

May 2006: Five days of intense hearings bring recognition, relief, tears and laughter.

May 2006: "FIVE DAYS OF INTENSE HEARINGS BRING RECOGNITION, RELIEF, TEARS AND LAUGHTER" from the by Hana Blackmore, Convenor People's Inquiry Newsletter No. 5

There is so much to write, so much to convey, and I am sure it will all eventually be said – but I hope a few words now will tide us over.

So much happened over that last week in March. Three years in the making, one year of planning, and finally we made it. We held our people's inquiry.

Five days were too short, but we did hear from everyone who wanted to speak at the Inquiry. For many it was very hard. It was hard to have to recall experiences and situations they would rather forget. But they still came, and we were there to witness their stories, and to support them.

The recognition and thanks have flowed non-stop since the first day, but to those who came we thank you again for your courage. Thank you too for being there for those people - who for whatever reason - could not be. Their stories were heard through you and it has been hugely appreciated.

There were tears - but there was also support and care for each other, and with it came the relief and the laughter. So many stories.

People came, never intending to speak, but did, and their contribution was invaluable. A place was given up so others could be heard, and a last minute submission slotted in which blew us all away. How diminished we would be if we hadn't heard it.

What synchronous chance led three International Human Rights Commissioners to visit the Inquiry right in the middle of the only detailed submission about Human Rights? The courage of the scientists prepared to stick their heads above the parapet and tell it how it is. A local GP rushing in from surgery at the last minute and providing some much needed local perspective.

Whole families together, reporting and supporting each other. The clarity of the young people and children participating. A young man reducing the room to helpless laughter with his response to MAF suggestions that his symptoms were all in his head. The stillness in the room as we heard the stories of loss and pain - the applause at the end as we acknowledged their courage. We are so proud of them all.

On the opening day I said that the Inquiry was not the end, but actually the beginning. We were treading out a new path that we hoped would be used to change the way we do these programmes, the way we treat people. I also noted that the path we were creating is not made by any one person, but many. To those many who came, and all those who have participated in many different ways - your footsteps have made a firm and clear impression. We know they will endure, and will show us the way we need to go.

To those who made it all possible: SPECIAL THANKS

From the warmth of the opening evening at Te Piringatahi O Te Maungarongo Marae to the farewells for a safe journey home, the Inquiry was blessed with a safe and supportive atmosphere.

To Papa Fred Holloway must go special thanks for this. He was with us every day, sharing in the rollercoaster of emotions we all went through listening to the submissions, always providing that support and care we appreciated so much. And of course Warahi Paki of Waitakere City Council who was here, there, and everywhere we needed him. Indeed, the quiet support and help of everyone at Council from Mayor Bob Harvey and Councillor Penny Hulse to the admin staff and receptionists, made our Inquiry not only possible but enjoyable.

For me as Convenor, the desire not to miss one word of the hearings clashed constantly with necessary administration duties. And some of those duties definitely fell at the last hurdle! I not only forgot to thank everyone at Waitakere City, but also the fabulous team that is the People's Inquiry Steering Committee. Without them the Inquiry would never have run as smoothly as it did – and we did have some real challenges to overcome. But they calmly and cheerfully got on with the job.

And to Alan – who collapsed with a massive coronary shortly after giving evidence with us – thank goodness your good heart which led you to do so much for everyone else, was also a strong one and pulled you through. You gave us all a huge fright and much pause for thought. Safe recovery, Alan.

Recognition and thanks are also due to many others who provided valuable back up and support, and in particular the great work that Ray & Chris did filming the hearings. We thank them both, particularly as their task did not end with the Inquiry. The processing of the recordings takes as long as it did to make them! And of course there are not thanks enough for the hundreds of supporters whose donations and contributions really did make it possible. Without you, none of us would have been there. Thank you all.

Effects of pesticide spraying - Overseas delegation share their experiences

International guests who travelled from India, the Philippines and Malaysia to support our community and the Inquiry, presented a special lunchtime session during the Inquiry about the effects of aerial spraying pesticide over their villages. The session was filmed - (as were all hearings) - so we hope that at some time we can share their experience with a wider audience.

But in the meantime - To Jayan, Ramel, Lo-Long, Shripathy and of course Jennifer, Thank you. Your stories not only resonated with us, but touched our hearts. We will never forget you.

See www.panap.net for details of their work, and great front page reports of the People's Inquiry.

Commissioners praise Inquiry process

At the end of the Inquiry, the Commissioners issued the following statement:

“We thank all those who gave oral or written testimony to the Inquiry. We acknowledge your courage in coming forward and speaking publicly about painful experiences.

We also thank the organisers for the competence and professionalism they brought to the Inquiry. It should be noted that the Inquiry is extraordinary in having been brought about by the unpaid labour of members of the affected community

itself. It became clear to us that this involved many hours of emotionally and physically taxing work.

We were deeply impressed by the dedication of the organisers and many of the witnesses to others in their West Auckland community.

We thank Te Piringatahi O Te Maungarongo marae for making us welcome and Waitakere City Council for hosting the Inquiry, and we particularly thank Warahi Paki and Fred Holloway for their guidance and care.

We will consider carefully what we have heard here; we hope to complete our report by 30 June 2006”.

In return we thank them for their extraordinary patience, hard work and good humour. We could not have picked a better bunch of people to do this job. Thank you Tom, Dell, Joanna and Romy. Thanks also to Moana Jackson who sadly had to pull out of the Inquiry at the last minute for family reasons. Hana Blackmore