

Australia/New Zealand in a weekend

or

Seeing the Southern Cross

Debbie Jones and Hilary Corrick

In September 1996 two middle aged, middle class, female, local government bureaucrats joined the 'international jet set - economy class' and travelled to the Antipodes as ambassadors for an organically grown child care system, 'The Looking After Children System UK'. We travelled as managers, having sacrificed our credibility as practitioners long ago, and being repeatedly reminded by our learned university and Department of Health colleagues that under no circumstances could we be labelled 'researchers'.

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to capture on paper what we singularly failed to capture on film - the bright colours, the sensations and the images of 30 plus days jetsetting on the other side of the world.

The first memory to record is the degree to which we both underestimated that traveller's friend 'jet lag'. We had somehow gaily assumed that you can travel 30 hours, lose 12 hours, leave the UK in the height of summer and arrive in Wellington, New Zealand in a freezing early spring and feel normal. We didn't. However our introduction to New Zealand probably made that transition even more difficult. Almost our first experience was a journey round Wellington's equivalent of Tesco and experience of what was to be almost a perennial theme, namely, they use the same language, even use the same terms, but they mean different things. For example, even buying breakfast cereal proved an impossible proposition for two jet lagged travellers.

In thirty days we clocked up something like thirty-six separate meetings. We must have met hundreds of academics, practitioners, carers and young people, and to all we attempted to remain fresh and new. We both expected to be 'found out'. One day some of these learned, extremely clever people are going to discover that our actual knowledge is only skin deep, attention to detail being less than impressive.

Our trip to the Antipodes was universally greeted in the UK by widespread envy, scorn and derision. On our return, tales of overwork, underpay and under-nourishment were met by blank stares and no sympathy. However, the fact is, the schedule was punishing and the consequences predictable in terms of 'flu' bugs and, of course, supreme irritation with each other. Imagine spending 24 hours a day with a colleague with whom you 'did not start out in love'. To stay the course in spite of basic accommodation and being thrown together

incessantly, was a remarkable achievement. However it is worth pointing out that, had our thoughts been videotaped, it would have been the Divorce Courts or for that matter Civil Litigation.

Our two LAC ambassadors are both professionals, used to controlling and acting independently - otherwise known as 'arrogant sods'. This meant that very early on we had to carefully negotiate 'rules of the game' which meant sacrifices all round. It was a tribute probably to our own professionalism and sheer determination that at the end of the day we were even able to use each other's stories as our own.

We are both novices at the international travel bit, unlike most of our academic colleagues, it would appear. It gave us a unique opportunity to get inside systems and get to the core of issues very quickly. We were both flies on the walls, surveying tensions between purchasers, providers, non-government agencies and commissioners. There were many moments when we could have come badly unstuck. We dug the holes and almost fell in.

STARTING IN NEW ZEALAND ...

As an example, in New Zealand we were completely thrown by the cultural mores, which no one had thought to warn us about, around the 'do's' and 'don'ts' within the local community. Did you know that it is rude to sit on tables while you are lecturing to a group of Maoris - to put it crudely, tables are for 'glasses not arses'. For those of us who are used to both waving our arms around and sitting and leaning on tables, the discipline was excruciating. We were also forced to give over control of our personal as well as our professional activities to people who were managing us. There were numerous comic moments - like seeing 'Independence Day' in Palmerston, New Zealand, a film that both Hilary and I had scorned in the UK. It was also salutary for us to learn that central heating is not valued in New Zealand. Equally, the total absence of pollution is stunning, the clarity of the air and brightness of the colours left us open-mouthed.

MOVING ON TO MELBOURNE ...

Melbourne is a big, international, smart city. Debbie was glad that she had brought all her suits. The pressure of our programme was at its greatest in Melbourne, we were

literally delivering nine hours a day. Money had been invested in actually getting us over to Victoria. Consequently our accommodation, although welcoming and nicely prepared, was a trifle spartan – an ex-children's home, the red lino brought back many less than fond memories of sleepovers. However, what was stunning and what must be the best kept secret around is the variety and quality of the food in Victoria. We did not lose any weight.

Melbourne Human Services is full of ex-pat English social workers who came over in the late eighties. Some of them are still rooted back there. The professional imperative is driven by the child protection conveyor belt. The services are all accessed via the child protection route. In some respects it must feel a very safe structure to work within and one certainly felt that one had some transferable skills. However, the awesome image of an enormous room entirely filled with technology and child protection workers filled me with horror and remains with me still. However, the most enduring memory has to be of a young person, a graduate of the care system, who made a profound impact on us and illustrated the gaps in services and things that needed to be done in Victoria to promote the voice of young people. It is no wonder that Looking After Children is attracting so much interest from carers and young people's organisations.

THEN TO PERTH...

Perth was a wholly different experience for us and illustrated acutely the demarcation between state and federal legislation. The fact is that you can be on a child protection register in Victoria, then move over to Western Australia into completely different custom and practice. There has been no new children's legislation in Perth since 1974. They are about to introduce a Children Act. It was a timely moment for us to be introducing the LAC system. It was also quite salutary to meet the Federal Minister whose total budget was only a mere 10% of your average English Local Authority Social Services Department.

IMPRESSIONS

Australians were rightly defensive of their practice, they resent importing models of service that do not necessarily transpose easily. However, they are open and receptive and are willing at least to look, listen and learn. There are of course many things we can learn from them. In Melbourne, we were introduced to the Emergency Duty Team, which basically means that a social work service is offered on a 24 hour basis, which is superbly resourced and managed and makes our own set up look like elastoplast.

The final stunner for us is the distances. Australians think nothing of travelling across thousands of miles to undertake visits. We always knew that the UK was gridlocked, but we have to say that distances in Australia give the whole notion of 'contact' a new meaning.

Professionally, we were wrung out, personally relationships were inevitably strained. As the images inevitably fade with time and become overtaken by more pressing immediate concerns, the ultimate proof of the pudding as far as these two LAC ambassadors are concerned will be the extent to which our mission was successful.

We are left with almost childish amazement that a system which was grown in the UK could be adapted over here. To quote one of the Maori representatives:

... we think this is an excellent system ... this embodies the things that we know we should do and sometimes don't and often forget...

This quote mirrors everything that young people or very own care graduates have said about the genesis of the Looking After Children System.

WHY 'AUSTRALIA IN A WEEKEND'?

Well, we had one free weekend out of a possible four. We were taken round Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne, introduced to kangaroos, wallabies, two seas, a couple of oceans and the great, tall trees of the Dandenong Ranges. However, an enduring image for us, not quite captured on film, has to be the massive surf breakers along the Great Ocean Road, with the odd surfer breaking an uninterrupted and empty skyline – distance and space – what a contrast. Equally significant was the Southern Cross, which we met in Wellington and sadly left some four weeks later. The stars are very definitely brighter – is this the start of an affair at a distance or is it merely the reflections of a transient visitor?

Both Hilary Corrick and Debbie Jones were members of the LAC Research and Development Team on secondment from Local Government Authorities. They visited New Zealand, Victoria and Western Australia in September 1996 to provide training and consultation on LAC with support from the British Council in Australia and the Victorian Department of Human Services. Hilary is currently a policy development officer with Southampton City Council and Debbie is Service Manager (Disabilities) with the Oxfordshire Social Services Department.