



A group photo taken at SEWB Gathering 6: Circles of Wisdom in Walyalup. Picture: supplied.

# Circles of Wisdom



**Pat Dudgeon**

Over five years have passed since our consortium held our first Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering in Boorloo/Perth – and this month we hosted our sixth gathering, Circles of Wisdom. It was wonderful to see how far we've come.

Circles of Wisdom was an energising and heartening event – representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCHOs), alongside academics, practitioners, policymakers, and front-line workers working in Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) and mental health came together as one. Over two days in Walyalup/Fremantle we yarned and listened – sharing about best-practice programs and services and the future of policy, practice and research in SEWB for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our event featured presentations, panel discussions, and importantly, small group-sharing sessions and workshops.

At the commencement of day one, Noongar leader, Dr Richard Walley and his son, Alton Walley, delivered a Welcome to Country at Esplanade Park. This was a vital and meaningful start to our day. We were then hosted throughout by our deadly MCs, Yamatji man, Michael Mitchell and Ngarindjeri woman, Judith Lovegrove. As speakers and panellists, we were honoured to be joined on the stage by our consortium partners, Monica Barolits-McCabe from NACCHO,



**Helen Milroy**

Tony Kiessler from the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA), and Rachel Fishlock from Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit), alongside many, many other talented and dedicated people working in this space.

It was so exciting to see the wonderful Ronda Clarke (an attendee and presenter way back at SEWB Gathering 1) in our midst, not just listening and yarning, but also drawing throughout the two-day event. Ronda was kind enough to agree to do a 'visual mapping' of our gathering – a process in which she uses her analytical and creative skills in symbiosis. She summarised key findings and learnings from the event in a beautiful painting which will be shared in our SEWB Gathering 6 report, in due course. Before our event kicked off officially, we had a day of workshops – one on Stolen Generations hosted by the Healing Foundation, a Women's Group hosted by Auntie Tjalaminu Mia, and a Men's Group hosted by Michael Mitchell. More on these to follow in future columns.

The SEWB Gatherings have come a long way since our initial meeting in 2021; from influencing national policy, to providing safe spaces for SEWB teams to come together and discuss what has been working and what hasn't. With these meetups, we provide an opportunity to celebrate the wins, big and small, and to facilitate discussions between ACCHOs and peak bodies.

At the event we honoured Auntie Roma Winmar for her beautiful artwork and story,



Gayaa Dhuwi by Auntie Roma Winmar, 2015.

created in 2015 to form the visual identity of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia. The painting helped guide us during our first gathering in 2021, and it still stands today. "It is about people coming together to find ways of understanding and acknowledging problems and developing pathways and responses that lead to action that is practical, progressive, needs based, relevant to current situations, and that strengthens resilience and builds capacity in the collective: within the structure of the community."

The small group breakout sessions across the two-day event gave us all the chance to hear each other and to share. At this gathering, we wanted to come full circle and reflect back on where we started, where we've travelled, and where we are now. This was anticipated to be our last SEWB Gathering, so it was especially important to bring together all our learnings over the past five years and close the circle.

One of the loudest messages to come out of the group sessions was that the gatherings need to continue in some form or

another. We heard from attendees who felt the gatherings are still in their infancy and need to be nurtured to grow into something bigger and better. The group expressed a desire to build these gatherings until they reach more people who need it – to nurture them from infancy to childhood.

Another big message was trust; this came up in group discussions and in presenting our cultural safety research. A shared understanding amongst the group was that research must be conducted with Aboriginal governance, via truth-telling and through listening deeply to real stories. Research, when done with community, is an extended process – time is needed to build trust.

As the last gathering in this series, we are now considering how the strong connections, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration fostered through these events can continue. We aim to build on the momentum created and to continue to amplify the importance of SEWB for our people and communities. Gatherings give people strength and a shared sense of purpose. It's good for our SEWB to know there is a pathway forward.

SEWB Gatherings are hosted by Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, and the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association.

**Professor Pat Dudgeon AM** is a Bardi woman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She is Australia's first Aboriginal psychologist, Director of the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP) at the University of Western Australia and founding Chair of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA).

**Professor Helen Milroy AM** is a Palyku woman whose homelands are in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. She is Australia's first Indigenous doctor and child psychiatrist, the Stan Perron Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Perth Children's Hospital and University of Western Australia, and Honorary Research Fellow at the Kid's Research Institute. She is an artist and published author and illustrator of children's books and has been shortlisted for several children's literature awards.