

Forum Presentation
Windmill Reception Centre
North Mackay
2.5.06

Guess who's come to dinner!

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about men's DFV perpetrator work. I am your guest, and I am honoured to be here. Thank you.

As your guest, it seems only fair that as I sit at table with you, you know something about me. I also believe that the way we deal with these issues is not simply technique, as clever and useful as that is. It must also come from the heart, from who we are. So I hope this also gives you a window to my work.

I'm 47, blissfully married, for a 2nd time, 2 years ago on the 16th of this month. Teresa is a social worker and Manager of the Lifeline Redlands and Logan Counselling Centres in Brisbane. I have no children of my own, but my stepson Ben came into my life about 9 years ago. He is a great source of pride to me, but not as much as he is to him Mum.

I have two sisters, both younger, and a memory more of body than of mind of a brother, Russell who died a matter of days after his birth, when I was 4 years of age. Both my sisters are married and I have 5 nephews and nieces.

My people are not indigenous. They come from southern Qld; at different times owning large tracts of land from Dalby to Roma and my paternal grand-mother's people, the Camerons, settled in the south west. One of the corners of Qld at its border with S.A and N.T. is called Cameron's Corner. I therefore carry a mix of pride and shame in the knowledge of my family's many achievements and I have no doubt the many exploitative forays into land we now know they had in fact and at law no right to call their own. For that I am sorry. They were by and large fair-minded, good-hearted people. But then, that's one of the characteristics of ongoing racism, is it not? ... discrimination by not just the overt bigots but by otherwise good-hearted, fair-minded people, in small and large ways dismissing, looking the other way, not having the gumption to treat people as equals, to say sorry or to exercise heart and head to stay the course in the long term because it is personally and politically expedient not to do so.

My own life history includes experiencing what were thankfully not severe acts of domestic violence, but my youngest sister who was still at home at the time of my mother's second marriage was not so fortunate, a matter that still plays out to this day, 20 years later.

I have worked in the D&FV sector for 16 years and I have used that time to learn what I can about the dynamics of abuse particularly in domestic but also in religious contexts. My second degree was in theology and although I rarely frequent a church these days, I still hold my ordination as a Minister of the Uniting Church. (Some of you may detect the frustrated preacher in me today). I have also used this time to make as much sense as I can (and of course our lives don't always make sense, do they?) of my experience as a child, a son, an adolescent young man and as an older man now as a husband and step-father. I can honestly say professional supervision and personal mentoring (often at the same time) has been my saving grace and I owe a great deal, to many wise women and men, elders really in my community. Children too I have found to be a great source of strength and heart. My own step-son, when asked by his Mum for a poem for her birthday rendered her a thing of beauty, describing her as a white owl, leaving her own nest just as soon as she could fly and now circling her new nest, a soft feathered white blur with claws always at the ready. And he's 15!

My engagement with Indigenous issues has largely been through elders and leaders of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, from the Cape to Beaudesert, and being here these two days is for me a great opportunity to learn so much more.

While I currently work for the Department of Communities in the Violence Prevention Team, I have come today as a practitioner and I am duty bound by way of a disclaimer to say any errors or fictions in what I have to say are mine and mine alone.

As I come to the table today, I want to place before us things which I am sure you already know, but I want to put them there anyway so that we both know what it is we are talking to each other about.

I firmly believe that, as I have found time and again in my own life, all the wisdom, courage and knowledge needed to resolve issues in Indigenous communities is to be found in the people who live there. I have heard, time

and again the lament of unrecognised cultural wisdom. And it costs us all greatly each time this wisdom is not heard, acknowledged and honoured. I have seen and heard the extraordinary stories and results, not least today, of people who give their hearts to their people, because they love them and they belong to them. I want to acknowledge that wisdom, that determination against extraordinary odds, to make a difference. Too few of us have the courage to believe we can and do actually make a difference. And too many of us who do make a difference, actually believe that.

So let me be really clear, if I may be so bold. The work you do, the work we do, **does** matter. It makes a difference in so many small and occasionally large ways. I do not pretend to be of great influence, but nor do I assume I have none. What we don't see is the ripple effect of what we do, but we must listen carefully to the intuition that says we need to work together. For if you believe that to be true, then it follows that when we do work together, whether or not we actually see it ourselves, things do change for the better. Of course, somewhere within yourself, you know this, but as I said, I just want to put on the table some things we already know.

What we do see every day is the trauma and the emotional distress in people's lives. We see it every day and we cannot turn away. That's why, of course, support and encouragement of each other is so important. Again, to put what we know on the table, can I tell you a story? A young man trains as a soldier. He goes overseas to fight for his country. By some dreadful accident or perhaps the direct actions of others, he is killed by what the military have the temerity to call 'friendly fire', a bullet from someone in the army he serves. He must now of course be taken home to his wife, children and family.

Then, by a further tragic turn of events or incompetence, his home-coming is interrupted because he gets left behind and another casket arrives in his stead. The family understandably are beside themselves with distress and anger. You can imagine the grief and anxiety, the disbelief and fury of those who are close to this young man and have steeled themselves for his return in the worst possible circumstances. Their hopes and dreams already dashed, they now face this other compounded screw-up.

I'm speaking of course about young Private Kovacs and his family, and I know many of you can imagine what they are going through because in the

living memory of so many of the people known to you as family and as community, there hasn't even been a casket.

So much of what was lost or stolen from you can never be repatriated. What remnant that can be returned is not returned or there is a huge compounding screw-up, people getting in the road and stuffing it up. So much communal distress, grief, anger turned upon themselves and upon those closest to them and escape through substances that deceive and rob still more life... I am quite simply stunned by the courage and generosity of spirit I encounter time and again.

And then of course there's the disinformation - again a parallel can be drawn with the experience of the Kovacs family. They remain certain he would not have been careless with a weapon he knew so well and had learnt to respect. So too the betrayal of the depiction of communities as dysfunctional wasted places complete with wandering wasted faces - a depiction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture which baldly says they can't look after themselves and goes further to say they float in a sea of addiction and as parents and guardians have thrown their children overboard.

Well, again, I place before you what you know already and how it is such a selective description of communities who daily deal with so much more than many of those watching TV can even imagine.

And so finally we come to this business of family violence, eh?

Such extraordinary anger and grief at the loss and theft of so much that matters at the heart: the spirit, the land, the children, the men, whole families. So much to do every day. So much physical and emotional distress and abuse. So understandable, so human, given the circumstances and yet so intolerable. So much blood, sweat and tears.

Given the manner in which so much was taken from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, **it seems entirely sensible to acknowledge this and use it as a springboard for healing, reconciling with the past (while the rest of us flounder around trying to reconcile ourselves with ours).**

Given the manner in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is passed from one generation to another, given the strength of culture and kinship ties, **it seems entirely sensible to give men who use abusive**

behaviour against those closest to them, the opportunity to tell their stories and mark their journeys with art, or song or trips back to country.

Given the manner in which individual and communal stories, told and retold, allow truth to surface and healing to make its gentle impression in the hearts of those who have been harmed, given the wisdom and knowledge of beginnings and endings, of the Dreaming in its many forms, **it seems entirely sensible to have great faith in this healing and in these processes.**

Given the impact of family violence and the manner in which it continues to make its mark even as much as 20 years later in the lives and dynamics of families, **it seems entirely sensible that we look to the long haul and do so one day at a time, so as to be less overwhelmed.** Quarterly statistics and annual reports tell only part of the story of healing. They are at best a necessary evil best used to point to the good things and the small changes that are so significant. When there's so much to do every day, we must of course make these changes significant in our minds, so as to report them for what they are.

Given the number of times it has been written and spoken that community development principles work best, and given the number of projects that have been tried only to fail because they were not sufficiently sourced, designed, shaped and determined by those who live there and know best, **it seems entirely sensible that reviews and evaluations take as much notice of how programs are introduced as it does to focus on the outcomes in the lives of the community.**

Given the intricate and complex web of relationships in communities and given what we know about all things being connected to all things, **it seems entirely sensible to bring together the issues and deal with them each one as part of the whole.**

Again, I'm putting before you a case for what you already know, **what in fact you have taught me.**

Challenges

The biggest challenges for me in my work with men were to put in the hard yards developing the program. It's a bit like painting a house or getting the rope ready to plait something stronger or preparing a garden for crops and flowers – so much of it is in the preparation. And so much of that comes from having a clear vision of what's needed, so that when you come across this person or that agency you're ready to give and take and to work together to achieve what you want and what they want.

Another thing is being open to other's points of views, not because they are right and I am wrong, but because there are bits and pieces of what they say that help, and together we build and shape and grow something strong and healthy. The greatest frustration comes to those who try to go it alone. (And if that's true for us, it's also true for the men whose behaviour is such a problem.) Where I last worked we had the facility to deal with legal, housing, health, drug and alcohol issues, emergency relief and good connections with a number of agencies including community corrections and women's services. It was hard work. So often the other agencies were suspicious or were so busy they didn't want to come aboard. They had to see they got something out of it for their clients too.

In the end though we found that when could assist men to get what they need in terms of the basics like food and shelter, legal advice and health care, they had less reason and less need to go back to the place where they have done so much damage, their own homes. So it was as much a safety issue as it was offering care to the men.

And for the team I worked with, a big challenge of all of us was to work with the men while maintaining this focus on the safety of those they have abused. It's not safe and it's not fair to those who have suffered the abuse to only work with the men. It's not getting to the heart of the matter to only work with the women. But when you try to do both and strike a balance, the first casualty can be the truth, that no-one deserves to be abused and there's no excuse, there's always other ways. The men don't tell the whole story because they are too ashamed or afraid the family will split up. Unless you can show them that they have a lot to gain by taking a step to the side for a while, they dig their heels in. Unless you can help them see that what they are doing isn't working and doing it over and over just makes things worse,

they won't get to a place where they can find the courage to do something different.

Finally in my work too the question of culture has been significant. Again it's difficult sometimes to carry the tension. Whoever we are we have cultural norms, the way we do things because that's what we do, it's what our ancestors did. Having respect for this is essential. What's equally essential is to identify the times and situations when abuse is used to maintain or achieve what is taken for granted as cultural. For example a lot of blokes think women have a particular place in their lives, namely in the home attached to the sink, child attached to the thigh or ankle. What they are really looking for is some stability and the experience of a having a family, preferable a close family. So, apart from identifying the human rights issue of forcing someone to do things out of fear, we'd talk about how close he really was to his family and whether this fear was actually helping him keep close to his family or close to the Police, a criminal record and that whole downward spiral. Other blokes in the group also tell their story about where it took them.

So when we ran the groups, I'd say to the men 'One of the things you'll learn here is how to manage your anger, but its much more than anger management, its about behaviour change and having the courage to work out how we give ourselves permission to use violence against our families.' Another thing I'd say is, 'We hope this group is supportive for you, but its not just a men's support group, it's about behaviour change and having the courage to work out how we give ourselves permission to use violence against our families.' And I keep coming back to this, no matter where the men would take things. This for me is the keystone, the bedrock, the vision; 'it's about behaviour change and having the courage to work out how we give ourselves permission to use violence against our families. We take the safety of your family seriously and we'd like to help you take more and more responsibility for the safety of your family. Are you up for it? What do you reckon? Could this achieve what you want to?'

And then for some we'd have to prepare them for the possibility that the relationship might not last, but there'd always be some kind of relationship; and what kind of a relationship do you have with someone who doesn't feel safe with you?'

And then there's the need to be aware of the possibility of suicide and to not be afraid to talk about it and to ask the men about it and also to work out if they really want to die or are they just sick of living like this? And then work out whether or not this threat is actually another form of powerful emotional blackmail which doesn't necessarily make it less likely that he'll try it, but it makes a difference to talking it through and recognising the harm he's causing in just making the threat, much less actually completing the attempt.

So many things, so much to do...

Open to questions...