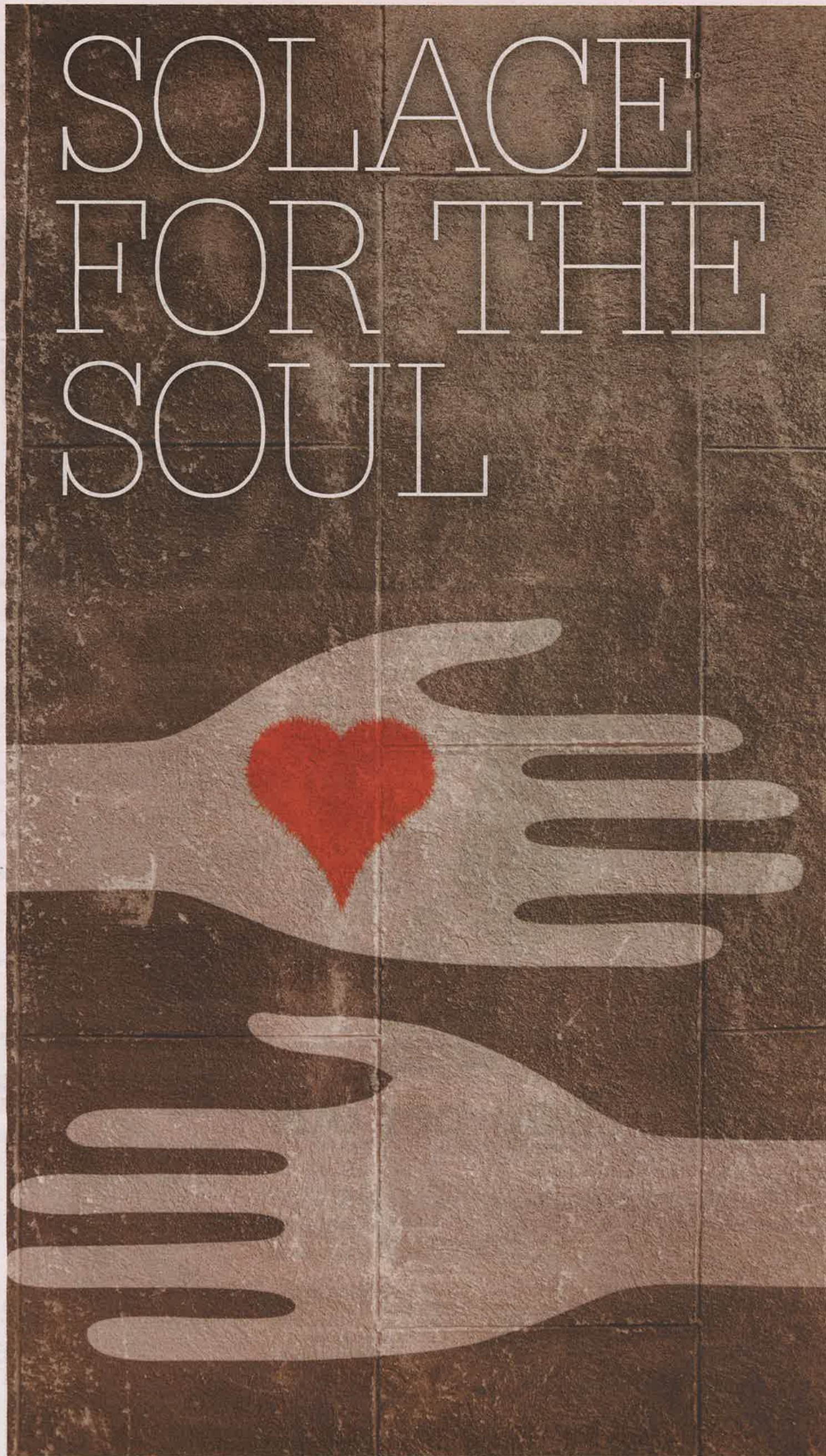


# COVER STORY

## SOLACE FOR THE SOUL



What do we do with the people in our community who are most at risk of harming themselves or others? In the second of a two-part series, JODIE O'SULLIVAN reports on a program that aims to heal hearts in order to mend broken lives.

**T**HERE are some wounds that cannot be seen. They bleed out slowly over a lifetime.

And our hearts are never the same.

What becomes of these people, the broken, the wounded and scarred of our society?

Albury Police crime manager Detective Inspector David Cottee knows all too well — he sees the casualties every day.

They are both the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and crime.

They end up in our courts, juvenile detention centres, jails and even hospitals.

They are largely written off as too difficult to deal with or beyond help.

But imagine if we could throw these people a lifeline.

A chance at healing unseen wounds and a chance to walk a different path.

When Inspector Cottee was invited to attend a workshop about the Heal for Life Foundation at Albury's Woomera Centre earlier this year, he went along not just with an open mind but an open heart.

There he learned of the foundation's approach to addressing the underlying cause of destructive behaviours and addictions that contribute to so many of the community's big-picture problems.

Now the man charged with the task of curbing the region's crime rate says that while there is no silver bullet, he sees great potential in the establishment of this ground-breaking program on the Border.

**C**ALLED Healing Hearts, the project flagged for the region is based on the work of the Heal for Life Foundation, which runs programs that help survivors understand the impact trauma has had on their lives.

In the past 15 years the foundation, based near Cessnock in NSW, has helped equip more than 5500 people with the tools to move on from the past to build better futures.

Albury's Luke Williams last week spoke to *Weekender* of how his time at Cessnock proved life-changing, helping him triumph over a 10-year cycle of drug addiction.

Sexually abused when he was four years old, Luke had bottled away his pain, unable to speak of the crippling childhood trauma.

Through the Heal for Life program, Luke was able to understand why he had been drawn to drugs.

"This knowledge gave me the power to move on from my past," he said.

Heal for Life founder Liz Mullinar is herself a survivor of childhood trauma.

With husband Rod Phillips, she first established nationwide charity Advocates For Survivors of Child Abuse in the early 1990s.

It soon became apparent there was a desperate need for a healing centre and in 1996 the couple found and purchased 200 acres at Quorrobolong, near Cessnock.



**SONG OF PRAISE:** Aboriginal community representatives Alison Simpson and Cathie Egan with country music star Sara Storer (centre) who has written a song to inspire others to triumph over addiction. Picture: MATTHEW SMITHWICK

**ROCK-SOLID SUPPORT:** Luke Williams says it was the support of his mother Muriel, 66, that helped him in his journey to overcome a 10-year drug addiction. Picture: DAVID THORPE

The land was named Mayumarri, an Aboriginal word meaning "peace", and in October 1999 the centre was officially opened by Sir William Deane.

Over the years extra facilities have been added to the charity, which now runs one-week healing programs for survivors of childhood trauma from those as young as eight through to teenagers and adults.

Mullinar has authored two books, been awarded an Order of Australia in 1997, a Centenary Medal in 2000 and in 2009 was named NSW Volunteer of the Year.

She has run several workshops on the Border and is booked to host two more trauma informed care training sessions in Albury at the end of August.

The push is now on to establish a similar set-up here with plans for the Healing Hearts program to run from a rural retreat on Wiradjuri country with outdoor workshops, art and music sessions, campfire cooking and traditional storytelling (or "yarning").

The project has attracted enthusiastic support from a range of local agencies, from police and youth and family services to Aboriginal community representatives.

**A**LISON Simpson says trauma is tearing apart the fabric of her community.

The Aboriginal community representative believes it is a major contributor to issues of alcoholism, drug-taking, domestic violence and crime in her people. "Trauma is like a wound of the soul," she says. "But you can't fix it if you can't recognise it."

With 13 years' experience in Aboriginal health, Ms Simpson has witnessed the effects of people self-medicating to overcome the pain of trauma in their lives.

“

When you break it down, we are one race — the human race — and we need to address what is needed to live positively.

Alison Simpson

"It's a huge issue in our community," she says.

"We have many fantastic programs already in place but they often only address the symptoms, not the cause of behaviours."

It's why Ms Simpson sees great merit in the Healing Hearts program.

"I personally believe that addressing trauma is the first step to tackling some of our major issues," she says.

"A lot of those issues stem from the impact of historical and cultural trauma, which is then carried through generations to create lifestyles our children see as 'normal.'"

However Ms Simpson is also quick to point out that trauma does not discriminate.

"A lot of attention is poured on the Aboriginal community but these issues are far-reaching across Australian society," she says.

"When you break it down, we are one race — the human race — and we need to address what is needed to live positively.

"People need a sense of belonging, of being valued and respected, a sense of purpose and they need loving relationships."

Ms Simpson says when those elements are destroyed and people start to self-medi-

cate, the road becomes very short.

The statistics certainly support the anecdotal evidence with Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for 2013 showing the suicide rate is twice as high in Aboriginal men and women for every age group than in non-indigenous males and females.

The NSW Department of Juvenile Justice says 50 per cent of its juvenile detainees are indigenous and acknowledges "the over-representation of Aboriginal young people under supervision in the justice system".

Cathie Egan, one of the co-drivers of the project and the chairwoman of the Albury-Wodonga Aboriginal Community Working Party, says there is a huge demand for the Healing Hearts program locally.

The need for a healing centre was an overarching theme at a 2013 Aboriginal community forum on health, education, and social justice, according to Ms Egan.

Through her work in education she has seen first-hand the impact of trauma on families, particularly children.

"Trauma can restrict children from engaging fully in the education system and becoming productive members of society," she says.

Ms Egan says there is a long list of government and non-government agencies, as well as GPs, waiting to refer people to Healing Hearts. Now they need the funding to implement it.

Supporters are looking for donations to help get the program off the ground or businesses to sponsor a place, which costs \$2000 per person for the week.

**I**F you ask Inspector Cottee, it would be money well spent.

He describes the program as an "invaluable method of assisting the most

difficult clients make positive changes to their lives".

He believes that here lies an opportunity to identify both recidivist offenders and continual victims and to help them understand why they behave in a certain way so that they can change their behaviour.

"These people often present as clients of multiple agencies and are at high risk of harm to themselves or others," he says.

Inspector Cottee agrees the need is urgent and police can only do so much.

He says the problem is compounded by the fact rehabilitation centres in the region are few and far between and there is only one drug counsellor and a handful of phone referral services.

"There are programs available through the private sector but they cost in the tens of thousands of dollars," Inspector Cottee says.

"There is just not enough help for someone who wants to get help now.

"We know the longer the delay in getting help the less likely the person is to continue looking for it."

**F**OR those who emerge from Heal for Life happier and healthier, there is no price that can be put on the experience.

The most important thing they take away with them is the power to continue their own journey of healing.

Healing that renews relationships, changes lives and mends hearts.

**For more information or to donate to the Healing Hearts project or to book in for Liz Mullinar's training sessions, contact Felicity Corrigan at [felic\\_corrigan@live.com.au](mailto:felic_corrigan@live.com.au)**