Valerie’s story 2

I came back to Perth, I went and done my Health Worker’s course in Marr Mooditj.

My key learning was that the different cultures and the different tradition around the state and all of Australia, that they are not all the same.

With my health work, I done about three months in Newman, and that was an experience. Every day I would do a dressing on some person, you know, one of the Aboriginal people. They used to come in from [remote] community. They used to have cuts in their heads or legs or arms, or they’d broken limbs. And, yeah, every day I was sort of doing a dressing on somebody. And it was hard for me to understand their culture, because it’s completely different to mine.

I mean to say, I didn’t know whether... My understanding was... Was it cultural for them to be fighting every night? But the longer I stayed there, I got to understand it wasn’t their culture, it was the alcohol that was induced to make them get violent towards one another and, you know. But I mean to say, they just wouldn’t fight fist fight, they would fight with anything they could pick up. And some of the injuries were just really bad. And some of them wouldn’t even attend to it straight away, they’d leave it to a couple of days down the track and then decide to come into the clinic to get attended to.

I mean to say, you get the Kimberley women and they are completely different to the Pilbara women, and the Pilbara women are completely different to us Gascoyne mob. And then you go down to the South and that and it is all different. And the diversity of the women that used to come in to [women’s shelter], weren’t just all for the same tribe, they were from different backgrounds and that there... And you had to have the understanding of where they come from. And some of them could not speak English very well and it was very hard to understand.

But with their health issues, I found the best part of it is illustrating to them is drawing a picture for them. With that picture, I used to say our body is like a motor car. If this thing didn’t work on the car, it wouldn’t start. And I use the battery on the car as for the heart. If that didn’t work, the car would close down. And I used to say to them, ‘Well, that’s just the same as your heart. Your heart will stop if you don’t look after it.’
And it’s the same as explaining diabetes and the pancreas. I used to say, ‘Like a filter. It’s filtering and it’s pushing all this sugar out, you know? When that shuts down, that’s when you got to be on dialysis and then you got to be on injections.’

I explained it to them and I used to draw the pictures, because as I said, some of the women from the Kimberleys and that, they could not speak English very properly and it was very hard to communicate with them.

Some Aboriginal people who are on medication, got no idea what that medication for. The doctor can write a prescription out and say, ‘Okay, take this here. This is for your diabetes.’ Or, ‘You have this injection. This is for your diabetes.’

It’s not actually telling them how that medication is gonna help them, you know? And it’s just hard for some of them. Some of them might just go back to the community and just chuck that medication away, coz they got no understanding that’s gonna help them. Yeah. So it’s really good to give them the understanding of that medication and what’s it used for and what will it do for you.

Well some non-Aboriginal people... I mean to say, it’s not only in health it’s a broader area... They haven’t got the cultural awareness and the understanding that not all Aboriginals are the same. They’re all from different cultures.

To work in Aboriginal health, they need to build a trust of that Aboriginal person, and also to give them the understanding what’s really happening to their body, you know, their health. Also, understanding of the different tradition and cultures. See, like some old lawman, you mightn’t be able to touch him, you know? There’s different ways.

But my main key would be don’t just give them medicine and a piece of paper, explain to them what that medication is about, because they might just take it home and throw it away.

I think the best way for any person to speak to an Aboriginal person is to have a yarn with them first, you know? Like, as you came to me and we sat down and had a yarn.

I reckon, get their trust first and then explain what’s all the medication about, because they haven’t got enough... Like, the older generation they haven’t got enough understanding what the medication is about. You put them on dialysis, they know it’s got to do with the kidneys, but they don’t really know what’s happening to them. What’s it all about? It’s not saying, ‘Oh, it’s filtering your kidneys to cleanse your kidneys. The kidneys that helps to get the blood to go around your body...’ They don’t really know that, it’s the education. They need to be educated.

It’s the language barrier too, between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. Because the non-Aboriginals think that the Aboriginals can understand some of my words that the medical professions that they use, you know, their term of language. Some Aboriginal people, even
myself, can’t even understand what they’re talking about. Coz the English language change all the time, you know?

I found that even in the refuge, going out the back and having a yarn with them while they’re sitting down having a smoke... Just sitting there and yarning with them, because a lot of them wouldn’t tell you what’s really going on in their life.

You know, as an Aboriginal person, you know the non-Aboriginal workers used to say, ‘You should go out there and talk to them.’

And I used to try and explain to those workers that I’m not from their country, they’re just as shy of me as they are of the non-Aboriginal worker, as you know. So the best way to get them to open up and talk to me was just to sit down and yarn with them.

And it was like when you’re yarning with them, it’s like a big gate that opens and everything just bursts. They’ll tell you all about their medical problems, if they’re down for medical reasons. Or they’ll tell you whatever happened with them and their partners. Or family feuding, who they are feuding with, all that. Yeah. It was the best way to go about it I reckon.