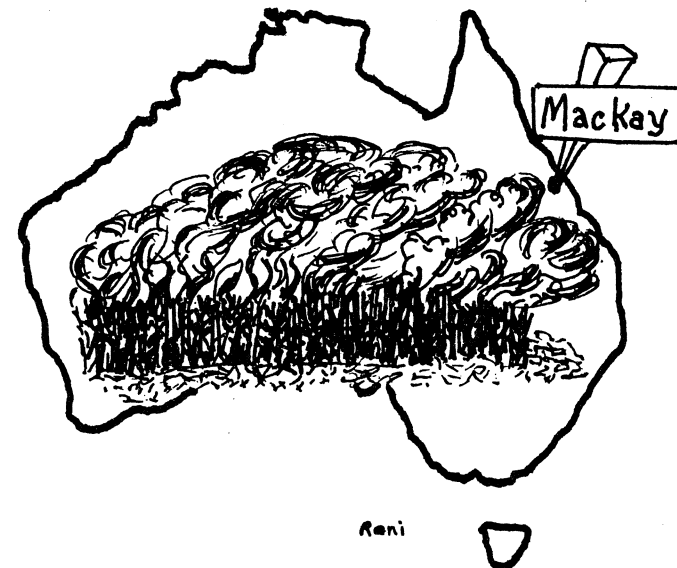


Making Our Place In The Sun

*Let the canefields burn, Let the flames rise,
Let the politicians and the bankers in the city
Look up in wonder at the glow in the skies,
Let the canefields burn . . .*

Graeme Connors
Let the Canefields Burn



My first stop was Mackay: Mackay is a provincial city north of Brisbane, a sixteen hour train-run on the *Queenslander*. The vistas of canefields as the *Queenslander* moved north brought to mind Connors' music for Mackay is his home town. The message of social justice in *Let the Canefields Burn* felt very present. Mackay is a prosperous city, the site of vigorous community development workers' action over the past quarter of a century. Here is their story.

CARMEL DAVESON

It was 1972. The Whitlam Labor Government had just settled in with a slate of social justice policies. In the Queensland coastal city of Mackay, nestled among canefields on three sides, folks were hopeful of a new impetus in expanding the social resources of their community. Carmel Daveson was the new kid on the block.

The time and place were right for the advent of Carmel's visionary crusade for establishing a more democratic process in the provision of human services. Carmel is an idealist, a humanitarian in the most ecumenical sense. After all, why should everyone not have access to the abundant resources available for a richer lifestyle? Carmel regards her own early years as eminently satisfying, growing up in a small Queensland town where a strong sense of community was pervasive.

Her grandparents were publicans, and Carmel recalls that "everyone was always welcome at the hotel". She encountered no sense of social or religious discrimination, no awareness of class distinctions in the country ethos. "What I am trying to convey is, not that there was no discrimination, rather more that my parents and grandparents were a buffer to any social and religious discrimination which existed in the town. My extended family system was rich in religious and political diversity. For example, my grandmother was a Catholic and grandfather a Grand Mason. My father was the chairman of the shire council, was very interested in State politics, and he put no barriers between people. Although not rich in a financial sense, music, people, community issues, numerous relatives, family security, being known by most

people were special memories. Years later I wrote about my childhood in my thesis:

As a toddler and young child I lived in a very small community with half a main street. Being part of an extended family system, I experienced a wonderful sense of belonging and the love of many people. Wherever I went in that small community I felt welcomed. The loving care people extended to me may have been because my father was a prisoner of war. However, my memory was not of a child without a father, but as someone who was loved and valued by my mother, grandparents, numerous aunts, uncles, cousins and their many friends.

On my father's return from the war, we moved to the small township of my birth. Although my father's life must have been in upheaval, I had no sense of that. My parents and extended family were very involved in their community, and the door to our home was always open. I was lovingly encapsulated and protected.

"I always had a sense that we looked after each other and cared about other people. From my father I learned that you could always try to change things in your community and indeed the rest of the State. He was an advocate for the town and belonged to policy boards hundreds of miles away." Carmel recalled surprise at finding a broader heterogeneity among people when she went away to secondary school in Brisbane. "There, for the first time, I became aware that not everyone shares the same ideas and values." There was not the same sense of community service or tolerance, though she did not yet know what to do with this insight.

As was customary in Queensland at that time, Carmel left school after her Junior year, and returned to the small town that was home. She had done well academically and was encouraged to take a job with the local pharmacist. "I hated it," declared Carmel, "so I went to Brisbane. The first job I had in Brisbane I loved. It was in the musical field where I worked as the junior of a team arranging the music sections of radio programs. I have a deep love of music and at the time was doing my letters in piano and was one of the first part-time students at the newly established Queensland Conservatorium of Music where I learnt singing. However, my parents

urged me to leave this job as they saw no future in it for a woman. My father encouraged me to extend myself professionally so I joined the staff of a bank. At that time women had to stay in the back rooms working adding machines. They could not be a teller. I hated it and I returned to night school." She studied for her Senior certificate in night classes.

"I honestly can't remember when I discovered social work," she told us. "I didn't know any social workers and I had never heard the term. But when I finished Senior, I landed myself in the social work course at the University of Queensland and I loved it." It was a small group, about fifteen students, representing a range of age and backgrounds. Here Carmel was influenced by two people, Doctor Poulter, who reinforced her interest in political processes, furthering her father's childhood influence and "... Les Halliwell, whom I loved dearly, inspired me: he was my professional father." Les initiated the teaching and early development of community work in the Social Work Department. Carmel learned from Les a central principle of her community development practice, ... that when one wants to know the solution to a community problem, one must **ask the people**.

Following graduation in 1964, Carmel was placed in a job with the Department of Social Security to complete a Cadetship which had been awarded her in 1962. Here she observed service delivery with a one-to-one case orientation, from a remedial perspective, with no consideration of societal and structural causes. Carmel began asking the 'why' of problems, that is, not what were the patterns but what were the causes and, especially, what could be done to address them. Carmel's vision began to form. Why not focus on the factors which create the debilitating conditions in people's lives; why not eliminate the problems which cause people to seek help?

During this period Carmel married a young doctor, and the first of her children was born. The young family took up a practice in the country town of Miles, an experience which Carmel described as "learning firsthand about the social isolation of a small community". Her husband was the only doctor in a large service area, on call twenty four hours a day, and constantly working.

Carmel had neither professional nor social connections of her own, and found clear social stratification in the rural community. People had their place, and the parameters of one's status position were clearly drawn. "Only the banker and the doctor went everywhere, and they didn't necessarily go together. My husband and I were inundated with social invitations. I began to lose my own sense of self, for I was the Doctor's wife and mother of beautiful children. I felt very much alone and found it hard to cope with the social engagements, with no facilities for mixing with people or making new friends. I quickly became aware of important issues, for example, I had small children, and there was no kindy, so I worked with a small group of mothers to develop that facility."

Clearly Carmel was buzzing with ideas for restructuring the town, and one can only speculate on what might have happened in Miles had the Davesons remained there! As it happened, however, Carmel's husband took up a practice in Mackay, and the family moved there in 1971.

Carmel maintained contact with Les Halliwell across these years. "He was my mentor, my professional support even though I was not a paid community worker. He understood the meaning of my words as no one else did and intuitively sensed where I was heading.

"When I came to Mackay I joined the Mackay Council of Social Welfare. This Council had been formed in the late sixties as a result of the work of Les Halliwell and a group of students. The Council consisted of people from diverse backgrounds who were volunteers. I was the first person who had a social work degree. I loved belonging and sharing thoughts with those people."

The Whitlam Government introduced a community development program called the Australian Assistance Plan in 1973. The Mackay Council for Social Welfare wanted to adopt a more explicitly developmental focus and employed Carmel. She worked with the people to establish a regional structure, which became known as The Mackay Regional Council for Social Development, affectionately known as the MRCSD. It still exists as a development agency, gathering people together to consider what to do about any number of community issues.

Carmel described the birth of the Regional Council as follows. "The organising committee was headed by a man named Stan, who represented both the Uniting Church and the Local Government. He was a traditional chairperson with extensive experience. He and I were an example of how people can work together, respect each other, even though we came with very different points of view. Stan was the Town Clerk of the Mackay City Council and was wonderfully skilled at handling money. He was task oriented and concentrated on such things as setting up a venue, procuring desks and telephones. We complemented each other as I was able to walk the streets of the small towns in the region and have community meetings under trees in the bush and find out what the people wanted, what they needed and what made up their dreams."

A desk at which to sit was well down the list of Carmel's priorities. She talked to people. What do we need in Mackay ...? What do we want for the region ...? What can we do for ourselves, for each other ...?

"My husband was very supportive at that stage," Carmel recalled. "We got in a caravan and went all over the region, to hamlets and homesteads, asking people for their views and inviting them to participate in making the final decisions." Stan tolerated this, though he didn't necessarily think it appropriate. He saw the role of the organising committee as that of preparing a motion for establishing the Council, then presenting that motion to a public meeting for approval. Carmel insisted that the people of the community should have a voice in formulating that motion.

When the public meeting was called, two hundred and fifty people attended, including Les Halliwell and some of his students. Stan was aghast at the thought of inviting discussion from so large a group. There would be chaos! Better just put the motion and call for a vote. Carmel appealed to Les Halliwell, who responded calmly, "My experience has been that if you let people have a say, they will come to a decision that is right for them." With Les' assurance that "it will work out", Stan allowed it to happen that way.

As it turned out there was no chaos, nor was there a quick, decisive vote. The people insisted that they had to check

back with their own communities regarding the decisions which were being proposed. Another meeting was set for six weeks' time. Carmel's consultations continued during that period. The people asked her to return to their various communities and work with them at this checking-out stage. Along with Morrie O'Connor, who at the time was one of Les' students on placement in Mackay, they attended every meeting of every community in the region. (Now, twenty years later, Morrie is a senior community development practitioner in Brisbane.) When the final meeting occurred, Carmel felt they were ready to formalise the structure for the Regional Council.

Tony Ghusn, a solicitor who is still working voluntarily with the MRCSD, was engaged to draft a constitution based on what the people brought to the meeting. "This was an exciting experience," Carmel recalled. "The people did all of this themselves, and it gave them a real sense of ownership over the next few years." The constitution, entitled the "Articles of Association", created a Regional Council in which the smaller geographical units were protected from domination by the larger ones by representation on a General Management Committee comprised of forty people. This group of forty were made up of elected members from local areas, organisational members nominated by their organisations, and 'of right' members from the eight local government authorities of the region together with one State and one Commonwealth Government representative. They were empowered to set policy and to supervise Council operation through various sub-committees. They were to meet every three months to review submissions for funding.

The MRCSD had both a social planning and a developmental function. It allowed for both 'bottom up' and 'top down' work and was to be the interface between localities in the region and the region and the State and Commonwealth governments.

Provision had also been made for a community development officer. "No one at that time had a clue what that was," Carmel said with a chuckle, "but we had a sense that some structure was needed to liaise, for example, with local government. Intuitively we knew that local government had to change, to become more responsive to the planning,

policy and advocacy needs of the people. The development officers were placed with them and for the first time local government in Queensland had a community development worker, working for them. As the social planner and executive officer of the MRCSD, I met with the community development officers regularly to offer consultation, support, encouragement and to plan and consider joint strategies. Further integration and co-ordination of the work occurred with the appointment of the local government representative on the general committee of the MRCSD.

"In the beginning, people simply began putting up proposals for working out the issues, innovative strategies were employed from the start. One exciting initiative predated community health services which now exist. It was an example of creative planning by local people, addressing human and financial resources. The inland people came from three different localities in the region, hundreds of kilometres from each other. They were totally isolated from medical care and telephone services during the wet. We had a series of 'tree' meetings and then a regional meeting where they developed their own unique response to their need. The Flying Doctor, who was located in Far North Queensland in Cairns, approximately eight hundred kilometres from Mackay, met with them. As well as obtaining their own two-way radio service which was linked with the Flying Doctor, they opened communication, and with access to a specially marked and packaged medical kit, they had their own medical service. One group obtained an old caravan and this became their community centre base."

Another community requested help in meeting requirements to establish a child-care centre. Their physical facility had been criticised, and they needed a little bit of money to upgrade their toilet! This was achieved by making a video of their existing toilet for presentation to the General Committee when they met to consider submissions. Carmel recalled with good humour the showing of this video to a group of people which no doubt included a number who had never sat in an outside 'dunny'.

Families expressed the need for a facility where groups could meet for social and recreational activities; for a child-care centre with provision for both occasional and full day

care; for youth recreational facilities. The Regional Council's subsequent proposal for a Family Centre was funded, and became a forerunner of the Neighbourhood Centre concept which would soon emerge throughout Australian communities.

The seventies was a thriving era of social and community growth, and the Regional Council became an influential structure for directing this growth in Mackay. The Regional Council was very critical of the need to modify creative solutions to fit government policy. During the seventies, for those four years, the Regional Council was the vehicle for the allocation of untied money. The plan generated enormous energy, people wanted to be involved and consequently presented funding proposals based on their own creative solutions. In developing proposals they had access to the three community development officers who worked within the structures of the eight local authorities.

This came to an end with the demise of the Australian Assistance Plan, even though the MRCSD did not compromise itself. It continued to exist on volunteer effort and has consistently renewed its decision not to be a service provider. Having said this, it auspices groups in that early developmental and demonstration stage and then supports the particular groups as they become separate legal entities.

Despite the fact that the Australian Assistance Plan was discontinued with the collapse of the Whitlam Government in 1976, the Regional Council in Mackay has continued to operate, with some independent funding. We are sure that the continued survival of the Regional Council is due, at least in part, to the fact that it was built on solid ground and that the community had a genuine sense of investment in it.

In 1976, Carmel was elected to the Mackay City Council. She described her election with characteristic good humour. She had agreed to stand for the office, but was strongly opposed to any active campaigning. Her father, who had been in local government prior to his military service, protested. He insisted that one does not simply stand for an office; one must get out there and tell people why they should vote for you. Carmel was adamant. "I was certainly not going to tell people how to vote!" She was elected by a comfortable majority.

Was this an awkward position for you, we asked naively, or were you welcomed as a bright spot in local government? "I was a nuisance," Carmel replied unequivocally, with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. "I didn't understand. I kept raising issues." What sort of issues?

"I had assumed," Carmel explained pensively, "that I would bring to Council the questions and suggestions of the people who elected me. I expected to negotiate with Council on their behalf on matters of concern to them. I had been used to open processes."

As it turned out, this was not the way things traditionally worked in this local government. The community was neither informed nor consulted, nor indeed were the elected council members expected to critically involve themselves. Many of the elected people would meet privately and decide on the issue. The staff made decisions secretly, all committee activity was closed to the public, and the monthly Council meetings were essentially a brief rubber-stamping exercise.

Carmel's first confrontation with Council occurred over a new town plan which had been drawn up by the elected members of Council, but not made public. It had been formulated prior to the election but kept secret. The members wanted no publicity, they said, because they didn't want the town plan to become an election issue. One local group, however, had heard about it, and sent an official request to the Council that a public discussion be held. Carmel's response was that yes, of course there should be a public meeting where the Council staff would explain the plan in detail. Such a plan, after all, was of great significance to the residents of the city, involving zoning regulations and general land use with vital implications for future development.

"Well!" Carmel exclaimed, "you'd have thought I was coming from the moon. It was absolutely not on!" The proposed town plan was a matter for Council to decide; it was not a **community** matter. Consequently, because Carmel's motion for a public meeting had not even been seconded, no discussion ensued. The matter was closed. Carmel was dismayed.

"I couldn't believe they were going to push it through so quickly after an election. The whole experience was a huge learning curve for me and highlighted how disempowered

people were in their own communities." She tried to defer the town plan for one month. Her logic was that, as a new Council member, she should have a month to go around town and see what was being proposed, and to talk to people about it. For example, how would rezoning decisions affect young families with children, older residents without independent means, extended families? These questions should be considered, suggested Carmel. Now the Council was dismayed. Those were **welfare** issues! No business of City Council!

While all details concerning the above discussion were successfully suppressed at the Council meeting, the press smelled a story, and they were waiting for Carmel when Council adjourned. What was it that she had wanted to say? Carmel restated her position regarding public discussion of significant community issues, and the press had a field day. It was Alderman Daveson's first front-page headline. It was not to be her last.

Toward the end of her first three-year term, Carmel had established a practice of holding street meetings to determine public opinion. She recalled an example of residential concern about a narrow two-way street which had no footpaths. There was no room for children to walk safely nor for mothers to push their prams and shopping carts. Carmel approached the chairman of the Works Committee, a man named Sam, to see what could be done about it. She then called a street meeting, asking interested parties to meet under a tree to talk about the problem.



When she and Sam arrived at the appointed time, more than fifty people were gathered under the tree. Numerous

options were discussed. Carmel subsequently prepared a report and gave it to Sam who would carry it through to Council, thereby ensuring that it would be placed on the meeting Agenda for comment.

The response from the Council to Carmel's report was a terse one-and-a-half-line statement which totally ignored everything the people had said, emphasising that the status quo would remain. Carmel recalls that she was downright mad. "I am of the opinion," she declared, "that my role as an elected representative is to act according to what the people want. The Chairman of the Works Committee and I have talked to the people, we know what they want and this Council has ignored that. I therefore move that Milton Lane be converted to a one-way street."

Carmel recalls that the gallery was packed. Concerned citizens sat tensely. There was an awkward silence. You could hear a pin drop. Then the motion was seconded and passed. Carmel exclaimed, "It was my first victory in three years!"

The Deputy Mayor stopped her on the way out. "I've disagreed with much of what you say," he told her, "but by god, you've made us think." What greater tribute to a community worker?

By the time Carmel's second term came round, the people were aware that they could have a voice in their local government. In Carmel's words, their involvement in community action spread like a bushfire. It was during this second term that Carmel succeeded in establishing the Community Development Officer position in the Mackay City Council. This was a significant move, and a timely one. A community network was forming, and the diverse energies available in the broad community sector were there to be channelled.

BEA ROGAN

Enter Bea Rogan, now the new kid on the block. She and Carmel complemented each other like the two sides of a coin. Carmel's energy is fluid and spontaneous, like a pot boiling over. Bea, on the other hand, operates with a calm, imperturbable efficiency. Her skilful organisation and infinite patience belies her own tenacious determination to do the right thing and to get the thing done.

The two women's backgrounds are markedly different. In contrast to Carmel's peaceful early years, Bea forged her way through difficult years of poverty and a broken home. "To talk about where I am and where I'm going," Bea said, "I have to refer to my past. I was born in a slum area of Vancouver, Canada. My family was destroyed when my father went off to war and was never able to return to us." Divorce followed. Both Bea and her mother endured a long hospitalisation with tuberculosis. Her mother worked at whatever jobs she could find in order to feed the children, and Bea remembers many months of moving around in various rental accommodations.

It was a teacher in grade eleven who pointed to a new direction for Bea. "She gave me a different picture of what life could be, and encouraged me to apply for a scholarship." This scholarship was awarded and Bea attended the University of British Columbia for two years. Her family situation changed, and she left Vancouver. "I felt I had to get well and truly away, and I realise now that I was distancing myself from negative family connections. I certainly succeeded in getting away, as I went to Sydney, Australia! There I learned what it was like to have no sense of community. In Sydney, I was not connected at all." Not for long, however. Here Bea met her husband, and they returned to Canada for a short time, and then lived briefly in the United States. When they came back to Australia, they settled in Mackay.

The Rogans had two young children by this time, and Bea discovered she was pregnant again. With twins! How would she cope with four children under the age of four? A frightening prospect for any young woman! Then Bea recalled an organisation she had heard of in the United States called the Mothers of Twins Clubs. Would there be sufficient interest to form such a group in Mackay? Bea surveyed her community and found that indeed there was an interest. Bea Rogan's first community development project was formulated. With the help of her gynaecologist, Bea identified other mothers of twins, and a support group was established.

"About this time I met Carmel Daveson," Bea said, "and she became a tremendous influence in my life. When some funds became available for initiating self-help groups, Carmel suggested that I organise a support program for mothers of

twins while they are still in hospital. We got a grant of six hundred dollars for this, and the project was so successful that support for mothers of twins is now a part of the nursing training curriculum.”

As Bea became increasingly involved in school and community activities, Carmel was her source of advice and direction. “I found it easy to work with Carmel,” Bea explained. “When I first got involved in community work, I encountered one woman whose style was ‘confrontational and aggressive, meeting power with power’. That wasn’t my way. Carmel’s style was one of cooperation and negotiation, much more compatible with my own.”

Community project work became second nature to Bea Rogan. In her quiet, competent way, Bea took on one project after another, and soon became aware of the many areas in which something should be done. Unemployment, housing, health, deinstitutionalisation.....the list of issues was long but the roles of government were complex and hard to galvanise action about. There were no structures for taking matters to the State and Federal levels. She recognised the urgent need for a more coordinated structure for ensuring access to resources and a voice in policy-making for the poorest of the poor.

Bea recognised also a need for training in community work strategies, for an understanding of basic community work principles. There was no such formal course work available in Mackay, and Bea felt an urgent need to know.

Her first opportunity came when Carmel arranged through TAFE for a series of small informal training sessions to be offered in Mackay. “Tony Kelly came up from Queensland Uni,” Bea explained, “and gave workshops on community work strategies. These sessions had a big impact on my thinking. I began making connections between community work as practice and the theoretical knowledge as the underlying framework. That was extremely important for me.”

Bea was appointed to the Community Development Officer position in the Mackay City Council soon after it was established. “I was frustrated,” Bea said. “What could local government do? What should be done for the poor, for single-parent families, for Aboriginal and Islander groups? At the

same time I felt I had to look more carefully at what local government does not do? How can community workers intervene in basic government functions, such as the use of land, in order to acquire more facilities for people beyond the provision of water and the removal of garbage?

“At that stage of my professional development, I wasn’t looking at ways of hooking into the corporate structure, or for strategies to change that structure. My approach, as a community worker, was fairly limited in that I sought ways of strengthening the community so that they could access resources through the existing structures.

“I saw two ways of mobilising the community in relation to an issue. One was to focus on the issue itself: youth unemployment, single parents, domestic abuse, all these issues which cut right across all communities citywide. The other approach was geographical, to focus on locality development with a view to confronting problems generally in that one locality. There was one neighbourhood, for example, which was disadvantaged and isolated, with no infrastructure at all.

“This area, known as Southwest Mackay, was a housing development and nothing more. Many of the residents were single parents, usually women, struggling to support their children on the dole. There were no shops, no parks, no church, no community centre. Just a house to live in. I made it part of my work plan to do some developmental work there.”

Bea began this project by knocking on doors, hanging around the area and talking to whomever she could. She made it very clear from the beginning that she was from the Council, that she was interested in talking to them about developing some resources in their neighbourhood. Everyone who spoke to Bea agreed that they certainly needed a lot of development in their neighbourhood, but were reluctant to step forward with any action plan. They seemed reluctant to get involved with any authorities at all.

“I continued this canvassing for only a few days, because I realised that I was collecting a lot of information that would set me apart from the people. We needed to be in it together, all sharing the same information. After I was satisfied that I had a good sense of the residents’ feelings, I went back to the office to think about my next move.”

About this time the Council received a letter from the Commonwealth Government, stating that they wished to fund another child-care centre in Mackay, and asking for the Council's recommendation. The Town Clerk asked Bea to nominate a place.

"Well, I had no idea!" Bea exclaimed. "Then it occurred to me that this might be an opportunity to start something in Southwest. So, with this mandate from the Council, I went back to the people. At the third house where I stopped, I met this wonderful woman named Peggy. Peggy was a straight talker, with a direct approach, and she knew her community. She had lived there for years, knew everybody, knew what the problems were, and she had credibility with her neighbours. Peggy was the person to mobilise that community.

"We started having meetings in Peggy's back yard. We set up a play group for kids, and we all had a lovely time together. The play group became a regular thing. We called ourselves the Action Playgroup. When I wanted to invite a member of Council to one of our meetings, the women were again reluctant. They didn't want or need a full-time child-care centre. After all, none of them had jobs. I assured them that the Councillor would understand. Trust me, I told them, and we'll see what we can negotiate for."

So the Councillor came and she did understand. The women decided that it would be okay to negotiate with Council, but they made it clear that there was no way they would go to Council themselves. Nor would they have anything to do with the support agencies, such as Social Security or Family Services. There was no trust there. No doubt a lot of the women had dealings with these agencies in the past, and to these women, any government 'helping' agency constituted a very personal threat. Bea backed off. The Playgroup flourished, and the women continued holding their meetings.

Eventually Peggy and the other women reached a state of readiness to pursue a plan. They would request support for casual child care, and for some space in which to hold their community meetings. Bea convinced them that they should consult the mayor on this, assuring them of his strong support for doing something for the Southwest. The women

trusted Bea by then, and reluctantly agreed to go with Bea to see the Mayor. "What happened was that Peggy and three others went along to the Mayor's office, taking all their kids with them. After all, they had no child-care facilities, did they? The kids left cracker crumbs all over the purple carpet. The Mayor was duly convinced that these mothers needed child care!"

The Commonwealth rejected the proposal for a part-time child-care facility and/or a neighbourhood centre, but by then the Mayor was determined to help the Southwest women do something. He was impressed with their commitment and perseverance. The poorest people in town and so active!

"To do anything at all," Bea continued, "we needed some community space. The Department of Education owned eight hectares of land in the middle of the housing development for which there was no specific plan. The Mayor negotiated with the Department of Education to lease some of this land, which would then be subleased to the Department of Family Services. The Council would put up \$25,000 to build a neighbourhood centre beside a child-care centre. The Commonwealth agreed to this, and the buildings went up."

It took about three years to get the Southwest Centre up and running, but it was a significant event for the Council. It gave the Council a large measure of credibility among community groups, as well as giving Council important experience in working directly with the community to create and develop human services. The Council got very good press on the opening of the Centre, which had, in fact, been part of Bea's strategy as the project neared completion.

The creation of the Southwest Centre was also significant for Bea, as the Council's Community Development Officer. "It gave me status in Council which I had not had before. Certainly this made it much easier to recommend and implement other projects from then on. I began to see how local government could be significantly involved to work with the community sector."

The Mackay community, with Bea's help, hosted the Queensland Community Development Forum. The Community Development Forum is held every other year to the Queensland Community Development Conference. The

Conference concentrates on education and training, while the Forum concentrates on policy development. Out of the Mackay Forum emerged a Community Sector policy on determining what sorts of projects to fund. "The formation of such policies encourages people and strengthens networks," Bea said, "but it does not provide legitimacy for action. The community sector needs an association, something such as the Queensland Council of Social Service(QCOSS), to give it the authority and mechanisms to act on its ideas in ways consistent with its values and principles."

To encourage interest in social planning within the government sector, Bea organised a Community Development and Planning Conference for Local Government. Her aim throughout this period was to establish the necessary structures to empower the community sector. "The Government puts too much emphasis on products, with limited emphasis on process, They want discussion papers, surveys and reports and such. I say, tell me what you need. Resolving that need will be a developmental process, and without that process the product will mean absolutely nothing."

Bea's most trying time was when she was criticised for her lack of professional qualifications as a community worker. "I took it personally and it bothered me greatly. The social work caseworkers resented my position with the Council without qualifications, and I began to question myself. Then I saw it as a question of controlling professional standards, of the inherent nature of casework versus community development. I didn't value their contribution and vice versa!

"Sympathetic people helped me to see the broader picture, and I recognised a need for proper connections between structural and one-to-one work. As a community development worker, I didn't see the individual problems of a specific family, and the caseworkers didn't see the total debilitating environments within which the families lived. It became a question of my connecting effectively with their work."

On the positive side, Bea's recognition as a valuable support to the community continued to grow, and the network expanded.

By this stage, a newcomer was on the scene, the vivacious Maggie Shambrook.

MAGGIE SHAMBROOK

Maggie simply bubbled with enthusiasm to get involved in community work.

"I grew up in a country town in the 'deep south' of Queensland," Maggie explained, "where the perspective on social and political activities was very narrow. My Christian Youth Group experience gave me a sense of purpose, of wanting to do something worthwhile. I didn't have a clear sense of direction, but I knew I wanted to be involved with people at the grassroots level."

Maggie's early interest in women's issues put her in touch with Carmel, which led to her meeting Bea. Through these relationships Maggie discovered new ways of looking at problems and of working toward resolutions. "I began seeing women in the context of their families, where housing was a major problem. The need for improved access to affordable housing was an easy connection for me to make because I needed such housing myself."

The overall quality of lifestyle for low-income families was also a concern. Residents of public housing and caravan parks, often single-parent families, were frequently without family support networks, and without adequate recreational and child-care facilities. As a community worker with the Mackay Regional Council for Social Development, Maggie began the task of canvassing these low-income areas to determine the people's needs and wishes.

With Maggie's neighbourhood work well under way, the Regional Council requested that Maggie set up a work base at the new Southwest Neighbourhood Centre. The neighbourhood was inordinately proud of their Centre, but there was a lack of cohesion in the Centre's objectives. "There was a tension around the direction the Centre would take. Government program guidelines and community needs featured in this tension, as did the needs of people in the broader Mackay community.

"I recall that Deirdre Coghlan came up from Brisbane and held a workshop on establishing 'rules' for implementing objectives in community organisations. The result was that the tensions were eased and the Southwest residents were given effective tools for resolving conflicts as they arose." The Centre, based on a clear mandate from the people

themselves, moved quickly into smooth, independent operation.

Meanwhile Maggie, through her outreach neighbourhood work throughout Mackay, was becoming increasingly aware of special problems within the Mackay South Sea Islander community.

The Mackay area has the largest concentration of Australian South Sea Islanders, approximately five thousand. The historical basis for this fact is not something for Australians to be proud of. Some sixty thousand Islanders were 'blackbirded', quite literally kidnapped, during the last century, and brought to Queensland and New South Wales to work in various industries. Notable among these were the sugar plantations in the Mackay district, where the Islanders were found to be exceptionally hard workers in the cane fields. Their labour was in continued demand for several generations. Then, with increased European immigration, unionism, and advances in agricultural mechanisation, the need for the Islanders' toil was reduced.

Government legislation led to efforts to return the Islanders to their homelands, several generations later, but this ill-planned deportation exercise left the people worse off than before. There were no ties to return to in their homelands, and no longer sufficient opportunities for work in Australia.

Discontent grew among the indigenous and ethnic minorities. The situation in Mackay was uniquely complex. Traditionally, government agencies made little distinction among the Australian South Sea Islanders, the Torres Strait Islanders, and Australia's own Aboriginal people. Because the Australian South Sea Islanders had no visible identity as a distinct cultural group, they sought benefits available from various Aboriginal Affairs Departments. The factions which developed among the ethnic minorities were made even more complicated by intermarriage. 'Mixed' families had little choice but to identify with whichever group had greater access to the resources necessary for survival.

The conflict reached a crisis when one of the government agencies in Mackay convened a community meeting to which only Australian South Sea Islanders were invited. Here the Australian South Sea Islanders were informed that they

would be jailed if they were found to be accessing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) programs.

Clearly the Australian South Sea Islanders had been dealt a losing hand, and Maggie turned her attention to the possibility of developing independent resources within the Australian South Sea Island sector of Mackay. "The need for such direction," Maggie recalled, "was initiated by Shirley Firebrace, a recent arrival to the Mackay area. Shirley's experience in Aboriginal politics in Victoria gave her a keen sensitivity to the emerging tensions among the three 'black' groups in the Mackay community.

"Shirley was astonished to learn that the children whom she worked with at the out-of-school program had no sense of their own unique cultural heritage. The children had little identity, it would seem, beyond being 'black'. Consultations throughout the community resulted in a number of initiatives to provide a community structure that would acknowledge the heritage of the SSI people."

Maggie herself began to connect with the work undertaken by the Miller family. This family had its roots in the community of people known as the 'River Rats'. They had survived for several generations as a community in an area near the Pioneer River in Mackay. The local authority had attempted to move these 'squatters' on several occasions, but their sense of community was strong.

In the context of the Human Rights Commission Report on the current plight of Australia's South Sea Islander population, Mackay's South Sea Islander people sought their own recognition as a unique cultural group. Such recognition, they felt, was the key to ensuring their rights to resources, and to their own representation in all areas of their community life and business. Maggie's key focus was to support the work of this group towards securing a position for one of their own to serve as their community worker.

Two leaders emerged from the Australian South Sea Islander sector. High-spirited Winnie Boah, formerly a Miller and part of the 'River Rats' community, represented the poorest of the poor in the Australian South Sea Islander population. This family group had little mixed-race heritage, and, while they were proud, they were also the most

vulnerable to the competitive separation of the three minority groups.

Maggie saw the Miller family through the establishment of the first of three Australian South Sea Islander Housing Cooperatives. This project established eight Australian South Sea Islander tenant-managed homes, and was a vital factor in boosting the confidence of the Australian South Sea Islander community generally. Homes under their own management! A power shift could be felt throughout the minority communities.

The other Australian South Sea Islander leader was Rowena Trevie, representing a perhaps more conservative position in the Australian South Sea Islander community. Rowena was a masterful negotiator, able to restrain the conflicting tensions inherent in the community until a mutually satisfying resolution could be found. Rowena became a recognised leader in the Mackay community generally, as the liaison between the Council, her own people, and the broader community. She was recently presented a Senior Citizen Award for outstanding achievement in Mackay. She is the first South Sea Islander to receive such recognition.

Through the leadership of these two women in their own communities, with the support of Maggie and a network of other community workers, the Australian South Sea Islander people achieved recognition at last. The time seemed right for establishing a tangible tribute to their heritage. A proposal was made for the redevelopment of an area of Mackay known as the Lagoons. The Mackay City Council, with strong encouragement from Bea, supported a plan for erecting a Long House, in the South Sea Island tradition, to be used as a community centre. The Mayor was keen on the idea.

Consultations proceeded, with training workshops and special cultural advice from Vanuatu on the design of the Long House, with traditional gardens and landscape designs. Plans were complete and the project was ready to go when the Mayor lost his post in the city elections. The new Mayor was not supportive, and the project was put on the back burner.

This was a bitter disappointment, but Maggie concentrated on supporting morale in the community and Bea maintained

vigilance in the Council. They waited, unwilling to initiate further discussion of the Lagoons project until the climate seemed right. The right moment came when Prime Minister Keating announced that he was releasing the last lot of money for the creation of jobs. Seize the moment! The Council had to have projects now! The Lagoons project was ready to go, and Council approved it speedily.

An elders cultural advisory committee was established to ensure direct participation of the Australian South Sea Islander people in the design and construction of the Long House, and the thatch-roofed edifice was completed. It stands as a significant feature of the Mackay landscape. The Australian South Sea Island community has also erected a bronze statue of an Australian South Sea Island cane cutter as a memorial to their people's contribution to the economy of the area.

The Lagoons is a symbol of pride for the Australian South Sea Islanders. As Maggie says, "Their sense of identity is emerging as a powerful force for change that brings benefit not only for themselves as a culture, but for all of us who are enriched as a society through their efforts."

Maggie has bittersweet memories of her community work with the Australian South Sea Islanders. She is acutely aware of cultural differences, and spoke with nostalgia. "I could never create their sense of humour, though I could love and value it at times. The Australian South Sea Islanders concepts of time were sometimes frustrating, as their priorities are determined almost entirely through relationships. I came to understand that for this extended family culture, family is first.

"Their capacity to accommodate the demands and needs of those within their own families is phenomenal. They can teach the more individualistic cultures, such as the Anglo-Australian culture, a great deal about different ways of caring and connecting. I remember gatherings when, with little apparent effort, the women organised, with the men's support, full meals for three hundred or more people. Their sense of humility taught me humility, and I took on their sense of oppression with passionate advocacy."

What does Maggie consider her greatest achievement in Mackay? Without hesitation, she replied, "The inaugural

meeting of the Mackay South Sea Islander Association, which the people conducted themselves. It was a moment of pride for all of us, the culmination of four years' work.

"While the jubilation of such moments is unmistakable, there is a commensurate drain on the worker's personal energy. Community workers themselves need a source of support and encouragement beyond that linked to work itself. They must have a means of recharging their energy and commitment."

A central contribution to recharge energy and commitment to all around is another member of the network in Mackay, Patricia Wood. Pat is not only an important community worker, but a source of strength for Carmel, Bea, Maggie, and the others in the team.

PAT WOOD

Pat is a local woman. She grew up on her family's cane farm in the Pioneer Valley in the Mackay region. Her family was a close-knit one, with a devout religious commitment. Out of Pat's early religious training came her own vision of community. "I was thirteen years old," Pat said with a smile, "when I decided that my mission in life was to change the world so that it would be a better place, especially for those who were poor."

Pat's primary education was in the State schools, with secondary study at the Sister of Mercy boarding school in Rockhampton. Having left school at age fifteen, she went home to work on the family farm. Two years later she began her training as a Sister of Mercy, making her vows some years later. With the enthusiasm and idealism of youth she believed that this career choice would help her to fulfil her goal of 'changing the world'.

Pat became a schoolteacher by profession, and when she was twenty-six she responded to a call to teach on a mission station in New Guinea. This experience was a satisfying one, and Pat remained there for five years. She returned to Australia when she was recalled to teach at the Marist Brothers first co-educational high school in Gladstone. Five years later she returned to New Guinea for another year, but by then Pat was questioning whether school teaching was the right path to achieve the goals for her life. The goals

remained the same, but she wasn't sure how to go about achieving them.

Pat described her doubts as reflecting a lack of confidence, of direction, of a need for more study and training. Pat enrolled at university for an Arts degree. This study was reaffirming for Pat's self-confidence, as she found university study quite easy. The experience did not clarify a direction for her, however. She took up a parish affiliation in a Central Queensland mining town and focused on faith education for families and community groups. This was her first experience of working with people in the community. It was here that she became interested in the concept of 'basic Christian communities', a term which evolved from experiences in the liberation struggles of Latin America.

Later she moved to Mackay where she heard of people called 'community workers'. "I thought that these people would have the skills to help me build small communities in the Parish. I began asking questions and finally got put on to Bea Rogan. I invited her to meet with me, and she brought Maggie Shambrook with her. That was my first introduction to community work and the beginning of relationships which were to prove challenging, stimulating and enriching. They invited me to meetings of various community groups and to a workshop being offered through TAFE by Tony Kelly from the University of Queensland. He was offering a session on community work skills training. I went but with no idea what I was in for. The workshop turned me upside down! I realised I could work with the poor right here at home. Starting where you are - that's community work! The saying 'small is beautiful' became significant for me."

Pat was searching for a way to do things. "I don't want to hear all this theory. I want to know how you **do** justice! That's what the workshop did for me. It gave me some skills, e.g., structural analysis of problems. People are unemployed. Why are they unemployed? What structures are responsible for that? What can we do about it? Who is going to do what, where and when?"

Meanwhile Pat was disillusioned by the Church's model for action. "Church people treat symptoms, not causes. We have been bought up on the 'servant' model. It's much easier to provide service stuff, but I knew that wasn't the full picture."

Her dissatisfaction with her inability to work with people in the community on their issues led her to resign as Church Parish Worker.

Pat returned to university and completed a postgraduate degree in Social Planning. She undertook her practicum experience of community work in that course within a State School classified as 'disadvantaged'. This was a first in Queensland State Schools, since community development work had never been undertaken in this setting before. At the conclusion of her practicum, the Principal decided to apply for funding for the position, and it continues in the school to this day. Soon after completing study, Pat was appointed as a part-time community development worker with the Council while continuing her school community work.

Pat's work in both church and school contexts raised a number of questions about community work practice. "Those who most benefit from our work are those who are usually socially well off. By that I mean that they have some supportive relationships and a reasonable sense of self. This provides the basis for people to take control of their own lives, to be empowered. But where these qualities are lacking, a lot of individual work has to happen. This takes time and much energy. Community workers often don't have too much of either of these. The result is that the 'poorest of the poor' remain stuck in a cycle of oppression."

Pat feels some concern about the community work principle of empowerment. "This was spoken of by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – that without reflection on action, those who were formerly oppressed often become as oppressive as their former oppressors. We have not built enough 'reflection on action' into our work with others, and I have observed the negative consequences of this in a number of cases. We have to try to build this dimension into our work with people. It is a part of evaluation if you like, but it is assisting people to reflect on self in the action, at every step of the way."

Pat has a vision of goodness for goodness' sake. Bea said of her, "She is a marvellous support person. The task outcome is less important than the spiritual bond between people working together. We used to meet on Friday nights, four of us – Maggie and Pat and another worker named Thea

and myself. Pat sustained us during that time. It was just being together, linking our personal lives in the work issues we faced. Pat's spirituality allowed us to grow as women, individually, and she gave us confidence. Pat provided us with strength when we had problems."

What sustains Pat's energy? Her fundamental faith in gospel values. Like so many sincere Christians, she is not uncritical of the Church and sees it often as taking the 'soft option' in terms of justice. She points out, however, that the social values specified in church dogma are really quite radical and quoted statements from Liberation Theology and church documents and their parallels with Marxist philosophy. While she has chosen not to confront the institutional Church as a public activist, she has adopted the more 'radical' values of justice and peace as standards for her own behaviour.

It would be in error to imply that the Mackay story evolved as smoothly as this account might suggest. There were many hiccups and as many disappointments, with starts and restarts. A project which can be described in three paragraphs may well represent months of strategic planning, of negotiation and compromise, of falling back to regroup and approach the issue from a different angle. Community development work, it must be remembered, is a *process*.

Similarly, it would be wrong to suggest that this team of women was responsible for the work that has been achieved in Mackay. Of course there were many, many others. Yet, there is something special about this quartet of women who worked together so well, while each contributed her special talents. There is a bonding which is both professional and private. Not surprising, perhaps, in view of Bea's position on the nature of community work. "You can't separate the public from the private," she declared. "You are what you do, and it would be paradoxical to try and separate your *self* from your *work* when, by definition, you and the people in the community are all people working together."

Pat summarised it in a slightly different way when she described her belief in a holistic approach to life. "Your personal and public life are two dimensions of that whole – one flows into and out of the other. The problem with community workers," Pat stressed again, "is that they do not

take time for reflection. It is absolutely essential that we reflect on what we do, so that we can understand what happens. Action – reflection – action. We are what we do, and both have to come together in harmony.”