



Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse

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ISSUES IN GOOD PRACTICE

Marlene Speechley, Coordinator of Nawamba House Women's Shelter, Mt Isa

by Karen Wilcox

Marlene Speechley has been the Coordinator of the Women's Shelter in Mt Isa for nearly thirty years. She speaks here about her work in the refuge movement and with local Indigenous communities.

What is it like to run a refuge in a rural community like Mt Isa?

Well, one of the main differences is that the location of city shelters is secret. Here everyone knows where we are; you cannot keep the address secret. When we first started twenty-nine years ago, we changed our phone numbers all the time but the location and number kept getting out, so we gave up.

Mt Isa is also a melting pot. We have clients from so many different nationalities, from the Gulf country, the south east, everywhere. Although domestic violence is our priority, we also have women who have to come in from communities for medical appointments. At the moment there's an accommodation crisis in Mt Isa, due to the mining boom. That has had a huge impact on the availability of housing. It is an issue across the board – for people who are homeless and who have experienced domestic violence.

Now is a busy time and it is leading up to rodeo [in August]. Christmas time is a slow time here. The events shape our needs; the rodeo and when the money comes around, like tax return time. When there is more money in communities (for example, when the baby bonus is available and at tax time) it causes more problems. There is more money, more alcohol and drugs, and more domestic violence.

Another issue is that Mt Isa is in demand because of the "dry" communities in the Gulf region which have Alcohol Management Programs. Many people come down here for lots of reasons. They come down for work, for court, they come out of the criminal justice system and go back to abusing alcohol. Queensland has a program, *Bringing Them Home*, to get people back to their communities but they do not want to go.

Who do you take in at Nawamba House?

We take in women and children, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and boys up to fourteen years of age, because we've got individual units.

When we first started, we were a solely Indigenous shelter. They changed our service

from Indigenous to mainstream and now we cater to all women, regardless of race.

We used to take the mothers and younger children, and send the boys to the youth shelter but that does not work now. Prior to the housing crisis, we had a good relationship with the Department of Housing. They would give us a house and we did not have to wait. Once we were able to house three families in one week.

So you have good networks?

Yes, it has taken a long time to build a relationship with the Department of Housing. We have discussed things with the Primary Health mob. They want to come and help us now. We work in with Shirley Slann [Coordinator of North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service] and Mr Mathey, the magistrate who used to be here [an Indigenous man]. We have the Domestic Violence Action Group. That has encouraged the Domestic Violence Network. Now we have our finger on the pulse. In the early days, there was not much networking but we built our service up to cope with the problems of the community.

We have had to cope with the influx of other groups. We are a multicultural community and have lots of immigration issues because of the mining boom. Many ladies have visa problems. The influx of skilled workers raises new issues. Before, immigrant women were coming here to marry local men. Now, the skilled migration means the workers come with their families on temporary visas. Women and children can feel abandoned here following domestic violence. The town is a different lifestyle. We cannot put them back into the community after being in the refuge because they have no supports here. We have to negotiate with the mining companies about supporting them because the companies naturally take the side of their workers. We have to negotiate with the migrant support worker in Mt Isa.

Can you tell me about the other programs not normally linked with domestic violence that Nawamba House coordinates?

We have put in applications to the Federal Government for support programs, like sewing classes and 'deportment', to build up victims' self esteem. It is so important for ladies to have something to do and somewhere to go, to be able to make something and be proud, and this has strengthened their self esteem.

At first, applying for Commonwealth funding was really hard for a domestic violence shelter. We have had to look outside the box for the needs of our client group. We had to develop our organisation in a way that is accountable, responsible and transparent, and in doing so, we care. People trusted us. They gave us programs to run besides our own women's shelters. They allocated funding for us to do all these other programs. Some Indigenous programs were de-funded because of strict accountability processes. We started taking on other areas; such as sporting programs, children's programs and mother's programs.

So strong women are important?

Our reputation in the community is as a strong women's group and we have pushed ourselves because we were fully accountable. Our organisation is strong, not just in us as women, but in our accountability. There is strength in that as well. In the early days, domestic violence wasn't known but today, after three decades of service, there are

people using the shelter, who had been here all the time but who are now trusting us and coming out; Indigenous and non-Indigenous women.

Does having an Indigenous woman managing a mainstream service make it more accessible to Indigenous women?

We are the central point of contact – some of the white organisations were put out and we were challenged at SAAP meetings when Nawamba got the money for the mainstream shelter. But the Department supported us. We had good management and accountability and transparency. Now we are part of the mainstream. Everyone comes here; well-to-do people, as well as ladies from the Gulf country. We have a good relationship with Queensland Police. They bring women down from the Gulf or we meet them half way out of town. When we have domestic violence month in May, in Queensland, we visit the Gulf communities, Mornington Island, Normanton, Boulia, Camooweal, Cloncurry, Dajarra. There is a whole band of us, like a travelling group of preachers.

Over three decades you see there is not much difference in domestic violence suffered by different races of people, you are just catering for women in domestic violence, the colour of their skin does not matter.

When we first changed from being a specifically Indigenous service, one of the women said, ‘Sister, isn’t this our black shelter anymore?’ I said, ‘Yes, it still is but we’re helping these ladies as well.’ It has been good for the Indigenous women to see that domestic violence is also problem in white communities. We started as a black shelter but now we have got to help our sisters, too.

The (community awareness) trips sound wonderful...

Yes, we had Viv Edwards (previously Mt Isa Court Support) who was a great draw card. She would start singing, then everyone would come out from the communities and we would get a great crowd to talk about domestic violence. Sometimes she would start at seven o’clock in the morning when it was freezing cold. Next, a whole band of people would be around. We had a march in Boulia and around three quarters of the town joined in. That felt great. I grew up in Boulia. There used to be so much racism. Then I came back leading a march, a strong woman going back home.

Do you have any final comments?

I thought about writing a book about my life and my experiences at the shelter, to help us survive as workers in such a tough area. With so much violence in our working lives we need to remember that there are also so many success stories that make you feel good when looking back on them.

Many thanks to Marlene Speechley for speaking with the Clearinghouse about her work at Nawamba House.