

# Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Children

## A vision of survival, a dream with a future

Lisa Bellear

*"I mean we're sitting back waiting for our younger people to take over. When I'm talking about younger people I'm talking about teenagers and ah our people in their early twenties. They are the ones that have the new ideas, some of us now I think our ideas are a bit stale, a bit old, we try and keep abreast of what's happening with issues that are affecting people but ah, the same way as we can't, ah don't want white people telling Aboriginal people what should happen, you can't have older people telling younger people what should happen either. But I think we should work together and map out a future and the younger people should come in and take it...seize the time".*

*Sol Bellear<sup>1</sup>*

Endless statistics, documentaries and Royal Commissions into Aboriginal deaths in custody, often don't highlight the positive aspects of being Aboriginal, of being Torres Strait Islander. We know about unemployment, we know about racism, substance abuse, lack of culturally relevant education, and there is a truism that if a program seems to be working within the Koori community, then sooner or later the funds are stopped, or the rules are changed. An excellent but disheartening example is what is happening at the Northland Secondary College in Victoria.

This is Aboriginal land, and yet for 205 years of colonialisation we have been on the receiving end of some of the most oppressive discriminatory legislation, which has earned Australia the somewhat dubious title of being one of the most racist countries outside of South Africa. The question then, is what we can do to redress this, and how can we work alongside young Kooris, set an agenda whereby the young Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islanders believe that they not only have a voice, but they also have a sense of hope and a sense of future.

As professionals, as community workers, care givers, parents, aunts, elders, we need to reflect on how we can translate our knowledge base into practical action which can best service the needs of our young folk as well as to empower them and promote their sense

of self worth and spiritual and cultural identity.

I know sometimes we forget about being young, or we see young people reacting to alienating cultures in ways we cannot understand, or approve of. We may even feel uncomfortable with the possibility that we may not know the solutions. Or perhaps the idea of acknowledging that indigenous Australians do have a heritage and culture which we are not equipped to deal with, is a reality we do not feel comfortable with. If we are serious about empowering Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islanders, then we have to face our prejudices, and we must be open to new ideas.

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While many professionals are ingenuous in their motivation and intentions towards Aboriginal people, a relationship of trust needs to occur. Indeed if you and/or your organisation has never developed links within the Koori community then the International Year of Indigenous People is a time to begin to make connections. Although Kooris have a healthy reputation for sharing knowledge and welcoming people from outside our

culture, do not expect the Aboriginal organisation to embrace you on the basis of your initial openness to be receptive to 'Aboriginal culture and life style'. You and the organisation you represent, have to do some work and earn the respect and trust of people within that particular organisation that you have broached.

The key to building a culturally appropriate partnership of understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is to listen and have respect for what we have to say. Ideally a meeting should be organised in conjunction with an appropriate Aboriginal organisation, and take place in a familiar environment where the young folk feel relaxed. The young people need to be assured that their opinion will be heard. They have a right to define their world view and they may also offer ideas which make a great deal of sense. It is crucial that the facilitators and other 'professionals' listen.

There may also be some hostility and anger directed at those of us who represent government agencies. Under no account are you to internalise this and then respond with disrespect. What it tells us is that we should have met with members of the Koori community a long time ago. As well, that if make and break promises, if similar meetings have occurred and no change has taken place then a relationship of trust must be rebuilt. Remember the pain of racism, prejudice, loss of trust

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takes time to heal. But we must face this process and work together, and it is also likely that you the worker will have to own some responsibility too, and that you may feel some resentment at hearing the effects that colonialism has imposed on indigenous Australians.

Cultural awareness programs, designed and implemented by Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islanders are a way through which your organisation can become more sensitive to issues affecting our community. These programs can also highlight changes that may make your service delivery more effective in regard to Kooris. As well as individual workers and policy makers, managers may find that they have some prejudices which will have to be confronted and resolved. Of course, a seminar/workshop on racism is confronting. However, if we are serious about building a partnership between indigenous Australians, then the healing process must begin with owning responsibility of our values, along with a

preparedness to work through the anger, or hate, or misunderstandings that we have towards Kooris/Torres Strait Islanders.

In order to heal the hurt between Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander and the dominant society, a process or reconciliation through 'partnership' building and land rights must occur. If our young Aboriginal people are to believe they have a future, they have to feel empowered, they have to know that they have a place within this land which is Aboriginal country. And more positive images of Kooris need to be portrayed within the media. We know about our oppression, the racism, the sexism. Being black is also a very positive experience, it is essential to the essence of our identity. There are plenty of survival stories, and quintessential to our survival is our sense of humour. Remember it wasn't until 1967 that we received citizenship in our land, a land in which we have survived for over 40,000 years. We had

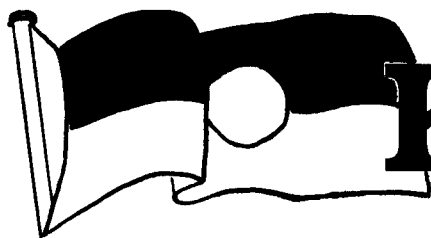
a dream back then, we had a dream prior to the invasion in 1788, we have a right to dream of a future, to know that we will continue to survive and that our heritage will not be denied. Let's make it work, don't hold back, don't be afraid to demand that Australia treat Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islanders with dignity and respect. ♦

**Notes**

1. Sol Bellear, Deputy Chairperson Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Commission, interviewed by Lisa Bellear, December 1992, broadcasted on 3CR "Not Another Koori Show"

**For further information:**

- Tune in to Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander radio programs
- Subscribe to Koori Mail - The fortnightly National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Newspaper.



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