

40 Stories for 40 Years

Celebrating the 40th anniversary of Australia's first women's health centre



Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre

Acknowledgements

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This book is dedicated to our clients.



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Introduction

Leading up to the centre's 40th anniversary in March 2014, we were touched by the number of women who were mentioning the impact the centre had on their lives.

Around the same time, homelessness services in NSW, including women's refuges, were experiencing changed funding arrangements, with the result being that up to 80 women's organisations lost government funding. It was an extraordinary time, and it was noticeable just how many people were asking if Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre's funding was secure and, in each interaction, it was clear there was a deep personal imperative that the person asking the question needed assurance that the centre was safe.

We had known that Leichhardt Women's held a special place in many people's lives. Having the fortune to be the first women's health centre in Australia, and opening at the same time as the country's first refuge for women and children escaping domestic violence and the first rape crisis centre, the centre seemed to act as a bookmark in history. A lot of women of a certain age have a story to tell about helping set it up, recalling what they were doing when they heard it had opened, or coming for health care or a discussion group in those early days. An often heard expression is 'it changed my life.'

Over the years some of the services have changed to meet changing needs. We've seen the centre adapt to external changes like professional registration, acceptance of minimum and best practice standards, insurance and medico-legal considerations, as well as astonishing developments in medical science and technology. But as the world has grappled with some of these changes,

Leichhardt Women's has often sought to be prepared a step or two ahead. In its time, it has been accredited six times, and the holistic, multi-disciplinary model the founders espoused is now widely accepted as an ideal way to deliver health care to people in vulnerable populations. From its beginning, the centre has operated from the social model of health framework, and regarded integrated medicine, good partnerships, the environment, time and relationships, as essential to effective health care. All these elements were highly regarded in 1974 and they are now.

In its fourth decade, the centre employs 19 staff, and operates four clinics and health education throughout Sydney Local Health District, and a state-wide specialist counselling service. The centre provides around 20,000 occasions of care to more than 4,000 women a year, and relies on nearly 200 partnerships to enact its philosophy that believes in the rights of all women (regardless of their personal circumstances) to access quality health care.

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*In its **40 years**, Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre has provided health care to an estimated **140,000** women.*

*In **2013/14***, its anniversary year, **94%** of clients reported **their health had improved** as a result of the health care they had received and **97%** of women participating in health education reported **increased skills** as a result of participating in their programs.*

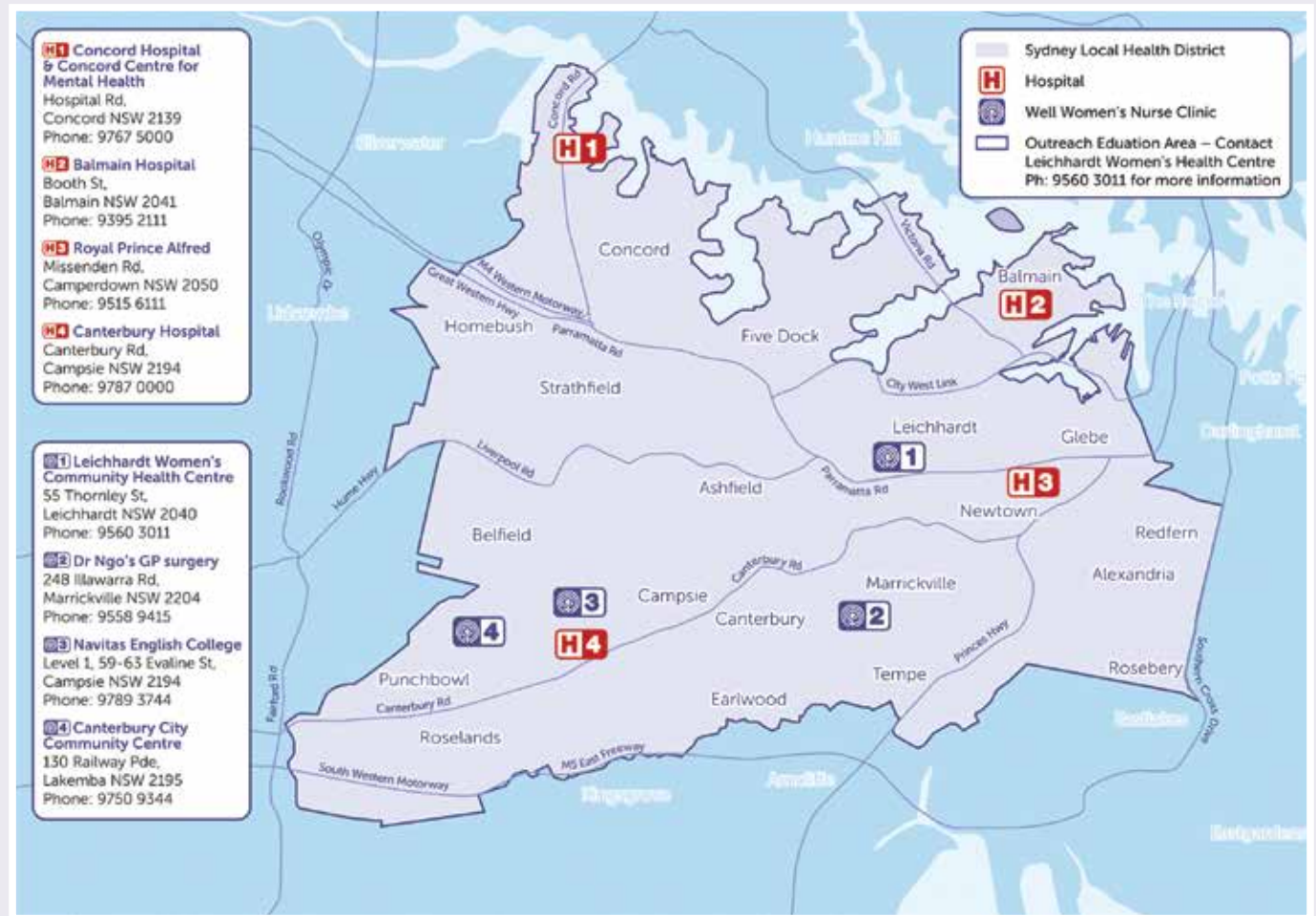
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*In 2013-14 the centre provided a total number of 23,754 occasions of service to 4,192 women engaged in multidisciplinary health care services and health education.

In hearing women say the ‘centre changed my life’ we wanted to know more. We wanted to understand just what it had done to have this effect. We invited women to talk to us, and the result is *40 Stories for 40 Years*. You will see from *40 Stories*, that there seem to be themes. Women talk about the importance of the women-only environment and the safety it gives them to feel comfortable raising issues, the skills of the staff, the range of services and how staff work collaboratively with each other and other health care providers, the emphasis on being provided with information on their options, the respect they receive, the affordable costs and the time spent with them. They speak of the centre’s treatments resolving or improving health problems that had previously been stubborn to shift or not detected.

For four decades the centre has aimed to improve women’s health and play a role in creating a healthy, vibrant community. We want to learn what works, and reflect on what women say they need. And so, to mark 40 years, it seems entirely appropriate to hear from some of the women themselves. We hope you enjoy *40 Stories for 40 Years* as much as we feel privileged to be sharing this part of the centre’s life.

Roxanne McMurray
 Manager,
 Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre



The centre works with over 200 organisations and complements the local hospital and health system.

Sara

STORY 1: My first interaction with Leichhardt Women's was in 2013 with the weekly walking group... my first impression of the Centre was good and staff gave me friendly information. My current activity is Qi Gong. It's a really good group, in a lovely space with lovely, like-minded women and I'm enjoying it immensely. There's a talk with the gentle exercise and I've found it to be very informative. I've meditated faithfully for 30 years and experienced enormous changes in my life and to have this extra top-up with Qi Gong has been a surprise.

The staff here are friendly and knowledgeable. They have created a welcoming space of safety and relaxation. With skilled female practitioners who are like-minded and caring, there's an empathetic dynamic. The Centre meets my needs as a 65 year old woman, body, mind and spirit. It is quiet, peaceful and not on a main road, so the lack of traffic helps to maintain that peaceful environment. The atmosphere is egalitarian, comfortable and easy going.

“With skilled female practitioners who are like-minded and caring there's an empathetic dynamic. The Centre meets my needs as a 65 year old woman, body, mind and spirit.”

There's a greater respect from both staff and clients that I have found lacking elsewhere and I've experienced understanding and like-mindedness at this women-only health centre. Women doctors weren't around when I was in my 20s so to have them here now is wonderful. Throughout my life, I have found male doctors appalling. I had ongoing cystitis in my 20s which became stressful. I was sent for an x-ray by my male doctor whose only comment on the results was that I had good child-bearing hips. I was unimpressed with his attitude. I've never forgotten his words.

In this Centre, the women-only focus offers an essential service for me and I would imagine it's the same for everyone who comes here. I can't speak highly enough. I just love it.



The front hall is filled with useful information

ELSA

“I feel this centre is so broad, it’s beyond its time, beyond the years, beyond the decades. It’s very advanced. They really care... there is a huge demand for these services... I’d like to see more centres like this, in rural areas, in all areas. Women need them.”

STORY 2: I was living in an accommodation centre in Clovelly in 1997 and I saw a pamphlet in the waiting room when it was my turn to move out of the supportive accommodation. Being a woman with mental illness, and isolated, very isolated, I thought wow, they have groups and they had all these therapies, and GPs! I thought, I’m gonna actually move from the eastern suburbs to be closer to the women’s health centre. And I’m glad I did. When I moved out to the area I was quite isolated as well. The women’s health centre softened that blow. I haven’t got any family, I’m a single woman with mental health issues and I’ve been unemployed for such a long time, you know, so it’s a cycle of isolation.

I’ve been institutionalized since I was 20, I’m 38 now. Being at the Leichhardt Women’s Health Centre I learnt techniques that really do help. They fill in the gap, the void, the isolating experience of having a mental illness and feeling vulnerable. The courses are empowering, even for women with mental illness. I’ve had acupuncture here, I find that terrific with my medication. I know that my medication is making me sluggish and once I’ve had acupuncture it gets rid of that sluggishness.... I’ve done meditation here which has helped so much with my way of living. I really lost myself, through having years and years of abuse as a child, I went crazy. These groups are so vital for women who have been abused because out there in institutions – such as a public hospital and community welfare – they don’t have alternative health, it’s this horrible cycle of coldness. I just think women deserve to know that there’s a different way, a smoother and sweeter way to get well. If I didn’t know about the women’s health centre and their beautiful treatments for women, I’d be

suffering more out there in the community, unnecessarily. This fills the gap for me.

I’ve got schizophrenia, so with the biomedical model schizophrenia is a disease. You take a tablet and that’s it. But at the centre it’s like, it doesn’t matter if you’ve got schizophrenia, you can try to get well with schizophrenia and live with it! That’s what I’ve learnt from Leichhardt Women’s, that the schizophrenia is not all there is to me.

This centre has been broad for the last 40 years. I feel like it’s an honour to be here with such respectful professionals. They really understand us. They know where we’re coming from, because yes we can become needy, but the courses prevent that with the self-help techniques. It’s like they’re saying, come on, have some respect for yourself and others.

I’m realising the importance of self-care as I get older. It’s essential to rediscover that after being mad. When I went mad I didn’t have any self-care. I didn’t brush my teeth, my hygiene was poor and I had no diet. I really believe that if it wasn’t for this centre and with my diagnosis and the prognosis of schizophrenia, I could’ve been in a nursing home years ago. I’ve seen the naturopath and she helps me with formulas of vitamin supplements, and remedies and she always asks me what I’m eating. I don’t get that from a GP outside of here.

When I first came here I was unwell and unbalanced... so the vision that I got of the place was, truly, this is another institution. But after participating and listening to the healers – like the acupuncturist and GPs – I thought, I’ve never had an hour session with a doctor, I’ve never had acupuncture for 45 minutes, I was shocked that the

consultation was so long. It was lovely to be listened to and to have a doctor spend a good half hour or a good hour with you. You don’t get that elsewhere. I started to open up and trust the place.

The holistic criteria is certainly here. It’s not imaginary, it’s a real thing that helps women, especially on the lower economic scale. Holistic care is essential to survival. I would still be eating only cornflakes and full cream milk if it wasn’t for this centre. They don’t approach us in a patronising way. The person who trains them is doing a wonderful job. It’s someone who’s very aware of human beings, I think. This place has been a centre for me to learn and grow up, and get out of my victimisation stages, and even if I couldn’t come back to this centre tomorrow, I feel that I’ve learnt enough to sustain me forever.

I feel this centre is so broad, it’s beyond its time, beyond the years, beyond the decades. It’s very advanced. They really care. I really hope that they continue to think about expanding size-wise because there is a huge demand for these services and they’re doing the best they can with what they have, but I wish the government would help them branch out into other areas. I’d like to see more centres like this, in rural areas, in all areas. Women need them. I’m a survivor of abuse, how many other women are out there in the community that don’t have a centre like this to escape into? So I’d love to see more of these women’s community health centres.

It’s empowering once we get over the stage of victimization because victimization, I felt, could’ve killed me. I didn’t want the things that happened to me in my past to happen, but they did. Getting out of that situation was painful and without this centre I don’t think I’d be here.

KATE

STORY 3: I've been coming to Leichhardt Women's since 1991 and I've known about it probably since the 80s. I like the ambience, it being not so much in a surgery. The staff were always very helpful and I felt comfortable the first time I came in.

At first I was seeing the doctors and the nurse and I was getting a massage occasionally. I've also been getting acupuncture on and off as I've needed it.

I always feel much better in myself when I come in and have professionals who have studied women's health. I prefer to come to Leichhardt Women's rather than to see another GP, especially when it's to do with women's health problems because I feel there's been a difference, they're particularly looking at issues to do with women's health and I feel there's more empathy. I feel a lot more comfortable than I do in other places, especially when you get particular examinations.

The acupuncture and physio treatments here have helped with my neck and wrists a lot and that, along with the exercise in the groups, was very beneficial. They've given me stretches and stuff for home as well, I don't need to go to a class every single week. If I go to something a couple of times, then I can balance that with doing my own exercises at home.

I have kept in touch with at least three of the women I met through the centre. It didn't happen straight away, but since 2005, some were in the same groups as me, Qi Gong, and dance therapy, and we connected to each other. At the end of one of the Qi Gong classes we swapped contact details and now we go out and see movies together. We've been to each other's places for lunch and we meet for coffee. It's good to have a couple of women who live in the area, it makes it easy to connect.

They always look at what they can do things. It's good they're putting on new groups for women who have been coming for a long time. There are other women's health centres, but none like this one. When I have the blood pressure taken at the women's centre, the blood pressure reading is fine, but when I go to my regular GP doctor and he takes it, it's up! I think because you've got to wait two or three hours to see him and that builds the pressure up. It's always been fine when I'm at Leichhardt Women's.

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valerie

“After a few months at Leichhardt Women’s, I’m off my medication and I can practically do anything I want to do...”

STORY 4: I was going to an anxiety group at Leichhardt Library and one of the girls gave me a brochure. I put it in a drawer and didn’t do anything about it for over a year. I wish I had rung the very day they gave it to me.

Almost two years ago, I started having these violent panic attacks. I was barely getting out the door. I would wake up with butterflies, I could hardly breathe, just because I had to go to the shop and buy some milk or something. After a few months at Leichhardt Women’s, I’m off my medication and I can practically do anything I want to do, it’s just made such a difference to my life. I can’t believe it myself.

They sort of balance my head and I’m thinking straight again. They taught me how to breathe. I’ve been able to breathe my way out of a really horrible panic attack since I’ve been here and that was all just breathing. It surprised me, it really did. I tell everybody now, they should come and do the breathing course.

“I think you feel more compassion at Leichhardt Women’s, more understanding than the sting in the doctor’s office... We feel more like a person than just the next patient on the list.”

I don’t even think I thought about the women-only aspect of the centre when I first came, but it’s been really important. All I thought of at first was the help, there’s help there. I would’ve gone anywhere just to get some help. I really was desperate. But everybody at Leichhardt Women’s has just been so lovely, just lovely. So are the people I’ve met through the course and doing Qi Gong. I can sit down and talk to people.

I couldn’t say anything negative about anybody there. I think we went overtime in counselling a few times, I’m sure my counsellor gave me extra time because she knew I needed it. I feel more compassion at Leichhardt Women’s, more understanding than the sting in the doctor’s office.

I was going to a psychologist in Camperdown and I was just part of the factory, just the next customer. The lady I saw did what she did with one person and then my turn was next and the same sort of routine, while here it is more personal. We feel more like a person than just the next patient on the list. It really makes a difference, knowing there is somewhere you can go where you won’t feel humiliated. At the women’s centre, there’s always a smile and always a hello. I feel like I’ve been coming here for ages and I’m new. I feel at home.

I’ve had depression for as long as I can remember. I wish I had known about the centre 40 years ago. My whole life would have been so different, truly.



The healthcare environment is critical

ELIZABETH

STORY 5: I first came to visit Leichhardt Women's in 1985. I have a disability and because of that, I can feel victimised and a bit negative, but now I try not to think that way. I have come for the doctor and for the naturopathy and nutrition. I've also done a lot of activities and I've been involved in the walking group for a long time. The naturopathy helps with my immune system and my memory... I love the cooking and nutrition classes here, like Food for Moods, it makes me happier and shows me what I need to be healthy. The doctor is very good for me and she knows a lot.

I also love the women's centre because I need friendship and it gives you that. The staff just have more time for you, that's why I keep coming back. I like the kitchen, the tea and all that. I'm not at the centre that often now, because I'm doing better now. They've given me a lot of support and time and I've learnt a lot. I think I have become more spiritual and I feel more that way now that I'm older... I feel welcome at Leichhardt Women's, I've got to know the staff and they're very positive people. It's a lovely place, it's close and convenient and not expensive and I think Leichhardt is a lovely suburb, it's good. There is history in that house. I know where to come when I have problems.

"I have a disability and, because of that I can feel victimised and a bit negative, but now I try not to think that way. I love the women's centre because I need friendship and it gives you that. The staff just have more time for you."



The centre's founders and first staff participated in demonstrations against Parramatta Girls home, 1973

Zahava

STORY 6: I was looking for counselling, for a decent counsellor – a counsellor who suits me after having been to many, many counsellors who didn't suit me. I was suicidally depressed and at Leichhardt Women's I found the perfect counsellor for me.

Severe depression affects your physical self, it's all interlinked. I had two decades of intense single parenting. I think if you had normal children that might be less stressful, but I have twins with Asperger's, autism and schizophrenia and I have an extremely dysfunctional family, who are not only of no help, but are a huge hindrance.

I find the centre is much friendlier than other services, both the physical environment and the staff. There is information on absolutely everything, mental, physical, emotional and it's all laid out for you. I feel that the resources there are fantastic. The people who work at the Centre are truly professional. I think they offer gentle handling without being patronising and they are efficient without being official, they retain their professionalism. They are concrete in their answers, but it's delivered in a pleasant way. I've seen them handling some awkward and demanding clients and they're very good. I think it's also very nice that you make yourself cups of tea and that sort of thing, so you can actually unwind when you're feeling stressed and get a biscuit or cup of tea. You feel, immediately, that it's not an office. I've been to many psychiatrists, counsellors and psychotherapists who present in a way they think is professional but what they actually do is they set up barriers, psychologically, with their furniture in their waiting rooms or their procedures and their mannerisms.

“It's definitely not just ‘worthwhile’ for the centre to continue, it is essential. More centres like Leichhardt Women's should be set up.”

The women-only aspect is definitely important to the ambience. It definitely has a different feel when it's programmed towards women. Also, in my particular situation – I've been assaulted by somebody with a knife who was male – it would have exacerbated my PTSD, sitting in a room by myself with a male in the waiting area, so in that regard, you come in and it's less threatening. Safety is everything when it comes to physical, mental or emotional health, so the women-only aspect is a virtue of the centre.

Without the Leichhardt Women's Centre, I'd be stuffed. I'd be totally, totally stuffed, because I wouldn't have met this particular counsellor who's just, for me and I wouldn't have encountered this environment. I think it's a very personal matching of client and professional, but for me she performs her magic and is an incredibly nice person as well. I've met a lot of professionals who do their professional job extremely well but they have personalities of wet toilet paper and here, it's a case of getting extraordinarily talented service combined with a genuinely nice human being.

My counsellor is an important part of an invaluable team that is keeping me on the planet. It's as simple as that, because I was very determined to leave. The knife attack nearly killed me and I woke up in hospital and thought I'm

actually glad I'm not dead so that shifted me. The positive of nearly dying is that I was glad I didn't die, therefore my suicidal obsessions or tendencies were, by and large, switched off. It is an intense journey. What I've realised, now, is amazing resilience and a very strong insight which has always kept me going.

Leichhardt Women's is an invaluable resource in the community, the local chat about the centre has always been really positive. Even those women that don't access the centre, knowing that it's there gives them hope, faith and support. So, it even just existing is incredibly positive. The women they provide care for truly appreciate what they've got. It's definitely not just worthwhile for the centre to continue, it's essential. More centres like Leichhardt Women's should be set up. Leichhardt Women's has modernised with the times, it is adaptable and flexible to the current needs of the clientele. There are a lot of women I've come across who I think have serious issues behind closed doors and if they felt that they had somewhere to go, it could be a really valuable tool and resource for them. They need to celebrate big, advertise big, enjoy big, and pat themselves on the back big on the 40th anniversary.

“...I've been assaulted by somebody with a knife who was male - it would have exacerbated my PTSD, sitting in a room by myself with a male in the waiting area, so in that regard, you come in and it's less threatening. Safety is everything when it comes to physical, mental or emotional health...”

judy

STORY 7: I first came here about thirty years ago.

There is more time here. All these professional places are always so rushed I don't know what it is about them, they move one in and move one out. It's a very bad thing to have back to back appointments. At the women's centre, it's different. I had acupuncture and she took a great history of me. I saw the physio for my neck, and once again, a fantastic young woman, assertive, new in her way of thinking and very positive about my possibilities. She gave me different exercises to those I've had through people outside the centre – my yoga therapist and osteopath and chiropractor – and within two months the improvements were there... I was really impressed with her. I said to her last time I don't want to see you again, you've fixed me, spend your time helping other people because you're fantastic! I had great success with the physio.

“I've felt morally supported and I'm impressed with the calibre of the practitioners. Because I've had lupus a lot over my lifetime, I have got the knowledge to compare. I have seen a lot of people so I know what is professional, and the standard at Leichhardt Women's is high.”

“I just look at them, the practitioners, and think wow, I want what they've got. I want the feeling of giving back, the feeling of having maturity, with a work ethic and a reason to be.”

I'm starting to feel better and because I've been coming here, I've felt morally supported and I'm impressed with the calibre of the practitioners. Because I've had lupus a lot over my lifetime, I have got the knowledge to compare. I have seen a lot of people so I know what is professional, and the standard at Leichhardt Women's is high.

I have felt supported and I know I can come here because I can afford to. Before, when I saw other people, I'd wince thinking I've wasted \$100 and I know more than they do. I feel supported that I can come in here and see someone, I can give a donation or the fee is affordable.

I just look at them, the practitioners, and think wow, I want what they've got. I want the feeling of giving back, the feeling of having maturity, with a work ethic and a reason to be. I would love to have what these women have got at the centre, the chemistry and the respect that seems to exist between these women. From coming here I've discovered more about myself. They're not judgmental. They're patient, and that's a fine line when you're trying to help someone because you have to be a little assertive. There's a mutual respect amongst the centre which is fairly unique. It's a chemistry of sorts that seems to be working here, and it's like the chemistry of different people comes together and creates the centre. Everyone here is aware. A lesson I need to learn is to not be self-conscious and not be judgemental and that's probably what I've learnt from coming here – humility and being responsible for myself.

The other thing about here that's good is it's not just for low income earners... because you can be a paying patient it's getting in a lot of different people. They're not all broken or downtrodden, so I think that's a healthy aspect, that it's open to all women, not just the unemployed and low income. It keeps a healthy mix. It's been a wonderful supportive network for the women in Sydney. And without that safety net, honestly, I really don't know what I'd be doing if I didn't know that I could come here from time to time.



Rev Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon and Federal Member for Sydney, Tanya Plibersek at the centre's 30th Anniversary

YOLANDA

“I hate to think what would have happened if I hadn’t found Leichhardt...”

STORY 8: I was one of those people that live to work and I burnt myself out. I used to do office administration and I developed RSI, so I can’t use computers anymore. I’ve been treated like obsolete machinery. Someone sent me to Leichhardt Women’s to see a counsellor and I felt very welcome. I felt like it was a really good place and I felt safe and comfortable.

I suffer from depression and anxiety and the support here and the courses I’ve done have made me more confident. I’ve learned from the ground up, from the roots, how to look after myself and my mental health properly, even just basic self-care, like eating properly, exercise and relaxation. It’s been a very steep learning curve because I was brought up in a working class family, work work work work and it doesn’t work. I’m learning to accept that I suffer from a mental illness and that it’s not the end of the world.

I’ve been so very, very blessed. I’ve seen the psychologist and counsellor and the GPs here – they’re amazing. Everything, every part of my health, has been covered here from the emotional to the mental. It’s fantastic. For me, I’m just so grateful for this centre, it’s been life changing.

Western medicine didn’t work for me. I feel with western medicine, if they can’t cut it out or medicate it, you’re stuffed. I think the centre’s more holistic approach is brilliant. I think there should be more centres like this because mainstream western medicine has its limitations. It was a rude awakening, because when I was still in that western medicine point of view, I thought that you popped a pill and you’d be alright, but I now know your

whole body is such a dynamic system, there are so many different parts. It is continual work, down to the roots of the way you think.

I hate to think what would have happened if I hadn’t found Leichhardt, because I wouldn’t have got the help I needed. Under the current health system, mental health care is pathetic. To find a psychiatrist that will see you under Medicare, who’ll bulk bill, is virtually impossible. I see a psychiatrist under Medicare and I get 15 minutes every two months for medication review, that’s it.

I feel, from experience, that a lot of GPs don’t understand mental illness. I feel I’ve been brushed aside, they just palm it off to someone else because they don’t want to deal with it, they don’t have the time to deal with it. I think a lot of them are burnt out. The worst horror story I had was that when I went through premature

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menopause at thirty-six and my GP printed me off a sheet on menopause. She did not explain to me the health risks of premature menopause – which are heart disease and osteoporosis – she didn’t even mention them. Before coming to Leichhardt Women’s, I had been very disappointed and let down by doctors. If I had listened to my GP, I’d be a codeine addict by now. All she did was pump me up with pain killers and anti-inflammatory medication which wrecked my stomach.

My parents were war survivors from the Second World War, all they knew was survival. They didn’t know about self-care, so I didn’t know about self-care. If it wasn’t for the women’s centre I wouldn’t have learnt, I would still be doped up on medication walking around like a zombie.

Western medicine just seems to be the quick fix. It’s a band-aid, they cover the wound, but what’s causing that wound is not being addressed. Before Leichhardt, I found people didn’t take me seriously because I’ve got mental illness on my file. With mental illness you get treated like an idiot or a fool or you get brushed off. At the women’s centre, you’re treated with respect, treated equal. People here are friendly, they’re full of good advice.

In the beginning, when I first came, I didn’t care about the centre being women-only, but now I think it’s important. You meet people here and you make friends, there are so many traumatised women in society from abuse, from husbands or partners.

dimity

STORY 9: I might have even been part of the beginning. I think they had all female doctors and there was a big room in the backyard where we used to hold groups. The women's movement was in full strength at that time. At one stage, my mother, myself and my daughter were all going to Leichhardt Women's Health Centre. In fact, my mother is in a little film about it.

It was absolutely wonderful to be able to come to a place where there were women doctors, where it was all women! It felt really accessible and really relaxed and safe. I think it contributed to an ease about what was happening to you physically too. They were like me, so it was much easier to talk and to explain. A lot of things you didn't have to explain because other women have the same, they had periods whereas male doctors didn't.

I go to a local doctor for general things and I always come here for things like pap smears and breast issues – those sorts of things. I feel much more relaxed here than with normal doctors. And so I'm more liable to talk about something that has crossed my mind – they pick those things up, so it ends up being a thorough treatment. I find I'm very relaxed here, I feel I am in safe hands and in very professional hands. They're very thorough from a women's point of view because they specialise in women and have seen every variety of thing that could happen with a woman.

If I wasn't coming to the women's centre I may not have known that I should keep having pap smears after 70. There's that feeling that if I've missed something they'll tell me about it, whereas at other places I feel like the onus is on me to bring up the things to be discussed by the doctor

because they are under so much pressure that they don't really chat and they seem rushed. If it weren't for the centre, I might have cervical cancer still. It might have not been picked up.

I feel that they're generous and you're treated as a human being. I feel really comfortable and respected. At the same time they have their professionalism, they're not just relaxing, they're thoughtful and thinking about things. They haven't switched anything off, they've just turned an extra thing on. I have a feeling of great safety, I really respect the people who work here and I feel like I could approach them about anything and that I'd be treated with respect and kindness.

I'd do anything if it was threatened, I'd be out there with a banner. It's interesting how different it is in my mind, when I compare the general practice that I go to with the women's centre. It's really just very, very different. The people at the GP practice deal with you like a customer, but at Leichhardt you're dealt with as a person, so it's different. When I think about the waiting rooms at each place, the feeling of being in them is just so different. In one I feel like I'm a bit of a nuisance and that I should deal with what I have quickly because there are lots of people who are waiting and you only have some minutes allowed, but at Leichhardt I feel like I can actually get down into things and really talk about them to the doctor. I don't feel hurried in anyway.

“There's that feeling that if I've missed something they'll tell me about it, whereas in other places I feel like the onus is on me to bring up the things to be discussed by the doctor because they are under so much pressure that they don't really chat. If it weren't for the centre, I might have cervical cancer still.”



The centre's staff provide professional clinical care

PAULINE

“I can say, quite honestly, that if it hadn’t been for this centre, I would have taken my own life, truly.”

STORY 10: I found out about Leichhardt Women’s through a friend of mine when I’d been living in Sydney for about a year. I came to see the naturopath and I wasn’t very well at all. My daughter had died a couple of years earlier, indirectly from drugs, and I’d lived up in the bush. She’d left four children here in Sydney under very, very bad circumstances. It was really heavy-duty stuff.

When I came in, I was in insanity. The naturopath was so good to me and she spoke to the doctor at the centre because she was really worried about me. I was in a really bad way. One of them rang me that night to see if I was alright. People don’t do that, doctors normally see you and you’re gone and I hadn’t even seen the doctor yet, but the naturopath was so worried that she spoke to her about me. Then, I had an appointment with the doctor and it all started from there. I can say, quite honestly, that if it hadn’t been for this centre, I would have taken my own life, truly.

I’m a recovering addict and alcoholic and I’ve had many ups and downs. I had half a lung removed this time last year and that was another miracle. Christmas 2012, it must have been, I was very sick for a few months and they thought I might have pancreatic cancer, the doctor here wasn’t sure. She rang a resident up at the hospital and I got in to see a doctor there, very quickly. It was chronic pancreatitis. Praise God it wasn’t pancreatic cancer, but they gave me a scan and they found cancer in my lung so six months later they operated on that. Now, I know if I was at any other doctor, I wouldn’t have stood a chance. I’d be dying of third stage cancer now.

If it weren’t for these people here especially my naturopath and doctor, who know everything that’s happened to me, I wouldn’t have survived. The communication here has made a big impact on my life, people talking and giving you their time – not having to rush in for fifteen minutes to sign a form and get a pill, you know?

This kind of clinic should be all around the world, because it’s all under one roof, and they’re so skilled. People that come here have often got other problems, but you can get help for every problem you have here. That’s what good about it. I just know that as a pensioner, in that system out there, I would’ve died. I would never have got the attention I got here, but the most important thing is the personalities. It’s the way we’re treated. It is home. It’s comfortable. It doesn’t matter who you are.

Having come for so long we have got to know each other. And even if I ring up, because they know me and because I was so very sick last year, I always get to see someone if I need to. I am so grateful, I know I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for them.

I’m not prejudiced, all the doctors they put me on to, the specialists, were men and I couldn’t have had better doctors. Especially one doctor – we talk about all kinds of things, he keeps them all waiting because he’s very interested in alcoholism and what’s happening.

I’ve even told men there should be places like this for men and apparently in the US there are. You’ve got a doctor here and they can all read your notes and everyone knows what you’re talking about. The staff actually communicate

to each other if they’re concerned. Where else do you get that? In all my years, I’ve never found that anywhere else. They think about the whole picture to do with your health. I couldn’t afford furniture and was sleeping on an old mattress. I couldn’t sleep because my body hurt so much, so they bought me a bed. It makes me want to cry because, except for the women here, no one had helped me in those first few years.

I tell a lot of people to come here, and a lot of people in AA come here and they just think the world of it too.

“When I came in, I was in insanity. The naturopath was so good to me and she spoke to the doctor at the centre because she was really worried about me. I was in a really bad way. One of them rang me that night to see if I was alright. People don’t do that, doctors normally see you and you’re gone.”

JULIE

“I just have a very vivid memory of feeling really held by them... I came looking for it and it was here.”

STORY 11: I'd come out of a relationship that was with a man who was an alcoholic and I'd become quite co-dependent. Someone suggested doing the assertiveness course at the centre and I came along and that was my first understanding about the difference between assertiveness and aggression.

I learned the difference between the two. I'd been using anger and aggression to get a voice in the relationship. I'd been using anger to try and control him and to try to get him to stop drinking. I'd use my anger in lots of ways that were really quite dysfunctional. So that was really significant and I was just coming up to 40 years old and it was my first, real a-ha moment. I left the family home and came to live in the inner west and after a twenty year marriage, I was completely lost. That's how I came to be looking for some support.

About three years after all of that I had come out as a lesbian and I was with my first girlfriend, we decided to come to Leichhardt Women's and do the meditation course that was being run. That was significant as well because it gave me a taste of meditation. I then went from that course to another course in New Zealand and now I'm a regular meditator and I have been for a long time. So that was my kind of spiritual awakening, in a sense.

The centre was really important for my development. I think an important aspect was the emotional support that I felt by the women who ran the assertiveness course. I just have a very vivid memory of feeling really held by them. There were two women and I really got the essence of what it was like to have women support you and nurture

you because I was in quite a distressed state. Emotionally, it was significant, and I remember admiring them.

I'm working in mental health now and I've been a trainer in mental health and a leader for the last 10 years. I really get the work and I guess it's taken me a long time to realise why I was drawn to mental health. At the time when I first came to the women's centre, I was very mentally distressed and very anxious and very depressed because I'd left my children. I think why I'm thrilled about being part of this centre is that it's really important to have the support at the right time and that's what the centre gave me. It was just the right thing. I came looking for it and it was here.

Now I look back and I think that the women-only aspect was a big part of it. I think women are good at supporting each other. We understand what women need.

Holistic is really the only way to work with people because otherwise we've separated the head from the body. In mental health that's been a huge drive. Now we look at the person's physical health and we push for physical health to be included when people are being prescribed medication and we look at people's lifestyles.

If I hadn't done this assertiveness course, it would've taken me a long time to get on track. It wasn't the only thing that helped me get better and heal, but it was obviously big.

It's really quite fantastic that the centre's been open for 40 years, I think that's wonderful. And it really says a lot about women – give them some funding and support!



Nutritious nibbles help support the messages in clinics, counselling and health education about the importance of nutrition and a healthy lifestyle

Amie

STORY 12: When I had my baby I got to see a midwife and she told me about Leichhardt Women's Health. I feel quite emotional when I think about it, because when I first started coming I was in quite a bad state. We didn't have any family here and I'd just had my first baby and my health was really, really bad and we didn't have a lot of money. I couldn't access all the things I needed because we didn't have any money.

I was suffering with really bad migraines and when I came to the centre it was right, okay, we're going to have a plan, this is the plan, you can see them, you can see them, and we'll get to the bottom of the problem. That's how I felt so supported emotionally and physically. Even the appointments with the doctors are longer, little things like that just make you feel like people care. Because the centre is run by women, you feel like they understand and they're obviously sensitive to women's needs, and women's needs are that you need time, you need to feel like people are actually listening to you, and then they apply their skills. Women need emotional support and that's what I found here. I'm not just saying it – it really saved my life because I felt awful when I first came.

“Because the centre is run by women, you feel like they understand and they're obviously sensitive to women's needs, and women's needs are that you need time, you need to feel like people are actually listening to you, and then they apply their skills.”

“I really don't know what would've happened because I was in a really bad way. I couldn't get any help that I needed anywhere else.”

When I look back at when I first came, I couldn't see a light, and I was really worried about my daughter because she only had me and I kept thinking, I'm a bad mum, she's not getting what she needs. I just didn't have anybody, I didn't really have any friends because we'd moved countries. I'd not had time to establish any proper friendships, so I couldn't open up and tell them what was going on. If this wasn't accessible for me, I really don't know what would've happened because I was in a really bad way. I couldn't get any help that I needed anywhere else. I did try to go to other doctors but I wasn't getting help, I was getting tablets. In the other places I went before I got here, time was very limited, it was like ticking a box of requirements.

In terms of health I'm like 100 percent better than what I was. I think what I've found about the clinic is that it is holistic, so it's not that I just come and see a doctor and then they give me a tablet and send me away, which is what the other GPs were doing. When I started to feel a lot better with my treatment, they asked me what I wanted to do into the future. They told me about a special fund that they have for women who want to retrain and as a result they've helped support me become a yoga teacher.

So not only did they help with treatment, but now I'm training to be a yoga teacher which will mean I can earn money, it's what I love doing and it's good for my health. The yoga journey is a journey in itself, but the fact that they've helped me pay for it – I would never have been able to do it if they'd not helped. I'd be stuck where I was, whereas now I'm on this path. That's another source of income for us and my health and my mentality has also improved throughout it so I can't be more grateful.

I've told a few people to come here now. I've met some people that were quite desperate, some other mums, and I said look you need to go and access help. I think there is a bit of a taboo about that when you've had a baby, especially about the post natal depression. You might be feeling it, but you don't want to admit it because you might see it as you've failed. I look back and think thank God that I did, because I don't know how I would've coped, I really don't. I was really at breaking point. I wouldn't dare to think where I'd be without Leichhardt Women's to be honest.

MARIE

“They realise that social and emotional wellbeing is part of our health.”

STORY 13: Someone I knew had been going to Leichhardt Women’s suggested I should go there. This was back in 1997. In the early times, in the beginning, the centre made a profound difference to my sense of wellbeing. From a young age, from the age of 16, I struggled with my reproductive health and I was put on a low-dose pill at the age of 16. I was used as a test case because I always had heavy and painful periods, it was a burden that I carried with me. I used to spend half of every month in pain. I was bleeding so heavily that people thought I was miscarrying every month.

I arrived at Leichhardt to see the naturopath... I sat down with her and it was like windows and doors were opening. I was such a mess. She took my issues seriously, she wanted to try and help me and it was genuine. I felt comfortable. I knew it was a safe place just by going there. I knew I wasn’t going to be judged.

The naturopath did give me help with pain relief and she tried to balance out my hormones. My conditions were deteriorating while I was with her, she kept me going. I felt she informed me. I felt that I was able to make decisions with her, that she wasn’t making decisions on my behalf. That was the first time I had been to any practitioner who treated me equal, to keep me informed so she and I could make decisions. There’s a big difference. The way she treated me was partly her, and also the philosophy of the centre.

Endometriosis was causing the heavy bleeding and I had surgery. When I went to the women’s hospital in 2000, I had her advice under my belt. I wouldn’t let anyone touch me who I didn’t trust. When I met the surgeon, I trusted

him. The lessons I learnt were about knowing who to trust, to follow intuition and not to discount my feelings or dignity about being treated properly as a woman.

I now have greater understanding and self-esteem and have felt empowered by the process because I was treated humanely and with respect and compassion. I was taken seriously and my problems were taken seriously. I felt safe in Leichhardt. And when I say safe, I mean that I felt safe to have a point of view about my own body. I felt listened to. They taught me to understand the difference. Now I have a GP who I really like.

I’d like to say that I think they should keep the foyer the way it is, with the flyers and umbrellas and all of those things. The foyer told me a lot about the centre, it said that you’re here in a community centre. It’s also a private space, a person can run in, and grab information and go again and not have to speak to anyone if they don’t want to. I hope that the government doesn’t pull any funding... If they ever tried to shut it down I’d be knocking on minister’s doors.

I really need to say that when you’re at the stage where you can no longer help yourself, you need to go somewhere where they can help you, but you need to feel safe before you receive help. Leichhardt is that place. They build you up and give you more resilience to face what’s ahead. They do that seriously. They realise that social and emotional wellbeing is part of our health.

“The foyer told me a lot about the centre, it said that you’re here in a community centre. It’s also a private space, a person can run in, and grab information and go again and not have to speak to anyone if they don’t want to. I hope that the government doesn’t pull any funding... If they ever tried to shut it down I’d be knocking on minister’s doors.”

jennifer

“The costs of not providing this service far outweigh the costs of providing it.”

STORY 14: I was referred here by my counsellor. It was last year and I had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome and I'd been suffering that since December 2012. I was really incapacitated. I couldn't get out of bed for months, I had to go back to sleep half an hour after waking up. I'd be sleeping for two hours at a time, several times a day. Before, I'd have several naps of two hours every day and I'd fall asleep at 5pm in the afternoon and not be able to care for my daughter properly because I was so unwell. I went from going to the gym five days a week and doing the Bay Run every weekend to being knocked out for nearly two and a half years. I'm not going to be going to the gym next week, but now I feel it's not an impossibility anymore.

One of the most fabulous benefits of coming here is that it's a very holistic service in that all the people that I've seen here understand. They don't just understand and empathise with what's brought me here, but they are technically competent in what to do to move me on from here as well. I've had a history of abuse and that's another way in which the women here are so good at what they do, because they can recognise that, they can see. They don't treat that as something separate from the rest of you, they understand how that fits in with how you function as a whole. They can treat all of those parts as a whole to get you functioning, much better than I could have anywhere else. They're well-intentioned and they're well informed about what to do.

In other places, things like getting an ultrasound done or seeing a gynaecologist are health care services that are very intimate and people doing them seem to have

no conception of how difficult it is for some women to seek those services, they're completely ignorant of the difficulties. That's something that really discourages you from seeking out health services that are going to prevent you from developing horrible diseases that are costly for the taxpayer. I'd say there are plenty of women out there that don't seek out health services because of how they've been treated in other parts of the health care system.

“...they take the time and the deliberation to sit and listen compassionately to what your situation is, they don't jump to conclusions, they don't make moral judgements they make professional compassionate judgements.”

The attitude in medicine is – take a pill. I have had the most incredible, dramatic, immediate improvements in my health from Leichhardt Women's by doing breathing classes, lymphatic drainage massage and nutrition. My stomach is functioning better than it has done for years. I've suffered allergies, like nasal stuff, and the breathing classes made the most phenomenal change to me.

I've had decades and decades of not having any clue about doing anything to look after myself. When that lack of self-care has been so entrenched for such a huge part of your life, you don't turn it round in an instant.

You need more than an eight minute GP consultation before being bundled out the door again. So that is another huge benefit, at Leichhardt Women's they take the time to sit and listen compassionately to what your situation is, they don't jump to conclusions, they don't make moral judgements – they make professional, compassionate judgements. All the women here are exceptional in their strength, their compassion, their professionalism, their knowledge – they just tick all the boxes, they really truly do.

The 40th anniversary speaks volumes about the work that they do and how effective they are in doing that, here's to another 40! I think there are sections of society that would be quite happy to dismiss a women's health service as being some sort of basket weaving, hippie fringe, but there are just such concrete benefits, not just to the women who come here, but also to the people around them. For example, I've been through a tough time, but with the support that I've had here, I can go back and be a better parent to my daughter than I could have been if I hadn't come here. She doesn't deserve bad parenting any more than I deserve what happened to me, but thanks to the help that I've had here, that doesn't have to continue for another generation. So it's not just the people that are being dealt with immediately that come in through the doors, it's the other people in their orbit that are being taken care of as well.

The costs of not providing this service far outweigh the costs of providing it.... If you're not dysfunctional and you're able to go out and contribute to society more effectively, there are no losers in that, only winners.

tula

“It is the type of haven that has so many different facilities available for women who have been through so much and I will be forever grateful.”

STORY 15: When I moved into the area, I first heard about Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre from my doctor who referred me. I was having a consultation with her about acupuncture. I didn’t know about the Centre so I thought I should check it out. I started having acupuncture and it’s helped me enormously. I am not that financial and the fact that you can come to Leichhardt Women’s and pay what you can is just fantastic.

I have also been seeing the physiotherapist and I can honestly tell you, I have been in a lot of pain for 10 years and she pinpointed a problem in my shoulder that I spent 10 years trying to get to the bottom of. She found a tear in my shoulder. I have a lot of chronic pain, but no-one ever worked out what was going on in my right shoulder which effects my right arm, my hand, everything. I was just absolutely amazed.

There have been changes in my life coinciding with my coming here... I have been going through some grieving and coming here has helped. I find it to be a very supportive, healing and welcoming environment and I do really, really admire what the people at the centre do for people.

There is camaraderie of the women here and there is a real solidarity of the women – if it wasn’t a women’s centre the conversations wouldn’t be the same. I have been treated on a physical level as well as an emotional level here. I am very, very grateful. It is a haven that has so many different facilities available for women who have been through so much and I will be forever grateful. I have not had experiences with this before so it is very hard for me to draw comparisons, but I don’t think you could get this type of camaraderie or support in any other situation. Congratulations and thank you for the amazing work you all do.

LISA

STORY 16: It was about 2002. I separated from my ex, it was a very ugly relationship. I went to a domestic violence support group at Campsie and I got told about Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre. I came along to quite a few courses to evolve myself because I was totally vaporised by him. Back then, I probably had low self-esteem physically, because my ex would always complain about my weight and give me a hard time about having a baby and having not lost weight within three months, that sort of thing. So I did the Healthy Body Image course at first. That was amazing because it made me look at my body again and it made me look at myself spiritually as well, so then I did the next course called Life Balance.

I did an assertiveness course and that was good because I learnt how not to be aggressive, especially with family, and that was hard when I got angry. In some situations in particular, I had a lot of frustrations and the things I went through with my ex had kind of hand-grenaded into that. I was working in IT and I recognised that it wasn't for me anymore. I realised that I wanted to work with people, so I started doing a Community Welfare course.

It was like a u-turn coming to Leichhardt Women's, a u-turn to my life. I felt the centre gave to me what I needed in life and then I wanted to give back to the community that helped me when I needed help. Now I work in the sector where I get to do the same for other women and people in the community. I love what I do, I have found my passion in life. The women's centre has enabled me to find that passion, to identify that working with people was my passion.

I met some amazing friends. I still have friends that I met those ten, 12 years ago. We all came here for different reasons because we were in crisis, and after doing the courses here we had a social group and we built on our friendships outside of the space.

Some staff celebrating the 1970's themed 30th Anniversary in 2004

This is a space to connect and help you to get through. It has so many tentacles, you come here for a group and you also have the GP, the acupuncture, the other programs. You come in the door for one thing then you find there is another world in here. The staff are amazing because I have seen them from being a client to now being a colleague, they are just sensational, the team goes to the 110th degree to help the clients, which is so needed in this sector.

There just aren't many centres around, especially that offer the breadth of service that Leichhardt Women's does. They have such a great reputation in the community, people know about the Centre and they know to refer people there. I send people, I have the confidence that they are going to get a good referral, they are not going to get told no, we can't help you.

The manager has been here such a long time, she has maintained the Centre through so much upheaval around them and it seems to me that she is such a powerhouse in the community.

“The staff are amazing because I have seen them from being a client to now being a colleague, they are just sensational, the team goes to the 110th degree to help the clients, which is so needed in this sector.”



JOANNE

“The difference in coming to this Centre is immense. I couldn’t even begin to gauge it.”

STORY 17: All my life I’ve been exposed to domestic violence and living in dysfunctional domestic violence relationships. I found out about Leichhardt Community Women’s Community Health Centre in 2002 when I went to Detour House, it was recommended to me, but I’d just got clean and I had just fought to get my kids back from care and I didn’t have time. I had been clean then for seven years. In 2009 I relapsed with a partner at the time – and I’ve had a series of relapses since. Around 2012, I was under the care of Barnardo’s and my case workers bought me to Leichhardt Women’s for some counselling and to see the doctor and find out what I needed. I came back here in early March last year. I really got my foot in the door properly around September 2013 and I’ve stayed clean since then. I’ve been coming here pretty much on a regular basis. I have probably been a pretty constant presence here since then, working through issues and having everything treated.

The difference in coming to this centre is immense. I couldn’t even begin to gauge it. The counselling has been really, really helpful, having had so much domestic violence abuse. I’ve been in pain for nine years and I just went to my doctor and had a cortisone injection. That sort of helps for a few days but at Leichhardt Women’s I started physio, and I’m now a lot better than I used to be. I’ve still got limited movement but apparently I might have sustained quite a bit of damage to it and I wouldn’t have known that if I hadn’t come to Leichhardt for physio. I felt like I was just being dismissed a lot by doctors and GPs.

I’ve had acupuncture, which was really good, it just gave me some relief. I’m a lot calmer. In early rehab especially, I was quite manic, I was either really up or really down. In the months I’ve been coming to Leichhardt Women’s I’ve stayed clean and I’ve become aware that I’m in that middle ground now. I could have probably done it out there on my own, but I would have been as mad as anything. The centre is good for sanity and grounding. I think I’ve developed something with the women I have seen on a regular basis and it’s been an amazing journey.

I’ll go back to uni in August after not going for a couple of years. The centre has definitely played a part in that. I’ll be studying adult education, languages and numeracy, English and reading and writing. I started this part-time in 2004, but I had to drop out because of everything that was going on. Late last year with support from my counsellor backing me up and writing letters, I was allowed to go back.

I get the sense that a lot of the workers here have been deeply connected to women who have suffered the same kinds of thing I have. I feel safe and that’s really important. I have never felt safe most of my life at school, at home, and it really has given me the sense of safety. I was in counselling for over a year with a lovely women in 2003, but I divulged to her only a fraction of the stuff that I have felt comfortable to divulge at Leichhardt Women’s.

“I get the sense that a lot of the workers here have been deeply connected to women who have suffered the same kinds of thing I have. I feel safe and that’s really important.”



The centre hosts the ‘Biggest Morning Tea’ every year. In 2011, one of the centre’s doctors gave a cooking demonstration to the hungry guests

REBECCA

“If I’d gone to a different service, I would have felt judged, but at Leichhardt Women’s I was never judged, I was just encouraged to deal with it, acknowledge it, and let it go.”

STORY 18: I am in the Stepping Out program for women who’ve had childhood sexual abuse and it was encouraged that we come to Leichhardt Women’s and get a feel of the place because this is where they have counselling, around rape and sexual abuse.

I started doing the courses that the Centre had running. By coming here and doing the courses I have been able to be with other women in the Stepping Out program, women who have had similar life experiences and I can see how they’ve managed to get through it. I just follow their footsteps. I think it’s is a great start, to be finding yourself in a safe environment. I had to be taught by other women about myself because I knew how to be abused, but I didn’t know how to be nurtured.

Before I came to the centre I didn’t know much about health and wellbeing. I had a lot of abuse, I had a lot of injuries. I was offered physiotherapy and acupuncture. This time last year there was no way in the world I could walk up stairs, but through doing acupuncture and physiotherapy I am now able to maintain my pain management without taking prescription medication. I never ever thought about alternatives. I only ever knew that if you’re in pain, you have a drink or you deaden the pain by taking a substance. To learn that there are techniques out there that you can use is just amazing. It’s like I found this new world I didn’t know about.

Through doing the workshops and having the confidence of showing up on a weekly basis, I’ve been able to volunteer for Missions without Borders, it’s a Christian organisation and they help children escaping slavery in Romania, Bosnia and the surrounding countries.

Different organisations, like the Country Women’s Association and churches, knit clothes and donate brand-new items. We pack them and they are sent off to the orphanages after the children are stolen back from slavery. I went to that organisation because of being a child that was never protected, not knowing that I had a voice, or not being believed.

Having drug histories and child sexual assault can put you into fields that you are not proud of and there is always judgement around that. If I’d gone to a different service, I would have felt judged, but at Leichhardt Women’s I was never judged, I was just encouraged to deal with it, acknowledge it, and let it go. Before, I was made to feel a lot of shame and I felt that I was constantly being judged or spoken about. On top of that, the women’s health centre encourages working girls and drug addicts and people like that to come in, to feel comfortable, that it’s somewhere safe that they can have a check-up or communicate, and be encouraged if they are going to work (on the streets) to work in a safe environment. If they want to get out of the work, they will help them to do it safely and refer them to women’s shelters.

The skills that these ladies have got, and the capacity that they have, encourages us to come back. For example, the phone calls they give you before your appointment, to remind you that you have got that appointment, are cheerful. Hello it’s so and so here from Leichhardt Women’s Health, just reminding you about your appointment tomorrow. It is things like that, that welcome you to come back. I think that is really important. The staff here are fantastic.

I’ve grown up in the system – in refuges and all that stuff – and Leichhardt Women’s is different – they really care about their clients, and that’s the truth. Other centres that I’ve been to feel like they’ve got shadow staff, the staff come and they are only there for a couple of days. At Leichhardt, you see the same women, and the same women doing the courses are doing treatments on you and on the front desk and I think that’s what makes it. You come in the front door and you see someone familiar. I just think they really care and you can tell they love what they are doing. That is what makes it special. I don’t know what wages they are on, I wouldn’t have a clue, but to see what they do in itself shows me their love and determination.

“I never ever thought about alternatives. I only ever knew that if you’re in pain, you have a drink or you deaden the pain by taking a substance. To learn that there are techniques out there that you can use is just amazing. It’s like I found this new world I didn’t know.”

LIS

“I tell everyone about this place – it really did save my life. I think when you are in the situation you have very troubling mental health issues and drug and alcohol issues, you lie a lot, and my GP here was the first person I didn’t lie to.”

STORY 19: I came to Leichhardt Women’s when I had just come back from the UK and I was in a bit of a position where my mental health wasn’t very good. I’d also had a back injury and I’m a nurse so I found it very difficult. I had only just started at the hospital where I was working and they weren’t very happy. They didn’t want to keep me on with the injury and I didn’t feel very supported, so I left. Then my relationship started breaking down and my friend that I knew from the UK said do you know there’s a women’s health centre close?

Well, I’ve been here since 2005, the GP literally picked up all those pieces for me and made them into a much more manageable sort of agenda, life agenda. She saved my life.

I was in a very bad situation and I didn’t want to live. That’s not very nice actually, but like I said there was so many health issues.... I’ve got asthma and I’ve got a cardiac problem because I kept wheezing and she said well you won’t just have asthma. So her journey with me was like her getting me to see the simplest things.

I think first was the relaxation course then the breathing course and then the Qi Gong and then the meditation course, the GP steered me towards the courses and the other person that saved my life. It gave me purpose and helped me settle down... I was like a sitting duck, I was using drugs and alcohol, thinking of suicide, lots of chronic illnesses, and one by one both of them just helped me over the next hurdle I was able to overcome.

I tell everyone about this place, it really did save my life. I think when you are in that situation where you have very troubling mental health issues and drug and alcohol issues, you lie a lot, and my GP here was the first person I didn’t lie to. She was like a guardian angel, it’s just incredible. It’s great – I lost 30kg as well, so I have lost another person almost.

I’m working again now and I’m a practice nurse. I work in chronic illness so I’ve set up chronic illness clinics where I work and it’s fantastic. I am able to speak to people, it’s like I walk the talk when people talk about overwhelming scenarios, and I’m also able to talk to the people where I work about a lot of these things.

There are so many people out there that need Leichhardt Women’s and places like it. There are times in women’s lives when there needs to be access to things they need, and they are up against people who just don’t understand, but to find the right place really means a lot to someone who is mentally affected, or sick – it’s huge.



Campaigning for women’s health centres in the 1970’s

AMELIA

STORY 20: I was looking for help. A friend of mine came to my house and gave me a pamphlet. And she said, try this, try here. I was desperate, and this is where I got the strength to do what I have done.

I feel that coming here has made me stronger. It has opened my eyes, because with the strength of this help and the strength of God, I got through. I learned not to keep it in and it gave me more learning, because I didn't know a lot of things. I have learned to open up through this centre.

I don't wish on anyone what I've been though. But this place got me stronger. I did get through and now I'm happy. I'm happy because now, I can live. Before, I couldn't live in that situation. Now, I'm on the top because I know where to go.

This is different to other services. It got me to open my eyes, not to close the door and now I can knock at any door. I'm not scared. It's great, put this Centre anywhere, put it out there on the TV because people should come here. Especially women, they should come here, and more and more women should come, because here you are safe. I still need to come for some things.... I'm still going through things, quite a lot, but I made it, I did make it.

“I don't wish on anyone what I've been though. But this place got me stronger. I did get through and now I'm happy.”



The staff from the centre take health information to the streets in a Community Information Van, seen here in Glebe in 1977

SALWA

“Even if you don’t come for an appointment you can get a cup of tea and you can go out the back and these things help to restore you and help to nourish you.”

STORY 21: I first came here when I was 17. I think I was just more politically conscious. I would travel in from Panania to use the services, but now I’ve moved to be closer. I was continuing to develop my consciousness and it was a time of women’s health in women’s hands so I thought that (the centre) would be a good place.



The naturopath is the main person that I see. I believe her support and her as a practitioner has helped. I’ve got a lot of health problems – I’ve got chronic health ones and the stuff she gives me has helped me to not be as bad as what I used to be or could be. She doesn’t cut out general medicine. I’ve learnt skills in groups that I can apply to my life, and practical support like picking up fresh food. They helped me exhibit in an exhibition – that was probably the biggest thing because it validated me. It was from a fund – the Lisa Macdonald Fund – and I’ve said that if I died, then I have achieved that. Governor Bashir came and it was sold out. After the exhibition others wanted me to exhibit my art.

Leichhardt Women’s is different, for example, if I go to the rheumatologist, there’s not that space – the tea and that – and, you know, you can’t get into massage, you can’t get into physio there. If I go somewhere else, everything costs so much, I just can’t afford that. With the women’s centre, even if you don’t access it all, you feel that you can. One of the difficulties for me is that I don’t have a support network at all. I don’t have any family to go to. I’ve just got me and my kids. Even if you don’t come for an appointment you can get a cup of tea and you can go out the back and these things help to restore you and help to nourish you.

Left: Holistic health care extended to sponsoring a successful art exhibition showcasing clients’ artwork (left and right) and encouraging creative expression as a pathway to wellbeing

Susannah

“I don’t think you can do the hard work without support.”

STORY 22: I’ve got a chronic pain management issue, in that I’ve had a broken leg and had my ankle pinned, so it causes me a lot of spinal and nerve problems in my lower back and the acupuncture was really, really good for managing pain. I just prefer to use an alternative therapy like that over taking drugs or medication of any kind. I think that’s one of the things I liked about Leichhardt Women’s, they gave you options for traditional counselling and traditional treatments, but then they provided you with other options for alternative care as well.

Coming out of rehab and being in pain for some time and not being able to manage it and then coming here and being able to manage it and getting a job, it’s really good... all those stepping stones. Coming from the position where I was really depressed and very sad after all the things that have happened to me and having to go to rehab for a long period of time, it was a big challenge for me, coming out and being able to get services and being able to make myself feel physically better.

“Together, they all make the difference. I can take credit for taking the action, but I can’t take credit for all those highly trained skills that I don’t have and all those people with those skills helped me to where I am.”

I don’t think you can do the hard work without support. Whether they be a massage therapist, an acupuncturist, a counsellor, GP, whatever, they help in their way. Collectively, together, they all make a difference. I can take credit for taking the action, but I can’t take credit for all those highly trained skills that I don’t have and all those people with those skills – they helped me to where I am, so I have to thank them as well.

I remember thinking it felt really personal when I came to the centre. I’d only been a few times but the person remembered what I looked like and it was just really comfortable and safe. It’s a beautiful facility, well-appointed and decorated. And you just feel peaceful and comfortable and like you’re going to get help there.

I’m grateful that I had Leichhardt Women’s Health to go to after rehab because it’s a pretty harrowing experience and if I didn’t have people to talk to when I was fresh out of rehab and fledgling in my sobriety, I think I wouldn’t have been able to keep being successful. It was those initial people that supported me along the way before I moved up (to Queensland) that made it all possible, so I’m just grateful that places like the women’s health centre exist for people like me who’ve been victims of domestic violence and who’ve had such difficult circumstances in their lives.

It’s places like that, that really truly do make a difference and really do mean that you can go on.

It’s like that mental health thing, people tell you have a mental health issue and as soon as you say that people automatically attach a negative association with it because historically that’s how it’s been. It’s good to be in a place where you just feel comfortable to talk about those things and deal with them, you know?



Clinics in four community locations thrive thanks to solid partnerships, like the one the centre has with Canterbury City Community Centre (pictured here)

BRONWYN

“People at Leichhardt do have time for you. Time is very important.”

STORY 23: Back in 1978 or so I was training as a Psych nurse at Rozelle Hospital, I was about 19 and I had come from the family home at Wollongong to live in the nurses’ home.

I recall having a number of sessions here before I left the country in 1980 and I was away for seven years. I really didn’t come across anything as good as this (Leichhardt Women’s) but I probably referenced the treatment that I had here in my work in the UK which was a development worker for women’s alcohol services in East London.

I have been a number of times over the years... when I was in quite a terrible psychological state, because in my work I experienced an attempted sexual assault on me and I became a whistleblower about the lack of safety in mental health for staff and I fought really hard to implement some changes. I was then really attacked by the response of the authorities, and I was helped with acupuncture.

Last year I... fell all apart and went into profound depression and pain. I was suicidal and did make a suicide attempt six months ago, but it didn’t work (laughs). I’m still here and I just felt that I really needed that kind of understanding and approach... but what the practitioner has done in that time and what she has prescribed for me is really truly magical. The naturopathic arts/science is very effective and I’m not feeling like killing myself at all. It’s a real success story.

There is a lot of difference here to mainstream health centres and I deliberately chose a GP based on the philosophy (at Leichhardt) and this experience with Leichhardt Women’s is why I come here as well. I was at the top of the state in NSW in the mental health exams. People at Leichhardt do have time for you. Time is very important.

“...but what she has done in that time and what she has prescribed for me is really truly magical. The naturopathic arts/science is very effective.”



Courses in stress management, breathing and meditation provide women with life-long skills which complement the work of the clinics

gloria

STORY 24: I saw a flyer in the library and it was really what I was looking for. I had just moved, a few months before to Australia from Italy, and I really felt like it was an opportunity for me to get out of my isolation, to meet people and to learn.

I did Qi Gong and Nia... particularly the Nia really helped me to start moving again because I had a problem with my knees before and I was almost scared to move. I also joined the guided visualisation course and... I met a woman and she spoke to me about a major car accident she had been in and I found out, through her, about other treatments that were a real life-changer for me. So, maybe that was not so direct, but if it hadn't been for the centre I would not have had a chance to meet this person and find out about that. The price at the centre is incredibly different, it helps you – I couldn't have had a chance to explore these things if they were the common price that you find at an average centre.

Apart from the price and the skills, the great difference is how you feel supported and nurtured. They create this loving and supporting space for you, it's really unique I'd say, or at least really rare. I think it's the people that work there, their attitude. The people make the difference.

At the time (when I first came to the centre) I was really, really, really stressed, it was an amazing help for me in a really difficult time. Coming to Australia, to completely change my life, was very hard. I was leaving all of my family and my friends, losing all of my personal connections. The centre made such a difference.

I made two dear friends through the centre, one of them is really my closest friend I have here so that was really a gift.

“The centre was really welcoming to me, I couldn't imagine a place more welcoming. Also, the economic factor is important. I would not have had access to all those things...”

Coming to the centre helped me go out because I was always at home, I didn't know where to go on my own, so I was sad, going around by myself all the time, feeling so insecure and not knowing the area, struggling with the language, that was massive. The centre helped with that.

The centre was really welcoming to me, I couldn't imagine a place more welcoming. Also, the economic factor is important. I would not have had access to all those things and I wouldn't have had that chance.

The centre gives you an opportunity to expand around your health, both the emotional and physical health. You have the opportunity the find out about new things, things to improve your health that you may not have known about before.

So, access is an important part, but it's really also the approach, of really wanting to help you. You can find this with other doctors, I suppose, but it's rare I would say, this made the experience at Leichhardt very special. When it's about health and feeling better, when you feel nurtured, it's like the placebo effect, you're already triggering that healing mechanism. It's the attitude of the people working here.



The centre prioritises outreach clinics and health education

ANNETTE

“I think these centres are really important for women’s health for their physical and mental well-being.”

STORY 25: I was about 17 or 18, and I was at that age where I wasn’t very responsible with my lifestyle and some things I was doing in my life. I needed to go to a doctor for things like STD tests – where I could go and not be judged negatively to do those things. My doctor and the nurse I saw at the centre were always supportive. I saw the nurse first and then I started seeing the GP, those two women were always helpful and the doctor started to give me information on outside services.

Seeing the naturopath made a difference, because some of the things she recommended I still live with today, health-wise. I started to get more into natural health after that and I take better care of myself. I think most of the western medical practitioners in other places address the symptoms, but not the real cause of a problem, which is not useful.

The atmosphere at Leichhardt Women’s starts with the staff, they are always warm, kind and non-judgemental, and also there’s the way the place is set up – it gives a kind of welcoming atmosphere. You can tell there’s a holistic interest because there are a lot of posters and things up about all kinds of issues that a woman might be experiencing.

It is a women’s centre with women staff and the environment is different. It gives the impression that it’s okay to talk about things you might not normally feel comfortable addressing with another doctor or at another surgery. I have actually had that happen with other doctors, I did feel like I was being judged and that they were not so accepting.

If you want help with things after you might have done something like have sex with someone without a condom when you were too drunk, you don’t want to go to the doctor and be judged, because you are already judging yourself. You already know how stupid you are. I am more in control of myself and my life and my behaviour now, but then, I wasn’t so much.

On a more personal note, Leichhardt Women’s Health Centre was important to me because I did have quite a few problems when I was younger that I felt comfortable addressing at this centre. My mother died when I was a kid and I grew up with males, so I didn’t have any females at home to talk to as a teenager about the things I was experiencing. Because of her death I became very angry with life, I was depressed, and I engaged in a lot of self-destructive behaviour.

“...Leichhardt Women’s was important to me because I did have quite a few problems when I was younger that I felt comfortable addressing at this centre. My mother died when I was a kid and I grew up with males, so I didn’t have any females at home to talk to as a teenager about the things I was experiencing.”

My point is, why would any young female in my position want to go to some uptight, conservative, judgmental doctor to seek help, or a male doctor for that matter, although the two aren’t mutually exclusive? Some of my sexually active friends have never had a pap smear because they are embarrassed! Perhaps they would feel more comfortable at a women’s health care centre. Leichhardt Women’s allowed me to seek help without feeling as though I was being negatively judged, and so I didn’t leave there feeling worse than when I came in, which I cannot say about all doctor’s surgeries. They definitely helped me with my sexual health, and my general health and wellbeing, and I really appreciate that they are open to and offer natural alternatives. They helped me with my psychological health, and they certainly provide you with the resources to do so if you’re willing!

I think these centres are really important for women’s health for their physical and mental well-being. I think that there should be more of these centres.

Bridget

STORY 26: I heard about the centre by word of mouth. In 1999 I came to live in Leichhardt, I heard about it from a friend and I sought the place out, but I don't remember what I did first of all. I had just had neurosurgery at the back of my neck and I'd been told by the neurosurgeon that I just had to live with it, that the pain was just par for the course with neurosurgery. When I first came I felt really ill and really sick, with a lot of pain. After the first treatment at the women's health centre I walked out feeling 60 percent better – that started a series of treatments that went on until I felt I didn't need to come any more. I was quite desperate at the time I started, I'd tried other things and it didn't work and I just couldn't live with the pain.

I've done a number of different things at Leichhardt Women's, I've done courses, acupuncture, massage therapy and naturopathy. I keep coming back to the centre because, after I see someone here or do something here, I leave the centre feeling like I've been cared for. I very much like the therapists, they are very accessible, very welcoming. The centre has provided a range of services and there's always been an option for low income earners. In the time I was recovering from the surgery and unwell, I couldn't work and I wasn't able to earn

“I keep coming back to the centre because, always, after I see someone here or do something here, I leave the centre feeling like I've been cared for... It got me to a place I could work again, and go back to study...”

an income. I wouldn't have been able to afford these treatments. They're usually \$100 a treatment and I wasn't in a position where I could pay that. So, that's where the centre has impacted my life because the treatments went on for about 18 months pretty regularly – and that changed my life... and got me back to a place where I could work again and go back to study – basically, the centre, through that treatment, has actually facilitated me getting back to a degree.

The holistic model of wellbeing is really important to me, I think the western model – where we isolate these pathologies out – is not a good idea, like with my neurosurgeon. And I was like, okay, he's not thinking about ways that I can be assisted, he's not looking at the whole being. Leichhardt Women's looks at your physical health, your emotional health and your spiritual health.

The centre really, really works. That goes with the 40 years this organisation has been around. I know there aren't many of them at all and that some of the services that are offered here are really unique so I'm just very, very fortunate. I know that it came to fruition with women sitting around a kitchen table, to get this service up and running. Often, I think about that and I think about how grateful I am for their tenacious spirit. I really like that

“I know that it (this centre) came to fruition with women sitting around a kitchen table, to get this service up and running. Often, I think about that and I think about how grateful I am for their tenacious spirit.”

it's a women-only centre, I feel very safe here and the services are tailored specifically for women. I always feel a little nervous around men, I always have. I see them as a bit of a potential threat, so I've always sought out female practitioners, even outside of Leichhardt Women's because I don't feel safe or comfortable with male practitioners. I'm just very wary of men, so I come in here and I know that I can relax.

Without Leichhardt Women's I certainly wouldn't have received this holistic health care, working on a problem from all angles, it was all working on a problem in different ways to see what works. I've really benefited by feeling like the women who work here really care about their clients, I have always left here feeling really cared for, like they've given 100 percent to really assist me. I love that the staff hang around, many of the staff have been here for a long time and that's an indication to me that it's a healthy working environment and that's good for the staff and good for the clients too.

JANEY

“They’ve never told me to go, they’ve never said, that’s enough now, off you go!”

STORY 27: I’d always been in the corporate world, then at the age of 46, I had to leave my job under some unfortunate circumstances. Because of stress related to what I went through, I sought some counselling through a 12-step fellowship. This counsellor knew about Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre, that they had facilities that might help me. It took me a while between hearing about it and taking action because I felt so much shame about my situation.

I had to face my addictions, it was mainly alcohol, but it was getting into drugs as well. Because of what had happened in my workplace, I went into a major depression and I came to the centre to seek assistance for that. The GP I saw was wonderful in supporting me with Centrelink, every three months I had to be reassessed and that didn’t help my journey because each time it was coming up to be reassessed I would go right back into panic, I’d be terrified I would have to go back and I couldn’t deal with the workforce and my depression would flare up again. So the GP at Leichhardt wrote and said I needed to be on the Disability Support Pension to get my journey underway. I think I felt that my other GP was in and out, 10 minutes in and out, boom boom! Here, there was an hour, a half hour, there was no pressure and it wasn’t just *where’s the pain?* It was the emotional, the spiritual, it was looking at me as a whole person. And I just thought this is what I need because at the time I just needed to be treated with cotton gloves, basically. The real world out there, the GPs, the medical centres, just don’t cater to that, not then, not now.

I’ve always felt so completely non-judged here. They’re also very professional, they really know their boundaries. You’re a client first and foremost, but you also feel treated as a friend, they make you feel as though you are coming home, it’s a very interesting combination. I didn’t know what my needs were, so this centre was a wonderful advocate, it gave me breathing space, time and support. I tend to yo-yo with the women’s centre these days. I go through times of need and when I do, I get very involved and then I don’t go for a while, but I just know that I don’t get the same service out there. It’s more medical out there, more clinical. And the non-judgmental attitude of the women at the centre is probably the most important thing that I’ve felt. I think I’m okay, but then something happens and *whomp!* and I’ll need the centre again. Maybe that’s just me, thinking that I’ve had enough help from them, that I need to make way for someone else. They’ve never told me to go, they’ve never said, that’s enough now, off you go!

I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t come to Leichhardt Women’s. I was suicidal when I first came. God, I just wish there was more funding for these services so their services could be better recognised. I just can’t say enough good things about this centre. It’s been such a nurturing place. I get emotional just thinking about my journey. Even at my age, I have learned these profound lessons. I’m now 60 and I’m still constantly learning and the women’s health centre makes me feel okay around that because there’s such a wide age group of women here. I don’t have that sense that at a certain age you should be over it by now.

They have provided me with so many tools and whether I’ve taken the tools up is up to me, but the tools are there, they’ve offered them and I have never had that and under the one roof, amazing, amazing.

“I’ve always felt so completely non-judged here. They’re also very professional, they really know their boundaries. You’re a client first and foremost, but you also feel treated as a friend, they make you feel as though you are coming home.”

WEATHER

“The centre has been just like a big supportive family.”



STORY 28: My daughter was born with lots of complications and had to have numerous operations. I had two boys prior to that with no problems, so it was a shock to the system. I was a single parent at the time and I was overwhelmed, the doctor thought it would be useful for me to come here.

Initially, I saw the naturopath and over the years they advised me on different herbs and vitamins that helped a lot but, the main thing that really helped me at the centre was the self-esteem course. It was perfect. Because my daughter was born with so many problems, it had sent me into a deep depression. I wanted to kill myself at that stage, so that course was the big turn-around. It was the major turning point for me. Since then, over the years, I've done various courses they've run.

The centre has been just like a big supportive family. I know that I can walk in here and I know everybody. I love that. It is just so lovely, when we are in the group and have a morning tea break and we sit around out the back, all that sort of thing. After being depressed, that first self-esteem course changed my mood and got me back to positive thinking, back to the way I used to be. I learned how to cope, that was the main thing, but also, the supportive environment and knowing there was somewhere to go helped as well. Back then, they were very dark days I'm now 100 percent better. The Centre has probably changed my life in lots of ways, not just the emotional side, knowing that I can come and get what I need just helps to keep me going, there are things that a doctor just can't do. It's a friendly environment and it's been like a second home. I have got to know the staff.

They saw my daughter grow up because she used to come in. I could bring her and she was safe, she would play with the toys while I had my appointments. It was a complete home environment and I felt supported.

In every way the centre is holistic. I have had acupuncture, the support of the naturopath and the groups, and now I'm in a position where I am helping other people, friends of mine or people that I know in difficult situations. I'm giving them the newsletter, telling them about the courses and helping them find out about the centre too. The courses are just so informative and also, when you are down and depressed and you want to do all these things but don't have the funds, it's affordable. You can make a donation. Even now I always say that when I win the lottery I'm going to donate to the Leichhardt Women's Health Centre. It changed my life a lot.

I can't praise the Centre enough. It brings tears to my eyes and I get emotional when I remember how bad I was, and how even just walking up those front stairs, you get a feeling that you are coming home, coming home and saying hello to all the people you know.

“I can't praise the Centre enough. It brings tears to my eyes and I get emotional when I remember how bad I was, and how even just walking up those front stairs, you get a feeling that you are coming home...”

rosemary

“Women’s health centres cannot be replaced by anything else. There is nothing like them. I think sometimes I go to the GP’s that it’s like going to the supermarket.”

STORY 29: The first time I came to Leichhardt Women’s was 20 years ago. A neighbour told me about it. I was by myself and I was moving to Sydney and I had just badly injured my back. I was suffering a disability and I knew I needed support. I had run round to a lot of other places and I thought the centre would be more nurturing.

I came about ten years ago and then five years ago and now. I remember when I came five years ago I felt like a failure. I was saying to myself, I can’t believe you still need support. I can’t believe that you’re back here again getting support. I can’t believe you’re not better than this now, but then I realised that I had done more and more work on myself. I have addiction and mental health issues in my family and so self-care is going to be a lifetime project. It is not a failure to come back, it is actually the right thing to do. Now I see that because I have done a lot of counselling.

Women’s health centres cannot be replaced by anything else. There is nothing like them. I think sometimes when I go to the GP it’s like going to the supermarket. It seems so obvious, I don’t know how to explain it, there’s nothing that replaces them. And there is nothing that covers those issues, that is a nurturing place or that has the different courses. Coming to places like Leichhardt Women’s and doing the courses made me think differently about my own self-care. I don’t know that I want to say it kept me alive because I don’t think that I wanted to take my life, just that my life was extremely painful from many, many times of dealing with lots and lots of crises.

I used the acupuncture at the centre for help to give up smoking and I don’t know whether I believe or not, but it seems to have been crucial. I came here and kind of wanted a menopause check and said I wanted to give up smoking and, at once, I was offered other services. I was offered physio for my back injury, acupuncture and

massage and I was feeling supported. I had just had a family visit which brought up a lot of stuff in my family because we were not seeing each other and there was lots of denial and I needed help. I felt very low and it would be hard for me to afford all of it, but here I could do it.



The centre’s opening, International Women’s Day 1974



“I don’t know how it’s funded, but it seems to be quite independent and alternative and for \$5 or \$10, it’s amazing, I couldn’t have had the same sort of service anywhere else.”

STORY 30: I’m 42 now and I had heard about Leichhardt Women’s Health Centre on the scene for quite a long time. A couple of years ago, maybe about 2012, I was trying to give up smoking and I went to the drug and alcohol people at another place and it just didn’t work for me. But up on the noticeboard, there were some advertisements for groups and services at the Leichhardt Women’s Centre... so I started coming here for counselling about four months ago. I can hardly believe that for \$5 or less, depending on what you can afford – it is such a good service.

I got support around quitting smoking, but I can talk about other things as well. Because I have a mental health issue, I get suspicious of people really easily. I get stressed easily, and when I come here I don’t feel stressed, the heater is on and I can relax, the place is spick and span and the room is beautiful and the whole building has a sense of peace and there’s just a good aura about the place. I do remember coming to a sleep workshop here as well. I found that really, really helpful.

This is such an establishment, a beacon of the community. Forty years is amazing, I was only two years old when this started up! I think they’re really genuine here, people here have a good attitude. I don’t know how it’s funded, but it seems to be quite independent and alternative and for \$5 or \$10, it’s amazing, I couldn’t have had the same sort of service anywhere else. I wish I could give more. One day I’ll have a proper job – I feel like I’m just on the cusp of finding a job – and I’ll be able to contribute more. I don’t know how they do it, or how they survive, but they should just keep doing it because it’s fantastic.



NSW Health Minister, the Hon Jillian Skinner, MP with Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre Board of Directors and some of the centre’s closest clinical partners

SOPHIE

“For me, access to these services, at a price I could afford at that time, was critical. I think I could go as far as to say that I was able to stay in the rehab because of the Centre...”

STORY 31: I was in a long-term women’s rehab in Glebe called Kathleen York House, it was a six month program – my issues were largely due to co-dependency and stuff like that – and I was incredibly anxious. I had post-traumatic stress and I was on antidepressants. We were all on unemployment benefits from which we’d make a contribution to the rehab each week, so there wasn’t a lot of spare change. They recommended that we come to Leichhardt Women’s for low cost treatments. I think someone had recommended acupuncture and that was the first thing I did. I probably did about three months of acupuncture quite consistently and it was fantastic. Being in the rehab was quite stressful, we were doing a lot of therapy and breaking delusions so to go to the women’s centre was like having the most divine sanctuary. The whole philosophy of the place permeated the atmosphere. I just thought it was an amazing gift to the community. I couldn’t believe they were willing to just allow people to pay what they could afford and that they had the idea that everybody should be able to receive those kinds of services.

I wasn’t earning any money and I felt nurtured by being able to come to the centre. It was a real treat. It felt like there were a lot of things that were about getting and having a life, a really healthy life and enjoying that. Being in rehab is about being in recovery. You’re abstaining from your substance of choice so there’s that deactivation when you stop using, but then there’s an activation, where you start to think about what is actually good for you and your recovery. There was one woman from Leichhardt Women’s who would come to the rehab with a kind of dance therapy thing and it was really, really good, because we were all very out

of our bodies, we’d all been neglecting our bodies so much and she came in like this complete goddess lady teaching us all to loosen up and to have some fun. Then there was the acupuncturist and she is just the most amazing person. She did the acupuncture and then, just sort of quietly, she said you should come to meditation and I had done some meditation before, but since her meditation class I’ve been practising every day, I actually practice twice a day! I do a yoga practice consistently now too, so there are things that have now become part of my life that I’d just never been able to commit to properly before.

There’s a knowing wisdom in the women at Leichhardt Women’s, it’s like they see you before you see yourself. I think it comes in part from age and experience and I think there’s an enormous longevity in the women here and they’re committed to their practice, whatever their respective practice is, but they’re also committed to the ethos of the place. It’s unique. I’ve never come across a place with that particular ethos. It’s so fair. It’s socially fair, economically fair, and that inspires you. When something is offered for not much, it actually inspires you to want to give back, there’s a feeling of what can I do to help them?

It’s been two years now that I’ve been doing this rehab, not obviously as an in-patient, but I’m almost finished now, so it’s kind of an interesting time to be reflecting back. I’m no longer on antidepressants, I have a yoga and meditation practice and I’m so much calmer in myself. I think, probably, I’m more courageous in my life and in getting on with it. Also, I’ve lost weight and I’m healthier. I just generally feel more at ease.

There’s an invisible thing that happens at Leichhardt Women’s. They take you on holistically, but in a very kind of detached way. It’s up to you to kind of move, but they teach you, it’s an empowerment process but it’s subtle. They are like old aunties or something, just kind of giving you a bit of a push. They’ve had a huge impact on me. My success in recovery has been a convergence of many elements for me. The rehab was amazing as well, but what the women’s centre gave me was a sanctuary outside of that, outside of the intensity and rigours of basically being in psychotherapy nearly every day. I think the centre and the people here, just by who they are and what they do and how they are, how their philosophy is matched by their actions, has absolutely enhanced the process for me.

You go to a regular GP when you need a prescription, there are GPs on a timeframe and its tick tick tick and you just get shunted through. You’d never go there for the help I needed. They actually know you here, they know your name, they know you because you’ve talked to them. You feel seen, which is very powerful.

We certainly should have more of these women’s health centres. I’d like to imagine centres like this one could be in every major council area. That would be amazing. This is the way people avoid getting really sick, by keeping well. For me, access to these services, at a price I could afford at the time, was critical. I think I could go as far as to say that I was able to stay in the rehab because of the centre, I would go that far. It kept me in a calm enough state to be able to continue persevering. So that’s massive really. There are other women at the rehab as well who benefited enormously.

AMIT

STORY 32: I went for an STI check at my regular doctor and I had a bad experience. So I asked around my friends and they recommended that I come here. Here, I was treated with respect and the doctor treated me with respect and didn't make assumptions about me. I was told that Leichhardt Women's is friendly to all sexual orientations and that it was a non-judgemental environment, I think that maybe they're just more in touch with what's going on. The (mainstream) GP that I went to was a five minute consultation. Here, the doctor cared about who I was, she asked about me and it was just more comfortable.

I'm always recommending this centre, for things people want help with if it's related to gender or sex, because it's welcoming. I like that there's an option to donate, my friends and I don't have much money and it can be quite scary going to get any medical help. It's a lot less stressful to come here.

“I like that there is an option to donate, my friends and I don't have much money and it can be quite scary going to get any medical help. It's a lot less stressful to come here.”

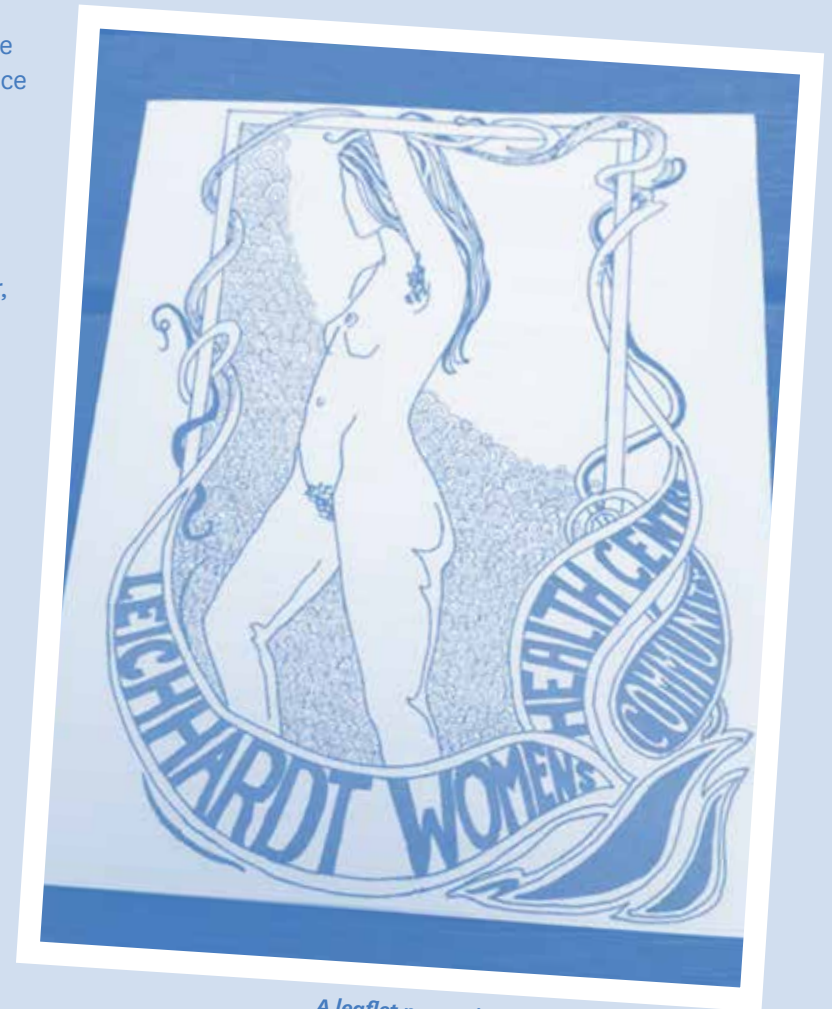
“I find it more comfortable in the women-only environment. I feel more respected, like everyone is equal.”

I find it more comfortable in the women-only environment. I feel more respected, like everyone is equal. I didn't like my mainstream GP experience out there, that GP was female, but maybe she just wasn't educated in a lot of areas. When she rolled her eyes at me just because I asked her what it was, this STI I supposedly had, that was just crazy, that didn't make me feel good at all. And then she just sent me out, two minutes later, really confused, so confused!

I got my original results back and it was all negative and then she acted like it was my fault, when I went in to get the results from her she said that it was my fault that she was wrong because in her medical experience she's always been right, that's what she said!

I just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. So maybe it was just the one doctor, but it really pushed me to want to come to Leichhardt Women's. I didn't feel very safe speaking to the women at reception there about my experience either, whereas here I feel much better. There are lots of resources here, but in regular doctors you wouldn't have that. When you walk in here, it feels caring, I feel cared for.

I think it's great that this place has been around for 40 years, I hope it's around for another 40 years.



A leaflet promoting the centre from the 1970's

Susanna

STORY 33: A friend of mine, many, many years ago was coming to Leichhardt Women's, she's eighty-five now, but she recommended it to me. I am Italian and I was new to Australia and didn't know much about places to go and as a woman, I thought it would be much more specific.

I was looking for a doctor because my son was born a few months before and I'd had a very hard birth with him and I also had a problem with back pain. I had very good help from the doctor at Leichhardt Women's. If it was not for this centre in this time of difficulty, it would have been very hard for me. It was very special. This doctor understood me as a woman and she had a very gentle approach about how I could manage my back pain. It was something I will never regret.

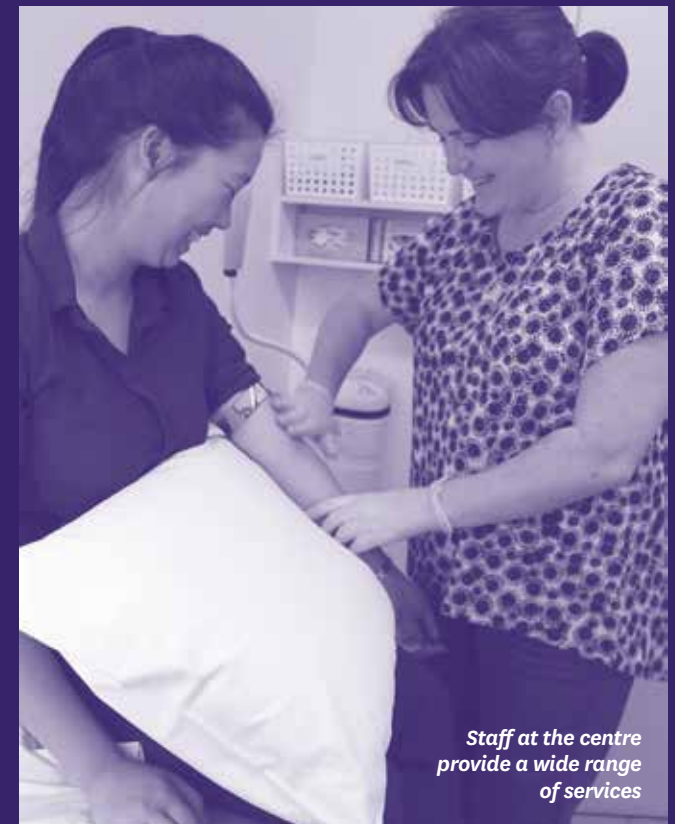
I was separated from my husband. We got married and when the baby was six months old, he left. It was very hard, especially with a new baby and with lots of expenses because I discovered later that it was very complicated to get citizenship. It was also very expensive to live here as a single mother. The child is born and I didn't think that my marriage would end up like this. I think I was forced to make connections.

Then I discovered the Leichhardt Women's Centre and they give me comfort. I could always find people here... after a big crisis the women's centre was the place I could find guidance and understanding. The centre was most important. I see my doctor at the centre and I have also done acupuncture, naturopathy, massage and also counselling.

“When I came to Australia I was from another country, it was outstanding that the people were understanding and embracing... they give me comfort. I could always find people here...after a big crisis the women's centre was the place I could find guidance and understanding.”

Because my problem with my life was back pain and after the birth of my son it was difficult because I couldn't move my leg, so I had to understand how I could walk. The centre was a huge support without doubt, it is a place where you are safe and if you need support economically too. Any people, any women, from different situations can come and it is a huge help.

It helped me with my son, because this little family could walk with dignity now. There was a sense of privacy and family and support, I feel comfortable. I don't say that other places are bad, I have to choose another place for my son because he is a boy, but always I come back here. I find myself here. It is very, very special. I think what they are doing is unique. You cannot find this in another place. It's the very part of Australia that we are missing, from my point of view. When I came to Australia I was from another country, the centre was outstanding in that the people were understanding and embracing. It is a place where you can find yourself without being judged. The people at Leichhardt Women's Health Centre are not for the economic, but for the human side. They are nurturing, this is part of the women. To find this opportunity for good health is just beautiful.



Staff at the centre provide a wide range of services



“With the Vietnamese women’s group and other services provided through the centre, I feel confident, like I can talk about anything.”

STORY 34: The first time I came to Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre, to the centre itself, in 2008, but I had been involved in the Vietnamese women’s group for many years before that. I knew about the health centre and all the services they have for women through that and I knew I could have a pap smear with a woman doctor there. I felt comfortable, it’s even in the name, Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre, which made me comfortable because I knew it was reserved just for women. I thought first of all that I’d just try it out, just to see if the Centre was good, if it was welcoming. The first time I came, I found it was very welcoming and so I was happy to come back after that.

I had past trauma, because I had come to Australia to escape from the civil war in Vietnam. I had a broken family as well. I was very traumatised and I had depression and when I found out about the group for Vietnamese women I started attending.

“I feel more confident to say something that I can’t say with other services outside because it’s all women. Outside doctors, the Vietnamese doctors, are all male and so it’s really hard to say some things.”

Through the group and the services at Leichhardt I have experienced a lot of improvement with my physical health and with emotional health especially. When I first joined the group, I didn’t know about depression, but I was very low. I didn’t know I had depression, it wasn’t until it was mentioned in the group – where it was explained how it was possible to have these symptoms as a result of the trauma I’d experienced and the pressure and difficulty of migrating to Australia – that I understood. But, with the help of the friends I had made in the group, in the neighbourhood and from the Centre I have improved. I am much more positive. I have also started going to the Buddhist temple to look after my spiritual health.

Through the support from within the groups, the friendships and the health and wellbeing education and the activities, I have not had to take any medication for my depression.

I made a lot of connections through the groups. I have a friend that I met in the group and now we go out and volunteer in the community and I just feel much more confident and capable now. I have taken yoga classes and meditation and my spirit feels stronger now, I feel in harmony with everyone in society. It has been good for my health and wellbeing.

With the Vietnamese women’s group and other services provided through the centre, I feel confident, like I can talk about anything. I feel more comfortable than I do at another service outside of here – at a normal doctor and other services. I feel that I can disclose personal problems, and with the doctors or nurses at the women’s centre, I feel more confident to say something that I can’t say with other services outside because it’s all women. Outside doctors, the Vietnamese doctors, are all male, so it’s really hard to say some things.

It has made such a difference to my life. We often have to use our own money to maintain the group and we would love to see some funding for these kinds of groups and services. Because when we have these groups, we ... don’t get sick and need to rely on the government, on the health system – so, a little government money could be spent on this type of holistic, wellbeing and health promoting community efforts, it makes financial sense!

MS PHAM

“When I have been to another Centre because of my other language and not good English the people did not welcome me. At Leichhardt Women’s the staff are quite different – even though they know I can’t speak English, they welcome me and they are very nice.”

STORY 35: About five years ago I found out about Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre from joining a group at Anglicare which was run by women from Leichhardt Women’s.

I have been a victim of domestic violence for a long time and I felt very lost and hopeless. I have no relatives in Australia and since I have joined the group I got assistance from the facilitator and group members and I am more confident and I have better self-esteem. My life is good now compared with before.

Before I came to Leichhardt Women’s I had a problem with my arm and it was very painful but after I came here for some sessions of acupuncture it feels very good now. The pain has left and I feel very happy with my health. I also had headaches before and I came here and had acupuncture for my head. I go to the doctor less than I did before and that is really good.

The environment and staff here compared to another place is quite different. The staff here are very enthusiastic and very helpful, very friendly and welcome me every time I come here, I like the practitioners because they are so good and very gentle. Sometimes in the Centre they have some food and because they know my situation, they’ll give me food and I appreciate this very much.

When I have been to another centre because of my other language and not good English the people did not welcome me. At Leichhardt Women’s the staff are quite different – even though they know I can’t speak English, they welcome me and they are very nice.

I came as a domestic violence victim. I felt I didn’t know where to escape, but since I have joined my children also think I have changed emotionally and physically. My children don’t need to go to see the doctor so much because I now know how I can look after them. As a single mother with four children, I now know how to reduce stress. Leichhardt Women’s has helped me so much.



The centre’s 2003 mural project brought young women in refuges and youth groups together to explore depression, anxiety and healthy relationships

louisa

STORY 36: I came across the women's centre, for the very first time around 30 years ago. Back then I was seeing a counsellor for some sex therapy things. I felt much more comfortable discussing those intimate details with a woman, particularly because it was from my perspective that I needed the information.

Around three and a half years ago, I went through a particularly bad phase. I suffer from what turns out to be Bipolar Type Two depression, but I didn't know that. I wasn't diagnosed at that time. I was having several bouts of depression and I'd just get over one and then descend again and through one particular crisis phase, I ended up becoming homeless.

I was doing a job where I had created a whole travelling exhibition for the company I was working for. I gave up the place I was living in because I was supposed to be going on the road with the exhibition for six months.... then just a couple of days before Christmas, they called a meeting with me and said we don't think you're the right person for the job. I had given up everything so I just totally crashed. I became suicidal. I was living in my car. My psychotherapist directed me to B Miles and they settled me into an apartment with a group of other women.

Throughout that time, I was coming to Leichhardt Women's for different treatments. I was encouraged to come to courses for that group environment because I wasn't seeing my friends and I just wasn't coping in general, it helped just to have some socialisation. It was important to me, particularly in that time, that the centre is women-only.

“You could just stay until you were ready to go, you didn't feel ushered out or rushed the way you would in a mainstream clinic. You felt welcome to remain if you weren't feeling ready to face the world.”

It wasn't so much that I need to be safe from men, it was just that I was in such a fragile state that it helped to be in that more motherly environment, to have the support of women. It was more sisterly, I suppose. The practitioners were very nurturing, there was kind of a counselling process there as the added bonus of the sessions, to be downloading as well. I'd make myself a cup of tea, go to the toilet and read some of the books while I waited. You could just stay until you were ready to go, you didn't feel ushered out or rushed the way you would in a mainstream clinic. You felt welcome to remain if you weren't feeling ready to face the world, it was a nurturing environment to gather yourself and get ready to face the world out there.

My health has massively improved from my contact with Leichhardt Women's, the acupuncture pretty well resolved a respiratory problem I'd had since I was a child along with the naturopathy, the herbs and vitamins, gave me the building blocks to keep going. It has had a huge impact.

I've come quite a long way and now I have a good housing situation, which has been very beneficial and I'm physically much better too. I was in crisis. I don't know what I would have done without the support of this centre and practitioners to help me through that crisis.



Clients talk about the skills coupled with feeling respected

Libby

“A lot of us get caught up in this transgender thing and that’s as far as we ever go, but there are some of us that move beyond that, we move into womanhood.”

STORY 37: I first came into contact with Leichhardt Women’s through my case worker, because I’d only recently moved to Sydney and they are trying to get me involved in community activities and it was my request that I become involved in activities specifically for women. A lot of the activities I get involved in are usually for both genders, but as part of my transition I feel it’s very important that I access services particularly for women.

I’ve moved from my past into my female personality and I think that it’s very important that I do that, because it’s a journey that I’m on and I learn a lot on this journey and I learn a lot of that from other women around me. The groups at Leichhardt Women’s have allowed me to interact with women and I’ve been made to feel very accepted and it’s safe. It’s a safe environment and I’ve never really felt threatened and even though I might have my own feelings about my gender, I’ve been made to feel part of the groups and quite validated.

I’ve been in and out of homelessness for the past five or six years and I had become stable in the Mountains, but then I was offered some permanent accommodation in Sydney so I took the opportunity up. But I have felt quite isolated since moving into Sydney probably more so than in the Mountains. I think when I came to Sydney I had a lot of expectations. I thought I’d fit in really well and blend in, which I do, but I’m not really connected. So with the groups at the centre I feel connected. I feel like I’m having some kind of more meaningful relationship with people even if it’s just for the period that the group runs.

I was a bit nervous to come that first time because being transgender you’re not really sure what people’s reactions will be. I am aware that there are some hardline feminists who don’t see transgender as being real and while that is changing, to tell you honestly, I didn’t really know what to expect. I spoke to the management and they said they did accept transgender people to come along here. I found that it was good and I think it’s boosted my confidence.

A lot of us get caught up in this transgender thing and that’s as far as we ever go, but there are some of us that move beyond that, we move into womanhood. I think that’s an important step for me, it’s a goal for me to keep going that way. Because so many people, they move into the transgender community and that’s it. I have to remind myself why I commenced this journey – it was to become the woman I’ve always believed that I was. I try not to bring it up in the groups, I try not to let my gender issue be an issue in the group. I just come along and I feel like I behave like any of the other women in the group. No-one has ever made any comments and nobody has questioned me. No-one’s asked what area of transition I’m up to, that’s never happened here, which I think is amazing. I transitioned at the age of 46 after raising three children, the younger ones of us, when they transition early, can transition very well.

I think a big problem for a lot transgendered people is isolation, particularly those of us who’ve transitioned later in life. I’m hoping that with the Leichhardt Women’s Centre maybe others can move on, beyond isolation, too. I’ve already got one friend who is interested in coming along.

The courses are affordable and you can put money down in instalments, it’s very flexible and that makes it accessible.

The centre has helped my wellbeing because it’s helped reduce my isolation, I really look forward to coming along. I’m very happy. I really feel part of the Leichhardt Women’s Centre. It’s really rewarding to feel like you’re a part of something.

“I have to remind myself why I commenced this journey, it was to become the woman I’ve always believed that I was. No one has ever made any comments and nobody has questioned me. No one’s asked what area of transition I’m up to, that’s never happened here, which I think is amazing.”

corinne

“I really feel the difference between myself now and myself before I started out with Leichhardt Women’s.”

STORY 38: I first heard about the centre about five years ago when I was working part time at a community centre. I saw a flyer on the board there for meditation which is my type of thing. I began with the night classes and after the very first class I said to myself, this is just fantastic. I think it was an eight or 13 week course and I absolutely loved it.

That first time, I’d had a lot of stress in my life, in the family, because my brother had an accident. I just wasn’t finding things as easy as I could have. I more recently did the breathing course and I cannot believe the benefit. I’m telling people about it all the time. It improved my quality of sleep within a week and a half of practising. My mind became clearer and even physical pain is different in my body as it just seemed to dissipate. The pain was disappearing gradually, I’d continue on with the breathing and just come to a point where I’d realise I didn’t have the pain anymore. I began to feel I had lot more energy too.

A big thing that was happening for me, while I was taking that course was that I was studying. I was trying to reach the end of my study, to become qualified in my course and I was doing long days of continual study, hours and hours of it. I would find connection between the exercises I was practicing from the course and my ability to concentrate for those long periods. It was incredible.

I found the centre very welcoming the first time I came. The notice board and flyers at the entrance all caught my attention. I had known where and what the centre was, but I hadn’t really known what all the services they were offering were. So many other centres just weren’t offering that broad range of services Leichhardt Women’s was offering. Everyone was really friendly and I got to know the practitioners. You could have a chat, relax, I felt that it was a supportive, relaxed environment.

Other health and community centres can be a bit more, right, what do you need? And then, thank you very much and you’re out the door again. Not to say everywhere is like that, but I feel that Leichhardt Women’s is friendlier and very welcoming. You can meet other people and it’s a very, very supportive place.

I finished my study and now I’m qualified. People might think there’s a lot involved in allowing me to achieve that, but I know I attribute it, and I always will attribute it, to Leichhardt Women’s. I experienced levels of stress throughout that intense study period and I found techniques and exercises I had learned throughout the course really helped.

I know that some classes of this nature, like meditation and other holistic healthcare courses are often very, very expensive around Sydney and the thing to mention is that the low cost of this class is in no way, shape or form linked to the quality of the course.

The courses I’ve done at Leichhardt Women’s are among the best courses I’ve done anywhere. The overall experience has been the best quality, in all respects, ten out of ten. I feel so strongly about the results I’ve had, about the way I felt after attending the centre, that I keep telling people to encourage others with whatever they might want help with.

I do the breathing and the meditation every day now. I really feel the difference between myself now and myself before I started out with Leichhardt Women’s. I sleep better and I feel better in my mind overall. I’m glad to have been involved in the centre, it’s been the most wonderful experience.

“...the thing to mention is that the low cost of this class is in no way, shape or form linked to the quality of the course. The courses I’ve done at Leichhardt Women’s are among the best courses I’ve done anywhere. The overall experience has been the best quality, in all respects, ten out of ten.”

KATRINA

STORY 39: I have chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia – both conditions that for me are linked to trauma and child sexual abuse. I’ve got those on top of the fact I have PTSD, long-term PTSD. I was living in a lot of fear, in a heightened state of awareness, and my body was always tense and it didn’t know how to relax. I think that just pushed my body over the limit.

My family don’t really know about what had happened to me in my childhood. The trauma that I went through was an ongoing thing, I was threatened not to say anything, so I basically grew up in a lot of terror and fear. I don’t like being around dominant people... so when my conditions started hitting me, it affected my entire life. I worked in a travel agency, but I found I couldn’t process the information properly. With study as well, I couldn’t memorise information properly, I couldn’t focus, I had slurring of words and mind blanks, so study was not an option.

I had to run away from home because the environment was becoming way too toxic for me, but I didn’t know where to go. I started couch surfing. I became more vulnerable with my conditions and I found that a lot of male ‘friends’ would take advantage of me. I was seeing a social worker at the time and she saw that I had symptoms of childhood sexual abuse and referred me to Stepping Out, and that really changed my life.

Stepping Out is for women only and because they have a holistic program, they help teach you how the brain works and your physical, your emotional wellbeing and you feel really supported.

“The healing and support that I have received has changed my entire life around and I want to be able to provide that for other people.... I think these women-only services, like Stepping Out and Leichhardt Women’s are awesome and life changing.”

We have weekly group therapy and I love going to that because I’m getting a lot of information, a lot of health and well-being stuff out of it. If Stepping Out had any males, I would never have gone. When you’ve been through really traumatic experiences, you have all these triggers, all these flashbacks and nightmares within you, held within your body.

In order for you to have proper healing at any place whatsoever you need to feel safe. That’s the utmost important thing that you need to feel before you can relax and accept any healing. If there aren’t women-only places where females actually can feel safe, they wouldn’t even bother going for healing it would just be a downward spiral for them... how can a male provide a service for a female when they themselves can be a trigger for the female?

I only completed one year of uni – I was 19 when I got sick. I’d like to get back to my studies, but now I’d like to study education and psychology, I’d eventually like to study case management as well.

In future, I want to do what these women have provided for me, because I can see how crucial it is. I want to learn about education and child psychology because I know the impact that families and upbringing can have on children, it can impact them for the rest of their life. The healing and support that I have received has changed my entire life around and I want to be able to provide that for other people....I think these women-only services, like Stepping Out and Leichhardt Women’s are awesome and life changing.

I previously never accessed this type of healthcare because I couldn’t afford it. The women-only aspect means you feel you’re in a comfortable, safe environment. I also really like the tea service. You can go and make yourself a cup of tea and they make you feel really welcome and it feels like a warm, tight and cosy place to be in.

I didn’t choose to be abused as a child, I didn’t choose to get my medical conditions as a result. I didn’t have any say in the things my life has done to me, but places such as Stepping Out and Leichhardt Women’s have changed my life. They have opened the door. They have shown me the light at the end of the tunnel – where for me there was just darkness for a really long time. I can finally see a really bright light for me, in the future.

LINDA

“Leichhardt Women’s is helping generations of women, which is magic.”

STORY 40: Growing up I was intelligent and high-achieving with schoolwork and sports, but I was really self-conscious and quite awkward socially. In high school I began to worry a lot and became depressed. When I was 16 I discovered that taking drugs really helped me to forget about my problems and deal with overwhelming feelings, but once I started I couldn’t stop, no matter how hard I tried. I struggled with being addicted to marijuana and many other drugs and, eventually I gave up trying to stop, I thought I had to always use drugs in order to cope with life.

In 2004 after using for six years, I was admitted into a hospital for drug-related issues. By this time I was homeless and all of the people I was associating with used drugs. In the hospital I was forced by the environment to be abstinent from all drugs including alcohol, but I knew that when it was time to leave, if I was to enter the community directly, I would revert to my old coping behaviours. I had already seen people leave hospital and die from taking drugs again. I knew I only had a limited window of opportunity to get and stay clean. I needed to learn how to live life in the community while being sober.

“Each staff member is highly skilled and professional, and all the services complement each other... The women that work there are very, very special to me and I’m forever grateful for what they’ve given me and what they’ve done for me. I definitely would not be in the place that I’m in now if it wasn’t for them.”

I heard about a women’s rehabilitation program, Detour House, from a nurse in the hospital. I used the hospital phone to phone them and thankfully, after a week, a space came up and Detour House took me in.

I was on the right track with my recovery, but wasn’t quite stable and strong yet. Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre formed a critical part of this recovery process. It provided a stable base upon which I could continue building my life. I had heard about Leichhardt Women’s through my good friend Julie. She would come to the rehab to visit me and she would talk about this great place that was a really good resource for women, that was really supportive and nurturing and had lots of good services that would be able to help me. The first services I used were the assertiveness courses and acupuncture for a shoulder injury.

As I started to piece my life together, the services that I used at the women’s centre helped. I went back to uni, at first part time and then full time... and the centre helped me stay on track and keep going with my studies.

The counsellor there also helped me to continue to build the personal skills and emotional toolkit that I needed to function in the world. That was absolutely critical because I had no knowledge of how to interact with other people or how to live my life. Leichhardt Women’s gave me the opportunity to develop those skills in a warm and welcoming environment. I was provided a lot of support through all of the different challenges I faced in doing things for the first time clean.

The staff members at Leichhardt were always hugely respectful and nurturing of women and their choices. This had a very large impact on me, even just sitting in reception. Being there with those women and the atmosphere was very empowering, the way that people treated you with so much respect. Leichhardt Women’s remains a totally non-judgemental place while offering some really critical services.

The women-only component gives the centre the focus that allows it to be excellent at what it does. Each staff member is highly skilled and professional and all the services complement each other. My experience at the centre has been hugely positive, the services and the tools I have gained through the centre have enabled me to rebuild my life. I’ve never had such an experience elsewhere, the holistic treatment of the individual and the whole philosophy behind the centre’s work.

The way staff treat the individual with the utmost respect and consideration makes me think that it must be a component of their training or their philosophy or something the staff agree to honour. At the end of the day, there are just absolutely beautiful people working there. The women that work there are very, very special to me and I'm forever grateful for what they've given me and what they've done for me. I definitely would not be in the place that I'm in now if it wasn't for them.

I continued on my journey of recovery. I completed two degrees at university, learned how to ride a motorbike and bought an apartment after working for three years. I am having a successful career, having worked my way up in my field of choice, and I now work in a management position in financial services. The tools and skills I learnt at Detour House along with the support and care at Leichhardt Women's have helped me stay off drugs and build a full, balanced and interesting life.

Leichhardt Women's is helping generations of women, which is magic.



Taking the centre into the community, and this time meeting up with the centre's first GP, Dr Stefania Siedlecky – Yabun 2014

Contact details

Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre Inc.

www.lwchc.org.au

T: (02) 9560 3011

NSW Women Partners of Bisexual Men Service

www.womenpartners.org.au

T: 1800 787 887 (02) 9560 3011

Some women's stories refer to other services they were using while they were receiving health care from Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre. Leichhardt Women's is proud to work closely with these services within an integrated network of women's and other services. These are the main services mentioned:

Stepping Out Housing Program

www.stepsouting.org.au

T: (02) 9550 9398

Detour House

www.detourhouse.com.au

T: (02) 9660 4137

B Miles

www.bmiles.org.au

T: (02) 9360 4881

Other helpful contacts:

Women's Health NSW

This website lists the contact details for women's health centres in other NSW communities.

www.whnsw.asn.au

T: (02) 9560 0866

Family Planning NSW Talkline

Reproductive and sexual health information and referral.

www.whnsw.asn.au

T: (02) 9560 0866

Domestic Violence Line

T: 1800 656 463

TTY: 1800 671 442

1800 RESPECT

www.1800respect.org.au

T: 1800 737 732

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

T: 13 11 14

Beyond Blue

www.beyondblue.org.au

T: 1300 22 4636

Butterfly Foundation

www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au


T: 1800 33 4673



Top: the centre's 40th Anniversary and International Women's Day 2014, guest speaker NSW Governor Her Excellency Professor The Honourable Dame Marie Bashir AD CVO

Above: sampling the 40th Anniversary cake





Cutting the cake at the centre's 40th Anniversary and International Women's Day celebrations with Leichhardt Council. Pictured from left are Councillor Linda Kelly, NSW Governor Her Excellency Professor The Honourable Dame Marie Bashir AD CVO, the centre's manager Roxanne McMurray and the centre's Chairperson Lyn Lormer.

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