

The blonde who dropped a bombshell . . . '70s rebel is stirring for justice

By DESMOND ZWAR

SHE is white. She has intense blue eyes, cascading blonde curls and a beautiful face. The people she has devoted her life to are black.

It is lunchtime in the sunny Cairns Hilton, and Barbara Miller, secretariat director of the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council in Cairns, is quietly and unemotionally talking about alcoholism, self-mutilation, depression and despair; going over the shock report she has just delivered to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which has warned that Aborigines "as a powerless group, have turned their rage in on themselves".

As a result, she says, there has been the long list of cell suicides, self-injury, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect; and alcoholism.

Her face devoid of make-up apart from the highlighter intensifying the blue of her eyes, she looked to be in her late 20s or early 30s. She is 40, and has been fighting for justice for black Australians since 1970.

She married one — Mick Miller, a dashing, moustachioed school teacher she met at a meeting on injustice. They have an 11-year-old son, Michael, but are no longer together.

Barbara appears preoccupied, speaks in a soft monotone and smiles for the first time when she confides that Aborigines in the communities her council represents call her "Auntie".

This is the horror story "Auntie" Barbara uncovered in three weeks' intense investigation for the Royal Commission and outlined in her 107-page report:

- That in some communities there was an average age of death of 44 years for males — 27 years less than the average age of death for other Queensland males; and that the average age of death for females was 43 years — 34 years less than Queensland women generally.

- That assaults are seven times more likely to be committed by children from Aboriginal communities than white communities; that sexual offences are 11 times more likely to be committed; robbery is 26 times greater; break-and-enter 19 times more prevalent; property damage nine times greater; weapons offences 41 times greater.

- And Aboriginal children from communities are 17 times more likely to appear for Liquor Act offences than Queensland children as a whole.

"Queensland Aboriginal communities are clearly in a state of crisis," she concluded.

Because Aborigines living in the scattered communities on Cape York trust her, they had confided their problems, fears and despair, as they never had before to a European.

A substitute for initiation

□ BARBARA Miller found that many young Aborigines used a jail sentence as a sort of substitute for tribal initiation.

"Initiation is now rarely practised in north Queensland and the first time a male Aboriginal gets drunk or goes to jail, tends to fill that vacuum," she said.

"We are hoping to get together with elders and young people to do something about a traditional marker; for some it might mean bringing back initiation."

She had learned from the years with Mick how to understand their feelings. "They are very good at reading body language. They are different from Europeans in so many ways," she said, toying with her lunch.

"They are more family oriented, less individualistic, less selfish; always prepared to share what they have, often to their own detriment.

"They have a spiritual level we do not begin to understand; they read a lot more into what is not said than is said. However they can get stressed and uptight and have loss of sleep, just like we do."

Why do they trust her?

She smiled again. "I helped Mick set up the North Queensland Land Council in 1975 and they got to know me, I suppose. Even though we are not together any more, they give me the respect and recognition of the relationship.

"It began for him when a well-known Aurukun identity called Jack Spear adopted him as a boy, and it remains, for both of us. I therefore have a whole network of relationships."

Mick Connolly, 38, an Aboriginal councillor at Yarrabah (pop 900) community on the opposite side of the bay to Cairns, said when he read her report: "It isn't just because she was married to an Aborigine that Barbara has an understanding of Aborigines. Her attitude is such that even if she hadn't married Mick Miller, she still would have been accepted."

"She not only understands Aboriginal ways, but when she puts it on paper it is the skill of her research coming out. Her report is spot on.

"She is one of those white people who almost have more knowledge of us than we do ourselves."

Barbara Miller, the beautiful young blonde, was listed by the



Barbara Miller and son Michael . . . "I knew I had to work for Aboriginal justice for the rest of my life"

police as a troublemaker during the anti-Springbok demonstrations, where she received her first understanding of apartheid and how much of it paralleled what was happening to Australian Aborigines.

She was arrested in Canberra for "inciting young men not to register for the draft for Vietnam" and went to jail in Sydney for refusing to pay a resultant fine.

At Queensland University where she was supposed to be studying first-year medicine, she became friendly with the only Aboriginal girl student on campus and spent most of her time writing and distributing pamphlets.

She later went back to her self-education and achieved psychology and sociology degrees.

"In 1970 I went to an Assembly of God church service and something happened; an experience. I became a Christian. From around that time I found myself driven, I knew I had to work for Aboriginal justice for the rest of my life."

Today she is in charge of an office that is the "umbrella" of Cape York Aboriginal community councils; advising them on their socio-economic develop-

ment and acting as an on-the-spot observer of what is going wrong in the sometimes depressing row of weatherboard houses with broken louvres, often clustered around a canteen.

Is she happy? "Oh," she laughs. "Very much so. And I have only recently found I am able to forgive the churches and the missionaries for what they did, possibly with the best will in the world, to the Aborigines in the early days. Children were separated into dormitories and taken away from their mothers. It was terrible. And now we have that legacy."

Alcohol — consumed in canteens and bringing in \$600,000 a year in some communities — or purchased from sly-grog dealers, does not in itself, says Barbara Miller, cause violence.

"Alcohol is used by Aborigines as an anxiety reducing agent; to cope with the stresses attendant on colonisation and racism. Alcohol abuse has become a way of defying white authority.

"I have seen children hanging about outside the canteen drinking glasses of beer. It is nothing to see children with \$20 notes in gambling games at Aurukun on pay or pension days.

"Children are neglected; they arrive at school or pre-school unfed or under-nourished, tired and with short concentration spans, especially after pay or pension nights."

Barbara Miller has, with her qualifications and her experience, been offered highly-paid jobs. She has politely refused them, preferring to work every day in an under-budgeted, understaffed office in Cairns that is looked on with respect by both Aboriginal communities and government.

"I guess it's my destiny," she says.

Where 'tough love' means 'tough, love'

□ BARBARA Miller's suggestions to combat Aboriginal drinking include "dry" houses, where alcohol may not be consumed and "tough love", where boozers' wives go on strike.

"Most programs deal with the person who is the alcoholic," said Barbara. "Tough love is directed at the spouse. She needs to take responsibility for her own life and not be overly re-

sponsible for the alcoholic's life. Because that tends to happen, they cover up for the alcoholic, to save face.

"In tough love the spouse is advised to say, 'OK, if you come home drunk, I'm not going to cook your dinner'. When he asks for money for grog, she won't give it to him.

"It means punch-ups; but they get punched up whether they

cook the dinner or not; whether they give money or not.

"But we are finding that it is working; they are not always getting punched up. What is happening is that the spouse is getting her self-esteem back and is starting to take responsibility for herself, not just her husband. And this is forcing the husband to take responsibility for himself."