

Collectively reshaping lives

*The experience of growing up "ethnic"
in Melbourne's west*

Helen Rodd

CHALLENGING MYTHS does not only occur in academic, theoretical contexts. For there to be a true challenge and a clearer definition of ethnic youth issues, the "stuff of life", the experiences of young people, must present the reality. Young people can speak for themselves. They are engaged in a constant dynamic of definition by the very fact of growing up. This dynamic is about making sense of all aspects of their identity and finding an expression with their friends, their family, their community and the broader Australian community. This chapter presents a case study of young people who live in the inner western suburbs of Melbourne. It centres around a network they formed in 1989 called the Western Young People's Independent Network (WYPIN). In 1992 I was employed by the network as their community youth worker.

Background: The inner west

The inner western sub-region of Melbourne encompasses the municipalities of Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Moonee Valley, Hobson's Bay and Brimbank, the focal point or "gateway" being Footscray, which provides a central commercial, educational, health and welfare focus for the region. In recent years there has been a proliferation of Vietnamese restaurants, Chinese groceries and discount shops. These stand alongside more estab-

lished Greek, Italian and Turkish cafés and restaurants, as well as the newest additions, an East African restaurant and a Bosnian café. Certainly the flavour of Footscray is a multicultural one.

The largest retail outlet is Forges, a discount department store. Fifteen minutes away is the retail colossus of Highpoint, occasionally touted as the largest shopping centre in the southern hemisphere. The ever-popular Footscray market draws people from throughout the region into the central business district. Young people often accompany their family to the market on the weekly Saturday morning shopping trip. Major government departments, non-government organisations and community-based agencies are centrally located. These include Social Security, Austudy, the CES, Planning and Development, and Health and Community Services. Educational institutions include Victoria University of Technology, Western Metropolitan College of TAFE, Adult Migrant English Service, and language centres, as well as numerous public and private secondary and primary schools. Trains, buses and trams criss-cross the region, beginning, terminating or exchanging in Footscray.

Major industries are located in the inner west, such as Smorgan, ICI, Toyota, Mobil, BP, Kinnears, to name a few. The infamous Coode Island petrochemical storage facility is also in the west. Public housing estates are scattered throughout the region from the tall 1970s towers around North Melbourne, Flemington, Kensington, Ascot Vale and Footscray, to new-style divisions like Lynch's Bridge and Angliss. Private housing also has a diverse character, from inner-city terrace houses and worker's cottages to two-storey Victorian mansions, brick veneer and the new, outward creeping house-and-land package estates.

Throughout its history, the area has seen migrants tread upon its soil, passing through to the goldfields, working in industry, working on the river (the "other" Melbourne River, the Maribyrnong), or settling with their families, hopeful of a new start. Indeed, the inner west often bears witness to Australia's newest immigrants, exemplified by recent migrants and refugees from Eritrea, Bosnia and Iraq.

It has largely been regarded as a working-class area. Most of the inner west is in Labor heartland, reflected by some of the safest seats in state and federal politics. There is high unemployment in the area. Youth unemployment is over 50 per cent. Unemployment numbers for non-English-speaking background young people are higher. There simply are not enough jobs to go around. More than half of the population in the city of Maribyrnong alone earn less than \$12,000 per year. Poverty is a big issue.

However, the wealth of the west cannot be defined by these statistics. It lies in its people. In Melbourne, the west exemplifies cultural diversity. There are over 60 languages spoken throughout the municipalities. In Maribyrnong and Brimbank, over 50 per cent of the constituents were born overseas, or are from a non-English-speaking background. The Department

of Immigration provides on-arrival housing for refugees, and many community refugee support scheme groups are located within Maribyrnong. Many choose to settle within the municipality that has become familiar to them. Migrant resource centres support a multitude of established and emerging ethnic organisations. Ethnic community organisations, such as the Vietnamese Community Association, support their specific communities. The universities and colleges host high numbers of overseas students, many of whom reside at the Student Village or in local households. Various religious denominations have churches, temples or meeting places in the west. Cultural diversity is a fundamental and unavoidable aspect of life of the west.

This is the melting-pot out of which WYPIN grew.

WYPIN's history

WYPIN began in 1989. My history with the network began in 1992. Those foundation years are very sketchy in people's memories but all agree that it had its starting point with young people and a grant-in-aid worker at the Footscray Migrant Resource Centre (MRC). The worker, Donna Beer, had taken on youth issues as part of the community development component of her workplan. In her view, young people of non-English-speaking background (NESB) were under-represented in the community and the MRC, and had limited access to both mainstream and ethno-specific agencies. This was reflected in her case work and conversations with young people. She was an enthusiastic graduate of a new school of thought where advocacy meant empowerment, full involvement and ownership of the decision-making processes.

Her first port of call was to young people themselves, and she asked the questions that no one had thought to ask: What do you want? What are your issues? How can I help?

For young people this was a case of, "at last! someone will listen to us".

Donna visited schools, refuges and housing groups in the local area and talked with a variety of young people. From the outset she emphasised young people's ownership, offering herself as a resource person. Teachers and local government workers, who were sympathetic and familiar with NESB young people's issues, offered similar support. It was critical that all workers involved supported the philosophy of advocacy through youth empowerment, and agreed to support the young people in their ideas. In the end it was up to the young people to determine the direction of the action.

Young people generated further interest among themselves. Informal meetings were held at different schools. Different groups of young people approached Donna and a public meeting was organised. A team from Maribyrnong Secondary College organised the meeting.

It was very clear from these initial meetings that the young people wanted a "network" as opposed to a "group". A network wasn't about competing individual and school politics or ethnic community politics. It had a community focus, a "west" identity, a young person's focus.

From these initial meetings committees and working groups formed. By the end of 1989 paperwork to Corporate Affairs had been lodged for the incorporation of the network. Submissions had been lodged with Ethnic Affairs for funding. Submissions were written to the former Footscray Council. These were successful and the funds supported their meetings, activities and programs.

The young people had approached and enlisted the support of Ethnic Youth Issues Network, Victorian Youth Advocacy Network and the Victorian Association of Youth in Communities, key players at the time in the youth sector. A constitution and a statement of purpose was drafted which reflected the clarity of the young people's needs and ideals. A management committee was elected: 16 young people all under the age of 21 (a constitutional requirement), across a diverse range of gender, ethnicity and experience.

Interspersed among this flurry of "official" activity were informal opportunities for young people to recreate, meet, talk, laugh, have fun, and share. Friendships formed, trust developed, idea after idea flowed.

The success of those foundation years depended on a number of key structures and actions:

- 1 *The constitution*: one where the terms are clear, involving young people in its creation and structured in a way to ensure a youth focus (e.g. young management committee), both in the short and long-term.
- 2 *Statement of purpose*: one that is visionary, explores the ideals of the group, is clear about the focus and issues of the network (i.e. ethnic youth issues), is long-term and comprehensive.
- 3 *The independence of the network*: to ensure the ownership by young people, as a safeguard against the possibility of future difficulties.
- 4 *Worker attitudes*: the importance of questioning where you are coming from, and of a commitment to the philosophy of empowerment.
- 5 *Regional cooperation between workers*: in order to support a range of young people and share scarce resources.
- 6 *The same worker for at least a period of two years*: stability, consistency, commitment.

In 1992 I attended an interview with a panel of young people and workers. Shortly afterwards I commenced as the new WYPIN worker. Having the same worker for three years has created a sense of stability and consistency, which has enabled the young people to gain a sense of achievement and confidence in the ideas and programs they undertook.

WYPIN's young people

The groups that have been involved with WYPIN for the past couple of years have included young people between the ages of 14 and 23, most falling in the age range of 16 to 21. At the moment we have slightly more young women participating in the management and various programs run by the network. The ethnic backgrounds of the young people who are members and who access our services are varied. Their countries of origin include Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Indonesia, El Salvador, Chile, Guatemala, Argentina, Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Greece, Germany, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. Some young people are Australian-born of an Anglo-Celtic background. Recently we have been working with young people from Iraq and Iran.

Languages spoken by the young people are as varied as their countries of origin. Proficiency in English is also varied and related to their period of settlement. Some young people arrived in Australia as children. Most fall within the two- to six-year arrival period, some are newly-arrived, some barely a month in Australia. Most have had refugee or refugee-like experiences. Many recall living in the migrant hostel, Midway, or living in the Immigration Department's transitory flats in Maribyrnong.

Most of the young people are enrolled at a secondary school or language centre. Some are attending a TAFE institution or university; others are involved in DEET-funded courses. Some are unemployed and desperate to find work. A few are working full-time.

Most are living with their parents, siblings or relatives. Some are homeless and are supported by a youth accommodation program.

They all carry with them stories, knowledge, and experiences of another life, of a journey and of a struggle to make sense of a new language and a new lifestyle.

WYPIN's programs

The programs developed by WYPIN encompass three broad but essentially inter-related areas: issues, activities, and personal support. "Issues" can be defined in terms of concern that is of personal and social significance. Issues that are undertaken and have some social action component always have a basis in personal experience. The exploration of these issues may encompass some personal support, and be expressed through undertaking activities and/or social action, including community and peer education.

"Activities" can be defined in terms of recreation, socialising, addressing isolation and loneliness, and expression of cultural and personal identity. The dynamics of peer interaction provide opportunities for young

people to exchange information about themselves and recommendations about services. Familiarity with how WYPIN operates and informal opportunities to meet and develop trust in workers are other outcomes of such activities. Activities such as community arts projects explore social and political issues such as racism and cultural diversity.

The area of personal support can be defined in terms of general case-work and counselling. From this direct service base, issues and needs are highlighted. Group or social action on a particular issue may follow, depending on the desire of the young people. This approach questions assumptions about NESB young people not being clear about their needs, not being able to articulate their needs, not being able to manage themselves, not being responsible, being apathetic, self-centred. A darker assumption is that they don't belong and therefore don't have rights. Young people experience and understand the end result of such assumptions: marginalisation, powerlessness and isolation.

This approach is holistic, underpinned by a philosophy of empowerment. It is flexible and responsive to young people's needs. It is very much a "grounded" or community development model. Young people are the stakeholders. It is real for them and defined by them.

Underpinning all of the programs undertaken by WYPIN is a philosophy which seeks to challenge and often explode these myths. Given opportunities, resourcing and faith, young people are able to gain satisfaction and achieve success on their terms. Encouragement is given to younger or newer members to participate or to lead. If something doesn't work at least they have gained an understanding of the processes, and have developed skills. The evaluation process informs the next project. This model mirrors life and the wisdom gained through life experience.

There are many programs which illustrate this process. The Time & Space Theatre Project is a specific example which highlights the achievement of WYPIN young people.

Time & Space

Time & Space is a community-peer education project which was developed in 1993. There are several reasons why it began. Young people had expressed their concern about racism and how ignorance and fear contributes to racist behaviour, beliefs and intolerance. They recognised widespread ignorance in the community regarding information about the experiences of migrants, particularly refugee young people. The hope was that through gaining greater awareness of the complexities of the refugee and settlement experience, teachers, workers and agencies would modify their behaviour or service delivery to make it more responsive, sensitive and culturally appropriate for the young people with whom they work. In addition, the aim was to inform

other young people of these experiences and to encourage them to question the assumptions and fears which fuel racist beliefs.

It was June. Refugee Week and the Culture Jump Camp were pending. These events provided us with a goal and a timeframe in which to work. Culture Jump is a project which takes place in a country community and involves country and WYPIN young people in a three- to four-day workshop and activity program, designed by WYPIN, and focusing on racism and cultural diversity.

It was important to start with the familiar – with what young people knew and were expert in. Stories and reminiscences of experiences are common cultural activities which help us to make sense of our lives. On the surface they are familiar and simple, yet they operate on a variety of levels of human consciousness to explore complex and fundamental issues of meaning, identity and values. Storytelling is almost intuitive.

At the time, there were several young people who were interested in drama and performance. I am also interested in drama, particularly as a tool for showing, revealing, exploring and educating. Drama can be dynamic and engaging. It can be a means of exploring, expressing and making sense of the self and one's creativity. Stories and drama seemed to be a natural complement.

One young person, Thanh Duy Huynh, was particularly interested and enormously talented. A lot of credit for the writing, design and direction goes to him. He has tremendous skill in motivating and inspiring others to participate. The title of the project also came from Thanh Duy. My job was to resource these energies, offer support, and create a safe space (physical and psychological) to work in. It was more like collaboration than "service delivery".

Certain criteria were agreed upon. In order to include as many young people as possible, and to allay people's fears and embarrassment with performing, the stories had to be simple and direct. The performance had to use language that was accessible to the young people, particularly those who were newly arrived. Each story was written by the young person in relation to their language skills. They determined the language and style of the performance. The framework of each story also had to be simple.

The stories are a series of monologues delivered by a character representing a specific ethnic group. Initially, the group explored the stages of migration. Images of the stepping stone and the journey were central in creating a framework for their migration and settlement experiences. The steps are: homeland, journey, destination and settlement, adjustments and barriers, and present situation. Each step explores a range of physical and psychological experiences.

The stories are delivered in single words or phrases, the bare minimum to convey a specific experience or state of mind. Each word or phrase is added to the next, with a layering effect, creating a "picture" of the physical and

psychological dimensions of experience. This technique involves the audience; they participate in creating the picture in their own minds. The effect of its simplicity, its personal nature, honesty in delivery, and the link with the audience, gives the piece its powerful impact. It cuts through defensiveness, and connects with a fundamental level of consciousness and shared human experience – the stories of humanity. It taps into people's empathy. It's at this level that attitudes can be challenged.

The issues covered in the dialogues are confronting and challenging, particularly those in the "adjustments and barriers" step. Themes include racism, isolation and loneliness, police, drugs, family breakdown, trauma, settlement and homelessness. It highlights young people's needs, what supports have filled those needs, and gaps in services. Revealed throughout is the complexity of identity, and the struggles of young people to make sense of their cultural identity.

The young people involved are actively seeking to shape their and the community's future. Time & Space is a tool we use at workshops to trigger discussion among workers, teachers, government agencies and the general community, focusing on the range and complexity of issues affecting NESB young people and highlighting their needs and gaps in services. It also encourages the audience to question their beliefs, values and related work practice. The peer education model is an effective tool. Expertise and knowledge lies with young people. Usually after a performance, the group create a space for an open forum discussion. Comments, feedback and questions are sought from the audience regarding the performance or the issues raised. Often questions about the factors that enabled young people to achieve a level of success are asked. These are often explored in depth. The young people lead this discussion, highlighting programs that have worked, institutional barriers and the importance of attitudinal factors.

As a prelude to each performance the group participates in a warm-up/preparation session, where voice, body and character work is undertaken. At the conclusion of every workshop the performers participate in a debriefing session. In these sessions we discuss how the performance went and any issues that were raised and needed clarifying. They shed their characters, and the emotional baggage of the performance. We refocus on the here and now. This process is a vital support and necessary conclusion to each performance.

Another aspect of the project, apart from the community-peer education focus, is its intrinsic value for the participants. The WYPIN Time & Space writing workshops were a safe and supported place where young people could explore the significance of their experiences. Through the writing and discussing of their own and other's stories they could find healing. For some it was about reconciling or clearing up what had actually happened in their lives. To relive, to face, to reflect, to control, to move on. At times it was about making sense of their parents' experience and the

transferred effect on them. For others, it was about reflecting on their specific community's experience. One comment at an evaluation session, was that the project and WYPIN were like a "family" where you are safe, supported, respected, and can develop. It enhanced their self-esteem and fostered confidence.

The project involves over 20 young people. A maximum of six perform. There is no pressure to perform. Some never do. They come to write their stories, to watch, to support, and work with the group. Flexibility is absolutely necessary. This also relates to our performance engagements. The same people are not always available. Each performance is different because there are different performers on the day.

Time & Space has provided fertile material for other projects. It has been adapted for specific functions. For example, two women-only performances were developed for national and statewide conferences exploring issues affecting women from non-English-speaking backgrounds. A performance was developed for the National Police and Ethnic Youth Relations Summit which focused on police and legal issues. In partnership with the Footscray Community Arts Centre, two theatre projects were developed: House of One, and Our Stories. They explored similar themes but through movement, voice, song and music.

Finally, through the donations or fees for the performances, it has given the young people a means by which they can support programs benefiting themselves and other young people in the community. Funds are scarce and WYPIN does not receive any program funds. Such financial generation is a remarkable feat and is a source of pride for the network.

Collectively, the young people involved with WYPIN are defining and reshaping their lives. This is an active, engaging and dynamic process. Time & Space is but one project which illustrates this. Others have a different focus. The Homework Support Group, for example, was initiated and developed by a group of young people in response to their need for additional after-school hours homework support, particularly in areas where English language fluency is necessary. The Challenging Racism Workshop was specifically developed to identify young people's understanding and experiences of racism. Further, through the use of role-plays, it seeks to develop strategies that young people can use in their everyday lives to combat racism. These are a few examples from a range of projects initiated and developed by the WYPIN young people.

WYPIN offers one model with a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness. Projects are varied as they respond directly to the young people's needs on an ongoing basis. For young people in the west, it fosters a sense of ownership and of belonging. It enables them to have confidence in their ability to shape their lives, and values their contribution to the community in which they live.

Ethnic Minority Youth in Australia: Challenges and Myths is the first book to bring together a wide range of contributions on issues relevant to ethnic minority young people. These issues reveal a great deal about the basic institutions, processes and structures of Australian society and the way in which we are dealing with questions of social justice, equity and human rights. From Vietnamese-Australian youth in Sydney's Cabramatta, to Muslim students in Port Hedland, the book offers new perspectives on youth issues, providing stimulus for discussion, activity and further research. In four sections, the book presents

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- a look at general issues such as gender, ethnicity and feminism, juvenile justice, sport, sexuality and mental health
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NQYS

Ethnic minority youth



in Australia

Edited by Carmel Guerra & Rob White

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