

## SOUTH WESTERN ABORIGINAL MEDICAL SERVICE

### Background

Oxfam Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Program (ATSIPP) unit has been partnering with the South Western Aboriginal Medical Service (SWAMS) on delivering Healing Circles to the Noongar people in the South Western Region of Western Australia. The Healing Circles project, known as Healing Spaces, was initiated in January 2010.

The aim of Healing Spaces is to provide groups for women, men and children in the Collie, Bunbury and Narrogin areas, with a focus on healing through empowerment, coming from a strength based perspective. All activities conducted focus on healing themes such as self-care, self esteem, safety, nurturing, healthy relationships, parenting, etc. There is also a strong focus on healing by connecting people to services in their local communities.

The objectives of the program are to:

- Increase access to culturally appropriate healing service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the South West of Western Australia.
- Strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to enable them to deal with the impacts of trauma, grief and loss in a culturally appropriate way.
- Support the development of culturally appropriate healing frameworks which assist with shaping policy and holding governments and service providers to account through advocacy work.
- Monitor and evaluate effectiveness of healing programs delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that can be used as best practice models.
- Develop and deliver quality care healing programs that are community controlled in South Western Australian Aboriginal communities.

The project set out to support the establishment of local Noongar groups, who could come together and operate in an informal and friendly environment to improve their social and emotional wellbeing. The project targeted the following groups:

- Collie Yorga's (women)
- Kooramining Women's Group – Narrogin
- Kwobidak Youth (Girls) Group – Bunbury
- Maamum Danjoo Koorliny Waakinininy Men's Group – Bunbury
- Bunbury Yorga's (women).

A wide range of activities were undertaken across the groups and have been tailored to the interests of local Noongar People. The groups provided an informal, friendly and safe space for individuals to 'yarn' and get to know and mix with each other. The Healing spaces are used to communicate a broad range of positive health messages (diet, medical check-ups, managing violence etc) and provide access for service providers to connect more widely into the Noongar community.

*Source: Oxfam Australia's South West Aboriginal Medical Services Evaluation Report, 2010 – 2014.*

## CASE STUDIES FROM STORIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Below are case studies based in interviews with people on how the healing circles and being involved with SWAMS has impacted on their lives.

### Self Esteem - Adult woman

Before they came to the Youth Group kids were more isolated. They were not so good at mixing with other kids. They really didn't know how to get out and mix with each other. They had to learn how they to trust each other and make sure that they are safe. The kids are secluded and they didn't know how to react when they met other kids on weekends at sport; some of them would stand back and were very uncertain and very shy.

Now the kids are really good. They've got self-esteem, They're not shy and they're not so easily put down. They feel they are all equal which is very important at this age- kids can sense it if they're being put down. And now you can see the kids interact with each other and we've got kids across all different ages from six different families mixing. Now with the kids having self-esteem they feel that they are okay and they feel safe as they know who we are, When working with kids you've got to have Working with Children check so they feel safe and they know that they can come to us for help.

What's made it happen? Well it's this place -- a place for the kids where they can do something so they mingle, share and muck around with each other and enjoy the others company easily.

*Why it is significant?*

Self-esteem is the most important thing. It cuts across everything - cuts right across the board. If you don't have self-esteem kids wouldn't feel comfortable coming here- they wouldn't have the guts to ask 'am I good enough?' Self-esteem is most important nowadays so that kids learn while they're young - got to help them early on. I've seen lots of kids with no self-esteem; some kids are brought up different and it's important to help share the knowledge around their basic needs.



### No longer ashamed - Youth



Before I did the modelling I used to be so ashamed. I was just ashamed. But I still looked confident on the outside.

Then the modelling came along and when I was first here I was a little bit shy but they (the older girls) encouraged me to get out and do it. I saw them do it and I felt confident myself. That was the older girls in the group saying to "do it" and me seeing them do it too. I felt nervous at the start but by the second time I wasn't as nervous. I just didn't know anyone the first time.

Now I got to know people here plus I can see that they do it (modelling). Now I don't think shame any more. I've done it (modelling) in bigger places and it's no big deal now. So now, though I sometimes feel a little bit shy, but really not so much any more. Now I'm much more confident - I feel good in myself and I feel really good when I'm here.

*Why is this significant?*

Well it was the big change. I really liked it and now I want to be a model. It's a big change - it's something new I learnt.

### Getting along with people - Youth

People didn't get along before. They used to argue and fight and stuff like that with some of the same groups always fighting with each other. Then once we had the group of kids came along here [Youth group] and then they started to get along with each other. There was things like modelling. Then when we had to practice, had to come together and so on. These things we did together and the things we made here that helped us get along.

Now it's picked up a little bit better than it used to be before. But there was a fight among some of the girls and things are not as good as it was when things are working well - but it's still a bit better than before we came here. I think now if some of the girls saw each other that they'd feel a bit awkward about what happened.



Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS

### Confidence - Adult woman



Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS

A lot of girls would sit back unless they had a natural gift of being outspoken and made way for others to have a say or have a go at things first.

And you can really see this changing confidence level with the modelling. The girls no longer hide behind the curtains or behind the door. When it's their turn they do their stuff and you can see they enjoy it. The confidence reflects a positive self-image and you can see that when you take photographs and they're not shy any more. For example with photography you can see girls doing a lot of posing and taking "selfies". Even at primary school the confidence comes out, that comes through. But it is a bit of a change because of the different mix of kids [at school] so the behaviour changes a little bit I suppose.

#### *Why the most significant?*

Once you have your self-esteem that's the start of everything. That's when you get resilience and self-awareness. That all comes naturally once you have got confidence

### Motivation - Adult woman

I didn't used to go out, I'd stay at home with the kids, I never went away - it was boring.

Since I started with the group I've been doing things with the kids and am more motivated to do things by myself. I learnt how to paint and draw and I am now assisting with the kids and I watch them play a lot more. I did a little bit with the kids before but now I do more with them. They are happy to come here too [womans group].

If I didn't come here I be locked up and in jail. The people I mixed with - well I'd be in trouble and I'd probably get drunk and I reckon welfare would come - I would have the trouble with the kids.

I gave it [booze] up. I do counselling one-on-one with the SWAMS who give me the opportunity of counselling. I gave it up when my daughter was born, she is five now. But the temptation of hanging around with friends and family would mean I could slip back. That's why I like to come here. It gives me something to do and I gotta get out the house.

#### *Why is this significant?*

Well it keeps me, my head clear. Talking to the others makes me think a lot and especially the older women. I've now got more understanding towards them.



Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS



### More relaxed – Adult woman

Before I came here I was bored. I didn't want to come here; in fact Joyce just brought me here once. I got here and I liked it more. I like doing the activities. Like I started to do the wreaths for the graves, and it's the first time I learned sewing.

I grew up in the Armadale. We didn't do any activities there. Mothers never taught their girls lifestyle skills and weren't educated in those things like white families who only have two kids. We didn't know how to sew because we only had cotton and needles, we didn't have machines so we couldn't learn. Also with the lifestyle stuff of food well we would get damper and things like that, so we didn't really have a lot of healthy food. So now I'm learning new things. That's why I'm relaxed. I feel really good now while I'm here, until I get back home and get into that boring routine of cooking and stuff.



Photo: Jeff Henderson/OxfamAUS

### We just love the company and making things – Adult woman

There was a Noongar women's group here previously and they were employed sort of via NEEDAC. We got each some payment and doing much the same – the arts and crafts and the sewing. But the money ran out and that was it. Then the women didn't do anything. They just stayed home and did their own thing with the kids and their family members. There's not much employment here for women in the town and the men there is nothing, even for the young or middle-aged.

So once we kicked off the group again it's been going really well. Sometimes we have slack times and other times really good times. With aboriginal culture you can't expect too much -- we don't demand things, we are not greedy but also we don't expect too much. Just to come along and get involved. With a barbecue and things like that where people can just come along and laugh and stuff like that and that's been really great.

Recently a couple of girls just come up and asked us to make a few dresses because NAIDOC is coming up soon. The people are coming along to learn new skills like for example sewing, which can help them in their own homes. The women like to make things like dresses, quilts, and pillowslips. They love it and just think it's great that they can make something themselves and also can show other ones what they've done.

I've seen a difference. A real positive change in some people. We had some young girls and some of them wanted to join a leadership thing and we got some money and a couple of them went with Joyce to Sydney on the leadership course. They said it was beautiful. One young girl said it was a lifetime experience and she talked about that and felt really good

about herself. Usually they don't get to talk about things like that and then actually do that and get to feel positive about things. So one of these young girls as a result of that leadership ended up getting a traineeship and a job, which was great; she applied for the job and got it. But there was some change in management and well for the job, that's no longer happening.

*Why did I choose this?*

Well when you see something different and good, you got to connect with it.



Photo: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS

**We've got respect and we are now mainstream - Adult woman**

Before the Yorga's started NGALANG BOODJA didn't have much profile in the community at all. Some individuals had a profile and are either recognised as elders or were recognised for the good things they did. But overall Civic Society didn't recognise Noongar groups in the community as part of the Civic Society. They didn't see them as someone to contact or to ask for contributions as a group. The Yorga's were very visible at the Collie Family Centre and they undoubtedly contributed to the increased recognition of the group. Noongars were now starting to contribute to doing positive things in the community.

We're (NGALANG BOODJA) now involved in many volunteer events, are working with the Shire, now talking to Rotary and organisations like that on things such as youth leaders, revegetation activities. We are on the Shire Weed and Water committee and we're part of the SuperTown committee. Our organisation (NGALANG BOODJA) is now recognised as being representative of the interests of Noongars in Collie. Previously the rest of the community didn't have the interest or have confidence in a body to represent Noongars in civic affairs. The Yorgas have definitely contributed to that change.

Why did I select this is the most significant?

Because it is the foundation for all changes in the future -the young ones now have got a strong organisation to help them work better in the future. The Yorgas have definitely contributed towards that. The publicity they used to do by the Collie Mail was enormous, just checked Joyce's records - there were so many articles all the time highlighting what they did. So now we have started to help promote change in the community. Indigenous organisations are starting to come out and bring others up with them. We had a comment from the CEO of the South West Development Commission that basically acknowledged our success and achievement. Now NGALANG BOODJA has traction in the community.



Photo: Jason Malouin/Oxiam AUS



### From being shy to taking responsibility and being confident - Male

I used to stay at home all the time; often I'd have no work and nothing to do. Not much work except around the yard and once I'd done that I'd just watch TV. Even when I had a little bit of work for a week or so I wasn't involved in decision-making or anything like that, I just did my job and got paid — that was it. I didn't mix much. Now I meet people a lot more.

So when I came to the men's group they elected me as a chairperson and I had to make decisions. Through the men's group I'm getting recognised by other people. People now contact me and ask if we can help with this and that. I'll say "I'll bring it to the group to discuss if we can do it or not". You know it's things like the yard cleaning, mowing lawns, even bush spraying for the Catchment Council.

Now that we are incorporated and all that stuff it's opened my eyes to a lot of paperwork and how to handle those things. I'm really glad we've done it and we got it right.

Now I'm more confident than before and I can talk to people like the ladies group. I went to the ladies group this morning and they want us to get involved with them in the future. Before I could do nothing like that. If I was asked to talk up front I'd never do it.

Being here has brought it out of me. We've even had meetings with the Shire Council, Bill and myself and I felt comfortable doing that. We're talking to them about a tombstone at the Memorial Park to recognise aboriginal soldiers and they have agreed. So we've got the contacts in the group with the RSL and the crematorium and working on things. I feel good about that — it's all on the go — we've got to go for it all-out.

*Why would I choose that as the most significant?*

Well it changed me a fair bit. I was always the bloke who sat back and was quite and listened; even at school I was like that. Now it's different. I can handle it ok and the boys haven't complained. And I know a few of the guys around said that if I'm still around they'll still be around, so it's nice to get some confirmation that you doing an okay job.

### Responsibility - We are starting to be more responsible - Male

Beforehand there was a bitter feuding around the town; like little spot fires just waiting to turn into a bonfire. Now since the men's group a lot of the guys have taken a step back from that. One small step back in their area is a change for everyone. Guys have now found out that they're needed in the community. I think this change happened because basically in the group we've got enough people and also people have respect for each other, which has helped this happen. Come along way I reckon.

Now people just have respect. And some of our members are now becoming leaders. Now even the women are humbugging the guys every second to go to the men's group, to not sit around the house. Now the blokes are out of the house and are not isolated and are doing stuff. And hopefully we'll have some things

which will get them into the workforce. So that created some self-respect. It hasn't happened yet but we are planning to try and work with some job placement agency like PVC to make links with them and try and get people job ready.

Now even non-aboriginal guys coming along. There is one white guy who asked me "can I come along?" because he doesn't drink anymore and doesn't want to mix with his old crew. He wants to socialise with non-drinkers - he said he doesn't get to see anyone any more because he is not drinking. And we are not about that [drinking] and we can support people.

Recently there was a young guy who did something he shouldn't have. The guys in this group were trying to deal with it and a group decision about whether to "burn him" or do they give the kid a chance to cool off and take some responsibility for it. The men's group is very strong and they can deal with this situation and now they will discuss how to deal with it. Basically they are looking after this very troubled young boy. They are strong because they respect each of others opinions. They are taking responsibility because other people in the community are either knocking back the young guy or he is being let down and this group is now taking some sort of position about how to handle or manage the issue. In a sense doing it on behalf of the community.

*Why it is significant for you?*

Well we have a range of problems in our community; I'm trained to fix one problem at the time. But in my job I recognise that there is a lot of issues that affect people i.e. could be the family situation, it's not just health, could be mental health issues and lots of things like finance - which is now a big problem. So you need to have a responsibility to deal with all these things. Not just have a specialist view of looking at solving only one thing like a sore throat.

