

# Stories of Wreck Bay

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*This is the first plenary address by an Aboriginal woman at an Australian Family Therapy Conference. The author reminisces about her early life and highlights changes in her community, giving many vignettes of her own work with Aboriginal people. A recurrent theme is the Aboriginal experience of Government control, and the impact of the dreaded Aboriginal Protection Board, which for decades by deliberate policy removed Aboriginal children to institutions and non-Aboriginal foster families. (Editor)*

## LOCATION

Wreck Bay is a part of the A.C.T. some 220 km south of Sydney. It is in a beautiful spot and is classed as a millionaire's dream at the edge of the water. It is not a big area. Wreck Bay and Jervis Bay all belong to Canberra so even though I have lived not far from Wreck Bay you have got to cross the border to go into there from N.S.W. The Navy owns Jervis Bay and Wreck Bay is owned by the Aboriginal Community.

Medical services were available at Jervis Bay if one was well enough to get there. Babies were born in their parents' houses and the community took care of the deceased, laying them out and burying them in the local grounds at Cemetery Point.

## School

We went to school on the mission. It only went up to sixth class and then you had to be fourteen before you could get into high school. This day and age it is twelve years of age. You never learned to mix with other kids because you were protected in a sense. It never bothered you because we done our own thing, we didn't have to wear shoes and there was no restrictions to wear uniforms.

## Racism

We did participate in sports once a year in Nowra and that was an experience because you didn't know how to mix. I mean, it's the first time a lot of the non-Aboriginal children had seen a heap of Koorie children together at once and because there would be a lot of fighting and name calling going on.

Just calling you black and all other racist names would get the Koorie kids worked up and most of the days with the non-Aboriginal children were spent fighting. Then we would have to wait until the following year's sports day for more fighting or until you started high school.

I started high school when I was fourteen. I was only fifteen in September of that year and I finished school, so I didn't even do a full year of first form. I have heard the odd (racist) remark aimed at quite a few kids in my days in high school. I was lucky I never let things like that bother me. It wasn't a big deal to me and that is why I got where I am today. It didn't mean a lot to me as I felt I could cope with what they dished out. I would give it straight back to them. I would look

- 1900s Aboriginal fishermen fished at Wreck Bay on a non-permanent basis.
- 1912 The construction of the Naval College commenced.
- 1915 Aboriginal families settled at Wreck Bay.
- 1915 Jervis Bay is acquired as Federal Territory from New South Wales.
- 1923 There were 7-8 crews of fishermen active at Wreck Bay.

## STORIES OF WRECK BAY

### Rations — Food

In the 1940s rations were issued at a shed next to the Station Manager's house, which was at Jervis Bay. Men had to work a couple of days each week, usually on the road, to qualify for rations. Flour, salt, porridge, rice, tea, sugar and baking powder constituted the bulk of the rations. Twice a week meat in the form of sausages or salt meat was delivered by mail van. No fresh vegetables or milk were issued. During earlier times in the 1920s, the people of Wreck Bay received a greater variety of food stuffs as orders on local stores were issued by the Huskisson Police Sergeant. The women of Wreck Bay remember the rations as being plain and, due to the absence of fresh foods, an unhealthy diet. The men state that the rations were plentiful and of good quality. Child endowment was in the form of an order slip, not cash.

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†Plenary session, XIth Australian Family Therapy Conference, Adelaide, January 1991.

at them and think they were the ones with the problem, not me, and I've kept that attitude all my life.

### Fishing

The fishermen were there at daylight till dark; the whole of the light was spent on the beach. It was really long days of hard work for them. They would have their boat at the edge of the water; they'd have a man sitting on the lookout on the hill; he was called the spotter, who would look for the schools of fish. He'd blow the whistle and as soon as that whistle would blow, the fishermen would hop into the boat and shoot around the fish in a wide circle by dropping their net as they went around; and they would have men on one end of the net and the other end was the other crew.

There would be four men to a crew. As soon as the man would blow the whistle on the hill he would have to run down the hill to help pull the fish out of the water. So it was very heavy work for the four man crew.

Net fishing concentrated upon mullet, jewfish, kingfish, whiting, bream and salmon. Snapper was caught off the reels with a hand line. At times the fishermen used to row eight or more miles down the coast and return with their small boats near swamping with fish.

Seven to eight crews of Aboriginal fishermen operated out of Wreck Bay when the netting was profitable. With so many boats in action a rotation system rather than a first to the beach system was used to determine rights to the first haul. A crew had rights for 24 hours or until it had shot its net, then it was the turn of the next crew, and so on. Spotters were stationed at vantage points on the promontories or in high trees on the beach.

### As a Young Girl

I got into mischief like everybody else. In my days of growing up we made our own fun, there was no televisions. We had a radio. We had different games for different seasons.

When school was out of an afternoon we'd go up to the bush and we'd eat some bush tucker and we'd have the time of our lives. We'd get gee-bungs or dig for yams and there were so many other different berries we would eat. A lot of our time was spent playing and looking for food in the bush.

The practice of regularly obtaining bush honey continued into the 1950s. Pipsis, mussels and oysters were collected along the rocky coast. During the early days the odd kangaroo was added to the stew pot. Occasionally women would grub for bush yams and make containers from the bark trees. Spears for catching fish were slowly hardened in the evening fire place. Rations were carried from Huskisson in sugar bags over the shoulder. Later, when rations were issued from Jervis Bay, carrying them back was easier. During the influenza outbreak, Reg McLeod recalls that he was the only person in the station fit enough to drive a cart to fetch the rations.

### Entertainment

Gum leaf bands filled out with violins, guitars and an occasional accordion enlivened parties at Wreck Bay. People

played a lot of euchre at community fund raising events. Some women were handy at decorating small boxes with shell work while men made good quality boomerangs. The wood work was decorated with animal figures burned into the wood with a hot wire. Signs advertising the wares for sale were placed outside houses and the goods sold to passing tourists or flogged at the Naval College.

During the off season men went away from the station to search for work. Logging and seasonal crop picking were available until recent times.

Depression times were difficult at Wreck Bay, the fishing was not particularly good and people turned to a number of different pursuits to gain cash. One of those ventures was the gathering of abalone, and sun drying it on wire racks. It brought 6c per pound from a Chinaman who came down from Sydney. Wattle bark was stripped and sold to tanning concerns.

### Housing

Lamps were made of treacle tins filled with sand, a cloth dipped in fat served as a wick. Food was cooked in camp ovens in the embers of the open fire place. During the early 40s some people lived in bark shacks while others occupied galvanised iron houses, made with materials shipped down from Canberra.

Bark was removed in sheets from the stringy bark trees at Blacks Waterhole, softened over a fire and flattened under weighted logs. They made an excellent building material. Bush timber was used for uprights and roofing timbers. Driftwood planks were collected for flooring. The walls were lined with hessian painted with white pipe clay. This clay was obtained from pits slightly inland from the houses.

At times kerosene tins were available from the Lake Windermere water pumping station. Carefully flattened, they were used as roofing iron or as chimney cladding. These tins had many uses: two on a yoke for hauling water, cut diagonally they made twin wash basins, and in the absence of coppers were used by all the Wreck Bay women when washing clothes in the nearby creeks.

### Station Manager

It wasn't until the 1950s that the Station Manager actually lived at Wreck Bay. The second manager to live on the station was a resident, Bob Brown, the first Aboriginal manager in NSW.

### Rations — Clothing

Annually the government supplied blankets, an issue of summer clothes and a separate issue of winter clothes. Women were supplied with cloth, but no cotton or needles, to make dresses. The practice of issuing boots continued into the 1940s.

### Seasons and Play

In the summer, well all of our time was spent on the beach and in the water, or we'd go blackberry picking, pipping straight from school or we'd go straight down to the blackberry bush. We had tracks all the way through the bush that's real prickly. We had a lot of empty milk and milo

tins which we would fill with sand and put holes in each end then run wire through it then add string to the wires for extra length and use them for rollers. We would have sand tracks going in every direction on the beach.

Another season we would get a long sheet of tin and would bend the front up so that we could get our feet in and we would sit on the long piece of tin. We'd steal some dripping from our house and grease the bottom of the tin and use it as a slide. We would slide down the many hills on the tin slides.

The other seasons of play were hopscotch and marbles.

### In my Family

I've got six brothers and three sisters. I am the third eldest of the ten. We were always kept amused because we had each other, us older ones were taught to look after the younger ones and more or less help to raise them. So it was really great.

### The Mission

The only white people that we saw a lot of was the Manager, because it was classed as a mission, then it went from a mission to a reserve which sounded a bit better than a mission. Today it is classed as a community. It was called different names over the years and the Manager was classed as the big boss.

He was there to govern everybody and tell them what to do and I seen quite a few of them come and go in my days when I was growing up in Wreck Bay. After six o'clock they would not let anybody else on the mission even if they were family. You had to abide by their rules which we didn't agree with, but we had no choice.

## FAMILY THERAPY

I see family therapy as being people who need to know into backgrounds of other people in order to deal with their problem. I've never been told in depth what these family therapists do but to my way of thinking, they deal with family structures to find the problems and deal with different people in the family.

That's my interpretation of them and now I am interested in a lot of our younger people that are coming forward. They were the last lot of children that were taken away and they are the ones with the problems. I now feel that family therapists need to be aware of it because these children are the ones that we are going to turn to and use and we need them now to know what our people's about. I find it very hard this day and age because of these younger people that I am talking about; they are more mentally disturbed than the older type of people that have been through it.

I think mainly more so because of the drugs that are available, alcohol is more available, there is so much more around than there was in the older days when the older people couldn't turn to anything like that. The older people were more inclined to suppress their feelings and emotions.

I firmly believe a lot of the older people still out there in the community have never seeked any counselling but have managed to cope with their problems. I find that the

younger generation cannot cope and this really bothers me. The more that family therapists learn about the Aboriginal culture, then you will be able to understand our people a lot better.

I do a lot of counselling within my work as a Community Aboriginal Health Worker; I do feel I have a lot to offer other people and I do have a good ear for listening to their problems.

In one case I had a mother come to me with her daughter aged 15 and said to me "I want my daughter to have an abortion" and her daughter was just sitting there and never opened her mouth. The mother was doing all the talking and I just sat and watched the daughter and I said "Well you know, what does the daughter want to do?" The daughter still never opened her mouth. The mother said "She must have an abortion because her father will kill me." The mother and father were split up and I politely said to the mother "Can I tell you something?" and she said "Yes." I said "You're talking about the father killing you", I said. Now I am going to have to tell you even though it was told to me in confidence, the father already knows that his daughter is pregnant. He was quite happy to think that he was going to be a grandfather. I told the mother that she would get killed if she made her daughter have an abortion. They were told to think very carefully what they were going to do.

I think this is a tricky situation but I had to tell the mother because the young girl's father did tell me that he was going to be a grandfather and was very pleased about it.

With our counselling we can walk down the street at lunchtime and if people have a problem they will tell you there and then. They will not come into an office environment unless it is an emergency. They think a lot of their problems are not that important, what they need to do is come to us and sit down in the office to really talk about it. Like that mother I was just talking about did see it as a need to come there and talk. That was fine. The mother saw this as very urgent that her daughter get the termination. We could be anywhere, you could just pull up at the traffic lights and they would flag you down. Any place you'll get their problems.

We have to be prepared all the time. It could even be out of work hours. Our people know no time limits, we have got to be prepared all the time. There may be one or two depending on their upbringing that would say, "I would like to come and see you tomorrow when you are at work," but very few do.

You are left feeling that you're not supposed to be doing work this time of the day or night. You can walk into a shopping centre, anywhere, if they have got a problem you'll get it there; a lot of them have never been trained in that sense to do that because they were always ready to talk to some people they trust.

We can go into the home on a home visit for one reason, you can go there for one problem and come out nearly bent over with so many other things that come out. I don't know if that is good or bad sometimes.

I think one of these days I'll have to change my tactics and not say how are you going because they are willing to tell you how they are going.

## BEREAVEMENT

My main interest is to be a bereavement educator. It involves more time to go into universities, colleges and talk more freely about death and dying. But again Bereavement — Grief covers such a big area. It doesn't stop on death and dying, it could be a loss of a limb, separation in a family, maybe the elderly has a loss of their pet they are so well attached to.

Years ago bereavement wasn't such a big deal because of the closeness in the kinship with Aboriginal people. If somebody died at Wreck Bay the biggest church service was held — in the house where that dead person came from it was beautiful. Nobody seemed really sad, it was like one big family, all together, it was really good. Over the years a lot of that closeness has gone. The old people have gone and they are a totally different generation of people.

Because of a lot of settlements around the states there are a lot of people moving away from the missions to areas where they know nobody. If a death occurs within their family where they have moved to they have got nobody to go to that they could relate to.

Nobody can go too long with that bottled up inside them because they can go off the deep end. I always feel people could relate to somebody and just open up and talk, that's what I am used to. People just coming to me and saying "Can I talk about this, can I talk about that?" Now I am waiting for one particular person to come forward and she has only just found out that I have had a lot to do with bereavement and in her case she has got four children and they are in our Aboriginal home at the moment and she has moved from pillar to post.

She was driving behind her husband who was on a motor bike in front of her. He skidded and the bike went out from underneath him and she ran over him, she's never ever had anybody to talk to about it. I mean she's probably still seeing him lying there and although she has run over him with the car, all I want her to do is come and say please sit down with me and help me.

The only time I ever see her now is maybe if I go to the club here on occasion at night and she is there and is drunk. She would come up and say "I need to see you and I'll come up and see you tomorrow night, bye." She only says it to me when she is drunk and she realises it too. I waited for her to come and hoped that she would come but she still hasn't.

Now she has got to straighten her life out but she won't be able to do that until she gets it all off her mind. Again she is one of these girls that was taken away from her family and put in a foster home with non-Aboriginal people. There are problems with that in itself without this other problem that she has got.

She knows she can't cope with that and four children. Again I suppose it's like history repeating itself. She was brought up in a foster home and now her children are put there in a foster home. Where do you go?

I suppose deep down she is singing out for help as she was with a man that really flogged her and only wanted her and not her children. I don't know what is going to happen to her and her children. We have got her children that have been awarded custody to us by the courts. So in the

meantime we are hoping that she gets her act together within six months so that she can take her children back.

I have done everything that I could for her in that respect, but as I said, I don't see a lot of her. Maybe what I should do is chase her up and make her sit down and talk. She will let you catch her if she feels like it. It's situations like this which makes my work very frustrating.

I can understand a lot of family therapists being very frustrated at times, if they cannot get a pass to go where they want to go.

## LINK-UP

Link-up\* has been around for quite a while and I have been involved with it for years, I suppose from early setting up of it.

I was one of the lucky ones as I was never taken away and I could feel and sympathise with the ones that have been taken away because through my work I do a lot of dealings with it.

With Link-up when they have their meetings I go and sit in their circle. I told the group that I felt like a hypocrite sitting there because I was never taken away from my family. The reaction I got was that I cared enough about what they were going through. It makes me feel good to think they didn't see my being there as only a career.

They go through a lot of anguish. In one case they were sitting within their circle and one young guy stood up. He had tears in his eyes and he said that he found his mother but she died a month before he got to meet her.

It's really heart wrenching, you know, to look forward to finally meeting your family. I could relate to their experience that every face that goes past them, they look and think that they could be their mother, father or whoever.

I suppose that if you ever got a picture of that parent you try to get a face, you would like a face and you search the crowd for a face that you have pictured in your mind.

My own grandson has never seen his father and I asked my daughter why didn't she ever get a photo of his father but she thought that it wasn't very important. I told her that it was going to be important when her son gets older because he knows that he has got a Dad in Sydney but he has got no idea what he looks like. If he hasn't got a picture to look at I can see him searching faces looking for his father.

He'll probably wonder, do I look like Dad? Then you sort of look for somebody that might look like you and all they ask is that you put a face to the picture. They make a picture of you if they haven't got any photograph. That would go for non-Aboriginal people too. I've got a grandson who is okay so far. Somebody asked him the other weekend did he have a dad and he told them no he only had a pop. As he gets older he is going to ask where his dad is.

In my years of growing up on Wreck Bay we lived two doors from this couple. The mother was pregnant, they had a son and the mother would go to hospital and I used to wonder why she would never bring her children home, they

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\*Link-up is a mutual aid network for Aborigines who were separated from their families of origin by government officers.

were taken away from her as soon as they were born. All up, six children were taken from her.

I could understand the parents in the way they had big families. They would have a child, thinking "They won't take this one away from me" and every one she had they took again the same way as the others. There was thirteen children in the family and she never knew any of them. They had just been taken away from the mother.

That's sad, all the kids grew up and there was no closeness. The family unit was not there. They were all split up. The elder brother did want all his brothers and sisters to all come back to the house that his parents owned but I told him it probably would never happen.

That was his dream, to have all his family back together. He has got a brother living in Melbourne and the rest are scattered around here. One sister came to me when she found out she was pregnant and said, "Aunt, I am pregnant" and in the meantime there was an old aunt who told her she had to have an abortion. I was quite upset that this aunt would even consider saying this. I mean, she wasn't even close to her niece because this young girl was raised in the homes, in an institution.

She said, "Aunt, I am not having an abortion, I am having this baby because I want something to call my own." I could cry for that little girl and she told me that her mother and father didn't love her but I told her that they did love her.

You cannot blame them for what happened but if you need to blame somebody the so-called Aboriginal Protection Board is to blame. They were the ones who did it. She was totally different after that and realised that it wasn't her parents that were to blame because it came from me that I knew her parents and that they did want her. I watched her kids being taken away from her and that was really sad. Now she adores her little girl. She has got a beautiful little girl and I think that she has a totally different outlook on her life, thinking "Well, they did love me."

### ABORIGINAL HEALTH TEAM

Our Aboriginal Health team works well together. We are a liaison for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within government departments, hospitals, doctors, police, schools and nursing homes. Because a lot of the older people never had schooling, their self-esteem is very low.

You had only to get somebody to talk in a couple of big words and they lost them straight away. Because of their education! A lot of Aboriginal people never had a lot of education. Nowra was a very racist town. The Aboriginal people were all looked upon as alcoholics. In a sense, it's a learning experience for the young people, even though their parents may have had a racist attitude and growing up with which I believe stems from the family. You learn everything from within your home. The good things, the bad things. It's what you're taught when you're growing up. If your parents were racist it's going to be there always, it's inbred in the family.

So now over the years I can see that phasing out. Because today kids are finding out for themselves what the people are about. It's really something now to sit and see. That's

why I enjoy doing the Cultural Awareness Program, because you need to get to a lot of these people still with this attitude.

Years ago the townspeople weren't interested in anything about the Aboriginal people, whereas today, because I suppose we have got a lot of people within different Aboriginal departments, they are willing to learn more, which is a whole new turn around.

### CULTURAL AWARENESS PROGRAM

I do a cultural awareness program with the Shoalhaven District Hospital, with the Mental Health Unit. I go into schools and teach the children. I have done a workshop with our family therapist in Nowra. I also intend to do one at the police station and Community Health asked me to do a workshop with them.

We make people aware of what our culture is about. There are a lot of people who've grown up in other towns that never had to do with Aboriginal people. They read and see things on television. What publicity is highlighted to do with Aboriginal people, it is all bad. They only show the bad ones, it's never the good ones that they show.

If there is a riot around Redfern\* it is always highlighted. Well, I mean, people who have never ever met an Aboriginal person automatically think "gee they're bad". So I suppose there is a big thing there. To make people aware that we are not all bad.

### ABORIGINAL WOMEN

Aboriginal women today, if you're talking about the younger generation, to me they are very forward, upfront and are totally different from me. I learnt the old way and still carry a lot of the old values. Today the younger people do what they like, have got a totally different outlook on life. They have more self esteem. The only problem is there is still too many drugs and things are available at their fingertips, which is worrying. I'd worry for the young. Also I find the younger generation cannot cope with crisis. I suppose they are a lot more liberated. I mean those days of where the women stayed home and did what the husband told them are gone.

Today it is like the women race the men out the door. Or it could be a whole new turnaround where the woman is the boss — "You stay there, mind the kids, and I am going out" and the men do it. I mean, that's a bit hard to take but it's happening. I suppose they are really standing up for their rights and they are winning. So I suppose in years to come I like to think they are going to be equal, but at the rate I see a lot of women go, they are winning over the men. As far as saying "I am the boss" (as the saying used to go), who wears the pants in the house, half the time you have to point at the women.

So I can see that women stand up more for their rights, more than they used to in the old days. In the old days you were expected to sit in the background.

The husband was the breadwinner and he was the boss. I don't know if it is changing maybe for the better. I'd like

\*Redfern is a mixed-use inner city area of Sydney with a high concentration of Aboriginal people.

to see people grow together and be there for each other in a relationship more so than one being the boss; I mean compromise a lot better.

I really don't know where it's heading or where it's going to end up. With me, I've always said, "I'll give you a run for your money." I've always stood toe to toe with my husband from the word go. We get on terrific. I mean we've been married for 29 years. He is not Aboriginal but we respect each other. I suppose he respected me because he knew I'd always give him a run for his money. I don't know how I'd have got on in a big disagreement, he's quite bigger than me, but he always thought maybe I would give him a run for his money because he's never ever tried it. I always firmly believe that I would give him a run for his money and that's why we get on fantastic.

Actually I was stuck on Wreck Bay as a teenager and never ever got off Wreck Bay and then his mates used to come down for the weekends. Actually he knew my eldest brother before he knew me, they were great mates and he just

wandered down there one day and we clicked and that's where he's been caught ever since. In fact he's got into the community at Wreck Bay.

We got married there and it was quite comical in those days actually because we still had the manager and it was my wedding night; it was comical because the Navy Padre that married us asked my husband had he been christened before and he said, "no". My husband had to be christened in the morning and we were married in the afternoon.

That night because he was white, a stranger, he was expected to sleep outside the gate of the mission. The manager was sitting there at my wedding so I think he turned a blind eye on our wedding night. On our wedding night, from all the excitement my new husband had an asthma attack. It's the first time I'd ever seen anybody take an asthma attack and I looked at him and thought he was going to up and die before we could get a go on here. But it turned out okay, we were like gypsies for a while roaming around but once the kids started coming along we settled down.

## Letters

### ABORIGINES

Thank you for bringing to our attention the plight of the Aboriginal community as expressed in your recent Editorial (June 1991).

It has taken me until now to get some understanding of my feelings at the Family Therapy Conference in January when I sat, with several hundred others, to listen to two Aboriginal speakers tell of their peoples' pain and handicaps and to enquire of us what we have to offer.

I felt distressed. Initially I thought I was distressed at the apparent lack of support and contact between us as hosts and our guests, the speakers. I felt they were extraordinarily brave to stand alone in that modern spacious auditorium to speak to an audience of sophisticated white 'experts'. I felt upset at the contrast between their presentations as 'outsiders' and previous presentations from New Zealand where Maori and Pakeha were respected partners and

included as 'us'. I hoped someone would relieve my tension; I looked for a response from us ("not me, please not me").

Later I recognised I felt guilt yet did not know what to do. Later I recognised my avoidance, my sense of powerlessness, my anger at my and others' failure to respond.

I still don't know how to respond. As your Editorial says, perhaps the Aboriginal needs are more basic, our expertise is not yet appropriate. Meanwhile should we be respectfully learning about their systems and their systems' interactions with ours? Perhaps we have to ask questions and have questions asked of us, rather than passively listen, trying not to be patronising, to cries in the night.

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