

ANNUAL REPORT



2014-2015

Women's Mental Health Network Victoria

About the cover image
‘We all add to the big picture’
by artist Guler Altunbas
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Guler is a Melbourne based visual artist.

To find out more about her art go to
<http://www.guleraltunbas.com/>

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annual report

WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK VICTORIA

FROM THE CHAIR

The last year has brought new opportunities for the Network to give voice to female consumers' concerns within the Mental Health sector and related services. While new doors open, some doors close with the loss of some key supporters of the Network.

In particular, our Treasurer Merrilee Cox who has been with the Network intermittently since the late 1980s has moved interstate in May 2015. However, knowing Merrilee she will make a reappearance sometime in the future!

Sadly our Executive Officer, Sally Gibson, had to leave suddenly in June 2015 due to family commitments.

I would like to briefly touch on some of Sally's work in the time she had with us. Two key areas of achievement were the 2014 Election Survey, in which we lobbied candidates from both sides of the political fence, and pushed for commitments once elected. Working to her strengths in media, Sally also developed media releases and commentary on current issues helping to raise and maintain our profile within the Mental Health sector and the broader community. These promotional skills shall be missed and the Network wishes Sally all the best in her future endeavours.

The loss of our Executive Officer has meant that the day-to-day running of the Network, meeting grant requirements, delivering training, and facilitating special projects has largely fallen to the members of the Committee of Management. This has been a challenge at times as our COM is voluntary and members also have other work commitments to maintain.

Nevertheless with the help of much appreciated additional volunteer time we have acquitted the Lord Mayor's Charitable Fund grant to develop a communications framework for women consumers and carers in rural and regional Victoria. A key

part of this project has been the redevelopment of our website creating a resource for women to easily navigate and identify mental health services in Victoria.

Another COM member who has been very active in her personal time is Jude Stamp, Chair of the Communications and Advocacy Sub-Committee. Jude has been doing the rounds of her Anglican Church communities presenting talks on the female consumer experience of mental health, psychiatric hospitals, and issues for women in the wider mental health sector. Not only has Jude bravely raised awareness of issues, she has also raised income for the Network via the generous donations by local church communities.

We continue to work to our strategic plan with particular focus on the strategic goals of financial sustainability, safety, collaboration and advocacy. Obviously financial sustainability is a serious ongoing issue for us as we are reliant on income from grants, project work, training sessions and donations, in order to survive financially. We do not have the luxury of recurrent funding, but being a NGO we are not fettered in how we operate and advocate for the women consumers we represent. We are looking to employ an Executive Co-ordinator to help address funding issues and carry out the requirements of the Survive and Thrive Grant provided by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Fund to aid in our ongoing sustainability.

The other three main domains of the strategic plan have been pursued in a number of ways including attendance and input at the Minister for Mental Health, Martin Foley's, round table talks for the Government's 10 Year Mental Health Plan, as well as attendance and input at the public Consumer and Carer Forums for the plan.

We have continued to advocate systemically by holding a Family Violence Forum to consult with

female consumers about their experiences of the intersection between mental health, justice, community supports and family violence. COM member Robyn Minty facilitated the forum and developed the Network's subsequent submission to the Royal Commission with recommendations. The submission is available on both, our own and the Royal Commission's websites. The Network Vice-Chair, Sabin Fernbacher, was called as a witness to the Royal Commission on the mental health focused day. She was able to raise specific issues for women with mental illness experiencing family violence and suggest some solutions to systemic issues and answered Commissioners' questions.

We also continue to work with other sections of the mental health sector, such as requesting the Mental Health Complaints Commissioner Lynne Coulson-Barr apply a gender focus to data collected by her organisation in order to identify and support gender issues needing addressing in mental health services. We are still engaging with Justice Health in regards to the development of a new 44 bed mental health unit at the women's prison, Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. We provided ongoing support to Forensicare for the creation of a women-only space and outdoor area within the mixed-sex rehabilitation unit (Daintree Unit). This work by Forensicare is now complete after receiving financial assistance through a capital grant by the Victorian State Government's 'Safety of Women in Mental Health Care' initiative. These grants were successfully lobbied for by the Network.

We have kept our commitment to promote diversity by running the Breaking the Silence program in rural areas with SNAP Gippsland as well as launching into the multicultural arena via the joint facilitation of the Women Speak Out program with Action on Disability in Ethnic Communities (ADEC). For further details see Jude Stamp's report later in this report.

Finally I would like to thank all of our supporters, financial, volunteer, and otherwise. Your passion and commitment in supporting the Network, and subsequently female consumers, is what keeps the female consumer voice out there and being heard.

In particular I would like to thank R.E. Ross Trust, SNAP Gippsland, Victorian Women's Benevolent Trust, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, Neami National, Women's Health Victoria, The Alfred, the Northern Area Mental Health Service, Forensicare and Bendigo Health for their financial and in-kind support and partnerships. Not to mention as always Drummond Street Services for providing us with office, administrative services and meeting space to run the Network from.

I would also like to make a special note about our inaugural Executive Officer, Cheryl Sullivan, who continues to be an endless and willing source of information, trainer and all round supporter of the Network, even in retirement.

We deal with passionate issues supported by equally passionate and justice orientated people. Let's keep working towards both individual and systemic Recovery while championing consumer rights.

Julie Dempsey

A RURAL PERSPECTIVE

This year WMHNV activities in regional areas of Victoria have provided women consumers and carers with an opportunity to voice their needs, experience, wisdom and creative ideas.

In Bendigo, the Network and the Women's Mental Health Service/Bendigo Health, facilitated individual and focus group interviews for both the Communications Framework Project and the Network's submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Some of the specific issues highlighted by rural women include-lack of anonymity and privacy; reduced access to specialist services due to travel and financial constraints; the need for clear information on women-specific services; in particular women counselors who specialise in trauma recovery; and lack of anonymity in seeking professional help when you work locally in the health profession.

As reported by Jude Stamp later on the Network implemented the *Breaking the Silence* program in the Gippsland region this year. A key aspect of this project was the delivery of the Network's *Speak Out* program, which supports and skills women with a lived experience of mental illness, to advocate for others, educate the community, and become more involved in community life.

The project has been very valuable in deepening our understanding of the needs of women experiencing mental illness in rural areas, and in providing women with training, and opportunities to connect, share their stories, and gain skills and confidence in advocacy and community education.

Issues highlighted by women participating in this project include: the impact of stigma; lack of anonymity; lack of continuity in the public system; the need for more preventative community mental health care options; and the impact of isolation and loneliness on recovery in a rural setting.

It is vital that we continue to create opportunities for regional and rural women to voice and advocate for their specific needs. There is much diversity in women and in their experience of

mental health. The Network seeks to be responsive to these differences, to highlight the amazing value within this diversity, and to strengthen women to feel connected and respected in their common shared experience of being women.

Bridget Nutting
Committee Member

IN WOMEN'S OWN WORDS...

Women in rural and regional areas talk about a range of issues they deal with, including...

lack of anonymity
and privacy

reduced access to specialist services due
to travel and financial constraints

the need for clear information on women-
specific services, in particular women
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recovery

lack of anonymity in seeking professional
help when you work locally in the health
profession.

CAPTURING THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S OWN STORIES

No presentation has more power than a woman consumer telling her personal story of mental illness. It takes courage and practice to feel comfortable, whether it's in front of a dozen nurses in a training session or 200 mental health professionals at a national conference. It's vital that we protect this wisdom and see that it is used to provide insight to all levels of the mental health sector. The material for this article is in part taken from evaluation documents prepared by Cheryl Sullivan and looks at the planning and delivery for two innovative training packages: *Women Speak Out* and *Breaking the Silence*.

Both programs were initially held over six three hour sessions – with the final session devoted to celebrating the achievement of the women who took part, and to award certificates. The sessions explored ways in which experience can be shared; how women could look after themselves; how to begin and end your story with maximum impact and how to deal with the media – allowing participants an opportunity to test their skills in front of a camera. Cheryl Sullivan facilitated the sessions

with input from two Network Committee members - Sandy Jeffs, poet and writer and Jude Stamp, advocate and presenter.

The *Women Speak Out* (WSO) program allows women to gain basic skills in presenting their experience/stories. It is interactive and supportive – and participants develop confidence as knowledge builds from session to session. One of the most popular sessions involved setting up a 'mock meeting' where the emphasis was on learning to participate in different types of meetings and learning how to get ones point across without too much anxiety.

The Women's Benevolent Trust funded a second WSO program, this time aimed at women from CALD backgrounds. Working closely with ADEC we reduced the number of days women need to attend the program from five to three days by conducting two modules on each of the training

days. The focus of this program was to work with women who are newly arrived, from an asylum seeker background and women from Non-English speaking backgrounds. The main aim of the program is to empower women to actively participate in boards, committees and to speak publicly at conferences and forums. Additionally, it aimed to assist in building relationships between women, breaking down cultural barriers and recognising similarities rather than differences.

Of the women who participated four were from a Chinese speaking background, one from an Indigenous/Australian background, two were Australian and another from a Middle Eastern background. A staff member from ADEC co-facilitated the program, while a second staff member interpreted for the Chinese speaking women. A Consumer Facilitator and the Course Facilitator from the Network delivered the program. Another difference with the ADEC program was that we brought in two experienced journalists from SANE Australia to facilitate the media session – and this proved very positive. It is hoped that SANE will be able to provide this expertise for future WSO sessions. Each woman was given an opportunity to tell her story in her own way and the journalists taught them how best to get their story across.

The Network also received funding through State Trustees to develop a program called *Breaking the Silence*, which was a rural adaptation of the WSO program. The primary aim of this program is to reduce the impact of the stigma of mental illness in rural areas through empowering women with mental illness to engage in their community. In partnership with SNAP Gippsland WSO commenced in February 2015 and involved women from various locations in Gippsland, Victoria.

There were several notable differences in the rural program. Because many women came from long distances and were often transported by their support worker, the women decided that it was appropriate for the workers to attend the sessions so they could share information on the often long

trips back to their bases. It was expected by the women that their workers would fully participate in the training sessions. The workers may also be involved in presenting the program themselves given future opportunities.

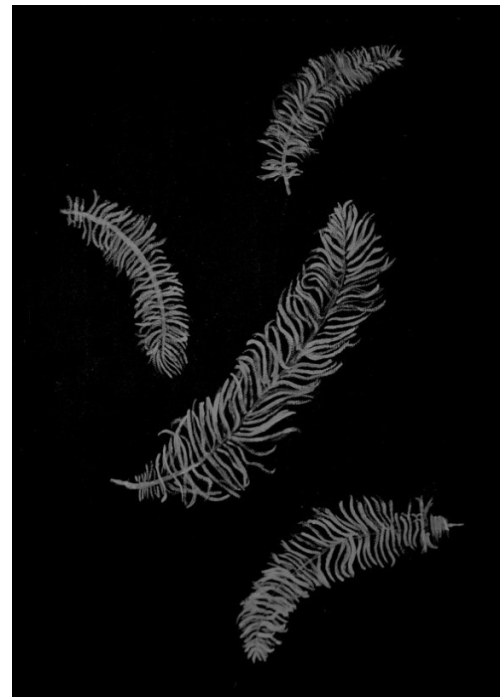
A program held in Morwell attracted seven women to the first session. Three of these women completed the program and received a certificate of attendance. Although recruiting larger numbers of women is more difficult, it is considered that operating from a pool of 12 – 15 participants might help retention rates. Reasons for not completing the course ranged from being reminded of past events and one woman's fear that if she appeared too well, her disability support pension could be affected. Conflicting medical appointments over two of the sessions caused another woman to feel she had missed too much to keep up with the program. While some women feared that undertaking the program might expose them to unwelcome attention in their own communities.

Evaluation has found that women consumers who attended all sessions of the WSO and BTS programs have gained considerable poise in presentation and sharing their stories. It is hoped (and anticipated) that graduates will find roles on committees, in staff training for mental health workers or in presenting at conferences and forums at every level. In addition, we hope to see our graduates facilitating future programs or sharing their insights as guest speakers.

The Network is confident that the WSO and BTS programs will allow women consumers to confront stigma and tell their story in the most effective way.

Jude Stamp

Committee Member
Convener Advocacy & Communication Working Group



'Light part' by Guler Altunbas

COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT

Julie Dempsey (Chair)

Dr Sabin Fernbacher (Vice Chair)

Sandy Jeffs (Secretary)

Merrilee Cox (Treasurer until April)

Cheryl Miller-Yell (Treasurer since May)

Jude Stamp (member)

Robyn Minty (member)

Bridget Nutting (member)

Shelley Anderson (member)

Chris McNamara (member)



'Within Diversity Friendship springs' by Guler Altunbas

The Dark Hours

*I love the dark hours of my being
My mind deepens into them.*
Rilke

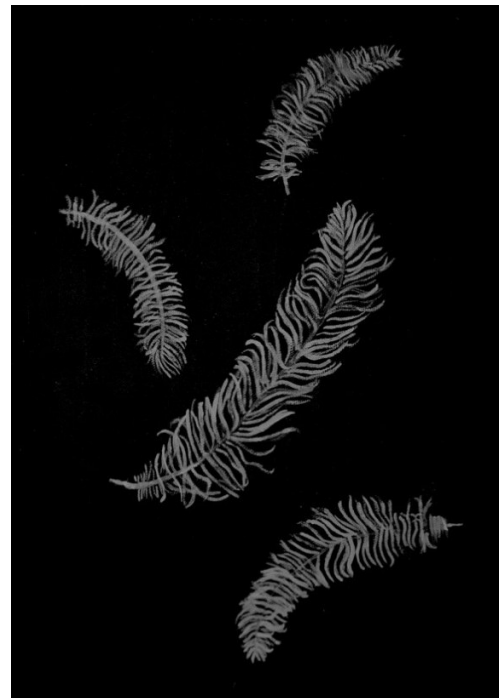
 come upon me without warning
opening wide the rifts of my mind
their unsufferable nights
of reckoning and judgment
endless whimpering self-pity
of a life half lived in regret.

I spend too much time in these hours
my mind darkens into them
along creep into a deep weeping wound
where I know myself too well
 a place of all lost dreams
 a place of ever-forming sorrows
 a place of a never-ending ache
I see too much
feel too much
labour with my inconsolable self
yield to my somber mood.

*This is a dark hour
in which my soul does not rest in peace
yet a poem is born.*

Sandy Jeffs

Committee Member
Secretary
Poet, Writer, Advocate & Public Speaker



'Light part' by Guler Altunbas



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