

## WFWP Victoria, Australia's Dignity Project in the City of Dandenong

John Bellavance  
November 23, 2016



As a project of WFWP Victoria, committee members of the Dignity Project met throughout the year to organise a public forum in the City of Dandenong. The Dignity Project was initiated at the 2015 UN International Day of Peace Conference, with the forum being an answer to the call of action from participants on the day. The outer eastern growth corridor of Melbourne is an area showing high levels of documented violence against women and children, plus drug and alcohol abuse. These council areas include Cardinia, Casey and Greater Dandenong. According to the 2016 'Profile of Health and Wellbeing in Greater Dandenong' the number of family-related violent offences documented by Victoria Police in 2014/15 was 87% higher than the metropolitan average and the second highest rate in Melbourne. In 2010/11, the rate of child abuse in Greater Dandenong was more than the Victorian rate and the second highest level in metropolitan Melbourne.

The Dandenong forum raised awareness about family violence, but took the approach that restoring the dignity of individuals in the relationship cannot be undertaken in isolation. Both women and men need support, education and healing. Hurt people, hurt people.

The forum date was chosen to support the Nov. 25th UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and supported Orange Day, a campaign initiated by UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, who said, "Break the silence. When you witness violence against women and girls, do not sit back. Act."



[The UN day advocates that:](#)

Violence against women is a human rights violation

Violence against women is a consequence of discrimination against women, in law and also in practice, and of persisting inequalities between men and women

Violence against women impacts on, and impedes, progress in many areas, including poverty eradication, combating HIV/AIDS, and peace and security

Violence against women and girls is not inevitable. Prevention is possible and essential

Violence against women continues to be a global pandemic.



The goals of the forum in the short term were to raise awareness and educate about the dignity of men and women through the sharing of real life experiences. To educate, heal and strengthen couple/family relationships, and foster respect. To empower men and women, and for the long term change their behaviours for a ripple effect within society.

After an introduction about the significance of forum, Anne Bellavance presented the projects and goals of the Women's Federation for World Peace. Honourable Julian Hill MP and Federal Member for Bruce welcomed participants to the forum. Julian shared about his experiences being raised by his mother, a single parent, and how her strength guided him. He emphasised that more women should be represented in the leadership of political parties, and this should likewise be the case in all aspects of society.

As the keynote speaker, Dianne Simboro spoke about, "Working collaboratively to create a new normal." Dianne is founder of Family Violence Mindset Solutions and for the past seven years has used her own lived experience to support and benefit other survivors of family violence in the Western Women's Break the Cycle Program, providing Court support and advocacy, and one to one counselling for complex cases. She became co-facilitator of the Women's Multicultural Support Group, and over time created seven training programs specific to the women's needs.

Four forum panelists, who are experts in their own fields, offered presentations to raise awareness about the different aspects of Dignity and answered questions from the audience. Khatija Halabi, founder and current Vice President of the United Muslim Sisters of Latrobe Valley, shared about the Dignity of Moslem Woman. Veronica Hassett, director of Wellsprings for Women in Dandenong, shared about the Dignity of Asylum Seekers. Bianca Joyce, social worker in the homeless sector, shared about the Dignity of the Homeless and challenged the audience to develop a new mindset towards people they see living rough on the streets of Melbourne. Dr. Les Spencer shared about the Dignity of Women after experiencing violence. Dr. Spencer works in the Bio-Psycho-Social field of community psychiatry, clinical psychology, clinical sociology, neuro-psychology, and behavioural science. He shared the stories of his experiences with tribal women who have experienced violence in South East Asia and the Oceania Islands, and re-enacted to us how the women regained their dignity and healed each other.

The day concluded with a workshop session on relationship tools based on the 'Mastering the Mysteries of Love' Relationship Enhancement® Program. This interactive workshop was presented by John Bellavance and followed by a lively discussion about empathic listening and its benefits to develop better communication within a relationship.