

# BARNDI NYARLU: GOOD WOMAN

## Our Healing Journey





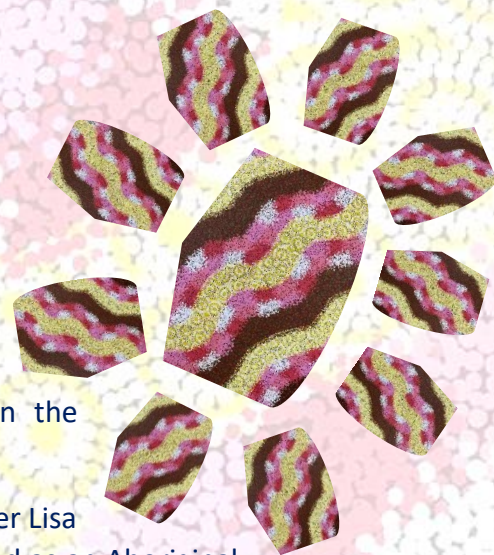


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# Barndi Nyarlu: Good Woman

## Our Healing Journey



### Introduction

The WA Centre for Rural Health's (WACRH) Stronger Together program is funded by Healthway and aims to foster health in the communities of Mullewa and Mt Magnet.

The *Barndi Nyarlu* project arose from community conversations after Lisa Lockyer commenced her work with WACRH in Mullewa. Lisa trained as an Aboriginal Health worker before she completed her degree in Indigenous Community Health – specialising in Indigenous Mental Health and Counselling. Her long history of working with Aboriginal people in small communities meant she was ideally suited to the community development role of the Stronger Together project. Lisa recognised the importance of starting where the people are and listening to their priorities in any effort to promote better health in Mullewa.

With the support of MEEDAC, Lisa began conversations with the women who were attending the Mullewa Arts Centre. At that time, the community was reeling from many tragic deaths. The women's stories were about grief and loss. Lisa invited the Family Wellbeing program from the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA) to run workshops in Mullewa.

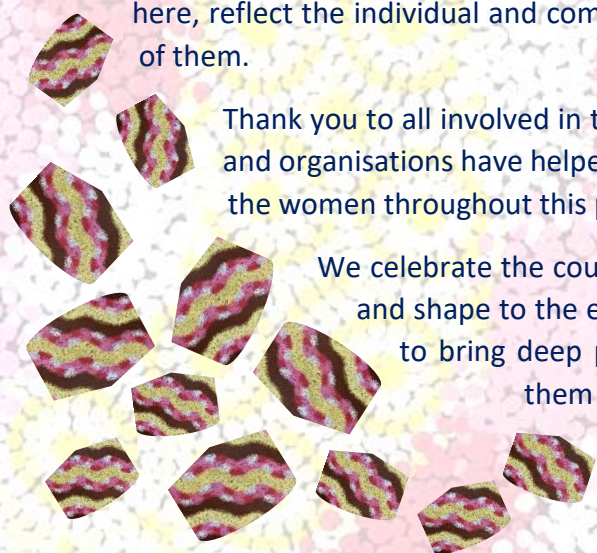
The Family Wellbeing workshops, developed by and for Aboriginal people, built trust and connection. In the workshops, the women tried new experiences, including meditation. Conversations between them deepened. More talking and more listening uncovered long held secrets and pain from so many sources - family violence, abuse and addiction, losses of loved ones, unspeakable tragedies...

The women started to talk about healing. Lisa invited art therapist Sonya Bandy to help the women give shape and form to their experiences through creative projects. Using different approaches and materials, many of the women discovered the strength to be found in sharing their stories and discovering others knew the same pain and sadness.

A small grant from the Department of Communities encouraged the women to think about sharing their Healing Journey through showing their creative projects to the community. Some of the women agreed to record their stories in words and the personal vignettes bound together here, reflect the individual and common experience of the women who bonded in the telling of them.

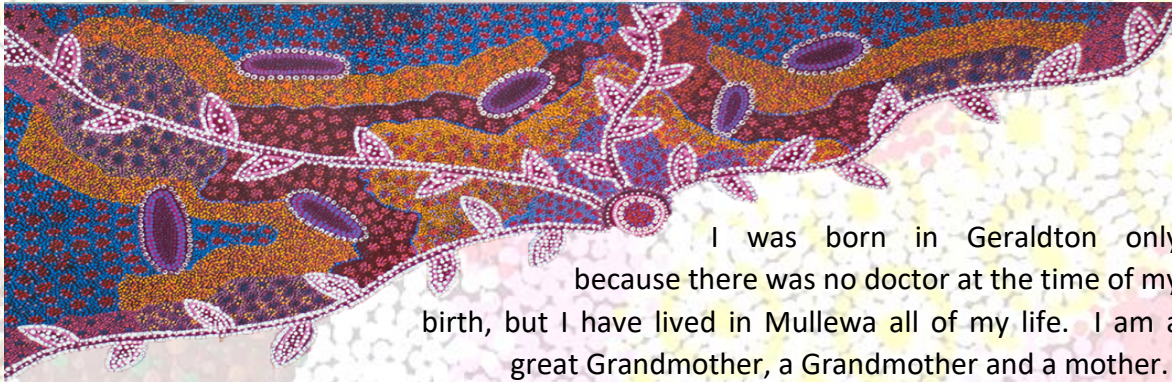
Thank you to all involved in the *Barndi Nyarlu: Good Woman* project. Many individuals and organisations have helped out in different ways. Lisa's unwavering commitment to the women throughout this project throughout deserves special acknowledgement.

We celebrate the courage and strength of the women of Mullewa to give voice and shape to the experiences that have wounded them, and which continue to bring deep pain and sadness. We admire their resilience and thank them for their generosity in sharing their Healing Journey.





## Story 1 –



I was born in Geraldton only because there was no doctor at the time of my birth, but I have lived in Mullewa all of my life. I am a great Grandmother, a Grandmother and a mother.

Growing up in Mullewa was really good as a kid, we would always be out bush and drag wood home for the fire. We used to live in an old tin shack at the old reserve. Mullewa has always been a community known for family feuding and violence – sadly it even still happens today.

I was 16 years of age when I had my first child and got married up when I was around 18 or 19 years of age. When I met my partner and had another four children to him. This relationship was not only mentally abusive but also physically violent. I felt that the mental abuse was just as bad as the physical abuse. My partner was a drinker and the violence only occurred when he was drinking but when he was sober it was the mental abuse. I used to drink as well, sometimes I think this was my way of coping.

I used to dread Christmas time or anytime that we would be going to spend any length of time with his family as I knew that the violence would happen and never once did or would anyone try to stop him or help me. Whenever I would drink I would leave my children with my mum – who would look after the kids and make sure they were safe.

Until doing this program I never really thought about how the violence was affecting my children or myself, or that they were really even witnessing the violence but thinking about it they were.

Remember one occasion he was threatening to shoot me and was drunk trying to put the bolt in the gun when he dropped it onto the floor in front of me giving me the chance to kick it under the bed. He was a very jealous man and often accused me of sleeping around with other men something I would never have done.

I am a full time carer of my 4 Grandchildren due to one or both parents being addicted to methamphetamines and living in domestic violence relationships. I will never allow my grandchildren to be subjected to violence – my home is there safe pace.

I have had a lot of pain in my life and have just had to learn to cope myself and to deal with it by myself. I have lost two brothers to suicide and a grandchild in a horrific manner that I can't bring myself to write or talk about still to this day. The pain is still to raw, to painful ☹

My current partner who have been with for 20 years has been diagnosed with leukemia, around 8 years ago and on that same day 8 years ago I also began to care for two of my grandchildren as Department of Child Protection was about to take them into care. I have had them ever since as their mother is addicted to methamphetamines.



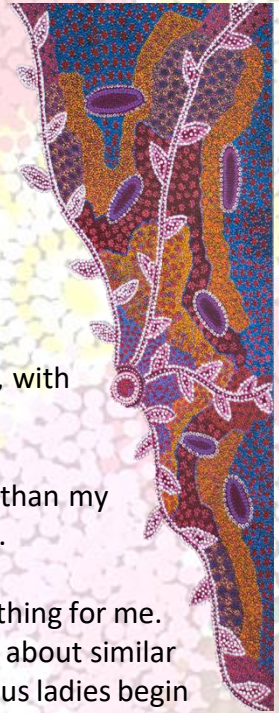
Today I was asked by Lisa how I get through – how did I cope – I had to think about this question as I didn't realise I was coping I was just doing what I knew I had to do – take care of my grannies, take care of my partner and take him to his medical appointments, clean and take care to the house – get the kids to school – cook the dinner - as women we just do what we know has to be done.

But what I think helped me was

- (1) Good support from one of my daughters
- (2) When my mum was alive she helped me so much: financially, with my kids, and by just being there

I never had friends – they were all his friends. I really had no one other than my mother and my daughter – I never had or even thought about counselling.

This program firstly got me out of the house, back into art and doing something for me. It was really good to hear many ladies that I have known all my life talking about similar issues to mine. I really enjoyed this program and I know it has helped all of us ladies begin on road to recovery – thank you Lisa.





## Story 2 -

I thought I had it all, I was newly married, a loving husband, and a son. Living on a station was going to be something new to me but being only 19 I wanted to give it a go. For a few weeks it was good and then the cracks started to appear. I didn't have my license and when he tried to "teach me" he made me even more nervous. "STUPD BITCH" became my name. A push here and a shove there. "Oops sorry slipped" he would say. He only ever made contact where the bruises wouldn't show or would be hidden by clothes.

The day we left the station the owners gave us a Christmas present for my son. Down the road we went, then he stopped the car and hit me for the first time in the face. "That is for not saying thank you". I cried the whole way back to Geraldton. Time passed and more of the same happened. Not long after another son was born.

More yelling, hitting, being thrown into walls and cupboards. "She is very accident prone" he would say – "always tripping over the kid's toys" I always thought I could tell no one and had nowhere to go. The shame that this was happening to me. I had not been brought up in a violent home, we didn't even get hit by our parents so why me?

The final straw came when he hit my eldest son for just being there – that was all no reason "just for being there" he said. "He was just mean" my son yelled at him, he went for him again. I stepped in to protect my child and yelled at him "that's enough not him he is only a baby. I was beaten again, verbally abused called stupid, useless, dumb and told that no one liked me and that I would have nothing without him.

The next day when he left for work I made changes to our life, kicked him out of the house and left his belongings outside the house. It was during this time that I realised I did have friends that I could count on – they helped me out then and I know those friends I can still count on today.

When we were married he had all his mates and his girlfriends – when the truth came out they all disappeared really quick. "We didn't know" they would say. Yep that's right I bruised myself by being clumsy. More black eyes than a boxer. "Iron deficiency" I would say. More than the physical abuse the verbal abuse was the worst bit. Hours and hours of verbal abuse at a time because he had mucked up at work or he didn't have smokes, dinner not ready or the house was messy. A hit or smack around and it was over I can say that I did get used to that but the endless hours of verbal abuse seemed to go on for hours and it felt that it was never going to end some times.

I never spoke to anyone about the physical or verbal abuse but after a recent workshop went home and found the "Hidden shame" a wardrobe door with the imprint of my head in it and finally threw it out, I didn't know why I kept it but I did. I will never forget all that I went through but I am now moving on with pride and I have learnt that abuse does not have a type but happens to all walks of life, all colours, and sizes.



### Story 3 –

This is my personal story of my life and my journey of healing ☺

I am a 47-year-old local Mullewa Nyarlu (woman) I have four children and 20 grandchildren.

My first partner – and the father of my children was found dead in a park in Balga and I was never allowed to sight his body again or have an open casket at his funeral due to his horrific injuries that were inflicted on him and causing his death.

9 months after losing my partner I lost my Grandson to a medical condition. This was a very difficult time of grief and loss, but as a woman, a mother and a Grandmother you just have to keep going – no matter how tired, how sad, how broken, how isolated, how much your heart is breaking you just have to keep going for the sake of the other members of the family who are also struggling and learning to cope with the deaths and sadness.

I then moved from Perth back to Mullewa and my daughter stayed in Perth. Not long after returning back to Mullewa the Department for Child Protection removed all of her grandchildren from her daughter's care and placed them into Child Protection Care, where they still remain today.

Around this time, I got into a relationship and after only a couple of months he passed away unexpectedly to a heart attack. I questioned why his was happening to me?

I never got any counselling or support, at the time I was also a full time career for my oldest grandchild. I felt that having been a career for my oldest Grandchild probably helped me to stay focused and cope with all of the trauma that I was dealing with in my life.

At this time, I felt so isolated that I had no one that I could talk to – I was feeling angry, I was sad, I was hurting and I was tired – tired of trying to be the strong one, tired of feeling pain, tired of being tired. It was during this time that I started using marijuana and then I started using harder drugs like methamphetamines as a way of coping and getting through each day. I also began to sniff petrol and using anything I could get my hands on as a way of coping and dealing with this pain that wasn't going away, it seemed to numb the pain anyway for the time being.

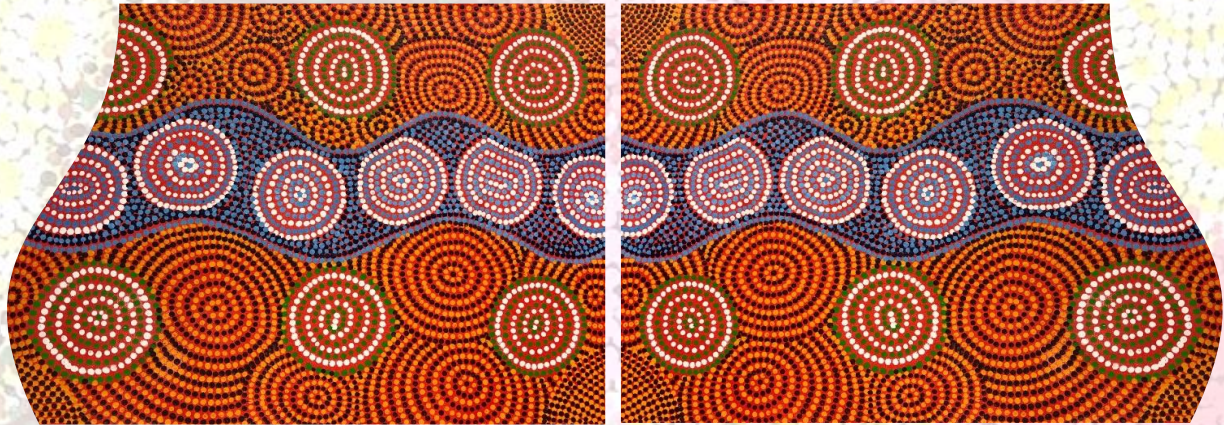
Growing up in Mullewa was a hard place there was often alcohol and drugs and a lot of family feuding that still continues today – it is what I hear people call today “Intergenerational trauma”. When I look at my life and reflect I wish I never ever touched the drugs or used them – I started smoking marijuana in my late 30's and using meth in my 40's and now I am addicted to methamphetamines. I honestly feel that drugs made my life even worse although at the time I thought they were helping to numb the pain they were actually making things worse. They cost me so much money – money that I didn't have – it also got me addicted and now I struggle with the addiction.

Doing this program has made me understand that all of the ladies are dealing with issues in their lives from addiction to alcohol and or drugs, caring for their grandchildren, loss and grief of loved ones, family and domestic violence and that there are always choices that we can make when we are dealing with life's issues to have much healthier outcomes and that we also have each other to support, listen to and give each other advise and direction and not put each other down and gossip how is that ever going to help – it's not and won't ever help.

Lisa as you know I was not working in the ladies center I was doing something else and until I come that one day I had no interest – coming that day has been good for me and I also know for the other ladies. These types of programs are really needed. I just want to thank you for your compassion, your understanding and for never ever making me feel like you were judging me – you made my healing journey so enjoyable and fun, but also educating me– thank you so much girlfriend you good at your job also thank you for sharing your own personal story.



#### Story 4 –



I grew up in a happy, loving, hardworking home of five children. As a teenager I did all of the normal things you do as a teenager. At aged 17 I decided I wanted to be a nurse. I got married a twenty-two and had 3 boys. I lost both of my parents within a few years of each other both died young at aged 47 and 52 years. Their deaths were devastating to me.

The first few years of marriage were very busy and happy. Then my husband started to put his friends before his family. It seemed that he had lost interest in us. Then the domestic violence and abuse started. He was a very nasty bad tempered drunk. He had grown up in a house of domestic violence and abuse – it was normalised in his home. His family were also big drinkers and he didn't see anything wrong with his behaviours. Because I had never seen or known this kind of behaviour I began to blame myself. I always worked and had to be both a mother and a father to our sons. When the abuse and violence stated I would pack the kids up in the car and drive to neighbouring towns with friends. Then the phone call would come "I am sorry – it won't happen again" I would take the kids and return back to our home and everything would be good and calm for while (what I now know as the honeymoon period)



After 22 years of putting up with the family and Domestic violence I decided that enough was enough – my children were grown up. I relocated, changed careers and didn't see much of him. Not long after he was diagnosed with cancer I felt that I was forced to feel that it was my duty to care for and look after him. This is happening in my retirement. However, he has mellowed down and doesn't drink any more. In fact, I call the shots now it's my house and if you don't like it then fuck of.

I felt that I gained a lot out of this course and has helped me to understand that caring for myself is very important and the anger that I felt about having to take care of him has subsided. I felt very comfortable with the other participant's no one was judgemental. Thank you for allowing me to participate.



## Story 5 –

I was born and raised in Meeberrie Station and later moved to Willeen Station before I started school. I went to school at Palatine Mission – I used to catch the bus to Palatine and then home to the station on the holidays. My father passed away when I was 1 years old.

My older brothers and sisters helped our mum grow us younger kids up. Growing up on the station was a good life and we learnt about the bush life.

We moved into town and I met my life time partner and lived in Mullewa from around the age of 17/18. My mother had to move from the station to Mullewa as she was becoming sick and needed to be close for medical help.

Me and my partner had 6 children. We lost one of our son's when he was 21 years of age through cancer. You never really heal from losing a child, you never think you will be burying your children. Losing my son was one of the hardest things that I have ever had to deal with. My son left behind 3 children.

I then lost my best friend to cancer also and not a day goes by that I don't miss him and think of him and I miss his phone calls.

I then suddenly lost my daughter in law who lived with my son and who left behind 6 children and at the time they were expecting their first grandchild (a girl) my heart ached for my son and all of my grandchildren.

In September of 2018 I lost my brother who had a heart attack and I was very close to him. Five days after losing my brother I lost my grandson in very tragic circumstances in a drowning in the Swan River in Perth and he had only been with us here in Mullewa the week before with his girlfriend. We took them out to see the wildflowers and took some photos but never thinking that this would be the last time that we would hear his voice or see his face.

Losing close family and friends is always sad but when you have so many deaths in such a short time it doesn't give you time to grieve or deal with that sadness before we are laying to rest our next loved ones.


The healing program was very good and I felt that it really helped me as I was feeling very sad and down and had not talked about my grief and loss and until Lisa came and talked to us.

The program also gave us insight into other woman dealing with similar grief and loss issues, family and domestic violence, caring for their grandchildren or drug addiction and how we were able to deal with our own issues but also able to support other ladies in the community and allowing us to begin our healing journeys together.







## Story 6 –




I never really thought I was sad or depressed until I did the healing program in Mullewa. I guess I didn't really have time to think about it, but since doing the program I learnt that I needed to deal with my issues to be able to support my family and also heal myself.




I grew up in Mullewa – I went to school in Mullewa and I married and had my kids in Mullewa. I grew up in a violent home where I saw my parents drinking and fighting and also other family members in fact during my childhood I witnessed a lot of family violence. I was also sexually abused by a close family member when I was 10 the first time that it happened until I was 14 years of age. I never spoke of my abuse to anyone but doing this healing program gave me the time to think about it (even though I never talked about it in the group). I did speak one on one with Lisa and this made me feel so much better and she gave me some things that I could do to be able to begin my healing from my abuse as a child. I can now also say alcohol helped me get through my pain but didn't make anything better.



Doing this program allowed me to listen to many of the ladies that I had known all my life but never knew that many of them also had issues from their pasts that they were also holding onto inside of them and most of us and never really had the opportunity to even deal with our past issues or to even acknowledge some of the pain from our pasts. Healing through art, discussion, group work and listening was very helpful for me and also Sonya the art therapist gave us some good tools and ways to be able to work through our pain, grief and loss, abuse or addictions in different ways.




I am a grandmother and since doing the healing program it allowed me to sit back and watch some of the things that were happening within my own family and one of the things that I learnt and feel guilty for is that I went from a violent childhood to a violent marriage and then allowed my own children to witness violence also and this is now what I now to be intergenerational violence or cycles it makes me sad to think of this and I wish we had these types of programs around when I was younger and maybe then my own children's lives would have been different – because what I also know now is that not only did they witness my vicious cycle but they have also ended up in violent relationships or become the perpetrators of violence. I do try to talk to my kids and grandchildren now as I want to be where the cycles of abuse stop in my family – I want to make up for what I have been through and what I put my own kids through I want the violence and abuse and addictions to not reach my grandchildren.



To the Ladies in the Mullewa healing group thank you for sharing your heartfelt stories, and thank you for listening to mine, thank you for helping me to begin my healing journey and also to begin my families healing. I loved every session that we did together and I have the deepest respect for every single one of you strong women.

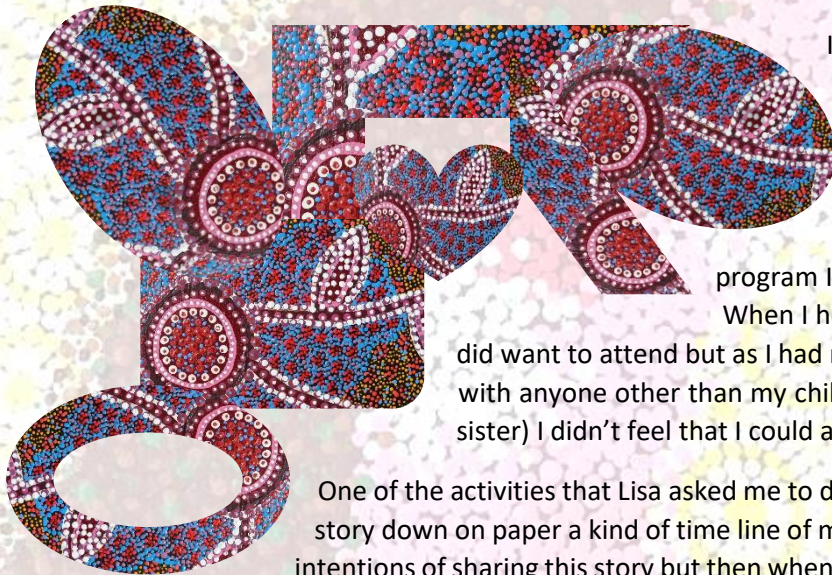
Sonya thank you – you are an awesome art therapist. You taught me that we all have pain in our lives no matter what our colour or race. Thank you for sharing your story and for helping us women to talk to trust and to share.



Last but not least - Lisa I want to say to you, you are truly so good at your job, you are one amazing woman and I am so glad you came to Mullewa. This program was one of the best things I have ever done for ME. Doing this program has changed something inside of me, I am no longer drinking, and I now have a deeper respect and admiration for the ladies that also did this program along side of me. I want to be where the cycles in my family end, I want to give my grandchildren a better and healthier start to life. I also want to thank you for sharing your own sadness, pain and grief and story of family and domestic violence. People like you and Sonya really make this world a much better and kinder place and I will never ever forget you –  
THANK YOU FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART.



## Story 7 –



I didn't do the program but I was talking to Lisa out of the program. I didn't do the program as I didn't feel comfortable sharing my pain or my story for fear of being judged or gossiped about - but I wish I did do the program I know people who did do the program. When I heard about the healing program I really did want to attend but as I had never talked about what had happened with anyone other than my childhood best friends (actually my cousin sister) I didn't feel that I could attend the workshop.

One of the activities that Lisa asked me to do as part of my healing was to write my story down on paper a kind of time line of my life I guess you would call it. I had no intentions of sharing this story but then when I shared this with my daughter she said that I should share this as it might help someone else who could be in a similar situation. So here goes this is my story – I have asked to remain anonymous.

Growing up in Mullewa was hard. There was always family feuding, alcohol, domestic violence and I often wished and sometimes still wish that I hadn't of grown up here. My father was a very violent man and as a child I was terrified of him. My dad has passed away now but I never felt a love for him that I wish I could have. He was so violent to my mum and I remember many night laying in my bed crying until I couldn't breathe whilst I could hear my mother being bashed again. The next morning, she would have black eyes, or a broken arm, or always some evidence of the beating from the night before. Myself and my cousin were sexually abuse by a family relative and we used to always talk about running away together, if I hadn't had been so terrified of my dad I would have run away.

When I was 14 I was out with my cousin and she had been sexually abused the night before and time got away from me and before I realized, it was dark, my cousin walked me home and my dad was there waiting very drunk and I got the beating of my life, I was so sore and so bruised I could not attend school for the next week.

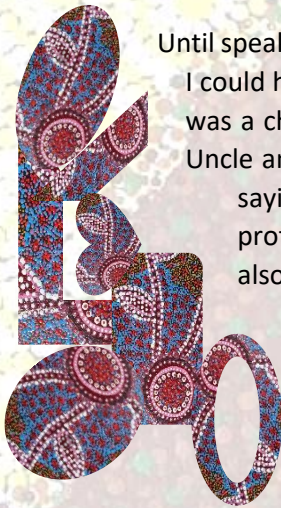
My mother was a quiet spoken woman who was kind and gentle, she never really went anywhere without us kids with her and I am sure that she would drink alcohol to cope with all that she was dealing with. My dad would often come home drunk and accuse her of being with other men – and then the violence would begin. I would often think how could she when she never left the house the only person who left the house was my dad, knowing what I know now I feel that it was more than likely he was the one who was out having affairs or playing around with other women.

When I turned 16 my cousin finally told me who had been sexually abusing her and it was one of our Uncles, the same Uncle that had been sexually abusing me. I don't know why neither of us had said his name before but we just didn't – He has also now passed away. We wanted to tell someone or go to the police but we were scared, scared we would not be believed, scared that we would get flogged, scared that our Uncle would find out and do something to hurt us, so neither of us ever dared tell anyone.

Know that I am an adult I often wonder would things have been different if we did have someone that we could have talked to, someone that we could have trusted because keeping this horrible secret was hard. I watched my cousin become addicted to alcohol and drugs as a result of her ongoing sexual abuse. My cousin has now passed away but my heart is and will always think of her and the demons that she had to deal with as a child and young girl growing up and hen finally to her sad death (RIP my sister you are always and forever in my heart).







Until speaking with Lisa I blamed myself for not having the courage to speak up, thinking maybe I could have helped her, changed the direction of her life. But what I learnt from Lisa is that I was a child, she was a child and he was the adult, he was in a position of power being our Uncle and being an adult and that sexual abuse can and never will be a child fault. But in saying that I still feel that he robbed us both of our childhood, he should have been protecting us as our Uncle and I also blame our families, (mainly my dad) because they also should have been protecting us instead of allowing drinking in our homes, allowing him to have access to us. I have been an alcoholic and addicted to drugs thinking it would numb my pain, but I don't drink or do drugs anymore and I want to make sure that my grandchildren are safe in my home. I don't allow my grandkids to be in their parents' home if they are drinking – they come home to me where I can protect them and make sure that they are safe from sexual abuse and violence.

Lisa thank you for working with me in your own time, thank you for being patient with me, thank you for never judging me, thank you for helping me to begin my healing journey finally even at this age it feels so good and the activity of burning something helped me more than you will ever know. I finally feel free of my past abuse and I finally feel free of the guilt that I have carried around all of my life not only for me but for my sister (RIP) doing this with you has been so good for me and my family and has opened up many discussions between my daughter and myself – thank you so much Lisa I can never express what you have done for me.

As Aboriginal people we have to start talking about our past pains and hurts, we have to change the silence to discussion, we have to look out for our children and our grandchildren – stop alcohol around our vulnerable children, we need to notice when our kids behaviours change, we need to speak up when we see things are not right - our children are each and every single one of our business. Breaking cycles begins with us.

Thank you for reading my story I hope even if it only helps one person then I have done what I set out to by sharing my story.



**BARNDI NYARLU: GOOD WOMAN Healing Journey Group**

The Healing Through Art Ladies would like to sincerely thank Sonya Bandy, Art Therapist for her inspirational work in helping them to begin their healing journey.



**Sonya Bandy, Art Therapist**