

# Tree of Life

## **Women's Group**

### Community Garden Art Project



***“This is a collective document to celebrate our achievements. We wish to share our knowledge and skills to pass on to future generations.” Tree of Life Women's Group 2009-2010***

***Our Tree of Life Women's Group uses Collective Narrative practices to uncover our knowledge and skills as Indigenous and non-Indigenous women living in the Elizabeth area of Adelaide, South Australia. We have used artwork and gardening to show how we have responded to some really tough things we have tackled in our lives. These works, as well as the planting of significant Indigenous trees and shrubs in our Community Garden honour the skills and culture of the Kurna people and the survival of their expert knowledge of this region. Central to the group is the significance of the Tree of Life Narrative Practice, which uses the metaphor of trees to explore our histories, skills, and the gifts we have received and given to our communities. We have become a rich and dynamic group filled with and fed by generous women.***

***“From a little seed big things can grow”***

## **The Soil: Where the group ‘lives’**

Our Tree of Life Women's Group meets at Elizabeth to share lunch and work together. We engage in many activities that embrace the greater cycles of Mother Earth, from beginning to end. We enjoy drawing, writing, sharing, painting and getting our hands dirty planting things in the ground.

***“This is where I am and it's a good place to be.”***

## Roots of the Tree: Our history and where we come from

**"We are one but we are many,"** is a song that sums up how we feel about our group. We come from diverse backgrounds and bring with us a wealth of life experience. We live around the Elizabeth region, but we have been many places. The rich cultural heritage within our group provides a sturdy root base for each of us to strengthen and fortify one another. We have each in our own ways, dealt with adversity and weathered terrible storms. Some of us have spent many years running away, being too busy, running from ourselves. There are times in our lives that we have been isolated, and the challenges have been many. We acknowledge the skills we have gathered along the way, and we know life works in mischievous ways. We say mischievous, rather than mysterious, because that is how it has been. There is healing in what we have to share, and the group provides us with the nourishment and feedback we need to keep on at it. Our trunk is strong, and we are resilient and of a tough bark. **"WE ARE DEADLY, AYE!"**

**"Since we have been working in this group, having to write things down, it has been very revealing. It has been a great release."**

## Trunk of the Tree: The skills we use to live our lives

**"We are connecting with the Indigenous history and knowledge of local food plants of the area and strengthening our own skills and wisdom from surviving hard times."**

**Lost and Found** I was having a downer of a day. My daughter went to prison and I'd just been to see my grand children who had been taken away from their mothers. I was walking back past Families SA and this guy was pointing up at a tall tree. At first I thought it was a crow, but it was a duck, frantic with worry. We didn't know what to do. We were just wondering whether we should call for a cherry picker or something, but suddenly she flew away. The next thing there was all these little ducks falling out of the tree, one after the next. Little babies tumbling out of the sky. Some people gathered them up and put them in a box. They took them down behind the railway station. And there it was, I saw their mum come for them to pick them up. All of them were safe and sound. I cried and cried. I thought to myself, "It's Ok. I just need to be there and to love them dearly. I own my problems, and they theirs. My journey is empowered by the strength of my own tree, its soil, roots, branches, leaves and full fruits of love, patience, kindness and forgiveness.



Ruby Saltbush

**Calling on Our Ancestors to Heal Our Spirits.** Listening to our ancestors has guided me in healing from our children being taken away. When my grannies were taken away by Families SA it brought the bad times back. Our family has a long history of being taken away which has broken our hearts and spirits. It has left me feeling deep sadness and animosity towards others. My language, my Dreaming stories, Art, Mother Earth and Kinship, help keep me in touch with our cultural values. I have been guided by my parents and used my skills of being able to listen and cry to help me heal. I have hung in there through many hard times and called upon my ancestors for healing and guidance. I have learnt how to help others bring our children home. I have taken charge and decided to be positive and help my community to make good choices and to not let the hard times run our lives. I have found ways to challenge Families SA constructively to try and stop our children from being taken away. I have joined with other Grannies so we can understand what and why these hard things have happened so we can keep on fighting for justice.

### **Dadirri – listening to one another**

Dadirri. A special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is something like what you call contemplation.

The contemplative way of Dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way we learnt to listen from our earliest times. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened.

We are not threatened by silence. We are completely at home in it. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course – like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth. When twilight comes we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the Sun. We watch the bush foods and wait for them to open before we gather them. We wait for our young people to grow, stage by stage, through their initiation ceremonies and meetings. The right people must be present. Careful preparations must be made. We don't mind waiting because we want things to be done with care. Sometimes many hours will be spent on painting the body before an important ceremony.

We don't worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of Dadirri (that deep listening and quiet stillness) the way will be made clear.

*We are like the tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt, but inside the tree the sap is still flowing and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree we have endured the flames and we still have the power to be re-born.*

Our people are used to the struggle and the long waiting.

We still wait for the white people to understand us better. We ourselves have spent many years learning about the white man's ways; we have learnt to speak the white man's language; we have listened to what he has had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways. We would like people in Australia to take time and listen to us. We are hoping that people will come closer. We keep on longing for the things that we have always hoped for, respect and understanding. We know that our white brothers and sisters carry their own particular burdens. We believe that if they let us come to them – if they open up their minds and hearts to us, we may lighten their burdens. There is a struggle for us, but we have not lost our spirit of Dadirri.

There are deep springs within each of us. Within this deep spring, which is the very spirit, is a sound. The sound of Deep calling Deep. The time for re-birth is now. If our culture is alive and strong and respected it will grow. It will not die and our spirit will not die. I believe the Dadirri that we have to offer will blossom and grow, not just within ourselves, but also in our whole nation.

From Recreating the circle of wellbeing Unit, Masters of Indigenous Studies (Wellbeing), Gnibi College of Australian Peoples, Southern Cross University. Lismore NSW

Edited version adapted from the writings of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr.

Professor Judith Atkinson, We AL Li a Program of health, healing and wellness

## Branches of the Tree: Our direction

The branches of the tree represent our hopes, goals, dreams and wishes for the direction of our lives.

We intend to be alert, visible, and out there. **“The branches to me are about how I want to do this thing. To love and be loved.”**

### **Not Listening to Abuse**

I survived hard times by not listening when I was being abused. I learned how not to listen when my mother abused me. I learnt this from my Father, as he always knew about how to draw on our inner strength as a way to survive difficult times.

I learnt how to breathe, put on my army boots and march into battle. I survived hard times by taking it one day at a time and doing the best I could, despite not getting the support I needed.

My children and dogs have made a big difference in being able to survive hard times. When things seem too hard, I always wake up to another day and keep on going. There is always another way to get through difficult times.

We dare to love despite being hurt. We support each other and get through tough times by remembering to breathe and stick together. We draw upon our inner strength to help each other and have a family full of love.



Australian Hollyhock

### **Caring for Myself and My Family**

The care of friends, family and the guidance from my ancestors has helped me survive when I was left without a home after being rejected by some family members. I have stayed strong by not dwelling on what happened. My parents and my son know that I don't let the hard times get the better of me. They have been my greatest friends. The complex situation that led me to being homeless has taught me how to help others without being judgmental. It has enabled me to let others be themselves. It has also taught me how to take care of myself.

We have survived hard times by taking care of each other.



Dianella

## Leaves of the Tree: People, Pets and Role Models

The leaves of the tree stand for people, pets, role models, characters from stories and imaginary friends who have been important to us. Some leaves stay with us forever and some fall away but nourish us through our roots. There are some people that you are better off without. DNEIRF is friend spelled backwards. Some friends can be like this; they are not on your side because you can't trust them. We have all had a few of those in our lives. That's why we added a compost heap to our Trees of Life. We can't ignore the really destructive people in our lives, but we want to turn that destruction into wisdom, so we put them in the compost heap. We recycle them and add nutrients to our soil. If they are too toxic for the compost, we stick them out on a broken branch. We aim to keep people in our lives that help enrich us and help us to grow and move forwards. Just keep the friends you can trust.

**“I survived hard times by sticking to my values about making our family safe for my daughter to grow up in.”**

### **Looking After Pets**

Looking after my pets helped me to survive when my husband died. That was eleven years ago and I found it hard to keep living. Depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder made it difficult for me to make decisions and get out of bed. My daughter took care of me and helped me to get medical help so I could get the better of depression and OCD.

My pet dogs Trixie and Tina also helped me to get out of bed because I needed to take care of them. Getting the medication I needed and caring for my dogs helped me to stay alive and get through this difficult time. We are very close, especially since going through this together.



Tree Planting

### **Being the Best Mother I Can Be**

Focusing on being a loving mother helped me to survive when my newborn son's father left us.

When I was left alone as a single mum after my son was born I was shocked.

I felt angry at my son's father for leaving us alone and not taking up his responsibilities for his son. I felt violated and lost a lot of trust in people as taking care of your family is a value I hold dearly.

I survived this hard time by taking it one day at a time, doing the best we could having being left without the support we wanted. I survived by caring for my son and being close to nature, birds and trees. The rise and fall of the Sun and Moon reminds me of what is valuable and how to live my life.

I kept in touch with my values of looking after family by being a good mum. Talking to friends and family is a way I have been able to be honest and maintain my integrity, which is how I can be the best Mum I can be. This way of living is important in my family and friends.

When I take my son fishing, it is a way for us to enjoy each other's company and have quality time together.

I choose to be strong and see the positives rather than become a victim.



Treasures in the Nursery

**Making Our Families Safe for Our Kids.** I survived hard times by sticking to my values about making our family safe for my daughter to grow up in. There has been a lot of violence in my family. When my daughter was born, I wanted her to be safe, and so I refused to let violence be around her. This was hard because it meant she couldn't have a relationship with some of her relatives. It took a lot of strength to stop abuse being acceptable, but by making a stand, it has helped the rest of the family to say no to violence. We learnt the skill of being strong and making a stand from being poor and having to stick together to survive. We survived poverty, abuse and leaving our country. This has given us the strength to fight the abuse that often tried to destroy our love for each other. These skills of making a stand and the values of keeping children safe have made it possible for my daughter to grow up without violence. She is probably the first person in my family to ever have the opportunity to live without experiencing abuse from members of her family. Learning to stand up to violence taught me how to do it in my work. I can help people to put one foot in front of the other, no matter how hard it gets, because I have done it myself.



Tree of Life Drawing

## Fruits of the Tree: From all we have been given

**“Being empowered by my culture is what the fruits are to me.”**

We are helping each other to live life to the fullest. We have a space where we can be creative and separate ourselves from our problems. Through learning, listening, crying and forgiving we are forging change. Our community will benefit from our strength and knowledge.

**“A problem shared is a problem halved. By meeting in this group I have had the opportunity to start healing. This here is what community is about. This is real.”**

### **Most Beautiful Heart**

One day a young man was standing in the middle of town proclaiming that he had the most beautiful heart in the whole valley. A large crowd gathered and they all admired his heart for it was perfect. There was not a mark or flaw on it. Yes, they all agreed it truly was the most beautiful heart they had ever seen. The young man was very proud and boasted loudly about his beautiful heart. Suddenly an old man appeared at the front of the crowd and said, “Why your heart is not nearly as beautiful as mine.” The crowd and the young man looked at the old man’s heart. It was beating strongly, but full of scars. It had places where pieces had been removed and other pieces put in. But they didn’t quite fit right and there were several jagged edges. In fact in some places there were deep grooves where whole pieces were missing. The people stared. How can he say his heart is more beautiful, they thought. The young man looked at the old man’s heart and saw its state and laughed. You must be joking,” he said. “Compare your heart with mine, mine is perfect and yours is a mess of scars and tears.” “Yes.” Said the old man. “Yours is perfect looking but I would never trade with you. You see, every scar represents a person to whom I have given my love – I tear out a piece of my heart and give it to them, and often they give me a piece of their heart which fits into the empty place in my heart, but the pieces aren’t exact. I have some rough edges, which I cherish, because they remind me of the love we shared. Sometimes I have given pieces of my heart away, and the other person hasn’t returned a piece of his heart. To me these are the empty



grooves – giving love is taking a chance. Although these grooves are painful they stay open, reminding me of the love I have for these people and I hope someday they may return and fill the space I have waiting. So now do you see what true beauty is?” The young man stood silently with tears running down his cheeks. He walked up to the old man, reached into his perfect young and most beautiful heart and ripped a piece out. He offered it to the old man with trembling hands. The young man looked at his heart not perfect any more but more beautiful than ever, since love from the old man's heart flowed into his. They embraced and walked away saying, “Only God can make a beautiful heart.”

**“We dare to love despite being hurt. We support each other and get through tough times by remembering to breathe and stick together. We draw upon our inner strength to help each other and have a family full of love.”**



**Native Apricot**

## **The Plants We Love**

**These plants hold special significance to our group:**

**Balga Grass** grows in the Flinders Rangers as well as other regions. It will branch if the growing point is damaged. Flowering is stimulated by bushfire. This is an important plant to the Aboriginal people. The spike makes a useful fishing spear. The nectar from the flowers gives a delicious and refreshing drink. The flowers can be used as a compass because they bloom on the warmer, sunnier side of the spike (usually on the north side). The resin from it is also an adhesive, and it is used for spear making and to patch up leaky coolamons (water-containers) and even yidaki (didgeridoos). The bark is used to inhale for colds by Adnyamathanha and Kaurna Peoples.

The **Ghost Gum** grows up to an impressive height and has a skin like pinkish white bark, which can also have a texture like thin scales. White flowers bloom in summer and the fruits are brown. This tree features in Aboriginal Dreamtime stories as well as in the famous paintings of Albert Namatjira.

**Dianella** has bright edible blue berries. The leaves were used to weave dillies as well as baskets by Aboriginal peoples.

**Quandong**s grow in the Southern deserts of Australia. The fruit is a tangy and exotic flavour and it is one of the most popular forms of bush tucker. There have been attempts to domesticate the Quandong, but it is hard to grow in a backyard. Aboriginal corporations also harvest the fruit from wild trees commercially. Many Aboriginal peoples have used the fruit and the nuts.

**Ruby Saltbush** is a durable plant that copes through droughts and frosts. Although it looks like a saline variety it can also be found in forests and is much loved in home gardens. The tangy berries can be eaten and the plant is also sometimes fed to sheep.

**Native Hollyhock** is a wild flower we remember growing around the place. We used to enjoy gathering the flowers as kids.

**Native Apricot** is a rare tree that grows in the dry regions of South Australia. It grows out of tough ground but it is a very delicate looking tree. The tree grows woody fruits that stand out because of their vibrant orange colour.

Some of this information was resourced from Wikipedia: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

### **How We Have Made a Stand Against Abuse**

**“Abuse sits in you. When it is buried inside it can become your driver. It can make decisions for you, often the wrong decisions. I tried to look at it through rose tinted glasses for so many years. This only made me more guilty, isolated and depressed. I didn’t know what all the anger was inside. It eats away at you, corrosive like rust. Painting over the top doesn’t work, eventually it seeps through. Confronting and being aware of the patterns of verbal, psychological, physical and sexual abuse is a long and necessary process. ”**

#### **Knowledge we want to pass on to other women about how to respond to domestic violence:**

- Listening when I get that funny feeling in my stomach
- Don’t use a tier system to grade what violence is worse, it’s all bad, violence is violence
- Letting our children know they’ve got all this inner beauty. They need to look after this and it’s our right to protect them
- When I was beaten up by my partner, I fought back and left to go to a women’s shelter
- I was determined that my children would not be abused like I was
- When I see the man who is violent against my daughter I call the police straight away

- I kept telling my daughter how beautiful and worthwhile she was when she was working as a prostitute. I also let her know she was hurting me
- You have to be strong to get out and sometimes you're not, but sometimes you are
- Don't be sucked in by the perpetrator
- Get the cops, keep reporting it and don't give up
- Realise the abuser is responsible for their own actions
- Don't be manipulated
- Perpetrators of violence are the only ones who can make the decision to stop being violent
- The hits get harder over time
- Focus on the good things inside
- Listen to kids and guide them
- When the good times are good and the bad times are bad, eventually the bad times override the good times so you've got to get out
- Only associate with positive people
- Look, listen and learn
- Be honest to yourself about what's happening
- We keep faith in our hearts about our love for friends and family even when we're isolated by domestic violence
- All children have the right to be safe
- Don't listen to labelling and people telling you "It's only a hit across the head." All violence is serious
- We've got to look after each other
- Use your networks
- Domestic Violence isolated us from friends and family
- Only let people into our lives who respect us
- Contact the Women's Health Centre, DV hotline and Crisis Care

**"I have learned from surviving these difficult times that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and there is support out there when you need it. Getting support and talking to others can help when things happen to make it difficult to keep on living."**

**Taking Back Control of My Life from Abuse.** I survived hard times by getting support when domestic violence tried to keep me isolated and stop me from loving others. Getting support and loving my kids helped me take back my life from isolation and fear. When I was a child I was taken away from my family and put in a home. We were treated very badly. My husband also hit me a lot, but I fought back. I felt a lot of guilt about this and felt afraid of other people. My animals helped me so much and so did my tears. I learnt to watch and to listen. Helping my kids and others has helped me get strong enough to reach out to others. I have learnt about what it takes to stand up for yourself and take back your life from abuse. I know that love cannot be killed by abuse. Keeping on loving yourself and others can help us to forgive ourselves and take back control of our lives.



Tree of Life Artwork

**Moving Towards My Goals.** When I had a falling out with my friend it was really painful. To lose a friendship was extremely difficult. More than the combined years of mental, verbal and sexual abuse, and the guilt, shame and depression. I started to lose touch with my values and frames for my life. It was like walking on broken glass. I called upon my spirituality and my experience of maintaining my relationships with my daughters to keep moving forwards. I also used my skills in getting help from services to keep moving in the direction I wanted my life to go in, even when the tough times made it difficult. I kept on doing things bit by bit. I asked for help from God. I meditated and made positive affirmations. This kept me moving, changing my life towards to what I want it to be. My friends have noticed the changes in me and I have started seeing them in myself. Friends and Counsellors have seen the strength in me and believed I would come through this. This helped me when the hard times left me feeling overwhelmed. I would like to let others know that it is important to call out for help so the hard times don't get the upper-hand in your life. Strength can be drawn from being honest and true to you. Stick to your own rules and principles as a way to move away from violence and negative situations. This will help you maintain your integrity. Have a vision for your future to keep you inspired in life.



Tree of Life Artwork

## Tree of Life -One of many

**Building Networks, Companionship and Communication.** The Tree of Life is also The Tree of Healing. It has provided us with an avenue to explore past and present, and map out a better course for the future. We want to encourage others to share their knowledge and bring it to their communities. The group would like to thank all those who have shown support, as well as the young crow who has attended the meetings each week. If we look after the birds, our families and the environment, the rest will fall into place.

**“When we began we were wilting. We didn’t want to talk. It was like we were in a drought. By about the fourth week most of us found our voice and suddenly we all wanted to talk at once. Now we are flowering. You don’t always see it in yourself, but others notice, and we notice it in each other. It has been really magnificent to do this. I recommend it to anyone.”**

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We would love to hear responses from anyone reading this. You can contact us at: Anglicare SA Elizabeth Mission 91-93 Elizabeth Way SA 5112 PHONE:(08) 82095722 FAX:(08) 82095433 E-MAIL: [jennifers@anglicare-sa.org.au](mailto:jennifers@anglicare-sa.org.au)

