

Past Student Spotlight Melanie Waters (1990)



From 1986 to 1990 I attended the St George State High School. During this time, I was more focused on sports than academics due to learning difficulties. While I faced academic challenges during that period, participating in sports boosted my self-esteem and confidence. The supportive teaching staff, who showed kindness and empathy, left a lasting impression on me. I had a friendly relationship with everyone, without specific cliques, and consistently stood up for those who were marginalised, unknowingly hinting at the significant role that social injustices would come to play in my life.

In the domain of sports, I excelled in touch football, progressing from school-level competitions to regional, state, and national events. This journey allowed me to explore different parts of the state, providing me with unique and invaluable experiences. I am truly grateful for these opportunities. In addition to school sports, I attained representative status in indoor cricket, leading to notable achievements at the local level and in open-age competitions at the Super League and representation at the regional level. Not bad for a little girl from the bush.

As I neared the completion of my twelfth year of education, I encountered the significant decision of what to do next, a choice that we all inevitably face. It became clear that pursuing higher education, a common choice for many, was not a feasible option for me. However, my strong work ethic and willingness to take on labour proved beneficial. During my school years, I worked part-time as a cleaner at St. George Bakery. On weekends, I spent every other weekend maintaining the bakery premises and cleaning the owner's vehicles. The money I earned went towards funding my various sports activities.

After deciding to move to Toowoomba in search of better job opportunities, I spent three months looking for work without success. Upon returning to St George, I got a job at the BP service station, but it only lasted for one day. I was determined to find more stable employment at the meatworks, like many others in my situation, and fortunately, I succeeded.

While I was grateful for the job, the six months I spent there made me realise that it wasn't the right long-term career path for me.

Selina Saunders, a compassionate person for people and community, worked at the Youth Advisory Centre located in the former National Bank on St George's Terrace. Selina had earned an Associate Diploma in Social Sciences from the Kangaroo Point Tafe in Brisbane. She willingly shared her insights with me and encouraged me to follow a similar path. Taking her advice to heart, I signed up for the two-year course and moved to Brisbane to complete it between 1992 and 1993.

After completing my qualification in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Welfare, I came back to St George. I landed part-time roles at St. George State High School as a Community Education Counsellor and at the Youth Advisory Centre, where my mentor, Selina, used to work. Although I cherished my time in these positions and enjoyed being back home in St. George, I kept my hopes up for securing full-time continuous work. My patience paid off when I was offered a role with the Queensland Police Service as a Police Liaison Officer based in Toowoomba, where I remained for approximately five years.

After facing several challenges in the police service, I decided to change careers. In January 2001, I secured a position with the Liquor Licensing Department as a Liquor Licensing Officer in Rockhampton. My main focus in this role was implementing alcohol management plans. I served as the licensing officer for two DOGIT communities: Woorabinda in central Queensland and Lockhart River on the east coast of the Cape York Peninsula. The demands of travel and the job began to take a toll on me, and I decided to resign and move back to Toowoomba within a year. During this time, I had the chance to explore stunning landscapes, as my job required extensive travel across diverse regions. I was grateful for this aspect of my work.

The saying "It's not what you know, but who you know" often proves true when finding a job. This was the case for me when I landed a position with the Commonwealth Government. I oversaw educational support programs in schools in Darling Down and South-West Queensland, and I held this role for five years. Transitioning from the state government to the Commonwealth Government, the Commonwealth government recognised state prior service. After accumulating ten years of government service, I took time to consider another career move. This one was the most significant leap yet purchasing a service station in a small rural town in 2006.

As I embarked on this new endeavour, I expected to face various business and personal challenges that would push me beyond my limits and test my resilience. In early 2011, I had to shut down my business involuntarily while trying to maintain financial stability in the aftermath of the 2009 global economic crisis. This experience was challenging, involving the loss of my business and personal investment. Looking back, it brings up mixed emotions. It was a tough time that required great strength to overcome without being defeated by the circumstances. From here, I picked myself up and continued with life back in the security of my hometown once more. This chapter would be a time to recoup financially and personally. I would take on several job opportunities in St George, starting with the Handy Store, Manager of the Aboriginal Housing Company and the Balonne Shire Council.

In mid-2014, I relocated to Toowoomba for my studies. Initially, I enrolled in a bridging course to help me transition and manage the trauma from my previous workplace

experiences and to give me every chance to succeed in this new space. After study, I secured a role as a professional staff member in the Indigenous College's Engagement section. It was whilst in this role, my skills were recognised by the Associate Head of Learning and Teaching in the School of Creative Arts, acknowledging that my skills needed to match the equivalent education qualification. Here, I was encouraged to engage with the Program Coordinator for the Master of Arts Program, which included coursework and a research component. After meeting the program entry requirements, I began my post-graduate degree.

The research component enabled me to concentrate on a subject that had intrigued me throughout my professional career. It pertained to a behaviour resembling bullying, but my focus was on the phenomenon of Lateral Violence prevalent within First Nations communities and individuals. Due to the lack of clarity and understanding, I titled my thesis "HOW IS LATERAL VIOLENCE DIFFERENT TO OTHER FORMS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING." I draw on experience from previous positions to guide my thesis. I offer my abstract for you to peruse; some may find it interesting, and it would be nice to share.

ABSTRACT

The topic of lateral violence as it affects First Nation People (FNP) in Australia has not been extensively researched; If lateral violence is not understood, how can it be afforded the attention it deserves to resolve issues as they present. My experiences of lateral violence have motivated me to engage with the topic to increase my knowledge and to deepen my understanding about lateral violence as a distinctly separate phenomenon from bullying. My inquisitive mind and forever questioning spirit compelled me to want to know more.

Lateral violence is not only isolated to Aboriginal communities; similar behaviours have been recognised in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workplaces. In simple terms, lateral violence may be defined as a behaviour whereby oppressed people - in this case First Nations People in Australia- who experience rejection, powerlessness, and despair, turn on themselves and others within their own group with hostility. This behaviour is manifested in the Aboriginal community and in the external workplace.

As an example, in the community, lateral violence occurs when some Aborigines use derogatory terms such as half-caste, creamy, yellow-skin, Johnny come lately, coconut, textbook black and uptown black to describe their kin. These terms undermine Aborigines and their identity. Perpetrators universally use these terms as permissible insults and tools of social exclusion. In ignorance, the perpetrators are causing disunity among First Nations People, ultimately leading to lateral violence in their communities.

Such behaviours in the workplace are displayed among Aboriginal managers/supervisors and employees, non-Aboriginal managers/supervisors and Aboriginal employees, and Aboriginal employees against each other. On the surface, behaviours may appear the same, although significant behavioural attributes separate the workplace environments, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

This study presents a historical explanation of cultural differences between mainstream societies and Aboriginal societies, which isolate the behaviours and direct attention to the lateral violence that is occurring in the workplace. A theoretical framework is built around the work of Paulo Freire, particularly his study of the oppressor, the oppressed and the sub-oppressed. Other key concepts Freire identifies to understand oppression are adhesion, prescription and conformity. These key concepts offer a defined behavioural guide to distinguish differences between lateral violence and other workplace bullying behaviours.

To explore this research question, the qualitative method of autoethnography is used in the form of three stories because storytelling is central to Indigenous culture. The stories focus on scenarios in three independent workplaces, one from inside an Aboriginal organisation and two from non-Aboriginal organisations. Reflexive methods are used to explain bullying and lateral violence within these environments.

The purpose is to compare the behaviours and differentiate between the three stories to demonstrate the importance of recognising lateral violence as a separate phenomenon. Other critical areas of significance will be examined in the following chapter order: Colonialism and Violence, Colonialism and Violence in Australia, Oppressor, Oppressed and Sub-Oppressor, Definitions of Violence, Lateral Violence and How Lateral Violence Manifests in Nursing.

It is vital to understand the history that produced lateral violence in order to liberate the oppressed and enable them to walk in complete, authentic existence. This research has provided a deeper understanding of lateral violence, allowing it to be labelled and recognised in the workplace and the community. It is my wish that First Nation Peoples and mainstream societies learn to appreciate the meaning of lateral violence as distinctly different from bullying, which is an already familiar behaviour. They will then be positioned to effect positive social change for themselves and their community, to move beyond the destructive force of lateral violence.

After my master's, I continued working for the University of Southern Queensland as an Academic, teaching and writing courses in Indigenous Studies Education in the following disciplines: *Media Representations of First Nations Peoples, Comparative and Contemporary Indigenous Cultures, Human Rights and the Ideologies of the nation state (the colonists), Perspectives on Knowledge*. The period I dedicated to teaching proved to be a profoundly enriching experience, significantly contributing to my personal and professional growth. While I cherished this experience, my true passion lay in pursuing my PhD. I am proud to report that I am nearing the completion of my doctoral journey. My research focuses on engaging with government officers in the community development sector to delve into their personal and professional insights. I titled my thesis: "***Dialogue in the Community Development Space: Privileging First Nations Knowledge.***" The study aims to address the cultural knowledge gaps that perpetuate misunderstandings about the historical and contemporary understandings of First Nations People and their communities. Motivations came from listening to the impassioned pleas of the First Nations People and the inquiries from non-first nations individuals seeking guidance and support. This project aims to advance qualitative research methodology by developing a Gamilaraay Bariyan Ngama Standpoint Theory for Qualitative Research. The Bariyan Ngama holds significant cultural importance as it represents the Women's Dreaming of the Gamilaraay people. This cultural narrative

embodies the continuous Creation of the Gamilaraay and the essence of five women who are fundamental to the ongoing creation principles and disciplines. From this position, the ambition is to develop a cultural framework to implement across sectors and industries, whereby First Nations cultures are valued and not appropriated for self-interest and economic gains. These attributes are not from FN cultures but are characteristics demonstrated in the West's pursuit of land and the enactment of international and domestic laws during colonisation.

After finishing my PhD, I look forward to spreading the word about my findings, and I remain excited about where my new achievements will take me.

I cherish the memories from my time at St George State High School, and they will stay with me forever, as will the many friendships.

Thank you, St George State High School, for allowing me to share my story.

In closing: Always remain humble, never give up on humanity, and include yourself, but know how to LOVE through it all.

Melanie Waters - Gamilaraay