‘Task Force Days: Looking Back and Journeying Forward, 1975-77’

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http://waynera.wordpress.com/family-history/

Background:

The format of the Task Force History project is written from an oral history perspective. Like other students of the time (1973-1991) the Task Force experience is still vividly implanted in recent living memory. I was at the Task Force, 1975-1977, TF nearly 40 years ago, and given the major transformative experience it had on my life, I will draw very much on living memory to reflect on the history now being recorded. It will take a story line approach and is written in a narrative style rather than an academic analysis written for an academic audience. The narrative is structured in a question and answer approach which allows for the elaboration of those substantive issues that I would like to share from the Task Force days and beyond. It will also draw on materials of the events in time and place which will be used to elaborate on the journey of learning that took place.

My story is for the purpose of documenting the memorable history that unfolded at the SAIT City campus so that it can be shared with other students, family, Indigenous Studies courses, and the communities from where we came. Hopefully it will provide some inspiration for the next generation to see the value of higher education as a tool of individual and community empowerment, the importance of culture and identity in the learning process, and some ideas for present and future Indigenous education programs.

What is the Task Force, TF?

The name Task Force in itself conjures up images of a challenge at hand, driven by a force for change, to achieve a designated goal at the end of the task. It is reminiscent of names like ‘Softly Softly Task Force’ which was an Anglo TV series of the 60s era. These are some of the underlying
assumptions that would confront most people in finding an appropriate definition for the Task Force - an Indigenous Tertiary Education program at SAIT that produced some of Australia’s most outstanding scholars, leaders and spokespeople in Indigenous Affairs. Whatever the task may have been and the force used to achieve the goals it set for itself, the Task Force is a story that deserves its rightful place in 21st Century Australian Indigenous Education History.

The TF education program was a community and Government initiative established in South Australia in the early 70s. It was perhaps the first National Scheme of its kind designed to provide a pathway for Indigenous Australians to gain tertiary qualifications from an accredited academic institution. The program developed within the academic structure of the South Australian Institute of Technology, SAIT City Campus. It was funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the predecessor of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs administration in Australia before ATSIC, and was administered in collaboration with SAIT. I don’t have funding details or the contribution of SAIT, but given its national focus, teaching staff, administration, overhead costs, and capital expenditure it would have been a substantial amount.

In highlighting Indigenous education programs as ‘firsts’ one also needs to consider such appraisals in the context of Indigenous education generally as first Nation peoples. Against a background of exclusion, it is ironic in the extreme that the penny finally dropped after 150 years of colonial domination of the education system, that Indigenous education should be given its rightful place within the academy. The long exclusion of an education system with its own unique epistemology and teaching methods that represents one of the oldest living, surviving, cultures in the world, is an indictment on any education system. Closing the continuing ‘Gap in Indigenous Education inequality’ revisits us in 21st Century Australia-see Federal Minister for Education admits Indigenous Education Defeat, 10 May, 2013.

It was through the conscious efforts of great Nunga leaders of the time supported by visionary political leaders like Don Dunstan that the TF can claim credit as a long awaited and indeed first in equality of Education in Australia. A long time coming but we were the beneficial generation of this huge paradigm shift in formal Tertiary Education in the late 20th Century. I will return to the vexed question of achieving changes in fundamental human rights issues like education and Indigenous rights later.

Who was Eligible to Attend?

The TF catered for Indigenous people from all parts of Australia who did not have the normal entry requirements for higher education. Some of the students were younger members of the community who had recently completed secondary levels of education. The majority like me were adult mature age students who had been in the workforce and wanted to return to further education. Many were government workers sponsored by their relative authorities, to study at the tertiary level and to gain qualifications that would assist them in their career paths in Aboriginal Affairs administration and service delivery.

Underpinning the diversity of students coming to the TF was also the assumption that once we had acquired academic qualifications, it would provide a pathway to employment in what is essentially our domain. A ‘self determination’ and ‘autonomy’ belief that was certainly driven by community expectations-no question about that. An expectation that was further encouraged by those working in Aboriginal Affairs administration of the time and beyond, who often alluded to
the fact that; once Aboriginal people were qualified the analogy of ‘handing over the reins’ or ‘stepping aside’ to allow for equality of opportunity to be enjoyed by Aboriginal people. I will elaborate on this fundamental question as we go through the history, keeping in mind that it remains highly ‘contested ground’ in Aboriginal Affairs policy and administration today or what is variously labelled, the burgeoning ‘Aboriginal Industry’.

Where did I first hear about the Task Force?

I was living and working in Echuca and heard about the TF through one of the Social Workers from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Social workers were mostly non-Indigenous people who used to visit local Aboriginal communities to do community welfare type work, and to also keep us in touch with things happening including information on education programs like the Task Force. A rather ironic proposition at the time I must say, particularly when you consider that Welfare and Social Work oriented studies would be the main qualifications of our education at SAIT.

As a local Aboriginal resident I was always interested in what was happening in Aboriginal Affairs and what opportunities were available particularly in the post 1967 referendum era which did raise our hopes and aspirations for a better and more equitable future. Hopes were further raised in the 1970s with Gough Whitlam coming to office on a platform of policies and commitments to ‘land rights and self determination’. It was a ripe time for change and reform and one that saw the rise of local community based organisations. These organisations were set up in regional centres where there was a significant representation of Aboriginal people, and the Njernda Aboriginal Coop in Echuca grew out of these commitments. Local Coops as they were known, provided an important community base and information outlet, and later became major service providers in health, education, housing, employment and other services.

At that particular time my schooling was only basic and I had been in the workforce for a number of years working as a labourer and concreter, always keeping my options open for new opportunities that may arise. I was already working like a man before that and used to go into the shearing sheds with my father when I was 12-13 roustabouting and picking up wool after the shearers. My Grandfather Puppa Henry Atkinson was the head ringer or gun shearer in the region and I’m sure he would have liked me to follow in his footsteps like his son, Clive Atkinson—my father. Like many other Indigenous people I also worked in the seasonal fruit industry picking fruit during the summer school break to earn money to buy our clothes and books for school the next year—there was no Abstudy in those days, 1950s.

I was very keen and often desperate I must say to change the direction of hard slogging and repetitious physical work with limited opportunities. I was hungry for new learning and knowledge but at that time there were no education programs like the Task Force that allowed us to return to study except for the Swinburne Aboriginal education program in Melbourne which started later than the TF around 1976.

One also needs to acknowledge that the stark reality of Indigenous people in regional Australia at the time, against the background of only basic education that our forebears experienced, was one of exclusion. Lacking in education, and the exclusion of our forebears from a proper education during the out of sight mindset of the reserve system, meant that the only option available was to join the labour force. The other barrier to equality in employment and education at the time was the racism that existed in regional Victoria. Remembering also that the schooling for Aboriginal
kids in regional Australia in the 1950s was a huge struggle. Trying to adjust to moving into towns from life on the fringes and adapting to a learning environment that was pretty hostile towards Indigenous people were rather daunting realities. I know it was a familiar experience that many of us shared at the Task Force for which we gained some relief from the commonality of our existence as Indigenous Australians. When race and class are combined however and used to relegate your existence to the bottom of the socio economic scale, they become and remain potent forces of marginalisation that continue to stifle Indigenous initiative today.

It was against this background that I left school in form 3, the equivalent of year 9 in today’s terms, and went into the workforce at the age of 14-15.

I needed to find work to help bring money in to support a family of 6 at the time. My mother was a supporting parent who worked as a cook in the local hospital and it was a struggle to raise a family of 5 children. I saw it as an obligation on my part to find work and help my mother with the struggle of raising a young family. Some of my siblings who were old enough to find work or were fortunate enough to get apprentices did the same.

After being in the workforce for at least 14 years I was now approaching my early 30s. It was around this time, through the community information network, that I first heard about the Task Force and the opportunity it offered for those wanting to return to study. The chance to get off the treadmill and to realise those desires and dreams that I had to put on hold were now becoming a reality. It seemed like my hunger and passion for knowledge was within reach and no barriers were going to stop the drive within me. To use the ‘brick wall’ analogy it was like facing the reality of your existence with questions of; do you resign to the fact that your future is going to be one of hard slog, or is there a pathway that you can use to transcend that reality to a more fulfilling and secure future? With a bit of guts and determination along the way the, latter was the obvious choice, and a pathway that became a profound turning point in my life.

The other significant factor that was the underlying motive for my vision forward was the ancestral lineage of my forebears who were outstanding teachers and leaders in the Aboriginal community.

My great grandfather Thomas Shadrach James studied medicine at the University of Melbourne before the turn of the 19th Century and was the teacher, mentor and community leader at Maloga and Cummeragunja Aboriginal reserves (1881-1947). My great uncle William Cooper, and relative Sir Doug Nichols were students of Grandpa James and together with Marj Tucker, were the founding leaders of the Aboriginal political movement, established in Victoria and New South Wales, 1930s. 'The power of the voice and the spear of the pen' are key strategies and educational tools they passed on to our generation. This is where I believe the hunger for knowledge and the value of higher education was nurtured in places like the Scholars Hut at old Maloga Mission (1874-1888) and Cummeragunja (1889-present) where Granpa mentored and taught the first generation of Aboriginal leaders. Looking back I believe this is still a powerful metaphor and the single most driving force of Yorta Yorta people today - to value higher education as a means of empowerment.

Our family was always proud of what our forebear’s achieved and the contributions they made to the Aboriginal struggle. We were taught to be respectful of the fine track record they set for us, and to use their leadership qualities to inspire our career paths whatever they may be. They are
certainly the key motivating factors of my achievements in life. We were also raised within an extended family kinship network that taught us to be proud of our Aboriginality and to use that to transcend the put down negatives, and to walk tall and proud wherever we chose to go in life. One thing that we had in our favour is that we learned to be grounded in our Aboriginality and to use that to fend off the negatives towards us from those outside our group. I think that has continued to hold us in good stead throughout the many trials and tribulations in life as Yorta Yorta people.

Having provided a context from which to view my journey of learning and background to those key events that lead up to the Task Force in 1975, I will now talk about the Task Force journey itself and the quality of education we were about to receive.

After hearing news of the Task Force in the early 1970s, I wrote a letter to the course coordinator and founder of the program Dr Ross Harris expressing an interest in the course. I also took advantage of speaking with a student who completed the course and was working in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, DAA, and Melbourne. Being one of the first groups to do course she had mixed reactions about its effectiveness as an Indigenous Tertiary study program for which I will return to shortly. Following these conversations a decision had to be made on whether I would do the course and pull up stumps and move to Adelaide with my family. I was married with two young children at school; one was 10 and the other 8. After much discussion and weighing of the advantages which far outweighed the disadvantages, we reached agreement that it would be the best course for the future. An opportunity to further my education and find new pathways in employment was a key factor that influenced the decision.

Start of Task Force

![Start of Task Force](image)

After being accepted into the course we moved to Adelaide in 1975 which was the year of the second intake and took up residence in Elizabeth West. What a change from little old Echuca nestled on the banks of the Murray River now living in what was essentially a decentralised
English community mostly filling the labour market for the car industry. This was a bit of a comedown for my wife and young family, as we thought we would be living in Adelaide and to find ourselves in Elizabeth some distance from Adelaide was a bit of a shock I must say. I often revisit this journey of learning and the famous train trip where we used to pick up other TF students along the way to the North Terrace City campus from Elizabeth and Salisbury.

My first contact with the Task Force located in the lovely old red brick colonial style building in North Terrace it was one of mixed feelings and certainly one of great expectations. The physical to the intellectual path was a welcome transition and one that I adapted to very quickly. The other factor the influenced the decision was the chance to find out more about my Aboriginality and our history and culture as a people. To do this with my own people was a huge incentive.

We gathered together on the top floor of the building which was to be our little abode for the first year of the course. We met some of the students of the first intake, some of whom were sceptical of the course as mentioned. As a newly created course within a credited academic institution, like SAIT, the first intake saw themselves as guinea pigs in an experimental exercise, to use that term cautiously. Being the first intake of a new and innovative project in Indigenous higher education in Australia, the program certainly had that ring about it. It was perhaps the first Indigenous Studies program within an academic institution in the Australian context and one that had a lot of focus on it in terms of input for outcomes expected. I must say that it was bit funny at the start as the term Technology conjured up images that we were going to be doing some sort of scientific studies and being aware of the worldly inventions of David Unaipon a famous Ngarrindjeri inventor, of South Australia, who is regarded as the Leonardo Da Vinci of Australian inventions, I thought that was a fair assumption to make. The imagination on the return to study in Adelaide I must say took on all sorts of images at the time.

Given the feelings of the first intake I did see their point. Like all first groups in a new program, they were part of the process of a new learning curve in Aboriginal education from which new things would be learned and adapted for the next intake, so in many ways, we were the beneficiaries of their experience and in that context it did create a tension that needed to be acknowledged. I think we eventually came to grips with that through some open discussion with the group as a whole. Some of the first intake was actively engaged in sharing their experience after the course, discussing the pathways they chose and what opportunities that opened up for them in employment and community work. Some found jobs in Government Departments administering Aboriginal Affairs and others chose to work in community based organisations. Some of the more outspoken members were quick to alert us to some of the false assumptions floating around at the time about career paths and equality of opportunity issues. We were reminded not to get our hopes up that the qualifications we got would be a ticket to empowerment and a door opener to jobs in Indigenous Affairs. I must say that it was a fair assumption that floated around during the Whitlam era in that the policy of self determination would deliver greater control of Indigenous Affairs to Indigenous people. Whether the Whudjullah bureaucrats who had entrenched themselves in the ‘Aboriginal Industry’ were willing to relinquish control and take a walk, is a matter of continued contention across the spectrum of Indigenous Affairs. The gap between myth and reality became a common theme in Indigenous education, and the ideals of self determination, community control, and Indigenous empowerment remained ever illusive.
What did we learn at the TF?

The best way to answer this question is to break it into two parts. The academic learning, and the personalised and cultural learning that took place between the students themselves, keeping in mind that the unique thing about the Task Force is that it brought Indigenous students together from across Australia. We come from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, and from a diversity of traditional, regional, and urban settings. Looking back I think this was the most enlightening experience and one that was to enrich us all in our education, self esteem, and confidence as Indigenous Australians.

The Academic Learning for those of us who had been out of school for a considerable time was like coming back and sitting at a desk with a teacher up front. For me it was a re-entry program that gave us an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the academic environment and to learn at our own pace. The course was certainly designed to cater for students, from a diversity of backgrounds with different literacy and educational needs. I know that my practical education in the work force was a big help to draw upon and it held me in good stead with my verbal and people skills, but my literacy and academic skills were challenges I and I know many others faced. They were challenges however that were easier to understand when you compared the two different worlds that you were coming from. After working so hard in the workforce with limited opportunities, I made a conscious decision that now was the time to develop those intellectual capacities that lay dormant in me for so long and that the time was now ripe for new and challenging adventures to happen. I often drew on the experience of the workforce to motivate me and to take me to new levels in my desire for knowledge and greater understanding. Confronting each challenge as it came and keeping my eye at all times on the goal that I set for myself, family, and community, are other motivational imperatives that I drew on and which kept me on track.

I need to mention here that in addition to the diversity of student mix there were also different expectations of students attending. Most students were working in government agencies delivering Indigenous programs and were returning to study to further their knowledge and skills in Aboriginal Affairs administration. I think that it was the needs of those students that the course was designed to cater for and the responsibility was on students to successfully complete their studies and return to those agencies that supported them under the assumption that their qualifications would increase their chances of promotion. For students of my status, it was more like returning to tertiary studies to gain a qualification that would be a stepping stone to employment or the basis to do further academic studies at the undergraduate and post graduate level. Whatever our interests may have been, it was the same learning process and those who were not sponsored by government agencies were able to draw on what was called the NEATS, (National Employment and Training Scheme), similar to Ab Study today. It was a scheme that allowed adult mature age students to return to study on an allowance that was comparable to the dole. Incidentally the NEATS was introduced by Clyde Cameron who I think was from South Australia and a senior cabinet minister in the Whitlam Government, 1972-1975. The NEAT scheme was eventually abolished and other schemes and scholarships have continued through Commonwealth agencies like Centrelink, New Start, Abstudy and others.
What subjects were being taught?

The course was well structured in that it allowed you to come back to study and to work your way through the transition at your own pace and to then take the next step up when you were ready. There was certainly plenty of support along the way and the academic staff was tuned into the diversity of student needs that they were dealing with. On the personal level this was a steep learning curve as there were people from traditional backgrounds who spoke their own language and were willing to share a lot of their cultural knowledge. Students from regional and urban backgrounds had a vast range of stories and common experiences to share. It is an experience I’ll never forget. Each day was a day that you woke up with enthusiasm looking forward to what you were going to learn from each other, and what new knowledge was going to come your way. I will return to the personal, social and cultural learning later and will now look at the educational side.

The course had strong Social Science and Humanities focus that embraced the key disciplines of Sociology, Psychology, Politics, Social Work, Welfare Dimensions, Aborigines and the Law, and Community Development. Other subjects included English and History and of course there was an Aboriginal Studies component some of which was taught by guest speakers and a large amount was learned from each other in terms of shared history, and oral knowledge - a key learning curve for the group as a whole.

There were initially two components of the course. One was a Task Force Certificate that provided students with basic skills in literacy and welfare oriented programs. The other was a Certificate course in Community Development which was equivalent to a Higher Secondary Education Certificate that provided entry to University. The highest qualification was an Associate Diploma in Social Work which could be used as a stepping stone to University and an Arts Degree program. I think I was one of the first to test the status of the Associate Diploma after graduating in 1977. The Victorian Tertiary Education Accreditation Committee recognised the Associate Diploma as the equivalent of two subjects towards a Bachelor of Arts Degree in a Victorian University. As the Task Force grew it developed more options and towards the end of its operation was offering many different courses in Tertiary Education including Bachelor of Arts and Diploma programs and opportunities for studying Business Administration.

Quality of Education and Teaching at the Task Force

Most of the lecturers were non-Indigenous. Some had worked in communities as administrators, and social workers and others worked in government administered programs like the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Community Welfare. Others were trained teachers and graduates in the Social Sciences and Humanities and some were doing post graduate studies in Anthropology. There were no Indigenous lectures at the start except for some guest lecturers who worked in government and community organisations. We did have an Aboriginal Councillor who provided support for students and their families. In my second year an Indigenous lecturer from Victoria came on board and taught Indigenous Studies, legal studies, and politics. Some top profile Indigenous leaders and activists would often visit and give talks and share their stories, culture and musical talents. The course certainly encouraged Indigenous guest speakers and did have an open door policy on those matters. Overall that was the broad spectrum of subjects and teaching offered during my time at the course, 1975-1977. I will now elaborate on some of the experiences of that time.
As mentioned, I was a very keen and motivated learner and my aptitude for leaning took off on a roller coaster ride. I learned quickly and could practically recite a lecture after it was given. My cognitive skills were very sharp and my hunger for learning was being fulfilled. I seemed to have had a natural flare for those subjects that had a humanitarian focus and a social justice dimension, and I certainly cottoned onto those subjects that taught us about change and how to achieve change through the strategies being taught.

As we settled into the course many of us found some of the western and theoretical constructs a bit over the top and abstract. We often engaged the services of a tutor to help us decipher some of the jargonistic terminology that was being bandied around. It was required however by most students to break down the jargonistic terminology and for lecturers to adapt their teaching style to the cultural context of the audience and the knowledge being presented. This is an important point because it made us realise the power that we had as a student group. We could express a view, ask questions and challenge the way knowledge was being conveyed in accordance with our own expectations and cultural values. Keep it simple and break it down so that we can understand and learn together was the message often conveyed. I can verify the power of collective action which was clearly demonstrated in one of the Sociology courses that was looking at the social and political theorists of the 18th century. It was mostly going down like a lead balloon and the group decided that we would get more value out of learning something relevant to Australia that we could apply in our work and communities - the applied knowledge model. As a result of collective action we were instrumental in changing the structure and content of some subjects and making them more relevant to our needs. Due credit also needs to be given to the Task Force administration for being open to student views and willing to accept the need for change and adaption when required.

There were times when tensions arose in the learning process and some of the more assertive members of the group were not backward in coming forward in expressing their views considering that some of our students came from families of strong political activists. We learned much about
political activism and strategies that could be used to bring about change through some of our
guest lectures and particularly from the Community Development subject. The textbook for
Community Development was Saul Alinsky’s ‘Rules for Radicals’ which advocated the ‘ends
justifies the means political philosophy’. Legitimate political strategies could be used to bring
about change which required collective organisation. Alinsky advocated ideas of empowerment
that Individuals and communities could use to break down the barriers between equality and
inequality, and to bring about a more fair and just society. This could be achieved by challenging
the current agencies that promoted inequality by direct action and the means that you engaged
justified the ends that you were attempting to achieve. A fairly tall and formidable order but
definitely a plausible western theoretical construct if changes in existing power dynamics could be
achieved in the real world.

I must admit that I was familiar with some home grown political strategies and how similar actions
were used by my people, the Yorta Yorta, to bring about some change in rights based issues
before and after the 1967 referendum. It was more of political action that grew from the
grassroots of what was called ‘base camp’ politics. It stayed at the base camp as a community
driven action lead by outstanding leaders whose means to the ends they wanted was the ‘power
of the voice’ and the ‘spear of the pen’ supported by ‘collective organisation’. At all times
however, and in the struggle for change, political strategies were created and lead by Indigenous
voices. Applying theory with practice and achieving a paradigm shift in the power dynamics for
Indigenous Australians, is often referred to as -the ‘struggle continues’. Not to overlook those
changes that needs to be recognised and have been achieved through base camp politics.

One very prominent Aboriginal visitor to the TF in the early days who did put the fire in the belly
of many of us in terms of base camp politics was Charlie Perkins. At that particularly time in
Australian history Charlie Perkins and John Moriarty were probably the only two Indigenous
Australians studying at the University level. Both were at Sydney University (check) and were
employed in the infamous Department of Aboriginal Affairs, a paternalistic structure that
overlorded Indigenous Australians for the most part of the late 20th Century. Charlie was able to
share his experience of working in the system and the frustrations of being subordinate to the
heavy laden bureaucratic structures above him. He used to have some fairly hostile
confrontations with one of the head bureaucrats of DAA by the name of Barry Dexter. Charlie
took the opportunity of a captive audience of Aboriginal enthusiasts, to expose the nature and
structure of the administration, illustrating how the actual structure worked and whose interests
it served, pointing out that most of the money or at least two thirds was absorbed in the fat cat
salaries of those who chose to ride on the bandwagon of the Aboriginal Affairs industry. Charlies
lecture was certainly one of the most enlightening experiences of my Task Force days and it did
put the fire in the belly. Looking back now with the benefit of hindsight we can see just how big
and pervasive the industry has become across the broad spectrum of Indigenous Affairs
administration. The extent to which our affairs continue to be dominated by non-Indigenous
interests was bought home in the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission Report, 1992.

One of the strategies that emerged from this discourse was the ‘insider outsider view’ in which
many of us believed that in order to change the system we needed to get inside, and change
would come from within, whereas the outsiders believed that the only way change would come
was by direct action and collective organisation. The irony of this ideology however, as many of
us would inevitably find, is that change is hard to achieve no matter what path you choose to
take, and the chipping away philosophy grounded in base camp politics has produced more changes than imported ideological constructs. Some great intellectual niceties were floating around in days gone by.

I think I’ve covered many of the issues and events that are still vivid in our memory banks and have tried to keep on the track on my own storyline without assuming the position of speaking for the groups as a whole and for the course in its entirety.

What did we come out of the task force with?

I think one of the key things we came out of the course with is a big pumped up chest full of self esteem, reaffirmation of Aboriginality, and confidence ready to take on the world and to break down those barriers that stood in our way for too long. It also gave me added confidence to assert myself more in race politics back on the home front. I was aware of the odd racist one liner type joke often used to get a laugh from the group. Those who engaged in this activity didn’t think their words were offensive, and those of us on the receiving would often cop it sweet in order to keep the peace. The Task Force experience however, gave me the added confidence to challenge underlying prejudices, stereotypical notions of Aboriginality, and casual racist jokes when they arose. In other words people became more conscious of what they were saying when I was around. I wouldn’t take a backward step in expressing a rational view on race relations issues, or challenging some of the negative red neck views often read in the local media and heard at community meetings.

We also came out of the TF with important skills in literacy and knowledge that could be applied back in our own communities. Many of us gained from some of the personal growth and self development skills through the social sciences and humanities courses.

‘The Room at the Top’: Memories come back to revisit?

There is a room at the top of the original Task Force program on North Terrace that holds some precious and personal memories for many of us who ventured down the path of group dynamics. One particular encounter was in a Psychology subject in which we did some therapeutic work on dealing with anger. This particular teacher came to the conclusion, after knocking around with our mob that Aboriginal people including myself carried a lot of unresolved anger around. Finding a way to deal with anger to control it and to try and get rid of it was the key challenge, for which we were introduced to a therapy called ‘GESTALT’. From what I understand it is a German concept used for treating or indeed exorcising unresolved anger that lingers within us. If not controlled, and as we know, anger can cause tensions within the group, it can alienate people, and it can also manifest itself on others. There is of course some underlying factors to the causes of anger that need to be considered, and when you look at the nature and the history of Indigenous European relations in Australia there are many ‘causative factors’. I won’t go into that history except to say that it is true that many of us did carry anger in varying degrees, and what I witnessed in that little room upstairs under the guidance of our therapist was full on anger expressed in many and often scary ways. The idea behind this GESTALT therapy was to bring the causes of the anger out and put it up front. By doing this you could then work the anger out through what was called two chair works. That is, you put whatever caused the anger in the chair in front of you and created a dialogue with the nature and the source of the anger you were dealing with. In releasing the anger you were at liberty to use these foam type battens to go to town on what was the cause of the
anger by literally bashing the shitter out of the chair in front of you. The idea of this therapy was to release the GESTALT, to unleash it, get it out, and hopefully leave it behind. I can remember many floggings going down in that room with those rubber battens. Some pretty scary stuff considering the degrees of anger being dealt with. It was a rather gruelling and emotional encounter that you were taken through by the skilled therapist, who empathised with you through the process. At the end, you were left up in the air totally exhausted, needing time to desensitize yourself and come back down to an even keel. After a couple of days reflection on the process that we went through as a group, I think it did help to get rid of a lot of the GESTALTS that we carried around.

Let me say however, this is still a vivid memory that stands out from our TF days. It often revisits many of us and I know of others who have journeyed back to that old ‘Room up Top’ to reflect on our profound experiences. I often think about all the GESTALTS we dealt with and the stories that we shared, which had a bonding and trusting affect on us as a group. While those stories are kept in our secret sacred memories, and some of us have been back to revisit, we all have compelling memories of what we left behind. I had the opportunity to revisit the room at the top with members of the group who are doing this project and shared the sacred storylines that are ever present. I’m sure this story will be part of the 40th Anniversary history project and I’m willing to give those interested a guided tour of the story of the ‘Room on the Top Floor’. I also need to acknowledge that some of the group, at least three to my knowledge, have been called back to the dreamtime where I hope there are no GESTALTS to deal with anymore.

Combining the Academic with the Social

During the Task Force program it brought together many talented and gifted students in sport, music, theatre, art and community affairs. We formed our own basketball and football teams and competed in local competitions. Some of our footballers were top players sought after by many established clubs. The women participated in basketball and were supportive of social and sporting events. Music also saw many talented artists who could sing and play instruments. Not to forget the legendary ‘Task Force Band’ that played at our local social functions and gigs held in Dillinger’s, North Terrace. I played bass and guitar in a band in Echuca for many years, and was only too pleased to step up and be part of the band which became a focal point of the social scene. The flow of talent through the Task Force continued and it was not uncommon to see different artists entertaining, picking on a guitar, singing and cracking a joke along the way- that is the family spirit that the Task Force created.

When you add the entire social, community interaction, and academic learning that combined to produce some rather outstanding graduates, it is easy to paint a very vibrant and prosperous learning environment that the Task Force achieved in its time. The other aspect that needs mention is the Task Force was driven by a strong community spirit of elders and representatives of local Indigenous organisations who formed part of the advisory board that gave direction to the program and encouragement for students who attended. I loved listening to the stories of some of the elders and people who had been involved in the Nunga struggle for justice and equality over the years and their stories helped to inspire us and to keep us on track in terms of our community obligations, identity as Aboriginal people, and potential leaders of the future. We need to value this memory and to appreciate what was achieved in time and place. As a long awaited first within an academic institution, much credit goes to the Nunga Community and to one of our great Political leaders of the time, Don Dunstan who supported equality in Aboriginal education.
and the Nunga community generally. I believe Don Dunstan was one of the main driving forces behind making the Task Force happen. Indeed we did have the pleasure of his casual visits including his words of wisdom and encouragement on many occasions at the course, and in marches and at community gatherings— all inspirational stuff.

After the Task Force

I graduated from the TF in mid 1977 which was a grand occasion shared by family who came over to celebrate from Echuca and Melbourne and lots of community members, as can be seen in some of the images. I returned to Echuca and then was offered a job in the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs at Monash University. The job was a Research Assistant Grade 1 and the salary level was $8,499 a year. That was in July 1977 and I worked in Centre for a while as a Researcher and also assisted with the Indigenous Studies program at Monash which featured
guest speakers from across Australia of the calibre of Gary Foley, Harry Penrith, Burnam Burnam, Cheryl Buchannan, Chicka Dixon, Kevin Gilbert, and Kath Walker to name a select few. Pretty big names in Indigenous Affairs at the time and the program was run concurrently with Melbourne University so I used to pick up the guest speakers, introduce them and coordinate the program between the two Unis.

Other TF members returned to their jobs in Aboriginal Affairs across the country and some went on to do further studies towards the Degree program that had been introduced. Many graduates became outstanding leaders in their communities in politics, media, archival research, land rights and cultural heritage struggles, including senior administrators in Aboriginal community and national organisations. Some of us went on to become PhD graduates, professors, and lecturers in Universities, and many others achieved in whatever path they chose to take including the International and Human Rights context. An outstanding track record for the Task Force I must say, considering what it achieved in its time. Over a generation of scholars came and passed through its doors, and while we all went in our different paths, memories of the TF will linger with us forever. Full recognition must go to all of its major contributors, far too many to mention here.

Learning Curve Continued

My learning curve continued and the job at Monash gave me an opportunity to set my sights on further studies. It was from Monash that I continued my interests in Oral History which was initially encouraged and nurtured by one of our top teachers at the TF, Rosemary Ingolhby. Rosemary was like the mother figure of the TF, a great matriarch and teacher who commanded a broad worldly knowledge and teaching pedagogy that was influenced from her teaching experience and involvement with the Nunga community at Point McLeay where she worked for some time as a community worker. Rosemary was aware of the enormous depth and richness of oral knowledge held by our communities, and she encouraged us to tap into this readily available knowledge base and to use it to balance up the ledger with the written record, which she rightfully pointed out - was mostly written by whitefellas. Rosemary was pretty straightforward when it came to telling it as it was and that certainly was how she saw the discourse of Aboriginal History in Australia. Rosemary’s views on the need for oral history to be recognised as a valid source of knowledge in the telling and writing of history became a major career path and a special interest for me when I was at the TF and Monash. I applied for a research grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra and was successful. My journey of learning for new knowledge unfolded from there-see Booklet on North American Study Tour at: http://waynera.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/nthamericatrip.pdf

In closing I must add that I am thrilled to have just received the Rio Tinto Award for Teaching Excellence, 2013 at the University of Melbourne, and nominated for the Australian Awards for Teaching Excellence including the Neville Bonner Award, all of which certainly has its origins in the story that I have just shared.

My life journey and Career Path after the TF, 1977 can be accessed from my website including a page my ‘Family History’ and newspaper articles from the graduation in 1977, in which I think we were the first graduates of the Certificate and Associate Diploma course. In closing, due respect and acknowledgement to TF brothers, sisters and contributors who have been called back to their respective dreamtimes.
http://waynera.wordpress.com/

http://waynera.wordpress.com/family-history/


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