



## EMBRACING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN SLSA “ON THE SAME WAVE”

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### ABSTRACT

The beach is a common point of recreation for all Australians. Families flock to the beach on the weekend to picnic and to enjoy the sun, the sand and the surf. The traditional family holiday also occurs at the beach, whether you come from a coastal suburb or from the centre of Australia. Many Australian couples also marry on the beach. The beach has become an important part of the Australian psyche.

The Australian surf lifesaver has also become synonymous with the beach and in particular with safety at the beach. The surf lifesaver has become an Australian icon, respected by all. As such, the events that occurred on Cronulla beach on 4 December 2005 generated anger within the community. This incident occurred between a number of local surf lifesavers and a number of Muslim youths. It is alleged that this incident was started by an exchange of words and ended with a physical altercation. In response to this incident, a large group of men and women gathered in the surrounds of North Cronulla beach on 11 December to show support for the local community. This gathering has become known as the Cronulla riots.

On the Same Wave is a program that aims to provide support to young Australians of all backgrounds, particularly young Australians of Middle Eastern background, to engage Surf Life Saving around Australia. The partnership also aims to achieve greater harmony between all beach users and promote a culture that the beach is there to share. It further aims to develop inclusive practices within SLSA and individual surf life saving clubs to more effectively recruit members from a broader population demographic.

In delivering On the Same Wave, SLSA is not only meeting the cultural needs of the organisation, but also showcasing a practical example of SLSA as a lead organisation of social change in the Australian community.

### INTRODUCTION

A recent independent review of the National Museum of Australia Surf Life Saving Travelling Exhibition (travelling to each state during 2007 in celebration of 100 years of Surf Life Saving in Australia), by a Research Fellow in history at University of Queensland, began with the following introductory comments ...

“After 100 years the most astonishing thing about the surf lifesaving movement in Australia is that it is currently at the vanguard of some critical areas of social ... change in Australia. That an association of about 113,000 volunteer members ... who adopted at their inception a military-style model of organization, and who only admitted women to full membership in 1980, is capable of leading major social change in Australia is a subject worthy of further analysis.”(Stell, 2007)

Through these comments, the reviewer recognizes the valuable role Surf Life Saving is playing in leading the way in embracing social change; a role that will provide benefits across the Australian

community. Embracing cultural diversity is one element of the social change agenda engaging Surf Life Saving Australia in its pursuit of organisational change.

## **THE AUSTRALIAN BEACH CONTEXT**

The beach is a popular recreational destination for Australians. The beach plays an important role in the makeup of the Australian psyche. It is a destination of preference that epitomises the rites of passage for many within the Australian community as they move through life: they honeymoon at the beach, they take their families on holidays to the beach, they find refuge at the beach in Australia's heat, and they move residence to be near the beach.

The issue of cultural diversity on Australia's beaches involves sharing and participating in the beach experience. The question emerges, "On whose terms does that sharing and participation take place?"

The Australian surf lifesaver has also become synonymous with the beach, and in particular with safety at the beach. The Australian surf lifesaver has become a national icon. In 2007 Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) celebrates 100 years as a water safety organisation. Over that time, SLSA has remained essentially a white, Anglo-Celtic organisation. Today, the Australian community enjoys a high degree of cultural diversity, and if SLSA is to maintain its relevancy as a community based organisation, then it needs to reflect a membership base that is more representative of the Australian community.

An incident at Cronulla on 4 December 2005 generated a wakeup call to both SLSA and the Australian community. The incident occurred between two local surf lifesavers and a number of young Australians of Middle Eastern appearance. It is alleged to have started as an exchange of words and ended with a physical confrontation. In response to the incident, a large group of men and women gathered in the surrounds of North Cronulla beach the following weekend carrying Australian flags and voicing support for local surf lifesavers.. The resulting civil disorder became known as the Cronulla riots. The Australian beach lifestyle had become a focus of community tension.

This paper addresses the issues of diversity and inclusion within SLSA, with a particular focus on cultural diversity and ethnicity issues arising as a consequence of the Cronulla riots. It provides a discussion of the steps taken to consult with the community, the challenges faced in ensuring SLSA's acceptance and understanding of cultural diversity, and addressing SLSA's image to reflect that acceptance and understanding to the Australian community.

## **ETHNICITY AND SURF LIFE SAVING – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Surf Life Saving Australia has in excess of than 113,000 members in 305 clubs around the coast (Surf, Life, Saving, & Australia, 2006).

For its first seventy years, almost without exception, SLSA was the preserve of white, Anglo-Saxon males. It was not until 1980, when females were finally admitted as fully-patrolling members, that SLSA organisation opened itself up to significant social change as an organisation. Women now make up in excess of 40 per cent of the SLSA's 120,000 membership.

The popularity of the 'nippers' movement (i.e. boys and girls between the ages of five and thirteen) since the late 1970s has been another source of social change as SLSA opened itself up to children and their families. Today there are more future volunteer lifesavers in training (ie. 'nippers') than there are active patrolling surf lifesavers.

These two significant changes to SLSA's demographic makeup over the past thirty years help to chronicle a changing perception of the organisation opening itself up to an increasingly wider Australian demographic. But there is still a way to go. In a country where 24 per cent of the population was born overseas (Australian, Bureau, of, & Statistics, 2006) and 26 per cent of persons born in Australia had at least one overseas-born parent (Australian et al., 2006) SLSA membership has yet to be representative of this demographic profile. The reasons are complex, and include both 'perceived'

and 'real' barriers to entry to Surf Life Saving in the eyes of both members of the community and members within SLSA.

The iconic image of the Australian surf lifesaver – tanned, blond hair, blue eyes, and able to swim through huge seas – is a long way from the reality of surf life saving today. This perception of a surf lifesaver poses a barrier to many members of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. To qualify as a fully qualified patrolling surf lifesaver, a candidate must pass a series of tests involving basic theory, first aid and resuscitation, surf rescue skills and a basic physical fitness assessment as part of a Bronze medallion. In reality, there are many other patrolling duties, such as first aid, resuscitation and radio operation, which do not require the holding of a Bronze Medallion.

In 2000, SLSA recognised that SLSA's membership demographics were not representative of the wider Australian community. It commissioned research that focussed on perceptions of surf life saving in the ethnic Australian communities. 'Overall, this research found that there was a high rate of awareness of surf clubs and surf life saving among ethnic Australians' (Big Picture Consulting Group, 2000, p.5). But it also identified barriers to joining including friendship circles and physical restrictions including the inability to swim.

As a result of the *Sound the Sirens* research, SLSA adopted the engagement of broader ethnic groups as one of its key strategic objectives. Innovative programs were developed by a clubs including one at Scarborough Surf Life Saving Club prompted by a drowning of a young Vietnamese Australian male. The Scarborough SLSC (Western Australia) developed a program involving international students from the Perth Modern School. Students from Afghanistan, Belgium, Burma, China, France, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Sudan, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam and Yugoslavia were invited to a series of 'Days At The Beach'. After two years, the program resulted in seven students obtaining their Bronze Medallion. One of the key lessons from the Scarborough experience is that, for its program to succeed, consistent effort and commitment was required.

Unfortunately, a lack of access to the financial resources necessary to provide national support for a greater engagement of CALD communities was a limiting factor. This changed following the events at Cronulla in December 2005.

## **ON THE SAME WAVE**

The *On the Same Wave (OTSW)* program is an initiative of Surf Life Saving, the community and both local and national government and was commenced in July 2006.

The *OTSW* program provides support to young Australians of all backgrounds, particularly young Australians of Middle Eastern background, to become part of the beach experience, and to engage with Surf Life Saving around Australia. The partnership aims to achieve greater harmony between all beach users and promote a culture that the beach is there to share. It further aims to develop inclusive practices within SLSA and individual surf life saving clubs to more effectively attract members from a broader Australian population demographic.

### **Initial consultation**

The *OTSW* program commenced with focus group consultation in South-Western Sydney. Participants in the focus groups came from a diversity of communities, with the majority being Australians from Middle Eastern and Lebanese backgrounds.

Key findings from the focus groups included:

- There is a very strong perception amongst young people that Surf Life Saving is for people from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds.
- At the outset 98% of young people said that they would not consider becoming a surf lifesaver.
- Reasons for not joining included not feeling welcome, not believing they had the physical skills, and having significant family commitments that limited their time.

- Participants had strong feelings about the “Cronulla riots”. They often felt singled out in Cronulla and on the beach.
- 80% of participants indicated that seeing ethnic surf lifesavers on the beach would help to prevent a repeat of the incidents in Cronulla.

Despite the large number of focus group participants who said they would not be surf lifesavers, 60% indicated that they would be interested to learn skills associated with lifesaving.

This latter finding was an important influence in the design of the OTSW program and resulted in an emphasis being placed on general beach awareness and surf safety, and less of an emphasis on recruiting surf lifesavers. The outcomes of the program were refocussed to the number of people involved in beach visits and basic surf safety lessons. To support this core of the OTSW program, it was agreed that other strands in the strategy would include:

- production of multi-lingual brochures with a safety and recruitment focus
- wide promotion of OTSW programs to reach a maximum number of people
- cultural awareness training in the surf life saving clubs

### **The evolving program**

With information gained from the initial focus group consultation, the *On the Same Wave* program was developed with a number of strands. The approach taken was met with a willingness from communities and school groups to learn more about beach safety and surf lifesaving. As a result, surf awareness programs were delivered extensively and were reinforced with information about further courses (such as the SLSA Bronze Medallion) and membership opportunities within surf life saving clubs.

The following specific programs were delivered and continue to be delivered:

Surf Awareness programs	Promoting surf awareness to people from CALD backgrounds. Programs of various lengths including one, two or five day programs as well as half day and one hour sessions. These programs aim to increase surf safety amongst CALD communities and to reach a wide number of people from across Sydney, with the aim of breaking down surf life saving stereotypes.
Resource Development	Resources, including lesson plans and delivery supports, have been developed to assist in the delivery of programs. Outcomes of the programs are matched to the needs and abilities of the students, resulting in delivery in a format that caters for groups with limited swimming ability.
Bronze Medallion training	Bronze Medallion training was delivered to a group of young people from the Lakemba Sports Club to provide them with the necessary skills to become active surf lifesavers. These individuals also received further awards during their training including first aid and resuscitation awards. Eighteen (18) new members from predominantly Muslim backgrounds are now actively patrolling as members of one of Cronulla’s four surf life saving clubs.
Cultural Awareness Training	Cultural awareness training was conducted with surf life saving volunteers and staff in order to ensure that they had an understanding of the issues affecting people from diverse cultural backgrounds as well as an appreciation for the roadblocks that CALD people face when considering joining SLS. This training has been further developed as part of an ongoing surf life saving training package for clubs.

The OTSW strategy reflects not only the need to engage with the community, but also to build a culture of change within SLSA and its clubs that acknowledges and embraces cultural diversity within Australian society. This need was addressed through the delivery of cultural awareness training and the development of a cultural awareness DVD. These measures moved towards engaging clubs in cultural change. Sustaining such change provides SLSA with a significant challenge to ensure that *On the Same Wave* creates sustained change.

### **Outcomes (June 2006 – June 2007)**

The OTSW program has achieved a number of outcomes in its first year. These outcomes include

- a. OTSW program outreach involving 46 schools and community groups visited, 819 lifesaving awards gained (including surf awareness awards, Bronze medallions, resuscitation and first aid awards), and 1754 students participating in surf education sessions.
- b. Extensive resources produced for clubs (cultural awareness training DVD, support tools for engagement and delivery of programs, posters) and the community (multi-lingual water safety brochures, multilingual information brochures and inclusive imagery).
- c. Contact and collaboration with Intensive English Colleges (IEC's) to educate newly arrived migrants in surf safety and surf lifesaving. These colleges have been established to provide schooling to newly arrived young people that have limited English skills.
- d. A significant level of engagement and education within CALD communities in three of the major Australian Capital Cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane).
- e. A program model that provides advice to clubs and states on key principles of community engagement and program delivery based on the Sydney experiences.
  - Engage with communities through focus groups to establish community perceptions of surf life saving and learning needs appropriate to each community.
  - Access the suite of OTSW educational resources to meet a range of community learning needs.
  - Provide training for a pool of skilled surf lifesavers to enable them to articulate the benefits of the water safety, drive program objectives and tailor resources to community needs.
  - Provide cultural awareness training to equip surf life saving club personnel to ensure clubs are accepting of cultural difference.
- f. Extensive media coverage both nationally and internationally.

### **Challenges for SLSA**

As a result of the *On The Same Wave* experience, three major challenges present for SLSA within the context of embracing cultural diversity.

1. The first challenge involves breaking down the perception that all surf lifesavers are of white Anglo Celtic Australians who must be strong swimmers. This is a significant barrier in reaching out to CALD communities. Part of this challenge involves SLSA's use of 'stereotypical images' of surf lifesavers in printed materials and advertising. In beginning to address this challenge, SLSA is reviewing imagery and marketing strategies.
2. A second challenge relates to the sustainability of a cultural diversity change agenda across the organisation. All levels of SLSA (members, clubs, states, national) need to make a commitment to

cultural acceptance and change. This will only happen when surf lifesavers understand the benefits of embracing cultural diversity. Failure to address this challenge carries with it the risk of diminishing SLSA's relevancy to the Australian community.

3. A third challenge involves working with local communities to address the integration of marginalized groups into mainstream organizations and services. This challenge involves recognizing the importance of establishing and maintaining relationships as the cornerstone of any relationship with a community group. That relationship will define and determine the outcomes of the resulting program, and its ongoing success. This challenge translates into the need for the local surf life saving club to establish positive and mutually supportive relationships with the community group(s) participating in the program.

### **An Inclusive Organisation**

In addressing the challenges outlined above, SLSA is embracing cultural diversity within a wider Inclusion Strategy perspective. A number of issues relating to cultural diversity are seen as being applicable across other forms of diversity (i.e. gender, age, sexuality, physical disability, etc). The Inclusion Strategy enunciates a set of basic inclusion principles that relate across a range of diversity challenges.

Key inclusion principles are ...

- Diversity embraces a range of membership profiles, including women, youth, age, cultural and linguistic diversity, and disability.
- Inclusion is fundamental to the egalitarian culture within SLSA, and those egalitarian values embrace all Australians.
- Establishing and maintaining a positive relationship is the cornerstone of any inclusive practice. The relationship established defines and determines the outcomes of an inclusion program, and its ongoing success.
- Inclusion as fundamental to the recruitment and retention of all members.
- Surf Life Saving is for all Australians.
- Embracing cultural diversity is one dynamic in the challenge of change if volunteer organisations are to maintain their relevancy within the Australian community.

Over the years, SLSA has responded to diversity challenges over the past thirty years. The acknowledgment that SLSA needed to open its doors to more diverse sections of the Australian community can be demonstrated through the...

- inclusion of women as active surf lifesavers
- inclusion of nippers as members of the organisation
- adoption of masters competition to provide older surf lifesavers with the opportunity to maintain an active interest in surf sports and also to encourage them to continue active patrolling duties or commence such duties (for later entry members)
- extending the minimum age of SLSA membership to 5 years (previously 7 years).

The OTSW program and its focus on embracing cultural diversity is a continuation of SLSA's journey towards being an inclusive organisation within a changing Australian society.

### **Take Home Messages**

1. Spending time listening to the target community and seeing the issues from their perspective is critical to the engagement of the community, and the ongoing success of any program.
2. Establishing a degree of comfort with water-based activities (preferably within the target community locality) provides the basis of trust upon which the program will be built.
3. Engaging with other community support agencies (that provide integration services for the target community) is important to learn from their experiences.
4. Modifying teaching / learning resources to cater for the experiences and understandings of a particular community is vital in tailoring a program to the needs of that community.
5. Change is a two-way process. An analysis of the change required within your organization will be critical if it is to adapt to the needs and expectations of a wider range of community participation.
6. Embracing diversity is a slow process. It is important not to expect significant change in the short term. Embracing diversity is a long-term project.

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