



A HISTORY *of women's Gatherings in NSW*

January 2005





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History of The women's Gathering

In Orange in 1993, NSW Agriculture's (now NSW Department of Primary Industries) Rural Women's Network (RWN) and FarmSafe Central West, instigated the first Women on the Land Gathering in NSW, as a way of bringing rural women together for networking, learning, gaining inspiration and ideas, and sharing information. The idea came from Victoria where *Women on Farms Gatherings* have been an annual event since 1990.

More than 400 women from around NSW and other States came to the Orange Gathering and from that event came the enthusiasm for NSW Gatherings to be held each year.

Gatherings are organised by local committees who make key decisions, develop a theme and the weekend program. Each Gathering reflects the unique culture, industry, tourism and environment of the host community.

Over the years perceptions have remained that the *Women of the Land Gatherings* were only for farm women – despite the hard promotional work of the organising committees to ensure that all rural women were welcome.

In 1998/99 the RWN conducted a review of the RWN program and its activities. Using this information and after long discussions, the RWN's State Advisory Committee decided to rename the annual event to '*The Women's Gathering*' in the hope of making the Gatherings more inclusive to the full diversity of rural women.

The importance of The women's Gathering in NSW

Women's Gatherings are for ALL rural women including: farming women; Aboriginal women; women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; mining women, women in the fishing industry; women who live in regional cities, towns and villages; and coastal women.

Gatherings are now a well established state-wide community event for all rural women and provide an opportunity for rural women to network, share experiences and support each other. It is not a 'conference' as such – but a way of bringing women together.

Gatherings also provide opportunities for rural women to have a direct voice to decision-makers through government Ministers and other decision-makers attending the Gathering, and sometimes through the wide distribution of a Gathering report.

They enable rural women to access information on existing services, resources and assistance available and provide an opportunity for rural women to learn from listening to top calibre speakers and participating in workshops.

The Women's Gathering also contributes to raising the profile of rural women and highlighting important issues through wide media coverage.

Gathering locations and how they are decided

Gatherings are held in different locations around the State, to ensure the greatest accessibility for rural women across New South Wales.

To date, Gatherings have been held in Orange, Gunnedah, Yanco, Cobar, Tocal, Cooma, Moree, Wellington, Kempsey, Bourke, Temora and Coonabarabran. The 2005 Women's Gathering will be held in Bega from 31 September to 2 October 2005.

The RWN's State Advisory Committee is responsible for ensuring the Gathering is shared fairly around the State by deciding on the host group each year. The selection is based on proposals received according to set criteria in the gathering guidelines.

If you are interested in having a Gathering in your area please contact:

NSW DPI's Rural Women's Network
Ph: 02 6391 3620
Fax: 02 6391 3650
Email: allison.priest@agric.nsw.gov.au

It's also a good idea to have a look at the Gathering Guidelines which can be found on the Rural Women's Network website:

www.agric.nsw.gov.au/rwn/wolg/guidelines.pdf

If you do not have access to the Internet please contact RWN who will either fax or post you a copy of the Women's Gathering Guidelines.



1ST ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Surviving and Thriving

Orange Agricultural College, 9 to 11 July 1993

Margaret Carroll, (NSW Agriculture Rural Women's Network) and Ronnie Hazelton (FarmSafe Central West) coordinated the first Annual Women's Gathering attended by 450 rural women from across rural, regional and remote NSW.

The official opening was performed by The Hon Kerry Chikarovski, Minister for the Status and Advancement of Women and Minister for Industrial Relations and Employment. The Plenary & Close was performed by The Hon Ian Armstrong, Minister of Agriculture & Fisheries and Mining.

Keynote Speakers included:

Christina Hindhaugh, an author and farmer 'extraordinaire' who inspired the audience. As one participant noted "a great asset to our country and rural Australia in particular".

Professor John Chudleigh, Principal of Orange Agricultural College, spoke on finance and provided as one participant noted, "good factual, sensible, in-depth information – an important message for farmers in this economic climate".

Magistrate Pat O'Shane spoke on *You and the Law* and concentrated on domestic violence and its impact on rural women. One participant said "Pat has travelled the road of enlightenment – we must follow or stay in the dark". She called us to stand in solidarity as "women hold up half the sky".

The workshops aimed to emphasise the theme of the



Gathering – *Surviving and Thriving* and focused on themes relevant to rural women. These included finance, learning, the environment, health and personal development.

Two panels of experienced people addressed important issues on: The Whole Woman – Health and Safety Issues; and Political and Legal Issues.

Farm Tours giving a flavor of Central West farming enterprises and interests included Doon carrick Apple Orchard, 3 wineries, a canola mill and the Orange Agricultural Research Station.

A Hypothetical in which a complex scenario was developed involving personal relationships and financial management of a farming family held the attention, interest and involvement of the audience.

An Ecumenical Service was held on the Sunday morning and was an important part of the Gathering. The service was delivered by Dr Helen Clements (Orange Presbyterian) and Deaconess June Armstrong (Orange Anglican).

The theme *Surviving and Thriving* was carried through with Deaconess Armstrong giving examples of the hopes of women through the ages supporting their menfolk and families with faith in God who created us and our world. The service provided inspiration and hope for the future.





2ND ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Sharing and Caring

Gunnedah, 16 to 18 September 1994

Janet Redden of NSW TAFE convened the 2nd Annual Women's Gathering attended by 370 rural women from across rural, regional and remote NSW.

The official opening was performed by The Hon Kerry Chikarovski, Minister for the Status and Advancement of Women and Minister for Industrial Relations and Employment. The Plenary & Close was performed by The Hon Ian Causley, Minister of Agriculture & Fisheries and Mining.



Keynote Speakers included:

Marie Mahood who began her keynote speech on sharing and caring by defining limits. The first main area of caring touched briefly on Landcare and the second, because it was the Year of the Family, on caring for the rural family, particularly during the current drought conditions.

Maree McCaskill talked about two simple things – *realising how important you are and getting involved in the things that matter to you and proving it!*

Four wonderful women; Pat Studdy-Clift, Marianne Lichti, Gwen Griffin, and Judy Simson, gave personal accounts of life on the land. Heidi Austin spoke on her interesting and varied life as a country veterinarian.

Workshops focused on themes relevant to rural women. Some of the topics included; education beyond 2000, public speaking, superannuation, sustainable agriculture, farming for the future, computers, self defence, suicide awareness, coping alone, women's health and home hosting – just to name a few!

The Ecumenical Service was held on the Sunday morning and was conducted by Sr Gemma. During the singing of 'Bring Forth the Kingdom of Mercy', yellow, red, blue and green balloons were released.



3RD ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Today's Knowledge, Tomorrow's Success

Yanco, 22 to 24 September 1995

Margie Fixter of NSW Agriculture convened the 3rd Annual Women's Gathering attended by more than 300 rural women from across rural and regional NSW.

Official proceedings began on Saturday with The Murrumbidgee Chorale singing 'Advance Australia Fair'. A welcome address by the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Principal, Mr Geoff Creek was followed by words from Mr Noel Hicks MHR, the Federal Member for Riverina. The Hon Richard Amery, Minister for Agriculture officially opened the Gathering.

Mrs Beryl Ingold, State Treasurer of the Agricultural Bureau of NSW, Riverina Regional Development Board, farmer and Murrumbidgee College Advisory Council member, chaired the official closure.

Margaret Carroll spoke about the Rural Women's Network and Sonia Muir shared some of her experiences from the Beijing Women's Conference. At the closing Margie Fixter passed the 'tilly lantern' to the convenor of the 1996 Gathering at Cobar, Mrs Pat Le Lievre.

Keynote Speakers included Dame Leonie Kramer AC DBE, Chancellor, The University of Sydney, Ms Linda Burney, President, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc, and Mrs Ella Lowe, Director of Nursing, Mildura Base Hospital. Ms Robyn Tredwell, 1995 ABC Rural Woman of the Year gave an insight into life in the remote Kimberly region of Western Australia at the Gathering Dinner.

Workshops focused on education and health issues and covered topics such as story telling/writing, leadership, Aboriginal people, stress management, self-esteem, women and fatigue, utilising technology, marketing, computers, communication, succession planning and native plants.



The Land Newspaper ran a special Photography Competition and art displays from various exhibitors were opened for viewing.

Participants also had the opportunity to take part in a special farm tour at Eric and Jan Male's Alabama Ostrich Farm in the picturesque Colinroobie Hills north of Narrandera. Included in the visit was a fine display of egg craft, painting and carving, together with high fashion products such as handbags and belts.

The Ecumenical Service was held on the Sunday morning and was conducted by Sr Clare Gaynor. The Service was one of the highlights of the Gathering - 'To Care for the Earth is to Share with God in the Act of Creation'.





4TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING *Resourceful and Resilient*

Cobar, 27 to 29 September 1996

Pat Le Lievre a former member and Co-Chair of the Rural Women's Network State Advisory Committee along with Ruth Barclay of NSW Agriculture, convened the 4th Annual Women's Gathering attended by 370 rural women from across rural, regional and remote NSW.

Clr Lilliane Brady, Mayor of Cobar gave the official welcome with Helen Board, National Rural Women's Unit performing the official opening. The Plenary and Close was performed by Dr Kevin Sheridan, NSW Agriculture Director-General.

Keynote Speakers included Dr Wendy Craik Executive Director, National Farmers' Federation who spoke about 'Agriculture, Business and the Environment'; Sally Milne, Women's Health Worker, Bathurst Health Centre spoke on 'Health and Wellbeing'; Vicki Dickman, from the Australian Country Information Service at Chinchilla; and Nancy Snow of Skilful Solutions in Chinchilla. Nancy spoke on 'Personal and Community Development'.



Four wonderful women; Joan Myors, Vivienne Davis, Anne Rogers, and Carol Buckman, gave personal accounts of life on the land. Joan spoke about life in the pastoral industry in Western NSW. Vivienne spoke about life in a mining family and town. Anne spoke about growing up in a country town and Carol shared her expertise of growing up as an indigenous woman.

Some of the workshop topics included; low maintenance gardens, permaculture, approaching your bank manager with confidence, understanding insurance policies/superannuation, mothers and daughters, now that I've got kids, good health naturally, First Aid for accidents in rural areas, domestic violence, time management, Aboriginal culture, poetry, speaking out and marketing your produce.

Action Group Forums provided the opportunity for delegates to raise issues of concern about rural life within the three areas of Agriculture, Business & Environment, Health & Well-being, and Community & Personal Development. Each session was facilitated by a key person who directed questions from the floor to a panel of persons representing relevant authorities, agencies and politicians. Lively debate and ideas were encouraged.

Lyn Sykes, a relationships counsellor from Dubbo spoke at the Gathering Dinner about forms of communication, how families relate to each other, and the involvement or otherwise of a person marrying into that family, especially a woman.

Mr Ben Bennett, Chairman of the Orana Regional Development Board (ORDB) implored the audience to take every opportunity to promote the agricultural industry in a positive light to those who perhaps did not have a true appreciation of the issues involved and the commitment of farmers to sustainable production.

A special Partners' Program was introduced by Cobar for the first time and included the Cobar Cultural and Mine Heritage Tour and the Mt Drysdale Mine Heritage Tour.

The Ecumenical Service was held on the Sunday morning and was led by Sr Megan Brock in conjunction with the Cobar Christian Women's Choir. Sr Brock described the breads of the world that were presented, broken and shared as symbols of the women they represent and their contribution to life and all that sustains life.

At the official handover, Bronwyn Norman a member of the 1997 Gathering Committee accepted the lantern and the challenge to host the 1997 Women's Gathering at Tocal.



5TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Inspiring and Achieving

CB Alexander Agricultural College Tocal, 9 to 11 October 1997

Jane Reynolds of NSW Agriculture convened the 5th Annual Women's Gathering attended by 320 rural women from across rural, regional and remote NSW.

Cameron Archer, College Principal welcomed women to the Gathering with the official opening performed by The Hon Fay Lo Po', Minister for Fair Trading and Minister for Women. The Plenary and Close was performed by The Hon Richard Amery, Minister for Agriculture.

The Gathering was organised into three special themes; Women and Technology, Women in Decision-making, and Women Managing Change.

Keynote Speakers included Barbara Scott of Coonabarabran, 1996 ABC Rural Woman of the Year; Catherine Harris, Federal Director of the Australian Affirmative Action Agency; and Libby Darlison, a consultant for health, physical activity and sport. Each of the speakers addressed one of the three themes.

Three wonderful women; Fay McGuigan, Wines Export Manager for McGuigan Wines, Margaret Francis, a student amongst the first intake of women at Tocal, and

Nancy Snow, from Skilful Solutions gave personal accounts of life on the land.

Tony Parry, a bush poet and ex student of Tocal was the special speaker for the Gathering Dinner.

25 workshops were available including: public speaking, no news is not good news, meeting procedure, a sense of place, Stepping Stones training kit and networking, farm business planning, self-esteem, women managing change, practical home healing and negotiation – to name a few.

A spiritual ceremony was held outdoors in the grounds of the 'homestead' followed by breakfast.



6TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

High Country, High Hopes, High Achievers

Cooma, 16 to 18 October 1998

Sally Martin from Cooma Council convened the 6th Annual Women's Gathering attended by 280 rural women from across rural, regional and remote NSW.

The official opening was performed by Mr Peter Cochran, Member for Monaro and Dr Kevin Sheridan, Director-General of NSW Agriculture.

Amanda Gore who holds a Bachelor of Physics majoring in Psychology focused her address on stress and change management, male and female communication, differences in relationships and how we can better understand each other.

Robyn Henderson, a master at networking looked at utilising these skills in our business and personal lives, and shared simple strategies and skills to enable individuals and businesses to achieve full potential.

On the Friday evening following registrations two local women shared their stories about what it was like to live in a rural community. This was complimented by cheese and wine.

A variety of workshops were offered throughout the program including, paddock to plate, family stays and B&B's, back for life, deciding which venture, keeping the farm in the family, turning your weeds into profit, wandering the world wide web, river corridor management, and my soul mate the fridge.

All participants enjoyed a spectacular Gathering dinner with a fantastic cabaret performance by the Braemar School of Dance.

Following on from the previous years' gatherings there was a special men's program which included farm tours and other activities such as viewing a film about the snowy mountains Hydro-electric scheme, a training young working dogs workshop, a snowy river winery wine tasting and lunch, a fly fishing demonstration, a traditional wood displays, and 18 holes of Golf.



7TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Participation, Persistence, Partnership

Moree, 10 to 12 September 1999

Helen Zilm, a cotton producer from Moree convened the 7th Annual Women's Gathering attended by 400 rural women from across rural, regional and remote NSW.

Helen, Myrana Harris and a representative from the local Kamilaroi tribe welcomed participants to the Gathering with the official opening performed by Mr Michael Montgomery, Mayor of Moree.

Terry Underwood was the Keynote Speaker for the Saturday. She lives on Rivern Station, 600kms from Katherine. She was the recipient of the 1997 Telstra Northern Territory Business Women's Owner of the Year Award and is an author of the best selling autobiography entitled '*In the Middle of Nowhere*'.



The Internet Cafe organised by the Department for Women and NSW Agriculture's Rural Women's Network provided an opportunity for women to experience new technology, chat to friends and family and send them an 'e-card'.

The Land Newspaper once again held their photographic competition which showed the Gatherings theme in a different light — categories provided for humour, hard work and play. The competition was judged by Keynote Speaker Terry Underwood.

There were over 70 workshops for participants to choose from. Some of these included: kinesiology, sip 'n' spit, growing old disgracefully, bush tucker, olives into the new millennium, menopause, computers for beginners, Aboriginal art, culture and history, reconciliation, organic farming and photography.

Phoebe Fraser was the speaker for the Gathering dinner. Phoebe joined CARE Australia in 1989 as the Victorian Coordinator. Her work has involved extensive travel to many Asian and African countries and her experiences include distributing supplies to flood victims in Bangladesh and coordinating emergency centres for up to 2000 lost and orphaned Rwandan children. In 1996 Phoebe published '*A Single Seed*', which addresses many of her experiences.

There was a special panel session that ran on the Saturday with a variety of speakers covering relevant issues. The themes for the panels were: Production for the New Millennium, Health Wise, and Community Responsibility.

There was a market place located at the Town and Country club which offered a wide variety of clothes, crafts and local industry samples.



8TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Information & Inspiration = Innovation

Wellington, 6 to 8 October 2000

Meg Strand, ABC Radio convened the 6th Annual Women's Gathering in Wellington attended by over 250 women from across New South Wales.

A local Wiradjuri Elder and Neita Scott, a Aboriginal representative on the Premier's Council for Women welcomed the women to their lands. This was followed by a local children's Aboriginal dance group performance.

The Gathering featured over 50 workshops and a variety of guest speakers including well-known local identities – former ABC Rural Woman of the Year, Netta Holmes (Wellington) and artist, author and cancer survivor Katie Barton (Mudgee). Christine Hindhaugh, the Keynote Speaker, shared her experiences as a Churchill Fellow and fledging broad acre herb farmer.



Throughout the Gathering there were lots of opportunities for networking between women's groups, service providers and the women themselves.

An interactive panel on the Sunday morning explored managing change through local women sharing their stories.

John Pym from Ausbuy (Dick Smith's supermarket campaign to buy Australian) also challenged the audience to control change by looking before buying to ensure products are truly Australian.

Numerous displays provided women with access to a wide range of information as well as an opportunity to talk with service providers direct.



Friday night highlighted a local (and very talented) vet/poet as well as singers extraordinaire! The Saturday dinner featured a local children's choir and amateur theatre as well as a fashion parade.

An ecumenical service was held on Sunday morning at the beautiful Cameron Park.

The local Mayor and Elizabeth Jones, the Wellington Gathering Convenor, as part of the closing ceremony handed over the Gathering 'torch' to Kempsey Gathering representative, Barbara Huntington.



9TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Unity in Diversity

Kempsey, 21 to 23 September 2001

The 2001 Gathering attracted about 150 women (and a few men) to the Kempsey showgrounds on the Mid North Coast on a sunny and warm weekend in September. Women came from up and down the coastal fringe, others travelled hundreds of kilometres showing that there was no *great divide* where rural women were concerned.

We received a warm welcome to the land by a Dughutti Elder and a Councillor from Kempsey Shire, followed by the Director-General of NSW Agriculture, Dr Kevin Sheridan AO, who officially opened the Gathering. A seafood dinner followed the formalities – very befitting for the first ever coastal 'saltwater' Gathering.

Throughout the Gathering women were continually encouraged to be involved in the many interactive activities which often include trying something new or feeling confident to voice their opinions and concerns to the wider group. Acceptance of others, reconciliation, forgiveness and valuing our multicultural Australian way of life were also strong Gathering themes that emerged over the weekend.



The broad scope of activities from which to choose, included sessions on women in business, natural resource management, reconciliation, leadership, health, computing, arts and crafts, music and dance... so there really was something for everyone. There were also lots of opportunities for women to share stories and concerns, speak with exhibitors or just take time out to enjoy the sunshine.

On Saturday morning a moving *bread ceremony* first used at the Cobar Gathering, set the theme of *Unity in Diversity* which was continually reinforced over the three-day program in many different ways.

The ever inspiring Madeleine Randall, well know ABC Local Radio presenter, was the Keynote Speaker. Madeleine spoke about the recent global developments and challenged us to think about what we could do on a more local level, in our own communities and lives.

The Saturday evening Gathering dinner had a wonderful international flavour through the food, entertainment and ambience created by the setting, as we were all seated under a silken canopy in the semi-outdoors. Octogenarian, Tony Mooy Hurley, the delightful dinner speaker from Coffs Harbour, gave us an insight into an expedition that she and her twin sister took to Antarctica. They retraced an earlier journey taken by their father, as part of the Shackleton expedition in 1914.

The Sunday ecumenical services was a continuation of the Gathering theme with representatives from a range of religious beliefs giving short presentations.

The Sunday changeover to the 2002 Committee saw many women already making a commitment to travel to *outback* for next years Gathering, confirming the importance of such an event to rural women regardless of where they live.





10TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Fortitude and Far Horizons

Bourke, 27 to 29 September 2002

The 300+ women (and a few men!) who attended the 10th Women's Gathering came from all corners of the state – by public transport, in cars and buses or vehicle convoys. If you can imagine these energised women on a balmy Friday evening under the stars networking, sipping wine, dining on outback treats and listening to bush poetry in the courtyard of an old historic colonial building, then you'll have a sense of the flavour of this special gathering.

Saturday morning began with a small group of talented local Aboriginal dancers performing indigenous stories following the official opening. The Older Women's Network was next on the program. They took us on a fun and thought provoking journey exploring social themes and more serious issues such as domestic violence – through song, dance and theatre.

There were four strands of workshops, which ran over the two days. They included sessions on climate, organics, discussions on health issues, explorations of the arts, Feng Shui, self-defence, grass weaving, belly dancing, Aboriginal culture, women's story panels and more. In fact most people found it hard to choose which workshop to nominate – the scope was so broad and enticing. For those who wanted to see more of the Bourke district there were also tours to Mt Oxley, a cruise on the Darling, a tour of outback agricultural enterprises and a visit to a unique sustainable energy home built in the scrub 20kilometres out of town.

Keynote speakers included Rachel Oakes-Ash and Lachlan McLachlan. Rachel challenged us to look at how we see others and ourselves. She also asked us to think about the ways we compete with each other, as women, and also talked about having a positive body image. Lachlan spoke of his 'surreal' life as an undercover police officer bringing into focus a dangerous profession many of us can only ever experience through film, television and novels.

The Gathering was also an opportunity to celebrate outback people doing extraordinary things. Tertia Butcher and Annabel Walsh were each presented with a Year of the Outback Women's Overseas Study Scholarship by Richard Sheldrake, Director-General of NSW Agriculture.



The Rural Women's Network's Living Out Back book was also launched by the Director-General and is a tribute to those people who tackle isolation and other problems of living in the outback.

The Darling River and the old historic wharf provided a perfect backdrop for the ecumenical service on the Sunday morning. Following the service, participants again had an opportunity to check out the many agency and group displays as well as complete two more rounds of workshops.

An official handover to the 2003 Gathering organising committee completed the program events. The Chair of the Temora committee, Margaret Duck welcomed everyone to visit her region and come to the next Women's Gathering on 10-12 October 2003.

11TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Golden beginnings, Harvesting our future

Temora, 10 to 12 October 2003

The eleventh annual rural Women's Gathering held at Temora proved yet again what a dedicated group of rural women can achieve.

The Golden Beginnings ~ Harvesting Our Future 2003 Gathering theme was high in our minds as we drove through the dramatic yellow splashed fields of canola on our way to Temora. The theme reflects the historical development of the Temora district and the roles women played in its early gold mining days to the later flourishing agricultural enterprises.



The Gathering weekend provided a wide range of activities which included workshops, tours, entertainment, great food and plenty of time to network.

The warm, friendly and nurturing tone for this year's Gathering was well set on the Friday night at the local Bowling Club by Wiradjuri Elder, Flo Grant's warm welcome to country using her local language, "Gawaimbann-gu, Wiradjuri Ngurangbaang" and the women's stories told by three extraordinary locals. Each shared their incredible lives and achievements...

Rosie Blachut is an unassuming dynamo. She is a qualified radiographer with an interest in physics and flying. Rosie told her story of how these interests lead to her spending five years building her own plane.

Elizabeth Kirkby originally from the UK came to Australia in 1960s after a diverse career in theatre, radio, television and the Auxiliary Territorial Service. Many may remember her as Lucy in the TV show 'Number 96'. Elizabeth then spent 17 years on the NSW Legislative Council. She now runs a farm near Temora.

Felicity Lehmann, a writer was born in the UK and came to Australia as a young child. In 1998 Felicity was one of a group of ten courageous breast cancer survivors who paddled 1,000kilometres down the Murray River to raise awareness and funding for breast cancer research.

The program also featured many and varied speakers who took participants on journeys into the worlds of business, health research and ways of developing and extending oneself.

Dr Ann Villiers described herself as a Mental Nutritionist and has written a book called 'Gorgeous Daring Dames'. Ann challenged us to think about the way we do things. Using a clothes line she demonstrated the many supposed 'right' and 'correct' ways to peg socks on the line! Participants could easily identify with this analogy and went away with a strong image aimed to make them think about other aspects of their lives where perhaps they need to reassess the way they do things and acknowledge that there can be many approaches to a problem.





Ann also talked about the 'pantries' in our minds and the need to take a stock-take now and again to check on our 'jars and packets' of beliefs and values.

Michelle Nugan is the CEO of a very large Griffith-based family business employing over 150 staff. Michelle shared insights gained over the years as she transformed from wife and mother to highly successful business woman, a position she fell into after the untimely death of her husband.

Her approach included listening to others and being responsive to change, maintaining core values, building loyalty and trust with staff and using mentors.

Michelle also believes in giving back to the community and funds leadership programs for women and young people and opens her house each Christmas to elderly residents of Griffith.

Professor Eileen Gallery was born in Ireland and is a highly specialised physician and researcher who studied in Oxford and Australia. Eileen currently co-heads the Perinatal Research Group at the Royal North Shore Hospital and gave an informative presentation in her wonderful Irish lilt called 'Are adult diseases already programmed in the womb?' This generated lots of questions and proved to be a very lively and interactive session.

Workshops covered a wide range of topics from marketing, women's health, essential oils and starting your own business to genetic testing and research, floral art and drought support to name just a few.

The Saturday night dinner featured local produce and wine. The evening also included a fashion parade of woollen scarves and wraps inspired by Wiradjuri designs. They were produced by a group of regional wool producers represented by Diana Gibbs of Cootamundra who won the NSW RIRDC Rural Woman's Award in 2000.

The men's Partner's Program featured bus tours to surrounding towns and tourist attractions and even attracted a few women who wanted to see more of the region.

Other activities included a cookbook 'Teapots and Tractors' launch, a wonderful art exhibit by Heather Valance called 'Conversations with Rural Women' and talented local dancers.

The frosty Sunday morning did not deter the Tai Chi participants or the group assembled for the ecumenical service where a minute silence was taken to remember the Bali bombing victims.

The Gathering was closed by the Director-General of the Department for Women who also lead everyone in some singing.

The finale of the Gathering was the handing over of the candle to the 2004 Women's Gathering Committee. A large number of Coonabarabran women travelled to Temora to experience the event and gather ideas for next year's Gathering to be held from 17-19 September. They thanked Temora with a song they had written the evening before.

I feel certain everyone went home floating with memories, new friends and better informed than when they arrived. With 270 participants, 50 presenters and 42 workshops it was a huge achievement so congratulations Temora!



12TH ANNUAL WOMEN'S GATHERING

Reach for the stars: Holistic health, wealth and wellbeing

Coonabarabran, 17 to 19 September 2004

Reaching for the Stars is such an apt name for the small town of Coonabarabran in the North West of NSW. Not only is it the home of the Siding Springs Observatory but the town really showcased its star qualities at the 2004 Women's Gathering held there.

Co-convenors, Cis Bruce and Liz Fox, along with their hardworking team showed yet again what a small group of dedicated, resourceful and creative rural women can do. They provided participants with a unique opportunity to experience their region's hospitality and, for the many locals to learn more about the talent in their own back paddock.

Many participants this year were first timers and by the end of the weekend were certainly Gathering converts!

Women, and a few men, travelled from far and wide to gain a sense of health, wealth and wellbeing – this year's Gathering themes. We spent time laughing, listening to guest speakers, participating in workshops, enjoying the entertainment and sharing stories.

The Shire Hall became the centre of activity throughout the weekend and registrations began there on Friday afternoon as Gathering participants drove into town. The benefit to the town was obvious. With more than 420 participants all accommodation was booked and the shops stayed opened catering for memento hunters.



Friday evening kicked off with an art exhibition featuring over 250 works from across the State. This was followed by an informal networking dinner and an evening of entertainment which included singing *We are Australian* in the Gamilaraay language.

This Indigenous language is slowly being revived and is helping to reinvigorate pride among the local Aboriginal people. Thanks to Maureen Sulter and her daughter, by the end of the Gathering we had all learned a few Gamilaraay words ourselves by doing the Hokey Pokey.

The Older Women's Network Theatre Group strutted and sang their stuff and had many women nodding knowingly as the group on stage dispelled many myths about being old.

Alice Springs Comedian Fiona O'Loughlin, kept up the buoyant fun-filled atmosphere by telling hilarious stories of her childhood car trips across the Hay plains and life as a mother of five.

The Hon Ian Macdonald MLC, NSW Minister for Primary Industries and the Deputy Director-General, Richard Sheldrake, attended the Friday evening and were seen deep in conversation with a number of women as they mingled with the crowd.



Official Opening

On Saturday morning Maureen Sulter performed a moving welcome to country speaking in Gamilaraay language. She was followed by the Mayor of Warrumbungle Shire and the Rural Women's Network Coordinator. The Hon Ian Macdonald MLC, officially opened the Gathering pledging his support for women and announced funding for the next year's event to be hosted by Bega.

Rebecca Arnott, 2004 RIRDC Rural Women's Award winner gave the keynote address. Rebecca spoke eloquently about her early career and the importance of self-affirmations and establishing support networks and approaching mentors. She challenged everyone to question what they could do if they weren't afraid.

Partners were well catered for too and tours were organised through the weekend to a local orchard, the Warrumbungle National Park, the Observatory and other places of interest.

This year's event also featured forums where we learned from others who have nurtured their rural community through Aboriginal employment programs (Dick Estens, Moree), supporting refugees (Jocelyn Stensen, Mudgee) and inspiring young children to read (Rhonda Brain, Parkes).

Along with nurturing community we were also reminded not to forget to nurture ourselves and listened to moving presentations by local General Practitioner Eve Tsironis, cancer survivor Bronwyn Ward and Sister Patricia Powell.

The array and quality of workshops made choosing a real dilemma and we all wanted to be in 10 places at the same time. There really was something for everyone: from singing and drumming, event management, charcoal drawing and understanding soils to grain marketing, Shaping Our Futures Together and belly dancing.

The Shire Hall was transformed for the Saturday evening Gathering dinner. A feeling of the night sky was created with black table covers and jars of stars and planets dangling from sticks under a galaxy canopy.



Music was a real feature of this year's Gathering with the Coonabarabran Orbital Swing Band, a local ensemble and country singer Diana Cormie. The Gathering song written by Elizabeth Barkley (Coonabarabran music teacher) encompassed the spirit of Gatherings and the role of women while focusing on the stellar theme. It was sung on numerous occasions through the weekend.

I think to be an astronomer you must also have to be a comedian, as Dr Fred Watson took us on a funny journey back to the big bang and revealed some secrets of the heavens.

Emotions ran high throughout the weekend and culminated in the handing over ceremony. Cis Bruce thanked her team and passed the symbolic lighted candle onto Wilma Chinnock and Dawn Hollins representing the Bega Gathering Committee. Wilma read a lyrical poem written especially for the occasion and inspired us to start planning for a trip to the south east corner of the State where they will be provided with a coastal experience on the long weekend in October 2005.

One can never forget the food at Gatherings and this year's event again showed how sophisticated rural communities have become by providing five star healthy fare and sweet tempting delicacies, no mean feat with the huge numbers.

Tired but full of new ideas and ways of building health, wealth and wellbeing, rural women travelled to their homes comforted in the thought that Women's Gatherings are alive and well and so important for supporting each other, learning new skills, sharing stories and providing fodder for the soul. I hope this little report has whetted your appetite for more.

For the real Gathering experience then you'll just have to come and experience one for yourself!

