

## BOWRAVILLE, BARRWAYAMBANG GIRRWAA (GROWING COMMUNITY)

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### Background

Bowraville is a small rural community in northern NSW, approximately 60 km South West and inland from Coffs Harbour in beautiful Gumbaynggirr Country. Twenty percent of the population of 2000 is Aboriginal and Bowraville was ranked the seventh most disadvantaged community in NSW in Tony Vinson's 1999 report - "Unequal in Life". Further to this alarming statistic, Bowraville is adversely reported in crime, unemployment, education and other social indicators. Many of the reasons for these characteristics of the community are multi-layered and complex and some interact together. They reflect structural issues and inequalities that isolated rural communities, especially Aboriginal people, face on a daily basis and include lack of access to appropriate health services, lack of employment opportunities, misuse of alcohol plus other drugs leading to associated violence and difficulties experienced by children in school.

### Barrwayambang Girrwa

The main aim of Barrwayambang Girrwa project is to strengthen families and to build community capacity through interactions between individuals and families. This is designed to happen in formal and informal learning situations. The project seeks to:

- Improve access to services by the Gumbaynggirr community through service networking,
- Promote active reconciliation and healing between families in the community and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations in the community,
- Foster better family relationships through parent training,
- To support community leaders by recognising their potential and offering courses and mentoring.
- Develop a united community vision,
- Promote economic and social participation through direct employment opportunities and placement.

The project has been underway since March 17, 2003. It started its life with four project workers. Each of us brought to the project, commitment, mutual respect, community values, strong ethical practices and inside knowledge of the community. The project was auspiced by MiiMi Mothers Aboriginal Corporation Inc.

As Barrwayambang Girrwa began its work, we came to realise that there was a need to support the auspice body in order for it to develop its' potential to manage this project. For this reason the project with the auspice body has worked on a number of different levels and in diverse ways. These include:

- Training for the Board of management on roles and responsibilities.
- Collaborating with MiiMi Mothers to facilitate other project work for example Healing Our Families Our Way and Creating Circles.
- Assisting MiiMi Mothers to continue functioning by contributing resources from the project (with permission from the funding body).

In addition to working with the auspice organisation Barrwayambang Girrwa has been involved in the following kinds of activities and strategies.

- Finding a permanent home and office for MiiMi Mothers and the project. This has taken a long time. It has involved long and extensive networking with Redfern Housing Company Inc and ATSIIC.
- Assistance in resume writing for job interviews for local people. The project also offers tuition on being interviewed for those seeking employment.
- Cross-cultural training offered through TAFE. This has involved co-operation between the project people and the TAFE College.
- Working with TAFE outreach. The project has worked extensively with TAFE outreach that has provided a fashion designing course (on request from a project participant). Project workers negotiated with TAFE for Aboriginal teachers to be included in the teaching staff. Although the major teaching hours were still taken by 'white' staff, the staff member reported a growth in her own sensitivity and awareness as a teacher of

Aboriginal students. It ran its full term and altogether 15 women were involved in it. The things that were designed and made were used in an exhibition at Back to Bowraville Week. Macksville TAFE took up the idea of social action research as a way of improving its service delivery for outreach programs for Aboriginal people. Plans are underway for further courses through TAFE outreach including a women's course (Aboriginal Women Excel) and a course on small motors for men.

- The project has responded to local needs and initiatives. Sometimes it has worked intensively to support and advocate with people who have experienced crises in their lives, sometimes it has taken up ideas and developed them into needed programs.
- Supporting, attending and participating in a women's camp that was initiated by the Goori Broadcasters of Radio Nambucca to collect oral histories. However the camp became much more than that. A young women's committee was established from the camp that is being supported to talk up their own needs and ask for assistance whenever they feel the need. Key concerns and interests of this group include alternate health care, looking after self, arts and craft, leisure, education, parenting, birthing, listening to Elders stories.

For more details of the project see the Development of the Bowraville Barrwayambang Girrwa (Growing Community Project) Evaluation Report (January 2004).

### Action Research and Barrwayambang Girrwa

Development of the Barrwayambang Girrwa project has been very much guided by an action research component. This has taken a number of different forms.

*Changing Direction.* Our commitment to regular reflective practice (the team meets every week) has changed the project direction or focus on a number of occasions. The most important of these changes involved the decision to work to support the auspice organisation. MiiMi Mothers is central to the people of Bowraville. It is the only organisation of its kind, it is an advo-

cacy and referral service, provides counseling one day a week, a domestic violence service and a place for women and for men to meet. People come for housing and employment issues. They come there for health issues and they come there for transport. This organisation could not be allowed to die. Working with the auspice body has meant that we have become involved in learning and doing a lot of organisational work including office administration and dealing with financial issues. As a result all of us are learning further financial skills for example someone is teaching us MYOB and Excel. This change has demanded great flexibility on the part of the project team and the funding body. However we would not do anything differently if we had our time again. We know that the project needs to be community driven. In words of the project mentor and strategist:

You never know where it [the project] is going to take you, but if your values are right and you trust in the process, you can really respond to the community. Our project has made a big shift, big turn. Instead of running learning camps for potential leaders we have had to pay attention to the needs of the auspice body and provide action learning on the job for the leaders of the organisation. This has proven to be an unexpected, but powerful outcome. It's been a struggle, but we believe we are doing it well. You can never underestimate growing community. We need to listen to the community, otherwise, it's [the project], driven by you and there's no honesty for the community. The big support mechanism for doing this is action research.

**Flexibility.** The project has been able to respond to requests from community members for needed courses, or advocacy. It has now become known as a place to raise concerns and issues about existing services and services are changing.

**Learning new skills** It is slow to make changes but gradually people are learning new skills such as enrolling in a course, saying what they want in a group, or asking for assistance or ques-

tions. One person's desire for a fashion design course led to us to facilitate the negotiations for putting it in place. From this some people learn that they do have power to make dreams become realities therefore more courses and learning will follow.

**Making partnerships.** We have worked very closely with a number of different local organisations as well as MiiMi Mothers. Our first partnership was with the Bowraville Community Alliance (in which one of us was already involved). Since then we have worked with TAFE, Southern Cross University, schools, the Neighborhood Centre, Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Community Care Centre and Galambila Aboriginal Health Centre.

#### *How do we do action research at Barrwayambang Girrwa*

For Barrwayambang Girrwa, an action research approach in its most basic sense has meant a number of things:

- *First of all* we went on retreat for a sit down talking time. We got to know one another and we work shopped our ideas and values in relation to the project: family and community. We used creative means to make sure we understood one another that took our communication to a deeper and respectful place. We came to this retreat — two local Gumbaynggir women, one Punthamurra, a Murri woman from Queensland and a European Australian born in Worrimi Country. We are all from diverse cultural background and life experiences. This time at the beginning of Barrwayambang Girrwa was essential for us to get to know one another and to begin action plans for our work. We needed to be in relationship to work in the community.
- *Meeting weekly to reflect on progress.* "Talking it up". This has been a serious commitment where we have gathered for between half and a full day. We come to the meeting with a flexible agenda, putting forward things that we would like to talk about, and then asking on the day what issues have arisen during the week to talk up. We don't let ourselves get 'bogged down' but take care of ourselves by having regular breaks from the work. At

the end of the meeting we check back with each other to make sure we are satisfied with the day's meeting. We usually finish up with a series of 'it was agreed that....' statements and listed actions. A detailed log of meeting notes has been kept. We 'talk it up' often and also revisit issues in our evaluation, looking at them again in later meetings if they didn't sit right in our guts.

- **Personal journaling.** We also keep journals, so that between our meetings we get a clear look at insights and can see how the project plan has changed direction over time.
- **Talking it up in the community.** We are gifted communicators and take every opportunity to network, consult and discuss with the community either formally through reference group meetings or informally through conversations around the kitchen table or if we meet in the street.

There's something to be said for working right on the ground at a community level -really honestly, sitting in the community and doing it.

#### **Action research is so close to an Indigenous way of working.**

This continual reflection and being responsive to the community has meant that the project has evolved differently to what was originally on paper. For example the project set out to facilitate personal growth, healing and to build stronger family relationships through five day camps for community leaders. However this has happened in a different way than planned. For example the Board of Management (of the auspice body) has become interested in talking about domestic, family and community violence and what should be done about them. Individuals from the Aboriginal Medical Centre in Bowraville and the local Aboriginal Land Council have approached the project for Board of Management and sub-committee training and help and advice, kids are requesting help with literacy, an elder who spends time at the office is assisting individuals with budgeting. The variations to the project impact on work plans and reporting.