

# White woman, black heart

When the inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody wanted first-hand information on the plight of Aborigines in the Far North, there was only one person for the job, and she was white.  
Desmond Zwar reports.

IT is a sunny lunch-time in the Cairns Hilton. Barbara Miller is speaking quietly and unemotionally about her experience of the scattered Aboriginal communities of Cape York. What she is talking about would put most of the diners off their lobster or barramundi; alcoholism, self-mutilation, depression and despair. Aborigines, she says, as a powerless group, "have turned their rage in on themselves".

The result, she says, is the long list of cell suicides, self-injury, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect.

Ms Miller, 40, secretariat director of the Aboriginal Coordinating Council in Cairns, has been fighting for justice for black Australians since 1970. She married one — Mick Miller, a school-teacher she met at a meeting on injustice. They have an 11-year-old son, but are no longer together.

Ms Miller 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 "Aunty".

The Aborigines living in the scattered communities on Cape York trust her, and for her report they confided their problems, fears and despair as they never had before to a European. She had learned from the years with Mick, she says, how to understand

their feelings. "They are very good at reading body language. They are different from Europeans in so many ways."

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

"They have a spiritual level we do not begin to understand; they read a lot more into what is not said than is said."

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, Jack Spear, adopted him as a boy, and it remains, for both of us. I therefore have a whole network of relationships."

"I know I'm not Aboriginal," she says. "It's just that I feel in tune with Aboriginal people. I relate to them as my family."

"I have felt that I have a black heart — as people keep telling me — for the last 10 years."

She had not studied Aboriginal affairs academically. "My feeling is intuitive. It was always there. It was obviously one of the things that brought Mick Miller and I together."

"I speak a few words of Wikminkun. I would particularly like my son,

Michael, to learn his language."

It isn't only because she was married to an Aborigine that Ms Miller had an understanding of Aborigines, says Mick Connolly, 38, an Aboriginal councillor at Yarrabah community (population 900) on the opposite side of the bay to Cairns. He says of her report: "There are certain people who deal with Aborigines in a detached manner, whereas Barbara almost becomes an Aborigine; she can really feel for the people."

"She not only understands Aboriginal ways, but when she puts it on paper, all she has to do is reach within herself; she's got it all in her head, and has had it there for so long."

At a recent meeting at the council's Cairns office, Gladys Tybingoompa, 44, and Alison Woolla, 42, both from Aurukun community on Cape York, talked of "Aunty" Barbara's "black heart".

Gladys: "Her outside appearance is white. But she has a black heart and a black mind. Even though Aunty Barbara and Uncle Mick are not together now, she never put her back on us. She is loyal. We trust her and she trusts us. Some of the things that Aunty Barbara has done are personal and I would not speak to people outside the clan about them. Within the clan, yes. But not to you. It would be an embarrassment."

"When she brings Michael, her son, to Aurukun they give him gifts and take him fishing and hunting. They wait for him now. When she arrives it is like a queen arriving. A tribal leader."

Alison Woolla, looking steadily across at Ms Miller: "They say that maybe you were a child somewhere else, a black child; and your spirit died and you were born into another world from us and you have come again to us ..."

Ms Miller, suddenly emotional: "Well I wasn't going to say it; but that's how I feel!"

BARBARA Miller, who the legal system turned to in 1990 for help, was not so popular with the authorities in the early 1970s. Then, she was listed by the police as a trouble-maker 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". She went to jail in Sydney for refusing to pay a resulting fine.

At Queensland University, where she was supposed to be studying first-year medicine, she became friendly



Family ties: Barbara Miller with her son, Michael. — "I feel in tune with Aboriginal people. I relate to them as my family."

Picture: RUSSELL FRANCIS

with the only Aboriginal girl student on campus and spent most of her time writing and distributing pamphlets. She later went back to her education and achieved degrees in psychology and sociology.

"In 1970 I went to an Assembly of God church service and something happened; an experience," she recalls. "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

people), deliberately cutting his wrists and his body. It is rage turned inward.

Black crime in Australia is not directed against whites as it is in the United States, but against other blacks, generally against the Aborigine's own family; his wife, girlfriend or de facto are the most likely victims. Men are fighting their brothers, fathers and uncles and bashing their mothers, she says. Women are running away from sons-in-law and grandmothers are being raped by their grandsons.

some communities — or bought from sly-grog dealers, does not in itself, says Ms 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 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. Some children have difficulty sleeping at night because of the noise of drinking and/or fighting. Neglect and lack of supervision are real problems."

"When I visited Community C I was told that cases of sexually transmitted diseases are dealt with every day, occurring in children as young as five. It is usually teenage boys who are the perpetrators, abusing young girls and boys. Some young boys are violated with sharp sticks. The children won't talk about it and are receiving no help besides medical treatment. The post-master at Community C told me that between \$4000 and \$5000 in COD orders for pornographic videos came every week from Canberra at the request of both black and white viewers."

"In another Cape York community, two teenagers raped a five-year-old boy after watching a pornographic video."

Ms Miller's investigations have also brought suggested remedies — some already being put into action. "Because Aboriginal men no longer

## A horror story uncovered

This is part of the horror story Barbara Miller uncovered for the royal commission and outlined in her 107-page report.

■ That in some communities the average death age for males is 44, 27 years younger than the average Queensland male dies. For women it is 43, 34 years earlier than Queensland women generally.

■ That Aboriginal community children are seven times more likely to commit assaults than white children;

■ That sexual offences are 11 times more likely to be committed; robbery is 26 times more prevalent; property damage nine times greater; weapon offences 41 times greater.

■ Aboriginal children from the communities are 17 times more likely to appear before the courts for Liquor Act offences than Queensland children as a whole.

have initiation as a 'marker' between youth and manhood, young men are using a jail sentence as that marker. Initiation is now rarely practised in North Queensland and the first time a male Aborigine gets drunk or goes to jail tends to fill that vacuum. 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."

Another suggestion: "dry" houses where alcohol may not be consumed. And "tough love", a scheme first tried among the American Indians "who have many problems matching Aborigines' problems".

"Most programs deal with the person who is the alcoholic," says Ms Miller, who does not drink. "Tough love" is directed at the spouse. She needs to take responsibility for her own life and not be overly responsible for the alcoholic's life. Because that tends to happen; the 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."

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

"I guess it's my destiny." 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."



September 1990: Barbara Miller visits Aborigine Valerie and Shirley Wolmby of Aurukun.