



Expanding Cultures

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THE WESTERN SUBURBS INDIGENOUS GATHERING PLACE: CULTURAL PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS

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Abstract

Colleen Marion led the team that established the Western Suburbs Indigenous Gathering Place in 2002. The Association aims to bring Indigenous people together to celebrate the community's culture and identity, enhance self determination and well being and give western suburbs Indigenous Australians a sense of belonging and ownership. Colleen's presentation will describe the Gathering Place's initiatives and partnerships, with local councils, schools, police and community and service organisations, in which Indigenous arts and culture have contributed to successful outcomes. Colleen will recommend ways that councils can engage with Indigenous communities in the process of Reconciliation.

Thanks for inviting me today to speak. I know there are many people in the audience here that I know very well. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners and pay my respects to the past and present elders.

Today, my presentation is about local government and how the Western Suburbs Indigenous Gathering Place works with the seven local councils in our area. I am the founder of the Western Suburbs Indigenous Gathering Place, an aboriginal organisation in Maribyrnong, in the western suburbs of Melbourne. My position is now CEO, rather than Director.

The Gathering Place was officially launched by the Hon. Gavin Jennings, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on 22 October 2003. The western suburbs NAIDOC committee was founded with representatives from councils and Victoria Police. Since then we have achieved huge success in strengthening the relationships and sustaining the commitment to reconciliation. NAIDOC, for anyone who doesn't know, is National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee.

The Gathering Place has a vision statement... it's about bringing indigenous people in, and enhancing aboriginal people's health and well-being.

All the councils in our local area raise the flags on the Monday of NAIDOC Week. On the flag the colours represent: black for people, yellow for sun, red for earth.

We were recently involved with an official flag raising at Melton Shire Council, the first time Melton had hosted such an event. At Hobson's Bay City Council we had exchange of flags with Victoria Police. I gave them the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and they responded with the police flag. One of the main people involved was Inspector Mick Millan, who retired recently. Mick was one of the force in our community in the western suburbs who really worked towards reconciliation, breaking down the barriers with Victoria Police.

In June, Hobsons Bay City Council hosted our Reconciliation dinner at the Williamstown Town Hall. I made a particular request of councils this year because it was so significant, the 40th anniversary of the referendum and 50 years of NAIDOC. I asked the councils to make a statement to our people in the west.

We work very closely with all seven councils in the western suburbs, Melbourne, Maribyrnong, Brimbank, Melton and Wyndham, who all have a reconciliation policy. I wanted them to strengthen their policies around employment and training and their commitment towards indigenous people in the West. All councils work cooperatively with the Gathering Place; developing policies and activities such as Reconciliation Week, NAIDOC Week and contributing financially to our organisation.

Our program such as the Western Regions Arts and Culture events have major sponsors: Delphin Lendlease, Macquarie Bank Foundation, Aluma Ltd, Melbourne Western suburbs committee, Bendigo Bank, along with financial and in kind support from Moonee Valley City Council. The Western Region's Indigenous Art Exhibition began in 2003 as part of the Moonee Valley City Council's commitment to reconciliation. It takes place in the heritage listed Walter Burley Griffith Incinerator complex, managed by committee which is a partnership between Moonee Valley Council, the local traders' association and the Western Region NAIDOC committee.

A highlight of the event is the Premier's Western Region art prize awarded to the work that best illustrates the show's theme. There is also a general award and an award for schools. This year nineteen schools contributed artwork. The awards to indigenous inmates are made at the prisons during NAIDOC week with celebrations at a special community event involving notable members of the community. The aim is for the prisoners at Port Phillip and Phyllis Frost prisons and just recently the new remand centre, to continue their art and develop their artistic skills amongst a wider community. One artwork was created by an elder and won the Premier's Art Award last year. It went on to our billboards all over the western suburbs.

The Incinerator was also the venue for our Cultural Day. It showcased indigenous art and culture from the region, a free day for the community, including indigenous dancers, free bush food, rainmaking, story-telling and workshops. During Reconciliation Week, we visited 19 schools in the western suburbs with a story-teller and an artist. What wonderful work they put in.

During NAIDOC week, as well as celebrating the 40th years since the referendum and NAIDOC week, we also recognised William Cooper. William Cooper was one of the elders who fought for the rights of aboriginal people in the 1930s. One of the events that remembers William Cooper is the William Cooper Cup, where we play Victoria Police in a game of footy.

On Children's Day 300 school children come together and are hosted by Maribyrnong City Council.

Indigenous art and culture can showcase the talents and expertise of aboriginal people, bringing out their creativity and allowing them to express their stories of past experience. Working in partnerships with our local government, corporates, police, schools, prisons and wider community has enhanced the opportunities for local activities and special events.

To sustain these relationships, we have regular meetings with councillors and Victoria Police. We need to be open minded about reconciliation but also listen to each other. We are grateful to our sponsors and all of the local councils we work with.

Thank you.

Colleen's background includes work in various State and Commonwealth departments including several years as a youth worker at Baltara Detention Centre. Her ongoing passion for her people is exceptional and is the force behind the success of The Gathering Place. Her determination to see improved outcomes for the Indigenous Community, particularly the young people, has been the catalyst for significant improvements, all of which can be attributed to her involvement. Colleen's work with and achievements in the Victorian Aboriginal Community have recently been acknowledged by Save the Children Victoria's White Flame Award (2005) and NAIDOC Victorian Recognition Award (2006). www.gatheringplace.com.au