

Island oath

By Penny Jones through Jawun

On Bennelong's traditional homeland, Goat Island, in the middle of Sydney Harbour, a woman is telling a group of eighty people how she spent her childhood watching her father bash her mother, only to find herself in one violent relationship after another. 'My first partner that I had children to, he was very violent, and a heroin user. Then my second husband was even more brutal, to the point where I have a lot of scars, both physically and mentally,' says Kimi Halapio, from anti-violence organization Enough is Enough. 'But I came out the other side and now I want to educate other young women and men about positive relationships using my life experiences.'

Then a young man steps to the front of the room and admits that he perpetrated violence for years against his female partner – until he ended up in prison and the couple's children were taken away. He is now out of prison, seeking counseling and help from a local community organisation, and starting to work things out with his partner, but they have not yet regained custody of their children.

'Violence against women is terrible. I look back at what I did to my family and it scares me and makes me sick. There is help out there for us if we're willing to change. If I can make those changes, there's hope for everyone. We can make those changes if we want to.'

All the people on Goat Island, men and women, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous, men's organisations, women's organisations, government officials, citizens and police, are gathered together to honour Family Violence Day, an initiative of the Babana Aboriginal Men's Group based in Redfern.

Babana Chairperson, Mark Spinks, explains, 'Family Violence Day came about through listening to the men, and some of our senior men in particular, that had issues with their younger siblings, their grandchildren. Those that had substance abuse issues were using violence in the home against other family members. It's not just men bashing their wives, it's right across the board.'

Babana receives no government funding for its activities to address family violence. It sought sponsorship and used funds it had earned through placing Aboriginal people in jobs, to bring everyone together for its second Family Violence Day event. 'The money we get from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for putting people into jobs enables us to keep Babana's doors open and put on events like this,' stresses Spinks.

The purpose of the Family Violence Day event is to identify service gaps, work out what needs to be done and write up findings in a report to be shared with Federal and State Ministers. Spinks stresses that effective action against family

violence can not only protect vulnerable people, but also save money for governments, which have to pay for hospital beds, jail cells and juvenile justice facilities.

The focus of the day is a series of workshops. One workshop discusses issues affecting people from the Stolen Generations, particularly the 400 to 600 Aboriginal men who were forcibly removed from their families as children and placed in the Kinchela Boys Home in Kempsey, one of numerous such institutions across the country. Facilitator Ray Minniecon, Babana's Deputy Chairperson, has been working with the Kinchela men for 12 years.

Minniecon explains that even though the home closed in 1970, and many of the Kinchela men are now elderly, they still experience major life difficulties. 'The men who went through this home are dealing with the traumas of being forcibly removed from their families and being abused physically, mentally, sexually. Many of the men did not have names in this place, they had numbers. We're dealing with that trauma – and all the issues of grieving and loss that go with it.'

Lacking the experience of growing up in a family, most of the Kinchela men continue to struggle to connect with their own families and communities. Many suffer depression and difficulties with anger management, and many have been to jail or lived on the streets. Minniecon states, 'many of these men have only been treated violently in these homes, and that's all they knew. So how do you expect them to grow into a family? It's one of the most fundamental institutions in any culture, family, and they've been forcibly removed from that.'

As well as the Kinchela men themselves, the forced removal policies have already traumatised the parents who lost their children and the siblings who lost their brothers and sisters. A major challenge is stopping the damage to future generations. One way to do this is by tackling family violence.

At the workshops on Goat Island, the participants present their ideas on how this can be done. They stress the need to change community attitudes, so that reporting domestic violence to police is seen not as 'dobbing' but as 'looking out for the little fella'. They also agree that more services need to be available for men, particularly mentoring to stop perpetrators of family violence from reoffending. This can be achieved, they argue, by providing funding to organisations such as Babana Aboriginal Men's Group.

In the words of Kimi Halapio, who overcame years as a victim of violence to become an anti-violence educator, 'although keeping women and children safe is a priority, we do need to have programs for men – and men's organisations are few and far between. Even if a man leaves his family, if he has a problem with domestic violence, he's just going to create more victims. So it's really important that we educate men and assist them to change their behavior. Victims and perpetrators also need to speak out, like we did today, to tell the young ones in schools that violence is not ok, and there's got to be a better way to have a relationship.'

At the end of the day, everyone walks out to a grassy hill overlooking the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and makes a pledge. 'I swear never to commit, excuse or remain silent about violence against women. This is my oath.'

For organizer Mark Spinks, this oath alone is an achievement. 'If we change one person's behavior out of this, it's been a success. Because all it's taken is a bit of sweat, and roll your sleeves up, and let's do it.'