

**BARBRA ASPLET  
AND THE ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S  
HEALING HOUSE**



*'It is now everyone's business to take the issue on board...*

*Indigenous violence has to be understood in ways that take into account  
culture, history, race and place as well as gender'*

(Dr.Lowitja O'Donoghue, Hyllus Maris lecture 2001)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence reported in 1999 that the degree of violence suffered by Indigenous women 'cannot adequately be described'. Indeed, the levels of abuse, suicide, homicide and endemic violence are almost impossible for outsiders to grasp. Caught as many often are (in Joan Kim's words) in 'a fatal conjunction' between 'two laws, two cultures', heeding the voices of Aboriginal female leaders such as DOV patron Dr.Lowitja O'Donoghue is therefore vital for such violence to be overcome.



Even more crucial is the day-to-day work of Aboriginal women such as **Barbra Asplet**, coordinator of the **Aboriginal Women's Healing House** at Picton. Together with others in the **Aboriginal Catholic Ministry** across Australia, she has been actively engaged in overcoming such violence for many years. As Barbra herself relates:

*The Healing House is a development of the work I was doing at a house owned by the Sydney Archdiocese in Forbes St. Newtown. I began this work because I could see the great need for the healing of the pain and hurt carried by the Women of the Stolen Generation. I began this work in Forbes Street, but I felt this was only a start; the house was too small, the urban setting was unsuitable, and we were only touching the surface of what healing should be. My dream was to set up an Aboriginal Women's Healing House located somewhere in the bush. With the help of Sister Jenny Gilligan I gathered together a team of religious from various orders to form a Support Committee. This committee also included Father Frank Fletcher and Bishop Peter Ingham. They met together regularly at the Newtown house to give me some support and discuss our future direction.*

*In consultation with the Archdiocese we began to discuss the possibility of selling the property at Forbes St. Newtown, and buying something more suitable. Father Brian Lucas, on behalf of Cardinal Clancy, and Bishop Peter Ingham gave their full support, saying 'go and find the property of your dreams'. Brenda McDonnell and myself, assisted at times by Fr Frank Fletcher and other Committee Members then began to search widely for a suitable property. Eventually we found one at Picton, in a beautiful setting on the top of the Razorback Range. This had the proper bush setting, trees, water, rolling hills, bird life and there was there a great feeling of Aboriginal Spirituality. It had a large two-storey homestead and a cottage as well as sheds, and five acres of beautiful grounds.*

## SEEDS OF PEACE



### **Aims of the Healing House**

*'What we are hoping to achieve for Koori women' says Barbra, 'is quite unique and I believe has not been addressed by other healing places. Our gatherings allow the everyday person to speak out and be heard, this is allowing us to collectively assess our real needs, our inner pain and our helplessness in a workable way. The Healing House gives us the*

*appropriate environment for our people. It is a place where we can share our pain, share experiences, address our stress and how it affects our body spirit, soul and mind and especially our relationships, and reclaim our stories or just yarn. The Healing House is a place for relaxation, meditation, reiki massage, spirituality, arts and crafts. It is a place for women to come together to share, create and be supported.*

Since its Official Opening on 11 March 2000, many groups have benefitted. Indeed, besides local groups and young women from Redfern, Aboriginal Women have come from Nambucca Heads, Coonabarabran and other country areas, whilst several programs have been run for Aboriginal men. Aboriginal organisations have used the facilities for planning, training and stress management, and Aboriginal Elders have used the property for 'get-togethers'. The Healing House also runs Reconciliation retreat/workshops for non-Indigenous people.



### ***Healing ritual with young girls from Redfern***

*'The "rock and bowl" ceremony was held on the last morning of the camp. It was a great way for the girls to let go of the pain they had shared over the past three days and gain a sense of closure. Barbara invited the girls to reveal their inner pain to the rock, either openly or silently and to then pass the rock on as they together in a circle. The eldest member of the group then took the rock and scoured away the pain into a bowl of water. The youngest member of the group then drained the water into the creek; and she then placed the cleansed rock with rocks of other people who had participated in a similar ritual here at the Healing House. Aunty Barbara told the girls that they could return at any time to their special rock, and that they could think about their rock whenever they were feeling down.'*

(from report of a Youth Camp targeting girls who were either not accessing other available services or those who at a crucial time in their lives needing intensive assistance and support)

Barbra's own pain as a member of the Stolen Generation has thus become a healing wound and source of mercy-power.

### **Sources and more information:**

<http://www.aboriginalcm.cathcomm.org/aboriginalCM/HHouse/awhh.htm>

Joan Kimm *A Fatal Conjunction: Two Laws, Two Cultures*