AUGUST 2021

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Parliamentary Community Support and Services
Committee Inquiry Submission

From Jennifer Vanderheld



INTRODUCTION

I write regarding the Legislative Assembly agreeing to a motion that the Community Support and Services Committee inquire into and report on social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. I support this Bill.

VIEWPOINT

I agree that Social Isolation and Loneliness, is an epidemic, and what I do know and understand, from personal experience, is that mothers, must, be included in the targeted support to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and those most at risk.

I would like to bring to the attention of the Parliament, this crucial group of people who are vulnerable, disadvantaged and most at risk, in our Queensland communities, being mothers, are included in this motion.

How many mothers, the bearers of this next generation, have been impacted by social isolation and loneliness, particularly during COVID-19?





JENNIFER VANDERHELD

Born and raised in Sydney from 1976 within a hard-working blue-collar family with strong morals and family values, I bounced between the bush and the city during school holidays, working on cattle and sheep stations, that of my friend from school and my mother's family station in north Queensland.

I Graduated Grade 12 in 1993 from Loreto College, Sydney, and headed west to work as a contract Jillaroo, travelling as far inland as Camooweal before returning to Sydney, studying Hospitality at TAFE, and working three jobs in the Hospitality industry.

I then joined the Army Reserves at the approximate age of 20 where I thrived on discipline. I won awards for 'Fittest female', 'Best shot' and overall 'Best recruit' and was a member of 2/17 RNSWR as a clerk where I was given the opportunity to train in urban warfare, 176 Air Dispatch Squadron RAAF Base Richmond as an Air Dispatcher and later attached to 2CER (Combat Engineers Regiment). Later in Sydney where we deployed to Butterworth, Malaysia.

As a member of 2/17 RNSWR, 16 of us were selected, after meeting certain criteria's, to travel to PNG and walk the Kokoda Track where we visited many villages, paying our respect to the original Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels along the way. Being the only female within our group, the village women invited me to their community meeting, sharing their insight into their community, opening up topics for discussion and explaining the programs they ran to support and educate women in small business. This was a fascinating insight for me as a 20-year-old

In the Year 2000 I joined the Army full-time, as our unit, 176 Air Dispatch Squadron, was deployed to East Timor. I took it upon myself to study Bahasa Indonesia intensely prior to deploying to increase my ability of engaging with the local people, where I was able to act as a liaison in some difficult and conflicting situations

General Sir Peter Cosgrove, visited our unit at Dili Port where we were working at the time, alongside the United Nations and other Countries Armies. A few of us volunteered to build outdoor play structures at the local schools and joined in with the children's activities. Upon returning to Australia, I was awarded Soldier of the Year, a tremendous honour.



I had applied to QANTAS to work as a Flight Attendant before our unit was deployed to Timor. Once returning, I changed my status from full-time Soldier to part-time and accepted the offer from QANTAS, flying for the next four years domestically as well as internationally, travelling the world in my spare time.

In 2005 I married and my husband and I moved from Brisbane to Blackwater. I worked for Australian Agricultural Company, later accepting a role as an Operator in a Mobile Manufacturing Unit (MMU) working with explosives.

Two years after mining I moved from the mines to Manage my mother's family cattle station near Collinsville. A few months later, my Husband transferred to a closer mine and then two years later we moved to Bowen, where I gave birth to our first son, in Townsville Hospital.

Four months after that we moved our new family to South Kalimantan, Borneo, Indonesia for work opportunities and to further build on my language skills of Bahasa Indonesia and live amongst this foreign and new community. Ten months later I gave birth to our second son. The car accident we were in brought about an emergency Caesarean in by which the town we lived in was not equipped to carry out such an operation. I was transported by plane to another city which was foreign, and my husband not being allowed in the birthing suite due to cultural reasons, brought about a tough and isolating birthing experience.

Three months later my husband accepted a role in Mongolia and I decided to return to Australia. I had to send my 15-month-old child back to Australia with my visiting mother and father-in-law and I followed a month later, with our then three-month-old baby.

From Moore Park Beach in Queensland where I ran the local mothers' group, as a family, we all moved to a property in Anakie, the Gemfields, west of Emerald. We joined a strong rural community here and flourished. I travelled every few weeks with my boys to Roma sale yards and began trading cattle. The boys were two and three years of age.



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A year or so later, we sold out of cattle and moved to Yeppoon, inland of Rockhampton where I joined the local Mining Women Support Group and decided to educate myself. I became a member of 'Smart Hub' in Rockhampton, run by Elize Hattin, where Entrepreneurs are supported to grow and develop within their own business.

I worked at local cafes and studied Frontline Leadership and Management, Workplace Health and Safety and completed a Trainer Assessor course. After the completion of my training, the Registered Training Organisation in Yeppoon called Coal Train, owned by Karla McPhail, offered me a job as a Trainer Assessor for Hospitality. I accepted the position and worked at this for four years while studying and completing my Diploma of Hospitality until my husband left mining and purchased a mowing business in Yeppoon

I moved on from the RTO and assisted in building our business, buying out another local mowing business, thus becoming the largest operation in Yeppoon. I purchased a mobile coffee business to assist with our income during the winter months, thus enabling us to employ six local members of the community.

After building both businesses over a two-year period, we sold them both as well as our home, our car, our furniture, and other assets and by March 2019, we purchased an old boat in a yard in Darwin that needed a lot of work. One year on amongst the renovations, living in an industrial shed and home schooling my boys, this 55' steel boat would become our home.

I have recently started a business I called 'Soul Explorer' with the purpose of connecting, sharing and inspiring matriarchs within Australia and beyond. I am travelling around Queensland with my family on our boat, interviewing women whom I ask the same seven questions to about how they raised or are raising their children and what their support network looks like.

These interviews will be turned into a podcast. With my client's permission, their information is gathered, broken down and analysed to help me understand in depth what women lack, require or gain, during their role of matriarch while raising children and if they experienced loneliness or social isolation.

I am now enrolled in the University of New Castle, Cultural Anthropology course to study humans and their behaviours relating to culture and society, with the aim of understanding why we do and think the way we do in order to be able to make positive improvements moving forward into the future as mothers.







VITAL CONNECTION

90% LONELY MUMS

54% FRIENDLESS

SUFFER PERINATAL

https://www.todaysparent.com/baby/postpartum-care/theexcruciating-loneliness-of-being-a-new-mother/

https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/primary-healthcare/perinatal-depression-data-from-the-2010australia/contents/summary

Across the world, we are seeing growing awareness and recognition of the issue of social isolation and loneliness. This is an issue that has a significant impact on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of many people, one of the largest groups being mothers.

Prior to COVID-19 most women, had a positive aspect, and a mother's position of loneliness and social isolation, largely, would not be permanent, rather, transitional, in the way that she may return to work and gain support from the people around her.

Unfortunately, it is now highly likely that COVID-19 has exacerbated the situation to now include, women not only being alone while at home with young ones, but also throughout pregnancy and childbirth. Women may be forced to work from home, with children doing home schooling, increasing the pressure and expectations, feeling even more lonely and isolated with nowhere to go.



Queensland Government has a chance here lead the way toward a solution to this dire situation, and to tap into a part of our community that already wants a closer connection, and historically have provided support and grown networks to deliver the assistance needed to overcome the issues surrounding isolation and loneliness in Queensland - mothers...

From my interviews with mothers, and from personal experience around being both a member of community and a mother who has lived through loneliness and social isolation, my greatest realisation to come from this is that through these experiences, most women lose their self-identity.

When a child is born, the woman now exists for the child. There is a saying that is very relevant; "To move freely one must be deeply rooted." Women must know and trust oneself, become educated in a new and valuable skill set of self-worthiness and identity

My proposal is around systemising self-help for women. Prior to childbirth, the women in our communities ran businesses, held executive positions in companies, organised and managed staff, were responsible for accounting, hired and fired staff, ordered stock, served customers, and dealt with conflict daily. Women drove trucks, buses, and flew planes. When they give birth to a baby and are at home, caring for the needs of their babies, all the while, these skill sets are sitting idle and isolation, loneliness and depression become very real concerns.

By including mothers in the governments process, not only is the Queensland Government assisting to reduce the effects of COIVD-19 on our communities, they are also leveraging an existing network of women who want to create connections and deliver support to others.



DELIVERY

- Upon leaving Hospital, new mums are provided with a treasure box, a gift containing books about self-worth,
 Brene Brown's book on vulnerability, "Dare to Lead", include a brochure with links to Ted talks relevant to the
 worthy of self and your purpose. Photo cards of easy to make, nutritious smoothies, positive mantras on
 magnets for the fridge, and most of all, ways to connect with their local community centre where guest
 speakers will present in a family friendly environment. Topics include:
- 1. Matrescence: the education of what happens to your body and mind, chemically, emotionally, and mentally as the hormones and experiences change your body,
- 2. Courageously Identify Yourself: workshops about self-identity, heritage, belonging, the meaning of your name, your strengths, your power mantra,
- 3. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: If all needs are not met within your home, their will be instability and insecurity within yourself and your children,
- 4. Tuckman's Theory: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Adjourning. How these change your family dynamics every time a member leaves and returns to the family unit,
- 5. Personality testing: this can be done for each of your family members to help understand why people react the way they react, understand each member's love language.
- This treasure box is the Government's way of saying they care for every mother who leaves Hospital with a
 surviving baby or not. This is not a support package about how to breast feed or change nappies, that already
 exists. This is information and education is about the mother, for the mother.
- Without the primary care giver being in a stable state of being and mind, how can she care for children and
 run a household effectively? What will the children see and possibly be affected by later in their lives?
- The Government already provides a van to Primary Schools, educating children from a very young age about good nutrition, acceptable and not acceptable behaviours, how to stay safe and how their bodies will change throughout puberty. Why not for mothers? The bearers of this next generation. Can the government add to the services already being offered, to be inclusive of mothers?



DELIVERY

- Empower and educate mothers to retain their self-worth, their dignity and keep their minds stimulated. These women ARE the drivers of projects and volunteer work in the community. These women with young children see the benefits and want to connect with other women and members of society through giving their time. When their child does enter day-care or start school you have invested in these women, they are confident, ready, and able to go back to the work force or start their own business. I decided to educate myself once my children started kindergarten and school but after being out of the workforce for six years, I had very little confidence and superseded skills. Education in myself and personal development over a six-year period would have prevented this feeling of hopelessness and feeling isolated from the workforce.
- Women from a particular area will attend their local hospital to give birth. This is a natural catchment. These
 women immediately have this in common. The infrastructure exists in community buildings, for meetings to
 take place. If there are restrictions in place, women can connect via zoom. There is a Buddy system in place.
 Immediate support best works one-on-one. One being accountable for another takes the focus of loneliness
 off you as you are now thinking about your buddy. Daily or every second day you exchange text messages, a
 personal check-in.
- The Community Co-Ordinator manages the roll-out under the program and is the contact liaison officer between the mother and community resources such as medical and post-natal care.
- Give women structure and resources and they will take the reins to look after each other. The system is
 about reducing the stress on local mental health resources, up-skilling mothers in learning about
 themselves, learning to know and trust themselves, all while they are at home anyway.
- Mothers have access to volunteer matriarchs within the community with a lifetime of knowledge and experience. Matriarchs for mothers is the support network. The women build their own tribe, the tribe they crave to belong to, crave for purpose and support. A network of women whom they can talk about adult topics with, not so much focused on if their baby has started on solids yet or not. Come on, provide mothers with more stimulated activities. These mothers are the people that will run your community and be the matriarchs for the next wave of mothers.



As mothers are interviewed in the "Matriarchs for Mother's" program,, they are talking about their well-being both mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually, collecting data on their friendships, effectiveness of the support network, what they have learnt, accessibility to support, readiness to return with confidence to work or to support their community as well as their overall feedback, improving the program as required and providing measurable information for future programs.

The natural catchment of these mothers already exists, the government is simply Investing in mothers amongst their local community by providing education on the value of investing in self.

Women are natural connectors. By empowering women as mothers, you are empowering a community.

The idea behind a systematic solution being implemented as a program is about investing in education for a mother once, that gives a lifetime of benefits. Not only will this approach be working on limiting loneliness and social isolation but also, a sustainable approach to breaking the cycle.

Women must know themselves enough to trust themselves when times get tough. To have your own back, to be able to be your first port of call when you are actually on your own while raising a child will actually bring more benefits in the long term as opposed to only while rearing children. To believe in yourself, holding the tools of knowledge in how to support yourself by helping others has far more reach than simply within a home, be it running the next community program or a business.

If mothers have more confidence in themselves, their skill set and worthiness to be of value within her community or workplace, the roll on effects of this can also lead to a reduction in a lengthy domestic violence situation. A woman can reach out within her community if she needs to leave a violent situation and trust herself to be able to do so.



BECOMING A MOTHER IN A PANDEMIC

Saturday 7 August 2021 ABC News

"During Melbourne's lockdown last year, Emma was pregnant"

The below link shares Emma's story of feeling lonely and the experience of isolation during lockdown has taken a serious toll on her mental health. Isolation, anxiousness, depression: What it's like becoming a mother during the COVID-19 pandemic - ABC News - CLICK HERE

THE EXCRUCIATING LONELINESS OF BEING A NEW MOTHER

March 28, 2018 Today's Parent

Last month, the British government appointed a Minister for Loneliness. The new role was created to look at strategies for dealing with what health professionals around the world are calling an "epidemic" of isolation and disconnection—an issue widely attributed to an aging population and rising rates of people choosing to live alone in countries like the United Kingdom, United States and Canada. <u>CLICK HERE</u>

WHY A WHOPPING 90 PER CENT OF MUMS FEEL LONELY

March 8, 2017 Essential Baby

A survey conducted by ChannelMum.com found that more than 90 per cent of mums admit to feeling lonely since having children and many of them suffer in silence rather than talking about it. <u>CLICK HERE</u>



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