

DVIRC Turns **Twenty-One**

A Reflection on Twenty-One Years of the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre

Vig Geddes

2007 marked the 21st anniversary of DVIRC. At the celebration of this milestone, the Centre's Coordinator, Vig Geddes, spoke about the history of the organisation and its links to some of the changes that have occurred in the field since DVIRC was established. The following is an edited version of her speech.

Like other domestic violence services in Victoria, DVIRC owes its beginnings to the Women's Liberation Movement. Women's Liberation Halfway House opened in 1974, followed by other refuges, outreach, and other domestic violence services. It was the refuge women who wrote the submission for DVIRC. They saw that many women came to refuges because their children were being sexually abused. They could also see the need for a domestic violence service that responded to the sexual abuse of children - one that, unlike the refuges, would provide a public and easily accessible contact point. In 1986 a \$50,000, six-month government grant was made available to establish DVIRC. A one-woman telephone service was set up in the back room at WIRE with Lynne Burgoyne as that one woman.

The next year Victoria's first family violence legislation, the Crimes (Family Violence) Act was passed by parliament following the recommendations of the 1985 Criminal Assault in the Home Report. The passing of the Act was not without controversy. A number of prominent feminists argued that civil remedies available under the act worked against domestic violence being seen as a crime. The report recommended that resources be made available for community education about the Act. DVIRC received a significant funding increase, employed new workers,

expanded the telephone service, developed community education activities, and set up support groups, a newsletter, and a library. The Centre then moved to new premises in Elgin Street Carlton.

The employment of DVIRC's first legal worker, Ariel Couchman (known to many feminist lawyers as the first woman in Australia to be admitted to the Bar wearing pants), saw the beginnings of a tradition of political lobbying by the Centre. DVIRC also employed some very skilled and dedicated women, providing support groups and advocacy for survivors of incest. Di Margetts provided training on Protective Behaviours. The use of the term 'incest' in DVIRC's name was intended to draw attention to the prevalence of sexual abuse of children in the home and to mirror the legal terminology of the time. With the setting up of more Centres against Sexual Assault, DVIRC gradually developed a stronger focus on domestic violence than was the case in the early years. Separate government funding streams for sexual assault and domestic violence services has also reinforced this change.

DVIRC assisted in the production of a Victorian version of *Standing Strong*, a set of magazine style publications on respectful relationships (based on a New Zealand publication), for use in secondary schools.



In 1989 Diana Orlando (now the CEO of the Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service)

and I were employed to develop DVIRC's community education activities, with Diana having a particular focus on work with what were then known as Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) Communities. DVIRC was growing quickly so the service moved again, this time to Sydney Road, Brunswick.

The same year DVIRC was part of the Domestic Murders Project that organised a very moving event in the Melbourne Town Hall to commemorate women who had been murdered by their partners. The stories of those women were later published in *Blood on Whose Hands?* The killing of women and children in domestic homicides, which was launched at another big public forum. These events generated a large amount of publicity and had an enormous impact on those who attended.

Another big campaign around this time was based on the case of the Collis Sisters who had been sexually abused by their father, made a statement to police, and then under pressure from their father, said their allegations were untrue. They were convicted of perjury and jailed for six months. Ariel lobbied hard on this and generated a lot of media. The sisters were later pardoned although no compensation was made.

Meanwhile DVIRC acquired its first computer, shared between all of us and kept in 'the computer room'. DVIRC set up a multilingual advocacy program, under the guidance of Diana Orlando, along with Silvia Weiss, Hong Thai, and Jeanette Hourani. They piloted a telephone referral service in Spanish, Vietnamese and Arabic, then produced incest pamphlets in those languages. DVIRC was part of Mafalda, a

collective of Spanish speaking women who organised a support group and presented the first ethnic women's program on 3CR. The program was soon followed by 'The Voice of Arabic Women'. Later DVIRC was providing legal workshops in Vietnamese, Spanish and Arabic.

In 1991 DVIRC began delivering the 4-day NSW Domestic Violence Training Package developed by Heather McGregor and Wendy Styles. This was the first major professional training program of its type developed in Australia and what we learned from Heather and Wendy built the foundations for our development as a major training provider. Soon we were training others to use this model, and Silvia Weiss worked with Women's Health West to translate the training package and deliver it in Spanish.

We then moved on to develop a range of new training programs. Chris Fagan developed training in support group facilitation, particularly groups for mothers and children and Joanne Donne further developed this work. We also provided train-the-trainer for TAFE teachers delivering the Family Violence elective and for a time the DVIRC training was seen as prerequisite for teaching that unit. Within a few years we had won tenders to train Maternal and Child Health Nurses and SAAP workers in Victoria, and a national tender with Legal Aid and Family Services to develop and deliver training to mediators around Australia.

In 1991 in response to a number of calls about lesbian domestic violence, Kassa Bird initiated the Lesbian Violence Action Group, set up a lesbian violence support group, and in consultation with the women in the group, wrote a lesbian violence pamphlet, which has since been updated, and used by other groups around the country.

In 1994 Maria Dimopoulos became DVIRC's second legal worker. She immediately began organising public forums, always with a large cast, always very impressive

speakers, mainly immigrant women and members of the legal profession.

For DVIRC the early 90s was a period with a lot of energy, new initiatives and projects. In her book *Women Working Together: Lessons From Feminist Women's Services*, Wendy Weeks said: 'This is a collective with no sense of "looseness" or "vagueness" about whether or not things will happen, or what the final decision was. The women (as well as the observer) see themselves as independent and disciplined. They are all experienced at working alone and have learned to work together, with the benefit of continuity and staffing stability.'

In 1997 DVIRC uploaded its first website making DVIRC's materials available to a new audience. The following year Woorarra Women's Refuge published its Women's Refuge Disability Action Plan and the Violence against Women with Disabilities Action Group was formed and began lobbying for a funded project for women with disabilities. It took five years and a lot of lobbying and negotiations by Keran Howe, DVIRC's Jenny Nunn and other women from the Action Group.

In the midst of the Kennett Government's cuts to the welfare sector, DVIRC was informed by DHS that it would no longer fund a telephone counselling and support service for people experiencing violence. The argument was that DVIRC's telephone service replicated that provided by the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service, even though our data indicated that most of our calls were from women seeking general support and information, support after they had left violence, or from friends and family members. Luckily however we didn't lose the funding altogether and were able to redirect it into publications. This marked the beginning of DVIRC's expansion into the area of publications.

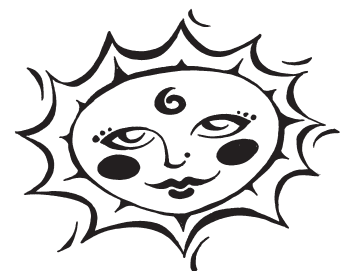
In 1998 DVIRC published its first discussion paper *What's In A Name?* Helen MacDonald led the organisation to new standards in writing, editing and

publishing (and provided us all with a style manual so we could do footnotes properly - some of us used it more than others). The same year 'When Love Hurts', a website for young people, was launched. It won the 2001 National Crime Prevention Award and \$10,000 for DVIRC.

In 1999 we published *Is someone you know being abused?* a booklet for friends and family, informed by the findings of the 1998 Keys Young Report that found that women who did not seek professional help did often tell friends and family about the abuse. Co-funded by the Victorian Community Council Against Violence, this booklet has been a 'bestseller' resulting in copyright requests to republish this in other states of Australia and internationally. Another 'bestseller', the Relationships booklet for young people, was published the following year. This was developed in conjunction with schools and community organisations and funded by the Reichstein Foundation and the Women's Trust.

Under contract to DHS, and in partnership with Women's Health West, we developed a resource kit and training program for General Practitioners in the western suburbs. This kit was later reproduced by the Victorian Community Council Against Violence for use in other regions and has also been reproduced in other states.

In early 2001 DVIRC moved to Collingwood. Our motivation was to have a building that was more accessible and that would enable the organisation to grow. VCOSS owns the building and they have been excellent landlords and lords. Good news for domestic violence services at this time was the appointment of Christine Nixon as Chief Commissioner of Police and project funding for the Victorian Women's Refuges and Associated Domestic Violence Services (VWRADVS).



Christine Nixon announced that family violence would be one of her top priorities and appointed the very talented Leigh Gassner to lead the review into police responses to family violence. Soon after her appointment DVIRC wrote a letter to the Commissioner, signed by all the domestic violence services and Family Violence Networkers asking for a meeting to which she quickly responded. The appointment of Christine Nixon marked the beginning of a new relationship between women's domestic violence services and Victoria Police.

VWRADVS (now Domestic Violence Victoria) had existed under several names since the early 1970s. The new project money was the first step to achieving funding as a peak body. Project worker Lisa Hanlon worked with the group to organise the 2002 'Putting Women First' conference, a significant event which brought together VWRADVS members and government to discuss practice issues and to hear about integration work in other states and New Zealand.

Later that year DVIRC organised a forum, 'Towards an Integrated Response to Domestic Violence'. At the forum Christine Nixon announced the recommendations arising from the review of police responses (including a new police code of practice) and the Department of Justice announced that it would refer the review of the Crimes (Family Violence) Act to the Victorian Law Reform Commission.

After a long period of waiting there was funding for a disability project – less than we had hoped for, and for a different kind of project. DVIRC accepted the offer to provide an auspice for the project and so began DVIRC's ongoing commitment to its disability project.

Initially a DHS funded project to develop protocols between domestic violence and disability services in the western metropolitan region, it was extended for another year to apply the learning to other regions. Since then DVIRC has been very grateful to the Reichstein

foundation, Brenda House, Molly's House, the Telematics Trust and now the Buckland Foundation to continue this work. We have also used some of our own income to support the project. We have enjoyed working with the Victorian Women with Disabilities Network and we thank them for the support they have given us. DVIRC's work has benefited from the relationship. Having a disability project at DVIRC has had a big impact on the organisation, teaching us to keep disability in mind whether we are doing training, a pamphlet, or a website. Our website has been upgraded to meet disability accessible standards and we are now producing pamphlets that are more accessible in terms of language and format. The 2006 discussion paper written by Liz Olle explored the issue of violence induced disability. Chris Jennings, our project worker, has tirelessly led the organisation in this work for the past 5 years.

In 2002 the *Women's Safety Strategy* was released, articulating a whole of government commitment to reducing violence against women. The Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence (SSCRFV), co-chaired by Office of Women's Affairs and Victoria Police, reflected this whole of government approach to family violence. The Committee was made up both of government and community organisations as suggested by Christine Nixon. Community organisations including DVIRC then lobbied for a broader representation that would include the Federation of Community Legal Services, Elizabeth Hoffman House, and the Victorian Women with Disabilities Network. Libby Eltringham has solidly represented DVIRC on that Committee and on many others since then.

In 2003, in response to increasing demand from the field for formal recognition for training, DVIRC became a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), probably the first organisation in Australia to deliver training mapped to the new national domestic/family violence competencies. The pioneering work done by Margot

Scott in developing DVIRC's early training programs, building the training team and the Centre's reputation for excellence in training deserves recognition. Margot and the team continue to be grateful to Wendy Clancy for the hard slog and mounds of paperwork required for DVIRC to achieve RTO status.

Also in 2003 DVIRC launched the 'Bursting the Bubble' website for young people experiencing violence at home and the accompanying booklet *Something not Right at Home?* The website won the 2005 Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Award. In partnership with Melbourne University we evaluated this website and the project won the 2005 Australasian Evaluation Society Community Development Award. The site has since been updated to include feedback from the evaluation. DVIRC is very proud of Mandy McKenzie for the groundbreaking work that she has done to establish DVIRC as a leader in family violence websites both in Australia and internationally.

Family violence work in Victoria built up momentum in 1994 with the release of the new Code of Practice for Victoria Police and the publication of VicHealth's *The Health Costs of Violence*. The national 'Home Truths' conference was held in Melbourne, jointly organised by Domestic Violence Victoria (DVVic) and the Centres Against Sexual Assault. DVIRC played a major role in the conference organising group. Four hundred people attended, with many more turned away and more abstracts than we could accept. The Body Shop launched a national campaign drawing on DVIRC material for its publications.

In 2005, under contract to the Department of Justice we participated in the training needs assessment, and developed and delivered training for Court staff in the new Family Violence Division of the Magistrates' Court and later to Registrars across all Magistrates Courts. More recently DVIRC trainer Nancy Corbett has provided training to future Court Registrars at Victoria University.

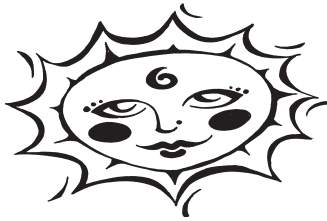
Developments in the federal legal arena have not been so positive. DVIRC is concerned that the Commonwealth Family Law Act may force women who have experienced violence into mediation with violent partners. Allie Bailey worked with Relationships Australia on a research project on women's experience of mediation and later developed training for workers who are supporting women to go through mediation. Pia Mathys, a student on placement at DVIRC produced a tip sheet for women on mediation and violence, and Debbie Kirkwood wrote the discussion paper *Behind Closed Doors: Family Dispute Resolution and Family Violence*. The paper has been widely read across Australia and is now available on the website of the Federal Attorney General's Department.

Victoria Legal Aid invited us to provide training and policy advice for the establishment of the Round Table Dispute Management (RDM) section of their organisation. As RDM provided an alternative model from other dispute resolution practices, in that their clients were legally represented, and that this practice was something that DVIRC firmly endorsed, we were very happy to be consultants to the RDM team, both case managers and chairpersons. The relationship with RDM has continued, with DVIRC providing accredited training to new case managers.

In 2006 there was a setback to family violence work in Victoria when Department of Human Services funding to the Family Violence Networkers ceased. This was an incomprehensible decision to the sector as these were the only funded prevention positions in the state.

I would like to acknowledge the excellent work done by the Networkers. They brought people together to organise on a local level: domestic violence service





providers and other community organisations, including churches, schools, health services, and service groups such as rotary and lions clubs. They did some great work with local media, recruited local personalities to support projects, and coordinated Week Without Violence across the state. They organised professional development for local services. They were a brilliant distribution point for printed materials and the first point of call for any government department wanting to consult their local communities. DVIRC had the privilege of facilitating the quarterly meetings of the Networkers at our office and benefited from their rich source of knowledge about the needs of local communities.

Much of the work of the Networkers is documented in DVIRC's 2002 publication *101 Ways Great And Small To Prevent Family Violence*. Losing the Networkers was a big blow to prevention work in Victoria. It was also sad to see workers who had contributed so much, some of them over a period of 10 years, just disappear quietly from the landscape without any big public thank you for the truly amazing work that they had done. On behalf of DVIRC I would like to thank them.

The Networkers are gone but there has been additional funding put into family violence. This has seen new organisations come into the field, and new interest in training and publications. In particular domestic violence services welcomed the 2006 publication of the Code of Practice by DVVic, a publication which provides a basis for a shared understanding of the gendered dynamics of family violence and best practice.

With the increased awareness of family violence in our community the number and variety of requests to DVIRC continues to grow. Priscilla Salloum, DVIRC's Office Manager for the past 10 years, who was initially responsible for maintaining 3

computers, now oversees a system of 15 networked computers, and has developed new databases for training registrations and for our telephone referral system. The library service developed by Colleen Keane in the early 1990s has changed with many library requests now coming via email. However the library is still used by survivors of violence, with one of our most recent library workers, Ann Raouf, the subject of much positive feedback from some of these library users. The Telephone Information workers continue to be the public face of DVIRC. We have been fortunate to have many women from other domestic violence services and from WIRE work on our telephone service. It is not an easy job to balance training and publications enquiries with quality responses to survivors of violence. Michelle Soo and Ann Raouf deserve particular credit for the work that they have done in developing new systems to improve our telephone response.

In 2007 Kiri Bear began work on 'Partners in Prevention', a VicHealth funded project bringing together those who are doing family violence prevention work in schools and creating interesting ways of sharing learning from the project. We will continue to develop our training programs on children and young people, with Donna Zander and Debrah Clinch leading this work. In partnership with Swinburne University, under tender to DHS, we are providing the Integrated Pathways training. Our immediate plans are to build the training unit, to strengthen our position to respond to the increasing demand for training, and to find more resources to further develop our website.

This year we finally achieved Tax Deductible Gift Recipient Status (DGR), the end of a long journey for finance worker Janet Hall. Over the years we, like other community organisations have had to leap through hoops to get the most of whatever tax breaks were on offer to spin out our funding further. The latest of these was the quest for DGR status so that people can make tax deductible donations to DVIRC.

Who knows what the next quest will be? What's certain is that this is one of several areas where pro-bono legal assistance is necessary.

The achievements of DVIRC are due to the passion, commitment and skills of many very talented women who have contributed over the past 21 years, often putting far more into the work than was required in their job descriptions. The women who have worked here have been inspired by the challenges presented by a society where gender inequality and attitudes that condone violence, work against the safety of women and children.

The organisation has a history of retaining its workers over many years with several having worked here for 10 years or more. We are paid less than many who are doing similar work in other organisations and in government. Several women have even accepted a drop in salary in order to work here. While DVIRC attempts to compensate for the low salaries by offering generous and flexible conditions, there is also a willingness of the organisation to support its workers to initiate projects in line with their own interests, and then to embrace this work as part of the work of the organisation as a whole.

I would also like to acknowledge the commitment and passion of the Community Representatives in our Management Collective who have supported us, stuck with us and been prepared to work in our unusual structure. We thank them for their patience and willingness to support the workers through many interesting and demanding experiences and for their care about educating the community about family violence. In particular I would like to thank Deborah Davison, the current chairperson of DVIRC for leading and supporting the organisation through DVIRC's recent growth and changes.

The future

It is important that we ensure a common understanding of family violence, about power and gender and the impact

of various forms of unequal power distribution in the community. Family violence is a deeply political issue because it's about power and redistribution of power. There are always going to be pockets or movements of resistance to a change of power. We need funding; we need effective responses for both perpetrators and victims of violence. What we also need is a shared commitment to the political work.

The Victorian Government's commitment to a whole of government response to family violence is to be applauded and we are the envy of many people in other states. What we need to do now is make sure that the political work and advocacy outside of government continues and informs the work of government. It is not the job of bureaucrats to create political change. They respond to the demands for change. We in the women's domestic violence services and our allies need to keep our voices loud because there are other competing voices that speak out against change.

One of the threats that we now face is that the small services, the ones who have over the years banded together to lobby for change are now in danger of disappearing as government moves to funding larger organisations and government demands for accountability become onerous for small services. This is a threat to diversity and independence. It is important that these services continue.

Thank you to all the other organisations that have supported our work, and been prepared to enter into partnerships with us and to the bureaucrats from the various government departments who have provided their support and encouragement. In particular I would like to thank all the women who have shared their stories of violence, whose experiences continue to inform and support our work.

