owe consumers nothing. However, as I mentioned, we can try and do *'mad culture'* better. Humility, real listening, relationships as core, using story, respecting experience (for example, see http://www.care2.com/causes/trauma-has-genetic-impact-for-native-americans.html for parallel issues amongst First Nation US peoples).

In reflection, the main thing I learnt from the workshops was about being brave, humbly, to personally work towards reconciliation. I think it was important that the workshops moved participants towards active relationships with Wurundjeri people in Melbourne. Respecting culture, sitting in Fitzroy Park or Collingwood, resisting whacking people on to committees as 'tokens' and being brave about this, recognising that Wurundjeri people probably don't have a concept equivalent to *'consumer'* and working our way around this within our own sensitivities and misunderstandings.

I am so clear now that including Wurundjeri in the work we do in madness politics will be challenging and we will have to be prepared to be hurt and silenced and humble if we sincerely want something meaningful to happen. I realised that we would need to find some way to support consumers who want to relate with sincerity with Wurundjeri people. This is partly because so many people labelled/diagnosed with 'mental illness'/consumers/mad people (they are not actually the same!) are shame-ridden and childhood-deprived and abused and don't handle rejection, anger, verbal re-traumatisation as well as other, less damaged, white people. Yes, we do have to handle it and be tough and be strong and be prepared for the effects of colonisation, but for us this will only come *when we have fixed our ways of relating together inside the mad community.*

I learnt so much; I went home and read the *Looking Forward* report from cover to cover. It is great; I admire the collaborative work. I want other mad people to read it and learn from it. I was aware that there was a dynamic in the first workshop where consumer workers, particularly, wanted to *'hang on'* to their 'new' work status despite attempts by Michael and Margaret to dissuade them. They still felt a need to do *'on and to'* Wurundjeri people. This was disappointing but was perhaps because getting back into the workforce, in white culture, marks the transition from *'boy to man'* and *'girl to woman'* - something many mad people struggle to ever achieve.

The challenge for us all is to understand what happens when different forms of oppression interact and how we can arise with a shared humanity after the sometimes uncomfortable (and necessarily uncomfortable) challenges in understanding.

Working together makes us stronger: Mindful practices in mental health and drug and alcohol service provision to better support Nyoongar families

Michael Wright
& Margaret O'Connell

On the 11th December 2014, Nyoongar Elders in the southeast metropolitan corridor of Perth, Western Australia, celebrated the end of a productive year at a Christmas Luncheon at the Canning River Eco Education Centre in Wilson Park with representatives from twelve service providers from the mental health and drug and alcohol sectors, as part of the *Looking Forward Aboriginal Mental Health Project.* The Project's key objective is to change the way services are delivered to Nyoongar families in the southeast suburbs of Perth. Nyoongar peoples are the traditional owners of the southwest of Western Australia.

Service providers participating in the Project have found this to be the most exciting, innovative and energising experience that they've seen for a long time. The approach used in the Project is unique; built on a cultural foundation, working directly with a group of almost twenty Nyoongar Elders, it recognises and values the extraordinary in the ordinary, through the connective power of relationships[i].

Understanding the impact of the dominant worldview driven by historical colonialist practices and how this informs policy and practice has been the starting point for bringing services together with the Elders. Services have eagerly taken up the invitation by the Elders to acknowledge a Nyoongar worldview in order to move forward to create a better future, together.

Building relationships is central in this process of working together as laid out in the Project's handbook, *Open Hearts, Open Hands: A spiritual journey of change*[ii]. It nurtures and supports service staff through the meandering journey of conversations and stories that shape and deepen their relationships with the Elders and ultimately with the broader Nyoongar community. As services open up in this space, they realise that it is not a didactic and predictable process; in fact, it is the opposite: an experiential and involving process that occurs from the inside out. It is not about learning new skills, but more about how to sit and be still with oneself so as to realise and then expand one's own capacities. Like a river where on the surface there seems little movement, underneath the currents flow deeply; this is the change we are witnessing. Reconnecting with these aspects of oneself has seen service providers develop greater confidence and competence to approach their work with renewed insight and purpose, using their skills to greater effect, for the benefit of Nyoongar clients and their families. The ripple effect is that Nyoongar people begin to trust services where there was great distrust previously.

"See us as your cultural carpenters; we'll help shape you for this work. By the end, you won't know yourselves!" Nyoongar Elder, Aunty Margaret Culbong said in her reflections to the service providers at the luncheon. Aunty Margaret trained as a nurse and has spent her career working with Aboriginal people across the state and nationally.

A key outcome of the Project is the creation of an engagement framework consisting of seven preparatory conditions for working together, titled *"Dabakarn Koorliny Wangkiny: steady walking and talking"*, founded on a Nyoongar worldview, held in the authoritative hands of the Elders. It invites services to be intrinsically *motivated*, to declare their *commitment* to engaging fully and grow this commitment as they deepen their engagement over time. They are invited to *be present* and open to learning in a different way; again, the Elders ask this of them. *To be teachable* is to stay open to all possibilities that then arise. As the journey progresses and the services face the meanderings, the struggles and the questions, they are asked to *stay connected*, as it is in the experience itself that realisations unfold and crystallise. They are reminded not to give in to the anxiety that first occurs, nor the discomfort in becoming vulnerable, in effect to reveal more of themselves. As their confidence grows, staff *continuously weave* this new experience into their existing knowledge and skills, expanding into greater versions of themselves. Service staff do this by valuing more their heartfelt knowing rather than relying solely on their rational thinking in most cases. These are the conditions required to do work of this nature; to acknowledge a Nyoongar way of being and to work together incorporating different worldviews and valuing diversity and its creative possibilities.

In his reflections at the luncheon, Francis Lynch, Chief Executive of Ruah Community Services said, *"this is not a journey that takes you from A to B; it's a meandering experience."* Services are taken on this journey by the Elders and taken to places where things are not quite what they seem. This involves a good deal of unlearning as much as integrating new learning. *"This Project challenges the silos organisations often work in and promotes a collective way of working"*, Warwick Smith, director of youth mental health services, said at the luncheon. This process, uniquely defined through a Nyoongar worldview lens, dismantles this silo-ed approach in favour of a collective vision to move forward together, all the while supporting change across the system itself. *"This is paradigm-shifting work"*, stated Fiona Stanley, patron of Telethon Kids Institute and staunch advocate of the Project.

There are no excuses now to not do this work. It is the right thing to do.

The contributions included in this issue are as follows:

In *My Story: Growing up, Aunty Dorothy* Getta (Aunty Dot lives in the Kwinana area of Perth WA) tells of her life growing up in Quarry Reserve near Doodlakine WA. She follows that story with another one, *My Story: On holiday*, in which she tells of a time she went on a holiday to the coast with her Nan. Aunty Dot wrote these stories while studying at TAFE. In a third piece, *Dorothy Getta and Palmerston*, as she is currently part of the Elders Group on the Looking Forward Project, she describes her work with a local service that supports Nyoongar people to recover from drug and alcohol misuse and reconnect with their families and communities.

In *Reflections*, Aunty Theresa Walley reflects on her time spent with Aboriginal residential clients in a drug and alcohol support service. She loves to yarn with them and with service staff about Mother Nature and the birds and how connecting to land helps us to heal and grow stronger. Her artwork - images taken from an embroidered tablecloth which is a family heirloom – is included in the article.

A news item taken from *Drugspeak* (publ. WANADA and DAO) and with a poem by Helen McDonnell, *Palmerston listening to the wisdom of Elders*, was originally published in August 2014; it illustrates the impact the Elders have on services when they work at developing meaningful relationships. Helen's poems really underscore the profundity of their experiences.

Michael Wright and Ted Wilkes, in *Talking up culture: Nyoongar marmun wangkiny nidja Nyoongar boodja*, share their views on what it means to be *Nyoongar marmun* and yarn about the ways in which they think Australia might move forward with Aboriginal peoples' wisdom and connection to the Country (*boodja*) as a guide.

Aunty Joanna Corbett's untitled poem follows, reflecting on her many family violence experiences; she leaves a strong and positive message: *family remind you who you are and that you are well loved; you must then love and respect yourself.* Aunty Joanna works with a number of services on the *Looking Forward Project* as part of the Elders Group. Her skills and experience in teaching and youth work have been invaluable to the work she does with service staff.

The next contribution *'Miscellaneous Matters': Review of the WA Mental Health Act* (1996-2014), comes from Margaret Culbong; a community forum held in November 2011 enabled Aunty Margaret to better understand community feelings about, and reactions to, the lack of response on the part of mental health service providers to the number of suicides experienced by local Aboriginal families in the area. Aunty Margaret also met with the Commissioner for Mental Health to present the community's concerns in an effort to find a way forward. At the same time, a review of the 1996 Mental Health Act WA was underway. This article tracks her experience of the review process and the formation of the MHA 2014.

Kailie Athene Nestoridis (Culbong) poem, *Easy, easy I have to say...*, is the observing eyes of a child, spotting birds and snakes and surveying the landscape. There is such spirit and playfulness in this short piece; a talent in the making.

The following several articles and poems vividly describe the experiences of Elders and mental health workers participating variously in the *Looking Forward* project; starting with *Following my heart...*by Tanya Jones, who captures her reflections having worked on the project for over four years – this is her story of learning and growth... and Adrian Munro follows this up with *Transformational cultural learning at Richmond Wellbeing*, a reflective piece, recounting his experiences of working with Elders and explaining how this has transformed his ways of life and of working. The significance of the Elders in his transformation is profound.

In her poem, *We're not strangers anymore*, Brooke Johns captures the journey of understanding ways to work with Nyoongar Elders through yarning and sharing stories, whilst Bianca McKinney, Chelsea McKinney, Charlie Kickett, Helen Kickett, the, the WAAMH team, in collaboration with the Elders, have focused on the benefits and challenges of being involved in the project; their article, *Hand in hand - cultural learning for better mental health: our journey in the Looking Forward Project*, offers an evaluation including the key learnings integral to the success of the Looking Forward Project. It will enable WAAMH to identify and incorporate meaningful changes in its policy and practice, with the aim of improving Aboriginal peoples' experiences of WAAMH and mental health services state-wide.

Wei Soong, Warwick Smith, Bronagh McCann, Amanda Brooker, Cara Cleary, Ilona Law, Russell Oliver, Kyla Penfold, Wayne Thomas and Ashleigh Lin then share their reflections in *A newcomer to an old country: reflections of a youth mental health service participating in the Looking Forward Project*. For the past year, *Youth Axis*, a newly formed youth mental health service, has participated in the *Looking Forward* Project and the following article offers a reflection by the team about their participation. They held a team meeting to discuss their experience which was recorded and transcribed and a word cloud was created from the transcription using *Wordle*™. Several themes emerged from this reflective meeting, which are addressed here. There has been significant building of relationships with and input from the Noongar Elders about service development and cultural consultation for individual clinicians, especially about the reality of the experiences of Noongar people; the lack of clarity around expectations with both the service and the Elders was a significant challenge and talking further about expectations and working more systemically are potential solutions to meeting these challenges to together progressing this journey.

Similarly, in *Working Together: Growing ideas into practice*, Sheryl Carmody and Mick Gearney from MercyCare reflect on two aspects of their work with Elders – firstly, at the governance level of their service and at a more practical level in their engagements with the Elders and their families. This short piece shows how services can make decisions that have an immediate practical impact as well as planning for the longer term. Antonia Hendrick, Michael Wright, Margaret O'Connell follow this with an article in which Social Work staff offer their experiences of sharing stories with Nyoongar Elders, reflecting on developments emerging from their collaboration. They are together journeying a new story – one of relationships, created in new spaces towards new ways of knowing, doing and being, aptly titled: *Working with Nyoongar Elders to decolonise the Social Work curriculum*

WANADA was invited to participate in the Looking Forward project alongside three member organisations from the AOD sector. It was a unique and exciting opportunity to work with Nyoongar Elders and inform systems-level change, with the potential to take their learning and apply it for the benefit of the wider sector and service consumers across the state. They had no idea how challenged they would be by the project! In *It takes time...*Jane Harwood candidly highlights these challenges.

From *Drugspeak* (WANADA and DAO) comes another contribution, *Alcohol and other drug services embrace Looking Forward with Aboriginal Elders*, a news item originally published in December 2013, the beginning of the project's *'Working Together'* phase. The article outlines St John of God Health Care's Drug and Alcohol Withdrawal Network, Palmerston Association, Mission Australia and the WA Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies' (WANADA) participation in the Project, embracing the opportunity to learn from Nyoongar Elders.

In *Yarning and stories: Weaving our learning through our hearts and minds*, Rosemary Walley and Margaret O'Connell, a Nyoongar and a Nyidiyang woman together explore how yarning and stories have helped us to understand the many different ways we can learn and develop, so that our hearts, minds and bodies stay connected throughout our experiences. Through the metaphor of weaving and bringing the threads together, we ask: *What is it about yarning that creates this different way of being and what can non-Aboriginal peoples learn from this in order to work effectively alongside their Aboriginal counterparts?*

Finally, a news item, published by the National Drug Research Institute (Curtin University), *Dabakarn Koorliny Wangkiny Family and Community Day* (Mental Health Week 2014)describes the family and community day set-up

Two reflective contributions by academics loosely connected with the *Looking Forward* project close this fascinating set of contributions off; in *A reflection on conducting research*

Nyoongar Elder Charlie Kickett and Sheila McHale, CEO of Palmerston Association attended the Looking Forward Project Christmas Luncheon held at the Canning Eco Education Centre, Wilson Park, 10th December 2014. They have been working together along with Palmerston staff and other local Elders for the past 18 months.

Nyoongar Elder Mort Hansen shares his views with Dr Peter Morton, Acting Clinical Director of Armadale Mental Health Services at the Project's Christmas luncheon held at the Canning Eco Education Centre, Wilson Park, 10th December 2014. Behind them: Leanne Mirabella, Project Coordinator of the Palmerston Outcare and DAWN Capacity Building Project talking with Elder Irene McNamara. Photos by Margaret O'Connell

with Aboriginal mothers in prison, Mandy Wilson describes a project which involved interviewing Aboriginal mothers incarcerated across WA and NSW. The study aimed to better understand the health, treatment and other needs of incarcerated Aboriginal mothers in those states. Finally, Len Collard and Dave Palmer, in *Working together, Ngulla wangkiny, ni, katitjin; ngulla koorliny, kura, yeye, boorda; warniny koorlangka kwopa koorbal: A 'yarn' about going along together to look after young people's health*, reflect on some of the insights they've have gained over the past thirty years in how to respond to the challenges facing Nyungar families. They *wangkiny* or *'yarn'* about their own relationship and what they've have learned about working together. Through this 'yarn' Len and Dave seek to confirm what many *Nyungar* have been saying for years: that mental health practitioners, governments and others can gain enormously from old knowledge and *Nyungar* practice. Their piece is a great example of the connective power of *'wangkiny'* or talking and is the final word on the working together experiences captured through the *Looking Forward* project and compiled in this issue of the *New Community*, reminding us once again of the power of culture to connect us, heal us and *'grow us up'*.

The four additional articles closing this issue out address specific areas and issues within the mental health field, starting with Elinor Assoulin's reflective piece on Art Psychotherapy provided to an Aboriginal man, survivor from the Stolen Generation(s) and what social work, Indigenous and therapeutic theories have contributed to her understanding of all three dimensions.

Mish Colla then offers a searching reflection on mental health in an individualistic, market-oriented societal and meanwhile global context, in a way taking up a theme initially raised in our introductory few paragraphs to this editorial collection of statements. Mish argues for an *acceptance and commitment therapy* to overcome the generalised attitude of avoidance, a suggestion which certainly is in harmony with the thoughts of the Nyoongar contributors to this issue.

Jenny Martin than diagnoses a 'crisis of care' in the acute mental health services in Victoria; she reveals what feels and sounds like quite medieval and outdated attitudes and practices in what can hardly be called 'care' for acute patients and Lester Thompson links mental health with poverty and with the – meanwhile several decades of – withdrawal from the welfare state in Australia; a rather sad but also outrageous story when reflected against a background of growing inequality in this country and globally.

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i Wright, M., Culbong, M, O'Connell, M., Jones, T. & Ford, D. (2013) 'Weaving the narratives of relationship into community-based participatory research' *New Community*, 11(3) pp. 8-14 http://community.borderlands.org.au/index.php/issue-43/100-weaving-narratives

ii Wright, M., O'Connell, M. & Jones, T. (2013) Open Hearts, *Open Hands: A spiritual journey of change*, Handbook produced for service providers participating in the Looking Forward Project http://aboriginal.telethonkids.org.au/media/1087368/OH-OH_Handbook_Edn2_FULL.pdf