

# Indigenous Family & Community Strengths Conference ... Newcastle

Laurencia Grant reports ...

*HOW DO indigenous families and communities stay strong despite the challenges that confront them? How can non-indigenous organisations build stronger relationships with indigenous organisations so that our practices help to strengthen indigenous families and communities? How can we create more inclusive and accessible services that help to develop greater opportunities for meaningful engagement for indigenous families in community?*

THESE themes were played out over three days at the First Indigenous Family and Community Strengths Conference in Newcastle in April 2008. Mixed within these themes was a wonderful display of entertainment, heartfelt acknowledgement of the land of the meeting place and its people and lots of well received humour. The Family Action Centre of Newcastle under the leadership of Judy Geggie and SNAICC (the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care) combined their efforts to present this conference during a time of great hope in Australia in light of the Prime Minister's Apology Speech.

Central Australia was well represented with participants from Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa) Spirituality Centre and Men's program, Irrekellantje Learning Centre, Congress Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program, Waltja (Strengths Program), Mental Health Association of Central Australia (Life Promotion and Strengths), Tangentyere Council (Safe Families Program) and Bushmob.

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I felt a great sense of promise for the work being done by Aboriginal men to help build and maintain strengths. These were the sessions I was drawn to as I felt they were more relevant to my work in suicide prevention.

Gerard Waterford, Christine Palmer and Mary Therese Mulladad presented on the link between suicide and addictions and meaningful and sustainable employment pathways for senior Aboriginal community members, improved fathering skills and culturally appropriate ways to address Aboriginal grief and loss.

Liz Archer and Charlie Hodgson highlighted the importance of engaging men through trusting relationships, meaningful activities and appropriate educational tools in remote suicide prevention work. The important partnership between Waltja and Life Promotion was discussed as challenging and complimentary. Kristy Schubert's work in developing visual and audio information tools was impressive on the big screen and well received.



Charlie and Wayne at the Newcastle conference

Michael Yellow Bird is "a citizen of the Sahnish and Hidatsa First Nations" of the USA. He is also currently a Professor of Indigenous First Nations Studies at the University of Kansas. His speech was titled "The Strengths of Indigenous Peoples in the Time of Global Warming". It was poetic, sad and beautiful in its telling.

**His message was that we have much to learn from the stories of survival and strength through floods, wars, famine and drought that have impacted on many generations of indigenous people on our lands.**

He believes that the path out of our current dilemmas is through the untapped capacity of indigenous people. Their cultural knowledge, intuition, memories, stories and strong connection to land and this rich resource should be harnessed for our own salvation.

John Close is "a proud member of the Goorenpil people of North Stradbroke Island" and is the Director of the Goori House Recovery Service in Brisbane. His workshop involved a discussion of the treatment program he has developed for Aboriginal people recovering from drug and alcohol

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Paula and Amelia Turner and Mary Mulladad at the Newcastle Conference

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addictions. His honesty about his own journey of pain, abuse, dysfunctional families and addiction was mixed with humour and a warm and engaging manner. He convinced us that his methods work because they combine indigenous ways of working with easy to use assessment tools, data collection systems and a collection of ideas from his own research and life experiences in rehabilitation.

Brain Dowd is “a very strong young Gamilaraay man from North West NSW township of Coonabarabran” and the founder and general manager of “Black on Track Consultants” based in Lake Macquarie in NSW. His story was one of racism in small rural Australia, an absent father, substance misuse, suicide attempt and survival. His business is about creating change in the lives of young Aboriginal people by addressing healing, health, employment, education and motivation. It employs a team of staff in the provision of outreach support programs across Australia.

Chris Sarra “hails from Bundaberg in Queensland.” As the Principal of Cherbourg State School he gained national recognition for implementing

changes that resulted in improved educational outcomes, without having to interfere with welfare payments.

Chris believes that the NT Federal Intervention was driven by a Government who’s “heart was not in it.” He said it gained broader electoral support by creating an image of Aboriginal people as “absolutely hopeless and despicable”. He knows that Aboriginal people are “solid people, some who are drowning in the dysfunction they are forced to endure”. He believes that under the Rudd Government we will see an “education revolution” and that we need to be “armed and ready” to help breach the shameful gaps that we have seen. He looks forward to “an Australian future where we are all set free”.

The conference closed with a speech by Reverend Tim Costello who is currently the Executive Officer of World Vision. He drew on his experience in Victoria during unsettling times of competitive tendering of services and silencing of dissenting voices of Government. He believes in social capital and encourages us to see the strength and resourcefulness in the people and everyday occurrences around us. ✕

**For more information on the Indigenous Family & Community Strengths Conference contact Laurencia Grant on (08) 8950 4608**