

## My Aussie Experience

By Kirsten Kensinger

I can honestly say that I never thought I would go to Australia. Not that I didn't have the desire, but being that it was half way around the world it seemed rather inaccessible. My roommate, Chelsea Gulling, and I wanted to learn more about indigenous cultures and originally planned on going to Guatemala. Unfortunately, our lack of Spanish-speaking skill proved to be problematic, so naturally we opted for an English speaking country and thus, the idea of going to Australia arose. I had remembered seeing a movie called *Rabbit Proof Fence* that explored the history of Australia's Indigenous people and I was really excited about the possibility of learning more about Aboriginal culture.

As my roommate and I were discussing this possibility with Sarah DeMott, she informed us that some of the CWIL women were going to Australia that very summer to unveil the CWIL model on women's inter-cultural leadership to some contacts in Perth, Australia. Sarah said that she would talk to Bonnie Bazata and discuss ideas for our Australian proposal. Low and Behold, we were introduced (via e-mail) to Shobhana Chakrabarti, the director of Ishar, a multi-cultural women's health clinic in Perth, Australia. Shobhana had befriended some of the CWIL women a couple years ago, when she was traveling the world and conducting interviews for a book on inclusive leadership. After many e-mails, we finally got to meet Shobhana when she visited Saint Mary's campus last spring and we set up a month-long inter-ship at her workplace, Ishar. Because Ishar catered mostly to immigrants and refugees, Shobhana arranged for us to stay with a friend of hers in Kalgoorlie, AU for a few weeks, so that we could get

exposure to Aboriginal culture (as the town was small and had a high indigenous population).

The flight from Los Angeles to Sydney was fourteen hours of agony, but it was worth every leg-cramping minute. We got a pretty good deal on airfare and did a little sightseeing in Sydney and Cairns before heading to Kalgoorlie in the south-west Outback. We stayed with Shobhana's friend Anita and her "elderly active" father, Ameya. The next three weeks was pure bliss as we fed off of Aboriginal culture by day and Indian curry and Sahaj Marg meditation by night. Our period in Kalgoorlie was primarily self-directed, so we spent much of our time making contacts and appointments with local service providers for the Aboriginal community. This included meetings with various health providers (some of which were run by the Aboriginal community), legal services, and a women's shelter. In general, Aboriginal people tend to be wary of the "white fella" due to an ugly history of cruelty and exploitation; Fortunately, many of the people we met seemed excited to tell us about their culture, which is the oldest in existence dating back to about 50,000 years ago.

We were exposed to different aspects of Aboriginal culture, both the good and the bad. Through various contacts we were able to interview some of the women elders in the community and even got the opportunity to drive out to a few Aboriginal camps. Aboriginal culture is very traditional in the sense that community elders are respected as leaders, and men and women have separate "business." For example, an aboriginal woman cannot ask an aboriginal man about "men's business," such as certain spiritual dances etc. In some instances, it was said that this inquiry could be punishable by death. It is also important to note that I am referring specifically to the Wangkatha tribe located

in the Kalgoorlie area. There are many different Aboriginal tribes in Australia that do not share common languages or rituals. The women elders told us about “women’s business,” the “dreamtime,” or Aboriginal creation stories, and the history of the stolen generation. Going to the Aboriginal camps turned out to be more sad than exciting. Many of the camps were littered with trash and broken bottles, showing evidence of the notorious alcohol abuse within some of the Aboriginal community. The homes, or in some cases tin shelters, were run-down and neglected. The camps seemed to portray the clash of cultures (i.e. Aboriginal vs. Western) and the frustration of a seemingly lost tradition.

When our three weeks in Kalgoorlie were over, I think we were both disappointed that we couldn’t spend more time learning about Aboriginal culture first hand. I hoped that we might find at least a small Aboriginal clientele at Ishar, but as mentioned previously, Ishar caters to immigrants and refugees. And so, with a new city came a new adventure.

Perth is a beautiful city. Ishar was located about twenty minutes away, in a suburb called Mirrabooka. In some ways, the internship was relatively basic: office work, cleaning, etc. On the other hand, we were able to participate in some amazing work with some amazing women in an amazing atmosphere. Okay, you get the picture. It was amazing.

I think the most meaningful work were the projects done outside of the office. We taught a few English lessons to Sudanese refugees, helped with a multi-cultural fashion show, etc. The two projects that I enjoyed the most were the *Ran Away* production and the CWIL leadership presentations. *Ran Away* is a dance/drama depicting

several experiences of refugees and immigrants, charting the time from when they leave their country to their assimilation into Australian culture. We got to work with the cast/crew up until the opening night, so it was really rewarding to watch the progression and final production. The other project I really enjoyed was the CWIL leadership presentation. I learned so much about inter-cultural leadership and the value of diversity, and the CWIL model helped me to piece together the very things I had been experiencing all summer.

All in all, I think that this experience was invaluable. I got to learn more about Australia's Aboriginal culture, which has now spawned an interest to learn more about the Native American culture and current problems (they share a relatively similar history). I also learned a great deal about leadership and progressive change. Finally, I made some wonderful friends who showed me love and never-ending generosity. And so, perhaps one of the most important things I learned this summer was this: *I give to you, I receive from you. Together we share, to make the world go round.*