

My Redfern Story

Juanita Sherwood



Juanita Sherwood is a Wiradjuri woman and is currently the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Indigenous) at the University of Sydney. Before becoming a Professor, Juanita's early working years were spent supporting the women, men and children of the Redfern community as a nurse and teacher. This is her story of the challenges, strengths and people of Redfern then and now.

Working Roles in Redfern

I came to work in Redfern as a Child and Family Health Nurse for Redfern Community Health Services at Rachel Forster Hospital in the 1980s. It was a white organisation that was not well aligned with the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) or Redfern Aboriginal Health Services. This changed over the years as we all started working together in the area of child health.

I had trained as a Registered Nurse at St Vincent's Hospital from 1980–83. I worked for two years as a Registered Nurse at the general hospital, and while I studied, I worked part-time at St Vincent's Private Hospital. I studied primary school teaching at Australian Catholic University (ACU) North Sydney, completing it in 1987 and then looked for work in 1988.

I also became a member of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group — a vital body that pushed for Indigenous education to be taught in schools, and supported community initiatives to build educational opportunities for our kids.

I was very happy to be given the role of Child and Family Health Nurse as I believed it combined all my backgrounds very well. I was very keen to connect with the Aboriginal Health Service and Redfern AMS, where I had really wanted to work at and did so. I was greeted with much warmth and support.

It was, however, within the schools that I was quickly guided to what my role really was about. The Aboriginal education assistants took me straight to The Block to meet the Elders and community members. They were all very warm and encouraged me not to be shy; to come down and have a chat about anything. Aunty Norma from Darlington Primary School became my key guide and support on the many issues I was to witness in the coming years.

The centre I was working at was not particularly Aboriginal-friendly and I came to appreciate that it had done little over the years to change their way of working. I came to the centre gung-ho and keen to work with the communities and was often told off for being far too connecting.

Addressing Otitis Media Hearing Loss among Aboriginal Children in Redfern

As a Child Health Nurse, I attended preschools, primary schools and high schools. My role was to screen for hearing, vision and speech issues that may be impacting on a child's ability to learn in the classroom. I was really concerned about the very high rates of Otitis Media ('OM') amongst Aboriginal children living in the inner city area in preschools, primary and high schools. Otitis Media affects hearing and, consequently, learning.

Jennifer Bush, a Registered Nurse and midwife; who was the twin sister of Alison Bush (who worked for Aboriginal Health Services Redfern) and I raised our concerns about the high OM rates. Our concerns were heard by the Aboriginal education team at Sydney University who recommended we connect with the Menzies School of Health Research ('Menzies') in Darwin to explore a way forward. Jennifer and I met with Terry Nienhuys from Menzies who agreed that our high rates were a worry and that we needed to record them. We undertook a research project supported by the Redfern Aboriginal Interagency and Community in 1989.

The results indicated that we had a problem: 86 per cent of children we screened had an educationally significant hearing loss. Prior to our research, it was considered that OM was a remote health issue. Clearly, our work shifted this long-held thinking and health planning. The then President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Linda Burney, took the results to the then Minister of Education, who sprang into action under Linda's prompting.

This was a critical shift, where we grasped that students' lack of success in the classroom did have a health causation. We worked very closely with Redfern AMS to support breathing and coughing programs in the schools and preschools. The supply of tissues assisted in children being able to clear their airways. We developed a tissue rap which the kids loved to do, and it enabled quiet listening times for children post the rap.

With the results of OM research, and much work with the health services, we were able to set up an Ear Nose Throat (ENT) clinic at Redfern AMS. This made my job a lot easier, and it made those services far more accessible for parents as well.

Local Responses to Nutrition Needs

We undertook a food survey at the Redfern IGA, where most of the community shopped. It was costlier than shops in the eastern and northern suburbs. This inequity impacted on the healthy purchases families could make. The community were concerned with our findings. As a result, a community taskforce attempted to negotiate with the IGA to lower prices. The taskforce did not succeed, so we supported the set-up of a vegetable and fruit cooperative for the Block residents that provided much cheaper varieties of nutritious food. We also set up a breakfast and lunch program for Aboriginal school students, which was supported by the community and university students.

Police on The Block: Trauma and Healing

I worked in Redfern from 1988 through to 1993, and during that time, I witnessed the war against the people who lived on The Block. This war was the work of Redfern police. This was the period when *Cop It Sweet*¹ was filmed, which clearly outlined the racist over-surveillance and thuggery of the police force. This was directed at our Elders, adults and children — boys and girls. I was at our 1989 NAIDOC celebrations and sports carnival in Alexandria Park when three police detectives shot into the crowd of children and their families celebrating NAIDOC week.

I remember watching police cars hurtling down Eveleigh Street at 100 kilometres an hour. Mothers would run to grab their children who were playing on a street hardly ever accessed by civilian cars. I witnessed young boys and girls being harassed by police. These showdowns of white supremacist power were appalling.

I was there during the infamous raid Operation Sue in early 1990, an illegal raid conducted

by the Tactical Response Group that terrified families and The Block community. They sledge-hammered down doors of 11 homes at 4.30 am. They hit, kicked and violently threw men and women out of their beds too. They held guns at the heads of parents, threatening to shoot them in front of their terrified children. In the end, no serious charges were laid, it was all to instill fear, and it did.

People who were attacked during the raid feared that they would be shot like David Gundy had been in his bed only six months earlier in the nearby suburb of Marrickville.² The killing of David Gundy and the raid on The Block demonstrated that we were at war with the police and Inspector Peate.

The morning of the raid, I was called by a member of the community. The community was meeting in Tony Mundine's gym to talk about the raid and what the community could do. They requested that I organise counselling for the families who had been violently abused in their houses. I went straight to the head of mental health services at Redfern Community Health Centre who told me that they could not provide the counselling and that the victims would need to go to Lidcombe for torture and trauma counselling. I was overwhelmed with frustration and anger and contacted my very senior supervisor Marie Bashir to talk to her about organising counselling. Marie and a psychologist at Redfern supervised me in providing counselling to a number of the families who were all suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder ('PTSD') — a result of the trauma they were all put through.

The Impact of Racist Policing on Youth

We all lived through racist, abusive violence in Redfern. Due to the targeting of young Aboriginal male and female youths by the police,³ we set up a

¹ *Cop it Sweet* (Directed by Jenny Brockie, ABC TV Factual Entertainment, 1992).

² Chris Cunneen, *Aboriginal-Police Relations in Redfern: With Special Reference to the 'Police Raid' of 8 February 1990* (Report, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1990) 9.

³ *Special Treatment – Locking Up Aboriginal Children* (Margaret Anne Smith, Ronin Films, 1991).

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small working group with Redfern Legal Centre to support Aboriginal youth. The youth were taken to cells without their parents' consent and beaten. The legal service purchased a beeper that was to be contacted when youth were taken to the cells by the police. The ideology behind our night beeper program was to provide the youth with support and an attempt to reduce the beatings.

But the kids on The Block did not have a chance. They were harassed by the police daily. When the kids swore back at the police, they were picked up and fined for the trifecta: offensive language, resisting arrest and assaulting police. This was a pattern I witnessed, and we did attempt to stop it. The sad story is that these young ones were continuously hassled, leading to fines. These unpaid fines led to time inside. In 2012, I conducted interviews in NSW prisons to talk to Aboriginal mothers who were inside. At each prison I went to throughout NSW, I ran into someone I knew. Many of these grown-up women were the young girls I had worked with in their schools and on The Block. They were happy to see me, and we had much to talk about and catch up about. These women did not have a chance; their struggles with government services, police, housing and Families and Community Services (FACS) ensured they would be stressed, fraught, strained and worried about their children.

Aunty Norma's Guidance and Support in Working with the Redfern Community

With the guidance of Aunty Norma Sides, I got to meet with many of the members of the community on The Block and within inner Sydney. Aunty Norma was the Aboriginal Education Assistant at Darlington Primary School ('Darlo'). Aunty Norma was my go-to person for everything, she had worked in this school for many years and knew the families of the children who went to Darlo.

Aunty Norma took me to each house on The Block and introduced me to the families and Elders of the community. Her introductions ensured that I was known and that I would not be considered as a government person, an untrusted person. This was vital as I had to call on many homes to talk to parents about

their child's health, often recommending referrals to specialists and then surgery. I quickly discovered that if I wanted the children to be seen by a specialist, I had to get them there, as their parents often did not have the transport or the money to get their children to these appointments. Parents were also concerned that they would be talked down to by the doctors. So, I would take a crowd to the hospital, and then translate the doctor's story back to mums and dads. This worked well, although the hospital would often growl at me as we were too noisy.

My Other Redfern Aunties

Aunty Polly Smith was the matriarch of Redfern and she lived across from Murrawina preschool. This was a preschool set up by Aboriginal women for Aboriginal children. This was initially the only way these children had access to early childhood education. It was a place where children played merrily and were loved greatly by their Aunties (teachers) who cared for them at school. Every Christmas, the "Black Santa" would come to Murrawina and hand out Christmas presents to the children. Black Santa was famous and much loved.

Aunty Polly was the grandmother of many young children I worked with who had ear health problems. I spent a lot of time at her home hearing about the old days, while picking up her grannies for appointments to the hospital. Aunty Polly was highly respected on The Block, everybody knew her. So when it came to name the new early childhood centre set up under Tony Mundine's gym, it was clear that it had to be in recognition of this amazing woman.

The Aunty Polly Smith Centre proved to be a great success. It had the highest immunization rates in the whole of central Sydney. The nurses and Aboriginal health workers were incredibly warm, and nurtured me as a new mother. I witnessed much joy at Aunty Polly's.

Aunty Joyce Ingram was another mentor to me and I was guided by her strong sense of justice. She was there right from the establishment of The Block until it was taken down for redevelopment.

Margaret Vincent: A Friend, Colleague and Ally

Margaret Vincent was a very dear friend and colleague. Margaret worked very hard within the community, making it a place that people were proud of.⁴ She worked with the Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP) Program in 1991 that printed t-shirts with Paris, New York and Redfern on them and I bought many. Members of the CDEP also painted shoes, bags etc. and made great coffees. We were all excited about this opportunity to celebrate The Block and its peoples. Margaret and I set up the veggie garden on The Block, aiming to build children's knowledge about good tucker. We did a lot of good work around nutrition, and the CDEP served up healthy tucker.

Community Remembers the Ear Nurse, and I Remember Redfern

Today I have a long and trusting relationship with the Redfern and Glebe Aboriginal community, as I do with communities where I have worked and lived throughout Australia. Redfern is special in that it has always been considered the Black capital of Australia by Aboriginal Australians. It was the site of our taking responsibility for our health, housing and legal needs. It was the site of much political agitation as well as a site for the connecting of many families from all over NSW on four streets known as The Block.

The Block was a place where there was great solidarity of families who had moved to Sydney for employment, access to health services with Redfern AMS opening its doors in 1971, and access to education. The scene on The Block was warm and children would play on the street.

The wealth of wisdom held by many Elders who resided on The Block was immeasurable. I was grown and held by many who chose to share their wisdom with me. I grew, nurtured by their compassion for my work and being.

⁴ Bruce Dynan, *Auntie Polly Smith Centre, CDEP & Community Garden* (21 May 2010) Youtube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsHXAv99d50>>.