



National Victoria

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Coming full circle to heal the hurt

A unique Aboriginal initiative in Victoria is helping break the cycle of addiction and despair by combining indigenous spirituality with conventional treatment.

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I AM the only white man among nine Aboriginal men, standing in a circle at the entrance to the Living Museum of the West in Pipemakers Park on the Maribyrnong River.

Uncle Reg Blow, a grey-haired burly Gureng Gureng elder, sets alight gum leaves and wattle branches in a beaten tin bucket. One by one the men silently walk to the bucket and fan the smoke over themselves, first their fronts then their backs. They rejoin the circle, ritually cleansed.



Aunty Zeta Thomson, Leister Ross and Uncle Reg Blow (from left). CRAIG SILLITOE

Uncle Reg and others in the group then recite a liturgy, claiming for us the healing powers of Aboriginal spirits. As a group, we turn to the points of the compass, welcoming those powers - and the animals that represent them - into our midst today. We also seek guidance from the powers of the sky, and I am handed the liturgy to call on the powers of the earth.

Invested with these energies, the men remain standing and introduce themselves; their names, their people and their spirit totems, the animals that guide their decisions about what is right or wrong in their lives. Some have a turtle as a totem, others wallabies, fish and birds. They tell the rest of the group, in a sentence or less, how they're feeling today, whether they are "in", and therefore ready to participate. When everyone is finished, Uncle Reg plays the didgeridoo, laying the spiritual foundation for the sharing to follow.

We move as a group to a rotunda next to the river and surrounded by gum trees. Trusting that nothing they say in the circle will leave it, the men open up about the issues that have, in some cases, seen them imprisoned for half their lives, or addicted to drugs and alcohol for longer. An hour later, Uncle Reg seals off the time of sharing with another haunting blast on the didgeridoo.

I have just sat through the men's family circle, the weekly key component of the Healing Program. It's run by The Gathering Place Health Service, an Aboriginal organisation that helps a third of the more than 3000 indigenous people living in Melbourne's western suburbs. Now in its second intake, the program blends Western medicine with Aboriginal healing and has helped 44 of the people worst affected by drugs, alcohol and long-term incarceration.

Colleen Marion, a tiny but robust woman with a fierce passion for her people, founded the Gathering Place Health Service in 2002. Marion had, like Reg Blow, worked for decades in Aboriginal affairs and was frustrated that so many of her people were still destitute. Two years ago, fearing time was running out for some of them, she discussed the matter with Blow and the Healing Program was born. "Without it, some of them would be dead now," Marion says.

Leister Ross is a participant in the latest intake. A tall, brooding and intelligent Yorta Yorta man from Deniliquin, Ross has lost count of the number of theology units he studied at university - and the number of years he's spent in prison. His best guess on the latter, including youth training centres, is about 20. He grew up a Salvo like his family, distributing *The War Cry* magazine to hotels and shaking a donation can. But he never found the solace they did, later becoming an alcoholic, which led to crime.

"Soon as I get on the grog I get into trouble," he says, adding that he's been sober for two months and on the outside for nine. Except for periods in jail he has had only one other dry stint in the past two decades. But this time Ross believes his life is finally turning around.

"I've done groups before like anger management and violence intervention programs, some pretty serious groups, but I haven't done a group that is anything like this."

The difference that the Healing Program offers is a partnership between Western medicine and Aboriginal culture. Most of the participants have lost meaningful connection with their Aboriginality and, as Uncle Reg, the program's chief male mentor explains, that means they've also lost their spirituality's healing power. "We've got the longest living culture in the world and if you equate that to our religion we have the longest living religion in the world," Blow says. "The understanding that we are all connected is something that Aboriginal people have more powerfully than many other people."

Aunty Zeta Thomson, Yorta Yorta on her mother's side and Wurundjeri on her father's, is Blow's female counterpart in the Healing Program. She's been involved in Aboriginal affairs all her life and was the first Victorian Aboriginal painter to have work exhibited at Melbourne Museum's Bunjilaka Gallery. She says for Aboriginal people there is no distinction between culture and spirituality.

"Aboriginal people believe in the spirit world. And our culture, our language and our heritage make us who we are. A lot of Aboriginal people have not always

been connected to their culture and their heritage. So it's important for that understanding to be instilled in our families. Our people are empowered by their culture and heritage when they are strong in their lives; it makes them proud."

One of the ways she and Blow use the power of Aboriginal healing is by helping participants discover their personal spirit totems. That does not translate easily to a Western mindset focused on client outcomes and objectives.

"They are secret, deep things, sacred things," Blow says, "and I'm not sure how much I should say. But when you are connected to your spirit, you know what is right in your heart, and in your head you can't argue away what is wrong."

Men's and women's family circles are central to the program. Overseen by Uncle Reg and Aunty Zeta, participants connect with their Aboriginality, their spirituality, and speak openly - many for the first time - about the issues that have seen them jailed, alienated from friends and family, abused and abusive, and plagued by addiction. They learn their history, cultural practices, including painting, dance and craft, and benefit from the shared wisdom in the group.

At the same time the program connects people with conventional medical services, counsellors, a literacy course; whatever it takes to become, in Colleen Marion's words, "better citizens of this country". But even she wasn't prepared for the level of progress the program would achieve for some people. "I said of one of our clients, 'Throw away the key and lock her up forever'. She's proven me wrong."

Jenny Podger is the woman Marion wanted to see the back of. But after a year in the Healing Program she has kicked a 30-year drinking problem that made her a regular at Sunshine Magistrates Court and estranged her from her family.

She hasn't had a drink for a year, hasn't been near the court, and there are moves afoot for her to see her children and grandchildren.

"Aunty Zeta and Uncle Reg are the elders of the mob and without them and the Gathering Place I would be six feet under," says Podger, who, ironically, became alienated from her Aboriginal heritage because her mother didn't want her near the alcoholism. Marion says some participants who completed the program's first year have set up voluntary groups to assist frail community elders with house cleaning, gardening, shopping and other tasks.

"About 11 of them put up their hands and said they wanted to do that. They are feeling well and wanting to give back."

Various organisations in remote areas have made low-level and one-off attempts to blend Aboriginal healing methods with Western medicine. But according to Warren Mundine, former ALP president and now chief executive of NTSCorp, the Healing Program is the first and most comprehensive collaboration in an urban setting.

"This program removes Aboriginal people from being the ones who access a service, to actually being the service. They have complete ownership of the whole process. We always talk about the spiritual beliefs of Aboriginal people, and this is bringing it together and working with it in a constructive way," he explains.

The Healing Program has emerged concurrent with the controversial Northern Territory Intervention. Mundine has in the past publicly supported aspects of

territory intervention. Munaine has in the past publicly supported aspects of the intervention and he sees in the Healing Program a model for a second stage of the controversial policy.

"The vast majority of Aboriginal people who are stepping up, especially women, are saying, 'Hey, we need to deal with these issues, we're not going to pretend they don't happen. They do happen and let's roll up our sleeves and get on with it!'"

He says women see close up the effects of drug and alcohol abuse and it is no surprise that the Gathering Place and the Healing Program emerged under female leadership.

"They're the ones who are more sensitive to the needs of the kids and the community around them, trying to make it safe, healthy, and economically viable," he says.

One of the Healing Program's goals is to help participants become employable. But when the first program began with a five-day camp near Bright in August 2010 that hope seemed forlorn.

Organisers were just hopeful that the dozen or so participants could stay off the grog and drugs long enough to catch a bus and hold a conversation.

But many did, and Gathering Place leaders' close relationships with members of the justice system have been integral to the program's success.

Through their justice worker, Yaegl Gumbaynggir man Keith Randall, the Gathering Place worked with magistrates so they could see how effective the program could be.

"We have met people who are participants who have engaged in significant behaviour change and it looks like lasting behaviour change," says Jelena Popovic, Deputy Chief Magistrate.

"I have been in the justice system 33 years as a lawyer and 22 as a magistrate [and] I haven't seen anything like the Healing Program before, not with this degree of co-ordination, the holistic approach and the cultural appropriateness." Popovic recounts how she and fellow members of the legal fraternity were deeply moved when Reg Blow recently delivered a seminar to the Judicial College of Victoria on the issue of intergenerational grief. "I had no idea about things like intergenerational grief and when you know about issues like that you are able to craft sentences and solutions that are much more appropriate," she says.

For recently released Leister Ross that has meant a court order to attend the Healing Program. On past visits to the outside world, he saw programs such as the one in which he now participates as a frustrating restriction to his freedom.

But this time around he's opening up and dealing with what he sees as the long-neglected spiritual part of his life.

"It is a subject that I have toiled with for a long time, something very complex for me. But this program has been about understanding Aboriginal spirituality; I have had a sniff of it now, a spirituality that people must have had many hundreds of years ago for the earth, and understanding that there was a power much greater than themselves."

Ross hopes by the end of the program to be closer to his ultimate goal: a job in the justice system supporting Aboriginal men. He knows it's early days, but he has already achieved one of his other goals: a meeting with his six-year-old son, soon to be adopted by his foster parents.

"I wanted to start to have a relationship back up and running, which happened yesterday. It was fantastic; he's in an environment where he is thriving, so it is one big part of my life that I don't have to stress about."

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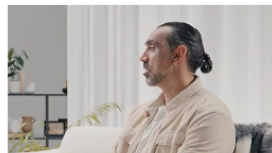
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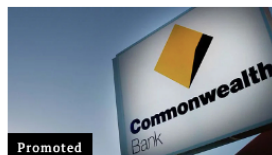
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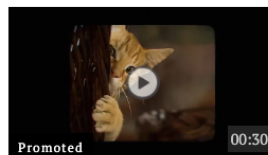
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