



Flat Out Inc Annual Report 2006-2007

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Thank You

To all the women involved in Flat Out over the past year, and those who chose to contribute their stories or art to this year's annual report. Thank you for sharing with us your stories, insights, advice and strength.



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Government Funding:

Department of Human Services – SAAP (Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program)

Department of Health and Ageing – NIDS (National Illicit Drug Strategy)

Non Government Funding:

Andy Inc.

Flat Out Staff

Billi Clarke
Manager

Dallas Taylor
Administrator

Brook Shearer
Case Worker

Emily Piggott
Case Worker

Amy Mallett
Duty Worker

Mary Hansen
Book Keeper

Flat Out Collective Members

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Maggie Barford
Karren Walker
Catherine Gow
Amanda George
Joanne Doherty
Michele Old
Amy Mallett
Billi Clarke
Dallas Taylor
Emily Piggott
Brook Shearer

Flat Out would like to thank the following:

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Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO)
Council to Homeless Persons
Aboriginal Health Service
Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
Regina Coeli
Eastern Emergency Relief Network
Vic Relief and Foodbank
APW Removalists
Salvation Army Social Housing Service
Norwood Association
Pearson's Barristers and Solicitors
Nickolls Windish Barristers and Solicitors

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Pearson's Barristers and Solicitors
Nickolls Windish Barristers and Solicitors
Melbourne City Mission, Women's Integrated Support Program (WISP)
Asylum Seekers Resource Centre
St Kilda Crisis Centre
The Queen's Trust
Royal District Nursing Service Homeless Person's Program
Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company
Aunty Lynn Killeen
Kathy Kroes from Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services
Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH)
Flemington Kensington Legal Service
The Lodge on Bell
Luke Meyer from Purple PC
Homeground Services
Salvation Army Eastcare Housing
Annamila Pty Ltd

Kayla Ta
Deb Tsorbaris
Andrea Lott
Moirra Rayner
Jan Carr
Mary Cotter
Melinda Naden

In Kind Support

A number of organisations and individuals have provided us with useful items, advice, support and understanding. We wish to thank everyone who has donated money, household items, clothes, computers, furniture, toiletries and presents for women and their children. We also wish to thank those who have been generous with their time and have assisted us to provide our women with a better service.

All art, writing and photos in this annual report are used with the permission of the women involved.



FLAT OUT

The name

“Flat Out’s name came about for a number of reasons and after numerous long meetings at bars, spas, lounge room floors, offices and weekends away. At first (in 1988) we envisaged that we would get flats for women when they got out. We also thought women might be working flat out on their back paying the rent and that perhaps we would find women flat out on the floor overdosed. We were certain that our workers would be flat out meeting the demand”.

Amanda George

Our Vision

- People’s rights are understood and upheld
- There is a compassionate response to personal and social trauma
 - Women are not imprisoned

Primary Task

- To support women who are exiting prison or who are at risk of incarceration, by providing access and referrals to transitional, supported, public or community housing.
- To provide support, education and information to re-establish women in the community post-release.
 - To avoid re-incarceration.

CORE WORK

Flat Out's core work comprises three overlapping areas of activity:

- Direct Support Services
- Community Development, Education, Research and Advocacy
- Development and Maintenance of the Flat Out Collective

Direct Support Services:

- Providing information on rights, housing options, prison issues, income, legal issues, health services, family reunification, courts, financial and material aid.
- Facilitating access to transitional housing, crisis accommodation, public housing and community housing
- Supporting reunification with children and family
- Case planning, developing support plans in conjunction with women
- Crisis intervention and support
- Court Support
- Support to prepare for prison,
- Organising recreational activities

Community Development, Education, Research and Advocacy:

- Educating other service providers and the community on issues around women and imprisonment and about the experiences of women in prison
- Advocating on behalf of women who encounter the criminal justice system
- Continuing research into issues relating to women and incarceration with the aim of informing community and government

Development and Maintenance of a Feminist Collective:

- Continuous exploration and articulation of the importance of feminist philosophy and collective structure for Flat Out
- Developing clear goals and priorities for the Collective and continually reviewing the effectiveness of our work
- Supporting paid Collective members in their work by developing clear job roles, lines of accountability and providing professional development opportunities
- Managing the financial and physical resources of Flat Out
- Ensuring a safe, functional workplace.



Melinda Naden

PROGRAMS

SAAP (Supported Accommodation Assistance Program)

SAAP is a joint Commonwealth and State Government Initiative.

SAAP is governed by the Commonwealth Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994. In Victoria, SAAP forms a key part of the Homelessness Service system, which also includes the Transitional Housing Management (THM) Program.

The overall aim of SAAP is to provide transitional supported accommodation and a range of related support services, in order to help people who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness, to achieve the maximum possible degree of self reliance and independence.

Within this aim, the goals are to:

- resolve crisis
- re-establish family links where appropriate; and
- re-establish the capacity of clients to live independently of SAAP

Flat Out has been funded by SAAP since establishment in 1988.

NIDS (National Illicit Drug Strategy)

NIDS is a funded Commonwealth Government Initiative. Flat Out has received NIDS funding since 2003.

(Non-Government Organisation treatment grants program).

NIDS key service requirements are:

- To provide short-term supported accommodation to clients affected by alcohol and drug issues who have undergone a drug withdrawal program or require assistance in controlling their drug and alcohol use.
- To provide support and assistance to enhance the woman's capacity for non-drug abusive community living, through skill acquisition, counselling, personal care activities and relapse prevention.
- To facilitate client access to other services appropriate to their health and welfare needs.
- To negotiate an "individual treatment plan" with the woman.
- To support the woman in safe, secure and affordable housing.
- To provide services for carers and families of those affected by alcohol and drug use.



Melinda Naden

WHAT WE DO

Flat Out works with women who are currently incarcerated or have been released within the last three months from an adult prison, or who have had or are having contact with the adult justice system. Flat Out aims to always be flexible in assessing our referrals. If a woman is referred who does not fit within our specific criteria we will not automatically refuse the referral.

Flat Out works within a feminist framework and is non-judgemental in it's provision of service. The overall objective in service provision is to secure long term housing and support the transition for women (and their children if applicable) to live independently.

Case Workers work along side women (and their children) to develop support plans that strive to meet the immediate and long term needs of individuals and their families. Case plans are regularly revised to ensure their relevance to women/children and to ensure their appropriateness to the individual support needs.

Flat Out offers an accessible and flexible service. We provide a range of access points including prison visits and home visits. We also provide a welcoming office space that can cater to children. It's all about what makes the woman feel most comfortable and how she wants to work with the service.

Support needs can range from low to very high. Each Case Worker works with a range of women and has a case load of twelve on average, depending on the configuration of worker hours. Assistance provided can include: housing, financial/material aid, advocacy, transport, removals, storage of belongings and referrals to services such as: legal, drug/alcohol, mental health, sexual assault, children's services and employment.

The service can offer support periods of 13 weeks for women/children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and up to 6 months for those in the National Illicit Drug Strategy Program. Although the funding bodies are directive in their support time lines, the service is always flexible, taking into account the complexity of need and the availability of the broader service system.

The service strives to develop networks that are relevant to the diverse needs of women/children accessing Flat Out. These include: Transitional Housing Managers, Crisis Accommodation Services, Drug and Alcohol Services and a range of medical/mental health providers.



COLLECTIVE REPORT

This year has been a make or break one at Flat Out. No doubt many organisations that have been going for almost 20 years can face inertia, stagnation, institutionalisation, entrenched inflexible ways of working and lose sight of the idealism and politics that led to grassroots organisations like us setting up in first place.

Women in prison and the women that we work with are often coming to us with more complex needs than they were ten years ago. The community is still feeling the impact of funding cuts in the 1990s which threw many support systems out the window. It can take years for the reverberations of these cuts to become apparent, but the prison system has felt the greatest effect of this with women going to prison having experienced extreme isolation as a consequence of mental health issues, ongoing poverty, homelessness and the paucity of appropriate treatment and support services specifically to meet the needs of women and women with children. This lack of appropriate services is compounded for Indigenous women and Vietnamese women. The more difficult life is for women leaving prison, the more difficult Flat Out's work is and the skill our workers must have often defies description.

The increasingly onerous accountability requirements imposed by government have resulted in increasing amounts of paperwork. In many instances these requirements appear to have little to do with improving the service we provide to the women we the work with and are more directed at streamlining service delivery across organisations and making it easier for funding agencies to tick boxes rather than read sentences.

This last year we have been involved in meeting the new federal HASS standards. We have been fortunate to be able to employ Jan Carr who has done an enormous amount of work with us to ensure we meet the new standards. Happily we have discovered that there is little in the way that we work which falls short of the mark. It is fair to say though that the burden on small organisations undertaking these standards implementations is huge and gives clear advantage to organisations whose economies of scale are much greater than ours. The weight of these increasing accountability requirements can be the straw that breaks the camels back in small organisations which do extraordinarily valuable work on the ground outside of the strictures of mainstream models.

When Flat Out received funding as a feminist collective in 1988 we were a unique organisation. We continue to be unique and the experiences of the women that we work with provide testament to the importance of having a variety of different service delivery models being made available to them. Various women who had been our service users and who spoke at the launch of Call Me By My Name, and whose talks are reproduced in this Annual Report describes the importance of this. Support and work with women who have been inside will never be successful if it is a one size fits all framework

Flat Out is still a feminist collective however we have for the first time created the position of skipper/coordinator/team leader to the crew of workers that provide for our women; support services, an ear, a laugh, lifts, court support, compassion, straight talk, baby clothes, advocacy and endless other things. The wonderful women who are employed at Flat Out are the front line of our organisation and the quality of their work is how we are judged. It is the view of the women we work with that is important to us and the integrity of our relationship with them which provides us with the strongest and most legitimate evaluation we could have.

This year saw Flat Out moving from Collingwood to Flemington. The new office has a welcome feel is easy to access, being opposite the train station and has an open area back yard where many cigarettes get smoked, cuppas had, meetings convened and fresh air taken in. Women appear to feel comfortable dropping in.

The women on the managing collective are not there in their capacity as representatives of other organizations but as individual women committed to feminist ways of working with criminalized women. We

The women on the managing collective are not there in their capacity as representatives of other organizations but as individual women committed to feminist ways of working with criminalized women. We have an eclectic mix of skills however we are always looking for more women to join us. We have only 6 women on the collective which has been stable for many years and with only a small turnover of members. But as with new workers and the things that they bring to Flat Out, it is important to have regeneration in the collective so that we are always critiquing our work and reassessing the way we do things and why.

This has been a hard year for Flat Out. For its continued survival we owe a debt of gratitude to the workers of the past on whose ground work a solid foundation was laid. We are extremely lucky to have a bunch of new workers who have taken this to a new level. Dallas Taylor who has been with us for twelve years has been solid as a rock in her work with us and her commitment to our women. We are grateful for the organisational memory that her being with us represents. This next year we plan on more fun, more activism and more creative community development.

Amanda George
On behalf of the
Flat Out Collective



SKIPPER'S REPORT

It has been an exciting year for Flat Out. We moved from Collingwood to a shopfront in Flemington. We changed our management structure and focused our energy on improving the support of women who have experienced incarceration.

The relocation to Flemington has been a positive one for the agency. We are now opposite Newmarket station and have our own private place.. Women have been dropping into the shopfront more regularly and feel a sense of ownership over the space. We are also closer to the maximum security prison, The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre which makes it easier to visit individual women. The trip to Tarrengower however, is a constant resource issue.

Changes to our management structure have basically been a response to workload and the survival of the service. Accountability to funding bodies has increased dramatically and as with all services we are undertaking an accreditation process. Flat Out is a very small agency (four paid workers) compared to other services and there was concern that we would be forced to amalgamate with a large NGO. The collective decided to protect the specialist service response by employing a Manager to oversee the day to day, 9 to 5 core business of Flat Out. We hated the titles of Manager, Team Leader, Coordinator, and so Skipper it is. Flat Out remains true to a Collective philosophy and to date the new structure is working well.

The unpaid Management Collective remains committed and loyal to the task at hand. They are a diverse and talented group who continue to step up to the challenge of providing a quality service and advocating on behalf of women in prison.

Flat Out has spent much of the last year improving our core business, supporting women and their children pre and post incarceration. We have reviewed our intake, assessment referral procedures and fine tuned our support capabilities. The feed back from the women has been positive and we have been able to provide a duty response to women not linked directly to the service.

Women in prison have little power or control of their lives, so it has been a priority of the service to be clear about what we were able to provide. How we would do it, if we couldn't why not and to be timely in our response and respectful of the women we support. On too many occasions, women doing time have been given incorrect information, none at all or were confused about the process. Flat Out is committed to not being a part of this systemic abuse. We will continue to improve on these areas of our service delivery and view this as an ongoing project.

One of the highlights of the year was the launch of the book 'Call Me by My First Name'. We had a great party, Moira Rayner officially launched the book and three women who had been incarcerated spoke about their lived experience. 'The Fairleas' made their debut and the night was a great success. You can read more about this and other highlights further on in this annual report.

The lived prison experience of women is the most important issue that Flat Out can promote. The impact of incarceration is without question a human rights issue. Homelessness, poverty, sexual/physical abuse, drug addiction and mental health issues are common place with women in prison. The absence of appropriate supports throughout their lives has led to incarceration. Unless the stories of these women are told, understood and responded to, the current status quo will continue; lock them up, let them out and lock them up again.

Flat Out were participants and presenters at the Sisters Inside international conference in Darwin in June 2007, the theme of which was Is Prison Obsolete? a concept which challenges community perceptions of women's incarceration.

The concept of incarceration as a solution has been embraced by the community out of fear, propaganda and the priorities of Governments. We are happy to lock people up at a huge cost to the public purse, but we can't provide basics, such as; housing, health, education and employment. Flat Out is committed to focusing on the big picture and promoting understanding.

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As a service we have also put our energy into being assessable to indigenous women. We are now working with various agencies and have a great working relationship with the Aboriginal Wellbeing Officer at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, Aunty Lyn. We have been able to establish a direct referral path for women and as a result we are supporting a number of indigenous women. The funding of a dedicated position to address indigenous issues is a priority for the service.

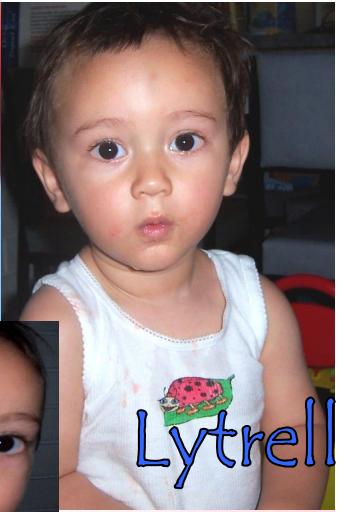
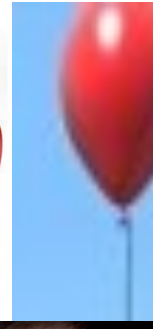
As skipper, I would like to get a bit emotional now. The paid workers at Flat Out are hard working committed women. Dallas is the queen of administration with a small case load, Emily makes up the entire IT department and Brook is the goddess of networking. The key to good management is to employ people smarter than you, so I guess I'm a good manager. I want to take this opportunity to thank and recognise their individual contribution to what is a great team. The unpaid Collective has been a solid management team. They give up their time, energy, skill and are truly committed and inspirational. Without these women, Flat Out Inc would not be. I thank them for their support, generosity and ability to party.

On a personal note, Flat Out has been a great experience for me. I have been motivated by what I have learnt and by what is possible. I am inspired to be part of something that sits outside the box, part of something that is inclusive and changing. Part of an organisation that takes the responsibility of advocacy seriously.

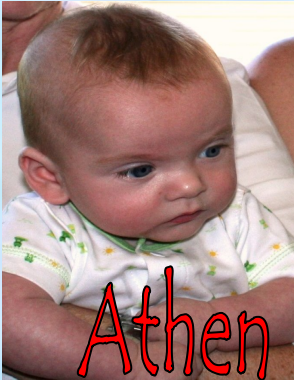
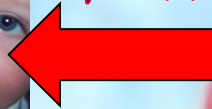
Here's to Flat Out Inc.

Billi Clarke
Skipper.





Jett



FLAT



Out



BABIES!



Badge Making Machine



One of Flat Out's purchases for this year was a badge making machine, which has been incredibly useful and fun to use. We have made a variety of badges with different slogans on them to ensure that people know who we are, and what we think! We are happy to make badges free of charge for women who access Flat Out, and for a small fee for other organisations/workers who may wish to be a bit flamboyant!

INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Indigenous women are over represented in Australia's prison and legal systems. Flat Out has always been aware and responsive to this alarming issue, but many barriers have made it difficult to respond appropriately and effectively over the years. Recently, Flat Out has made significant attempts to broaden its network with Indigenous women, services and workers. These networks and connections have been both internal and external to the prison in a commitment to narrowing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous referrals to Flat Out, and more widely to the sector. We have worked hard to establish ourselves as an appropriate, responsive and approachable service.

Recently, Flat Out has made many visits to Indigenous organisations and services, making connections with relevant and appropriate people who contribute to Indigenous women's release in an appropriate and holistic way. These include appropriate employment and training agencies, drug and alcohol services, health services and peak bodies. A relationship with Aunty Lyn Killeen, the Aboriginal Well Being Officer at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre has helped cement our commitment to working with Indigenous women post-release. Because of this, our referral process with Indigenous women can now come either directly from the woman or from Aunty Lyn, making the referral process for Indigenous women more appropriate and accessible from *inside* the prison. We continue to reflect and assess how the referral process is or is not working for Indigenous women; integral to this is feedback from the women. In order for us to get feedback from the women, this year Flat Out is planning to run Indigenous (and some non-Indigenous) specific focus groups out at DPFC to better understand barriers, concerns and issues related to the referral process for Indigenous women and their families.

In our commitment to being a service where Indigenous women feel they are a part of, we have made an effort to provide a holistic, flexible and informal environment, one which listens and responds to identified needs. Upon request from a few of the Indigenous women we work with, we display Indigenous Art (being rented on loan from some of the women), we have the Koori Mail delivered regularly, and one of our women donated her own flag to put up in Flat Out to signify our absolute dedication and commitment to working with Indigenous women in more practical ways.

Outside of our day to day case work, Flat Out remains vocal about Indigenous issues and political and structural inadequacies that contribute to the discrimination and inequity Indigenous women face. We remain committed to speaking out about the greater issues which so disgracefully impact on the lives of Indigenous women ...and all women.

Quote from an Indigenous woman:

"you guys know how to work with us mob, and you get it 'cause yous wanna get it ... you don't put us in shitty offices and talk shit to us like posh people do, yous are real" (2007).



Melinda Naden

“Call Me By My First Name” – homeless women on the inside, homeless on the outside.

This article was written by Dallas Taylor and published in Parity.

Women in prison are considered ‘housed’. Most women who access our service are homeless prior to incarceration, ‘housed’ whilst incarcerated and they are again deemed homeless on release from prison whilst residing in Office of Housing transitional properties. ‘Housed’ is defined as a building for human habitation. A prison is defined as a public building for the confinement of criminals. One needs to consider the correlation of the two definitions in determining what constitutes prisoners as being ‘housed’ and not acknowledged as being people without homes.

The Council to the Homeless Persons defines a homeless person as someone who “is without a conventional home and lacks the economic and social supports that a home normally affords...”. This would suggest women in our prison system are indeed homeless and not ‘housed’ as Corrections states.

Flat Out Inc is a pre and post support service that provides case management to women with or without children who have experienced imprisonment in the adult judicial system. One of the service key objectives is to ensure women obtain safe, secure and affordable long term housing.

Women when they enter prison are normally mothers without children in their care (approximately two thirds), uneducated, poor, drug dependent and suffer a history of abuse (physical, sexual, verbal, emotional). So it would seem that the profile of the average female prisoner would be that of a mother with dependent children, coping with violence and drug addiction, who is in prison for a drug related offences (approximately 70%).

Shamefully when women are released from prison and access our support program they present with the same issues and with increased stresses resulting from living within a system that is heavily structured under the guise of power and control. The imminent culture and violence that exists in prisons further exacerbates a woman’s well being and her capacity to function in a meaningful way on the inside and on the outside. Women become compliant and commonly subscribe to the rules and regulations within the context of being ‘housed’ whilst in prison. These tendencies can strip a woman’s capacity to manage her own life and become subservant to a system that has ultimate control on her every day functionality causing her to resolve to an institutionalised agenda.

Evidence shows that there is an increasingly marginalised female population slipping through widening gaps due to the complexity of needs of those who are repeatedly in contact with the criminal justice system. Recidivism is currently at 55-60% for female offenders. Flat Out aims to tighten those gaps but realistically this is can only be achieved by embracing a concept for a complete overview of why prisons don’t work for women and what needs to change in order to reduce women’s repeat offending.

Corrections acknowledge the alarming increase in the number of women in Victoria’s prisons. In fact the population has doubled over ten years and for Indigenous women, the rate has trebled over the last five years. This has put the Victorian women’s prisons system under unprecedented pressure, comprising inadequate rehabilitation outcomes and that of reducing recidivism rates. Prison based treatment services and personal development programs are unable to keep up with demand therefore denying women little to no opportunity in addressing the issues that lead them to offending and incarceration and ensuring that their transition to living independently is less challenging. Flat Out endeavours to work with women in identifying a support plan and linking them into appropriate services once they are released. The intensity of this process for a woman’s transition and recovery could be less painful and stressful for women if prison authorities adhered to their lawful responsibility by treating prisoners with dignity and respect and provided adequate equity and access to therapeutic, rehabilitative and personal development programs.

Corrections intends to place emphasis on enhancing the existing and planned initiatives for the women’s adult prison system in order to ensure that gender is mainstreamed into early intervention, prevention, really known or when we can expect to see the forecasted structural and programmatic changes to the

diversion, rehabilitation and transitional intervention programs. How this will look at the end of day is not Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. Until these changes are made women will continue to fall through the gaps due to Corrections failure to provide a holistic approach to the treatment and rehabilitation of women 'housed' in prison.

In the meanwhile Flat Out will maintain our commitment to provide housing and support to women in pre and post release from prison with the hope of unlocking life time patterns of cyclical homelessness, re offending and imprisonment. We will continue to work with women, advocate for women and challenge Corrections to make those changes necessary that promote better outcomes for women.

Flat Out aims to redress the inequality and discrimination that women and their children face when leaving prison by listening and involving women who access our service to inform best practise and to encourage appropriate and relevant service provision. In 2003 Flat Out conducted a forum called "Call Me By My First Name" a title that was born as a reaction to the prison system's tendency to refer to the women by their surname. The purpose of the forum was to raise awareness amongst community agencies, government departments and to those individuals who have a genuine interest in the problems women face pre and post release. Flat Out facilitated workshops and interviews with women who had a history of imprisonment to ascertain what issues they wanted addressed to the wider community. The main issues identified were the scarcity of housing options and the uncertainty of women gaining housing post release, consistent and intensive support and medication and medical issues. Those women that attended the sessions enthusiastically presented their own raw and honest accounts on prison life to a packed, attentive audience at the Richmond Town Hall.

Flat Out then employed two women studying at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre to transcribe the forum tapes for the printing of 'Call Me By My First Name'.

The book was officially launched on April 18, 2007 by Moira Rayner and is now ready for distribution. The book is priced at \$10/\$5 concession with all proceeds going to the authors who have been in prison. Orders can be taken by phone (03) 9372 5422 or by email: flatout@infoxchange.net.au

The speeches on the next pages were made by Aimee and Sue at the launch of the book Call Me By My First Name.



Melinda Naden

AIMEE'S SPEECH



Hi my name's Aimee. I'm currently building my career as a make-up artist. I do regular fashion shoots and last year I did 7 films, I am also studying special fx. In the last 3 years I have travelled throughout Asia and Europe. I really love being a make-up artist, getting paid to do something that I really enjoy. I have an amazing support network, my family, beautiful friends. But 8 years ago I couldn't possibly imagine having the life I have today.

In November 1999 my mother committed suicide, leaving behind 5 daughters, three of them under the age of 10, the impact this had was devastating. I didn't know my mother was suffering depression let alone the severity of it.

Being 18 years old and feeling so lost and alone I opted for the easy way to fill the void. Being so vulnerable I was easily influenced with drugs, staying out all night clubbing/partying and that's when heroin became my best friend.

It took me no time at all to get a raging habit and that was beyond my financial means. Next thing I knew I was committing armed robberies. (And before long I was in jail). I lost the trust of family and the love of friends. There are no words to describe the emotions you go through in a place like that. Being torn from your loved ones, being told what to do and when to do it, randomly stripped searched, leaving your dignity in the hands of a stranger in a blue uniform. Freedom then becomes a word that you dream about. Contrary to popular belief, I learnt so much while I was in prison. I met some amazing people, people that have changed my life forever. They supported me and encouraged me, I even started my psychology degree while I was in there. Rehabilitation isn't exactly a program that's offered, even though I'm sure Corrections would love you to think that they do.

It's education, it's compassion and patience, it's amazing services like Flat Out and Somebody's Daughter Theatre just to name a few.

Old habits die hard as they say, and you do have to really want to change. Getting your life back on track is a scary process that doesn't happen over night. You can be in a room with 100 people and still feel so alone, like nobody understands. But that's not true. There are people out there who know what you are going through and that genuinely want to help. It's about learning to accept the support that's on offer and utilise it to your advantage.

But trying to deal with the lonely roller coaster of post release is so hard. I suffer major separation issues. I have not been able to bring myself to contact anyone from jail since getting out. It makes me feel guilty because if anyone should know how important a letter is, should be me. My mum once said to me that we are the choice that we make. So each week I get regularly counselling and I only surround myself with quality people and bit by bit I continue to get my life on track.

And I can honestly say I don't think I've ever been happier.

Thank you
Aimee

SUE'S SPEECH

Good Afternoon

My name is Sue and it is great to see you all here for the launch of this book that contains a small piece of many of us.

When I was asked to speak at the forum, it was decided that my involvement would cover the topic, "Culture and Violence" in the prison system as I had seen it grow, change and often fester over the years. I was pleased to speak of it because I thought it was extremely important that people were given a different perspective on the subject and believed I could do this through my own experiences and personal insight.

Words can only convey so much but I am hopeful that my words have been able to show that though incarceration affects us all very deeply, it also affects us all differently.

Sadly there are some cold and cruel people amongst us, but equally as sad is the tendency to dump people in the too hard basket therefore placing them in the cold, cruel category. Many are demonised for perpetrating unacceptable acts on their fellow inmates but more often than not, it is the system that should be demonised. Very few begin their imprisonment with a desire to hurt anyone. Their desire is a simple one...to survive and there are people here today who have helped many, including myself to do just that. Of course I am referring to the gang at Flat Out.

I have known of the work they do with women in crisis for many years although my involvement with them was indirect.

It was only when Corrections finally passed the mandate that all parolees securing accommodation through the Women's Housing group were to have their own counsellor that I became one of their clients. I have always been an independent and self sufficient person who rarely, if ever, felt that I was in need of help. On the contrary, I was the only one who normally gave the advice, not being one who took it. Of course in the past, I have seen counsellors and analysts when it was required of me for one reason or another and I dutifully attended. I went through the motions sitting attentively and left after mentally compiling next week's shopping list or picturing my home, imagining how it would look with the furniture rearranged. It would depend on the length of my session.

My involvement with Flat Out proved to be very different indeed.

The counsellor assigned to me was Liz Thomas and I will forever be grateful that she came into my life when she did.

Needless to say there were official guidelines to adhere to, not to mention the paperwork to be completed. There's nothing like a corrections order, in triplicate of course, to gauge its way through a forest.

Liz was absolutely professional without any of the formalities I had come to despise. We went shopping, met for coffee, did lunch and she managed to always keep it relaxed while at all times doing what I needed and what was expected of her.

I mentioned earlier that the program that led me to Liz began with Women's Housing. Through them, especially Jade, I was given a transitional property in Yarraville that more than met my needs. I loved it there. Transport around the corner, a large park down the road and 10 minutes to the city. What do they say? Location, location, location! In fact, had I not been in the process of trying to get my grandchildren back to Melbourne and felt South of the Yarra to be a better environment for them I may have stayed where I was. Apologies to those of you from the Western suburbs.

I was lucky enough to move into my permanent home days before my 12 months transitional period was up. This meant that I was no longer Liz's client but she assured me she was just a phone call away. Both my grandsons live with me and have since 2003. I do believe success comes from within and knowing my grandsons needed me gave me added incentive, but I also know the help I received made all the difference in the outcome.

I had written so many letters to try to open the communications gate with Queensland child services, the people holding my grandchildren. I had been on the phone, but requesting special phone calls while in custody is one thing. Having them granted as often as I wanted is quite another.

My son had gone Queensland but feeling both frustrated and angry threw his paternal weight around consequently achieving nothing. I was going to give up the fight but was at a loss as to how to proceed. Enter Liz Thomas, closely followed by Amanda George.

Liz worked so very hard on the situation of the boys. My lengthy persistence, Liz's diligence and

Amanda's legal prowess finally opened the lines of correspondence that led to Chris and James being with me today.

Everybody involved in the program, even on the side lines, made themselves very available should the need arise and I felt their approach was what made it so positive. All pales compared to the boys but there are many things this program has done for me. Even today my writing is being published. I may have to get something on the net about it, as it certainly gives a more positive slant should anyone Google me. So, in closing to all at Flat Out and all of you – thank you.

*On an autumn night in April 2007, Moira Rayner was perched precariously on a makeshift stage out the back of Flat Out's building in Flemington. Flat Out supports women prisoners and the stage was a ramp owned by Amanda George usually used to get her dog into the car. Noticing that Moira was wobbling and in danger of being flat out herself, Amanda crept forward and balanced the stage with her ample boot. The occasion was the launch of Flat Out's publication of **Call Me By My First Name: Women's Issues Pre and Post Release From Prison**. The book was borne out of a forum organised by Flat Out and contains real life stories of the difficulties and experiences that women prisoners have shared. It is a great read and is available from Flat Out who can be contacted at flatout@infoxchange.net.au. Participants at the launch heard some of the stories, which were extremely moving, and a rousing blues song blatantly stolen from Johnny Cash with altered words such as I shot a man in Footscray just to see him die. When I hear that whistle blowing I hold my head up high. The choir, led by Flat Out's Billi Clarke, sang so well that the audience requested another song. Unfortunately they only had one so they did it again with enthusiastic audience participation.*

Beth Wilson
Health Services Commissioner



WOMEN'S STORIES

“People see but they don't feel” (M)

Thank you to the brave, wonderful, resilient, resourceful and generous women who share their thoughts with us.

I'm never going back to prison.

Flat Out has always been here for me, since I got out of prison. They have helped me with everything. Workers at Flat Out are cool and understanding. They are human. Some places you go they are like fucking robots. If I need someone to talk to I can always talk to someone at Flat Out. If I can't go to Flat Out, someone will come and see me at home.

I learned a lot about myself in prison. The experience made me appreciate all the things I have. I have learned to appreciate the value of money, friendship and freedom. In prison all your phone calls are listened to and you are cut off after 14 minutes. You can't see your family when you want to. You have to go to bed when you are told to.

Now that I am out of prison, my family respect me more. They are more supportive, respectful and understanding. Things are still really difficult with my dad. He has a criminal record and yet he has judged me on what I did.

My life is better now than before I went to prison. I now have a lot of support in my life that allows me to move forward. But before I move forward I have to revisit the past and talk to my counsellor about everything that has happened to me.

(R)

**I'm sick of crying
Tired of trying
Yeah I'm smiling...
But inside I'm dying
(Melinda Naden)**



Helen's Shed

“When you live in a 1 bedroom flat and don't have storage space for your kid's stuff, build a cheap shed, even though the housing service won't like it...ha ha ha...”

SOOZI'S STORY

Back in the year of 2000 my little dog of 12 years, Fifi had to be put down but I did not get my usual vet because they couldn't come for hours so I rang a local vet from the newspaper. This vet was a real arsehole being abusive to me and as I later learnt he was on his last warning from the vet association. I felt Fifi died without any dignity.

Then eight weeks later my marriage of twelve and half years and two children came to an end after twelve months of problems. A month after that I found out my husband had another woman and that my brother had HIV. I started drinking heavily and dabbling in speed and then a long lost friend reappeared in my life and he was going through a marriage break up and all the rest. He too had addictions but had been clean for eight years up until his marriage break up. During this period there was hope that my ex and I would get back together but this did not happen due to the woman he was seeing soon after our break up. I did not take this very well and one night I got pissed and ended up having sex with my long lost friend.

From here on we fell in love and started using speed and drinking alcohol. One night I went to score but couldn't get speed and came home with heroin. The heroin felt good as it blocked everything out and we were doing that right up until I overdosed and nearly lost my life and my leg. I was in a coma for three weeks and the hospital told my mother that I would be on dialysis for the rest of life, that is, if I pulled through. So, I felt real lucky and when I got out hospital we did not use for four months. I lost my house and my stuff was at my mother's home. My mother blamed my partner for my overdose and kicked me out because I was still seeing him. After this I was living in the back of my partner's car for about two weeks. We needed to get a house quickly because of my kids.

We started using again and I went into a psychotic state because my dealer was ripping me off as I reckon the drug was ice. My partner was struggling at the time and was drinking more and using drugs. My partner overdosed and died I didn't want to live and tried hanging myself in the garage where he used to hang out. The rope gave way and gave me rope burns. My mother noticed my neck marks and rang the Crisis Assessment Treatment Team (CATT) and was committed for three weeks to a psyche ward. I continued to try to kill myself and I asked my mother how to do it successfully 'cause I wanted to be with my partner. She told me drive over a cliff. I thought this was a good idea and did it. Then I just deteriorated and went off the rails. It just snow balled. I started working the streets to support a \$450 (min) day habit.

The kids had gone to live with their father and I went down, down, down living on the streets, in a car, in squats.

One night I got pillled up and the next thing I know is that I did two armed robberies with a blood filled syringe. I got 10 months jail and 14 months parole. On release I went to mum's, then she kicked me out and I was homeless again. It was then that I rang Flat Out to help me. They arranged for me to go to Gateways (Crisis refuge) and then into a transitional property.

Within less than 12 months I moved into ministry housing. Flat Out helped out with removals and furniture. I have not used heroin for about 12 months and I have my son in my full time care and my daughter lives with her father but I see her regularly.

WE BELONG – AND WE MATTER

By Vickie Roach

On the 24th November this year Australia went to the polls to cast their votes in the 2007 Federal Election. For most Australians aged over 18 this was a civic responsibility – for 8 - 9,000 prisoners across the country serving less than 3 years, it was a hard won franchise only recently reinstated by the High Court of Australia.

Until earlier this year, any discussion of politics was something I avoided. I skipped over newspaper articles on the subject and my mind glazed over when it was reported on television. Politicians and their empty promises bored me and elections didn't concern me. As an Aboriginal, a woman, an injecting drug user and a prisoner, I felt marginalised by and excluded from society - and in defiance of compulsory voting laws and resentment at being forced to participate in a system I had been rejected by, over the years I consistently failed to vote, incurring numerous fines, which I then failed to pay on principle.

All that changed at the beginning of this year when I learned that John Howard, taking advantage of the coalition party's senate majority, had sneaked through a legislative amendment in 2006 banning all sentenced prisoners from voting.

Our illustrious former PM's justification for the amendment, named somewhat ironically the *Electoral and Referendum (Electoral Integrity and other Measures) Act 2006*, relied in part on arguments that - *disenfranchisement of prisoners would act as a deterrent to crime and support civic responsibility – support respect for, and obedience to the law and encourage recognition that the rights and obligations of community participation are correlative.*

When I learned this, my Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD would you believe!) kicked in, and far from being relieved that I would no longer be fined for failing to vote, I began to resent the further exclusion from society this legislation represented.

It was often claimed by left-wing commentators that Mr Howard was 'out of touch' with ordinary Australians. This was never truer, particularly in relation to the disenfranchisement of prisoners; most of who are drawn from some of the most disadvantaged and impoverished sections of society. For people who already perceived themselves as marginalised and excluded, this legislation did little to promote the goals that Mr Howard envisaged - indeed whatever possessed him to think that it would?

In my view, *everybody*, and in particular prisoners, should be encouraged to actively and knowledgeably participate in political life and communication. It is by *inclusion* rather than *exclusion* that we as a society will support civic responsibility and respect for and obedience to the law.

The decision in the High Court of Australia on the 30th August 2007 to overturn the ban on prisoners serving sentences of less than 3 years from voting will go some way towards achieving this end. A renewed focus on social inclusion, rehabilitative rather than retributive justice, and a firm social policy that no longer marginalises or excludes the impoverished or disadvantaged in our communities, will be the first courageous step any government must take before it can become reality.

Prisoners lose their liberty, not their citizenship. The right to vote is enshrined in sections 7 & 24 of our own Constitution and recognised in articles 2 & 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which provide every citizen with the right to vote.

Thanks to the High Court decision on August 30th, many prisoners nationwide can feel once again that they do belong – and they *do* matter.