

Finding Your VOICE

Vicarious traumatising is often an issue for professionals working with torture and trauma survivors. STARTTS' staff working with Kosovar refugees as part of Operation Safe Haven last year were constantly exposed to immense personal tragedies and the rawest human emotions.

ALLAN TEGG reports on the writing workshops he held for these staff members, helping them make sense of their experiences and keeping their own symptoms of vicarious traumatising at bay.

I cry, unable to stop. No one hears. My pillow - wet on my face. The thumping in my ears. Sleep. I wake. Sobbing. Sweating. Images flash before me. The soldiers. The dogs. Guns. Bodies. Blood.

The above paragraph begins a story by Holly Byron, Psychologist and Counsellor. Holly wrote the story during a writing workshop for STARTTS' staff who had been involved with the Operation Safe Haven project. The project brought Kosovar and East Timorees refugees to Australia for short term stays during the conflicts in their respective countries.

"The writing workshops were the best debriefing I've ever experienced," says Peter Davis, Team Leader of the STARTTS Counselling Services during the Safe Haven project. "The workshop really helped my psychological well being. It helped me

understand the intensity of the whole experience."

The workshops evolved out of the fortnightly debriefing sessions that Rise Becker, a Clinical Psychologist working with STARTTS, was providing for the Safe Haven workers. "The experience in the Safe Haven was so difficult and confusing that those involved wanted something concrete, something they could hold onto. The idea for the writing workshop came out of these meetings," Becker says. A series of three writing workshops were then set up for these workers.

"We thought it might be a novel way of addressing secondary traumatising," Becker says. She explains that secondary, or vicarious, traumatising is often experienced by helpers as they work with people who have been through horrific events: "The work can leave the practitioner

feeling confused and hopeless."

There is no doubt that STARTTS' staff were deeply affected by their experience of working with the refugees. Holly Byron's story, written from the perspective of a young Kosova girl, recounts the girl's experience of being trapped in the toilet of the QANTAS plane on the way to Australia and the therapeutic assistance she received from Byron. The girl, suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, relived the horrors of Kosovo as the QANTAS staff tried to free her.

A strange man is there. He's not my father! He's a Serb [soldier]. The soldiers have got me. Run. Hide. Live. Survive. I can't get out. I can't move back. Trapped in that tiny toilet. I struggle with the man. He slaps my face. I tear at his arm as I desperately try to run to safety. He grabs at my sweat shirt. I duck down





the aisle. But there is no peace to be found. A sea of hands try to grab me.

New writers often have a strong inner censor which inhibit their efforts. The workshop consisted of a number of exercises designed to help the participants to write freely. Invariably the participants were surprised by the power of the images they developed.

This discovery not only increased their confidence as writers, but also helped with the debriefing. As Peter Davis puts it, “[When you’re writing] you have a time to reflect uninterrupted. Then when the stories are read to the group, people are touched and moved. It helps to heal people as they relate what they have gone through.”

Davis says that the structure of reflective time when writing followed by reading one’s work to the group

is particularly good for people who find it difficult to speak in groups. He is correct. When someone is reading their story no one interrupts.

Byron helped her little patient by letting her symbolically wreck the toilet she had been trapped in.

Can I?” Disbelief rings in my ears as Holly suggests that I jump on the box. Destroy the toilet. She reassures me and I leap, kick and rip it apart. We destroy that toilet...Holly encourages me, “That’s the way. You can do it. You’re safe here with me.” I pound the box. Pleasure and pain flash across my face.

I first met the participants in a pre-workshop interview at East Hills, the site of Operation Safe Haven in New South Wales. They told me they would not be able to write because there were so many stories they wouldn’t know where to start.

In a sense they were overwhelmed by their experiences. The workshop helped them to tell one story at a time; to look at this story in detail and begin to understand its affect on them. They then started to gain some control over their experiences and their stories.

Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Haywood, Community Services Co-ordinator at STARTTS, also attended the workshops. She uses narrative therapy techniques in her counselling work and says the workshops had a narrative therapy feel to them. “People focus on stressing events,” says Bajraktarevic. “But it is important that people see this as only one chapter of the story, not the whole book.”

Bajraktarevic’s thoughts apply to the STARTTS’ personnel. As the stories were written and read there was a greater ownership of what had ►

been achieved, along with an airing of the pain and frustration they had suffered.

"I would love to see this method used a lot more in our profession," says Davis.

ILLUMINATING THE HUMAN ASPECT

Lachlan Murdoch, the Deputy Director of STARTTS, attended another set of workshops for staff whose close association with the Safe Haven project had finished some time previously. "The workshops helped to take us back to that time. To look at what the time was really like," he says. Much of Murdoch's involvement with the Safe Haven project centred on the mechanics of providing a good service. "The workshops helped me reconnect my focus on the people I was working with," he says. Murdoch's story is:

Streams of people emerged from buses to make their way to the processing centre.

'Mir se ne vini' was all I could muster as the flow of people became a torrent.

A young man slowed to respond. 'Me vien mir,' he replied

As our conversation continued wave after wave of people brushed by as if we were clinging to an island in the middle of this stream.

Suddenly an official approached and directed my conversation partner to the processing centre.

'We are talking!' I protested. And then hurriedly explained that STARTTS was a counselling service that talked to people.

The officer was visibly displeased, 'Everyone must be processed immediately and he is gumming up the works.'

'Give him a few more minutes and he'll join the rest,' I replied.

The officer moved onto the next group of dawdlers.

The young man's girlfriend joined us. In the poor light it was difficult to make out who I was meeting. They were both happy to have come this far safely and could now stand and enjoy a cigarette. We bid farewell and they joined the throngs now spilling out of the processing centre.

Three days later a story appeared

on the late news that the couple were to marry. She had accepted his proposal made with a rose picked from the East Hills remembrance garden.

RECORDING HISTORY

Murdoch says that the writing workshops have provided the organisation with excellent material to include in forthcoming publications. STARTTS are considering various ideas for publications regarding the Safe Haven project. A possibility would be a document that includes theoretical papers and reports on the work that STARTTS undertook.

The pieces from the writing workshops could be used to spotlight the type of things that happened, says Murdoch. "[The writing shows] what it was like for STARTTS staff. It will illuminate things, give [the publication] a flavour," he says.

PERSONAL WRITING

Bajraktarevic-Hayward says that the workshops helped her to learn basic tools for writing. Originally from Bosnia, she says: "I knew I could write in my own language. I could also write academic [papers] in English. But to find that I could write fiction and poetry in English!"

Bajraktarevic-Hayward has been working with refugees since she was 20. She says: "I now see that I could write a story about the great and horrible things I've seen."

WORKERS' VOICE

One of the most exiting aspects of the writing groups is that they give the workers a voice. I worked for a long time in Aboriginal Affairs and it became obvious that there were increasing outlets for Aborigines to tell their stories; that governments and the various organisations - church, Aboriginal, non-government - could use press releases and reports to publicise their points of view; and academics could write books and speak at conferences. The people with the least outlets for story telling where the people who actually did the hands on tasks - community advisers, teachers, clinic sisters, shopkeepers, mechanics, policemen. This not only meant that there was a

huge gap in the general discourse on Aboriginal affairs. It was a concrete expression of the general belief that the workers have the least to contribute. The following story is by Peter Davis.

BETRAYAL

They huddled in terror as the dry grass pierced their shaking bodies.

'Daddy! Daddy! They're going to shoot us,' screamed Ardon, trying to cover his tear stained face with his arms. 'Daddy where are you?'

The eyes of his brothers grew large as the media helicopters swooped down like monsters with ominous intent.

The hot dusty wind was stirred up by the deafening noise of the rotor blades, The four brothers were frozen in panic. Thoughts flashed through their minds. Confusion. Blood. Dead bodies. Smoke. Sickly smells. Screams. People running.

In a moment there were an army of police. Linked arm in arm, they advanced through the frightened faces. Dogs growled and pulled at their chains. More police arrived.

People ran, shouted, fell over.

'Daddy! Help! Help! We're going to die!'

Ardon was barely eleven years old. He bravely attempted to shield his three younger brothers with his embrace. His desperate act seemed futile as they clung quivering together, almost unable to breathe.

A yellow sign caught Ardon's eye. He could barely read Albanian but he understood the simple words, 'Welcome to East Hills Safe Haven.'

'They said we would be safe! I don't understand. I don't understand!' cried Ardon. ■

Allan Tegg works as a Psychotherapist, Group Leader and Writer. He can be contacted on (02) 9568 1834. He will be facilitating The Finding Your Voice: The Power of Writing in Trauma Work Workshop as part of the STARTTS Community Education Program at Carramar on Friday 11 May 2001. Ring Melinda Austin on 9794 1900 for details.