

## BACKGROUND

The study circles have had a chequered history of success throughout Australia. The one at Manly Community College, representing Pittwater and the Northern Beaches, is an exception and it has been running continuously in this blue ribbon Liberal electorate since early 1996.

I grew up on Pittwater Peninsular and moved to the city 15 years ago. I heard about the Reconciliation Study Circles from friends who still lived in the area and who had been participants in one or more of the groups. Their motives for joining, their interactions in the group and the personal impact of the experience made for intriguing tales. It seemed to me that the eight week process had a structure in which one could capture on film what was an increasingly vast and diverse national issue, through the personal journeys of the individuals involved.

With a view to finding out more about the group and exploring the logistics of a possible documentary, I became a participant of one of the study circles in late 1997.

Ironically, despite belonging to a community not known for its cultural diversity, what confronts the observer as they embark on the eight week journey with the group, is the extraordinary cross section of people it represents. Whilst these are people from a 'comfortable' socio-economic area, the group includes pensioners and business people. They have had access to education and services yet they are both blue and white collar workers, products of the private and state school systems. They are not from the lunar right or radical left. Some vote Liberal, some Labor. When they begin they are orientated as much by their private as their public experiences. The group brings together strange bedfellows in terms of gender, age and class.

Exacerbating the differences is the absence of a lecturer or expert 'running the show'. This is intentional. The Council has promoted the study circles as a non hierarchical model based on democratic principles.

*For over a 100 years Study Circles have proven an effective and practical method of learning and social change. Community organisations, trade unions, churches and social justice groups have used them to empower their members to make choices and take action. They are one way that people can come to grips with important social and political issues, in their own way and their own time.*

This is all very well in theory. At the first session most of the group are either uncomfortable or annoyed. They have no experience of this kind of set up. Like most of us in the 90s - work, family, even social gatherings are highly structured. Someone has to be in charge. It seems 'disorganised'. How will anything get done? Some of them are wondering (and will say) "where are the Aborigines?" White strangers in a circle: some fidget, others are tense with nerves.

This Study Circle attracts all manner of people, the informed as well as the ignorant, the tolerant and the provocative. The isolated find contact. The participants embark on a complex and often confronting personal journey. Some simply will leave and not return - give it up as a bad job. Everyone is challenged. It is anything but a 'feel good' experience. There are frequent conflicts, heated debates, painful realisations and peculiar alliances.

The Study Circle participants have to contend with the fact that some other white people think the reconciliation process is a waste of time, as do some indigenous people - a group of 'whiteys' assuaging their guilt to little effect - 'a big wank'. One becomes witness to the contention that exists between colleagues in the workplace and even within families.

The group goes through a series of complex permutations - unity, factionalism, fragmentation - sometimes morphing from one to the next in a matter of minutes. The group itself becomes a kind of character, and begins to display a kind of personality. The area from which the participants live becomes similarly personified - 'the insular peninsular'. The disparate characters, the unwieldy structure, the dangerous and sensitive issues that get raised give the sense of part vérité, part soap opera, part disaster film... there is the constant question of who will drop out or be ejected from the group - in what order they will die.....

.....and in between the sessions all kinds of personal dramas rage.