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## **Creating an Aboriginal Women's Healing Space to Build Mental Health and Wellbeing**

**"NGALAWA WINGARA"**  
(to sit and think)

### **Introduction To The Women's Health Centre And The Project**

Liverpool Women's Health Centre has operated for 25 years in the Liverpool/Fairfield area. It is a feminist non-government organisation run by women for women. We provide free or low cost medical reproductive and sexual health services, a range of complementary therapies including naturopathy, chiropractic and massage. The Centre also provides individual counselling, therapeutic groups, and health promotion/ education and information, community development, support and referral. The Centre is active in lobbying and advocating for change on issues which affect women. We take a social view of health and the basis of our approach with women is about informed choice.

Many women who use the Centre's services have also used mental health services. A key priority area of work for the centre is building emotional and mental health.

Over many years the Centre has employed a culturally diverse staff with specifically designated positions. In particular the Centre for approximately 18 years has employed Aboriginal health workers. The aim of such a position was to outreach to local Aboriginal women and encourage them to use our existing services.

Over time the Centre found that it was more useful to work in partnership and for the Aboriginal health worker to provide outreach services in places where local Aboriginal women frequent such as the Miller Aboriginal Women's Clinic run on Tuesday mornings and the Liverpool Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance Scheme. Assisting with organisation of the annual Biyani camps is another component of her work.

Over years the Centre has built up a strong relationship with Aboriginal women in the area. In particular, women have tended to use our clinical services. However, there is a lower likelihood of women using our structured counselling services as opposed to informal support.

The aim of the Women's Healing Space Project was:

To use a community arts process with Aboriginal women to design and create a space at Liverpool Women's Health Centre that is culturally and spiritually affirming and can operate as a healing space for women who seek support at the Centre.

There is a strong cultural significance given to 'place' and a different sense of space for many Aboriginal people. Through feedback the Centre found that many women when seeking support preferred to sit in our backyard than in a counselling room.

The space is intended for:

- Individuals who seek counselling/support and have a yarn

- Individuals who want to sit and seek quiet solace in a calming and enriching environment
- Groups involved in community education/ discussions around a range of health issues including mental health.

Other project objectives were to:

- Encourage shared discussions and understandings of what it means to be an Aboriginal woman in Liverpool, what things promote mental health for Aboriginal women and what are the aspects of an environment that promote mental health.
- Improve the access of Aboriginal women with mental health issues to the Centre.
- To establish a model of best practice for mainstream organisations working to improve the mental health of Aboriginal women.
- To increase the understanding of mental health issues for Aboriginal women amongst Centre staff and the broader Liverpool community
- Operate at every stage of the project in partnership with Aboriginal women and organisations and local mental health services.

### **Some of the Project Strategies included:**

#### Creating the space

- Employment of Aboriginal woman community artist/ project worker;
- Consultation & design workshops with Aboriginal women;
- Discussion groups on what promotes mental health for Aboriginal women;
- Arts workshops for skills development; and
- 12 weeks of workshops for making the space.

#### Sharing what's learnt with other workers/organisations

- Project report;
- Briefing paper; and
- Training workshops.

#### Partnerships approach

- Steering committee involves Aboriginal women workers, women's health staff and mental health; and
- Consultation at submission writing and implementation.

#### Improve access

- Use the space and what we've learned.

### **Why did we need the project?**

Due to past and current experiences Aboriginal women have a distrust of many mainstream organisations and institutions and mental health services are no exception. Aboriginal women do not relate well to the idea of 'mental health' or 'mental illness'. The kinds of services offered within such a setting are not culturally friendly for Aboriginal people.

We found ourselves, it was much easier for the project to talk about what builds well being than to talk about building mental health or dealing with mental illness. The latter language shuts the conversation and discussion down. This project created a comfortable space for Aboriginal women to talk about emotional wellbeing and the features of an environment that contribute to this.

Working together with other Aboriginal workers and groups was a significant aspect of the project. The project was organised in a way that meant women could participate in structured workshops and the Hoxton Park Elders did this working on a mosaic for the space. Other women were able to drop in and contribute to planting, painting, organising materials, getting donations of goods, spray painting the fence etc. Other women created tiles for the space at outreach venues that the artist visited. Aboriginal women's involvement in creating the space would build some ownership of the space.

Funding for the project was received from South Western Sydney Area Health Service Mental Health NGOs Partnerships Program.

### **A Pictorial Walk Through The Project? What Did We Do?**

1. The backyard of Liverpool Women's Health Centre prior to its transformation;
2. The Project Steering Committee with Dr. Scott Clarke from SWSAHS receiving the funding;
3. Consultations – women were invited to workshops at the Centre and the artist also visited other venues where Aboriginal women meet to get interest in the project and consult about what the space should look like – Hoxton Park Elders group, women at the Miller Women's Clinic and women who attended the annual Biyani camp were some of the women consulted;
4. A design for the garden was developed following the consultations – the design went through a number of changes and the one shown is the final one. Some of the features of the design aimed to create a feeling of tranquillity and connection with nature. These are the use of water, a rainforest theme contrasted with a desert theme – the latter using red sand, a semi circular seating area, the use of mosaics and tiles to illustrate native animals, fence painted in a calming blue/ green colour, a mix of native and non-native plants, use of curved garden beds. Ease of maintenance was also important so the design including paving. Installation of a disabled access ramp from the Centre to the backyard was also seen as essential – quite a number of Aboriginal women have disabilities which limit mobility;
5. Landscaping/Construction phase – consultation with a landscaper who had experience working on community arts projects was important;
6. Art workshops were held at the Centre and at Miller – these involved mosaicing a broilga that was dropped into the ground, tiling, fence painting. Casula Powerhouse also worked with us as none of the women including the artist had done mosaic or tile work before;
7. The water feature and tiled seating area with painted galahs, dolphins creates a focus for the space and the movement of water across the rock is calming;
8. There were many many practical jobs that needed to be done as part of the project – cleaning grout off the ground mosaic was one in preparation for our big launch;

9. Invitations to the launch were sent to women involved in the project, Aboriginal workers and organisations as well as mental health and other mainstream community organisations;
10. Over 100 people attended the launch and people were impressed with what we had achieved so far. Sun protection is now an issue and the second stage of the project will be to seek funding to install a shade system. Acknowledgement of those involved in the project was by giving each person a native banksia flower and a certificate of thanks. These went to women who created the space, the Steering Committee, organisations who donated materials or services; and
11. Media coverage was an important part of letting women know that the Healing Space was operating.

### **Some Practical Lessons Learnt**

- A *steering committee* that has been involved in every stage of the project is essential;
- *Timing*: It will take longer than planned and that has benefits e.g. more women hear about the project and get involved;
- A *flexible and supportive funding body* is important;
- *Budget*: Don't skimp on the budget - remember to budget for construction costs, project management;
- *Networks and contacts* are essential – getting women involved, getting materials, learning skills, getting media interest;
- Where there is more than one person involved there will be *disagreements* and these can be overcome;
- There will be lots of ideas from consultations and thinking – be flexible but task focussed;
- It's difficult talking about *mental illness* – it's not user friendly;
- There's a great deal of *goodwill* in the community and projects like this provide a vehicle for expressing it; and
- This is the *beginning* not the end. The space now needs to be used and other aspects of the project are still to be done – centre staff training, workshops for other organisations, a report and printing and distributing a briefing paper.