

## ***What we did at Women's House***

In 1972 with the election of the Whitlam government funds became available for all manner of new and interesting services. Community health had come to be along with Community Information Centres. Through the auspices of these funding opportunities we sought to set up our dream — the multipurpose women's centre.

In 1973 Nancy Peck was working at Juvenile Aid. In fact she was the very first Queensland Police Officer in the position. She was and is a real pioneer. Her work in that position was with the young people in Brisbane who were in trouble with the police. Of course she came across young Aboriginal men and women, and relied on Elders such as Pastor Don Brady to keep them out of the jails and institutions. But she also worked with the young girls who were running away from home. It was Nance and Ruth Matchett who brought to light the facts about young women/girls who were being regularly raped, bashed and otherwise violated by their fathers, brothers, cousins and family's best mates right here in Brisbane.

*July to November 1974 Jan Williams and I undertook our final Social Work placement at Women's House at Cairns Street, with Sue Hirst our supervisor. Our placement was all about doing community development with women. So we set about applying the principles of radical social work. This fitted with the ideals of the women's movement, that women should have the power to decide for themselves everything about themselves. It eschewed all forms of hierarchical structures.*

In mid to late 1974 we received sufficient funding to rent a property, Cairns Street Red Hill to start our work. This was a great location being in a working class suburb, reasonably close to public transport and also close to Children By Choice and not far from the city centre.

We started small and voluntary with women rostering on the phone lines and providing the callers with the information they sought, and supporting them over the phone, confirming their worth and right to a peaceful existence; letting them know that it was not their fault; referring them to good doctors, finding them safe places to stay; educating them.

We measured all our work. We kept statistics about who called and why as this gave us the basis for our work. What women wanted was essential to our set up as we were heartily sick and tired of being told what was good for us and what we needed. This was radical community development where the people – in this case, women - determined their needs and provided the resources to meet those needs. This data became essential in supporting the applications for funding which would eventually be made. We were doing it.

## ***Women's Shelter***

We needed places to house the women and children fleeing from violent homes and families. The first shelters we had were the houses in Bowen Hills which had been resumed by Main Roads for the big freeway. It seemed not a little incongruous that we were able to obtain these houses from which the long-term residents were being evicted, and on whose side we struggled.

So we negotiated with the Main Roads Department and were able to use the houses being resumed for the North East Freeway as places of shelter. Consequently, as the demolitions continued, we were constantly packing up all the women and children and moving from one house to another.

Initially we rostered ourselves on to be at the house to speak with the women, go with them to appointments, deal with the dreaded Department of Children's Services for the paltry amount of 'welfare' paid by the State. No Supporting Parent's Benefit then.

*Our personal lives were reflected clearly in the social world, and we wanted to do it our way, and not in a competitive power-driven male way.*

We relied on the women there to take care of the household. They were the experts in this area after all. It was a point of great importance for the women to be free from the patronising aspect of having things done for them by well meaning others. So it was seen as essential that the women believe, see and care for the house as they would any other place, but to do so in a collaborative way. Sharing the tasks and care would build sisterhood, strength and solidarity. So jobs were rotated and shared, including the child care, between all of us, mothers, volunteers and workers.

*We all had experiences of personal relationships and shared housing. We all lived the sexual division of labour from the moment we woke up until the moment we went to bed, and then more often than not our bodies were not our own.*

*The question of sex role stereotyping was always on our consciousness. We are seeking / sought to be liberated from the confines of prescriptive demands about who we were, how we should be, what we should look like, and most importantly how we should behave.*

This had particular relevance for how we cared for the children in the houses. Our logic led some of us to the view that men and boys too would be subject to the coercive and destructive nature of this illogical and punitive belief. The children along with the women had been exposed to a male role model which in and of itself was superior, controlling, domineering, bossy, and ultimately violent. In order to challenge and change this, two of our male allies joined us. We organised and then later paid Brian Day who was the founder of Campus Inc. and in the forefront of the Gay Liberation movement to look after the children at the house when their mothers were away conducting their business. It was a complete and utter joy to see Brian playing with those kids in the back yards of those houses. Hoses running, swinging on the clothes lines, cricket, the whole gamut of backyard games familiar to any of us at that time.

We also asked Bob Borsellino if he would talk with those men who approached us seeking to reconcile with their wives, and he agreed. Unfortunately on the first occasion where we called on him he returned looking perplexed and non-plussed. He and the bloke, had gone to the pub where they had spent some hours talking, with Bob explaining the whole business of women's rights, the bad business that beating up your wife was, with the fellow nodding approval. So as the yarning came to the end Bob was asked, "So does this mean the bitch will come back?". Bob was furious, and promptly withdrew his voluntary labour saying that it was pretty much a hopeless cause to get Australian men to not be such misogynists - a view he held his entire life.

There was dissent in the group about whether or not to seek the funds available from the Federal Government. We argued about whether accepting money from the government would make us just another arm of the state. Many believed that doing so would undermine our independence to act politically and that we would become just another welfare service. If our true aim was to overthrow the patriarchy and liberate us and other women then we should do it on our own without using the funds of the State. Others argued that we would never be able to properly provide the support, safety, accurate information and security that women needed, or would we be able to have safe health without being able to employ trained and credited nurses. There was also dispute about how we should be structured. *How we would organise ourselves to make decisions was one of the first and most important things we needed to do. We had all come from different organisations and movements and shared our horror tales of dominance, authoritarianism, silencing and brute force that typified our experiences whether it was of the church, our job, the Police Force, our parents and in most cases men were the beneficiaries of our invisibility. So we wanted to make decisions collectively. The principles of informed consent were born here in many ways, and the clearly established link between our experiences as individual women.*

We wanted and acted as a collective, but needed to be an Organisation to obtain funds. Thus the Women's Community Aid Association was born. 135 women came together to be the members of that organisation and to be the foundation for attracting funding to complete our main goals. Not only would we have a collective decision making system, we would have relationships based on collaboration, inclusiveness, so we aimed for consensus decision making.

All such organisations were required to have stated objectives. So we set about naming and numbering what we wanted to achieve. Our first objective was to end violence against women within 5 years. We actually believed we could achieve that. We were the front runners in the area which is now de rigeur for all projects, programmes and the new managerialism – that is to have a time frame for our objectives. It is an indicator of our belief in ourselves and the capacity we had to bring about such a momentous change that we actually believed that we could do this within 5 years.

An area of difficulty and dispute developed within the group of women regarding how much we were to be political: to challenge and change our world and our society; as opposed to being a more respectable service oriented organisation. In truth many of us saw little difference between the two. By supporting and advocating for the individual in the way we were, we were in fact challenging the established order. We had a responsibility and duty to make political the personal lives of women and acted politically. We held demonstrations demanding an end to violence against women, for free safe contraception, for equal pay, child care and health care. These were and are integrally linked to the liberation of women; from men, from child rearing, from poverty and fear and from unwanted pregnancies. We weren't so much setting up a service but changing the world. Others however differed and sought to make a respectable women's service. The seeds of division and disruption were sewn. Ideological battlegrounds were drawn.

This struggle came to a head when the powers of the Constitution were used by the Directors to take over the whole organisation and establish a management committee as the primary decision making group. The collective notion of what we were doing was under threat. This was a poisonous time for many. This coincided with the mass exodus of many to the Southern States and a large number of the women who were founders left.

My story and involvement with Women's House ends here as I too headed for the hills of the Sunshine Coast.

Both the political, bureaucratic and funding environments changed dramatically. The movement had successfully lobbied for funding to establish women's refuges, and in the Southern States rape crisis services were also established, funding for child care services as part of community centres became available, and Women's Health Centres were established under the Federal Community Health Funding. To a large extent Queensland women missed out because of the intransigent position taken by the Bjelke-Peterson government against the Whitlam government and subsequent Federal governments.

*All this is and was dependent on many things, not just a willing heart or soul. We tried earnestly to live our own lives as we sought to change the world. Our life was what we did: what we did was how we would want the world to do. In every way possible it was and is the case that the personal is political.*

As well, we had a strong resilience and optimism arising from our wins. We did win on the war; we did win on the Springbok tour. We were successful, and we were street savvy. We had of course that added advantage of youth and the invincibility of the young.

*The disconnect between the espoused virtues of ideologies and the behaviours of those espousing and even prozletising them, was a matter of great interest. We dissected this on many occasions along with how we make sure that we have an environment where these noble aims of collective and collaborative living can exist. For many the system was so deeply embedded that we thought we should have nothing to do with men at all. Separatism was a lively and possible alternative for some women to consider. Shared housing, with shared child care and peaceful existence, does have its attractions. Many of us who were like that were named as man haters. In the context of a war on women, and our experiences of violence, this is probably not too far from the truth. Being labelled mad and bad was not uncommon.*

*We explored our bodies and our sex. Most of us had been denied any form of sex education, and knew vaguely of our reproductive systems. We busied ourselves correcting this, and began to make the links between our bodies and our health. The whole question of our role as women was for us a matter of life and death. Pregnancies, the fear of it, the low level of access to contraception were all matters which were of central importance to what we did. We promoted women learning about their own bodies, how our bodies changed over time, pregnancy and the dangers of child birth, undertaking self examinations, and when the woman wanted it we would be able to organise a clinical examination.*

*For us our health was not just about whether we were well or not. Women's health is about well being not ill health, Midwifery-led birthing. What concerned us was the medicalisation of our bodies and their natural functions: menstruation, pregnancy and child birth; women's role as healers in their families and communities.*

*Our health and well being are directly linked to our social and cultural standing. This was and is the essential link between the personal and political. Politics, the State or the Church and their instruments such as the Medical profession and its scientific model had always sought to control us through controlling our bodies. "Our Bodies: Ourselves" became the slogan of the movement and the underpinning philosophy of the Women's Health Movement.*

We also published and circulated information about contraception to the women and students of Brisbane, and as well were invited into some of the High schools to provide sex education. It seems so totally normal now that this is provided. Then however it was almost a criminal act and it is highly probable that the pictures we had and used were obscene. Previous experience of the Red and Black Bookshop led to this conclusion.

*This is tender subject matter. As we learned more of the extent of sexual violence we became more and more aware of the use of rape and sexual assault to control women. This had been brought home to us in a most confronting manner by Lilla Watson when she talked with us about the systematic violence against Black women by the Queensland Police Force. The complete failure of many complaints of rape to be taken seriously or in any other way dealt with by this same constabulary and criminal justice system (none) was sickeningly evident. Of course the story always ends badly for the woman.*

So in the face of this growing evidence it became clear that the whole area of rape and sexual violence could no longer be hidden. Women's experience was clear. This was all about power, and not some weird biological curiosity that men had in the control of their penises.

And so Brisbane Rape Crisis was set up in 1975 when we moved to Little Roma Street. What strong women they were, and I guess still are. They did not deviate from their mission of stopping rape and advocating for the woman. This was an enormous task which demanded continual confrontation with the Queensland Police, but the women in this collective would do just that. They would be with the woman, they would spend time with her from whenever she contacted and then be there to work through all the hideous rigmarole that goes with any complaint.... But they did that. They did that voluntarily. They challenged everything. They exposed the myths about rape. They got the consent part actually enforced.

And they/we had lives as well.

We were excited by the new technology and videotaped everything we could. We videoed our children yarning about themselves and their hopes and dreams, interviews with all kinds of women, a group of us participating in a self examination health education event, and the one with Lilla. We participated in the weekly Women's Programme (sorry proper name unknown) on 4ZZZ, opening up a space for women's voices to be heard; our views expressed; poetry, singing, discussion and debate about. In the mornings we would do yoga. One of the women from the Communist Party led these daily sessions to make sure that we the workers kept healthy and well. We made videos of everything we did. Self examinations were conducted in the safe environment of an all-women's place.

It does seem from here that at the time our lives were Women's House, it was in fact was just one bit of a bigger broader movement. It was so very exciting and optimistic. At the end of it all we had a telephone service providing information and support; a Shelter for women and their kids leaving violence; and a women's health, information and support service.

## CELEBRATING WOMEN'S HOUSE 30 YEARS ON

*In writing this story I wish to acknowledge both Maureen and Lilla Watson. Both Maureen and Lilla were fundamentally important in my awareness raising, education and direction for bringing about change. They taught me much, not the least of which, the important place women have in Aboriginal culture and society. Lilla said that she did not need Women's Liberation as she was a powerful Murri woman with control over Women's business and did not need to be liberated by a white girl. It gave me cause to think long and hard about the continuing role white race privilege has in the way in which we define and act on what we see as injustice.*

*Telling a story and the telling of women's stories was always important to those of us who started Women's House. This tells that story. The problem of telling a story such as this one is that it will always be partial because it is based on one perspective.*

*This story was written for the 30<sup>th</sup> celebration of the establishment of Women's House. It comes from collaboration between Nancy Peck, Trisha Nilvor, Bob Borsellino, Brian Day and I when we all came together for the celebration. We had so much fun remembering and yarning and laughing at the things we did and the enormous jobs we took on. And now that the story has been recorded, delivered and documented we could get on and do the thing Nance tells us is our next job - to be Trainee Elders.*

*There is a real joy in the continuation of the Women's Community Aid Association/Women's House. It is fantastic that we are all here and that we are still thriving. It is worth celebrating the strength and creativity of the many women who have kept Women's House alive over 3 decades. So this tale comes from a collection of feelings, memories, and experiences of how it was for us and me then. Because I was the narrator, and now the writer, it is also my personal reflection. And there is also joy in the recording and documenting of what we did and what we have all achieved.*

So what was it like then in the early 1970s when all this began?

Firstly Queensland was a police state. There was no question that Queensland under Joh Bjelke-Peterson was indeed one in which the State through the Queensland Police had enormous control over the lives of many, many Queenslanders. The infamous *Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders' Act of 1965* under which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived, controlled every aspect of their lives from where they could live, to whom they could marry, and how much if any of their wages or welfare payments they could have. By law, they had to get permission from the State to do anything that we non-Aboriginal people would expect to do as a matter of course.

Section 27A of the *Queensland Mental Health Act*, was used to detain people almost indefinitely in a psychiatric institution, with no or little appeal. Women could be detained under this Act and often were, when making complaints of violence against them and/or their children by their husbands.

And then there was the Special Branch of the Queensland Police Force which watched, raided and reported on many who were struggling to bring down this oppressive State.

At the Federal level there was a seemingly never ending line of Tories running the country from Ming the Merciless to Billy McMahon. They had engaged us in the American war in Vietnam, and Conscription was in force with the State taking it upon itself to force young men to join the army and fight the 'dreaded' Vietnamese communists. And then there was the Bomb and the very real and felt possibility of nuclear destruction of the planet.

There was no legislation to support or protect the rights of people. There was no Anti-discrimination legislation, no domestic violence legislation, and no Freedom of Information legislation. There were no services. All that existed were state-controlled or church-based welfare organisations.

However there were some things which were on our side. Free tertiary education had opened up the universities to more people, particularly women, who had never had the opportunity for a university education. It brought many women from many different backgrounds together for the first time.

So we entered into the struggle against the Vietnam War and conscription, against Apartheid and to end the Act and get land rights, and later the Right to March protests of the 1980s.

So what did we do? The first thing we did was to begin talking about what was happening to us. Our Consciousness Raising groups did just that. We read, challenged, talked, studied and discussed. Our new knowledge about our role as women, women's oppression, our choice or lack of it, the denial to us of information, led to a deep understanding of the authenticity of women's lived experience and knowledge. No more could our experiences be denied or explained away as hysterical lying nor could we be described as mad or bad.

We realised the absolute central importance of having information and support to make choices in our becoming independent women — to make choices for ourselves and the support to do them.

We also spent time talking about how this came about. We realised the positive and active role that the social order, the State has in removing, limiting or denying women that freedom - that basic human right - to be able to make one's own choices.

This led to further finding out and discussion. We thought critically and argued vociferously, analysing how society, its institutions and processes oppressed us women. We knew from our own experiences and those of our grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters, how straight out violence in all its forms, is and was the primary weapon used to keep us in our place. We knew too that the departments and services which were there, served only to reinforce and promote and maintain women in this oppressed situation.

And we said "Enough is enough. It is time to act and put an end to it." We began to imagine and dream a multi-purpose centre, run by women, for women; based on a radical new alternative way of responding to women's needs; driven by our knowledge of their and our experience; that would act politically to change the social order by addressing women's issues in health, the law, education, employment housing and more; that would be based on the information and support idea.

We dreamt and imagined. We acted first and theorised second.

I have a very clear memory of being told by my dear friend, another social work student about Kalimna, the Salvation Army place for runaway girls. My friend was on placement and had witnessed a young girl of around 14 or 15 being shoved into a room and placed in solitary confinement as punishment for swearing at one of the 'officers'. To me this was shocking, especially when it was revealed that this young woman had run away from home because of her father's violence. Later I shared this story with Nancy, Trisha and one of the social work staff. We were outraged, angered, and there and then decided to act.

So the four of us set about putting into action the information and support and it did not take long for us to gather together a large group of like minded women.

Children by Choice had been in existence for some time and were bravely giving women information about reproduction and abortion. Clear information was given and support to the woman. Many of the women in Children by Choice were also members of Women's House, our friends. Some were doctors, social workers, teachers, but most importantly women who had been in the struggle for women's liberation for many years. Women from the Union of Australian Women, The International League for Peace and Freedom, the Communist Party, Trade Unionists, all came to work together. We were not to be beset with competition but were to collaborate on the issue of abortion and abortion law reform.

The core of our work would be based on the idea of providing women information on which to base their decisions and to then support them in putting that decision into action.

We started small and voluntary giving information and providing shelter for women and their children who were escaping violence. But we also set up a Rape Crisis service, a Speakers' Bureau, used the media to publicise and advocate for big changes to the law and managed to do a bit of Street Theatre and hold many protests about our situation. We were unashamedly for the liberation of women and knew clearly that our liberation was absolutely linked to the liberation of all women.

Sometimes we were incredibly overwhelmed by what had to be done. We hit barriers, all kinds of barriers, such as women being charged with false complaint when they had been raped; the treatment of the police of Aboriginal women; the abuse of children by the State who charged the child not the offender. The realisation of the fact that young women running away from home would be charged with an offence – 'likely to fall into a life of vice and crime' confirmed that the violence and oppression we felt as women began when we were girls, and that we could not expect protection from the State or its institutions.

Every one of us took turns at doing what had to be done. No one was left off the hook. We based our actions on the premise that everyone has skills. We were absolutely experiential in our approach. We were so busy doing that the only time we had for theorising was through discussion and debate, and of that there was plenty.

We knew what we were doing. We knew what we wanted. And we did everything and anything to put into practice the Information and Support idea and to carry it out in all areas of our work and lives.

We focused totally on supporting the women in taking the action she wanted in her dealings with authority. No one was going to boss her or us around.

As far as information was concerned we had to find it or write it. So we found out from the inside of the Departments, their rules and regulations and for the first time broadly publicised this in leaflets and pamphlets and shared it with women who phoned or came. For the first time women knew what would happen if they chose a certain course of action; what they could do. Importantly they also found out they were not the first or only one; it was not their fault; and that they had options — choices to make.

In our own lives, by going with women into these situations, as advocates, we modelled a breakdown of the sex-role stereotype of women's supposed subservience to authority. It was our RIGHT to question and challenge.

We were under no illusions about how challenging we were to the State and the social order. The very fact that we as women had rights and were there to exercise them was met with hostility and attack. In the parliament we were referred to as 'those hairy legged lesbian feminists', and more and equally demeaning. On the streets we developed the courage to not take a backward step, and challenged construction workers on a daily basis for their abuse of all women walking past their building site.

In the time since we have seen many changes; new services; new money for supporting women's services; new laws. Women's House has continued to be true to the model we established through Women's Community Aid Association. It still has what is now known in the professional jargon, an integrated multi-purpose holistic health model. Informed choice remains fundamental to the work of the women there. Non-hierarchical decision making structures are still in place. Although it often felt that we took one step forward and three backwards, Women's House and our dreaming have remained, survived and continue. This is something of which we can all be rightfully proud.

[http://www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/1967\\_referendum/act.html](http://www.library.uq.edu.au/fryer/1967_referendum/act.html)

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