



# MEDIA RELEASE

Centacare Wilcannia-Forbes

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## **STRONG YOUNG MUMS PROGRAM WINS AWARD**

The Centacare Wilcannia Forbes Strong Young Mums program recently won the Catholic Social Services Australia Norma Parker Award for Innovative Service.

The Strong Young Mums Program was established in Bourke at the end of 2005 in response to the large number of teenage mothers in the community who had dropped out of school once they learnt they were pregnant.

Loreto Sister and Centacare Director, Sr Margaret Flynn said, "It is wonderful that such a worthy program has received this honour. It is a model that could enhance the lives of so many more indigenous and non-indigenous young mothers in remote communities."

### Gaining Funding

Centacare had been concerned about this group for a number of years, and eventually was able to attract funding to develop a program which would lead to them attaining the equivalent of Year 10 accreditation. As Director, Margaret was involved in identifying the need for the program in response to the social issues in Bourke. Along with her enthusiastic and committed team, she developed a model for the program and commenced the long process of seeking funding to commence the program. The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs were convinced about it as a model worth supporting and provided funding until June 2008.

Once funding was found, the next issue was to engage with these young mothers, encourage the motivation to pursue training and to be consistent in turning up. The first four months were spent organising activities at the Centacare office on the same day of the week, to help develop a routine of consistent attendance, build a support group among the young mothers, and develop conversations about their futures.

### Supportive TAFE Partner

At the same time, negotiations began with TAFE towards designing modules in line with the interests and abilities of the young mothers and with elements that would eventually lead to accreditation. TAFE soon became a very supportive partner, to the point where they made a vacant building available to the group, and had teachers consulting the girls regarding course content.

It was all looking very hopeful except for the insistence of the young mothers that they needed to have their children attend with them. They were not going to leave them anywhere else! While setting up childcare at the TAFE was considered, there were just too many hurdles to overcome to make the premises child-safe.

As luck would have it, Margaret heard that the local childcare centre had experienced a drop in numbers (due to the drought). However, no Indigenous families had ever used the centre. So Margaret asked the centre to invite the young mothers to a couple of morning teas. When the mothers saw the environment and the enjoyment their children were having, they agreed to enroll their children the days they attended TAFE.

## Outcomes

After 18 months, Centacare has:

- 19 young mothers consistently attending TAFE two days per week – on their way to gaining accreditation; thinking of further training and enjoying the support network of other mothers
- Indigenous children attending the Childcare centre for the first time ever, with increased developmental opportunities, social skills development and other important stimulus
- a group of approximately 40 young mothers who attend playgroup, where they have input on health, parenting, nutrition and issues such as domestic violence and financial management. Older Indigenous women often also attend these groups to provide support and mentoring
- young mothers with increased self-esteem and confidence and who are clearer on the life they want for themselves and their children
- strong partnerships with TAFE, Childcare, Maternal Health nurse, DoCS and other agencies

Through the Strong Young Mums program, young mothers:

- are appreciating education and learning
- have become stronger and clearer about the quality of life they want for themselves and their children
- have improved parenting skills and knowledge of children's developmental needs
- have developed a strong support network
- are better informed of services and more confident in approaching them
- are taking action to end violence in their relationships
- are developing a sense of future and its opportunities

Their children are:

- developing social skills
- exposed to early learning opportunities
- receiving improved parenting
- learning the routine of regular attendance, which has the potential to see them attending Pre-school, and Primary school on a regular basis

Margaret says, "We believe the Strong Young Mums Program has the potential to create systemic change and to break the generational cycle of poor health, poor educational achievement and family violence in Indigenous communities and our hope is to extend this program to a number of other communities within western NSW".

#### Exemplary Program

The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs who fund the program recently forwarded this program to the Minister as one of their 'exemplary' programs. The Department has now funded the establishment of another Strong Young Mums program in Lake Cargelligo, however the funding for the current Bourke program ends in June 2008. Margaret expresses her concern at the possibility that such an effective program could disappear and is currently in the process of seeking funding from other sources.

The Strong Young Mums Family Workers have been asked to present their program at a number of conferences including the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) conference to be held in Adelaide this month.

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