



*ya pulingina kani*

- Good to see you talk

The cover shows the artist, Allan Mansell's interpretation:

The leaves represent shelter, food and fire. The veins are gum trees.

The small dots represent the life force water, light, dark, air.

Circles within circles are the circle harmony.

Two dots represent two people as in a family.

Encoded message - break the cycle, alcohol, drugs and violence.

*ya pulingina kani - Good to see you talk*

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## Foreword

The Indigenous Family Violence Project Tasmania was funded by the Commonwealth Government of Australia under *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence* and conducted jointly by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs and Women Tasmania, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Tasmania.

The project activities included consultations that were held state wide in order to scope the extent of Indigenous family violence in Tasmania. An intensive search for programs, information packages and research initiatives relevant to Indigenous family violence was also conducted. It was found that a very large amount of materials could be accessed. Most materials were in academic format and language and therefore were limited to a narrow, privileged audience. Some were international and costly to obtain. The information was mostly about or for children and women in family violence. There was very little for men.

The original intention was to collate and disseminate best practice. It became evident that it was not possible to justify a Government department deciding what was and what was not appropriate for the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community or for service providers to use.

The materials have been summarised, categorised and briefly annotated. The list is available on request from the Office of Aboriginal Affairs.

*ya pulingina kani - Good to see you talk* is the narrative of the consultation process and represents the voices of the people who spoke. It includes a set of recommendations.

*ya pulingina kani* is presented to the Commonwealth and Tasmanian Governments, to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community and to appropriate stakeholders.

*ya pulingina kani* identifies what actions or changes need to occur; how those changes could be made; and what resources would be required to carry out change.

The Project Team spoke with over one hundred and fifty people formally and informally. The Project Team has observed proper ethical practices:

We have made the protocols for the consultation clear at the beginning of each consultation.

We have honoured the ethics of hearing and interpreting the stories of people's lives, beliefs and values. This meant:

- ◆ protecting the confidence and rights of individuals related to releasing his or her story into the public arena;
- ◆ suspending judgement, listening to and recording stories and talk in field note form (not on tape) and retelling the stories in ways that will not betray the identity or integrity of individuals; and
- ◆ giving a trustworthy account of the story of Indigenous family violence in Tasmania through the voices of community members.

We have not recorded information that could identify any individual or organization taking part in the consultation except by their explicit wish.

We asked permission from all participants if we could take notes.

Field notes were kept in confidence in one place to be destroyed when the report was complete.

We took the stories back to the people who shared them with us for them to read and ensure that their identity would be not revealed. Some people wished to be acknowledged for participating in the consultations and gave permission for their names to appear in this publication.

The stories have been faithfully transcribed and retold in ways that convey the real life context in which they were spoken. These are stories that were told in the hope that they would “go somewhere” and that, at last, action against family violence would occur.

The reader is challenged to respond thoughtfully to the stories. Only simple nouns and pronouns could be used to indicate the people, their voices and their situations. No proper names have been used except for those in the last chapter.

The stories are representative in that they illustrate the themes that were repeated by participants throughout the consultations. These themes are indicated in the margins of the stories. Many more similar stories could have been told about Indigenous family violence in Tasmania.

We wish to thank all those who took part in the consultations. We wish to acknowledge the welcome and the support that the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community and service providers gave us.

In particular, we wish to express our appreciation to:

Edwina, Lillian, Dean, Erica, Jeanette, Ruth, Buck, Pat, Macca, Beulah and members of the Aboriginal community from Flinders Island, Cape Barren Island, the North-West Coast, the North and the South of Tasmania

The Project Team, Jo James, Karen Brown and Roy Pugh

Carol Jackson, Sandy McIntosh, Robyn Wolstenholme, Kate Harrison, Greg Brown, Isabel Carroll, Emma Pugh, Desiree Fitzgibbon, Flo Hurst

Artists, Alan Mansell, Wendy Pitchford

The Office of Aboriginal Affairs and Women Tasmania

# *ya pulíngina kaní*

*- Good to see you talk*

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ya pulingina kani

- Good to see you talk

*ya pulingina kani* - *Good to see you talk* is a story told by Aboriginal people about Indigenous family violence in Tasmania. It is a story that releases the voices of individuals who suffer pain and who offer compassion by coming to terms with their own experience of violence and through opening their hearts and minds to understand it. The stories in *ya pulingina kani* merge into one full story because the voices echo across Tasmania as if in response and in unison.

*ya pulingina kani* begins with the voice of a man in his thirties taken as a boy from his island and his family. His voice reveals the poignancy of his compassion and justifies *ya pulingina kani* as the title of this story.

I spent four and a half years in an institution to further my education. I didn't do anything wrong. I was sent to a boys' home because there was no boarding school for Aboriginal boys. There was a lot of violence there. When you're a young boy sitting in an institution and you didn't do anything wrong, you start to think about the system. It has really affected me - too right it has.

Now I see a lot of young men striving for their culture, searching for it and it's not happening for them. Gambling is a cultural happening at the moment. Young men search. People are willing to help. It depends on resources, such as four-wheel drives to get out into the bush on field trips. Young men are not going to find themselves in the streets here. The only way is to walk the land, listen to it, walk with the right people.

What we've been doing today hasn't worked, I agree. The answer must be in identity and culture, it's all we have left. Frankly a lot of our own people are controlling young people, not letting it happen.

I've been to Eddystone Point. The food does something for the system, cleans you out. The more people that go down there, the good conditions develop among people. Good things can come from the land

if something is revealed to them about themselves - they've heard the land speak to them in their particular way.

Me, as an Aboriginal man, I feel uncomfortable talking to a white counsellor because I think a white person doesn't understand the issues deep within me. Men need to talk to the elderly Aboriginal men in their community. It is a community process. Also Aboriginal men can widen their own perception of the world because it is our ability to do that. We might choose that white counsellor who could point us in a particular direction. We might answer in our own way - bending, twisting, growing. We might develop a deeper understanding because it is also a white set of problems. The quicker I deal with it, the quicker I get on with it.

Culture brings power. With our culture, our sense of knowing and belonging becomes power. Any young man's self esteem starts to grow when he hears about culture, especially a culture thousands of years old. He really starts to assess this in his mind and in his thinking.

Take young men completely out of this environment to a camp in an isolated place where they feel comfortable. Most of the guys I grew up with - no use taking them to the Central Plateau because there are saltwater problems - they won't be able to connect with the land. We are saltwater people. The days are gone when we used to hide our issues. Talk, that's good. We'll get through this quicker if we are open and more honest with each other. It's not about sneaking into that office there and closing the door.

"Safe places" conjures up a good image. It's the follow-up that would achieve the final goal. Identifying the problem at the safe place, getting a cross-pollination of ideas, a real power of knowledge and further advancement of self. The follow-up provides the links in the process of who you are becoming.

If you have the goal set, know where you're going and where you want to be, answers appear. Once you find the path the person is walking, you keep putting things in front of them to keep them walking. I'm



talking about anyone who is listening to someone's problems and can come up with some point of view based on their own experience.

Speaking from a soul that is deeply connected to a saltwater island, this man's voice resonates with the themes of other voices, other stories told in *ya pulingina kani*. These are family stories of loss, violence and grief and stories of longing to return to self, land, culture and belonging.

The people who came to talk with us came because they were ready to speak out and listen to each other.

We sat together with women and men round their kitchen tables, in their lounge rooms, on their porches, in their work centres and in their community meeting places. We travelled Tasmania from south-east to north-west. Figuratively, we were *walking the land*. We were talking with people of all ages whose experience of violence and the wisdom and understanding that they learned from it turned them into our elders, our mentors.

We were three women, two Tasmanian Aboriginal women, Jo James and Karen Brown, and Roy Pugh originally from Scotland. All three saw Tasmania and the Bass Strait Islands as our home. We shared respect and responsibility for one another and we vowed to honour the identity and integrity of those with whom we walked, talked and listened.

One Elder explained for us how it was to *be* with people in this: "A lot of organizations have been set up to represent Aboriginal people but in fact are disempowering them. Forget about the power we have amongst the land and the animals. Be with them. I only have a few years left. I want to gather as much understanding of life as I can. There's no importance to this unless you give away - you gather to pass on." This was our role in the project - to gather understandings and *pass them on*.

This is what *ya pulingina kani* does. *ya pulingina* is a greeting that means good to see you. *kani* means talk. When the two words are put together, *ya pulingina kani* - good to see you talk, they have a richer meaning. They convey a welcome into the talk. At the same time they affirm the value of talk to *gather, understand* and *give away* knowledge and wisdom. We invite you, as reader, to come into the conversations that we were part of, draw fact and insight together and respectfully pass on what has been entrusted to you in these stories.

When we asked people to tell us their understanding of family violence, what they think about the affect it has on people and what could be done about it, we knew that we were asking people to risk disclosure. In return, we promised confidentiality.

We did not pretend to be unaffected. We knew that our own hearts and minds would be wrung by what we would hear and tested by the discipline and accountability of gathering, writing and passing it on. Talking with people in the way we did, meant having a commitment to genuine conversation. It meant participating in the conversation and, for us, risking something of ourselves, at least as much as we were asking of others.

Narratives and their readers require order. The stories that unfold in this narrative are not told in the order we heard them but rather according to the logic of our understanding.

## The second generation

We were sitting on her porch overlooking the city. It was a quiet afternoon, warm, breezy. We drank coffee and some of us smoked in that communal way that helps you think and talk. We had met before among a group of women around a kitchen table in another place, talking about similar stuff. Another story, not hers, was at the centre of the talk. She was ready to tell her story now, on her porch, on her terms, among just the four of us.

I am concerned about the second generation. When we talk about support for the child victim and give them what we think is support we think it's going to be all right. As they grow up, they remember a child's story with a child's mind.

I took my son to counselling for four years. My daughter never spoke about it. Their father didn't, wouldn't talk about it. He had guns and alcohol. I became a victim and their father became a perpetrator at the same time. He had to tell me he loved me with his fists. When my son was four years old he said to his father, "I wish I could hurt you like you hurt Mum". He was ten when he helped me cut his father down. Now he seems to have flashbacks. "Do you remember", he says, "the colour of the skipping ropes Dad used?" The effect of flashbacks is uncanny, like when you remember the colour of a dress you once wore to some occasion. I resuscitated him. His mother's attitude was that she didn't know whether she could make it to the hospital.

The long-term effects of violence in the family

In all the chapters, the questions and comments of the Project Team are in this script called Bradley Hand ITC TT-Bold.

I lied. It was a heart attack, I said, to protect the kids from the viciousness of the truth. When they found out, this would be a betrayal. I preach, tell the truth. Yet I lied to people. It makes you adjust your personal values. You can't really be who you are. It's like you live on the edge, all the time. So, I worry about my son. He's a second generation. He hasn't got closure.

He seems different to me. He's not violent.

Social interaction  
and violence

But he knows he can be - if he drinks. He says he knows. Mum, he says, I can be like Dad. It would be good for them to know that in social interaction, having a toddy doesn't always relate to violence. Though by the end of the day there are agreements, children still associate drink with violence. It doesn't have to be like that.

*Is it a values thing?*

*In that generation, the man was your man.*

Values, beliefs  
and traditions

You stayed for the kids. You did everything to maintain the family unit. I maintained a false pretence of how I lived, where I lived. We all know what violence is but we continue to pretend it's not happening.

*I heard a noise at midnight, a wounded animal noise, a man or a woman. Someone must have rung the police. They came. It haunted me for a while, days, hearing that person in my head.*

You see kids under 10 now, playing out mum and dad's domestic violence. You can see the strong character and the submissive character in the children's play.

That's why I wanted to sit on the porch. I didn't want to talk about it behind closed doors. I've had all that stuff in my house before this one. I don't want it any more, not in there.

As a mum, I've tried to do the right thing. My son was outwardly aggressive. His behaviour at school was deemed anti-social. I know it was a follow on. His father used to say, I'm gonna go up the bush and hang myself. I became blatant. Just go up the bush, I'd say. Finally he left the state.

Opening up and  
talking about  
violence hurts and  
heals.

We talk about this round kitchen tables. Then, like with the stolen children, we ask people to open up. It becomes raw and you ask, is it going to scab up again?

From the pain of suffering and loss this woman was to speak to us more as she joined our reflections over some of the questions that were perplexing us. *What does family violence mean? Why and how does it*

*happen and who does it affect? What is happening in the community? And what can we do about it?*

We had come to the porch without judgement, without answers, only with questions and empathy. She would speak from the wisdom grown from her experience and the strategy of hindsight.

### *It's in your face*

Effects  
and  
aspects of  
counselling

When I decided to go and do family counselling, I went once and didn't go back. It was like a doctor's room. A seat there for him and a seat there for me. I didn't talk. Then I went to a lovely lady. She asked you to be up front. When you're asked to write down ten things you hate and ten things you like, and when you can't find the "likes" after you name your children, it's in your face. We're the kids of some of the elders who've suffered violence and now death. We're suffering survivor's syndrome. We survived but we live with it every day. The partner I have now doesn't get violent but even if he raises his voice, I react, I become quiet.

I know you can make recommendations but is this going to make a difference?

I'm just sitting here thinking we could send fliers that say, are you a survivor? People haven't checked out what the flier we sent about this said. Is it like blinds come down? If we're trying to aim at something intimate in people's lives, they don't want to know. It's such a confronting issue.

Talking with small groups or one on one, in the different places we've been, has worked better than in formal places.

**In our family or with friends, we've got a safe place from raised voices or abuse. It's quiet, safe. Your friend won't judge. Aboriginal hostels are supposed to be safe places. They have to have 70% occupancy to survive. I just wouldn't go to that kind of place.**

Safe  
places

We have been told that you have to go through the court system for a restraining order before services will be provided. I found that quite amazing. What's a woman's safe place?

You need to be willing to make yourself safe all the time. In my family and my circle of friends we talk about these things. This helps you get through. We never come up with solutions. It seems talking about it is the healing. The solution might be the barrier if people have to identify what is right.

### *What is a safe place?*

Where I am now is safe. I'm in a relationship because I choose to be. In ten years there's never been anything that hinted I needed to be frightened or scared. I have been provided that protection. In retrospect, if I could go back, I would have gone once I'd had the babies. It's all hurt after that.

He has only seen his father three times as a grown up. His father didn't pay maintenance. So when I stopped paying, he had them once.

If you go to Centrelink when the man is not prepared to pay, you have to have police photos. It all has to be documented - when you've had enough. It's humiliating. I had bruises down my neck and body (she swept her hands over her body and head) and the policeman said, "That's all right, darling. I've seen worse." There was also a male photographer and a man had done that to me several hours before. And a man doctor. The public system doesn't cater for women in violence. You're just a punching bag, a casualty along with everyone else. Yet you've been violated just as much as a woman who has been raped but who has been taken in and nurtured. You don't get in to see someone straightaway.

Effects of  
applying for  
maintenance

*The legal system... I know three women, friends, who were raped and didn't report it.*

**And social workers. My mum's really scathing about social workers. My mum says, what's the difference between a rottweiler and a social worker? It's easier to get your kids back from a rottweiler.**

*So many people don't want to go to Child Protection. The social workers swoop in with the police and that's it, the children are gone.*

The siblings come together years later and they don't know each other. People don't want interaction with government processes.

Do you think we have become complacent because "the system didn't help them, it's not going to help me?" We need safe places for our kids. What is a safe place? Is it family? Is it an institution?

I feel my home is my safe place. I don't always know even then. A friend of my daughter was staying overnight. She brought a man. Home. At 5am, my daughter came to tell me a man was trying to get into her bed. Where was this man? I knocked on the door of the friend's room. I found him. I chased him up the street. This young woman had brought a stranger into my home.

*There has to be a time when it stops*

That's where I'm at. I've worked through my domestic violence. I still have abhorrence for guns. My daughter hasn't. But my son, who is older, has the same fear. It's the future directions I care about, my grandchildren. There has to be a time when it stops. When does it stop?

We had come to this question but we were almost talked out. The talk was easing away. There was stillness between us, punctuated by personal musings in the way that conversation does when its work is done. The question was sitting with us, disturbing us. It was as constant as the afternoon breeze fluttering along the porch, cooling hearts and coaxing minds into reflective insight.

*Are we trying to look from the wrong angle - safe places for victims? Should we be looking at punishment for the perpetrator?*

Or look at why people become perpetrators. We can't do to them what the perpetrators do to us.

There are times when I have said, you should take them out and give them a good hiding with tussock grass, good women's business. I don't care how we do it.

What we've heard says there is a level of acceptance of violence in the community. We've seen it in pubs, at home, fellas on toddies having a row, seen to be all right. People are getting sick of this abuse that's going on and on.

**My uncle was a fair old bugger on the drink. My mother used to hide the bread knives under our beds. There were times when we didn't feel comfortable sleeping on the knives. We were all girls. Mum and Dad were very particular about not going into the girls' room. When you look back, you realise what you had to live with as kids. It was normal, accepted. It just happens.**

Violence and alcohol

Alcohol was different in our social life on the island. A dozen longnecks would be the party and it was hard to get more. I never saw that as being associated with domestic violence as I do now. When Aunty's children were taken, it was about moral judgement of the drink.

As long as we have kitchen tables and porches, as a community we are offering some counselling amongst ourselves. There needs to be backup when the kitchen tables are not working.

But for others, they are sworn to secrecy. If you are a close friend, you can expect to be part of the secret.

Staying perpetrates the cycle. Where is there help to talk these issues through?

**We haven't got counsellors. Go back to our sisters. We protect them.**

*When the kitchen tables are not working...*

And so the questions formed: When the kitchen tables aren't working, what happens? If she wants to talk, where does she go? What constitutes domestic violence? What is family violence? Should there be punishment for the perpetrator?

And who is going to take responsibility – the Government? The community? Service providers? We are not providing answers in our consultations.

Need for support when you leave a situation of violence



**If there's secrecy in families, there's also secrecy in services.  
Nobody knows who the hell they are.**

*The community has an expectation that something is going to happen. One or two people can't do it on their own. The community has to drive it.*

**Maybe regional police stations need a male and a female liaison officer. In the public health system, people are not contactable, messages are not returned for weeks, months. There needs to be male and female support. You have to have gender choice.**

The talk dissolved into a quiet recognition that our talk for that day was done. It seemed that her intention to speak on her terms about her concerns was resolved, her work done, her heart firm but open, her self protected. Whatever understanding came to her through the talking was her business. She has left it to us, readers and listeners, to interpret her story, to understand something of her experience of violence, her survival and her wisdom.

## Helplessness, hopelessness...

When we arrived at her door, a young woman let us in. She was watching over the baby in her arms. A toddler came to watch us, standing silently in the doorway to the lounge room. Another baby was asleep in the bedroom. The Grandmother waved us in, asked us to put the kettle on. She sat in her armchair, bowed over, elbows on her knees, wringing her hands. She seemed in despair.

Grandmother couldn't contact her daughter. She was caught between wanting to fulfil her role as an elder, talking about a very important issue that affected her community, and her frenzy about her daughter.

Family stress

Who does violence affect? It affects all the family, me most as the eldest. The children are here. It's worrying me. She's never been away this long. I don't know where she is.

How does it affect me? It causes me to be distraught, angry. I've got the shakes right now.

When children are involved in violence, it brings in the whole family. Look at this young'un there. It makes me feel wild. She's got the kids to look after. I don't know of anyone to ring. I would if there was someone.

*What would you like someone to do for you?*

Well, it would have to be there for everyone. There would be some one there to go and look for her. In our community, we need help badly. If they didn't or did find her, they'd have to look after the children because I can't.

The right to confidentiality

I could contact somebody official...but I wouldn't...because they might tell somebody. A month ago, this girl was put into care. Her mother knew where she was and she shouldn't know. The mother was into alcohol and domestic violence. The child needed to be cared for. There was a breach of confidentiality.

*How can we help the children?*

## *Wouldn't let my old cat go there*

If the family can't help them, I'm sure no one else can. When it comes to domestic violence they should have somewhere to go and not put pressure on the family. A safe place to go. It's about making sure the kids are looked after. I do know people - wouldn't let my old cat go there - they are foster parents and they drink and take drugs.

We were at a loss to help Grandmother. Where could we find help, now, at this moment of need? This was the effect of violence, right in our faces - the sharp and dramatic reality of what people had been telling us: you need help straightaway, you need to know you are going to get it if you are to break the cycle of returning to violence and despair.

We rang the central office that coordinates the Aboriginal Police Strategy. "Let's see if we can get them to do something in the way you would like it done", she said. Grandmother was not confident.

That place at Launceston? That shelter? What happened to that? It was shut down because people knew where it was. The people involved were not counselled.. We can't go and stop there. There's meant to be people who are caretakers. We can't go there at all. Things run by the community? You can't keep them quiet. That could have been the place for all of us - Launceston, in a safe, quiet place. I'd be on my own with no worries.

Drugs, alcohol, Clark Island. I'm very interested in this program. But there's a sense of helplessness, hopelessness all around that's not going to help us.

When they do have somewhere - for parents and children- they should have kind of security guards, put barriers up for protection, have people with real skills, people who know how to deal with people.

Between the phone calls and the arrangements and agreements for help to come, Grandmother - Aunty and Elder to others in the community - told of her own despair, her voice dull with disillusion. When we left the house, she was still bowed over in her chair, waiting, shaking her head as if her longing for peace and for no worries was impossible. A strong woman of influence in her community, her energy was, on that day, diminished by the

violence she was helpless to deal with alone, diminished by her fear of the consequences for her sons and daughters, her grandchildren, her community and her own survival.

## We all know it's there

Family violence affects the extended family, the extended community. There is a cycle of violence that affects kids, mates...It's a tender private thing. We need to open it up so people don't feel scared. They can say, "I hurt."

It shows up at school.

It's emotional and physical.

It includes incest.

Hurt can be diverted through counselling.

Confidentiality is important.

At the other end of the island, we talked with four women who were involved with the community through their work and through their families. We met in their work centre. It was hard for them, as we had found it was for us, to separate work from life, experience from feeling, understanding from compassion and action from concern. And anyway, what is it that makes us think we should divide work and life, but tradition?

The room was charged with readiness to talk. We sat round the meeting table, cradling our coffees, warming our hands. Anticipating what was to come, we reached for cakes and biscuits - the sweetening that might make us feel better.

One woman in particular was keen to tell her story. I was waiting for you to come, she said. The others sensed her need to talk and let her.

We're a small community. Neighbours see and hear and don't get involved. But a story starts. You get a domino effect. The story gets longer. You get all these non-truths. The family gets ostracised. This is a special problem in a rural community.

Children whose parents have domestic violence will get into it too. They become like damaged vehicles.

The issue of  
privacy in a  
small  
community

How do we make our children strong? The whole family needs to be helped. You can help one person, put them on the right track, then they'll go back and they're just curling up. We all know it's there.

Mental violence is an illness. Grief, unemployment, no self worth, despair - they're part of violence.

Elder abuse

Some young ones won't move away from here. They've got steadiness. Their parents will slip them \$50 or so. Then they go and get a deal, what they live for every day. When parents don't give them the money, they will hit them. Drugs are related to family violence.

It's a shame job. A young fella thinks, who can you talk to, pour your guts out? Like, tell some one I don't want to live. I feel I just want to kill myself. Why do I have to watch my father, my brother? I'd rather die. What can I give a partner? People of 15 are watching.

### *My belly's aching all the time*

Some it'll affect, some it won't. I've seen some people I think are really lovely. Then he has defied my trust. He beat my daughter. 7.30 am - he turned up sober, looking for her. This happened in front of my sister-in-law. My reaction was, you fucking cunt! I'm going to kill you for doing that to my daughter. And he said, All you black cunts are mental anyway.

Family break-up

I feel good talking about it. I can't talk to my family. It's my choice to hate this man, not theirs. She is my daughter, not theirs. Her face - one eye closed, scarred already, teeth dislodged, lips at the top of her head, bruises, bites all over her body. She can't leave, she said, what about the kids? She went back. I'm waiting for the next time.

It has split the family. He is not welcome in my house. He defied my trust. When we have a family do, she doesn't come because he doesn't. The tension is hard. I want her there to share happiness or grief. There are no phone calls now. We go to her place. I am cordial to him while we're there, not nasty but cold. His father used to beat

his mother. My heart is breaking. I'm losing my daughter. I'll be there for her the next time. My belly's aching all the time.

### *Big, big damage*

For this group of four women the words "family violence" had a complex set of meanings. Terrible suffering was its effect.

In Tasmania, you have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal as partners. Family violence is not just indigenous. It's both black and white.

Indigenous family violence needs addressing in the indigenous way, in a broader sense than the white way, which is more vertical.

Extended families are suffering because of the racist attitudes of non-Aboriginal people. I was called a black cunt mother because my daughter's partner is non-Aboriginal. They know they can hurt you by shunning your culture.

Family violence is emotional. It hurts.

Racial overtones deliver a double whammy - children, grandchildren and the non-violent, non-Aboriginal partners are hurting too.

Behind closed doors there is still racism.

Emotional violence, physical violence, mental violence, financial - you don't have to hit them to throw them into a state where the spirit is broken. Spiritual violence is big, big damage.

*What can you do?*

We can't do anything unless they ask for help. You've got to be so careful.

## *A calming down place*

A family  
violence centre.

What we can do is have a family violence centre that has a shelter to remove yourself from the situation, a calming down place. No police or ambulance men here. Not in the township. In a nice bushland type setting, not necessarily accessible. Now, if you have to get the children out, you have to take them to Hobart. There you have access to Indigenous and non-Indigenous helpers. I would rather talk to Indigenous people because of their culture.

She paused, looked deep into her coffee and raising her eyes, she shared her dream.

The shelter has access for the whole family, not just women and children. Sometimes women are the bashers. The children are the ones to worry about.

An ideal safe  
place

The community has someone to tell. It is confidential. You don't have to give your name at the first point of contact. The workers are on round the clock shifts. There's advertising that's not offensive. There's a round table community consultation.

A number of contacts come in here. Some just want a yarn, some calming down time. You want to go down by the river, take some time and have a smoke? I say. Collect yourself for a while. Where are the kids? I always ask that.

In a community retreat or centre you can go bush, sit outside with a fire, return to your cultural heart. It's a time out centre where people are catered for within. There's enough land where people can go and just be. Have dogs there...

Here, one of her colleagues reminded her of the trials of working in their centre.

The mediator, that's the one in the middle - you, sometimes me - can be torn between all the issues, You can become a victim as well. There's always the question, am I giving the right advice?



## *I want to walk into water and just keep walking*

Despair

Then there's elder abuse. I get to the point where I just want to walk away and walk into water and just keep walking. In my office sometimes, I screen my calls. I can't take it all. I need to share it. As a worker, my abuse is that I don't have someone to debrief with me. For example there's a young girl that is mutilating herself. I don't have answers. I want to buy her something but can't. I need to be able to go somewhere and say, I'm really, really finding, that after 7 years I'm knocked out. I can't break the ties.

## *Catch 22*

Though the women were empathetic with service providers, they could not see the possibility of an adequate response from them. Mostly they saw the service providers as community organisations that shied away from complex funding selection criteria. The government powers were undertaking to simplify access to funding but in the latest round of Partners Against Domestic Violence (PADV) funding, there was not a lot of interest locally, they said. The lead-time was very short, only 3 -4 weeks.

And most service providers, they believed, had not yet come to grips with family violence. There was only one service provider in their region where they could refer contacts.

They could call the police but it most likely meant waiting. There was only one local policeman who could be somewhere else or on call and sometimes the person in trouble could not wait.

Police - support  
or threat?

People are frightened to call the police in case the perpetrator takes revenge. If people smoke pot or take other drugs, they are frightened of calling the police in. It's a catch 22 women's situation, fear of your own situation. What if they find my bong? they think. If I call the police and he finds out, he'll kill me.

## *An undercover place*

We were coming to that reflective time at the end of a conversation. She returned to her dream.

The need for protection as well as a sense of belonging

I need a retreat, a safe, undercover place where no one will know what I'm there for. I can have a massage, go to a hairdresser, walk with the dog, have counselling.

The possibility of an Indigenous Centre just for family violence was coming not only from what these women sensed would work for them and the members of their own community. But it was also coming from that community's longing *to be* - to be culturally understood, nurtured, protected and, most of all, accepted.

## Oyster Cove

Ruby Hunter sang about domestic violence at Oyster Cove in January 2002. Her voice came from deep in her belly, from her source. It rose plaintively, painful and hopeful all at once. It cascaded into the clearing where the people sat. It filled up the cracks in the earth and the spaces between the tall gums that made the people's circle. A long, wordless melody reached into our spirit filling all the empty gaps.

Then this voice of a woman, backed by the space and harmony her man gave her, sang to the people of certainty: all this violence, for sure, was going to change. Her voice was like a spell of hope. The Cove was full. Hearts were full. Change was up to us, she sang.

## In men's own houses

He'd bought buns for us. We'd brought along muffins for morning tea. As he made our coffee and talked of the outback station he lived on as a child, we could only imagine what his life was as a boy. In Tasmania, we are not used to people talking about "outback stations" here. Yet he is Tasmanian and he said that. His "outback" suggested to us a scene on an island but far from the sea, far from the town, hundreds of sheep, a handful of dogs, always work, droving, shearing, cooking, men, women and children doing it hard. We can almost see the cracks in the hard scorched earth in summer and the cracks in the lives and hearts of the people.

As this man from the outback station talked of life, we heard just how hard it was for him. His change was long and painful. His journey was one of understanding and returning to himself to claim his integrity. As we listened, the certainty of change - good for him and good for other men - was real.

I only talk about how I see it in my life. The female person trying to change who or how I am, a person trying to change *me* - *that* brings on anger.

*What do you mean by change?*

My values, the way I do things. It goes back to the outback station when I was a kid. Being told what to do all the time - it was the what to do part. The brick wall comes up. That's the start of everything. When I get into that position, when too much is expected of me, too much stress, too much demand...

The right  
counselling

For me to get proper counselling, what I feel to be proper counselling, I had to go interstate. I couldn't find the right counsellor, a psychologist here. It was a hard thing to do, leaving here.

All goes back to the station. I was taken away from the safest place, chucked in here, into city life. There was no one with understanding. Where I was before was the most safe. I was taken away. I had no choice. The government had set up a reserve but was not willing to make a commitment to the families.

*Authority often gives you no choice.*

When I did have my first breakdown...man, *you feel bare* and the *Mental Health* walks in dressed in suits. I walked out. Authority!

As he told it, we could see how this man's story was bound up in the history of Aboriginal children on the Islands. His mind travelled back and forth in time as he tentatively searched for order so that we might appreciate the important events that affected his life and caused his suffering as well as his healing.

*It has to be between you and the person you're talking to*

You couldn't find the right counsellor. What is the right counsellor?

First, it's what *I* look at - that first one was too old. B was my age. He took me right back to the start. We clicked. He had a lot of time. We need the right age group. They get into their thirties, they get too old. There are not the choices here. You can't pick and choose.

Before I went to K. That was too close to home. I had to get away from it, go to a separate space. It has to be between yourself and the person you're talking to.

At the start, you don't know what you're doing. That's the worst part. You're grasping at something. Then once you get it dealt with, you can talk - I talk to a lot of blokes when they understand it too.

I waited till I knew what it was about and then I told my family. They knew I was sexually molested. They understood. We are a staunch family. We never hit our women.

*That's confusion*

The confusion  
of young men

Alcohol and drugs make violence more noticeable and acceptable. People allow it to happen. Violence seems to be an acceptable part of growing up. Young fellas go through the stage of bashing up their women. They think it's acceptable within a certain group. They just go through it. It's not so much to do with authority. It's confusion.

Because I'm a domestic sort of bloke, I wonder what I'd do if my partner went to work and I stayed home to look after the children. That would cause me confusion, that is, my loss of role. The woman goes to work. You do the chores. There's a role reversal. Ask a bloke to do the housework and look after the kids. It's a bigger task than unloading a truck! That's confusion, that.

Black women are stronger than men. They're stronger in saying what they think. Men are quieter. They take longer.

*Talking of roles in the community, do you think men are not able to find their own space? Is it difficult to talk?*

### *The friendship of men*

Some of us get together and talk when things are tough. We provide support for each other. This is something that should have been on the go a long time ago. I've got these people I go to. They know a lot about me. We can sit down and not be shocked about what we've done. We can say anything. How many men have got that kind of friendship?

Trust and time

If you bottle it up, it comes out in the family. Building up the trust takes a long time between the men.

*How do you do it? Can the community do it themselves? Say there's a magic bucket of money. How would you say, this is what we need to do?*

Even by going round doing what you're doing is getting the ball rolling, the men thinking. You've got to find the right person to talk to. You might try half a dozen people. Get them together. Make a gathering. They make suggestions, talk about what they expect. They build and develop a program. They set it up. It's the men's program. They feel part of it. I'd worry about a woman coming into it. It might set it back. It can be in the city or out in the bush, once a fortnight, once a month. Jump in the car or in the boat. Make sure you have the right tickets. You're talking to a friend.

Including mum,  
dad and the  
kids

If you're going to have this, you have one day where Mum and kids come along so they can understand how to tackle the men's issues.

*Do you need skilled people?*

We can do it ourselves. We have people like me who have an anxiety disorder, who have experienced different things, studied it. We can use ourselves. We can use counsellors also. They can give us a look at the way they do it and help us understand. We can pick out the bits that are relevant. You'd have the whole group picking out the bits for themselves.

*When we were taken away as children, it really affected us, as well as our families and our parents.*

*I scrubbed my skin till it was red*

I'm taking the state government to court over the way I was treated at the home. I want the government to know what was promised and how we were treated.

I was pushed through a window and told I was a dirty black bastard and I scrubbed my skin till it was red. And I had to tolerate that everyday. No wonder I kept running away.

Separation and  
blame

Parents? It was written down that my parents weren't good enough to look after me. I was in court, eleven years old. When the judge says you are going to be put into a home because your mum and dad aren't capable of looking after you...when you're the one that's not towing the line... you can't help it because it's not your fault. I went to a detention centre where they had good blokes. I got help and got better. I ran away twice but I went back. Today, you have to look at who they have there.

I failed school miserably. I could hardly read and I couldn't write. I taught myself to read. I can speed read. I still have trouble to spell. I suffered ADD. That was not recognised then.

I was not that different from the other fellas who were taken away from the station, no one to feel comfortable talking to. We were taken away from a safe place.

Through talk, he had got to the source of his pain and anger. With reasoned talk, he would achieve the justice and recognition by government that his pain deserved. Through being open and honest in his talking, he knew he was healing.

*So the young ones can know and be comforted*

Lost initiation

Look at our young men. What do they do to cross over from childhood to adulthood? There's nothing. You go out to the pub, use your knuckles - that's what we've got now. There's no older role models out there that they can go to. When you see them, you're seeing something fake, something they're putting up front.

Support to work through the pain

The only comfort we can get is from each other. I'm past the point of caring about anyone knowing I've been sexually molested. I'm talking about it so the young ones can know and be comforted.

It's climbing the wall and getting over it. Getting over it and not getting stuck - that's the hard part.

*In men's own houses*

The role of education

I'm aware of the services because I work in government. It's whether they're appropriate for me. Tasmanian Aboriginal services are too close - something might get out. Mainstream services? Too authoritarian. Relaxation classes are not enough for me. There's not much around. Relaxation works well but you have to get to the understanding. Once you get to that then you start to get better.

*What type of things would you like to have happen?*

Education is the only thing that I can see. It's a positive thing. You can't put a stop to what's going on. Educate the perpetrators and the victims and the old people. Mums and kids come along to be part of the healing process to help the men. The men have a place where they



can go and have a casual chat. They have their meetings, plan their trips in those weeks in between. They might go to a lecture even and it doesn't have to be the cultural stuff. The lectures could help them identify the problems, work out the kind of things that might set them off and then learn how to deal with them.

*A men's house?*

We could be going to our own houses, to sit down and chat with people who already suffer what I have suffered from. I like to sit down like that.

*I'm worried we're not going to have enough men's input into understanding Indigenous family violence. See, I'm comfortable with you but I'm not so confident with men I don't know. What do you think we should do? We're women.*

You're putting up an obstacle. When one of us started doing things, we said we don't want women coming in, we wanted men in there to do it. If you're going to get honest feedback you're going to need a man to go around doing what you are doing. So many of them have suffered and don't know how to get it out. Most of them would say they, the women, wouldn't understand.

I'd just go round and visit. This is it, I'd say. This is why I'm here. Go weekends. If you were employed the hours would vary. You couldn't have an office. You'd have to wait till they started crying out, we need an office! They'll let you know.

Opening to  
what might be  
possible

Each time you have your meeting, some one from the group goes up front to chair. The next week another one goes up front. You swap round and share the chairing. You get responsibility and self-esteem.

I'm at the stage now to broaden out, put my story of violence to different people, have more feedback and find out what to do with it.

## Seeing from a distance

In a setting that seemed quite formal to us, we met with six men and three women who had been encouraged by their mentors to come to the meeting room. Four of the men were young and hardly spoke beyond introducing themselves. One explained that he believed he was Aboriginal but his parents denied it. His face was fresh and clear and his smile was shy and unassuming. You might have thought he was untroubled by this challenge to his identity. Perhaps he was one who had that certain strength it takes to go to the source of the self and assert your identity against the odds.

It seemed to us this time that people were reflecting more from a distance than from a willingness to share close, personal stories. It seemed that most of the younger men and women had decided to listen and see where our conversation would go. Who really knows? Perhaps they were recognising the wisdom of the age and experience of those who were speaking out. Perhaps they were simply not yet ready to speak in public. They remained attentive, watching and obviously engaged in the happening.

Whatever perspective these people were attending from, it was one that revealed their intense interest and caring for their cultural preservation and communal growth. What we record here are reflections by the group on the effect of family violence, the words we use to describe it, its history and issues and how we deal with it differently.

### *The words we use*

There are many voices in this chapter.

This is the flow of the conversation from one person to another.

It's generational...Alcohol abuse changes the personality. People get drunk. They change. Alcohol is like a poison...It's been a long term process. We've been suffering colonisation. We are treated as visitors. We are struggling for recognition just now. The government says we have done good things in relation to reconciliation. We've heard speakers. What does reconciliation mean? We haven't done anything...Our ancestors haven't...What has been done?... Our children, our land, our identity have been taken away from us. All these add up to substantial usage of us that becomes a trigger...Perpetual generation of violence in the press is seen everyday. We are portrayed too in that way.

Differing interpretations of the source and meaning of domestic violence.

In Aboriginal communities it doesn't matter if you beat each other up. But if you beat a white man, then there's trouble. In the white community if you beat up a black man, it doesn't matter. If you have a punch up between brothers, they don't tell on each other. Before I knew all the fancy words I know now, for me, domestic violence was watching my mother getting beaten up every night.

The big problem with the term domestic violence is that it is part of a labelling process.

This comment seemed to exasperate one of the men. One minute he was contributing to the conversation, the next he was leaving the room, fuming - like smoke was coming out of his ears. Whatever the explanation, his pain, his anger, his guilt, his hurt, we were startled and quietened by his action. We were less sure of what we were trying to understand when we talked about family violence and more aware of the complexity of the consequences of it. It felt then a most "tender" thing to talk about indeed.

### *Not blame, not labels*

"Family violence" is a better term.

The big issue with "domestic violence" will always be the attacks it makes on men. I don't like the labels "perpetrator", "victim". They always lead to blame for the man. This terminology gets used against people and creates avenues where governments won't help people to deal with the issues. If we say "family violence", then it's not about blaming. Blaming doesn't deal with the issues. We don't know what has happened to the people who are involved.

The big issue is that everyone has to be involved. Everybody - not just the survivors. The structure of domestic violence has never worked. It's really different for us. We want to deal with it differently, not with blame, not with labels but by creating a way that we can all talk safely, like this.

*There's been discussion about community responsibility in how they deal with it.*

## *Community responsibility for violence*

Community ownership of ways of dealing with family violence

Domestic violence normally denotes physical violence. When it happens it's called violence. But when you unpack it further, it's verbal violence...it's a person's inability to feel control over his or her life. As a community it's hard for us to deal with. We've never been given an opportunity to deal with things our way. We need to talk about it, decide what *we* want. *We* are the ones that need to be driving it.

I've heard people talk about what they've done. We need to talk about what's going on in our lives, come together and know we are supported. And our family members need to be supported.

Community strategies

Community responsibility should have components of people coming together, working on it together, thinking about it logically. Different groups will want to do it in different ways.

*People have been talking about healing places, places where families can go.*

We need to be part of the resolution, not government departments or bureaucracies. It's a community thing. There are links between us but each one needs to take part in their own way.

*What is the community going to have to do if they have the responsibility?*

The group had come to a most difficult question, one that was to raise more questions. But then can we say there is a right answer? The more we question, the more we talk and perhaps the more we understand, the closer we may get to realising actions that will heal families.

In the black community, violence is accepted as a measure of the power you hold, control usually between man and wife. The mother is accepting of violence - it was how she was brought up. How do you break the cycle if the mother agrees that her son beat her daughter-in-law?

Time - to change and break the cycle.

It's going to take a long time to bring about change, to break the cycle. The perpetrator is not going to step forward, band-aids are not going to fix the problem.

If our community takes a different approach what does that really mean? Where do we fit in the world? How do we deal with education? Health issues? Male disempowerment? Female disempowerment? Understanding by children that violence is not acceptable?

And so the questions unfolded with their issues about how health programs allow people to fall through the safety nets, why ambulance officers, doctors even, are unwilling to help in violent situations, what the hidden agendas of welfare agencies are when they decide to remove kids from families, why placing Aboriginal kids with Aboriginal families might be most effective, why they should not be taken from one violent situation and placed in another, what teachers should look for and report and what the services are doing, what is working and who they are seeing.

Exploring these questions led to suggestions for what could be done.

A clear listing of services...

Supporting action against violence

Services based in the community...

An infrastructure to support them...

A kind of Neighbourhood Watch...

Not accepting violence and using something like Crimestoppers...

Rehabilitation counselling...

TV advertising, in your face stuff like the smoking ads...

Respecting anonymity...

## Four short stories by women

We sat with four women sharing coffee and biscuits in a room decorated with posters that featured Aboriginal artefacts, history and life. As we talked, we learned that one woman came from a town out in the country, one from a river port, one from one of the islands and one from the city.

Our habit at each of our meetings was to go through the research ethics that we were observing before we raised any questions. These included honouring the stories that people told us and protecting the confidence and rights of individuals when gathering their stories for passing on.

We would ask people to talk about who family violence affected and how it affected them. Then we would ask whether they wished to talk about it.

The women in this group were very quiet to start with and we were not sure why. Perhaps they were shy. Perhaps they really didn't trust us. As well as coming from such different backgrounds, their experience ranged from grandmother to new mother. Perhaps there were too many gaps between them to trust each other. One woman said she didn't want to talk about violence in her life.

So we shared with them some of the insights and suggestions we'd heard from other people we'd talked to. Then one by one each woman told her story.

### *I'm frightened of my daughter*

We need help for people on drugs and alcohol. I'm frightened of my daughter. I've had black eyes and I've been in hospital because of her. I don't think anything can be done. I took her into the detox place and they took her in overnight. She got raped the same night. I would have liked help to work out what to do. A restraining order doesn't stop anyone from coming up to your place. That didn't keep her away. She kept coming back. I was scared of her. The police wouldn't do anything. They wouldn't come to get her.

The limitations  
of restraining  
orders

## *She can't leave him*

Many women  
won't leave the  
men who are  
violent towards  
them.

After the accident I had, there was a GP who was always there for me. He's the only one I can talk to. You have to have someone you can really trust, someone you can relate to, talk to. There should be someone there that people should be able to ask for help.

Take my daughter. He comes from where they can hit the females. He belts her. Her son is three years old and acts terrified of him. She brought the boy to live with me. I've had him for some months and just given him back. They were just trying to palm him off. Now she has a baby. There should be a place for mother and child to go. My daughter says she can't leave him because the children need a father. She keeps saying that and won't leave because of it.

## *You wouldn't feel good*

You have to have a restraining order before they can help you. My friend's boyfriend smashed her windows. The insurance company wouldn't help her unless she took out a restraining order. I went with her to help her. You wouldn't feel good. You'd do it for your child though. To get insurance, you have to show that you're doing something about it. My girlfriend was still seeing her boyfriend.

## *I couldn't have the kids on the island*

On the island, I tried to get a restraining order. They refused because the person was Aboriginal. You've got to talk things out together, they said. I've done that. The man I was with was being bashed up and he shouldn't have to be. The kids got abused. They were crying, frightened. I couldn't have the kids on the island because of them carrying on all the time. I rang the police. The police expect the community to sort it out.

There was a kind of timelessness about their stories that were told as matters of fact. This is life. This is how it is. It happens. Was the outlook of these four women one of resignation that inevitably, life is like that? Something had brought them together as a group - did they come out of

hope, out of a need to find themselves within a broader cultural community where they knew deep down they belonged?



I pulled away... I won't accept it  
any more

Her house was an artist's. Weavings, pots, drapes, plants - with colours, textures and composition arranged in this corner or against that wall to draw her eye and yours to the detail she wanted to capture, the effect she wanted to create. In a way, that was how she was ordering her life, giving all her attention to what she saw as precious and worth valuing, then surrounding herself with it. What she surrounded herself with most was her abundant love for her children and her love of home.

In my circumstance, I pulled away very early but violence still continues in the family. My children were subject to it. They know I pulled away from it. But they still see it every day in their friends and amongst their relations.

It affects everyone. You see it every day. The obvious thing is the stress on children. They will always live with what they have witnessed. You can't get away from it. It's not just in your head. You know it did happen.

My children don't know his side of the family. I've separated myself completely from them. It affects the children.

The young woman was her daughter. You could sense the intimacy of shared suffering and survival between them. She edged up close to her mother.

The fact is that domestic violence broke up our family. We don't have a family because of domestic violence and that sucks, it's not fair.

*What causes domestic violence?*

Like many others we talked to, the first most obvious causes the mother mentioned was alcohol and drugs. But for her there was a bigger problem.

Acceptance is a big problem. We accept it. That's one of the biggest dramas. We say, you're right girl, I'll support you. We don't agree

The problem of acceptance

with it but we are accepting of it. We are tolerant - I don't know what the word is - but we put up with it.

*You were one of my friends who told me, I don't accept it. I can see it happening, you said. You were a real strength. "It's not okay", you said, "I don't accept what's happening to you as a friend."*

I don't think you can teach that. It's what you come to know. Every girlfriend I've ever had has had violence in one step of her life. Someone to talk to would have helped. If there were more people like that, it would happen less.

It took me 4 years. I think we must teach our children that we won't tolerate being bashed. We won't tolerate our boys bashing. Educate the parents to educate the kids.

*Should there be something there for the children when the parents can't be there?*

I've seen it all too often where the kids don't want it anymore. They can't cope with it anymore. I don't know if there is even an answer.

*If we had a bucket of money from the Government, what would you tell us to do?*

I probably wouldn't go for TV ads or pamphlets. Possibly posters, billboards, something that makes a big impact with a message like: *We won't tolerate violence in our families anymore. It can't happen anymore.*

*How can people who have been affected be helped?*

Even with support. I don't think you'd get the participants for gatherings. If people are in it, they aren't going to face it. It's hard to say, yep, my man bashes me. It's actually a shame job. You'd get people such as me who've been there to go to the gatherings because we're the survivors. The question is how do you help the victims? I can do much more as a friend or a community member.

*Did you use services?*

Support from friends and community

I did. Once, when I went to a shelter, it saved my arse for a couple of weeks. We had everything flogged off us while we were at the shelter. They have helped me twice, my crikey, yes.

Now I just usually offer a bed myself, I know most of my friends wouldn't feel comfortable going there. I don't know why really. It could be finances -it can be quite costly to stay there. It could be there are no Blackfellas, it's a white run place - no connections.

*What about health services?*

Some people are funny about Aboriginal organisations. A few years ago I would have said no. Now everything is different. It's confidential and you do have the support of a lot of community people. I can't see how it wouldn't work.

*Who should be the people employed?*

Qualified counsellors wouldn't necessarily do the trick. I'd rather they sat down with someone they could talk to. Blackfellas want to go to Blackfellas.

*Women's support networks are family and friends. Is there a way of developing that so it is strengthened and becomes a formal support group?*

**That's how I think it could work.**

*A group of women can give the means of talking, dealing with the violence themselves.*

We described the men's group meetings as told to us by the man from the outback station. Both mother and daughter supported this. We asked the younger woman whether she would be comfortable going to a young people's group. She said,

If I knew I could trust them, if I knew them, yeah, I would.

*Such a group would have to lay down its rules, that is, the ethical ways they would work together. It would be the community taking*

Sitting down to talk

Young people  
creating new  
traditions

*responsibility, saying, "We don't accept this violence but we're there if you need help".*

**Just knowing it won't be tolerated any more would help - the fact that someone is there and it's not going to be tolerated any more.**

*Just living with it in the way I have, there is no way I'd go into a relationship like that. I know my brother wouldn't either.*

*A lot of people have said that the Aboriginal community are victims anyway due to genocide, a violent society, sexual abuse...in our parents' and grandparents' generations.*

**I'll agree in some circumstances. We are victims. All that creates what we're talking about. All those things contribute. They are passed on. We can't do this any more. We have to say, this is not going to happen anymore. We need to break the cycle in any possible way we can. People are dying of smoking. People are abusing alcohol and drugs because of these things. It seems to me that violence is in every third family. It's horrifying.**

**Voluntary work is what I'm prepared to do. There's a number of us who can do that with support and networks.**

*That's a big achievement to be able to say, "My family won't tolerate it."*

**My turning point was seeing my young one screaming. She was two and a half years old. I didn't want my children to see the violence. And my family supported me.**

**This mother and artist showed us she had a strong sense of who she was, where she had come from and where she wanted to be. What she had learned was perhaps what she yearned for other women - get hold of your inner strength, have courage to be on your own with your children, your decisions, your livelihood and your future, respect and cherish your own values and beliefs, find and develop your talents and love and support your family and friends but do not tolerate violence.**

## Keeping the children

There's three kinds of the drink. The midnight horrors are the worst - that was my husband. One, they go to sleep - they're fine old fellows. Another one, they're not so bad. With the midnight horrors they get up and run and when they start to cry, that's the time to go. If they've had a little doze and they wake up, that's the time to go. Once the police came and I asked them about it. They said these men could kill and they don't know they're doing it. So that's when I bided my time till I left.

Me and other women, we'd go out in the bush, all the people's kids, build a little shack. We took all the razors and guns, said it was for shooting the kangaroos for food. Back then, the men would go to the pub, the women took off for the bush. You don't know when they're going to take off into violence.

Alcohol and people cause trouble. The kids get trouble at school. That's why I cleared out from the island. It affects everybody. You get down...low esteem...I was sitting in the gutter. I jumped up and said, I'm sitting in the gutter. I've got to get myself out of this.

During that time on the island when Aunty was a young mother, there was nowhere to go on the island - no safe places, no shelters. According to the six women who met with us, violence on the island today was not as prevalent as it was. It was still there. They knew this, because they knew the community. There was still sexual and physical abuse: men bash, women bash, they said. They believed their local Aboriginal organisation really helped with programs for alcohol, drugs and unemployment. A lot of people who were caught in domestic violence were not as involved in it now. They were getting their self-esteem back.

The women's story of violence on the island nowadays was interspersed by their personal experience of it. Aunty telling her story seemed to make it okay to tell theirs. Like Aunty, these were women who have grown strong. Their work in their organisation had earned them powerful influence in their

community. Their achievement was in the way they were "holding" their community in their care. They worked hard and long and they advocated for the well-being of all their community members.

*We used to go out in the bush... Now you wait for a plane*

Governments  
must recognise  
that family  
violence exists.

First the government has to recognise that the violence is there and people are hiding it. You need somewhere to go. If you go on a plane, people will know. When you live in the Aboriginal community, you find out everything you want to know. Putting in a few dollars here and there is not enough. People need a safe house.

There is one here.

I've never known about it.

I could have used it. You can only get to it through the police. It's been there for a lot of years.

We need counsellors. Women and men should be treated. You go to counselling only if you want to - to a point. But if it is a bad case, he or she should be brought in and made to go.

My man wouldn't talk to anyone.

Healing  
happens

They can cure it if they have to.

**The older they get, they change...think of the children.**

He idolised my kids. He still has my daughter. She worships the ground he walks on.

*Should the children know there is a safe place? Some people have said there is a lot of secrecy about the services available to help. Who are they? How do you contact them? It's not easy to find them in the*

phone book. What type of service is there for children? Does the school do anything?

The school brings a social worker here. The kids can get counselling through the school.

Privacy is essential.

It wouldn't work if it was one of my children, I'd prefer to take them on the plane. You don't have the privacy here.

What services are you familiar with? Have you used them?

There's nothing here. You have to wait for a plane. You find somewhere to hide. You also have to hide the money.

The role of police

If someone can get off the island quickly the Shelter will pay.

You'll find that trained staff don't contact the police unless as a last resort.

I had to contact the police because I didn't have anyone else. He did more for me than anyone.

I rang the police. He wouldn't come. He found out he should. Then he had to.

## *Community action*

Women attack the police too.

What services are there for perpetrators of violence?

There has to be some place for them too. If the police come, they put them in jail for the night. As much as we would like them to be in jail, there has to be counselling for them. Then we'd be talking about them going off the island for that.

Till now the conversation had been quite measured. One comment slipped into another. Suddenly they were on the edge of their seats, leaning over the table towards us. What action could they take as a community?

Let them look. Let them hear about it. Shame them. Let everybody know. It's part of their punishment.

They can't get away from it. They've done wrong. They need help.

Apologising is the worst part.

**Mandatory  
counselling?**

*That everyone knows, is that enough to shame them?*

Everyone knows anyway. There's often two sides to the story. I know people who have been together. One will push till it sets off the other. Whereas, if you know your partner, you could prevent it. What about making some legal rule, like making it mandatory to have marriage counselling for both people?

*Counselling for children, for the partner who is abused, for the abusing partner all separately and then combined.*

### *For children to stay in the family*

**Empowering the  
family to keep  
the children**

If parents continue to live together and blue and they are harming the children, if they are not going to get out of the violence, parents should be held accountable for the children. There should be some mechanism where someone can step in to protect the children. A family member should be able to come to take the children. The parents should not have the right to harm the children.

**I put up with it for 17 years.**

I took 8 years. Some would have left but I couldn't. 8 years too long. Someone should have had the right to come for the children. I wouldn't do it unless I had the right. I'd need support. The children should move into their own family, not a foster family. If someone had come in and taken your children, would you have stayed? You'd have thought about it more. There's not enough pressure on the couple.

There was nothing out there to tell me what my next steps should be - who to talk to, where to go, how I was to get a roof over our heads and food.



The harm of  
labelling

When I went to the police they asked me first what I had rowed over. I got the policeman to take me home. Then going to the Shelter, it was still in the back of my mind that he and others would be thinking, what were you doing while you were away from him. You're classed. You feel you're an unfit mother. You give yourself a label. That's another reason why people won't leave.

You're treated as a coarse woman.

If you're putting your kids through that you're seen as an unfit mother anyway.

You might think it's easier to go back home.

*Could the local community set up their own child support unit?*

Child support in  
the community

Our organisation does that in a simple way. But we're really hesitant to take control because it could backfire. You live with them. You see them every day. You could see them at the door the next day with a shotgun in their hands.

We are responsive. If our children are bored at Christmas we get Aunty to organise and take the children into the bush and show them bushtucker.

If a problem happens everyone gets in and helps. It's part of them doing it to help our community.

The women were getting ready now to return to work. Their bodies seemed energised. They were pushing their chairs back from the table. Their ears were alert to telephones. And other people were hovering in the doorway trying to attract their attention.

We wondered whether the conversation had helped them talk through issues so they knew, in their minds if not yet their communications, just what they were going to do to prevent family violence in their community and protect and keep the children.

## We're starting from scratch

He had come back from checking that his colleague was okay. She had left the room suddenly not long after our meeting had begun. We'd had a coffee break to settle our nerves. He couldn't settle, so he had gone after her.

Only his eyes seemed to follow the conversation: the story of sexual abuse of 21 children, the court case that followed, the dismissal of the case by the magistrate...how hard it is to help, even if you want help, and how impossible it is if you don't... violence is let go to a certain extent...people don't take a stand though they know the person is abusing the child.

He stayed quiet for a long time. His chair was backed away from the table and he rested his elbows on his knees. When he did speak, tears rolled down his cheeks.

I was at a meeting with 12 men. Over three days they all opened up. It really hurt you, you know. I was hurting. I am hurting now.

As a man, I'm dead against violence against women. I don't condone it. It's up to the community men to say: "You been touchin' that sister around, we've got to do something about that. You have to deal with us."

Everyone is so closely linked, known. If you do it, you're on the outer. It takes a big person not to condone it, just to ask a question, to listen.

The group is more powerful now. Men from Hobart and Launceston met recently to see a community member about the return of the ancestors. Men have got together. A small or large group is needed to make sure violence against women doesn't happen. The members may be perpetrators themselves.

He was one of four Aboriginal field workers from the same Government agency. We met with them some floors up in the boardroom of a Government office.

Men together  
against violence

His hurt was the hurt of the three women who worked with him. When people came to talk to them, they had to get past their own hurt first in order to help them. One woman was candid about how she learned to do this.

Sexual assault,  
shame, memory  
and survival

Sexual assault is a long time process. I had to confront it a number of years ago. A sexual abuse claim came into the courts. When people were getting flashbacks and memories of when they were kids, they were coming to talk to me. A non-Aboriginal had perpetrated sexual abuse on 21 children of community members.

Justice that  
disappoints

Initially, I backed away. I didn't want to know because of my own sexual abuse. I was confusing to them. I had a shield up. It forced me to confront what I was feeling and move through it. One of the things I did that helped me was to come to terms with it, look at it so I would not feel ashamed anymore. It was a decision I made. I did it all by myself.

It was all family counselling I was doing during the court case. He got six months jail, suspended for two years. Most of the people I had been working with felt the system had let them down. Justice never happened.

### *When the system fails*

Sometimes, the workers said, when the system failed, they felt their client blamed them. That hurt too. They had to work according to the guidelines of the system they worked in.

They believed that there was not much happening in Tasmania by way of services available to help Indigenous people cope with family violence.

This project is starting from the bottom up. We're starting from scratch.

That's the value of this project - people talking. When it's out, there is a duty of care

to do something for community members. The thing is how abuse is interpreted by the community. How does it happen? When does it all become a reality and there is a duty of care?

Hypothetically, let's say the community decides family violence is not acceptable. We'd say, "We are going to take responsibility. We are going to be there for you. Perpetrators will know that support will be there for you". The community can do this.

### *It's time to promote ourselves*

In the north and south of the state, we met with mainstream service providers. Most did not seem to have the same confidence in their ability to respond to Indigenous family violence that the Aboriginal service workers had about the capacity of their community to take responsibility along with duty of care.

The men and women who came to our meetings provided support for sexual abuse, shelter for women and children, life and relationship counselling, legal advice and assistance, health care and youth counselling. At the beginning of each of our meetings, they sat quietly at the place they had taken round the table, waiting and somewhat nervous.

Were they nervous because they didn't know what to expect or what we might ask them? Were they worried about not having answers? Were they uncertain about how they might respond to any additional demand that might be made of them or to requests for figures about Indigenous access to their services? Did they feel their service, funds and energies were stretched to the limits already? Did they feel apprehensive about being asked to help a community whose culture they were not sure they understood?

Were they afraid of not knowing how to respond in "culturally sensitive" ways? Were they embarrassed that they had not been able to do more? Did they feel helpless - that they didn't have a policy or the backup of their organisation to flex their services to meet a different culture, that they did not have figures to substantiate demand from the Aboriginal community or that they had not consulted with the Aboriginal community?

Certainly these concerns came through in their talk with us. They had been able to tell us about their services and what they could do. But they were shaky in their knowledge and understanding of Indigenous family violence. And they wanted to know more.

Whatever their feelings or thoughts, they had come at our invitation. They were keenly interested and willing to share information. By the end of the meetings, they had agreed to meet again as a group.

This had not happened before. They would network, get to know what services were offered and share experience, policies and ideas for promoting services in the Aboriginal community and for building the community's confidence in them. One person offered to arrange their first network meeting. It seemed that they too would be starting from scratch. They wanted to find new ways of complementing the work of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. One strong voice came like a summary of intention towards the end of one of the meetings.

Out there, the perceptions of services are a real problem. If one person had a negative experience five years ago, that spread through the grapevine. It's time to promote ourselves, develop new help units, ensure privacy, allocate one of our houses as a safe house. I will definitely take that back to my organisation.

# The dilemmas of an Indigenous professional

*It's a shame job. It's humiliating. It's something you hide and don't talk about. It's something you lie about. You need to break families to survive...*

We heard these confessions over and over like a constant refrain on our journey. Just how hard was it for people to help?

When a person is badly injured and brought into the casualty department of the hospital early in the morning by a recovering drunken husband, when you suspect family violence, when you know that asking questions or offering any help other than medical treatment would only worsen the injured person's situation, what can you do? How does an Indigenous health worker understand what is happening? How does she prepare herself to cope with rejection of her help? How does she handle her own feelings when she knows that she too is personally affected by family violence?

*It's rare that a medical casualty case comes in as domestic violence. It comes in as an accident. If you are aware, you say nothing. If it's domestic violence, the client will usually tell you. There are no hospital procedures. If it comes from the client, then you can say, if you want, we can do this...*

*You have an Aboriginal woman. The perpetrator calls the ambulance, comes in with the woman and doesn't leave her side. This happens in about 50 percent of the cases - the perpetrator is there all the time.*

This woman's dilemma must be the same for many professional Indigenous workers: they become privy to knowledge that their people might rather hide; they want to help; they can't until asked and they must keep the confidence of their clients, their community members.

*Are you fearful outside your work environment? Say, you met the perpetrator at a gathering at Oyster Cove?*

*I do on occasions have feelings of unease but I am usually treated with respect by the perpetrator. I have been yelled at and apologised to in the hospital.*

Professionals  
earning respect

*Why do you think people react? Are they fearful of the white system or of a shroud of secrecy being opened up in the community?*

Fear of the perpetrator is what opens people up. Fear and along with fear, love - that's what they say. You could go in with guns blazing. You put yourself in danger. I'm very careful how I do it. I set up for the client to see who they want, for example, a lawyer. I arrange a safe place for her to go. No one is aware who she has met with, so no one is in danger.

There are no support services for help for the perpetrator if they want it. I have approached one organisation that had ten-week courses for men who were violent. They were not easy to get into. Some men would go or if they did, they wouldn't continue to go. I didn't get enough feedback. If there were resources, someone might set up for two or three men at a time.

There is need for a step between when it happens and getting help. There's not really anything there. Then there's the long-term help that's needed. It's then that things come out. Often it's sexual abuse, something that has affected them all their lives.

*It doesn't work with handout, band-aid stuff*

We have to teach our community to take responsibility for their lives. They may need help to develop self-respect and self-worth. We need resources and support. The government is responsible for past injustices and for what happened to people. Different situations started way back then. We have to take responsibility to heal those. It doesn't work with hand-out, band-aid stuff. It will be very difficult but people's problems need to be addressed or family violence will continue to happen.

Perhaps it was because this woman had lived with someone whose confusion and anger broke out in violence over many, many years that she had empathy for those who were violent. She was able to anticipate their behaviour, as well as how they might deal with help, such as counselling. Her son had been ill from childhood. Alcohol and drugs, taken to help him endure his being different, had worsened his mental condition. He had gone

to counselling and though he had gone only half-heartedly, there was no violence during that time. As she spoke she referred to her own experience only now and then. But you could see her emotion in the wetness of her eyes. Referring to her clients as "they", that is, in a more general than personal way, was perhaps helping her to share her understanding.

Government  
and community  
taking  
responsibility  
for healing

Usually in discussion with them you can tell there is something bothering them. They have to heal the past. In counselling they are getting to the reasons they are violent. They are frightened of what they are going to find out. "I can't get over what's happened to me", they say, "I can't clear it away."

We need to secure resources to train our people so that in future we have qualified people to fulfil a counselling service. It's unfair for our people and our community to be tied to our problems for the rest of our lives.

What I've said about perpetrators is equally so for the victims. They too have a past. Hitting is not an excuse. I've seen where a victim has not made it easier - ranting and raving. It's sad to see they are getting attention through getting hit.

*Training for the whole community wouldn't be impossible*

Training for  
both community  
members and  
Indigenous  
professionals

For the community there are ways and means of helping people. We get those skills, for example, life skills training and invaluable counselling skills. Some one wants to talk to you - you can let them go. Training a whole community wouldn't be impossible.

In my professional job, I highlighted my need for counselling skills. That's what the community wanted from me. Also you need to know when it's appropriate to use them. You have to be sensitive because you meet them when they are most vulnerable. You need to build trust.

In a small community there is an issue for professional Indigenous workers. If I have a personal connection to family violence, for



example, if there's a situation involving my own family, I'll send them to someone else. So I won't intrude.

She had survived a different kind of violence from that she encountered amongst her clients. Her son was now much better than he had ever been. Life was calmer for her now. As she shared her professional knowledge and experience, her personal history sat like a shadow behind her. She held herself and her shadow together with a mixture of strength and vulnerability. To let her shadow go would be to let part of herself go because it represented what had defined her learning.

The tears did not fall but she asked for a break. We went into the coffee room. Without our questions and without our notebook, she talked at last quite freely about her son. In a way, it was a release for all of us.

# Men have lost their place in time, their own law

Why we have violence is an unknown quantity. It's one of the reasons we're at a stagnant place. Why does it happen? Is it genetic, environmental? Is it about dispossession, oppression? I grew up and saw my father bash my mother. Why? Is that where we have come in our spirituality? Is it fate? Is it because we have many more options today?

Self-medication, drugs, alcohol play a big part. Frustration. Desperate situations. Where are people's roles in life? You will meet Aboriginal women who have lots of things going for them. They will meet up with some fella, black or white, it doesn't matter. She's caring. She will be a victim. The rest of us will see that tonight she's got a real beauty.

She cupped her right hand over her eye to suggest a great swelling. She was young with a wisdom that seemed way beyond her years. Her life and her professional work in law had exposed her over and again to violence. She had seen more than most at her age. For her, family violence couldn't be categorised nor could the perplexity of it be solved. She had seen too many instances, too many causes, too much physical and spiritual injury.

Her work colleague was older. She had represented many Aboriginal people in law courts. Though she was practised at keeping a personal distance from the situations of her clients, she tackled her professional responsibility with the same energy of caring as her younger partner. Their dialogue revealed that, for both of them, caring for and preserving the humanity and integrity of their clients was the essence of their work.

Yes, and that woman will still be inviting him home. That's what I find so unbelievable. She'll be keeping him and still put up with him.

It's some years since I got out. In hindsight, I thought it was my responsibility for us black women to be caring for black men. You realise - it happens slowly - you see it happen all around you, you see

worse scenarios than yours, you see violence on an extended scale.  
We sympathise with our own men.

We're open to understanding people's plights because we've experienced violence and we're devoted to family.

The suffering  
of men

Men have lost their place in time, their own law. Men are often silent victims in sexual abuse. We have no idea of what they have had to endure. Where am I in my manhood? They must ask themselves. Look back to everyone blaming Aunty. The young lad had just come out of jail. Aunty said, "You're at the head of the table. You're a man." Women, children and men don't have the ceremony to change that. For some men, it's easy to pass on knowledge, for others it's not.

### *Young men and their Elders*

One issue I see is standing over people for money-verbal abuse of elders. I see the breakdown of respect for knowledge. That's what you see younger fellas doing now. Before you just wouldn't, you just wouldn't.

There was a kind of disbelief expressed in her repetition. You wouldn't have heard of this kind of abuse, neither would you have dreamt of not respecting Elders. She cut the air with her open hand to emphasise, "You just wouldn't". At that moment, perhaps she was recognising that perhaps more than one ancient law was at stake, diminished by acts of despair by the people.

I am seeing breakdown in regard to our connection, in regard to sitting-down time. Young fellas in city living don't live with our Elders. They don't see how vital our Elders are. I often attribute that to drugs and alcohol.

Between young  
men and Elders

Elder men who are recognised are in the jail. There is camaraderie in the jail, a more cohesive group for men to be men. That's violence, their manhood. They must take it with them when they leave. How can they leave it behind? A couple of men I've spoken to find it difficult with no support when they come out after such regimentation. What goes on in there? It must stay inside them. They can't talk about it.

There is always someone who feels weaker, who is going to forgive them. I went to my family, not to a stranger.

### *Why forgive?*

We wondered why the women were so ready to forgive. It was hard to believe that they did. What experience did they have that helped them to understand? Did they forgive out of weakness or was it out of the strength that comes from knowing what the pain inside is like because they themselves have suffered?

We maintain our mother roles. It's in our genetic information. It's still all part of us, something that is strong - spiritual, emotional, physical.

The harm to  
the children,  
the love and  
the hurt

One of the things I hear quite a bit about - the men and women were taken from their families, put into welfare homes or into another family. In neither place it was good. But even with violence at home they were loved. They talk of that as a cycle. They say they want to do better. They don't want to speak up in fear of welfare intervention. They will put up with violence rather than have the same happen to their kids as had happened to them.

The husband trashes the house and the woman's stuff, all the time. When he smashes the baby's cot, you'd think that would be it. It's the harm to the children.

Her voice was getting thinner, less sure of her professional distance.

A lot of women get physically abused when they're pregnant. There's mental violence too: "I'll kick that baby out of you." It's guilt and fear: "You can't stand up to me now. You've got my baby. You are part of a chattel." All that responsibility!

The younger woman had pressed her body forward against the table. She had spread her arms out wide to show the enormity of that responsibility. She paused for a moment and you could feel the weight of the kick and the pain and the fear, the weight of a responsibility that is too much for one to bear. You could see how empathy could be born in the spirit of the woman. It was a relief when she released us from the suspense she held us in. She drew her arms back and held one hand up in a stopping gesture.

There comes a time when people snap. You know that time's coming when it happens. That's it.

Men can't understand that the child is growing. It is not tangible to them. It's not till they hold the child that they know.

### *Can we name the perpetrators?*

Why protect the perpetrators? There is also sexual abuse. Families are still not dealing with this.

There are particular uncles in the community that you would not send your kids near. But we don't say, you fuckin' kid fucker.

It's been said that a lot of people want to name the perpetrators.

Care for the  
parents and  
keep the  
children in the  
family

Before you can, you have to have support mechanisms. First for the children some kind of respite care. And a parent care program around that. Safe places where families can go. No matter what, you don't take the child away. The government could give extra funding for care within the family.

### *You just wouldn't take some options*

It's said that, in some foster situations, drugs and alcohol are a problem. Would this happen in the Aboriginal community?

Drugs and alcohol are big in our community. You wouldn't take that option. There are no appropriate long-term group homes where cousins and siblings can stay together. Carer's pensions and family group homes are achievable by the Tasmanian Government. It could be a bi-partisan agreement with the Commonwealth Government.

What do you know about services for women or services for men?

The case  
against  
restraining  
orders

A great proportion of our women don't use them. They are isolated because it's a shame job. Our women don't take out restraining orders. They don't mean anything or it means the courts are just going to send our men to jail.

Going to shelters is alien. They are not allowed to tell anyone where they are. That is so contrary to us. Most of us would like to rely on our family for support. Losing contact with your support base affects everyone - even if you're in the park.

They say, I won't leave my house. It'll get smashed up. There is a lot of deferred debt from violence. The women are left to pay.

*Is there no respite if you are male?*

Once again, the flow of conversation was turning from what was happening to what could be done, wavering between the two, never quite answering the second because there were still so many barriers, so many ifs and buts and possibilities. The plight of boys and men within the family and within the system was a focus of their empathy. Beneath their talk you could hear their hoping - hoping for boys and the men to forge a new place in this new time, to find new strength amongst themselves, to come forward, to be part of the family, to be committed.

There is not one place in Tasmania where you can take a child over ten years old.

*Is that true? Have you looked at service lists or websites?*

Knowing about changes to the rules

Has it changed? If they get there and they make a case about not taking a male child, say for a six year old to hear this it puts people off. It affects the child's self-esteem. If you've been in and out of welfare homes, you'd think, I'm not going through this!

*What services are you familiar with or have you used - professionally or personally?*

Immediate help is essential.

In my dealings, I've found that sexual advice support services were not particularly helpful. The staff were anti-any male thing, most of the community don't like that. You're not going to talk to them. You're left helpless. Then at the time the violence happens, it's hard to get in. You are already alienated - the attitude about males, the lead time - people change their minds. 3 days is too long to wait. A short immediate visit may be enough. There's a 10 to 15 minute window where people will try for help.

I've pulled out all sorts of stops for people - I've gone to the Minister's office, Housing. It depends on how black a picture you can paint. Once I got four options which turned out to be no options because of where they were. While there is nowhere else to go, people won't get out of the violence. If it's an emergency, the police have to say it is. You ring the Aboriginal Liaison Officer. He's not available because he's on leave. They change all the time. They're not known in the community. You don't know who they are.

The website? Who's going to be looking on a website? To be fair, when you actually manage to get through, they've been quite good. It's the access that's difficult. If the one person is on leave, another should cover for him. If people have a problem with the way the Liaison Officer deals with them, they have a right of complaint. People need to know how to access the complaint system.

Using language  
to communicate  
trustfully

**People need to be able to access the system for support. Some people speak a language that the community can't understand. I took a lovely person round in regards to kid's protection stuff. We had to interpret, interpret, interpret what she was saying to them. Service providers have to have people who can communicate with the clients.**

The place of children is vital. The Government should guarantee continuation of the role of Children's Commissioner.

*Do we want service providers to say, "This is what we've got. This is what we can do."? It has to be a reality. They have to open up - say how many people they can take in, what their client base is, what their waiting time is.*

Access to the  
Family Court

The Government could give support for accessing and using the Family Court - to men, women and grandparents crying for protection for the children. The Family Court is quite receptive of partnership stuff.

Access to the  
Family Court

**Here in Tasmania there're two types of restraining orders, one for no contact, one for contact but no abuse. In other places, men can't come home for 12 hours after drinking. They have somewhere to go**

to dry out and have counselling. If there is nowhere to go, the problem is that the women get jealous. When you have men who are in leadership positions and are perpetrators themselves, how do you convince them that this is a priority?

### *For men to be staunch*

This time she clenched the fist of her right hand and rested her right elbow on the table.

We need staunch men to come on board and take on some of this stuff. In some places they have family violence respite centres where you go - the men deal with the men, the women deal with the women, then they come back together. It seems a holistic way to do this. It has to be better.

“Staunch”. She shook her fist once as she said this word. It came out like a challenge, one that she had already shown us she was willing to support. She was so confident in this you felt this was how *all* her kinswomen wanted their men to be. We knew what she meant. From what these two women had said before, we could say that to be staunch meant to be loyal, committed, firm and able to stand up and speak, clear and strong. Then men and women would be together in mutual respect, not in fear, not in anger, not in derision. Her appeal for staunch men to come forward was for men to take a right and good place with the women in their families and community.



## The man in the mirror

When we met we shook hands. His grasp was light but firm, and warm. It was a gesture that told us he had come gladly, for a purpose. We made coffee and opened the packet of chocolate biscuits. We sat round the kitchen table and lit the candle that we'd taken with us to other consultations. We left the door open to a calm early autumn day. The flame was steady.

As he began to talk, he put his hand up to touch his head.

Family violence affects you up here somewhere. Family violence has psychological effects. It affects yourself and those around you as you get older. As a child, round the campfire, there's drink, people are dragged off into the scrub. My father was an Irishman, a service man. Every Friday night he'd get drunk and beat my mother. Then into our room he'd come and put lollies under our pillows. You'd be shaking. I always remember that.

My brother grew into a violent man, same as I did. My sister started drinking at an early age, nine and a half she was, then got into heavy drugs. So did her daughter and sons - and in and out of prison they were.

Where anger  
comes from

I was angry with my father and with my Elders. They were supposed to be people you looked up to. Not all of them, but they got into arguments and fights. They're supposed to be called an uncle, supposed to be there for you. I remember beautiful people who tried to intervene. They got flogged. You wouldn't tell anyone because they'd get into trouble. I was an angry man all my life.

Children like myself were neglected, abused. It was a vicious cycle. Your mother or aunty gets hurt, so do the children. Sometimes the children feel guilty as if you'd done something to get your mother flogged. You feel guilty. It hurts you. It feels like your heart is getting ripped out. You give her a cuddle. She's crying. You're crying. Things like that never leave your mind.

They didn't intervene. They should've.

Guilt, shame  
and silence

When somebody touches your body and you're sexually abused...they didn't intervene, you didn't tell, they'd have got flogged. To you, as a child, it was an accepted thing. Mutton birding...rookery hut, hands...rookery, penetration...that's family violence. Some of those men are dead now. Some aren't. It helps when I talk to other people.

You talk about the guilt. You feel guilty yourself. You lock yourself into yourself. Your body's been touched. That's your temple. Like, there are good touches and bad touches. I tell my grandchild. They're not allowed to touch on the bum - that's a bad touch - I do it on myself to show what I mean. I tell my grandchild, "Your body is your temple. It's precious." That stuff never went on before. All they wanted to do was play cards and have drinks.

### *A lot got a shock when I started talking*

A lot of that stuff is not talked about. There are skeletons in the cupboards. A lot of it is shame. Who could all those people talk to? I understood that. The violence could start on them. I have spoken with a lot of Elders now. It has happened to them.

At a workshop on family violence a lot got a shock when I started talking. They got uncomfortable because of the talking.

It was okay  
once, to be  
violent.

It's a hard question to answer - why it happens. Why? I can think of some men now, my age and ten years younger, and they were violent towards their spouses. It was okay to give your wife a backhand. It was okay to say, "Kick your arse." It was okay to say, "I'll kill you." We copped it too. We got all that. There's your role model. It was probably because it happened to them too - they were sexually abused and molested too.

You say some took it back to the sealing days? They took it back that far? Well, how many women were there then? How many men? Someone has to cop it.

*I did an inventory of my life.*

Educating self

I spent fifteen years inside. I hated rapists as child molesting dogs. Since I wasn't drinking I got to know what feelings are. I started to feel something for fellow human beings. I did an inventory of my life. I asked, "Why is it that men are like that?" That's when I started to get my education.

Out in the scrub, talking at our meeting, one man came along and talked about the shame he felt. We were having a conference in the bush. We were doing some filming. One of the men had been to a psychologist. But this is the best medicine, sitting in the bush, talking to someone who understands.

One thing that comes back to haunt me...When I was a kid I was in and out of homes. I would be wandering the streets. I'd had nothing to eat for four or five days. It was in those days when you took what we called the 'red rattler' into Melbourne from Ringwood. I saw this woman. I hit her in the guts, took \$30. I didn't know whether she was pregnant. I wouldn't have even given it a second thought then. A few weeks ago I was talking about it. I felt ashamed. What right did I have to do that then? What harm did I do? I cried - not tears because I had them flogged out of my face. I must have been comfortable talking to the men in the bush.

The right time to talk

I'd be lying today if I said I'd dealt with it. I was talking. It all came out. You asked me a question. It must have been time. It's like you're carrying a big bag of bricks and it somehow gets lighter. You know the consequences. You know what you are capable of as young people.

I've seen - in Pentridge - lots of young men get bashed and raped. In the western tier in '77 one of the screws went up to the top, a nice looking woman. Four of them dragged her into the shed, raped, beat her, shit on her. I tell those young boys, "Do jail here". Some go in doing big years. I watch them grow up, I know where they're headed - into violence. One young fella's family I know well. Even when I go to see his father, I wouldn't hug his mother. I know she'd get bashed when I left.

There would be a lot of people carrying other people's stories.

I have a few now. What surprises me is that a lot of the older ones are speaking to me now. It's shame. It leads some to suicide. You're lost anyway.

Here's a frank question: What is it about you - what has made you the man you are? What changed you to who you are now?

Spiritual and  
cultural  
belonging

Getting in touch with my spirituality, my culture. I'm a very spiritual person. When I go out in the bush, I ask permission to be on this land. While I'm here I'll love and care for it and leave it as I go.

I buried my daughter nine years ago. I lost everything when she went. I was the last one to see her. I gave her a cuddle and made her a promise that her two children would have a fair go. I thought about it myself. I was going to die. I had a towel at the door. Spirit came to my cell that night, one of the Oldfellas. I got up, put the towel on the rack, broke the needle, flushed it down the toilet. I had my mind made up. I was going to keep that promise. Along the way, see? I looked in the mirror.

*Spirit was always there, in the bush*

Also at Eddystone Point, I used to sit by myself in the bush, for a couple of hours - Spirit was always there, in the bush - I used to think about sitting in the bush when I was inside. I'd say to myself, "You've got to know more about who you are - you're a blackfella."

The smell of the earth...memories come strongly back... people like my son... where are his memories going to be, his connections, the smelling, the feeling, the doing of things?

Connecting with the land, Mother Earth. Me and S, we have talked. I love S like a brother. We talk as two men in the bush, like you can't talk to anyone else. When a man is doing his releasing of his spirituality, his culture into the land, it's a healthy process for him. What he talked about - I know because I was there anyway. That's how I found out what my totem was.

The community has hidden its spirituality and is frightened of it, of being mocked. I have heard people who have seen Aboriginal people with spirits attached to them. We need to accept spirituality, sit down and talk and not be afraid of being mocked - or them saying we're crazy.

A lot of our men are full on about this. We've just got to re-educate the community. Our culture is built on respect. It's disrespect to abuse people. With the men's group it's about getting respect back, as Aboriginal men. These guys are the next generation of Elders.

Self-respect  
and  
responsibility

I say to them, "Don't talk to me about responsibility while you're drinking, young people. You don't respect me. You're known as drunks. In twenty years time, you'll be known as the old drunks." When you talk to them about Aboriginal stuff when they're sober, they're a little bit afraid. We have to make that connection with the Old People.

Today I have responsibility because I know what it is, because I have respect for myself. What is respect? My mother, my aunty were treated bad. But in the institutions, we were treated like animals. You lived by the laws of the jungle - only the strongest survived. They made me into a person who was not very nice and had a reputation. Today, I don't condone that violence and I don't use it as an excuse either. Look at D. He's starting to see his true self. It will take him a few years.

There's a lot of people, men, who want to make a connection. The next generation, our future, is worth more than gold. We want our kids - as they're growing up - to see things differently.

*Peel the scab right off and expose what's under it.*

All the negatives start with family violence, like a bushfire on five hundred acres. Where did it start? It has to change. I've spoken to a lot of women since January. The women are positive about this. Men have to stop bashing the women and fucking the kids. Some men don't like my approach, women do. Women are talking now. Some men are, not all, because they are afraid. If you don't talk about it, you

condone it, you accept it. What I'm doing is promoting talking about it. Peel the scab right off and expose what's under it.

*The traditional way is to take them out in the bush and give them a flogging with tussock grass. That will never happen till men have got together to create proper traditional laws between young people and men. Our law is very strong. For the next generation we have got to start re-establishing our laws. For me as an Aboriginal woman, I feel it's the man's place to re-establish the law. They were the lawmakers of our community.*

Committing  
violence to  
survive

**We've talked about this. The men want to start dealing with this - take him out, flog him, stay with him in the bush for two weeks, talking... prison doesn't work. It breeds violence. To survive in there a young man has to be violent I used to protect the young men. "Touch him, I'll flog you," I'd say to inmates. To the young ones I'd say, "If someone starts on you, stick your finger in his eyes. To survive, be violent." Fancy having to tell a young man to do that! And some poor buggers haven't got it in them.**

**For punishment if you break the law, you do time. The prison perception is for people to be punished every day. For a lot that go in there is no personal development. You hear them. They just want to get even. But it goes deeper than that. The punishment breeds animosity. When they get out, someone cops it. They're robbed, molested or raped. It's planned every day - the humiliation by officers and other inmates. Prison's a factory. I'm a product of the welfare system. All that happened. First it was accepting violence from my peers, then the proper violence that happens in there.**

*What's the way to change the situation in the prison? When a young nineteen year old on the booze has to go to prison, we don't want him to come out like that. What ideas have you got?*

### *Talk about who you are*

Continuous  
connection with  
community for  
deep change to  
happen

**I think for our community, we have to influence from outside. Whatever education there is in there, you've got to have continuity outside. Young people in there now have an arts and crafts program with someone going in twice a week. They have to know you're coming.**

Accepting and  
doing things  
differently

There are people now who have been there, done that and are wise today. They have empathy and rapport with the young people. Other men can go in too. Talk about who you are and where you are and the Aboriginal culture. A lot of them have lost their way.

Change the attitudes of prison officers. They need to learn about Aboriginal culture and our systems. Change the view of other prisoners to expect that there might be different treatment for Aboriginal prisoners. Change attitudes of people you work with. I had to say we're going to have a meeting in the bush where Mother Earth is. It took a bit of doing. I have to educate the people I'm working with. I watch what I say. They are too much in their comfort zone - office, computer, mobile phone. I'm not saying that's bad. They're looking after Aboriginal people. They say have a meeting here. I say something different. I understand now.

It was time to smoke. We moved outside. We had tea this time, and cake. It was only a pause - to breathe crisp, autumn air, cup hands round hot mugs and follow the smoke that was wisping upwards with our thoughts. From the stillness, he spoke again.

The tentacles are going out further and further. As I talk to you, I'm going through a healing process. There's confidence in the sharing. I find it hard - family violence and sexual abuse. People are going through programs - one here, one there. Then you're dragged into it. One and a half hours later, they're talking, tears streaming out of their eyes. Think about the individuals who have spoken to you and in other programs. Action leads to reaction.

*I'm listening to you*

Talk that is  
sharing

You might have been to one professional helper, talking about your shame, tears for three quarters of an hour. But this way, talking is sharing. You help one another, talk about how it was years ago. It comes down to basics: two men talking, understanding, have empathy for one another. I'm listening to you. We're talking to one another. It's men taking responsibility in our community about this family violence stuff. Our men have to take responsibility and have self-

respect; they have to find out who they are and where they come from.

Think about the North-East. The Old People used to roam through there to do business. Why is it that they used to walk through there? For the *connection!* It's powerful.

The strength in our community has been the women. Along the way the men have lost their way. They've broken the link. Men don't want to talk about it because they are ashamed. Men have felt sorry for themselves. They've lost the track, the link. They've lost self and community. Women are longing for the men to take responsibility. They're tired. They've had to keep the fire going for too long. The men are the broken link. I believe what I say in all honesty. I've got to be honest for the little fellas. They're worth more than gold.

*Women have been the nurturers. Now they need to be nurtured by the men.*

I have seen women do things to put food on the table. When we moved to MH there was alcohol abuse and sexual abuse. There were eight kids to get food on the table for. I went into a home. All the men did was drink. See what I mean? The strength. The strength - you can still see it though their bodies have got old. They talk about the hard times. I hope I can live to be that old and have that attitude. Hard times shared. Good to sit down and talk to someone.

### *Just men...with vast knowledge*

To reconnect lost links

A lot of men don't have input into community doings. These men are not all perpetrators. They're just men. A lot are unemployed. They've got a lot to give back - bush tucker, culture, early times. White organisations are getting the jobs of running the programs. Why not employ men who have the experience? A lot have changed their ways. Give them a chance, a break, empower them, help them towards self-determination to show how they have vast knowledge and why people have bad attitudes.



A bloke gave this to me a long time ago about when I started to think about myself. I can't tell you who wrote it because I don't know.

***The Man in the Mirror***

*If you get what you want in your struggle for self  
And the world makes you King for a day  
Then go to the mirror and look at yourself  
And see what that Man has to say*

*For it isn't a man's father, mother or wife  
Whose judgement upon him must pass  
The fellow whose verdict counts most in his life  
Is the Man staring back from the glass*

*He's the fellow to please, never mind all the rest  
For he's with you clear to the end  
And you've passed your most dangerous, difficult test  
If the Man in the glass is your friend*

*You can fool the whole world down the pathway of years  
And get pats on the back as you pass  
But your final reward will be heartache and tears  
If you've cheated the Man in the glass*

Back in there you'd be doing an inventory on yourself. Some days were good. Some days were bad when you'd get into the same shit, thinking like an animal. He said I had to read it to motivate me. I was motivated to start thinking properly - to wisen up. Then I'd have a good day. I'd be top of the world, feel like a king. What I was trying to be was a human being - talk like a human being, talk without that lingo and body language in the yard. People would look at you as if you're strange. But you felt good.

It's like a pep-talk before a football game. It's got to be the right moment when you can talk about issues you've never talked about before - when you're being honest and genuine and people are listening.

Before, I didn't listen. They listened. People used to walk past me in jail. They couldn't look at me.

*People were fearful, afraid, scared. But you were an icon. Then I met you. You're just a person.*

I didn't realise that myself. On the way you create a legend. I had a big front and bullshit so people wouldn't hurt me. Be blank like a poker player, I thought, don't let people hurt you.

I used to study people - how they eat, sit, talk. It doesn't take long to summarise a man. I had to do it to find out how I was. When I looked in the mirror back then, I looked at a man I didn't like.

## Fire for dreaming

In a far corner of the island there was anger building up, exploding in the hearts of the young people. The literacy skills of the young people were not high. Employment was hard to find. They were going to be classed on the low socio-economic scale. They knew this. There was not much hope for their dreaming. The community group we met with told us this. They tried to work as a family unit might. They looked for avenues to support the young people and found it difficult to find revenues to help them sort out their problems. They were a small community. They had had a very difficult time.

Seven men and five women had gathered for this meeting. They filled all the chairs and sofas in the room of their regular meetinghouse. We sensed that they were comfortable with each other and that they belonged to each other. There was familiarity, calmness and trust between them. Even if they had shared many secrets before, we did not feel excluded. At ease with one another, they welcomed us. They were ready to pass on their stories to us.

In my era, when I was growing up, it was a common thing. Alcohol was the cause of it. If we can talk about it, we can live with it more easily. My uncle tried six times to hang himself. We had this as a family. I don't look down on anyone and no one looks down on me. What my parents have done - I'm not to blame. I've lived my life and that's that.

It's passed from generation to generation and a very hard habit to break. My family was very rugged. I was a country bumpkin. When I grew up and started to socialise, I had to stop and think. For my father, violence was natural. I had to reorganise my life.

I wondered if I'd turn out the same way as my father - drinking, beating my Mum. I was into everything. When we were growing up and something upset us, out would come the knuckles. 18 years ago, I stopped all that. If I had my life over again...

We can only make suggestions. In a small isolated community we're very limited by who we can pass people to. Because it is a small community, it's hard for people to say. It's like having a sign on you - "D.V."

A generation ago, it was hush-hush - there was the perpetrator and the victim. Now the victim has more choice - take a break; get protection, divorce, custody of the children. But the issue is a continuing one. The children are still trying to socialise but their education levels are dropping, they think, Mum and Dad don't want me any more. The kids play up and end up in the justice system.

Uncles, aunties, grandmothers, grandfathers and parents of young and teenage children, old and young parents, were reflecting on past and present times. No young people were there. But their families were here for them, sitting together as a community. Their hope was to turn young people around to face a good future and have good dreaming.

### *You fight fire with fire*

Fighting pain

Youth are more violent. Teachers are injured. Kids are threatened in the school ground.

School bullying programs don't work. You can't control the playgrounds. Youth are violent in homes, smashing windows.

The solution to their pain is to hit back. You fight fire with fire. Quite a few in the community have this problem, not just us. It's a way of releasing frustration and anger.

If I encouraged my daughter to hit back, she'd become a bully herself.

I always told my kids to stick up for themselves.

**A different kind of fire lit the eyes of Uncle, a fire that was burning the embers of his life, long and slow, glowing with kindness.**

Go into the school so they can relate to you. Go into the playgrounds. Have someone for the kids to talk to, feel safe with. If the kids talk to the teachers, the teachers may tell someone else, might have to - then the whole school knows.

*Should the person in the school be trained?*

Someone to  
talk to at  
school

Yes, but not a social worker. Someone that is low key, a buddy, someone you can talk to - an adult.

My son was a victim of torture. The anti-bullying policy at school wasn't working. There was a need for an adult presence in the corridors. In high school there are more places where you can be bullied and not seen.

The positive  
potential of the  
school  
curriculum

That is something that has to come into the criteria for teaching our kids: education has to be proactive rather than reactive. Teachers should find ways around the problem and look at long-term solutions.

Every kid should have a buddy.

**How many of our youth do we see at suicide prevention programs these days? Suicide is personal violence but it still affects the family. Suicide is a problem, though to a limited extent within our community. Drugs are not necessarily the biggest problem.**

The biggest problem is that you're at the bottom end of community status and you're put down a lot. Even when you are having a good go at something, you are put down. You get weary of it.

*What can we do?*

### *Where there is no heart*

These stories of prejudice, punctuated by Uncle's knowing, seemed to stoke other fires. One woman sat on the sofa, silent, watching, curled up tight as if to protect herself from us and the talk. She stretched out her legs and sat forward. She was tiny. Her feet didn't touch the floor. But her eyes were ablaze and her voice and body grew big with the offence she felt.

Doctors with a little more understanding would go a long way. They haven't got a heart, some of those doctors. They should be like the doctors on Country Practice. You ring the doctor. You get the nurse receptionist. What's your problem? You get asked by the nurse. That'll be okay till next week, she says. Many people would rather go to the next town. There are five doctors here and a lot of them are only locums.

Rural medical services seen to be unable to help with counselling

Bookings are difficult to get. Our doctors have been less in number than you're supposed to have for our population. So they are overworked. The hospital is basically closed. It only deals with flu, viruses and chemotherapy. Health professionals are unable to help.

If one of these teenagers is injured and you have to get them to hospital, you have to see the doctor first. My daughter had an asthma attack. The doctor got annoyed with us for not coming in earlier and he was trying to tell us how to manage asthma while she was hardly breathing.

We have a problem with doctors. It takes a long time to get rural trained doctors to stay here. We have a central agency and that's it. There is no choice of going to different surgeries.

*if health professionals are unable to give adequate service and if you are not likely to go to doctors about family violence, what about counsellors?*

**We are very limited with counsellors. If you go to see her, the whole town will know about it. We are supposed to be getting a new centre with some new counsellors. Lack of services has been a problem for a number of years. \$3 million for improved health services in rural areas has been applied for. We need to reinforce this application. For example, public transport is not available. You can go on the school bus at 7.00am and come back at 4.00pm. For domestic violence, we have cars that can be used in a crisis situation.**

*What would you like to see happen in your area?*

**We should have something for the young ones. There is not enough for them - they are bored with themselves.**

**A place for  
young people  
to belong**

**We need somewhere for them to drop in from day time till late at night, somewhere they can get a cheap cup of coffee or a meal or, if they have no where else to go, they can sit and relax. After nine, there is nothing to do, nowhere to go.**

**The long-term job situation here is limited. Kids have to leave if they want to get on. If you stay here for years 11 and 12 you get way behind the eight ball. It's the same for adults. If we want to go further we have to go into the cities. We need better educational opportunities.**

**The majority of people living in this area are on low incomes. Most survive on less than \$30,000 a year. \$30,000 is a luxury. A lot of families live below the poverty line.**

*We imagine the future*

*What services are you familiar with?*

Aboriginal  
business

The Police. And this centre. We've been building up our resources. We now have a youth justice worker. In twelve months time, we'll have two health workers. In our Aboriginal community we're building up our own self-esteem. We've taken our youth on camps. Four teenagers have been asked to perform in a coastal festival - we worked to get it to happen and it did happen. In NAIDOC Week we had one of the Elders come and sit with five year olds, mothers and granmas making shell necklaces. They were in this room and were totally engrossed. The men were in another room.

That was okay - men's business and women's business. We've been told to be ashamed of being Aboriginal. We are turning that around.

It was not that they were avoiding the directness of our question. It seemed rather that they preferred their caring for their youth to be of a certain kind - caring with a fire that was fierce but protective, not angry, intense and warm, not hurtful. This group was building the fire and keeping it going steadily to clean the wounds, to prepare their young people for the possibilities of a future. This would be a fire to ignite hope in their dreams.

Youth violence

Something that has become more and more prevalent are mobs of thirteen and fourteen year old kids looking for violence against older people. They drink a cask of wine. It doesn't matter who they target, a grandmother or a child. We've had some of our youth unconscious through street violence. One youth is still suffering brain damage. Violence is a common occurrence, just about every Friday or Saturday night.

We believe that our profile is rising in the community. Rather than fight back, for example in regard to land rights, we let go. We manage anger, we aim to be productive, find the positive and get out and do it. We are getting over the myth of not being able to control our futures.



### Uncle's eyes burned the brightest.

We were in tears when we watched the Olympic Games. We were recognised nationally for the first time. Aboriginal Australia was highlighted. For 30 years the Aboriginal community has worked for this. It was a victory for black and white. If we can work at that pace, imagine the future in 30 years!

## Now I sing my heart out

We picked up cheeseburgers and pancakes and went to her place for breakfast. Some of her friends had stayed with her overnight. The kids were on a free day from school. The women were still in their pyjamas, but they'd been up talking for quite a while in the way women do, round the kitchen table with their tea. There was a happy, holiday atmosphere. Seven of us sat elbow to elbow, squeezed around the kitchen table. Her little girl had slipped in beside her. The four women we'd come to meet were friends from way back. They lived in different cities now so they met irregularly. When they did meet, it was joyous. They'd supported each other through the hardest times.

She, whose house we were in, was like a bright star. Her deep eyes shone, her brown skin glowed and her hair frizzed into a halo round her face. Her smile was full of love and fun. Her body too was full but light, bouncy and fit. She was once a great athlete.

It was her story and her energy that propelled the kitchen table talk towards empowerment for Aborigines, the theme that these four women wanted to understand.

I can't handle verbal abuse. I wouldn't go near one particular person in my family. My family were well looked upon by the community. We spent time together with other black families. We never said black or white. We never spoke colour, even in arguments. Everybody had respect for each other. This person got lost in their Aboriginality. Whereas we grew up amongst Aboriginal people, some didn't. Then they had to prove that they were black. They say it all the time, I am a black.

They need to give away drugs. They change after taking dope. If they were to stop and take counselling, we would get that person back we had before. Everybody would respect them as we did before. Not enough is being done about yarndi and yarndi induced schizophrenia.

I think I look at them as being part of the separated children. They often married non-Aboriginal people, got involved in white government stuff, mixed with non-Aboriginal people.

And coming back into the community is a lost feeling. I was married and had children. Something happened to my husband. I've been back here for only a little while. From when I was a teenager till I was nearly fifty, I wasn't here.

The woman who spoke was the quiet one sitting shyly at the end of the table. She was looking down, drizzling her pancake with maple syrup.

It's like I'm a stranger and it's strange to me. I can't put the feeling into words - a sense of loss, even though I've always taught my kids what my mother told me, be proud of who you are. I can't turn the clock back.

She put her elbow on the table and her chin in the palm of her hand.

There are days when I wish I'd never come back here.

I've spent too many years in depression. I don't want it anymore. If people come here with it they can take it away. The same with gossiping.

The quiet one looked up and smiled. She seemed glad she'd spoken.

I can remember growing up round family violence. It was Uncle and Aunty. I never saw Mum being hit.

Our star laughed and put her hand to her mouth like a little girl would.

Once when Mum and Dad were, you know, "drunkified", we used to say, a bowl of curry got thrown. That's the only time.

We all laughed and the last of the tension lifted. Her story gave one of the answers about how family violence happens.

It happens when there's not much money, alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, prescribed medications, non-prescribed medications... I had a partner who was as abusive as much as anyone could say. I had a partner who was verbally abusive. I was just as bad. I was a gambler. We both had a habit. I wanted to get away from him. There was no money to buy the groceries. I'd spend it immediately I got it. He didn't care. Anything was fair game for his abuse. I had to get away. I started for fun. Then I was going back, giving them more than they were giving me. I didn't have to talk, not a word. I only had to put the money in and press the button.

Other habits develop where you have solace - drugs, Christianity, women's groups, exercising, work, yarndi, voluntary work. Me, I turn to yarndi - one or two cones after 4 o'clock and then I relax. I don't hide anything from my children. A lot of the time my children didn't know about my gambling. My daughter felt angry, pissed off. The hardest thing was to admit the compulsion. I admitted it, said I was sorry to the kids. We'll be all right, I said. We'll get through. I'm not interested now. I go to karaoke to sing my heart out.

She rubbed her hands together, shrugged her shoulders, twisted left and right with her hands on her hips in mock gleeful dancing gestures.

I've been there and don't want to go there anymore. It was a waste of a life.

And into the silence that sat within the circle of our smiles she whispered then yelped:

...Except the experience made me a better person. Woeeee!

The oldest of the women stood up and moved over to the kitchen bench. She made more coffee for us then leaned with her head against the dresser so that she looked upwards. Her willingness to voice her reflections invited the others to speak theirs.

My bruises are gone. I worry now about the impact on kids. I have seen kids acting out violence. It's devastating. We're destroying ourselves, our futures.

The strength  
of Aboriginal  
women and the  
right to human  
worth

I've been the best mother. They have my love. I want them to talk to me and they do. Sometimes it's like I'm talking to two grown people. I always have time for my kids. They'd never say I was a bad mother.

Everybody wonders why I don't have a man. It's because I don't want one. I listened to the doctor. The doctor told me to let my husband have sex every night.

As women, have we exacerbated this? As Aboriginal women, I mean? Aboriginal women in Tasmania have made the politics. We've made ourselves strong. We are strong in our relations. We've made a difference. Women can say: I am a woman of worth. You don't have to put up with that, girl! It was the empowerment of women that changed it. Did black politics have this effect? It's difficult to say. It's about morals and ethics, relationships and commitment that we can say: I'm not going to put up with this. I'd rather be apart and be friends with my man.

The 70s were all consuming - rallies, marches, walk-ins. That did give me empowerment, strength. I could say: in my world, in my country, I am worth something and I'm going where I'm worth something. I'm not staying here to be treated like shit.

**Now, are more black men going with black women?**

We went with white men. There was breakdown. We went with another white man. We jumped right back into the frying-pan. We'll never get to the bottom of what's happening even though women my age are coming out and naming the men who were perpetrators against them.

*This is serious*

We don't want to see anything like the Stolen Children. They can't ask us to open up, make the sore raw again and then do nothing. We're going to do this...and that...it's not enough to talk around the table, all tied up in government top administration.

Domestic violence is not looked at seriously enough.

The government looks at child abuse and pornography seriously.

This is just as serious. We have to make it right in the forefront.

I don't believe that anyone should have to stay in a situation of violence in this day and age. You need just one person to help, to keep pushing you, even if you don't think you have the internal fortitude to do it. I get pissed off with some one who comes here, tells me about it and goes back. When are you going to stand up for yourself? I ask. I am being tough on my friends. I say, " Only you can change. Make the ground rules. Do something positive before you whinge." Any little bit of help like that is worth it. It's worth something to some one.

Being  
responsible

We would have to say that at least 50% of the perpetrators are men. I know there is a women's centre but I don't think there's a great deal for men. Speaking about it is a positive step but when you are ready. There is no rule that you have to talk about it. Because it's too hard to deal with, you can't talk. You lock it away and pretend it didn't happen. It'll come out in time. You are functioning day by day. You don't have to go into turmoil. You don't know how talking about it will affect you.

*What should be available to our community?*

*One of my own*

Number 1 - we don't have a youth justice or youth diversion worker. We have something for the middle-aged and for the elderly but the younger age group is uncatered for. All those who work for the centre have been there too long. They don't care. For community members, if you open your mouth, say too much, you won't get that little bit of service, like transport to the doctor.

Most organizations look at what their services are and how they deliver them. We have a community

organisation that we wanted and we built and now we can't get the services we need.

We should have a domestic violence unit in each area and it should be there only for Indigenous people. Blackfellas have a different life style. I can't explain, it's more than the colour of your skin or your eyes or how frizzy your hair is. It's in here.

She pointed with her finger to her belly and then rested her open hand on it as if to protect something precious within.

I wouldn't go to a white agency. Everyone around here would be the same.

It's finding the right person.

Confidentiality. For example, what I want is someone to talk to, someone who is family. One of my own. Not that I don't trust her, that white counsellor I mean, but I trust her over there because she, that one there, is family.

When are we going to walk into a government agency and see a blackfella face?

It happens with blackfellas that when they need to talk to someone it needs to be there and then, for ten to fifteen minutes, when they are receptive to talking. If there's no response, that's it. You don't talk. You go back to your situation.

### *This is our voice*

If you agree to setting up a separate unit, you agree to have someone, a counsellor, who can sit down and talk right now. Like a twenty-four hour life link, you should have immediate access. And within fifteen minutes something is happening - a cab's there, a room is arranged for you and you'll be ready to go with the kids.

The  
responsibility  
of trust

So many people talk to me, pour their hearts out...

Does that trust affect you?

Three of us support each other including a white girl. I go to see them, I have to debrief...we help each other to step back...usually we get down to tin tacks and it will come out. Having a support group... to listen, not repeat, not judge. It's your business.

You don't need to reinvent the wheel. It's in place. It just needs its tyres pumped up. Anything that helps my kids through what I put them through is okay with me.

This is our voice. This is what we want. This is not a politically sensitive issue. We would hope that, as a result of this process, support groups will follow through. We've got to get together behind this. We have to push it. Domestic violence is part of telling the truth. What is our interpretation of empowerment? To deal with these issues is empowering.

I've been at a national Aboriginal women's health forum. I found out that there is a high death rate of Aborigines from cervical and breast cancer. They won't have pap smears because of the bruising from sexual and physical violence and rape. I hadn't realised this before. How many of our women have not had pap smears? Where do they go? To white fellas? They won't. How many eighteen year old women go? You might be eighteen, but you've been sexually active for as long as a thirty year old. Sexual abuse makes young women sexually active for many more years.

Telling the truth before women are at risk from death

There are three categories of Aboriginal people. One where they are brought up all the way through with drink and poverty and have never worked. One like you and me: they are brought up in the community but they only get so far. And one brought up as blackfellas in the community: they get educated and can get to the top. The people in the middle have enough knowledge, strength and ability to know who and where they are. People in the third category know they can go higher, above our heads. Those in the first don't know. They need someone to talk to and not be judged. They won't go to a white organisation. They feel looked down upon. It's not right.



Suddenly the talk stopped and we lapsed into a long silence. We had laughed. We had seriously deliberated some moral and ethical issues. And we'd been confronted by the terrible truth of family violence. We felt a companionship in having shared all these things. Had these women at last found their place of belonging - amongst each other? They looked at each other with love and respect and their eyes shining wet for the tough times they'd suffered and for the better times to come.

The fourth woman had not uttered a word. She was the youngest of the women and quite beautiful, the daughter of our star. There was a certain stillness about her. Her attention hadn't wavered. Her eyes had moved from woman to woman as each talked. Perhaps she was absorbing their knowledge and their power. Perhaps she was inheriting a learning from the pain and the joy of the mothers and grandmothers. Might this have been a kind of initiation for her, a passage into the knowing of women? Might she too learn to sing her heart out? And the child who sat by her mother all this time glad to be there amongst the women, what was she taking into herself and what were her thoughts? Might she sing too?

This is our voice.

This is what we want.

This is a story of Indigenous family violence in Tasmania. It tells what Tasmanian Aboriginal people said from their hearts.

It's a tragic story. When you listen to the voices you can't help but hear, see or suspect the connections they make with your own life. For at least some moments, you are held by them, sharing with them their loss, grief, outrage, offence, release and transformation. You are drawn into their truth. You recognise their kinship. When you first met the people in this story they were as strangers. Now you might recognise them as friends or kin.

It is a story that justifies what the Aboriginal community of Tasmania wants for building their community's capacity for healing the effects of the family violence. It justifies the understanding and support the community wants to say, "No!" to violence, whatever its cause, and to guide young people and children towards a future where they can be morally strong and proud of their families and community.

It's not a story of demand. When people say, "This is what we want", others might say, "It's not about what you want. It's about what you need." Who is to say there is a difference between want and need? What one person wants is what another person might need. And what one person needs is what another might want. Governments get stuck worrying about these kinds of distinctions.

Do you decide who gets what support because it is a right or it is an entitlement that people get what they need to survive - food, clothing, shelter and health services? Do you decide who gets what because people need love, respect, honour, dignity and belonging to realise their full human potential? How do we advise governments on making decisions about the wants that the voices in this story express?

## *Listen to the voices...*

We ask governments and your agents to hear the voices. We ask you to honour the courage that the people who have entrusted their story to you have shown. It was their will to open up to you through us. Perhaps they risked rumour and speculation. More likely they were risking speaking a truth that many might not want to hear - that takes courage and integrity. We promised confidentiality to all those who spoke with us. We have taken every care not to reveal their identities. Yet ten people, Edwina, Lillian, Dean, Erica, Jeanette, Ruth, Macca, Buck, Pat and Beulah wished to be acknowledged for participating in the consultations.

Edwina, Lillian, Dean, Erica, Jeanette, Ruth, Macca, Buck, Pat and Beulah have now taken on the task of working with people who may be affected by those stories that do appear in *ya pulingina kani*. It is work that is out in the open now. It is not secret work. It is work that is only just beginning.

There are still many, many stories to tell. And it's the telling of the stories and the telling of them over and over again that will help people understand themselves and each other. They might get a better understanding of their history, their traditions and their language. Such good talking will surely draw people together, reconcile their differences, prompt their healing and begin the work of hope for a better future.

The voices tell us over and over again what they want and are prepared to do for the Aboriginal community of Tasmania. They want:

*A decent life: to feel fully human - loved, respected and accepted.*

*A safe place to go when violence is too much to bear.*

*Some one to listen and act at that particular moment when you cry for help, when the trauma of violence is about to paralyse you with the fear of separation, deprivation and yet more violence.*

*A way of protecting the children that keeps them in the family when you're so low you can't do it yourself.*

*A place and time to talk with friends and kin who understand.*

*Time and support to heal - shelter, health care, counselling by kin.*

*Protection from rumour, blame and shame.*

*Respect, support and right action from police, ambulance officers, doctors, social workers and others to whom you might appeal for help.*

*Care and teaching for the children to help them understand the terrible nature of violence and that it won't be tolerated any more, that they can learn not to be part of it and that they can learn to be strong and healthy and wise.*

*Violence not to be tolerated in families or in the community.*

*Public awareness, acceptance and action not to tolerate violence.*

*Men and women not to be separated by the advice and action of mainstream service providers.*

*Men, women and children to meet to tell their stories, talk to one another, confront the reasons for the violence, support the healing that could come from this.*

*The Aboriginal culture to flourish - old cultural traditions respected, new traditions acknowledged and respected too.*

*Men's business, women's business, meeting together to be a continuing supported tradition.*

*Keep the children who must leave the parents because of violence and make places for them within families of the community.*

*Form bi-partisan agreements between the Tasmanian and Commonwealth Governments for carer's pensions and family group homes to make this possible.*

*Financial, physical, moral, legal and political support to do all this.*

When Edwina, Lillian, Dean, Erica, Jeanette, Ruth, Macca, Buck, Pat, Beulah and others say, "This is our voice. This is what we want", they are responding from their hearts and their experience of Indigenous family violence in Tasmania. They tell us about the Aboriginal Community's compassion for their people. They give us insight into this community's enduring capacity for healing the wounds of history, dispossession and alienation. They demonstrate a communal desire to restore relations amongst their families.

The events that led to the publication of the voices in *ya pulingina kani* are just the beginning of a long process of healing and renewal. We are making four recommendations that support and promote this process. We believe the Aboriginal Community of Tasmania, the Government of Tasmania and the Commonwealth Government of Australia will work together to continue the work of commitment and action for the healing of family violence and for renewal of the lives and culture of Tasmanian Aborigines.

### *First - Reciprocity*

The telling of stories in *ya pulingina kani* and the voicing of what the community wants has demonstrated community capacity to deal with family violence. There are several people in the Aboriginal community and in Government services who are passionate about contributing to the healing of Indigenous family violence in Tasmania.

We recommend that these people and others of similar minds and hearts be invited to work together to develop and advise on guidelines, processes, procedures and funds that will support and facilitate what the people have said that they want.

We recommend that these people be invited to form the Indigenous Family Violence (IFV) Working Party that will enable ongoing action in Tasmania for the healing of indigenous family violence and the restoration of family units.

The stories in *ya pulingina kani* have been given to the Government to read and interpret. They have been given in trust that the Government will respect them and accept reciprocal responsibility for participating with Tasmanian Aborigines in the process of healing that lies ahead.

We recommend that, in the first instance, the Government ensure that stories in *ya pulingina kani* are given back to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and that the Government support the community to keep the dialogue open and ongoing. There are more people who will probably want to tell their stories now.

We recommend that the members of the IFV Working Party be charged with protecting the integrity of the stories and the confidence of the people who shared them. The IFV Working Party will determine the most appropriate means of taking the stories in *ya pulingina kani* back to the people. It will advise and expect a Government Working Group to initiate and support talk groups amongst the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and publish and promote the stories in ways that will respect the dignity of individuals and the community.

### *Second – Healing*

After people shared their stories of family violence they now have to go through a grieving and healing time in which they need love and nurturing.

We recommend that they be offered something back for what they have given. That is, the opportunity to work together with Aboriginal leaders in dealing with grief and healing in Aboriginal communities. Training Aboriginal participants in community grief and healing work will promote the process that has begun. We recommend that they then train other members of their community to continue the work.

### *Third – Partnership*

In establishing the IFV Working Party, the Government will honour its policy of working in partnership with community.

The IFV Working Party will assist the Government to set up a working group *within* Government with appropriate representation from its agencies to implement action plans agreed by the IFV Working Party and Government.

The IFV Working party will design action plans to meet the desire of the community to heal Indigenous family violence (Pp.75-76). It will consist of eight people selected for their leadership, wisdom and experience in relation to matters of Aboriginal community capacity to act for its own well-being. The IFV Working Party must have the opportunity to be imaginative

and accountable in their planning and to have ownership of the initiatives they take.

We recommend that primary action include the development of partnerships between the Aboriginal community and government and community service providers.

This will engage agencies such as the Police and service providers in promoting shared knowledge and understanding of Indigenous family violence, listing and publishing the support available to family members and developing policies and funding guidelines that will ensure that the Police and service providers give direct attention and assistance at the moment it is requested.

#### *Fourth – Art, Performance and Culture*

The stories are dramatic. They are situated in time and in place. Their characters are human and appealing. The stories certainly have no happy endings but they reveal the poignancy of genuine human experience - fear, tension, disbelief, despair, passion, resolution. As the dialogue unfolds, an intellectual as well as an emotional response is evoked in the audience of readers, listeners and watchers. You are afraid, horrified and outraged. Your empathy is aroused. You want to cry and laugh and think and read and talk some more.

*ya pulingina kani* could be in itself a live, honest and questioning theatre play, a dance performance and an inspiration for writers and artists.

We recommend that the Government enable and fund its agencies for the arts and performance to engage Aboriginal writers, artists and performers to collaborate and bring the stories of *ya pulingina kani* into Aboriginal and Tasmanian cultural life and dialogue through the arts and performance state wide.

#### *Listen...*

Imagine the voices as different grasses that grow over the land and islands here. When the grasses blow in the wind, you can hear them whip fiercely in the storm or hush and shush in softer weather. The voices, like

the grasses, synchronise and tell the full story. They whisper into the quiet. In storms, they lash and scream. Then they sigh. In the sun, they dance. In the rain, they weep.

Some grass fibres are tough and tubular. You wind one of these grass fibres round both hands, twist and pull. The fibre might stretch but it will resist and won't break. Some grasses have sharp edges. One of these will cut your hand as you twist, if you are not careful. Some are long and soft. These will go with the flow of your hands, letting you twist and move them freely. They will work for you if you give them water to keep them flexible. Others are so fine and so delicate that they bend and break with your first touch unless you handle them with great tenderness. When you come to your weaving and you treat the grasses right, you can build a shelter and have a place safe from the storms and the night, you can weave a basket to hold the seeds you harvest or you can twist a rope to secure your possessions.

Like the grasses, the voices seek tenderness and a safe place. They nurture the seeds of new stories waiting to be told.