

## Unfurling our spirits (hands)

Andrea Bruno<sup>1</sup>, Loretta Weatherall<sup>1</sup>, Kym Rae<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Mothers and Babies Research Centre, University of Newcastle, <sup>2</sup>University Department of Rural Health, University of Newcastle

---

Loretta Weatherall is a Kamilaroi woman born in Goodooga. Her father is from Goodooga and Loretta lived there until she was eight years old. After that she moved to Walgett where her mother is from. This is where Loretta finished her primary school years and then high school until Year 9. Her parents decided to send her off to boarding school in Sydney, where she attended Mackellar Girls High whilst staying at an Aboriginal hostel (Biala) to complete her HSC.

Later, Loretta returned to Walgett met her partner John Sands and had two beautiful girls Zoe (11) and Georgia (8). Loretta worked for Attorney General's in the local court system for five years. She decided to move to Tamworth so that her daughters could have a better education and enjoyable lifestyle.

Loretta has worked for the University of Newcastle and completed her administration traineeship. Through the research opportunities offered under the Gomeri gaaynggal program she has significantly changed her role and has now completed her Indigenous Research Capacity Building Certificate IV. She is currently working as an Indigenous researcher with the Gomeri gaaynggal team exploring ArtsHealth as a mechanism to improve Indigenous health outcomes in pregnancy. Loretta is using all of her skills to become a role model for Indigenous women.

---

The Gomeri gaaynggal pregnancy ArtsHealth program seeks to develop a non-threatening environment for mothers to meet other mothers and health professionals to talk about issues related to health, pregnancy and motherhood.

Hands are so often used in Aboriginal art and represent reaching out to help, holding, protecting, nurturing, and bonding. The human hand can express a multitude of emotions. Fleeting hand gestures encapsulate enduring beliefs and feelings. Our mothers recorded their own important emotions in cement casts, tracing the trajectory of the mothers' journey.

The mothers have been exploring the ideas of protection, giving, and establishing a relationship with their babies; expressing those ideas with hand gestures and casting them in cement. The many hands of our mothers, children, staff and Elders form a tree, representing the relationship between the land, and the support that exists from generation to generation. This tree was the first project from the Gomeri gaaynggal program. The seed for this idea was planted with each of these mothers and many have used leaves to represent growth; growth of these women into mothers, the growth of their infants into healthy children and the future growth of their families and communities. Since then there have been many artworks produced in collaboration of young mothers. They all have underlying themes of; 'coming together', 'motherhood', 'health', 'community'.

This is the story of how the Gomeri gaaynggal ArtsHealth program began, the challenges we faced and overcame, the unfurling of our artistic spirits and the building of strength and confidence in our Aboriginal mothers through their art journey.