



HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

Talking Family Healing East Kimberley Gathering Report



The Healing Foundation, in partnership with the Gawooleng Yawoodeng Aboriginal Corporation, hosted a family healing gathering *Woorrb Yarrenkoo Ninggooneng Ngoodengig Woonjoo-gerring* on Mirriuwung Gajerrong country in Kununurra from 24 to 26 November 2014.

The gathering focused on family and community healing and the beginnings of a longer term healing strategy for the East Kimberley region.

Bringing together more than 100 community members and agency representatives from the East Kimberley communities of Kununurra, Wyndham, Kalumburu, Warmun, Halls Creek, Fitzroy, Derby and Broome participants shared their learnings and experience about family and community healing.

The gathering was designed to:

1. Facilitate community members increasing their knowledge and understanding about the impacts of violence and contribute to locally driven solutions
2. Establish a supportive culture and development of strong men's and strong women's groups
3. Provide service providers with an opportunity to work and engage with the community to ensure culturally safe and supportive structures are enabled to take forward key solutions

Community healing experts from the Kimberley and around Australia held workshops and yarning circles about family violence, child abuse and neglect, intergenerational trauma, grief, loss and suicide. These sessions facilitated knowledge sharing across communities, assisted communities to develop local solutions, celebrated culture and assisted in the development of a plan for change.

Background

Communities in the Kimberley region experience high rates of trauma which plays out in pain based behaviours including family and community violence. A number of strategies are being implemented by organisations and communities to address trauma but many struggle to deal with the demand for crisis response making preventative work and a long term healing process unachievable.

In 2012 the Gawooleng Yawoodeng Aboriginal Corporation, a women's crisis organisation based in Kununurra, along with non-government and government agencies, recognised the need to bring people together to facilitate a gathering in the Kimberley region with a specific focus on prevention and healing the impacts of violence including domestic and family violence, community violence, lateral violence.

An extensive community consultation process identified community issues and areas of focus for the gathering including intergenerational trauma, the impacts of violence on children, working with men, working with women and creating trauma informed care and practice.

A reference committee facilitated through three local community agencies Gawooleng Yawoodeng Aboriginal Corporation (GYAC), Waringarri Aboriginal Corporation (WAC) and Mirriuwung Gajerrong Corporation (MGC) with representatives from government and non-government agencies engaged with community members and organisations across the East Kimberley to support participation in the event. The Gawooleng Yawoodeng women have been leaders in advocating for and supporting healing for their communities over many years. Their dedication and commitment to driving real change for their families and communities should be recognised as a central force to the success of this family healing gathering.

Demographics

The East Kimberley region is an area of approximately 121,000 square kilometres extending from Kununurra, northward to Wyndham and Kulumburu, and south west to Halls Creek and Balgo. The area includes up to 50 surrounding communities of varying sizes.

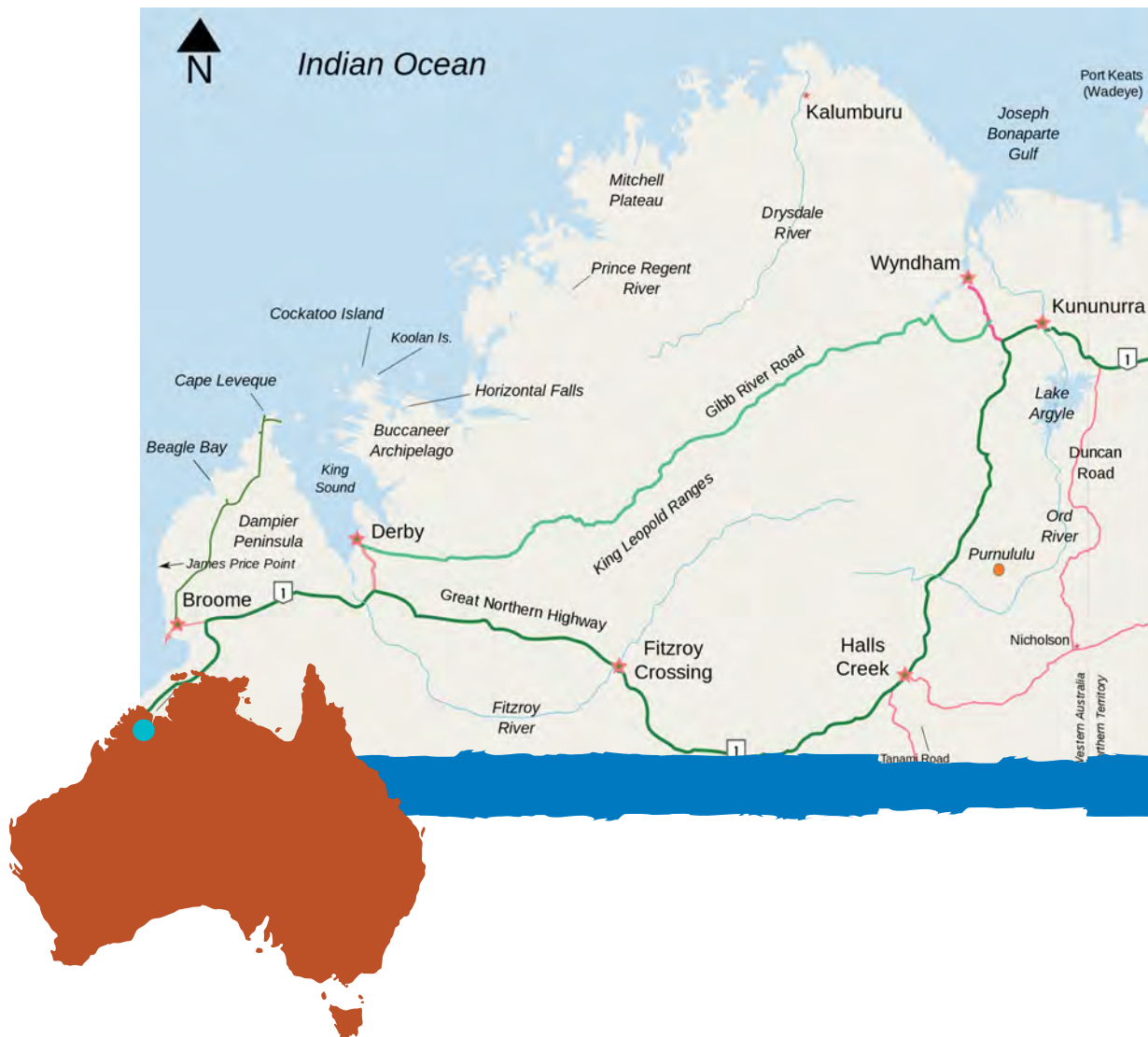
The communities and towns in the region are home to a population of approximately 12,000 people, which more than doubles during the peak tourist season. Kununurra is the largest town with just over 7,500 residents.

The Wyndham-East Kimberley and Halls Creek Shires make up 36% of the greater Kimberley region population, while Aboriginal people make up 45% of the East Kimberley region population.

The Mirrawong and Gajerrong peoples are the traditional owner language group for the Kununurra area however there are approximately 15 different language groups in the greater West and East Kimberley region.

The dominant industries in the East Kimberley region are cattle, tourism, the arts, mining and agriculture, while government and non-government community support services are also significant contributors to the local economy.

Aboriginal people have made large contributions to the cattle industry, mining, tourism and the arts in particular.



Talking Family Healing Gathering

The East Kimberley Talking Family Healing Gathering was held to coincide with White Ribbon Day 2014. The Gathering began with a White Ribbon Day march through Kununurra, demonstrating the community's commitment to healing.

Facilitated by Adele Cox and Grant Sarra, and incorporating ceremony of traditional welcomes, dance, song and music, the Gathering was a culturally safe environment for participants.

The Gathering participants were supported to:

- understand their shared history and make sense of their experiences in the context of colonisation and past government policies
- understand and explore key issues such as violence, suicide, spiritual health in a supported environment and engage with opportunities to heal and create change
- take ownership of their story and develop a plan for healing in the East Kimberley allowing people to move towards a more positive future with confidence and purpose
- strengthen and build upon community networks, relationships and knowledge systems that can lead and support a healing movement in the East Kimberley.

Disharmony and imbalance

Men and women participated in separate workshops, in accordance with cultural protocols, about the causes of disharmony and imbalance in the lives of communities, families and individuals and what may restore harmony and balance.

This commentary summarises the key themes as articulated by Gathering participants.

Family violence

Violence in family relationships is a significant community issue. A presentation from the Domestic and Family Violence Unit, WA Office of Child Protection, outlined the significant growth in the response by police to issues of family violence within the Kimberley region. Participants recognised the complex issues that this raised including the lack of culturally sound responses to violence and a lack of understanding of the impacts of colonisation as a cause of violence.

Vicky Hovane provided the gathering with key material outlining how domestic violence began with colonisation:

- women and children sexualised
- men were brutalised

Vicki discussed how when we are caught up in violence it's hard to see how to create boundaries and people become lost in family and domestic violence and cannot see themselves nor keep themselves whole.

Community members talked about the important roles of women and men in their culture and how violence was destroying this. Family feuding, physical and emotional violence was often being caused by overcrowding and the impact of societal and financial pressures.

Intergenerational trauma

Richard Frankland shared key thoughts about intergenerational trauma focusing on how people were becoming so overloaded with issues they were creating empires. The cultural loads that were weighing people down were creating distress and disharmony in relationships and often people are not aware of how much they were carrying.

Community members recognised the trauma and grief they and their families experienced as a result of colonisation, racism, disadvantage and grief and loss.

Our men

There are significant concerns for the men of the East Kimberley region with limited to no support systems or services and no appropriate place for men to gather and support each other, run cultural and therapeutic activities and seek support from the relevant services.

Men find it difficult to admit or recognise they have a problem and when they do seek help there is limited support available - no men's groups and limited culturally appropriate support for mental health or social and emotional wellbeing issues. This lack of support for men leads to greater pressure on women.

Contributing to these issues is a lack of solid family units and too much family feuding, leading to physical and emotional violence. Men struggle with their parenting and often experience differences with their partners in their values and discipline in family life.



Our women

Often our strong women are being left to support their families which is leading to burnout and ill health. Women are dealing with lack of respect and the complexity of maintaining healthy relationships within the family, given the stresses in the community. Women are multi-tasking and trying to juggle multiple roles as wife, mother, sister, grandmother and aunt.

Women are struggling to deal with violence and for those wanting to escape violence there is limited support to leave town. Many are caught in a relentless cycle of dealing with grief and supporting others.



Our children

***“We have all these sad things happening to our families.
We want to look at a future for our children”***

***“We need to do things with our children. They are our priority in the community.
They are our future”***

There is much concern about the impact of trauma and distress on our children. Children lack good role models and are affected by family and community drinking and violence, one of the key drivers for kids being on the streets especially in Kununurra. There are few opportunities for children and young people in the East Kimberley.

A lack of parenting support for parents who are often young and without life skills is resulting in children being left with overloaded family.

Our community

Many services and processes are involved in trying to deal with community issues. However, often there were problems in:

- getting the right or appropriate service
- high turnover of workers and services
- good services being defunded or not having secure funding
- having to explain things over and over again when you are engaging with multiple agencies
- lack of cultural understanding
- interagency meetings are not involving the right community organisations and members

The community struggles with a lack of connection and the trauma that people are carrying is making this worse. Violence is becoming normalised making people immune to its impact and feeling powerless to change this.

Our spiritual health

Richard and Selina Eggington discussed their work in Western Australia building a suicide response. Ngarie Ah Kit talked about the development of the suicide support network in Darwin, assisting families to respond to suicide and prevent deaths through building knowledge of how and where to seek support.

Participants spoke about the levels of grief in the community and the stress that individuals and families were under.

Many families have lost members to suicide. There are few services offering support to those suffering with suicidal ideation or their families. Participants felt there were many promises made by the government but often little follow through.

Of the limited services available concerns were raised about the fly in fly out nature of the professionals and the limitations this creates in being able to form relationships. Community members talked about the random nature of suicide and that it was not discriminating in relation to who it affected.

***“We have had a lot of suicide and family violence and not enough time to reflect.
We need more time to discuss these issues. We need to understand our young ones”***

A greater focus was needed to assist community members to respond including better and timelier access to support services.

In the past community members were able to live their lives in accordance with their culture but now people were lost and were left finding superficial ways of expressing their culture.

Community members are struggling to bridge two worlds: being beholden to two laws, white fella law and cultural lore and the gap between these. There is a lack of opportunity to engage with cultural lore and this creates tension. It is difficult to get some services to respect and adhere to cultural protocols including the inclusion of Elders and lore people at negotiating tables.

Restoring harmony and balance – Creating the Blueprint for change

“I have watched this town grow up under my eyes always running to government, always asking them to give us programs. But we as Aboriginal people have to stand up”

“It is good to be here. We have had a lot of trauma and grief. We need this healing. We need to get up and do things”

“I am super proud. Look at everyone who has come together to do these hard tasks. There is so much strength. We have lots to draw from.”

“These are not just Kimberley problems. They are problems all over the country. Let’s talk about our strengths and our determination”

Gathering participants planned ways forward, key themes are outlined below.

Local control

Community members are outsiders to the process of change. There needs to be a stronger community voice that doesn’t come just from agencies and services.

Strong men’s and women’s groups

The formation of strong men’s and women’s groups provides an opportunity to be part of the change process allowing community leaders to have better engagement with solutions in their regions. These processes support reclamation of cultural values and build strength in community.

These groups should be enabled to have their representatives talk directly with state and federal ministers and key decision makers.

Strong Aboriginal organisations

A commitment to creating stronger Aboriginal organisations that are managed by Aboriginal community leaders and employ local Aboriginal people will promote greater participation. A well developed strategy to ensure good community capacity building including a workforce development strategy will support this.

Respect for Aboriginal knowledge systems

Ensure that better two way systems where there is respect for Aboriginal knowledge are developed. For example Elders and community members presenting in the school to facilitate learning of culture as well as improving education outcomes.

Reclaiming culture

“Aboriginal people we are not relics. We are an evolving culture.”

“Start singing to that land again, singing to that ceremony reclaiming cultural ways”

Culture is strong and many languages, stories and teachings are still accessible. A focus on reclaiming culture and the strength of this process will create better wellbeing and spiritual health.

Respect for cultural knowledge and learning is central to healing. Cultural ways support community, families and individuals to keep their spirits strong and build healthy identity.

Cultural practices can be incorporated by:

- taking children out to country and teaching them language
- getting out bush and outdoor cooking
- developing language, language centre, masters and apprentice programs and kids book
- yarning circles with a common charter across the East Kimberly region and a regular yarning network built around cultural lines
- culture camps with families including fishing and hunting
- embedding culture and language and cultural kinship understanding
- cultural expectations to help family fighting

These ways need to be priorities for government and services and more cultural knowledge systems need to be used to address issues rather than impose westernised responses that do not always work.

Building understanding

There is a lack of understanding between services, both government and non-government, and community members. Building greater understanding will enable better use of services. Community members noted that sometimes local Aboriginal people were shamed to discuss their issues in front of non-Indigenous people. Greater development of an Aboriginal workforce is critical.

Cross cultural awareness

Cultural awareness training needs to be an ongoing process and not just a one off. It should be led by local people to assist in building connection to services and awareness of local protocols.

Government policies need to be developed by Aboriginal people and reflect Aboriginal protocols with a focus on understanding the local context.

Family Healing Centre

Communities can heal when there is a greater emphasis on healing the whole family and where cultural responses are part of healing practice. People are suffering because of a lack of strong cultural responses and individualised service systems.

Gathering participants supported the establishment of a family healing centre. A family healing centre will provide holistic responses, building the spirits of community members within a cultural framework, and enable community responses to domestic and family violence, suicide and mental health that support healthy family life to be restored.

Leadership

To achieve many of the solutions offered by Gathering participants there needs to be a focus on building leadership. This includes providing leadership camps and training for women, men and young people, allowing them to draw on their cultural knowledge and broaden their experience.

Strong Aboriginal leadership, governance training and greater involvement in decision making will result in effective community led solutions. Good leadership is particularly necessary to change the secrecy about child sexual abuse and violence. Strong community leadership is a pathway to developing crisis responses when services are not available.

“We need to create new pathways for our men. Where their values are strong, where they take the strength to be able to have strong relationships”

Coordination

Building better service coordination and engagement with community members is assisted by:

- service providers working with local families to develop appropriate service delivery
- ensuring that government and other consultation processes access the appropriate agency and community groups

The outcomes from this Gathering and the Empowered Communities project need to complement each other. Community men want more focused and better coordinated men’s activities including a men’s interagency network, and regular men’s gatherings to build culturally strong responses.

Men from the Gathering recommend the establishment of an office of men’s policy in Western Australia that can drive change at a state wide level. This is particularly important given the record numbers of men incarcerated with no healing programs offered.

Growing our families strong

It is important to focus on building families rather than addressing issues individually. Families need to be supported to undertake more activities together including outdoor activities, fishing and family fun days to build family cohesion, especially when there is overcrowding and widespread poverty.

Creating more family shelters and family support houses is critical to assist families struggling with homelessness and escaping violence and trying to recover from drug and alcohol abuse. A greater emphasis on family counselling and facilitators that are trained in healing and therapeutic services including group work for families is needed.

Creating safer communities

Breaking the silence

Projects that break the silence about abuse, protect children and create opportunities for leadership around these issues are critical including community led campaigns and education.

Improved responses

Improved responses to critical issues including policing of drugs and black market alcohol are critical and greater engagement about access to alcohol and its impact on families with a strategy within communities to combat this.

Community involvement

It is important to continue to encourage greater involvement in community life without the need for payment and a focus on creating collaborative solutions.

Community members supported the ongoing development of discussions on family healing annually and action such as the White Ribbon Day march to bring community attention to the impact of violence in community life.

This diagram illustrates the key components of community healing.



The Way Forward – First Critical Steps

The Family Healing Gathering engaged communities across the East Kimberley providing the opportunity to comprehensively view their challenges and build a holistic, integrated response that supports constructive change.

Recommendations:

1. Empowered Communities, the Western Australian Government and the Federal Government need to consider the issues raised by the East Kimberley community to support their healing needs and aspirations. Community members have outlined a holistic approach for addressing community issues that are a result of colonisation and trauma. Many of these solutions go a long way to restoring harmony and balance in the lives of communities, families and individuals and are supported by national and international evidence.
2. Urgent support is required to establish strong men's and women's groups that engage community members across language and cultural groups and support greater inclusion of local community voices, self-determination and cultural responses.
3. Development of a healing strategy – the Healing Framework outlined as a blueprint for change in this document requires a comprehensive strategy to enable its implementation. Development of a healing strategy that maps all current healing work, identify key gaps and critical actions including targets and timeframes is a necessary next step to ensure constructive change occurs and healing is supported in real terms.
4. Men's healing and recovery responses and whole of family healing processes should be explored in greater depth to ensure culturally recognised responses are being developed. These should be co-designed with the community and build on the work of the Healing Foundation in the development of men's healing work and healing centres nationally, including appropriate 'men's places' or spaces and locally co-designed healing programs that incorporate cultural and therapeutic methods or ways of working.
5. Suicide prevention strategies need to be reviewed and implemented within the local context as a matter of urgency. Given the significant prevalence of suicide and the overwhelming levels of cultural distress this is creating for families and communities an urgent local network of support is required to ensure safe and supportive responses are enabled. The reduction in suicide and self-harm in this region should be a national priority.





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