

# ***Rural Women Going Flat Out in Hay***

**Contribute – Create – Collect – Curate**

## **15<sup>th</sup> Annual NSW Women’s Gathering**



*A short pictorial account by Sonia Muir, Rural Women’s Network Coordinator,  
NSW Department of Primary Industries*



When Hay announced the dates for the 2007 NSW Women's Gathering hosted by *Women About Hay*, most of us thought it would be hot and dusty... well the drought may not have broken but the wet weather brought a returned sense of hope and the 260+ participants cared little about getting a bit drenched now and again although the Sunday ecumenical service tested our resilience! Who would have thought we'd need to pack ski gear for a November weekend in the outback.



The service was held in a private garden at a stunning river bend location. The singing, inspirational words spoken and spirit of camaraderie among women who had travelled from across the state helped us cope with the arctic winds sweeping across the plains.



***Bee Koh, Premier's Council for Women (far left), with Verity Firth, Minister for Women (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) and two Gathering participants.***

On Saturday morning Verity Firth, the Minister for Women, spoke to the crowd about important issues for women. She was enthusiastic about her first Gathering experience in Hay and reconfirmed The Minister for Primary Industries, Ian Macdonald's, commitment to future Gatherings by pledging \$30,000 for the next Gathering to be hosted by Coonamble in October 2008. Ms Firth spent a number of hours engaging with women and learning first hand about their concerns.



Friday evening was a chance to recuperate from long journeys, meet new friends and reconnect with others. A festive marquee was erected at the Waradgery Club as the main High School venue had been damaged a few months earlier.

As part of Friday night's program a group of young local women dressed in black, performed a short play called 'Eyes Down' which introduced a shocking history lurking within the walls of the Hay gaol.

The gaol, now a museum, had been a girl's reform institution up until 1974. Keynote speaker, Christina Green was a past 'resident' of the Hay Institute for Girls. She showed incredible courage as she revealed horror stories of injustice and abuse.



Christina (pictured left) was taken away from her family at the age of three and spent the next decade and a half on a rollercoaster ride of foster care and institutions. Her tale was both enthralling and very sad but showed how healing is possible with strong determination and support from others. It certainly made us forget the drought for a while. I was also grateful to reflect on my own fortunate childhood and be reminded to always look for the good in situations and focus on the positives in life.



The Saturday evening 60s and 70s fancy dress theme and fashion parade featured an array of wild hair dos, crimplene suits, short and long 'frocks' and even the once ubiquitous jumpsuit. The cast of local models led by the incredibly funny compere provided many belly laughs and gasps of horror as past 'statements' were brought vividly back to life on the catwalk.

The array of workshops included visits to Hay landmarks such as the historic *Bishop's Lodge* and the more quirky *Westhaven* property. Other workshops provided opportunities to explore creative potential by making mosaics, arranging flowers or painting landscapes. Heritage walkers returned from their stroll around town with a greater



understanding of the past and much Hay mud caked on their shoes. Women experienced kinesiology, learned to belly dance, how to use a digital camera and do simple car mechanics. There was something for everybody. I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to learn about local Aboriginal culture and customs from workshop presenter Gubba Woods a local Waradgery man.

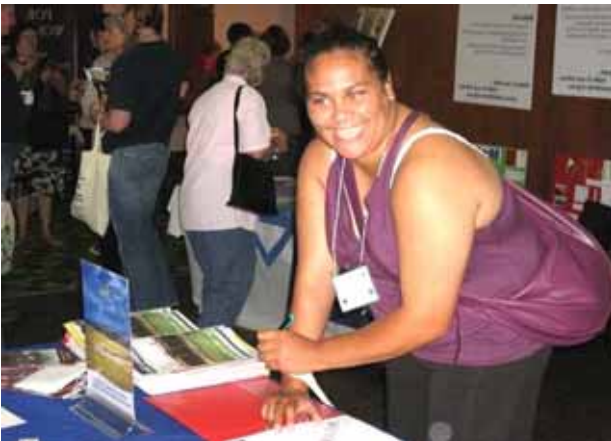
Gubba's daughter Lara (pictured left) performed the welcome to country with her brother Kurt who played the didgeridoo.



**Handing on the Gathering candle: Marg Tighe (Hay), Susan Ainge McLeish (Coonamble), Robyn O'Brien (Hay), Tertia Butcher (Hay Chair) and Amanda Colwell (Coonamble Chair).**

I gave a presentation on the 4<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Rural Women held in South Africa (April 2007) on Sunday morning before the Gathering handover ceremony. This aimed to provide a global picture of rural women's issues and inform participants of the next Congress being hosted by India (2010).

Congratulations to Tertia Butcher and the Women About Hay team who have been working for months to design this year's successful event and made everyone feel so warmly welcomed. As women drove home in every direction I know they go back to their families and communities with new stories, more energy and secure in the knowledge that they are not alone and have developed some extra skills and inspiration to face challenges that lie ahead.



Gatherings are events where you make a multitude of new friends and contacts. For me it is an opportunity I relish as I get to put faces to names and meet with a diversity of women from across the State.

If you have never experienced the unique opportunity to learn and gain strength from others, become motivated and revitalised by a NSW Women's Gathering, then don't miss your chance next year by marking 17-19 October 2008 on your calendar now. Gatherings are open to all women and I look forward to perhaps meeting you in Coonamble next year!

*Special thanks to all the many generous sponsors and especially to NSW DPI Drought program, The Uniting Church, The Salvation Army, CWA of NSW, TAFE NSW, Lower Murray Darling Catchment Authority and Department of Community Services who provided special assistance which enabled over 70 women to attend the Hay Gathering.*