



Looking Back... moving forw@rd at the 16th annual NSW Women's Gathering hosted by Coonamble

~ by Sonia Muir, Coordinator, RWN

A symphony of zippers heralded the start to this year's Women's Gathering as women emerged from their tents at the Coonamble Gathering 'village'.

This was the first year such an innovative approach to meeting accommodation needs of participants had been explored and the organising committee need to be congratulated for their courage and creativity.

Most women agreed the village provided extra opportunities to engage in valuable networking.

Over 300 women travelled from all corners of the state to experience Coonamble's outback hospitality.

2008 Gathering chair Amanda Colwell and her small team of dynamic volunteers provided spectacular warm days, cool nights and a weekend of delights ranging from informative and entertaining speakers to many workshop learning and information exchange opportunities.

Friday night was the time to relax after long journeys on the first floor verandah of the historic Commercial Hotel. We were greeted with a cocktail before the warm welcomes and music by two talented women musicians. The women on the Mildura bus were the last to leave the dance floor despite spending 14 hours getting there!

I began Saturday with tai chi on the lawn and a quick whiz around the excellent trade stalls before settling in to listen to speakers in the High School Multipurpose Centre.

Jean Hamilton gave the welcome to country followed by a series of short talks from sponsors and dignitaries including the Minister for Women Verity Firth who is now becoming a regular face at rural women's gatherings.



"I found the workshops I attended fun and the information useful."

"This was my first Women's Gathering and I am certainly looking forward to the next one. I would like to congratulate you all on the organisation of such a big event - the accommodation, food, workshops, etc were only surpassed by the friendly and helpful people who were herding us around. Well done!!!"

"I was very pleased to plant three trees in Coonamble, what a very thoughtful and responsible idea."

Verity announced NSW Government support for the 2009 NSW Women's Gathering guaranteeing \$40 000 in funding to the appreciative audience.

Keynote speakers included Dr Carol Liston who told fascinating stories about the hidden history of some amazing Australian women.

"I found it a very positive and empowering experience and am going to suggest to some friends that we go next year."



Women's stories have always been a strong focus of Gatherings. I attended one of the 'yarn up' sessions where we listened to rural women sharing life experiences as diverse as being involved in live sheep exports to the Middle East to time with gorillas in Rwanda.

Author and comedienne Kerry Cue told childhood stories of growing up in a rural area of Victoria and the perils and positives of the telephone exchange.

She reminded us to value our sense of community. 'This is much more difficult to find in the city. If my house burned down I doubt my virtual 'face book' friends would be on my doorstep to help.'

We were also challenged to deal with change by never saying 'I can't'. Kerry said we too often build our own barriers and her motto, when faced with a problem, is 'find a way'.

"I thought the weekend went very well and you all worked very hard for its success. It shows what a small community can do."



"I really enjoyed spending the weekend with such a diverse group of women and felt very proud to be part of such a dynamic, passionate and happy combination of personalities-the network of women at the gathering reflects that rural N.S.W. is in 'good hands'."

"I enjoyed the workshops that I attended... The outcome will have great significance re study and the rest of my life. If this, for nothing else, is why I was at the Gathering, I shall remember it as the starting point of something important. Thank you!!!!"



A personal highlight this year was the fashion parade at the Gala Dinner. Over 300 guests seated in a huge marquee oooooed and aaaahhed as local young women [and young men] sashayed down the red carpet wearing wedding outfits from the 1930s to modern days... some wore their Mum's gowns and were partnered by their Dads [more sighs!].

Workshops focused on health, creative pursuits, the environment and personal development. The ecumenical service provided an opportunity for the singing workshop to enchant the crowd.





Dr Meredith Burgmann and Yvette Andrews authors of 'The Ernies Book – 1000 terrible things Australian men have said about women' provided many laughs at the final Sunday plenary.

The weekend concluded with many women taking the opportunity to offset their carbon footprint by planting a tree in a local park before hitting the road for home with smiles on their faces and renewed vigour to face the future.



Annual Women's Gatherings are organised by volunteer committees who develop the weekend program to reflect the unique culture, industry, tourism and environment of their community. The next Gathering will be hosted by June 18-20 September 2009.

A BIG thank you to all the generous sponsors of this year's event. Major sponsors included: NSW DPI, Westpac, Coonamble Shire Council, Royal Agricultural Society of NSW, NSW Farmers Association, National Australia Bank, REX, Clyde Agriculture, Rangelands Australia, NSW Office for Women, Landmark, Central West CMA.

For more information on Gatherings visit www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rwn/gatherings

