

Finding ways to regain control of their lives

by Jeanne Becher

Erica Kyle, an aboriginal woman from Australia, has been a member of Program to Combat Racism (PCR) Commission since 1984.



She works with the Australian Council of Churches (ACC) as an advisor on aboriginal affairs, and is especially concerned with evaluating projects submitted by aboriginal groups. She is an outspoken woman, a mother and a grandmother, "committed and called by God to fight for justice for my people."

Erica was born and brought up on a State Government Reserve in Queensland -- Palm Island -- where her grandparents had been forcibly resettled in 1917. She remembers: "Our lives were regimented. The women had to line up for rations every week."

Aboriginal women have a particularly difficult problem to resolve, along with the men. Erica made it clear that the old tactics of allowing easy access to cheap alcohol and filling the jails with men who become violent with rage and frustration will not be tolerated by aboriginal women. But the problem is particularly acute. Cases of rape, murder, and suicide are too numerous to brush off as marginal occurrences. "There were times when my children and I could not sleep because of the screams of the women in the night" Erica said.

Erica decided that something had to be done. And it was clear that the government wasn't going to do it. Erica started out with a group of six women who shared their suffering and their anguish. Some of them had felt that they didn't want to go on living. They recognized that racism had destroyed many of the cohesive forces of the traditional society and that they would have to find ways to regain control of their lives and to reinstill a sense of self-worth among their men. They needed to provide examples.

The women set up a center which now employs five people who provide counseling and advisory services on such problems as housing, education and health. They also assist in setting up self-help projects. Erica helps the women apply for government grants by writing up project proposals which include the production of books that relate the history of the aboriginal people. The women also organize gatherings for story-telling and songs and dances; a way to revive the cultural memory of the people. Special efforts are made to revalorize the traditional role of men in aboriginal society and men are encouraged to join the center's activities.

Erica and other activist women continue to work for the rights of aboriginal women and raise awareness on their situation.

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