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CWIL Travel Grant

I completed my internship for the Saint Mary's College Women's Studies department in the summer of 2006. Armed with a small grant from the Center for Women's Intercultural Leadership (CWIL) and a big thirst for experience, classmate, Kirsten Kensinger and I traveled halfway around the globe to intern at two different regions of Western Australia (WA). For three weeks, we were stationed at a women's health center in Kalgoorlie, located in the South West outback of the country. There we facilitated our own intensive program, visiting various organizations which cater to the impoverished Aboriginal population of the area. In Kalgoorlie, we learned about the beautiful Aboriginal culture directly from members of the community.

After our time in Kalgoorlie, we took the bus to the capital of WA, Perth, where we spent the remainder of our time in the country. In Perth, we worked at Ishar, a center who markets their health services to immigrants and refugee women who have migrated to Australia from around the world. Although Ishar is a health center, they take a very holistic approach to health, cultivating the mind, body and souls of their clients.

Throughout my journey in Australia, there were many great women who embodied the mission of CWIL. They empowered themselves through empowering others, never acting with the intention of individual elevation. Many of these women held leadership positions in their communities and at the organizations with which I was affiliated. For example, the director of Ishar, Shobhana, is one of these incredible women. An Indian immigrant to Australia, she leads the center with absolute grace. She gains the respect of her employees by valuing each opinion and showing genuine

gratitude for the work they do. In exchange, employees work hard because work they can acknowledge the positive outcome of their labor.

In addition to the influential women I met who held leadership positions, there were countless others impacted me. For the purpose of this paper, I focused on three women who are not in positions of great authority; however, through their own cultural insight, and intercultural charisma, had a large effect on my overall learning experience.

## **YAIL**

Kirsten and I purposely flew to Australia one week before the start of our internship so that we could travel a bit throughout the country. Our plane landed in Sydney, where we were to stay for a few days. When we arrived at our Hostel, we decided to take nap to recover from our eighteen hour journey. When we woke up a few hours later, there was a perky brunette sitting on the opposite bed rolling a cigarette. Her name was Yail, (Ya-el, not Yail like the American school) she told us. We quickly learned that she was from Israel and had been independently traveling in Australia for almost a year. In Israel, after graduating high school, men must join the military for three years and women for two. Yail informed us that after being released from the military, many people take the time to travel. Yail was planning to continue her travel for an undetermined amount of time, working at farms or picking fruit for plantations when she was low on money.

We had a great time sight-seeing with Yail for the next few days. I have never met anybody with such a care-free love for life and adventure. Whenever something would happen that did not go her way, she would say “Faaack man” in her broken-accent,

and then make me giggle with her contagious laugh. Yail was such an interesting person because she had so much insight about Australia and the culture. Since she had been traveling alone, she was able to connect with a variety of different people, and had analyzed the various cultural differences between them. When we said goodbye, I knew that we would never see her again; however we would have been great friends in another circumstance not so divided by distance.

### **LYNETTE**

On one of our first days in Kalgoorlie, Anita, the woman with whom we were staying, called and told us to be ready within five minutes time. She then dropped us off to fend for ourselves at a local restaurant for the purpose of a networking luncheon for Aboriginal health workers. We walked in and casually sat down at the only table with open seating. The women we sat with were all aboriginal by race and culture. The Aboriginals are a very private people and an outsider, especially the “white fella”, must be invited by at least one member of the group to obtain access to the community. Many of the aboriginal people we met were so impressed with our desire to study their culture; they were more than willing to help us gain the access.

After chatting with the women momentarily, Lynette, an Aboriginal case worker graciously agreed to drive us to some of the local living communities and camps. Many of the communities are old missionaries or Christian living communities for Aboriginals. Today however, although often Christian, the communities are completely organized by the aboriginal elders within the community. Often the homes are government subsidized where families pay only a small monthly fee; therefore communities are desirable in

comparison to city housing. It was emotionally draining however, to see the condition in which the people live. The houses (shacks) often host a large extended family (15-20), and are very run-down, mud-smearred and missing doors, windows etc. The poor condition of the homes is one effect of the alcohol and drug abuse problem within the culture.

While Lynette drove us to the various sites, it was obvious that her Aboriginal heritage allowed her an instant connection to the community. She was stopped two or three times on our journey and asked for a ride to some destination by unknown individuals. In addition, we witnessed people flashing her hand signals every once in a while. Lynette informed us that Aboriginal people often use hand signals as a form of communication. Making an L-shape with your forefinger and thumb while turning hand from the palm down position to palm up means “how’s it going?” and then flipping your hand back to its original position means, “everything is fine”.

After that car trip with Lynette, we never saw her again, however, she allowed us to experience aboriginal culture through her connection to the community and her stories. She is a great role model as well because although she has raised her economic position, she is remaining in solidarity with her people, working to raise them up with her. This really embodies a common theme we witnessed within the aboriginal culture. The aboriginal people are far from individualistic which is what we often experience in the United States. Instead they make many of their decisions based on what will be most beneficial for the entire community. In addition, they share everything from, food to welfare checks to housing.

**Shaunez**

When Kirsten and I first started working at Ishar, we were a little uncertain about our role at the centre because we came at a time when many of center's current programming had already begun. One of our main tasks, was to help with the production of the play *Ran Away*, a dance-drama which served multiple covert purposes for the center. First, the performance was a way to improve the self-esteem of the clients. Many of the multi-cultural clients had been through great turmoil in their life previous to their migration to Australia and now they live in a society where their culture and language is negatively viewed by the dominant culture. In addition to boosting self esteem, the center uses these programs to bridge cultures that may otherwise have conflict between their communities. The programs allow the women to see the value of each other through their collective interests. Finally, the various programming allows for outside recognition of the center, facilitating the accumulation of grants.

On the first day of our work on the project, we walked into the rehearsal a little apprehensive of our position; however, we were immediately welcomed by the clients. Shaunez, an Iranian refugee who couldn't have been over five feet tall, walked into the room with such confidence, she seemed twice her size. She immediately approached, introduced herself and offered me some rice rolled in seaweed, a delicacy of her culture. She was curious about our presence at Ishar and our American cultural heritage.

Throughout the rehearsals, Shaunez's generosity was noted. Also, she was greatly respected by her peers for her humble confidence and ability to solve conflict. At one of the last rehearsals, one of the staff members led a discussion in order to elicit the client's reactions to the program. When it was time for Shaunez to talk referenced her

personal history in order to describe her deep connection to the performance. Shaunez was a member of the persecuted Bahai religious group in Iran when she was forced to flee with her children. If she had stayed, she and her family could have faced a gruesome death. She spent months traveling by foot to arrive at a refugee camp where she later received refugee status and was able to migrate to Australia. Shaunez told her story with tears in her eyes before describing how programs at Ishar have helped her to reclaim her ethnic background.

Like many of the women I met throughout this great internship, Shaunez emitted feelings courage and hope to those around her. My experience in Australia was more meaningful because of the women I met than the places I traveled. Many of the women were of members of minority groups where their opinions were generally not valued by members of the dominant Australian culture. However, almost every organization we were affiliated with seemed to have a common goal of cultivating women's gifts and talents according to their own specific culture instead of forcing the dominant ideals. I learned so much about the way to approach cultural difference so that everyone feels valued.