



NORITTA TAKES ON THE CHALLENGE

Noritta Morseu-Diop was a single mum with two small children when she decided to go to university to study social work about 20 years ago. She was working full time and had four children when she decided to do a PhD. Clearly, Noritta doesn't shy away from a challenge.

Through her career and studies she has been motivated to lower the overly high representation of Indigenous Australians in prison.

"I have met children in youth detention centres and they often have a parent, a grandparent or other family members in the adult prisons. A turning point for me was when I was working in prison one day and I met a mother and her daughter who were serving sentences in the same prison and the mother had five other children who were also in jail," Noritta said.



Noritta, a Torres Strait Islander woman, who lives in Brisbane, is one of the first recipients of the Good Shepherd Indigenous Reconciliation Scholarship program, awarded a few months ago. She plans to complete her PhD next year and hopefully it will underpin the development of Indigenous prison programs in the future.

Noritta graduated as a social worker from the University of Queensland in 1992 and almost immediately began working as a grief and loss counsellor for families who have lost loved ones through a death in custody. It was a traumatic job, but an issue she was only too familiar with.

In 2000 Noritta began a four-year stint with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service in Brisbane working with prisoners in some of the region's 15 adult prisons and community correction centres. The job influenced her next big step into academia.

"A major part of my work with incarcerated people was helping them with their parole applications, preparing them for their parole hearings and advocating on their behalf during their hearings.... I discovered that the prisoners had been knocked back (for parole) for not fully participating in the rehabilitation and other programs. Talking to the prisoners I found that many did not understand the language or why programs were run in a certain way," Noritta said.

Her PhD has led her to four years of research in Queensland and New Zealand. In NZ she found a system, which had developed some inspiring, and very successful culturally appropriate programs for the Maori prisoners.

"The Maori programs are all about giving prisoners life skills for living in today's world, but at the same time reminding them of their proud ancestry and heritage and rebuilding and nurturing self respect," she said

Noritta has interviewed former prisoners who spent at least two years in prison, as well as contracted Indigenous program providers who run culturally specific programs in prisons. She is examining the benefits of prison rehabilitation programs from the perspective of Indigenous prisoners.

She is also examining the level of support ex-prisoners get when they leave jail and what could help reduce the high rates of recidivism and over-representation of Indigenous people within the criminal justice system.

"I want the silent and forgotten voices of Indigenous prisoners to be heard and I want to look at the prison programs and find out if it has helped in the rehabilitation of prisoners," Noritta said.

