

MOTHER'S CRYING OUT FOR HELP

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History

In October 2000, Elsie Lymburner from Juvenile Justice reported that three Indigenous children were seen inhaling behind the Vincent State School, to her boss Mr Ray Carter. Mr Carter then informed the Juvenile Aid Bureau. The police liaison officers were also aware of this issue about the same time. Mr Carter arranged a meeting to take place on the 12th of January 2001, which was attended by representatives from:

- Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Services (ATODS)
- Townsville City Council
- Police Liaison Officers(PLO's)
- Juvenile Aide Bureau(JAB)
- Open Youth Project(OYP)
- Lifeline Resource Service
- North Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care Association (N.Q.A.I.C.C.A)
- Youth Justice Service
- Townsville Community Service
- Townsville State Police
- David Moore- Liberal candidate for Mundingburra
- Two Youth Representatives.

Because of this meeting, it was determined that a workshop be held in March 2001, 34 people representing 15 of the above community and government organisations.

The workshop identified the target group as children and young people who inhale substances deliberately, socially and dependently, as well as some adults. It was decided that further information was required so that agency information could be compiled to identify the community support mechanisms available in the Twin City area.

As a result of these meetings 2 groups were established-covering two levels:

- State and Federal agencies-The Thuringowa & Townsville Inhalant Abuse Group.
- Local agencies-Inhalant Abuse Prevention Groups.

For the next two years these two groups continued to meet separately, and worked towards developing strategies to reduce and / or prevent inhalant abuse amongst Indigenous youth in the Twin Cities. A major success was the Thuringowa group convincing Twin Cities businesses to lock up and remove from public display, all spray cans. Currently the practitioners group is addressing other strategies such as the retail kit.

In September 2002, five mothers approached Mrs Wilma Kemp, the coordinator for St Theresa's Catholic Church Garbutt, in a cry for help in dealing with their children who were chroming.

Wilma organised a community meeting on the 25th of September 2002 to address substance abuse. The organisations that attended were:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)-Regional Council representative.
- Lifeline

- Police Liaison Officer's
- Multicultural Migrant Centre
- Reverend Charles Harris Diversionary Centre
- Aboriginal & Islander Legal Aid Service.
- Juvenile Justice Bureau.
- Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service.
- Townsville /Thuringowa Indigenous People Community Employment Enterprise Development Aboriginal Corporation-(CDEP)
- Centrelink
- Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Services.
- St Theresa's Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Church.
- Community members.
- Stagspole Rehabilitation Centre.
- Five mothers of chroming youth.

It was from this group a Community based and focused that the Mothers group emerged calling themselves "Mother's Crying Out For Help"

From these small beginnings, directly in, and as a response to, media attention and the mother's desperation the Mother's group began. The mothers were:

- Donna
- Fay
- Julie
- Leanne
- Fay
- Wilma-coordinator from St Theresa's Catholic Church, Garbutt.

At this meeting, Mr David Glasgow, Children's Magistrate in Townsville mooted the idea of a Townsville Justice Group, as a response to discussion within the group.

The Mother's Group began to have regular meetings at St Theresa's Church. Ongoing, and almost inflammatory media publicity provided the means for Lifeline in obtaining a Government grant of \$72,000-00 as a broker to address the new public agenda issue of children, as young as four, five and six years of age, chroming. On reflection, it would appear that having this money generated much discussion, and for that matter, dissension as to whom would provide leadership of the Mother's Group.

For the mothers of chroming children, and from my own perspective, it does seem that funding, in this case, did become a distraction from the real issues / reasons the funding was originally granted.

At this stage the five mothers still had not received any concrete help, the process of coming together helping to understand the issue and be better informed about the issue of inhalant abuse. Further, over this period, community organisations received training in assisting chromers.

On the 28th January 2003, Wilma Kemp and I decided some "real action" was needed to further support the five mothers who were by this stage, desperate for assistance and support. With the mother's group we reviewed the minutes of meetings passed, and without reinventing the wheel, it became obvious that several major issues needed to be addressed:

These issues were:

- Chroming kids being kicked out of school and not welcome back.
- Youth boredom
- Need for education and training, if only to build self worth in the children
- Need for support for the mothers and families of chroming kids.

Based on these issues, it was essential to identify some strategies attached to the issues and what this group could achieve, these were:

- Support for Mother's Group through St Theresa's Catholic Church- Coordinator-Wilma Kemp, ATODS- Maria Walmbly.
- A detox shelter / healing centre for the kids (requires major funding).
- Transport for the kids and mothers for doctors appointments-Townsville and Torres Strait Islander Health Service (TAIHS).
- For other recreational activities to and from-Transport needed.
- Fundraising- to make things happen for the kids, such as selling of arts and crafts etc.
- Responsible media reporting in order to dampen the media flames.
- Night patrols which has now commenced in the community. They have a great challenge on their hands to cover the Twin city area, and will need a lot of support from the community.
- Alternative Education-when suspended or expelled. The children need alternative programs.
- Premises so the youth can call their own, a place where they will be able to learn cultural activities and programs such as dance, painting, story telling, arts and crafts and other educational programs.
- Cultural Camps- By taking fifteen "at risk" children aged between 13-17 years of age to the Laura Cultural Festival and 11 supervising adults. The aim of this camp was for Aboriginal youth to be given the opportunity to witness first hand-dancing, singing and many other cultural activities, in order to gain more appreciation of their aboriginality, their identity and increased awareness of the value of their culture and tradition, strengthen family spiritual bonds, and cultural-spiritual connectivness with self, family and community.

This was achieved by improving self-esteem, respect and identity. This encouraged the youth as to what Aboriginal people can do or be / to achieve the essence to motivate themselves, and to decide what road to follow other than the direction which involved offending or sniffing inhalants.

Outcomes from the Camp at the Laura Cultural Dance Festival:

- Peer Pressure for honesty, eg stolen cigarettes returned.
- Cheek from younger children towards adults reprimanded by older sibling to show respect.
- All the youth voluntarily remained at the campsite.
- Youth took turns doing the chores.
- Built on trust-returned after activities.
- No incidents of inhaling or offending
- Attended all cultural activities.
- Great interest in the next camp.
- All youth wanted to stay longer this reflects the overwhelming success of the trip in exposing the youth to their Indigenouness and need for group cohesiveness.

Some Comments:

J G: *"I liked the routine every day"*

"Next time more kids-bigger bus"

"Same supervisors"

"I liked the Milo and we had lots of food!"

N.G: *"The camp was deadly"*

"The next camp should be longer"

Pitfalls

- 1 There is a real danger of groups losing focus of who is being helped-ie. The kids "at risk"(the inhalers) and their families, and NOT the agencies who receive funding/grants
- 2 To date there is no detox / Healing Centre for the youth. At risk of sounding cynical- talk is cheap, but reality is very expensive.
- 3 There is no respite available for the families of chromers other than when their children are locked up.
- 4 There is no flexible learning available for chroming kids
- 5 There is no employment opportunities or traineeships for older kids. Work provides a means of escape from the boredom, as well as improving their standard of living. Along with the flow on effects of improved health, nutrition reduced petty crime etc.
- 6 There is a very real danger of Indigenous groups giving up. However, this community development approach will strengthen their understanding of the issues and what is most important is to empower the mothers to understand what they can achieve for themselves rather than wait for others to do it for them.
- 7 The Laura Camp gives testimony of what the mother's combined with the local community was able to do to make things happen for the kids.

Future

Assisting this women's group has reinforced the lesson for me that it's only the people themselves that can change what is happening. We must challenge ourselves to remove the yoke of victimisation and accept the challenge of healing our people. To the white community, our challenge to you to stop seeing chroming as an "us & them issue. Accept the social ramifications of colonialism as it impacts across all of society in 2003 and stop allowing the continued paternalism that pervades community programmes, by taking on the challenges ourselves and groups for dominance. This results in the groups losing sight of the people and community they were established to represent and resorting to missing the "goal posts" according to their agencies.

Finally, at not generating controversy, the "Mother's Group" has grown. This group is an example of self-management for Indigenous people providing the vehicles; the cures; the structure for the youth. The women recognise the re-introduction of Indigenous traditional values-teaching our youth about their roots and heritage, the urgency of teaching and showing them importance, the strength and dignity of the elders- so that their communities can begin to heal themselves-whether or not they are urban or rural.