

Rotary and the Community - Maryborough

An edited transcript of an Interview with Sharon Fraser of the Goldfields Shire Council,
Maryborough, Victoria, Australia.

CHRIS DE FRAGA: I'm talking with Sharon Fraser, from the Goldfields Council and "Go Goldfields".

Family violence has now become a major part of some of the work that they're doing at the council now. How did you get involved?

SHARON FRASER: Well, it really started for me...there was a looking at what we need to do to actually make sure that the community is doing the best that it can do, and it really came from a number of places. We had a very charismatic Mayor at the time, we had good leadership within Council, and we had some people who were leading the service system who were basically saying: "Enough is enough."

The 2009 Census had come out, and we were 79th out of 79 shires on the SEIFA Index, which is about social and economic advantage – or disadvantage, in this case. So they did some work and decided that to make a difference, we needed to improve the life outcomes for children, youth, and families. And then fortunately we got some funding; so it was at that point that I came onboard.

When we looked into that in detail, about what really needs to happen to improve the outcomes for children, youth, and families, family violence kept rising to the surface. You know, it's really quite apparent if you're involved in a household with family violence - it has impact on the exposure to trauma for children and for young people. So we have work that's specifically focused on children and families, and we have work that's specifically focused on youth and work readiness, and we decided we really needed to pull family violence out and have a particular focus itself. So that's how that work happened.

CHRIS DE FRAGA: And the communication between police, council, and so forth, and so on, has grown considerably as a result of this work on family violence?

SHARON FRASER: Yes. "Go Goldfields" is just about - and that 'banner' is just about - how we work together to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. So for family violence, it was looking at how we need to work together, *who* needs to work together, to achieve the outcomes. So we said, well, "Who are the decision makers who can put in resourcing, set policy, etc.?" For example, one of the decision makers we have on the Family Violence Action Group is the Deputy CEO of the Victorian Council of Social Services.

Then we said, "Who are the services, and who are the service leaders, that we need to have?" They're the likes of the Centre for Non-Violence, they're the likes of the

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Police, they're the likes of the Health Service or Family Services, those types of people.

And then we said: "OK, and who needs to be here with the community?" As a part of leading up, and as a part of working up the work, I had had conversations with Rotary. In fact, I think I even *presented* at Rotary one of the first weeks I was in the job! And that's because of the pre-existing work that Garry Higgins and myself had done in another role in the shire, that Garry had been pushing for social change for some time.

So initially, the conversations with Rotary were quite broad, but over time it became evident that there was a lot of passion from within Rotary to really have an impact on family violence. So then Rotary came on to the Family Violence Action Group, and we also have Zonta on that group. And from the beginning of May this year (2016,Ed.), we will have women with lived experience of family violence on that group.

Up until now, they've sat to the side in a group that we called Listeners Group, and that's for two reasons. Firstly, some of the women on that group are still in unsafe relationships, so they don't want to be seen out and about, associated with a title like Family Violence Action Group. But also, too, they are women that have had their trust in the system and their trust in people undermined. Not because of any individual people in the likes of policing or justice or the broader service system, but because of the way the system behaves. So it's taken awhile to build up trust, so that they see that this is something that may benefit them, so it's worth them investing in.

CHRIS DE FRAGA: It looks like the Goldfields area has actually got its act together very well, because you've actually got cooperation. People will talk with each other now, so the police figures of 1 in 4 families involved are less important, because everybody's talking to each other and you can get it fixed much more quickly.

SHARON FRASER: Yes, it is a long-term thing to change family violence, but what happens when you get everybody together is things start to move because people also start to have access to a lot of information and a lot of relationships that they otherwise wouldn't have had in the past. So for example, now within 48 hours of a police call about family violence, the police will go back into that home and say: "Now that everything's calm and settled down, what do we need to do here? Who needs to see who? Who do we need to get in contact with?", etc. So there's more of a social support role that the police are playing than just a criminal justice role.

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CHRIS DE FRAGA: Sounds like a proactive system: it's working well because everybody's talking to each other properly?

SHARON FRASER: Yes. A lot of the work for us has been about creating an environment for work. That's not easily visible, but it's one of those things – it's like building a house. If you don't put the foundation in place, then something can look great when you first build it, but then it starts to crumble. That environment for us has been things like: "Who needs to be here? What are we all working on together?"

Initially, when we first started talking about family violence, we had as many views around the table as we had people around the table, and we also had I suppose a vision or agenda that we were all working towards that was very long and had a lot of politically correct language in it. Whereas where that is now, the statement is: "Family violence is unacceptable in our community." And everyone who comes to that table, that's what's driving them. They absolutely, really want it to get there. They're not there thinking, "Oh, it'd be nice, but we're really not going to do it." The people around that table really want it to happen and really want to work out what we need to do to make it happen.

So there are four areas that we've teased down for the work to be against. One is around what role the broader service system takes. The second is around what role and responsibility the community takes - what ownership - how aware the community is. The third area is around the role of police and justice, and how those systems support and harm women and children. And the fourth one is around...

CHRIS DE FRAGA: ...men taking responsibility?..

SHARON FRASER: ...thank you, men taking responsibility, and also having a broader role for men around the accountability that they have. So our belief is, if we put in work together in each of those four areas, we'll actually move the dial on family violence. That's our belief.

CHRIS DE FRAGA: There's been a lot of work done so far. What improvements have you actually seen?

SHARON FRASER: There is no one thing that has led to any change, but if I can give you a bit of a story about what working together has achieved, and some of the ingredients.

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Some of the ingredients were that Rotary sponsored the manager of Early Years to go to England to visit Pen Green¹. And there, it was to look at how they teach children who are exposed to trauma, and how they connect with parents who are living in unsafe homes. What she did was she brought that learning back. At the same time, we've done a whole lot of work around understanding the impact of trauma for all of the staff down at the Early Years Centre. We've looked at coming up with a new, integrated Early Years approach that puts the learning of the child and the learning environment and how to connect with such parents in place. So it's actually informed the whole approach.

What that means in reality, for example, is we've had, say, a mum, and she has a mental illness, and her mental illness – I don't know the causes of it, etc. - but I also do know that in her household there is family violence. There are some times that she can get her little girl to Kinder in the morning, 9 o'clock, on the right day. But other times she can't. What would've happened previously is the child would've missed out on Kinder.

Whereas now what happens, because there's an understanding of the environment that she's raising the child in and there's an understanding of her intent and the work that she needs to do to be the best parent that she can be to her little girl, now what we do is we say to her: "We know that it's hard for you to get her to Kinder at 9:00 o'clock on, say, a Tuesday. So we will put her in a Kinder program any time you can get her here. If you can't get her in till midday, we'll put her in the afternoon program. If you can't get her here until Wednesday, we'll put her in the Wednesday program. But what is important is that we are working together to make sure that your little girl gets access to the learning that she needs to get, and that we know that you are doing everything that you can to help support her learning."

What then is happening is the Kinder teacher is going on a journey with the parent, instead of judging the parent for the lifestyle she has and for the home environment of the child.

CHRIS DE FRAGA: So it's a communication thing. It's communicating better between the various groups involved in family violence.

SHARON FRASER: And it's partnering. It's genuine partnering. It's really working together for the best interest of the child. Now, that's not to say that all the mandatory stuff that needs to be in place isn't in place. All of those things still happen. But it's maintaining that relationship, strong relationship, with the parents so

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that we can support them to keep the kids connected, instead of judging them for the violence that they may be living with.

CHRIS DE FRAGA: Thank you very much.

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Notes

1 For more information on Pen Green browse to <http://research.pengreen.org/>

Note: Chris de Fraga is a professional journalist, a member of the Rotary Club of Balwyn, District 9800, and responsible for Communications and Newsletters for the Rotarian Action Group for Family Safety (in formation) see: www.ragfamsafe.org

Links to more information

Rotary Club of Maryborough website <http://rotarymaryboroughvic.org/>

To contact interviewees after watching the videos, please contact PP Garry Higgins at pvb1@westnet.com.au