

A WOMEN'S REFUGE FOR BOURKE: A COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

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IN THE EARLY 1980S A PUBLIC MEETING WAS HELD AT THE WALLY BYERS hall in Bourke. This meeting was largely attended by Aboriginal women who stated that they needed a refuge in the town. This need was as a result of a perception that violence in the home was on the increase and that there was such a degree of overcrowding in the community that the previous response of seeking refuge at the house of a relative was not one that could be relied on any more.

In the next few years there were some meetings held and some government departments approached but nothing much came of these efforts. The next major push for the refuge came in 1987-88. The District Manager for the then Department of Youth and Community Services, Ms Maureen Irvine tried her hardest to assist a group of local women to obtain funding in order to establish a refuge.

Ms Irvine explained to her departmental officers who administer Supported Accommodation Program (SAP) funding that domestic violence was a very real problem in the town and that Bourke's relative isolation made it imperative that some facility of this nature should receive funding. These applications and submissions came to nought.

The committee formed to make these submissions continued to meet occasionally over the next few months.

The Establishment of a Refuge

In 1989 at one of these meetings it was advised that a woman from the Department of Family and Community Services would be coming to address local women about the possibility of obtaining funding for a refuge through her department.

When the meeting convened it was made aware that a group calling itself the Mygunyah Aboriginal Corporation had been formed by a group of women in Dubbo. The objective of that group was to provide support for victims of domestic violence. This group had already obtained funding for

the appointment of a domestic violence support worker in a number of western New South Wales towns. The assembled group of women were informed that Bourke, like a number of other places, would be able to appoint or elect a local sub-committee who would in turn elect two members who would be seconded to the Mygunyah governing committee. There was strong protest among the women that the town needed a women's refuge and not a support worker. However the meeting was presented with a fait accompli and the role of the worker was explained.

Whenever a woman was faced with domestic violence she could seek out the worker who would make arrangements to find her accommodation in a motel until public transport could be obtained or the worker could be in the position herself to transport the woman and her children out of town to the nearest refuge in the town of Parkes some 500 km away.

This service also provided the women with some funds to pay for the refuge and transport. This was the first facility that was set up to cater exclusively for the needs of victims of domestic violence in Bourke. There remained a vocal group of women who continued to argue to maintain the quest for a refuge because despite the vital service offered by Mygunyah and its domestic violence support worker, a large number of women in the town only wanted a short separation from their spouse while there was the potential for violence and after that wished to return to the spouse and the matrimonial home. They argued that a residential facility should remain as an objective.

A group continued to meet with this objective in mind and in May 1991 decided to formalise proceedings again and start writing submissions for funding. A Roman Catholic nun from Cobar, Sr Philomena Sewell, of the Presentation Congregation, came to Bourke to give us some ideas about how the committee could embark on this project. She had been involved in the establishment of a refuge in Young.

Shortly after that meeting a public meeting was called of representatives from every organisation in the town. Some thirty people attended. At that meeting the members of the Bourke Historical Buildings Cooperative made an offer which could not be refused. They had been in possession of a heritage listed building in the centre of town for nearly ten years. In the current climate of government funding they were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the building and were willing to make it available to the women's refuge committee on the undertaking that it was maintained.

The value of this offer has to be explained. This building was a grand old mansion with six very large rooms, two enclosed verandahs, open verandahs on three sides, a kitchen, two toilets and a bathroom. It was set on a large block and had a lock-up garage. The house was located in the centre of town and was only a half block away from the police station.

The Buildings' Cooperative offered the committee a twenty-five year lease rent free with an option to renew the lease for a further period of twenty-five years on the same terms. The Shire Council, on application, subsequently waived the water, sewerage and land rates. The committee thus had its premises at the right price.

Having accepted the generous offer of a free house, the hitherto fairly informal group of women decided to incorporate as an association under the NSW *Associations Incorporation Act (1984)*. This group applied and attained charitable status and then applied to the Commissioner of Taxation to be exempt from taxation and bank charges.

It was decided that rather than wait for government at local, state or federal level to respond to the applications and submissions, the association would start raising

funds in the community in order to complete the building repair and security enhancement program. A radio auction was organised on the local public broadcasting radio station. This entailed approaching every business house and organisation in Bourke and the surrounding towns of Brewarrina, Lightning Ridge, Nyngan and Dubbo and asking them to donate items for auction. All committee members chipped in with services, for example, two weeks ironing, a picnic luncheon for eight, a nappy service and so on.

On a Sunday in November 1991 the three stock auctioneers in town spent the whole day on the air broadcasting the auction of these items. This raised approximately \$13,000.

In the same month a local businessman appeared in the local court and in order to demonstrate to the court that he was of good moral character he donated \$2,000 to the refuge.

A private bequest of \$4,000 was donated from a CSIRO scientist. These funds were made available from her husband who said that she would have been delighted to be involved in such a project.

In addition money had been raised through the more usual means such as bingo, cake stalls and raffles.

Some of these funds were used for public liability insurance, workers' compensation insurance, and volunteers' compensation insurance. The building and its contents also had to be insured.

After the building repairs were completed and the fence installed, then began the difficult task of finding personnel. Up to date the committee had been unable to access any government funding. An Aboriginal woman who had been employed as a health education officer by the Health Department of New South Wales agreed to move into the refuge as her permanent home. The arrangement was that she would get the exclusive use of two rooms and a toilet and share a bath and kitchen facilities with the clients.

She would not be paid for her services and she would not be charged for her accommodation or electricity. There would be a phone installed at the committee's expense and whilst the committee would pay for rental and for the calls made by the refuge, she would make up the rest of the bill. The committee were really fortunate with its choice of the live-in refuge manager. Mrs Collis already had high standing in the community. Her reputation was unequalled for both integrity and confidentiality. As a result, from the day she moved in, which was about two weeks before the refuge was ready to accept clients, she had people knocking at the door to just spend a few hours talking to her and asking for refuge.

Some tough decisions about the refuge policy were also taken. It was decided that, unlike city refuges, the location of this refuge could not remain secret. The address and the fact that it was a women's place where women could go and speak to a sympathetic listener were published in the community.

The six months prior to the opening were really busy. A great deal of the time was spent talking to the grandmothers who had until now borne the weight of domestic violence by being the people who provided refuge largely at the expense of their own health and well-being. A large cross-section of the community was informally consulted, asking them about their requirements, their needs and their worries about such a place.

Most of the older women were extremely supportive of the concept of the refuge and many offered their services as volunteers. The younger women who had spent

most of their lives in the shadows of full government funding seemed apprehensive that the refuge could possibly function without funding.

Many older women who had been victims of domestic assault in their younger days stated their regret that such a place had not been around while they were younger. Younger women and current victims asked the following questions most often:

Would they be compelled to complain to police should they use the refuge?

Would they be chastised for returning to their husbands?

Would they be compelled to apply for an Apprehended Domestic Violence order?

They were assured that the refuge only existed as a place they could go to for a long or short term (as they felt like it) during which they could avoid an unacceptable situation. It was agreed that all women could bring their children. The committee was unable to agree on whether or not adolescent boys would be allowed in the refuge but eventually we decided that should a woman arrive in the middle of the night with an adolescent son she would be allowed to let him remain with her for the night. The next day, however, his continued residence would be dependent on the feelings of other residents at the time as well as the child's willingness to abide by the rules of the refuge.

Some time was spent talking to the wider community. The policies were explained and publicised. The intention was to ensure that nobody felt that the refuge was to be detrimental to men in the community. It was the intention to provide a safe place for women and children, but the committee were not going to proselytise and try and convince the women that it was the one and only way in which they could live their lives.

The intention was to support women in whatever decision they made and provide them with a safe and comfortable place should they need it.

The refuge opened on International Women's Day 1992. In the first month of operation, 100 bed nights were occupied.

Funding

To date, no government funding has been received despite letters to all levels of government and the refuge has been unable to employ full-time paid staff for any length of time. Nevertheless some help has been received from the congregation of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and also from St Vincent de Paul Society. The former made available an amount of \$10,000 while the latter donated \$5,000 for furniture. Two casual employees have been employed for two hours each day, five days a week in order to provide the refuge with continuity and to assist with cleaning and other household chores.

Both these women are local Aboriginal women. The live-in manager becomes a live in refuge worker after office hours four days and five nights a week. During office hours, on alternate Wednesday evenings until 10.00 pm and on weekend evenings and nights the refuge is staffed by an army of volunteers. Some thirty-two women aged between the ages of twenty-one and sixty-five staff the refuge on a monthly roster.

The committee continues to raise money through street stalls and raffles to pay for electricity bills and other incidentals. Some publicity is received in the *Catholic Weekly* and some \$600 in the mail as donations.

A fundamentalist Christian community provides the refuge with half a sheep a week and the committee buy bulk food like frozen vegetables, milk, tea, coffee for the clients'.

The clients are asked to contribute \$5.00 per day per adult and 50c per day per child. Only two clients have paid so far. There is no system to collect unpaid fees nor is there any intention of doing so. All that is done is request payment and hope that a sense of fair play and decency will prevail. The Mygunyah Corporation has recently agreed that should any of their clients use the refuge they will be pleased to meet the costs of their stay. This is vital as such income is exclusively applied to purchasing food and other items for the use of the residents.

Conclusion

What has been achieved is a facility that runs for twenty-four hours a day seven days a week and this has been achieved without having seen a cent of government money. It has been an enterprise run only by women for women.

The committee itself is an interesting cross-section of the community. It includes the first Aboriginal woman to be an elected member of local government in Australia, a grazier's daughter, a local general practitioner, a nun, an Aboriginal teacher's aide from the convent school, a pre-school teacher, a primary school teacher, a State government employee and a nurse from the Aboriginal Health Service. All of these people, except the nun, also have children.

All but one of the clients have been of Aboriginal descent although the problem of domestic violence, both in the town and in the wider community, is not an exclusively Aboriginal one. However, so far only Aboriginal women have publicly acknowledged the problem. The committee has decided that it will make its services available to all sections of the community. However, there has to date been little public acknowledgment that family violence occurs within the non-Aboriginal community.

There is widespread acknowledgment of violence on a personal and private level. However, it seems that economic factors, coupled with living conditions, make the desperation of Aboriginal victims of domestic assault more extreme than that experienced by their non-Aboriginal sisters.

In an otherwise racially divided community we have managed to have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women work together for the common good. Many women who would have never met have come together and made friends. There is a level of decision-making among volunteers that has made them feel that they have a stake in the ownership of the place. They cherish and nurture the institution as their own and defend it very strongly.

One of the great strengths is a non-judgmental stance. The women are not told what to do. A large proportion of clients stay only for a short time. They come to the refuge when they perceive that a situation has the potential for escalation into violence or after they have been assaulted to avoid further assault.

So far the premises have not been threatened by any men. This may be due to the fact that a large proportion of the volunteers are older Aboriginal women who have

some standing in the community and whose very association with the organisation gives us our reputation and prestige.

Finally, the name of the refuge is the Edith Edwards Women's Centre. Edie was a matriarch of the community. She was of the Wangkumara tribe. Her family owned a droving plant and originated from corner country. One day in 1937, following the government edict of the time her whole extended family were loaded onto a cattle truck and moved to the newly designated Brewarrina mission. This for her family was alien country and shortly after they walked out of the mission and began the long walk back to Tibooburra. When they got to Bourke the Darling was in flood and they stopped here. This is where Edie grew up and raised her family. And a large number of local Aboriginal people are related to her and this increases the sense of ownership. Edie died in 1990 but we hope her memory and her dignity and her traditional values will continue to live on through the refuge.