

# Aboriginal Male Health Summit

30 June – 3 July 2008

By Brian Kennedy, Life Promotion Officer

ON MONDAY, 30 June I attended the 4-day Aboriginal Male Health Summit organised by the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress. The aim of the Summit was to talk about some of the challenging issues taking place in communities, in particular the abuse that has been happening, and to come up with some solutions. It was also to acknowledge that not all Aboriginal men are perpetrators of violence. The 4-day event was truly amazing and it was a privilege to be a part of it. I learnt a lot about Aboriginal culture and some of the problems they are experiencing.

As a designated transport and support person I picked up seven men from Titjikala in my troopy to take them to the Summit and be their support person. Each night I slept around the fire with them and slowly got to know all of them better. I enjoyed watching as they cooked some of the kangaroo tail (see photo next page)—chucked on the coals, fur burnt off and then for a couple more hours buried in the coals ... but I wasn't quite game to try it just yet!

The older bloke in the photos (apart from me) was an elder from Titjikala, Phillip Wilyuka. Over the four days he and I basically went everywhere together. As it turned out, on the last day he was asked to speak on behalf of all the indigenous men from the communities—you can see him on stage in the photo top right wearing his red bandana to signify his status. Perhaps he thought that I'm some kind of white fella elder. He has asked for a blown up picture of the photo of us next to the fire (next page)—he insisted on the photo of us being taken—and I will give him a framed photo as a present.

A lot of talk at the Summit was around the abuse of women and children by Aboriginal men. The men at the Summit were very remorseful and sorry for what



Elder Phillip Wilyuka from Titjikala gives an inspiring address in language during the conclusion of the Health Summit

has happened in their communities and wanted to acknowledge that not all Aboriginal men are perpetrators of violence. The men in attendance expressed disgust at the level of abuse and violence that was occurring and asserted strongly that it was not part of their culture to abuse women and children. It has caused deep shame on all Aboriginal men and the Summit was about addressing the factors that contribute to the abusive behaviour, and to come up with solutions that can be addressed at Government and community level.

**There was general acceptance that the men themselves hold the key to real change within their own culture and Law.**

One Aboriginal male noted, "It was like I am walking down the street and all these white people are looking at me and thinking I was one of those perpetrators of abuse that were being talked about daily on radio and television."

Eight groups were formed consisting of about 25 men each,

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Group photo of participants at the Health Summit

a deliberate mixing-up of communities, with a couple of us non-indigenous support workers thrown in. Each group met for about an hour with different facilitators to discuss a particular topic and make recommendations that it was hoped, if followed up, would make positive differences.

### The topics were:

Children are our Future, Domestic Violence, Whitefella Law – Blackfella Law, Pornography, Male Health, Grog and other Substance Abuse, Environmental Health, Safe Housing/Communities, Education/Employment/Income Business and Aboriginal Culture/Leadership.

I was extremely privileged to hear and partake in the honest and heartfelt discussions that came from participation in each separate workshop. The problems faced by Aboriginals in today's times, particularly those living in remote communities and town camps, was brought home to me in no uncertain way. I am filled with admiration at how, in spite of all the difficulties experienced by these men that I listened to, there is still a deep pride in culture and determination to make things better for their families.

There were many recommendations handed to Government as a result of the Summit. These recommendations are particularly important as they come from Aboriginal men themselves, about Aboriginal problems and how they can see improvement in their society.

A full report will be out soon, but some of the main issues that came out of the Summit for me that could produce positive outcomes were:

- ◆ alleviating the chronic shortage and inadequacy of current Aboriginal housing
- ◆ improving the education system Aboriginal for young people while retaining the importance of cultural studies in school curriculums
- ◆ training for Aboriginal people to have a greater representation in the delivery of health service provision, both physical and mental
- ◆ men's sheds—or an equivalent buildings—where men can have health checks, participate in workshops or simply have a place to go to.

There were many more; these are only a few that I thought were particularly relevant.

Towards the conclusion of the Summit a prepared message to the women and families of Aboriginal men was read out. As part of the speech the word 'apology' was used to express regret for the violence and abuse towards women and families by some Aboriginal men. Out of the side of the meeting area stepped an Aboriginal man and in a loud voice he said, "If it's good enough for the new government to say 'sorry' to us we can at least use the word 'sorry' to our women and loved one's." The hair literally went up on the back of my head. This was stirring stuff and was enthusiastically applauded by many of the assembled men.

After dropping the men off at Titjikala the trip home was a bit more eventful.

Elder Phillip Wilyuka from Titjikala and MHACA'S Brian Kennedy relax at night at the campfire under a million stars



Brian, Phillip Wilyuka and a group of fine young men from Titjikala prepare to cook the kangaroo tails

As the Alice Springs Show was on the next day I was asked to take a few people back to Alice. This took a bit of time and so the last part of the trip was done on some pretty rough dirt roads in the dark. Drop-offs to town camps and a local community resulted in a tired homecoming well after 8pm.

While I was exhausted I was also appreciative of the experience I had had.

**The Summit had brought together many different men from many different communities, a chance to talk openly and to look for solutions.**

Hopefully more good things will come out of this Summit and that many of the recommendations will be followed through.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I was particularly fortunate to be the transport and support worker for Elder Phillip Wilyuka, his son Darren Wilyuka and the fine group of young Aboriginal men from the Titjikala community. It was a privilege and honour to share the conference and campfire with them. Their generosity and friendship to me have given me a perspective and appreciation of Aboriginal culture and community which I was not aware of before.

I would especially like to thank Charlie Hodgson from Waltja for his guidance, help and support in facilitating my involvement in the Aboriginal Male Health Summit.

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