie Street. We've just had a survey, out of Singleton where there was a Sub-station and you stroll around and there would have been an estimated twenty thousand artifacts there. Just from debris, large and small flakes but everything wasn't picked up. What was in the top soil that we took off was put aside so when the developer, when the Sub-Station was finished the top soil will go back as landscaping so that the artifacts will be still there where they were originally napped off thousands of years ago. We're flat out getting the mines to fill the holes in. We have 'no say' about the landscaping. We can plant trees and we can make sure that the people responsible for the destruction, in the first place, put the land back how it was originally.



Allen Paget 29/9/2003
Artifact in foreground below
right hand, orange in colour



Photograph taken for “Proposed Rezoning and Subdivision at North Muswellbrook”.
McCardie Cultural heritage. June 2003 - Photograph 1 Site NM1

The Coal Mines do a lot of re-veg and that but it's never the same but it is better than a big gaping hole and dust flying out around the Valley. That's one of the things that everybody is looking at now is re-veg after they leave (*Allen Paget, 2003*).

Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) Program.

GW Mindaribba actually gave us five positions on their Community Development Employment Project (*CDEP*) Program. The participants work for Ungooroo but they're also assisted by Mindaribba and we are really grateful for that because without that it would more than likely be a one or two man show here and there is no way we could do it because we are just too busy doing everything else. There is always stuff going on and you have to have someone in the office to take calls, you have to have someone over the gallery to do some other programs or what ever. So we are really fortunate in that respect that Mindaribba was serious enough to offer that position. And again I think that is down to Rick Griffiths who seriously knows.

I make this statement to government bodies: “They want it all for nothing.” I think government is the one that's become dependant on Aboriginal communities giving their time. When you go and front these same bodies they still want people to volunteer. And as everybody knows, volunteers are the same people all the time. You just can't do it... (*they see us as*) we're a Land Care Group. And even with a Land Care Group, I say: “Well the least you could do is put a BBQ on at the end of it or something like that to show that you do appreciate the volunteer's time.” It's not just a matter of going out there and doing it and saying: “Thanks a lot I'll catch you later.” Because it comes to a point when they say; “they are not appreciated. Why should I do it?” Give us your time and help us regenerate, help us bring it back and when you do we'll just knock it all down and put a building up. It becomes a money spinner for local government. I also state to Land and Water, Land Care and all that, a thousand years the Aboriginal communities looked after their land, and only two hundred years later it's buggered up and they keep coming back to the Aboriginal communities to fix it up. I feel there should be some sort of remuneration there. And maybe down the track there is. Who knows!

Up at Wanaruah Park, we had a big thing up there where we planted trees and all that. And we accessed the mines because the funding we got through the trust, through the heritage trust was for plants and equipment. Such as the plants themselves ... Ummm... compost and things related to that. I put a few letters out to the mines and we turned it into a really big show. It wasn't just a matter of going out and planting for two or three days and walking away. We had dignitaries from Land Care and all over the place. See, here is one of our points, always involve the kids if we can. We invited Mindaribba Pre-School up. They came up and they thoroughly enjoyed the day. We had the smoke ceremony, we had dancers. Big Trev rolled up, had a sausage or two. That was a really good day and the volunteers really appreciated it because it was a way of saying 'thank you' to them because they gave their time. There wasn't a mention of that we need money for this, that or the other. It was just; "let's get in and do it and let's put some life back into the area".

Wanaruah Park

“Wanaruah Park” to begin with there was a bit of a ‘curfuffell’ over the spelling. **W A N A R U A H**, we see that as the correct spelling. That has been passed down by our Elders and at the Lands Council at Muswellbrook it is spelt that way. Finally Council came around to our way of thinking and changed it, which was good. You will always have that. There is about eight or nine ways of spelling Wanaruah. But the Muswellbrook Lands Council being the first organisation in this area should hold right of way because it was registered as such and it's the way we spell it, and the way we have been told to spell it.

Community pulling together

Deb Dacey in the early days when Ungooroo was kicking off and working out of our home, Deb was in much the same sort of boat. But Debbie never forgot us when she got a little bit of funding. She wouldn't throw her old stuff out. She always thought of us and I appreciate that and I owe her some favours and I should do it. She never threw anything out, if she thought we could use it, she would bring it up even with something as simple as manilla folders and things like that. She would scratch the name off of them and send them up.

They are the people that helped us, unfortunately you drift apart because we have so many things going on and Deb’s got to look after her people and we’ve got to look after our people. Mindaribba has got to look after their people. Like I say, “I owe Deb a few ‘phone calls”.

NAIDOC Week, over the last few years, we used to have our own little thing which were BBQ’s and stuff like that because there was a minimal amount of funding. And again Mindaribba and Ungooroo and Black Creek came together and had a yarn and we thought: “Well because it is a minimal amount of funding, why don’t we work as a team” and say: “Alright, this year we will hold it at Kurri. Next year we will hold it at Minda’. The year after, we will hold it at Singleton.” And that way you get one big show for everybody that wants to go there. The thing at Mindaribba (2003) was excellent. We actually took two bus loads down. The kids thoroughly enjoyed it, not only the kids the Elders were poking around having fun. And that’s what it is all about, it’s a Celebration Day.

I’m going to start working on them shortly. ‘Cause Trev calls me his personal pest. I’m going to start working with him for NAIDOC next year, and make sure they don’t forget to have it up here. Like I said, it’s a great idea and Ungooroo enjoys taking part. When we took part at Kurri (2002) and Minda’ (2003), nothing was done in Singleton at all. There was no celebration at all as far as we know, not even a flag raising or anything like that because everybody had come to rely on Ungooroo to do it. We are not the only group here and then we get, when we do, do things, it is: “why wasn’t I told? How come I wasn’t informed?” All I’ve got to say to that is: “If you’re a part of the community, you do know!” If you are involved in the community, you do know. We hadn’t had a relationship with the Lands Council at Muswellbrook prior, due to conflicts with the people that run it. But under the new management over the past twelve months we have got closer and closer. With Jean Hands as the chair and Noel Downs being the coordinator, we actually spend a bit of time on the ‘phone discussing matters concerning community, not just the Wanaruah people but the entire community. And we only see this as a good thing. And we look forward to it continuing (*Graham Ward, 2003*).

RW We (*Rhonda and Allen*) went on an excursion with the TAFE out to Baiame. Baiame looks over the Valley and I know he is here to guard us and look after us. I hadn't seen him when I was little because he is actually on private property. I don't think that should be. He is ours and I think we should be able to go there any time we want to go and look at him. I don't think it should be on private property and I don't think they should be charging us to go there either (*Rhonda Ward, 2003*).



Rock Art Site showing part of stencils and drawing of Baiame in red and yellow ochre. National Parks & Wildlife Service, 1979.

AP The box was there. It's a steel box. A blue steel box with a latch on it, there is no lock on it. It's got a hand painted sign \$40 for a bus, charging people to look at our culture. Although I think it is for the upkeep of the road, the road has to be graded. National Parks don't receive any of it. There is a lot of swallows nests stuck to the inside of the cave, someone had been out there with a broom and knocked all them down (*Allen Paget, 2003*).

RW While there, I said to everyone: “Look there is a track that was supposed to be a convict trail that goes up, right up and overlooks the Valley.” So anyway we get halfway up there and the road just seemed to disappear. We decided to take this other road. Anyway I said: “I don't think we are going the right way,” and Claudia, that's the teacher said: “Let's go bush.” And we go ‘bush’ alright, we are going up this mountain, there's rocks and there is trees and everything like that, there was about nine of us to start with, two dropped out first. Then the rest dropped out and three of us made it. But the mountain was going like this and all of a sudden it just goes like that! And we're climbing up it. We made it! We got to the top. We sure had gone ‘bush’. We went up the mountain. It must have been about forty five minutes to get up there because we stopped every so often for a breather.

Al (*Allen*) said to me half way: “Do you want to go back?” I said: “No bloody way, I’ve come this far I’m not going back now. I’m going to the top.” We had climbed above Baiame which was a thousand feet above sea level. I was the only girl out of the lot that made it, up there. It was really beautiful looking at the Valley once you get up the top (*Rhonda Ward, 2003*).

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Identifying as Aboriginal

“Permission to Exhale”

By

© Marianne McKinnon-Kidd



Marianne identifies
as a **Biripi** person.

Marianne discovers she has Aboriginal connections. This changed her whole approach to life and art. At first there was confusion and anger but Marianne has an ability to share all these emotions as she was communicating through her art at a very personal level prior to this happening.

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When I first realised and I still get choke up thinking about it. That feeling is still very fresh with me. It was like exhaling, it was like stopping from treading water, I knew I wasn't going to sink,

I could float. All of a sudden my identity wasn't tied to my art. I was living in a country that I belonged to, I wasn't a displaced person. I had always felt displaced, I never felt that Scotland was home or England was home. I never had a feeling of anywhere being home and I desperately longed that Australia was my home. When I found out I felt as if I was home.

I first got a little bit of a hint in 1997 when Ned and I were in Adelong. The lady we went to visit, who was a friend of Mums, said that she heard that all the Goldspinks from Tumbarumba were blackfellas.

They were all Aboriginal. That was the first time it was ever suggested. That was the first time I had an idea. It would have been a year or maybe even six months later that I started to find out more and

more and more information. By then Ned and I weren't together so I rang him up and I said: "Well! Do I have to listen to Yothu Yindi now?" My friend Helen from Victoria was 'doing' her family tree and she encouraged me to do mine.



Marianne McKinnon-Kidd in 2001 with picture of Margaret in Margaret's country - Biripi



Marianne and Ned in 1997 at Artalga

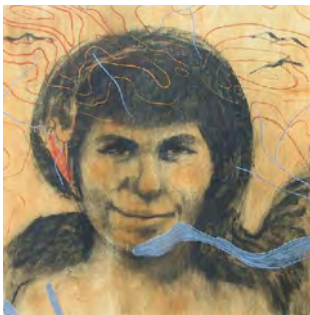
I didn't want to go up and down everybody's lines like she was doing, so I thought I would just concentrate on Mum's family because I know that she's been here longer than Dad.

I knew that my great, great Grandmothers' name was Jemina Perfect which gave me a perfect start because it was such an unusual name. I found it straight away and then I thought, well let me see how far back can I go? So then I found out her Mother's name, this was all on the same day at the Newcastle Library on the microfiche. I found out that her Mother's name was Ann Goldspink and I found out that her Mother's name was Margaret Read. I thought that she must have been born about 1813 according to the marriage details. So I looked in the 1828

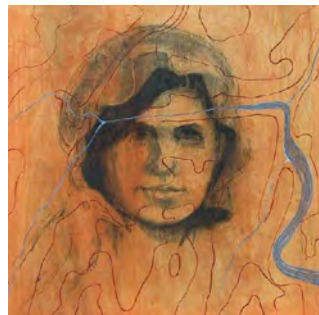
census, and she wasn't there. Then later, Judy the Librarian at Lake Macquarie said: “Well you know she might have been Aboriginal because Aboriginal people were not put on the census”. That was the beginning of the search for Margaret Read.



Title: “Margaret at Yass”: Drawing of Margaret Read by Marianne in 2002 – using raw natural pigment.



Title: “Margaret at Minimbah”
Mandy McKinnon
Marianne's Sister



Title: “Margaret at Parramatta”
Marianne McKinnon-Kidd
Self-Portrait



Title: “Margaret at Bago/Tumbarumba”
Joan McKinnon
Marianne's Mother

I felt an immense amount of love initially to my heritage and that's just continued. There is a strong desire to restore, to take her home, to acknowledge Margaret and her Aboriginality. To acknowledge where she came from to let the rest of the family know.

Know their origins, know where they came from. Know they belong. This has not necessarily always been met with warm enthusiasm by other members of the family, who probably label my passion as, “oh... here she goes off again”. It has made me feel quite sick really.

On thinking back

If you believe in things being I don't know... spiritual I suppose. What had led me to where I was when I found out? I had gone to art school wanting to paint like Manet and I just happened to be in the wrong century. So I thought: “Well blow, perhaps that's the journey I'm going on anyway”. So I got kicked out of art school because nobody else was marching towards Manet. They were all marching towards the New York School. The more I walked backward in time, as far as my art and looking at the techniques of the old Masters, I was taken all the way back to an earth pallet. I always had a feeling that there was so much more to Aboriginal people than had ever been acknowledged and I thought: “Well, with my art I'm going to prove it. I'm going to work with the same colours that they worked with and I am going to use the techniques of the old Masters and I'm going to use those colours”. And I did. I limited myself to red oxide, yellow ochre, black and white and perhaps an earth brown – and they were the colours that formed the pallet for those particular art works and I was able to paint like Rubens, I was able to paint like Rembrandt, I was able to use their techniques and get their effects using these particular colours and I thought how clever these colours are. So when I found out about my Aboriginality it was just like a shudder, it was just like a shudder you know, and all I did was, instead of going to a ceramics supply place and buying the oxide already ground, I just started to walk around finding them on the ground. So I went that one step back further again; I had gone back to making my own paints but now... I am actually grinding my own pigment.



Sue Mitchell, Director of the Manning Gallery – Taree and Marianne McKinnon-Kidd – Curator of Lake Macquarie Art gallery, at the “Forgeries Exhibition” Manning Gallery – Taree.

It all started out I suppose when I was at art school back in 1965, I had a teacher called Charlie Lewis; he was a real pain in the arse! But... he used to push me; he was always pushing that button I didn't want pushed and making me push myself a little bit more. He was like a pebble in our shoe. Anyway he had said that portraiture was the most difficult discipline of the lot. So I thought: “Well that's what I'm going to do. If that's the challenge then I'm going to do it”. Challenging myself or justifying my existence, whatever, but I got into portraiture. Realising that Rembrandt had actually done thirty six portraits, I thought: “I'm going to do more”. So I did you know. And I just kept painting portraits. As I was getting older as a woman I became more aware of my identity. Women seem to get very much short changed unless they are twenty year olds with a size ten figure. As you're getting older, I don't think it's like wine you know, so I thought that to cope with getting old and to cope with getting away from not being twenty anymore and a size ten. I was going to show in these art works that women were just as alluring and just as special and just as wonderful as they were when they were young and knew virtually nothing but of course thought they knew everything, which happens. Anyway, I thought that if I am going to show someone that is getting older, really I should put my money where my mouth is. You know, you're always looking for models and they're not always available, but you can always look in the mirror and there is your best friend.



The Red Chair by Marianne
Self-portrait



Marianne in her studio – Artalga
Hunter Valley - 1996

So I thought: “Paint yourself”. It was a way to, not just to do what I initially set out to do, paint those self-portraits but it was also a way to constantly have the subject with me. It was a way of coming to terms with my own aging.

It was a way of coming to terms with my own sexuality as I was getting older. And putting it out there, well people do, you make art works and you put them out there. I don't know why because it doesn't make much sense. You really are putting yourself out there to be judged. I never really had any problem being judged by my peers as far as my colleagues are concerned in the art world. They knew what I was doing. A couple of times people got the wrong idea but we just move away from them. It did take a fair amount of courage to stand there and argue your reasons when confronted: “Why are you painting yourself?” You know... in skimpy underwear and things like that. Then to explain, it's not because I'm on the market and I want to attract somebody to purchase it. I'm actually making this statement about women getting older. At the same time I was trying to master the art of painting flesh in the absence of a teacher. Working so thoroughly with that objective while becoming quite discerning about what constitutes good flesh and teaching myself. Being my own best critic I suppose I also became quite critical about other people.

Painting Flesh

The white opal from Lightning Ridge, the milky opal gave me the colour for white flesh. The colour for olive skin or black flesh came from the earth colours. But I found that when I was painting white flesh I had to have a little bit of opal in front of me, it was looking at the opal, it was looking at how the colours were there and they weren't there, depending on how you tipped it. That translucency, in that transience of the colours made me realise that in order to paint flesh you had to remember that flesh was translucent. It wasn't opaque. If you start to work the flesh with lots of glazes you ended up with flesh that sings. It has blood coursing through its veins. It's terrible, it's like Brett Whitely had this expression for painting and I always felt this about people too. That it was ‘difficult pleasure’, you don't enjoy painting a picture, you endure painting a picture, you are in there and it's a struggle from beginning to end. You put off starting because you know you are going to be in there in the middle of that war. In a way it is difficult pleasure. I felt discomfort living in this country before I found out about my Aboriginality and my identity. Therefore I pretty much stuck to the tag of artist because that was like the leaf on top of the water. Because it didn't belong anywhere it just sort of floated along, you know, it was free to float along.

The Struggle of Belonging

Then I found out about my Aboriginality and I was allowed to go below the surface of the water. In a way, just to sink and get into the country and to legitimately love the country passionately in a way that I didn't feel I had a right to before. I thought I had been just a displaced person. So I've gone from being able to feel whole and at the same time as I feel whole I feel uncomfortable. I feel angry, I feel supersensitive and I can spot a racist comment in everything which makes it very difficult for me. It makes it difficult for me to sit down at a dinner party, I feel uncomfortable if I..... I am finding that I am starting to feel a lot more comfortable hanging around with Kooris. People that I knew, that I was friends with, had walked away they didn't want to know, especially when they saw that I was embracing my Aboriginality. I did feel uncomfortable. I have very good friends who are very understanding of where I am, who share the same thoughts and they're the people I feel comfortable with. I don't feel like sticking my hand up any more and I don't feel like putting paintings in exhibitions. I don't have to promote me as the artist any more. I'm not interested in that, it's gone. I don't even want to sell pictures anymore, it seems foreign to me and it seems false and I know, I know it's a transition, something has happened. You know... I suppose every positive feeling has a negative feeling, every yin has a yang, every wet has a dry and this is just the other side of the coin. As to my identity, I am an artist, I am Marianne.... No, no-no-no it's like I'm right back down there on the ground. I've been on such a massive learning curve finding out about my culture. Finding out just what clever buggers those black fellas were. I always felt they were but I never felt I had the right to look into it not being one of them. As an artist I '*think*' now in a different way when I'm making art work, it's not to prove that I can do this or that. I can see further down the track to maybe use my art for political means. It might do some good somewhere, I don't know. If I find that I'm on a soap box and I want to push a cause I can do it. But it's still very difficult for me, because my paintings are probably more environmentally friendly than archival sound. Like the fifties they are going to disintegrate but 'who cares the bomb's coming'. I was so rude, I even said to the head of the art school, in mainstream, when he was talking about the costs of producing art works when working for an exhibition. I said: "Well, it doesn't cost me anything I just go out and pick up a lump of ochre off the ground". And he said: "But I want my paintings to be around in a hundred years".

And I said: “Why?” And that seemed to me to be a perfectly logical question, why do you want them around in a hundred years? That’s such a different shift from where I was. You know working as a curator and things being archival sound, otherwise they were an absolute nightmare; you didn’t want paintings that were going to fall apart especially when people were putting money on them. It was just even the idea of painting and it takes me back to a friend of mine who questioned my pretty pictures.

From Curator to Teacher

I’m working with students that have mixed resources as far as the degree to which they have been educated or their ability to cope with the classroom situation. A mixture that is very much on the ground and out there as far as their feelings and emotions are concerned. I seem to have slipped from a world where guile was the go, now there are a lot of very real human emotions and it’s very raw in a way but just quite lovely in its simplicity and complexity. It’s very nice. I love it. I love it because I’m teaching a lot of stuff that I’m learning about and that is pushing me too. I do a fair amount of travelling to get to the different classes but every time somebody has made a breakthrough there is such a support from the rest of the class, it is just fantastic. I have been working at Cessnock TAFE, Singleton TAFE and Maitland TAFE. I’ve been to Newcastle briefly, I’m going back there again next semester to the Tighes Hill TAFE campus, and I travel down to Gosford TAFE. But I’m also working as a co-ordinator of the Aboriginal programs in the Correctional Centers; most of that is at Cessnock. Students need to ‘be wanting’ to come to class and Correctional Centres need to actually be enthusiastic about running programs, those are the things that make it happen. You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it fly. For example a program for Muswellbrook was always planned, it was always thought of; it was always the big pie in the sky thing that might happen. But on the ground there wasn’t much support for it from that area. I’m sure where I’ve come from is going to somehow or other, do some good. But I’m really so bloody angry, I’m really angry and I guess... it’s the unfairness, it’s the ignorance, it’s the bloody cleverness of that propaganda.

In the same way that little short shit, bald man who can't say that big word that starts with 'S' and ends with 'Y' ... you know ... who had everybody convinced that Middle Eastern people throw their children off boats so therefore we should blow them up.

People will use all sorts of propaganda to get people to do anything; they will say the worst things. To think that people actually think that Aboriginal people are lazy and wouldn't do a lick of work. You go down to Mindaribba and there are so many people doing their CDEP. It was the Aboriginal people that were the first people to voluntarily work for the dole. They have never been made to do it but this is the way they are tarred.

I get angry; I get angry when I hear the racist comments all the time. I get angry when I sit opposite someone who I thought knew better and who said, “You know the Aboriginal people are the only people who don't have throw-backs.” And I thought: “what the hell's that got to do with it!” I thought: “Gee wiz.”

Actually my sister has always looked Aboriginal and how many generations away from Margaret are we? That's ridiculous and what a terrible thing to say, as if we were stock or cattle. Talking in terms of full blood, half-breed, you know quarter caste what an obscene language, what terrible language, the past de-humanized, taking away our humanity.

Aboriginal people probably, well the ones that I've come across and I've met quite a few now, genuinely *'feel'*, their eyes are always welling up with tears when they talk about the people that they love or how they feel about the country or anything else. They're really mushy, they're really on the ground feeling people. You go along to a Land Council meeting and there's blood and guts for everybody to see. There's no guile, there's no procedures that disguise, it's all transparent. You know even if it's a bun-fight, everybody knows who's on what side and what they think about the issue, it's so honest. Even when they talk about people that they think are 'fiddling' the system: It's like the worst crime you can do, is to be seen to be too prosperous. Which is far opposite, far opposite to the other side of the coin, where if you are considered to be prosperous you're lauded to be a hero. It's such a different way of looking at communities.

It's so different and I just find that there is an awful lot of people with really good solid values. If something's gone wrong with a Mum, say she's into drugs or something's happened and she's '*lost it*' or whatever, there is family around to keep an eye on kids and Mum. They might adopt or not, I don't know, but somebody cares, and even if they end up in the juvenile justice system, or they end up in a correctional centre, there is genuine affection between the Koori inmates. There is a strong sense of community support to get on and into training programs, the older ones helping the younger ones, there is a real sense of community, they actually care about each other.



Taking Margaret (*Peggy*)
home - 2004.

Marianne standing at the very
end of Minimbah Road
with
portrait of
Margaret Read.

Where am I now?

To go from feeling disconnected and culturally disabled and then to learn about the history and what happened to Aboriginal people in Australia leaves you feeling very angry. You feel the victim but at the same time you feel guilty that you were not living those times. I was feeling hatred and fear. Then slowly I allowed the arrogance I was permitted to possess growing up as a white Australian to lift me up out of that trough to stand proud, empowered and determined to do what ever I can to help undo some of the negative attitudes held by non-Aboriginal people: Attitudes still being perpetrated today.

“My Dream is the Return of Our Culture” by Elizabeth Griffiths

Working with

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

A.T.S.I.C.

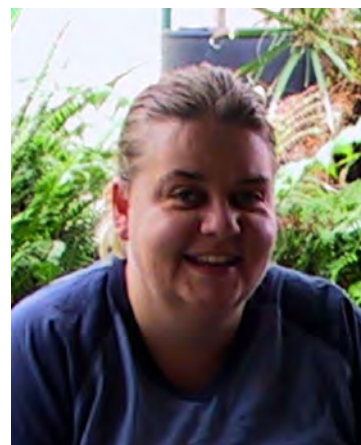
“My Dream is the Return of Our Culture” by Elizabeth Griffiths

“My Dream is the Return of Our Culture”

By

© **Elizabeth Griffiths**

Elizabeth’s family has a history in the politics of Land Rights in both Gamilaroi and Wonnarua Countries.



Elizabeth Griffiths
is a Gamilaroi woman

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My Dream is the Return of Our Culture



Michael, Priscilla and Elizabeth 2003

My dream is that we get our culture back, that we have the same access and rights as everybody else: That our health, especially out in the rural areas, is up to standard to what non Indigenous people expect. Education, that we have the rights to a decent education; that we get access to the same education as everybody else and that we get the best education. That we start working together instead of worrying about if one community gets more than the other. That's where most of our struggles come from because we don't work together. Imagine if we did work together, we would have a lot of political power and political push within this Country. We could ask for more things, expect more things and get more things. But people aren't willing to work together. Too much infighting, back stabbing and worrying what other people are getting and they're not getting.

“My Dream is the Return of Our Culture” by Elizabeth Griffiths

Finding out more about my culture, where do you find out about it, where do you go? Who do you ask? It’s not spoken about frequently within my family, not the old culture.



Aboriginal Land Council Areas¹ – Elizabeth works in Mindaribba LALC Area (*pink area marked in line*). She is a Gamilaroi woman and her Land Council Area (*top left: light green*) is “Red Chief”². Elizabeth considers both areas her home.

¹ NSW Aboriginal L.C. “Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983”: Map of ... Aboriginal Land Councils. Production date July 2003 : Office of the Registrar. Department of Lands. 2003

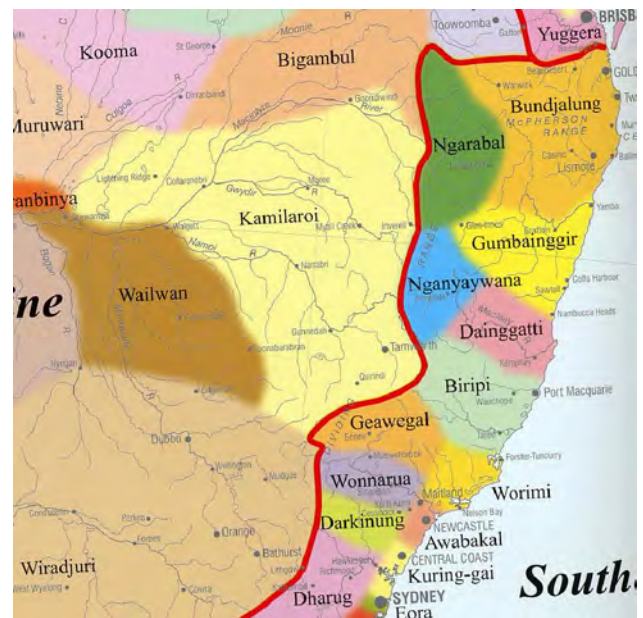
² Ion L. Idriess. “The Red Chief”: Australian Classic. Young Red Kangaroo warrior by his mental and physical powers became Red Chief of the Gunnedah district. Handed down from Bungaree. Angus & Robertson Publishers. Reproduced by kind permission of The Reserve Bank of Australia. 1953

The new culture the way we live now is, but that’s not how we lived three hundred years ago. The stories that were told three hundred years ago, the language that was spoken three hundred years ago, you know we have got on with things, which you would expect. But the past has been forgotten about. It’s sad because... we don’t know, especially me, I don’t know how they used to.... Oh, you could see pictures and archeologists will tell you, or you’ll see a book written by a non-Indigenous person they’ll tell you what it looks like three hundred years ago, what they used to do and the stories they used to tell. But there is not enough out there from Indigenous people. What they knew happened, from their perspective. What they were told happened. It’s been taken from us. The people that do know, the Indigenous people that know, they’re now with either Museums or other government bodies or agencies and they are telling their stories and it gets worded in English and it comes out completely different, so it’s getting lost.

The Queen; what the hell does she do here? She does nothing for our people. She does nothing for our Country, she never has done anything except visit us and we pay for it. Us tax payers pay for it. I don’t believe the Queen should be our figure head.

Aboriginal Language Countries³ below

The Maories, when they were first invaded, they were smart, they got a treaty, we have never, ever, ever had a treaty with the people that invaded our country. I’ve been over to New Zealand and I’ve seen how they get on with their own people and their own culture, they’re still intact with their culture so it’s worked for them.



³ AIATSIS. “Aboriginal Australia”: MAP by Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Compiled by David Horton. Published by Landinfo : The Spatial Division of Sinclair Knight Merz. Addition 3 2000. Basemap : Commonwealth of Australia AUSLIG - 1994/1996

It worked for the Maories and I know it's worked for the Canadian Indians but it hasn't worked for the American Indians and it hasn't worked for a few other Countries. So it really depends on where you're from. I would have to do more research and find other options before I'd totally and wholly agree to a treaty. We're too Americanized now as it is. Howard's in Bush's pocket with the war and stuff like that.

I started at Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council in 1988. I was the Secretary of the Land Council in the Maitland office. At seventeen, I had no idea. I knew how to type, and I knew how to do some filing but I had no idea how to run an office. I was actually working at the Awabakal Resource Centre with Donna Meehan two days a week and Evelyn Barker rang me and said: “I've got some work as secretary at the Land Council do you want to do it on a probationary period?” I said; “yes” and I just stayed there for two years. They didn't worry about the probationary period they just employed me straight away. We were in a one office at the top of the Westpac building in Maitland which we still own. We used to have our Land Council meetings there and we used to hold all our celebrations there. It was very small but they were good times.

Those good times became even better when Evelyn decided to leave and Dad came in and took over as the Coordinator of the Land Council because you couldn't meet a more smart man. He's just so on the ball and he makes you very proud. I was there for about two years and I felt the need to go. After two years I felt it wasn't a challenge to me and I had a calling that I had to get up and go

Winning a job at ATSIC in Adelaide

I applied for a few jobs and I won a job in ATSIC in Adelaide, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (*ATSIC*) in Adelaide. Within ATSIC I was in the Regional Services Unit. We looked after the Regional Councillors. Regional Councillors are elected by the communities once every three years and they're there to decide on what funding goes where into Aboriginal communities. I was their support officer. I would take their minutes, pay all their travel and see to all their policies. I was a public servant. I was there for ten years.

Travelling to different areas

I was in Adelaide for two and a half years, **ATSIC Adelaide** and then I won a position in **ATSIC Lismore** so I went there where I won another position in **ATSIC Mount Isa**. Then from **ATSIC Mount Isa** back to **ATSIC Lismore** and then to **ATSIC in Sydney**. After **Sydney Regional Office** then back to **ATSIC Lismore**. Because of the field I was in I was seconded by a lot of other offices within Australia because of the type of work that I did. I knew what I was doing so I was travelling around to different offices, setting their regional services units up and then moving on.

I was quite shocked when I went to Adelaide because the Aboriginal ... I don't know if I can say this ... but the Aboriginal people in Adelaide had a bad attitude towards black fellas from New South Wales. They had the opinion that because New South Wales was invaded first that the only true Aboriginal people left in Australia were from Adelaide and the Northern Territory. I didn't agree with that because I've got white skin. My Mother is non Aboriginal but I have always identified as being an Aboriginal person, that's where my heart lies so they sort of put me on the back foot. I only stayed for a couple of years with those comments because I didn't feel welcome. They weren't attacking me; we had a really good relationship, but when I walked into the first Regional Council meeting that was the first thing they said and it put me on the back-foot.

Mount Isa

Mount Isa was completely different. I really felt for the Aboriginal people in Mount Isa. There's no employment unless you're a miner or a public servant, so the only thing left to do all day, every day, was to drink alcohol and do drugs. Their whole attitude towards life, you could tell that is what they're used to, that's the life style they're used to. They don't expect anything else and it is very, very sad, because I expect the best from my life.

Lismore

Lismore has the same problems, very much the same problems. But because it is close to Brisbane and Coffs Harbour and a few other major towns, it wasn't as bad.

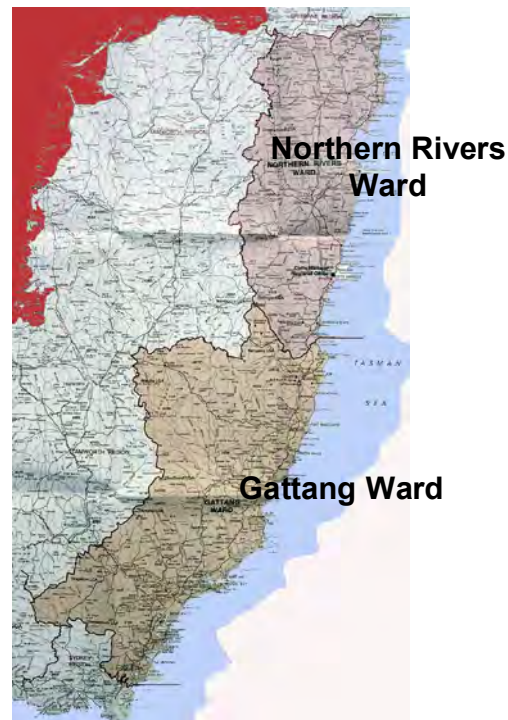
But everywhere I went there were big problems within the Aboriginal Community towards alcohol and the misuse of alcohol and drugs. When you see it, when you see them sitting on the street or in the park and that’s all they are doing, it’s heart breaking. Because Black fellas, they are so smart, they have so much talent and it’s just getting wasted.

Sydney Regional Council

Sydney Regional Council was completely different. It was so political, so very, very political. They’re very passionate about their ideas, not that people down here aren’t passionate, but if they didn’t get what they wanted they kept going until they did, even if it meant doing things “differently”; they had a few ‘bust-ups’. In Sydney it was go, go, go, everyone has that attitude down there even when you are walking down the street its go, go, go, they are very, very political. They are very much more on the ball in regards to the laws, the policies, how to get around one thing and go the other way. If the action they are taking is illegal they would know how to get around things, very easily.

In Lismore the Regional Council and the office was more laid back, it’s about seven hours from Maitland from where I live now but I felt very comfortable there because it was my Region.

My Region is Many Rivers which is the Gattang Ward. Because my cousin, Gordon Griffiths was on the Regional Council in Lismore and my Uncle Jimmy Wright; and for one of the years while I was in Lismore, my Father was a Regional Councillor. It was just the way those Regional Councillors treated me, like I was their niece, that’s where I felt the most comfortable.



“My Dream is the Return of Our Culture” by Elizabeth Griffiths

Many Rivers

After the ten years I felt I wasn't achieving enough. The reason I went into ATSIC was to get experience in politics and then come back and use it with my people, in my community. That's why I decided I'd learnt enough. I couldn't go any further within ATSIC. I'd been in every position except for the Regional Manager and the Deputy Regional Manager and there was no scope for me to go any further.



Gattang Ward or Zones⁴ (*above*)
in Coffs Harbour Region NSW

I wanted to come back and work with my community but my Mum seconded me into Tarro General Store for two years. Then ATSIC Lismore Regional Council approved that Mindaribba LALC would get a **CDEP** of fifty participants and I applied for the job and I won the job and I've been here for almost twelve months, it was a round circle.

Gordon and Elizabeth Griffiths

Preparation day for CDEP
at Mindaribba LALC 2002



⁴ ATSIC. “Coffs Harbour Region” New South Wales ATSIC Zones and Regions National Indigenous Communities Information Directory : (NICID) website: www.nicid.skim.com.au 2002/1

I didn't see it when I was working with ATSIC. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I always used to say to Dad even up to the age of twenty seven, “I don't know what I want to do”! And Dad says; “You're doing it”; but I never paid attention. He said, “... you know you're doing what you want to do”, but I never listened to him. For some reason I was just following my heart, someone was guiding me in that direction, I was following my heart and all of a sudden when I started here and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. It all made sense. Everything, everything that I learnt in that Commission I've been able to bring back and use. Dealing with people,



Rick and Elizabeth Griffiths
1996

policies on funding, how to write submissions, how to acquit grants, how to pay accounts, all that type of stuff; how to type, I knew how to type before I left but now I can almost pull a computer apart and put it back together again. It was just a great experience. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life. When I was going through it, when I was working with ATSIC I absolutely hated it. But I just learnt so much.

I love politics but I hated the fact that you're working for your people but the only outcomes that you can see are ... buildings being built or things like that. I couldn't see any positive outcomes. We really, really need training, education, housing and it's not happening. We've got this Aboriginal body and they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing. It's something we have to do ourselves we can't rely on other government bodies to come in and say here, here's some money go ahead and do this, and this and this.

We have to actually get out there and find something meaningful for the participants other than mowing lawns and making dresses or sewing, making quilts and all that type of stuff. Most of the boys on our CDEP didn't finished year ten. They had left school straight away and gone straight on to the dole so they have never had full time employment.

They don't know what it means to be full time employed, what is expected of them, what they're supposed to do. It's a huge worry. You set-up, they give you money for sixteen hours a week, and say, there go for it.

There are other things that could be set in place that they could be doing. The CDEP could be the master plan of all unemployment people. I mean that's how they set-up the “work for the dole scheme”, on the CDEP plan because we've been running for twenty five years. They have “work for the dole” they have access to more training, more facilities than the CDEP. We only got our healthcare cards and travel concessions cards in the last year and we've been going for twenty five years. “Work for the dole” started and straight away their participants could get a health care card and travel concessions cards, all that type of stuff. We weren't getting the same entitlements.

We supposedly get free cars and free houses because we're black but that's not the case, we work very, very hard. Mindaribba Land Council work very, very hard with what little we do have.

Education is the main thing. The Land Council now have an idea to have an Aboriginal School set-up, which I think is a great idea to teach the kids all about Aboriginal culture. It's not just going to be set-up for Aboriginal kids either it's going to be set-up for non-Indigenous kids too, which I think is about time because when I was going to school we did Aboriginal studies, but the man who taught us was non-Aboriginal, couldn't give a shit. To this day it's still the same. They either teach it and it's taught by non Aboriginal people who you don't learn much from, or they don't teach it at all at your school and that's when racism starts.

From Pre School up-wards right up until you finish University you never know enough or know everything about our culture. You're always learning – I'm still learning and I'm thirty-one this year. I'm still learning about my culture.

Maybe the students wouldn't have gone on at school but they would have been more comfortable within their own skin if they knew more about their Aboriginal culture.

My opinion is they probably would have got out there and had a few drinks and smoked a bit of marjuana or what ever they do but I don't think the problem would be this bad now if our culture wasn't taken away from us.

As an Aboriginal woman there is always something in the back of my mind that I wish my Grandmother was still alive so that she could teach me about my people. Teach me, tell me stories about what my Dad used to do and things like that. I've never ever met her. When she was alive she lived in Gunnedah with Dad, but she's originally from Curlewis,

That is where Dad was born, in Curlewis. Her name is Elizabeth. Her first name is Elizabeth, Dad named me after her. When I was a kid I hated that name but I wouldn't want another name now, because I know it's hers and I'm the only one that has it. I cherish that and the name will be passed on to my first daughter. I have a daughter, Priscilla, who was named before I met her.

Every time I enter Gamilaroi area I always feel ..aahhh ... I don't know why but I always take a deep breath and I feel at home, but I also feel at home here too because this was where I was born and raised and this is where my family live. I was actually born at Western Suburbs Hospital in Newcastle at Wallsend. Mum had the rest at the Marter Hospital but for some reason I was at Western Suburbs.

Usually if you're from the Aboriginal culture you take it from where your Mum's from, because my Mum is not Indigenous I've taken it from where my Father is from ... and that's Gamilaori. I've always identified and I always will identify as a Gamilaroi woman. Because Nan is Gamilaroi, I'm Gamilaroi.



Gamilaroi Country

My Dad hasn't had a drink for about twenty three years... but he always says he is an alcoholic. Once you are an alcoholic you always will be. If he had kept drinking, our lives would have been completely different. I'm under the opinion that if he had kept drinking we would have been leaning towards alcohol as kids, 'cause we would have seen him drinking and we would have thought “Oh, if he's drinking it's 'right, we can drink”. But he has set the best example that anyone could hope for, for us to follow in his footsteps. Every time I think about the man it makes me cry 'cause he's just wonderful, same as my Mum too. They are just absolutely wonderful parents.



Rick Griffiths 2002 Mindaribba LALC



Robyn Griffiths reading light-meter
at Glennies Creek Dam 2002

When I was younger, when I was about sixteen I used to go out quite a bit, not that Mum and Dad knew, I would always stay at my girl-friends house and she was non Aboriginal. I had no worries about showing my identity.

I always pick friends that had no problem with me being black. If, I come across somebody and they made a racist joke or anything like that and they didn't know I was Aboriginal I would still have an attitude towards them. Even if they didn't know they shouldn't be making racist jokes. I'm not that type of person.

I'm not racist against any other type of religion or where they're from or stuff like that so I don't expect anybody else to be. I always surrounded myself by friends who knew I was Aboriginal and didn't have a problem and always supported what I wanted to do. I've got white skin but I've never been white, I've always been black, even when I was at school, always, always ever since I was a little girl when Dad used to take us into Newcastle Mall and we'd march in the Mall for “A” Week I've always been black. My first memory I was about seven or eight. Dad took us into Newcastle Mall for “**A” Week** and we marched with Awabakal Land Council and they'd booked Newcastle Mall. Newcastle had double booked on us it had something to do with either, Independence Day or something to do with American culture.



Rick Griffiths sees the raising of the Aboriginal flag flying permanently over Maitland Town Hall 1999

Newcastle Mall had double booked it on us so the people that were marching weren't very happy. So Dad walked up, they had an American flag raised on the flag pole in Newcastle Mall so Dad walked up with these reporters around everywhere and ripped that American flag down.....an we kept walking. We kept walking, and they were all taking photos of him, he made the newspapers. I still have the clipping. That was my earliest memory.

In the eighties when Dad was about forty one and he was still about thirty seven because he wanted to keep playing football. People still talk about him playing football.

I remember Dad and Uncle Jimmy and Uncle 'Griffo' when I was little. They used to sit around the table and talk about Land Councils, talk about politics and stuff like that and because we'd always have a lot of people staying at our house I'd have to sleep on the lounge or in the lounge room or we'd squash up and I'd stay up late listening to them, just pretending I was asleep, just listening to what they were saying. My Uncle Kevin Anderson and his family, they had, three girls and one boy and his wife Auntie Dierdre. They used to live in Carrington and all of a sudden they came and lived with us in our three bedroom place, department of housing place in Woodbury and they'd pitch a tent out the back and my Auntie would come up and stay with us. We always had people staying with us, family or footballers or someone like that. That's the type of man my Father is.

I do feel bad for my Mother because she's non Indigenous. She's the most non-racist person, she's the most political person, she's the person, with the most regard and respect for Aboriginal people that I know.



Robyn Griffiths with Greg Griffiths in Gamilaroi Country 2003

She’s just wonderful, and she’s never ever said to me what about finding out about your white culture. To put her culture to the back burner and ours to the front burner, she’s a very special woman. She’s very encouraging. I don’t go to Mum and Dad unless I really need advice, I don’t go to Dad I go to Mum. Mum said I’m one of the most capable people she knows. When I was young, I chucked the dummy out myself and the bottle out myself. I’ve always worked, since the age of fourteen, actually thirteen. I’ve always had my own money, very independent. So Mum said she’s never really had to worry about me. She knows that if I needed something or needed advice I would go to her. But my dream is “the return of our culture”.

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Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council

“It’ll be Right”
By
© Narelle Miller

Narelle’s stories are connected through her family’s country of Wonnarua: They are traditional custodians and have an interest in Native Title rather than Land Rights. Narelle also connects with the International aspect of Native Title as she enjoys visiting the many different Aboriginal countries of Australia.



Narelle Miller

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Narelle Miller

It started through working with the ASSPA kids, at the schools. When ASSPA first came in, my kids were the only Aboriginal kids at Kurri Kurri Primary School so I virtually was the ASSPA Committee with the School Principal. There were things that they were asking me and I didn't know as an Aboriginal person and as an Aboriginal Mother, I didn't know. So I started reading some books and just a little bit of learning and finding out.

My family are 'Browns' from down the South Coast. We are in Wonnarua country and I've lived here all my life, we are in Wonnarua country of Gringri clan.

I've been in the Land Council for thirteen years now and I must say it changed the whole direction of my life. I've learnt so much in the last thirteen years that it has just changed my whole out-look on life. My outlook especially on how people live and not to judge people on how they live. And not to comment on things that I don't really understand. People may think its crazy but it gave me somewhere to go. I was a Housewife and a Mother and that was it! I know my Mum and I know my Dad and I know I was born in Weston. I started, just fumbling around for probably three or four years, doing little bit with the kids at school and things like that, then one day Debbie Anderson and Chris Dempsy her friend, came out home and asked us if we would come and join the Land Council. And I said: "I would talk to Tommy about it when he comes home." but we never went any further with it and then it was probably three years later – Tommy's brother come, Jack just doesn't visit! He had said that he had joined the Land Council and that we should come in and do the same thing.

Wonnarua Local Aboriginal Land Council – Muswellbrook

We joined the Wonnarua Land Council up at Muswellbrook first. We went to maybe two meetings and we never went to any more because Tommy went away working. He had felt he wanted to go up there because that’s where his mobs from and his cousins were involved there, but it was a bit of a ‘shamozal’ up there.

We had a State Councillor, Kenny Foster. And I met Kenny up at Muswellbrook which was probably three years before we joined Mindaribba. I could see him sitting in the meeting at Mindaribba LALC and I could see him looking at me and thinking. I knew he didn’t know who I was, he couldn’t remember where he knew me from, and at the end of the meeting I went up and said: “Look we met at that big meeting up at Muswellbrook,” and it all started to click.

Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council – Maitland.

First impressions

It was in the early 1990’s that we joined Mindaribba LALC. Tommy had been working away at Melbourne for a number of years. He was working for three weeks and then coming home and we hadn’t been involved in much. The first meeting was fine, it was held in the basement of Telarah bowling club. Everybody was very nice and I thought: “This is going to be nice.” And then Tommy had two heart attacks. He was in hospital and he was in bed for quite a while he just had to build up to going out again, it probably went on for three, three and a half months, four months.

Second impressions

We came back to the next meeting and that was held at the Koombah Resource Centre at Telarah School. And I was abused something fierce by Talbo. And I thought: “My God, this is the second meeting I’ve been to and I’m rowing with this fella who I don’t really know and he doesn’t know me.” He had mistaken me for some other person, some other woman who had been in the Land Council previously, who apparently wanted her rubber stamp for a house.

And I remember sitting in this meeting and saying: “What is this rubber stamp that Talbo’s going on about? - I don’t even know what your fucking rubber stamp is.” and then I thought: “Oh, my God!” and my brother-in-Law is sitting there with a paper up, his minutes, and when I swore he slunk down in the chair and put the paper up and Tommy is sitting there knocking me on the leg.... because I had done my ‘narna. And Talbo walked out on me. Well that just made me crankier. In the end I said to these people sitting at the meeting: “Well if this is how you treat new members, I really feel sorry for you.” And at that, the meeting closed, I left. I was home probably an hour and the then chairperson Billy Lord, rang and apologized saying: “He was just really sorry that it had happened.” And I said: ”Look that’s fine – not a problem”. Then I had a ‘phone call from Di Roberts, now Di Langham and she was secretary at the time and she apologized and I said look: “Not to worry.” So that was alright and then I had Di ring me back that night and said: “Look Talbo has realised you were not who he thought you were and he wants to apologize.” She wanted to bring him out, I said: “Well no! I would punch him right off the verandah if you bring him out, because I was still rather cranky with him.” But the next Saturday was the State Land Council elections and ‘bugger-me-dead’ who is on the door handing out the pamphlets but Talbo. He immediately came up and couldn’t apologize enough. And said: “He was wrong and that he would apologize formally at the next Land Council meeting.” Which he did, and we have been great friends ever since. That was my introduction to the Land Council.

When I first started with the Land Council, I had a total different view on lots of things. The “Bush” was the bush, and yes it had birds in it and yes I enjoyed a walk in it when I was a kid. But it didn’t hold anything special. I really don’t know how to put it into words... if I went on a holiday, it would have to be up to the Gold Coast. We were never flush with money so it didn’t happen a real lot but if we did then I would like to go somewhere like that.

Bums on chairs

After about twelve months there was a change in Co-ordinator. Rick Griffiths became the Co-ordinator and he wanted what is the terminology? He wanted to put a ‘bum on a chair’ in a class room so they could kick off this Aboriginal Studies at East Maitland School. Rod McKimm was going to be the teacher.

I said... “Oh, God I’ve been out of school since I was fourteen and nine months.” But he said they just want bums in the chair to kick it off. “Yeah right Oh, well O.K.!” When I started it was just something that grabbed me instantly and I couldn’t learn enough, which was great, I did my two years but I never did sit the HSC exam, for it. Rod McKimm was very disappointed but I pointed out to Rod: “Well I know it, it doesn’t matter if I’ve got a piece of paper, I know.”

Exam or Menindee?

Well what happened ... why I didn’t actually sit the exam was that I had started working at the Aboriginal Development Unit at TAFE. And we were taking a student camp away to Menindee and there was no way in this wide world I was going to miss going to Menindee, which is a hundred and thirty kiloliters south of Broken Hill, I was just not going to miss that experience of being away with Aunty Beryl Carmichael and a couple of our Elders from here, to sit an exam, so that was it.

But while doing this course with Rod... he also took us on a camp, a school camp, a forty year old going on a school camp. He introduced me into a whole different world of being in the bush and looking at different sites and what they were and seeing places that were just so special, you really, really could feel it. People look at you and say you’re a bit crazy. But you can really feel it. You go to these places and you sit there and you think gee...s.... it is just as if you were there two, three, four, five hundred years ago you know. So I learnt to appreciate those places.

A couple of years back we went up to Alice Springs and we went out to one of the Chasm Oh! ‘can’t think of the name of it... you walked in through a dry river bed and there is a little pond and you could hear the wind coming through the big gorge ... it was traditionally a children’s place. And when you sat down quiet and you could hear the wind and the birds and the little fish coming to the surface. It was just such a magic place that you expected to see a kid jumping off a rock into the pool. It was really a beautiful, beautiful place and you walked out of there feeling up lifted. It was just something very, very special.

Then other places you would go to.... we went out to the Hermansburg Mission and we didn’t stay long because it was sad, you could feel the sadness still there ... we never even went in.... it was like.... you got out.... it was totally the opposite to where the kids used to play and swim. You could feel the happiness there but you went to this Hermansburg and it was just sad... you felt sad... yeah, maybe it was because.... we know what went on there and how the kids suffered an’... the families and the torment they went through. It was like it was only yesterday. It was like someone was going to run out of one of the buildings.

I loved working for T.A.F.E

I became involved with TAFE through a ‘phone call from Di Roberts: “We have had all the staff leave, can you work for three months for us ‘till we kick it off again?” and I said: “Oh, yeah no problem”, because I wasn’t working at the time. So I started work there, in the old office near the Mercury building in Maitland. I walked into this office and I thought ...”Oh, God, what am I suppose to do?” Anyway Gail Garvey walked in and introduced herself, because it was her first day too, she had never met any of us before. Gail is a very efficient type person and she was doing something I don’t know what it was and she said: “Look Narelle, could you send that ‘fax’ for me?” And I thought: “Oh my God!” So I went and got the fax and I’m standing looking at it and Gail’s looking at me, and I’m looking at the fax machine and she said: “Just pop it on and send it Narelle” I said: “I would Gail but I have no earthly idea how to send a fax!” And she looked at me and said: “Oh, O.K.” So Gail showed me how to put it on the fax, so that was O.K. And then it just rolled from there. I had no idea how to turn a computer on, so it was: “Narelle you have to go and do a computer course.”

I’m still not very good at the computer but I learnt enough that I could do a certain amount on it. And if she wanted you to do something and you didn’t know how to do it, you were sent off to do a course. She wanted me to have a bus license, so I was sent off to do my bus drivers license. I must admit she was very patient. Gail actually got me to the stage where I was doing three-quarters of the course proposal, there were still parts of it I couldn’t do but when I was working there I was very proud. Gail Garvey was a real mover, and a boss you would never get another boss like her.

The trip to Menindee

I was involved in the organizing of a trip to Menindee for a group of students doing an Aboriginal Studies Course. Gail Garvey decided to take them out there as most of the kids and women in the course were of Aboriginal descent. We stayed in the old mission there, which was just unbelievable. We were in the red dirt, in the heat and I walked around in a swimmers type top and a pair of cut offs. That was me for a week because it was so stinking hot. But it was really, really good as it was to do with my work at TAFE. Which I loved doing.

I learnt nothing at school, totally nothing. I was the type of kid that would write all the sums in the book and then scribble in any number so I could go outside and do what I wanted to do. My spelling is atrocious. I used to get ‘minus’ in my spelling exams so Gail was really pushing, she was battling for me to get these things right. In the end she bought me a dictionary and she said: “If you don’t know, use a dictionary.” So for eight months, don’t forget it was suppose to be only a three month job, for eight months she just pushed me to do this, pushed me to do that, things that I would never, ever have looked at doing. And she got me to the stage that I was actually doing teaching at TAFE, just little bits. I was doing a little bit of craft, seed craft things like that. This was how I went out to Menindee.

I didn’t have my bus license then, that’s when I had to get a bus license when I got back. So Leonie Garvey who was a part time teacher at TAFE, that was Gail’s sister, she drove the bus. When we got out there it was a very special place. I didn’t like the fact that right on the sand patches and parts of the Lake are actually burial sites and they lobbed a road right through, probably five meters from the actual burial sites and the winds unearthing all these skeletons, I didn’t like that part of it. But it was a lovely week. There was a mixture of age groups from probably, sixteen through to Ida who would have been in her fifties. Everybody mixed in and everybody learnt from one another.

We got off the bus at Menindee and this lady is there and she had the most gorgeous grey plait, it must have been six inches round and it hung down past her bum this plait. Elvira was her name.

Ida got off the bus and there is these two women looking at each other an... Elvira said: “Is that you Idee?” And Ida said: “Yes... is that you Elvira?” ... “Yes”... well that was it everybody was in tears, everybody. They had been at Cootamundra together. Oh, God I’m getting real teary now just thinking about it. That was my first emotional reaction to an encounter with people who were a living part of the Stolen Generations.

At Menindee we did lots of things, I must admit it was very hot and it was very uncomfortable. If it got too hot at camp we would just pack it up and go over to the Lake. The mission was probably two kilometers, three kilometers from the Lake. I will never forget we got over there one day and Ida, who was the eldest by far out of all of us. It was her idea to have a game of ‘tips’ in the water. Well I’m not what you call a little person, but by the time I got out of the water running around like a two year old, I was totally exhausted. As I said we had sixteen year old kids mixing right through with all the oldies an’ what not, and it was such a magic, magic day. The best part about it was what we learnt. We learnt heaps of stuff. Leonie was my partner in learning how to track but we were supposed to bring back what we tracked. Leonie and I went off tracking one day and we tracked an echidna through about twenty different barrows and eventually we found the echidna. I looked at Leonie and Leonie looked at me and I said: “Let’s just say we didn’t find one.” So we left the poor old echidna right where it was.

During the night the generator used to be turned off at nine o’clock because we had to conserve fuel for Aunty Beryl. We were making all sorts of things, we made didg’s and seed jewelry and the night before we were leaving to come home, we hadn’t finished everything and we were sitting there by torch light, lamp light, candle light anything that you could find that would cast a light to get everything finished that we wanted to take home. We were there until about one o’clock in the morning trying to finish everything off. It was such a full week with so much to do and I think that’s what started me in wanting to get the kids more involved in cultural stuff and that’s what set me off in the areas that I went off in.

It started with Di Roberts, Di Langham now. She asked if I would like to be a supervisor on one of the kids’ camps, I was really thrilled and said: “I’d love to.”

We concentrated on the Maitland area kids. When I come back I thought of all our kids out home at Kurri, they are not getting to any of this sort of stuff so I went to the ASSPA meeting and spoke to the staff out there to see if we could get something rolling for the kids out there. They were only too pleased to help so we started off that way.

People from the Land Council, Telarah Aboriginal Resource Centre and the ASSPA committee from Rutherford High were involved. I might add afterwards, I didn’t know anything about it at the time as I was only pretty new on the scene. But afterwards it caused quite a ruckus within the Land Council because certain people weren’t asked or peoples’ kids weren’t included, I really didn’t know because the Kurri kids were not there then. There was a fraction between certain groups within the Land Council and the people who were organizing it. I don’t know what it was because I wasn’t really involved that heavily with it. I was just a last minute fish.

I approached the Deputy Head Mistress at the time. She was really good with our kids. She used to come shopping with me on a Saturday morning, to get the groceries to take on the trips. It was really good.

The first trip was to Uluru with Di Roberts/Langham and that involved Rutherford High, Koombah Homework Centre and that was mainly all the kids that went on that camp and Dean, my son, he was going to the Homework centre so that’s how we became involved in that. The first trip with Kurri High, I think we went to Mutwingee and Broken Hill. And if I am remembering rightly Rod McKimm, who introduced me to all this in the first place, comes as a supervisor and as a school teacher because it was a school education trip and we had to take a school teacher. Rod McKimm had to come as a school teacher but there was no hassle with Rod because he really liked to do those things and for those who don’t know Rod McKimm he is a teacher at Maitland High. I first got involved with Rod when doing the Aboriginal Studies. He was my teacher as well and the kids could just relate to him. He was just one of those teachers, if all our teachers were like him we would have a country of brilliant students. No kid was too bad to waste time on. Everybody had something good about them that he used to try and hone in on. He was very good.

Mootwingee

The first trip I organized we just took the Kurri kids and a couple of Rutherford students. Di Roberts came along as a supervisor. That one was very successful. We camped out at Mutwingee for five nights. For those who don’t know Mutwingee, or Mootwingee because the spelling has changed since being returned to the Aboriginal community, it is a hundred and thirty kilometers north east of Broken Hill. We were a fair way out camping. There was cold water, not hot water. It was the middle of winter and was freezing, I mean absolutely freezing to the point where, one child got up in the morning and carried his airbed out and he had shoved his washing next to it and it was frozen to the air bed.

The nights were very cold but the days were really nice. You were down to shorts and a tee shirt. It is a place I like to go back to every now and then because you come away from there and you feel ... uhhh... refreshed. I don’t know, it is just a really clean feeling. You come away thinking: “Oh. Yeah.” It is a place that when people say; “they are going out that way.” I say: “Look, take a couple of days and go to Mootwingee”. It’s just brilliant. It’s a great place to take the kids. A lot of our kids haven’t camped. We actually had one girl who had never made toast on an open fire, it was really strange. Then we had another girl there that could cook a whole meal in a camp oven. She knew what she was doing with a camp oven. It was a learning thing for all the kids because what one kid didn’t know the other one knew. What I liked about out there was the kids could run free. They would say: “Can we go over there,” and you didn’t have to watch them all the time. There were no people lurking behind bushes, they were in an area where they could enjoy themselves and not get hurt.

Spotlighting the echidna(s)

The kids liked to play spotlight and if you haven’t been to Mootwingee it has ridges three quarters of the way around and then a dry river bed. For this particular trip we had sweatshirts done for the kids in black and we had the echidna on them in real snow white.



Designed and created by
Mini Heath

The light from the torches would pick them up. So we were sitting there watching these torches go and all of a sudden no light. Then we could see these lights near the top of the ridge. And the echidnas were standing out. The kids had snuck up to the ridge. They were halfway up this damn ridge and they didn’t realise we could see the echidna’s on their tee shirts. So that was a bit of a fun game of spotlight. The following night we had another game of spotlight but we decided since they had not done the right thing the night before that the adults had to play spotlight too. It was really funny because I’m not the type to run around in the middle of the paddock, I’m not really built for that sort of thing. Anyway we all went, ”Off you go” and they all took off. I just went and sat inside one of the tents that had a big net screen. So I’m sitting watching all the action around the camp ground. Unfortunately there had been a few more campers come in through the day and this poor man and woman were walking to the toilet and my husband who doesn’t see real well of a day time, let alone of a night time, thought it was me and went running up in the dark and grabbed this woman and said: “Got ya!” And this poor woman nearly died. And I’m sitting back in this tent laughing I thought it was pretty funny. The couple going to the ‘loo’ did see the funny side of it, in time, and we promised no more spot light while they were there. So that was us trying to keep the kids entertained of a night time.

Of a day time they were really too busy with no spare time to get into much mischief because I believe that these camps are no good if you are just going to let the kids run free. They’ve got to have a purpose to them and I always try to include the cultural side, this is important to me. This is why I took the kids. But it’s also important that they’ve got to learn that they have got to look after themselves. We are not just going to be there at their beck and call. A lot of kids just expected their dinners to be served at the table and the dishes done. So we always had plenty of cultural activities, whether it be, walking or whatever. They are there to experience Country.

Some of my kids have been half way around Australia and I call them my kids because I’ve been involved with them for so long. They have been half way around Australia because there are places I had already been too and thought: “Wahoo... geese it would be good to for the kids to see this,” and we would try to get organized every year.

As I said it was very important to me that they not only learn that we are going on camp and we are going to see this and that, they also had to learn the other side of it. They had to participate in getting the breakfast, getting the lunches, getting the evening meal ready and helping to clean up. And one of the big, big things with me is, not so much on that camp but on other camps where we had a mixture of schools, I didn’t like the school kids to be in the groups from their schools I liked to mix them. So I would try and have a group from a mixture of schools in one group. I like one from each school in each group, like a multi-mix of schools.

So the short term was I was trying to get the kids to mix with kids they wouldn’t normally mix with. Because all the kids come from all different sorts of backgrounds, we have kids who have two parents working to single Mum families. Some only had Grandparents. So they all had really different life styles, and I thought it was important for them to mix and work together.

Always a wanderer

I can remember as a child, sitting in the yard and really having the shifts with my Mother because we sat at home all weekend. We never went anywhere at the weekend and I always wanted to go somewhere. I tend to do it a lot more these days but I like to be on the move, I like to see new things, I like to experience everything I can that’s out there that’s within my range. These trips or holidays or what ever you want to call them, they start with the initial planning with me. It always starts with me on a Sunday afternoon: “Well what are we going to do now?” My husband will be sitting trying to read the paper and he would say: “Oh, not now!” and I would say: “No we need to make up our mind where we are going next year, and we need to get it sorted, because I like to have it planned.” Like I plan morning tea stops. So eventually the maps would come out, the calculator would come out and accommodation books would come out. I would compare the accommodation in the motel against the accommodation in cabins and if that was too dear I would break it down again into camping and then if we had little money, which on the school camps you do, you look at National Parks. So I always start on the big scale and tend to work down. There are lots of arguments about the kilometers and distance between here and there on a Sunday.

They’re all fun to me. I mean I normally start talking twelve months before I want to go then I will plan it and fine tune it. Everything goes to all hell in the handbag anyway on the Friday before you leave. Something always goes wrong. Like, you can’t fit everything on the bus. The bus driver is a horror. Or the cooks on the trips are a horror. On one of the first trips, the cook was so bad that we were going to send her home at Alice Springs but the train had gone and there wasn’t another one for three days so we had to keep her. So things like that, there has never been a camp that something hasn’t gone wrong. We’ve had some ‘doosies’ I might add.

Whether it, be just a holiday with my husband and Sky or my kids at that time, or a school trip, the minute I set foot on the bus and close the vehicle door, I can just switch off from everything at home. Shut the door and turn the motor and I’m gone, that’s me. I only have a mobile ‘phone turned on for an hour of a night time so if you want me, you do it then. My holiday starts the moment I get in the car. And I’m like a kid the night before Christmas. It doesn’t matter where I’m going and I never want to come home. I could keep travelling, to the stage that I really have the shits when I’m coming home. I like to wander. Last July, Tom, Skye and me went to Cairns. It was decided we would go to Cooktown for a day trip. The return trip was nearly eight hundred kilometers but that’s me I do silly things like that.

These trips are always a success because somebody always learns something. Whether it’s that you don’t take that person as a supervisor because she doesn’t do her job, or that child is so disruptive that we are really going to have to talk to them before they can come on the next one.

The trips made an impact not to ‘drop out’

I had a group of kids out at Kurri High that I started taking away on these trips in the first year of High School. I have had them right through, now they started to drop-out of school, we had a lot of kids leaving in year ten, year nine. Some were kicked out, but I had maybe six that reckoned they stayed at school just so they could go on the next camp. I had three boys, their background is not all that important, who’s family were middle of the range income family, and the parents didn’t really want them involved in the Aboriginal side of things.

But the kids must have persisted because the adults, the parents said: “Oh, go ahead, go ahead.” Now two boys were dropping out in year ten and the other boy had already dropped out, they lived near me that is why I know a little more about them. And I said: “Oh, well that’s a shame because, not next year, because the trip had already been booked, but the following year, because I had promised you boys back in whatever year it was, that last year of school we would go to Uluru because that’s where they all wanted to go Uluru. I had already been four times I might add so it wasn’t top of my priority list. Those two boys that were dropping out, they stayed at school and did their last two years. The boy who was a close friend to those two boys started back to school in March the next year. He had left, but he actually came back, they had talked him into coming back to go on the camp. He went on to complete year ten.

Now these boys you would have thought, year ten would pull them up and that would be it, they would be on the dole. The girls who were quite good at school, you would have thought they would have gone the other way, gone right through and done year twelve. I think one girl was only sixteen, she left school, one girl wasn’t sixteen she left school with a baby. And the other girl she left school when she was seventeen with a baby. I thought the boys would have gone and the girls stayed but no.... I still see these kids. And if I don’t remember them, they remember me and make sure I remember them before they get passed me. Because I say: “Oh, look I know your face and I know you have been on the camps with me but what’s your name?” Because I’ve had so many over the years and all from different schools because one year we involved one of the Newcastle schools because they had a high Aboriginal population. I’m not going to say that that was a real successful thing because it wasn’t.

Mixed camps a mixed blessing

I don’t think it was because it was too big. I think it was because these new girls that came were totally different. The ‘kids’ I was taking away was a mixture of Land Council kids, Kurri High, Maitland High and Rutherford High, they all knew each other and with these new girls, the girls felt very threatened. Because that’s a very big thing on camp is the male, female thing with the kids. There’s always twenty romances bloom and twenty lots of tears as they get off the bus going home. We did watch the kids very carefully.

I’m a big enough bully that I can put the fear of God in them. I’m not a bully really. The kids would know how far to go with me that I’d be mucking on and then I would have a total change of voice and they would know Narelle would mean what she’s saying.

I’ve become very involved with the Land Council, for thirteen years. For thirteen of those years Tommy has been Chairperson. I’ve done all sorts of stuff. God! I used to clean, garden, I mow the lawns, cleaned the gutters, what ever needed to be done I would do it but not just me on my own, people like Sharon Swalwell who was working there at the time. ‘Cause there never ‘tended to be any males about as they were always at meetings that they had to go to.

Meetings, meetings and more meetings

I was also involved in lots of meetings with people like Cameron Archer from Tocal, with his sites out there. I was basically involved in the medical and Health meetings that were held down at Sydney. I was also a Regional Rep. on and off for probable eight years. I stopped doing that because I started work at the Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council Pre School.

A Regional Representative

A Regional Rep is a go between person for the Local and the State Councils. As a Regional Rep you are elected at your AGM. You put forward at the Regional meetings the feelings of your Land Council. Not my own personal views.

The Land Council is made up of the State Land Council at the top you then have the Regional Land Council and then our Local Land Council. I’ve always understood the Regional Rep to be like a mediation point for the State and the Local Councils to come into the middle. Each Region has a group of Land Councils.

We have:-

Worimi, Awabakal, Mindaribba, Koombatoo, Buttabah and Darkinjang.

These are the Councils in our Region but we also have two from Sydney in our region but they rarely come to the meetings. Nine times out of ten they were two day meetings.

If Land Councils were having problems, you would try and sort through that and get things happening for them. Other times it was problems with the State Land Councils we were dealing with. At one stage the Regional meeting, the Regional Land Council had a lot of bite but now it is just virtually a ‘toothless tiger’. Nobody takes any notice of what they say or do. We deal with things like, what each Land Council charges to do site work; an archeological dig. So we tried to get everybody charging the same. There are a lot of problems with ‘forestry’ and a lot of problems with Parks and Wildlife. I screamed, and Talbo did too, for two years we were on the ban wagon to have something done about the ‘map site’ up at Wollombi. Eventually it happened. I found I spoke out more on things like that then I did on the political side of it because the men that were there doing the talking, sitting around the table, they had been more heavily involved in the politics side than I had. I would put our Land Councils view across but I would never, I would never put my view across.

From these meetings it then goes up to the State Council. Sometimes it’s handled there if it is just something minor. But sometimes there has been big stuff that has been going on, like over the last two years that I have been involved. I always used to ring home, when I say home I’m talking about the Mindaribba Land Council, and say: “This is what’s happening how do we want to go on this?” I mean it could be completely different to what I felt but... I was there to represent the Land Council not me. That’s what a Regional Rep is all about.

I’ll speak after Peter Garrett

I have been put into some real spots and I’ve thought: “Oh, God! How am I going to do this?” The best one was, Rick said to me one day: “You like talking to people Narelle. Can you go and do a talk for me?” and I said: “Oh, right oh.” Now you’ve got to ring Maitland Council, so I rang Maitland Council and they put me on to Kylie Yeend. So I’m talking to Kylie and all she wanted from me was to stand up and just say something about the importance of keeping our sites and things like that. Like Baiame and why Baiame is there and the reason he is there. And I say: “That’s O.K.”

So this was all very fine, I was going to give this talk and I spoke to Kylie and she said: “It was at the Town Hall.” Alarm bells started ringing and I said: “How many people?” And it was: “Oh well, I’m not sure but I think we could pack the place.” And I thought: “Oh, My God” and then she asked me: “Would I like to speak before or after Peter Garrett.” And I just “Oh you’ve got to be joking!” And she said: “No.” I said: “Kylie, I really don’t want to do this.” I was starting to shake at the thought of it. And she’s: “No, no, no you’ll be alright.” And I said: “Look I’ll go last.” So she said: “Right Oh” and she put me down for last and when I see Rick I said: “Thank you very much Rick that was really great.” So Rick being Rick said: “Oh, I thought you would enjoy it.”

So anyway I got to this place and I went in and I’m sort of sitting there and different people got up and saying what they had to say and then Peter Garrett got up and I’m sitting behind him and I’m watching him and the man is moving from one leg to the other leg, he scratched every part of his body and I thought: “Oh.. well!” And by the time he had finished I thought: “Oh, look I didn’t have a worry in the world I’m just going to cruise through this.” So he really put me at ease because I have never seen anybody so nervous, he was very nervous. Very nervous. All the time he was speaking the hand was scratching like this... and all over the body and one leg’s rubbing up the back of the other... and I thought he’s either lousy or he’s very nervous. But I think he was just nervous.

That was probably the worst that I’ve ever had to do. I think I got very upset because I let people know how I felt about the mines. We have always been taught that Baiame was placed where he is, in the caves up there, to protect the Valley. And when you look out now from his cave, which I have only been to once because I just don’t feel comfortable there. When you look out all you can see is destruction for miles and miles and miles. So I think it was nerves and I was speaking about something that I really felt.... very emotional. Which isn’t like me because I’m not what you call a real emotional not in front of people anyway. Strange things really cracked me up ... so I did become very emotional. But that was probably the worst one I’ve ever had to do.

Tocal – Open Day(s)

Other than the one Kylie got me to do which was a two day workshop with all these schools, they were rotating around different workshops at the Tocal open days. Kylie Yeend was very good at getting me involved and Cameron Archer. They were very good at it.

I had to do a bit of a speech first up and I wasn’t real keen on that, I didn’t like that at all. I think it was because the room was full of University lecturers. If people hadn’t told me who was there I would have been fine. I would have just cruised on but when I found out I was speaking to lecturers and High School teachers that were Masters, I was really nervous, really, really, nervous. I was up there for a very short time and Rod McKimm again, this man keeps popping into my life, everything I seem to do he is there somewhere. I kept looking at him and I could see the encouragement, I could see him wanting to say: “Go, go on...” like this...you know. I jumped, I could see myself doing it, from one topic to an other. I was all over the place I was like a mad woman. You know jumping from here to there and I could see people going: “Ah yes” and they were catching on to what I was saying. And somebody would say something and I would be totally off right in a field somewhere else, but anyway ... we got through it.

Now I don’t know why Kylie did this and I’ve never really sat down and asked her. I don’t know if it was that we were doing Aboriginal Culture or she had no where else to put me but she shoved me on top of a hill. And the wind howled for two days. And it was the worst thing I had ever done. These kids didn’t really want to be there. They weren’t really interested in looking in much that I had. They did like doing the traditional painting with the clays and what not. They enjoyed that but other than that they were just sort of sitting there very non-committal no questions because I like to be asked questions. I can come across better giving, by answering questions. Yes, so probably that was the worst I’ve ever done, the really, really worst. I didn’t want to go back the second day. We were wind blown and there is twenty eight draft horses out there that blocked the gate way, they just stand there, literary stand there, they’re gorgeous, but they just don’t move. And you sit and you honk the horn and they don’t move. It was different. I tried to move them but they stood and looked at me.

**Forming of the Women's Group –
Yinnar Baran Bali – Women of the East (Coast)**

We formed a women's group. I will go back to the beginning because it was hard to form that women's group. It started because of the 'knockout', the football knockout. I was sitting at a meeting in one of the old buildings and it was 'knockout' this and 'knockout' that and at that stage it was mainly men that were the Regional Reps and the women weren't involved, they never played key roles. They just let these guys tell them what to do. I'm not a feminist but I do think women have a lot to offer.

It doesn't matter what field you are in or what group you are involved with I think women have a lot to offer. I just got a little bit sick of it and actually that's how I became a Regional Rep because I stood up at an AGM meeting and said I'm sick of the men being the only ones going to these meetings and that women had a point of view. I thought that the women had a role to play and should be involved in the decision making. It went over with the women really well. But with some of the men, it was just like we were just going to run the show. I become a Regional Rep and one other woman became Proxy Rep and Alternative Rep with another two males. That was how I started going to the regional meetings.

I asked a couple of girls, because they were girls then, if they were interested in forming a women's group. They were really keen but because we needed funds to form the group, we went to the next Land Council meeting and said that we were going to start a women's group. Well - it was asked: "What women were interested in forming this group" and there was a decent sort of hands went up. And Rick sat up and there was a big smile on his face and one of the other ... I can't really mention his name said: "What the hell do you want to form a women's group for?" Well, that set everybody off. The women were up in their seats but the comments continued: "What do you want to do? - Do you want to take over the Land Council, or what? - What's this all about?" He became very paranoid and it was just so funny and that women's group never ever eventuated properly. It was a flash in the pan thing because there was opposition from this guy. He thought that we would attract funding that the Land Council would miss out on. He had all these reasons, silly reasons but he had them so... we just backed off a bit.

And then it was probably three or four years later, it was when we moved into our new building that we decided to form the Co-operative. So within the Co-operative we form a women’s group. The only thing wrong with that is we formed under the umbrella of the Co-op and we could only have the same amount of members in the women’s group as we could in a Co-op. The Co-op closed its books at twenty or twenty five, so it was limited and some people found that pretty hard to deal with. It did cause friction and there were reasons it was kept like it for so long. My way of thinking is, it should have stayed that way. The women’s group would be operational today. But things move, things change. It was disappointing seeing it fall to pieces.

We didn’t do anything earth shattering, we didn’t do very much that was political. Really as a women’s group we wouldn’t have been classed as a good women’s group. We didn’t provide counselling, we were building up to that and we did have a plan that we were going to start to work that way but things just started to change and people dropped out and new people come in. People didn’t want to come to meetings you were really battling to get them to meetings.

Women’s Group Exhibition(s) “Time Factor” & “Together”



One of the panels from the exhibition
“Time Factor”

But there were really good times too, there were times that we really enjoyed. A lot of us got into photography and we went on a trip to the Blue Mountains. Just a little trip, about eight, ten of us I think.

Kay Adlem was the culprit. A couple of the ladies were interested in photography. I have been interested since I was little so I was real keen. A couple of the younger ones were real keen. So that was really nice and that was our first little exhibition when we got home.

Kay put it all together for us and we had a little exhibition and I don’t think I’ve been any prouder of my “tree” hanging there than if I had done a ‘Picasso’, I wouldn’t have been any prouder. I don’t know if the girls had done it before or what they had done but they were all really proud of the work that they had exhibited and that inspired us a little bit more. Until we thought we would really go all out and we organized a women’s camp. Not just women because we take our kids, those that had them at the time.

Photograph (*right*) taken by
Narelle Miller early morning in
the Blue Mountains 1998



Experience of a life time

We went out to Broken Hill and because it was in the summer we stayed at Broken Hill in the Caravan Park and we day tripped to places like Mootwingee and Menindee, Menindee Lakes and out to Silverton where it is just a photographer or an artists dream out there.



Narell Miller at Menindee Lakes

There is so much to take photos of, you are not really sure of what to take. But we did get some beautiful stuff. We all had different ideas, different things we wanted to say. I remember one night riding around in the car with one of the ladies with her camera shutter full open getting all the light movement of Broken Hill and just really having a good old cackle, to really intensive stuff in the desert.

There was a big range of stuff. That was the easy part. The big part was getting the show on the road. We heard so many times: “We are going to do this exhibition, we are going to do it - we are going to do it.” Finally it was done.

There were a lot of people that didn’t think we were ever going to do it they didn’t think we had the skills to do it. But ask anyone who was there: “What it was like?” and they will tell you: “It was an experience of a life time.”

Just one of those nights

It was one of those nights that ... I don’t know because I was involved with it so heavily, not just the camp, and not just the taking of the photos, but from the word go to washing the last dish of a night time. Putting up the screens and working until eleven, twelve o’clock at night, working all day just to get this stuff done and I’ve got to say that one of our main opponents as far as our women’s group was concerned was one of our biggest supporters. He did a lot of work very willingly. There were a couple of guys there that without them it wouldn’t have eventuated to the stage that it did. We had guys

like Trevor Patten, my husband

Tommy, Dave Matthews,

Talbo, that’s Stephen Talbot

for those that don’t know.

Guys like that that just worked

along side us and would do

what ever we wanted them to

do, as crazy as it sounded



Narelle
with
Cameron
Archer
at
exhibition
“Together”
1999

they would just hook it up for us and off we went. And the night itself was just such a success. We actually had people from ... Margret Sivyer from the Maitland Art Gallery did not believe that ... she just couldn’t believe that a little old bunch of Aboriginal women and some of our very close friends and supporters could put something together that was that good. They reckoned they had never seen a job as professionally done.

“It’ll be Right” by Narelle Miller



Preview for
John Price
Federal Labor Member
and
his wife Elizabeth
with
Rick and Robyn Griffiths



Rick Griffiths
opening
exhibition
“Together” 1999

We held it at Mindaribba Land Council, we wouldn’t let anybody into the main exhibition room at first. We put them over into the Pre-School and served them up some nibbles and what not. We were so lucky that a few months before on one of the ‘sites’ digs they unearthed an old fire place, that was over two thousand years old. This fire place which was carbon dated to be over two thousand years old and Rick Griffiths who was our Co-ordinator at the time allowed us to use it, as our centre piece. Kay Adlem and Robyn Griffiths made a setting to go under it, it is just too intricate to explain, you would have to see a picture of it to know what I’m talking about.



“It’ll be Right” by Narelle Miller



We used it as the centre piece of the exhibition. We set a little pretend camp fire by candle light for the opening, they had a little walk-way they had to go down, I can’t remember the name of it. And it wound around and it eventually came into the main part. It was all done by candle light and Trev was out the back playing his didj and we had dancers, it was very spiritual. That’s how I felt about it anyway.



The walk-way in was designed so that as you walked in, you couldn’t help but brushed up against government policies.

Exhibition “Together” 1999 at Mindaribba LALC.

When everybody was eventually in the room we blow the candles out and Trev finished playing and we turned the lights on and the looks on peoples faces was just,Wow, will you look at this, it was special, it was really special.

I can remember thinking, well Charlie Perkins had made a comment the week before that the flame of the Aboriginal people had gone out, something like that anyway, I’m not really sure exactly what it was.

I looked at this fire place
and I thought: “Well Charlie
you might think your flame
has gone out but ours hasn’t!”
It was just one of those nights
were everything went perfect.
We had heaps and heaps of
people there from all over
different areas and I can’t
even remember over half of
them that were there I just
know there was a lot of people
there and we just got really good reviews and everybody was we were proud but our men
were prouder I think. Yeah ... no that was really good.



Stories still being told around an ancient
Fireplace : Exhibition “Together” 1999

Photographer, Cook, Bus Driver and Organizer

So, that got me more involved. We used to say about Kay Adlem: “Well here she comes, she’s got her camera again,” and now they say it about me. I’m always clicking away so I eventually got the job taking the photographs in the Pre-School. I started working in the Pre-School three days a week with the kids, as a Cook and a Bus driver. I would do a lot of craft work with them and organize their excursions.

“It’ll be Right” by Narelle Miller

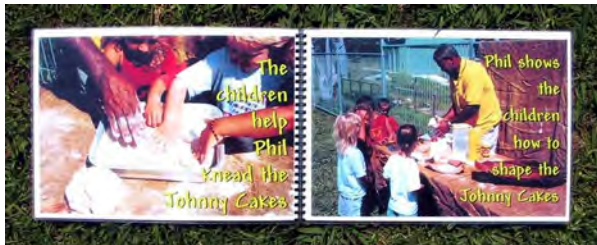
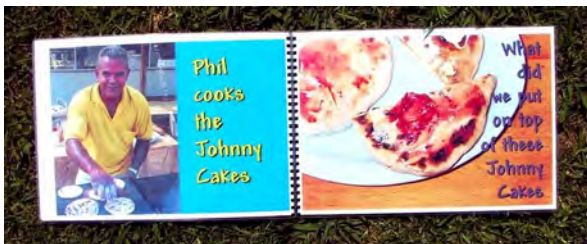


Pre-School Johnny Cakes project

Then, the middle of last year, the Pre-School got a small grant to do something cultural with the children and we decided we would get Uncle Phil, this is Phil Eulo, the kids call him Uncle Phil, to come in and cook some Johnny Cakes.



Well Phil just jumped at the chance and I’m sitting in the kitchen trying to watch how he does it but he is one of those real old fashioned cooks, a heap of this and a blob of that and just a dash of this and off you go, so I still can’t cook a decent Johnny Cake but anyway we decided that we would do a booklet of Phil making Johnny Cakes with the children.



Linda asked me if I would take care of setting it all up and trying to keep the feeling of the bush and the kids. So we made our own little book. The only thing is I’m just.... just a little ... vain enough to be just a little bit disappointed that I haven’t got my name anywhere on the book for taking the photos and setting it all up.



Boys’ Camp – Baryulgil in Bundjalung Country

I did a trip last Christmas with Trevor Patten and his boys. We went up to Trevor’s place, Baryulgil¹. Beautiful spot. The camps were good. Tommy came on that one with us. We had Leonie Garvey and Bill and a couple of other guys from the Land Council. That was a different trip, different to what I normally do. Hopefully the same outcome but done differently.

We went up there and camped by the River. A lot of the local community people came. They put up their tent and stayed with us. They were Trev’s family and we had big mobs of little kids running around the place and the guys going off and getting kangaroo and things like that. Diving for turtle and old Aunt putting the big net in across the river. It was different. I loved it. I honestly did love it because I’m a real water person so I did like being right on the river and seeing the cows wandering through.



You hear the cows outside in the night which throws you off but it was good. It was hard work because we basically had no modern cons’ what so ever, **none**. We were set up in a camp kitchen, a couple of gas cookers and an open fire. We pumped our water over from the ‘Mish’ as we were cooking for maybe forty people. That was my job on camp, cooking. So that wasn’t easy. I was going to bed totally exhausted and my back was breaking because of working so low and things like that but they were great times.

A lot of the camps we have been on, the kids eat, we clean up and they go and do their own little things until its time to go to bed.

¹ Photographs from this section come from the document Mindaribba LALC 2001 “Cultural Awareness Youth Program” Information Package. Trevor Patten Community Project Officer - 2001 p.21

But because of where we were and the community people coming in they would just sit and the stories they were telling of their childhood, of their growing up and thing like that and the kids were just.... and when I say kids I’m talking about boys, teenage boys, twelve up to probably nineteen twenty, so if you can hold a nineteen year old attention you are doing very well. Yes, they were great nights. But old Arn’ up there she liked to tell the old ghost story. She delighted in telling all the kids the ghost stories and I got to tell ya’ I sat listening I can’t think of the old Uncles name, but I didn’t know if he was spinning a yarn or telling the truth he was so good at it. But Trevor assured me that everything he told us was true. And then Trev proceed to tell us a few things that happened at the old homestead out there that’s been demolished. ATSIC in one of their magic moments pulled it down rather than fix it up for people like us to go on camps, it was one of those things that ATSIC thought it was better pulled down but why I just don’t understand but there were lots of ghost stories attached to it. As I said they were different. Much harder work because girls tend to help in the kitchen whereas boys really don’t like to do that.



Photograph set-up by Leonie Garvey (*seen in front row on right*)

The adults all pitched in. Leonie’s husband would cook a BBQ and Daf would you’ve never eaten like it in your life. Catfish, now two years ago if you had said: “Do you want a bit of catfish?” I would have said: “Oh, go away I’m not eating that!”

It is the sweetest fish. Trevor said to me: “Oh, I’ll get some ‘catty’ out” My reaction was: “Oh go on - I’m not eating catfish!” He said: “I’ll cook it for ya.” And he did, he cooked it on the fire and it was sweet. It was really lovely and Daf cooks up the best Johnny Cakes and Dampers and they’re just beautiful.

It was so funny this night she had fried Johnny Cakes and I had roust the kids like half hour earlier: “Don’t take more then you want because we are wasting it” So this big pot of stew, and dumplings and I thought: “I haven’t had dumplings since I was a kid”, so I’m sitting waiting I’m going to get mine now. And these big fried Johnny Cakes are sitting there an’.. I thought: “I’ll have one of those too I’ll be able to eat that much so... I got that ... there was always mountains of it, anyway I was sitting down at this table and I was tucking into this and I couldn’t make out what I wanted to eat first, whether I wanted to eat the dumplings or the fried Johnny Cake. So I opted for the Dumplings and I’d eat the Johnny Cake later.

So I opted for the Dumplings and I was scoffing into these dumplings Oh, look they were the best things I had eaten for about six years and I was thoroughly enjoying them but I was being greedy. I couldn’t eat a quarter of what was on my plate!

And I’m sitting here with this big plate of food and I’m thinking these kids see me scrape this out. And I’m sort of sitting there and somebody said something and I said: “Oh. look I’ll just wrap this up, I’ll just do this and I’ll finish it in a minute.” And that was it, it got quietly put away, I did eat it later but I thought it was really nice. They were good times.

Photograph to the right²



² Photographs from this section come from the document Mindaribba LALC 2001 “Cultural Awareness Youth Program” Information Package. Trevor Patten Community Project Officer. 2001- p.20

Photograph below³



Trevor Patten (*back row on right*) with didj and young dance group

Girls’ Camp – Taree

Last year I took an all girls camp away. It was totally different to anything I have ever experienced. I’ve got to say that these girls had never been on camps before and didn’t know what was expected of them on camp. These girls were different. I had spent ten weeks previously with them doing the cultural practices part of the course as this wasn’t just a camp. This one was a ten week course. We had done this with Trevor’s boys as well so we said we would try and do a girls’ one as they were asking: “What was for us?” The girls do intend to get left out of a lot of stuff. Like football, football is very important and I love it don’t get me wrong, I love it. But, there for a little while, the girls were left out of that. But I’ve got to say it only took someone to ask, like:

³ ibid p.22

“It’ll be Right” by Narelle Miller

“We want to put a girl’s touch football side in the Bathurst competition,” and it was done and the girls went away, so it was only a matter of asking. And everything was done for them, it is always good. So we thought we would try a camp just for the girls to see how it went.

The ages were from twelve to twenty three I think it was but the oldest girl we had there was seventeen, we had a few sixteen year olds, couple of fifteen year olds and couple of babies, twelve, thirteen year olds and then we took our own little one with us. That was a hard camp. The hardest camp I have ever had to do.



Some of the girls at Turtle Camp 2002





It was what I call high maintenance because there were definitely fractions in the groups. This was why we felt it important to split the groups up because they had formed their own clicky little groups and it was: “You camp over here and you’s camp there and we’ll go in this tent here and you’s will have to go over there.” So I decided then that I would break them into groups and each of the groups would have their own representative within their working groups.



We did a roster up and each group as required to do a certain amount of jobs each day and the jobs rotated so that they weren’t doing the same jobs day after day so we had someone helping me with the breakfast and the same with lunch and dinner and things like that. Our gas BBQ wouldn’t work so that meant we only had fire, so we had rosters that we had to work too. And a lot of it involved getting wood because we needed a continual supply of wood.



Narelle Miller at Turtle Camp bush kitchen

Turtle camp

We stayed at the Turtle camp out at Taree, near Old Bar. And I’ve got to say as far as location probably the best place I’ve been to as a camp because everything was there. Nothing was big or flash, we had hot and cold showers, flushing loo’s and we had a really good camping community area that was undercover, big open fire in the corner, plenty of cooking space and a BBQ; a fire BBQ that we used and an old lounge.

We split the girls up into groups. It was school groups to start with then we pulled one child from each school out and gave them a name that was appropriate to that area. On other camps we just went with the old schools theme of blue, green, red and orange. It eventuated at Taree that we had ‘turtle’, ‘shark’, ‘dolphin’ and ‘whale’. One student from the different schools went into each group until all the groups were filled. The main reason was to break up the little groups from each school and encourage new friendships to form. It was also teaching the kids how to work with people they didn’t know. You know if you get into a kitchen, working with six women that you know, not a lot happens. But if you’re in there with six people that you don’t know there is a whole different conversation that goes on... where you’re from, who you are, what you’ve done and all that.... and that’s what was behind the groups.





It was very cold so we needed the fire going of a night time and first thing of a morning, there was a resident caretaker and his wife who, were really lovely people, couldn't do enough for us. They had their dogs and they were really lovely. In front of the fire was two old lounges I think it was two old lounges and the first night I was there – I had lent, my son, Dean and Kylie my new air bed prior to going, it is a queen size extra thick velour – and about one o'clock in the morning I am sleeping on the ground, it just... he had punctured it. I was not impressed so, I had no torch it was pitch dark and I thought I'm just going to go over and lay on the lounge. So I went over and laid over on the lounge with me rug. But by the time day light came I had two dogs sleeping with me. Well I was extra warm. I had one dog curled up round the back of me on the inside knees and the other one curled up around me feet and I'm getting up scratching and I thought: "Oh God." But that was part of it ... you tend to ... unless somebody asks you ... you tend to forget the parts that were nasty or the girls that were the problems, you remember the good times.

Spacemen on Aboriginal Land

One night we had an extra lot on, the girls really had a lot to do they were full on. We were so busy that Christine and I didn't have time to get in through the day to restock what we needed.

So Christine said: “Oh, I’ll come with you for a run.” This was probably eight o’clock at night. It was still dark, it was very dark. Very dark in the middle of the bush and Christine and I were driving along.

I’ll explain to you, when you get to Turtle Camp you had to drive down a little bush track and then turn into this little place off this main road. So we are driving up the bush track and we hear this ungodly noise, it was so ungodly that I

freaked and I just looked at Christine and said: “What was that? For God sake, put your window up and get me the hell right out of here will yah?” So at that we take off and I said: “Look don’t worry about , if your muffler comes off, I’ll buy you a new one, don’t worry about it, just get me out of this bush.” So off we went: ... “and don’t slow down to take the corner.” It was really so funny because Christine is a really careful driver. And it was her car. But this noise was unbelievable.



Stephen Talbott and Tommy Miller move fallen tree



Christine 2002

It was the biggest shriek and scream I have ever heard. We are coming to where we leave the bush track and go on to the road. And I said to Christine: “Don’t you dare slow down, you keep going, I’ll replace the muffler, if we’ve got to.” So at that, once I was out of the bush track I was fine and I said: “I wonder what that was? – Don’t know!” So we went in and did our shopping and we are coming back along the track and all I could see was this huge bright light and these people, which we wasn’t sure were from this earth, decked out in all this white gear and I said: “Oh, holy – Christine just get out of here.”

So we flew back to camp, and all this had happened to us and we pull up and they say: “Guess what happened to us? You’ll never guess what happened to us.” And I said: “Well you’ll never guess what has happened to us!” It was so funny. And I’m trying to tell this as close as I can remember it. What had happened back at camp is that they were hearing these ungodly noises too.

And they said: “The dogs went off and the caretaker (Joan) and Leonie went to investigate this noise. It actually was these two guys, which Joan and Leonie had a bit of a confrontation with and they were going to sick the dogs on them. It turned out they were actually University people studying a rare owl and we had all spoilt their experiment. So everybody had ruined the University experiment for the rare owl. But Joan she was having none of it and just she totally abused them for being there.



David and Joan at Turtle Camp 2002

They didn’t have permission to be there. So she politely told them that they were on Aboriginal Land and they had no right being there without them knowing about it. They had no right scarring the hell out of everybody. It was a different sort of an experience I’ve got to tell yah. So eventually the ‘spacemen’ as we started calling them, because they were decked out in these white suits.

They apologized and made an arrangement to come back when the camp was finished, so it was all a happy ending and we have all laughed about it since but it really was a good experience, so as I said, there are the good times.

“It’ll be Right” by Narelle Miller

The kids when they were doing what they wanted to do enjoyed it. Like they loved going over and canoeing over on the lake and they loved the craft.



They didn’t like having to get out of bed at a certain time. They liked to spend at least, at least half an hour each in the shower. We only had one - oh we had two actually as we used the male shower area. The girls spent at least another fifteen minutes at the mirror and then one tent just held a hair dressing shop most of the time, you know little things like that.

We had Kiera Eulo. She was one of the younger ones but she’s at the School of Performing Arts so they got their little dance group together.

She did a really good job considering. So they got this dance ready that they wanted to perform for the Elders of the area. So they practice nearly every day for at least for an hour of an afternoon so they could perform on our last night there.



Narelle Miller watches the girls practice their dance routine with Kiera Eulo, in white top, at Turtle Camp. 2002

We had a big community night, where we invited the Elders over and community people from Taree mission and we put on a big BBQ and the girls they danced. They had done some art works and they give them to the Elders from the area to say thank you for letting us be up there because they never charged us anything.



The Community sent somebody over to take the girls on a bush tucker tour and things like that so that night was very good. I thoroughly enjoyed the last night there. We had a couple of the old Uncles there, they brought their guitars and they were singing along.

The kids thoroughly enjoyed it. A few of them got a bit shy on the night they didn’t dance but there are a couple of the girls that really should go further with their dancing because they were extremely good at it. One of the girls Isobelle Campbell (*right*) is extremely good so I hope she does go on and does something with it.



Last year we had an Education open day at Mindaribba LALC and Kathy Marika, she’s a Top End Lady, who has moved down this way. She has been teaching some of the kids over at Rutherford High to dance.

“It’ll be Right” by Narelle Miller

She had a couple of the students I have known over the years in that group. I was really pleased to see them. What really surprised me and I was so pleased to see was a couple of the boys in there dancing as well and couple of harder cases I might add from Trevor’s group. It’s good to see them and it’s really good to see these kids developing an interest in their culture and I mean ‘a real interest’. Not just whacking on a black, red and yellow band or a tee shirt or a hat but becoming really interested in their culture and where they’ve come from. Who their mob are and that’s a plus.

What does Rick call them?

“Little victory’s, nothing earth shattering just little victory’s.”

Yeah. But none of this could have happened if it wasn’t for people like Rick, the co-ordinator of the Land Council, and Tommy, my husband who puts up with all sorts of shit from me when I’m doing these things. I could never have done it on my own.



Narelle and Tommy Miller 9/9/1996



Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council

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