

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

International House, Melbourne, Australia, 12-16 January 2007

Session: "Healing journeys", 14 January 2007

Jane Mills:

I am a new Australian from an Anglo and African background. For the last 24 years I have lived in Sydney which, like Melbourne, is a richly multicultural city. However, it is possible for each community to live almost entirely within its own culture bubble, and rarely to have meaningful contact with other cultures.

Some years ago our family moved to the South side of Sydney, and for the first time I began to see women wearing what I called Arabic dress. My first reaction was strongly negative and ignorant: "You are in Australia now. Why can't you dress like the rest of us?" It makes me wonder what the Eora people thought when Captain Cook and his sailors arrived in all their clobber!

We came to live next to a suburb which is largely Southern Lebanese. In an attempt to get to know some of this community, I spent five years (one morning a week) teaching survival English to housebound migrants in this suburb - mainly young Mums. They were great students - keen, delightful, hardworking. I was the only person they spoke English with (doctors, butcher, banker all Arabic), but once the course was over they would not come out and meet with me socially. There didn't seem a bridge either side could walk across.

Then came the Gulf War, the Twin Tower bombings, the Iraqi War, and I began to hear of women who wear the hijab being spat on and abused by passers-by, refused service in shops, having difficulties in finding employment. There seemed a widening gap of negativity and ignorance.

In 2003 we had an Initiatives of Change conference in Sydney where we looked at case studies of practical peacemaking from all over the world. One group came from Lebanon, including people who had fought on both sides in the civil war in the 1970s and were now working together for reconciliation and healing. Through them we met a number of Sydney Lebanese (Arabic is Sydney's second language). One well known activist called Keysar Trad, spoke to my husband David about his vision of creating public forums where people could meet each other and be informed about each other's beliefs, with an emphasis on the values we share. David included the Catholic Bishop of Parramatta, Bishop Kevin Manning, and since then they and others have staged six forums all over Sydney drawing in hundreds and hundreds of people. Wonderful Lebanese food has been provided, music and prayer from both Islamic and non-Islamic communities, and people have been able to meet each other, many for the first time.

There have also been two "round table" discussions in the Shiite Annangrove Prayer Centre. The last, in October, saw a panel of Sunni, Shia, Catholic and Protestant addressing the topic of forgiveness. In November there was a workshop where David and Kuranda Seyit, a Turkish Australian, brought together young surfies from Cronulla and Middle Eastern young men from Bankstown. The local free paper, which is delivered to 149,000 homes, featured a front page story headed BUILDING BRIDGES. It quote two 16 year olds. Mohsen said he

had not spoken to an Australian since the Cronulla riots. "My whole perspective changed and so did Wade's. He told me he used to be racist and stuff, and I was extremely racist due to the riots." Wade said he only went along because "it was a free feed. I just hated the Lebanese after the riots, but now I definitely have respect for them and more understanding of how they felt and how it works both ways."

Also in Sydney for the last three years a number of women have been involved in "Creators of Peace" circles. A group of women of various backgrounds agree to meet for 6-8 sessions to work through a series of topics on peace making, and also to hear each other's stories. So far 14 have taken place in Sydney (including one for men, a world first!), and almost all have included Muslim women. Their participation has meant so much to the non-Muslim women and been a true education.

A former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, made a speech last September in which he said: "A new mental map is required by us all to include rather than exclude, and together to prize the hard-earned gifts of free speech, liberty, equality and tolerance that we seek others to embrace, without endangering their faith or undermining their values." I am so grateful for the new mental map I am being given by my Muslim friends, and want to continue to build bridges and work together to create a safe and peaceful place for everyone.

Jane Mills is current Chair of Initiatives of Change (Australia)'s Council of Management.