

A Brief Biography: Christopher Edwards-Haines

36 year old Indigenous Australian artist Christopher Edwards-Haines has survived being taken from his mother at nine months of age (his father was killed while Christopher was still in the womb), a childhood spent in non-Indigenous foster homes, an adolescence spent in detention centers, and 11 years in and out of adult jails.



These days he works in and with Indigenous communities. He continues his love for creating colourful, personalised paintings that illustrate his journey through trauma to a place of healing. He is a guest and key note speaker at state, national and international forums.

Chris describes his troubled past as arising from intergenerational trauma. "My mother was raised in Cootamundra Girls Home, so she had this void inside of her, where she had to disconnect herself from feeling for her family," he said. "I've actually watched that being passed down genetically or generationally as well within our family, where we disconnect ourselves from our feelings and from our children, through fear that basically, they're going to be taken sooner or later anyway."

As a result of his traumas of loss, violence and sexual abuse at the hands of others, the only path he knew led to addictions to alcohol and other drugs. This filled the voids in his life and met his need to numb the body of all feelings. Soon this led to involvement in violent acts himself, as he fought his way through life. Christopher makes no excuses or lays blame for his behaviors. Education, however, has given him a deeper understanding and enabled him to move forward and make better choices in his life.



While studying at the Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples at Southern Cross University, he has been illustrating his own story in a series of paintings...

- Indigenous Counsellor Training,
- Trauma and Trauma Recovery,
- Family Violence/ Family Recovery,
- Working with Children,
- Dadirri/Indigenous Spirituality,
- Recreating the Circle of Well-being,
- Loss and Grief Group facilitation Skills, Counselling,
- The Prun/Indigenous Group Conflict Management/Facilitation,
- Mens' and Womens' Healing Recovery,
- Addictions/Violence/Spirituality,
- Positive Parenting,
- It's my Life!
- Working with Adolescents.
- Aboriginal Australian history;
- Indigenous ways of cultural expression;
- Indigenous health and legal issues;
- Physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, cultural and social distress resulting from inter- and transgenerational aspects of trauma with practical processes for healing;
- family and community violence and recovery; and parenting.

Christopher's thesis is on incarcerated men and the tools needed to help, heal and stop the pattern of reoffending. Christopher sees his story as part of the trauma suffered by other Indigenous Australians.

"It's really hard to identify the problem, let alone try and find a resolution or solution for it which sometimes is under many layers of problems due to colonization and a lot of other things," he said. "That leaves people acting out basically self-icide, suicide and homicide, because you know that suicide and homicide are closely linked. And self-icide is basically what most Aboriginal people are in - and actually a lot of non-Indigenous people as well. They disconnect themselves from what they are really feeling and the real issues.

"The self-icide is also that basically by the time I finished my little boys home run and hit prison, I was hard in my heart completely, I was totally disconnected from feelings and very damaged spiritually inside. The only way I could do it was basically blaming - instead of ownership of my problems, I was blaming and putting it out on other people," he said.

Christopher and his wife are now members of a team that goes out from Gnibi College to communities across Australia, who have requested help with numerous issues involving trauma and violence. Being at Gnibi College with other Indigenous Students and being taught by Indigenous Lectures has been breathtakingly honoring. From the training Christopher has received and from his own life experiences, he has found strategies to express his own process as part of a community process that others can tap into. He also has a knowing that his learning and teachings will be a lifelong journey to wholeness.

"Healing is about repairing a damaged spirit," he said. "That is basically what I have been dealing with myself over the last couple of years. I have been out there trying to create these safe places. My safe place was unfortunately in gaol, so what I have been doing is actually trying to find a safe place outside of gaol, which I have done but I am trying to do on the community level. I am going out in community and helping them to create these safe places for people to find, to tell their stories and make sense of them."

Head of Gnibi College, Professor Judy Atkinson, says Christopher has taught her a great deal about what education really is. "An educator must be a person who has walked the path of learning from life's experiences, someone brave and courageous," she said. "Healing is an educational process, coming to understand the social, the cultural, the political, the psychological, environmental, family and community functions - or systems, or processes - that have made me who I am and how I relate to the world.



Healing provides me with the strength and the courage to look deeply at my past, and in the present provides me with the educational opportunities and tools to change the life circumstances that contribute to my pain. Education can be a powerful tool for change, for social change. Christopher has learnt more deeply to listen to himself and he has taught me to be still and to listen as well. Christopher has been making choices for change, in himself, well beyond my capacity to change myself. His changes, life choices have been massive."

Christopher contacted Judy after he had been rejected from a program on educating the men on violence and anger management through the jail system, because he was viewed as too violent for rehabilitation. He was also considered too violent to release.

"It is because I've been allowed to access these tools, this understanding and this education about myself, to move me out of my circle, the cycle that I was in," he said. "So many people are still trapped in that cycle and unable to move forward. I have worked myself into a place where I am strong within myself: I know where I'm coming from; I know the way out of there as well.

"By finding my true self I've been allowed to express all these things, to find my real voice, to find out my real problems, to identify and to make those choices, and to be able to move with myself, basically. One of my pictures is about re-connecting. That's the next generation. When I use children in my paintings I always use turtle eggs, because Mum, my Auntie, told me that turtles only know how to go forward, they can't go backwards, and if they roll over they're dead. And that's my motto for life, basically, because of that."

Christopher's life and story first came to the attention of Australians in the 1999 SBS Independent documentary "Cry from the Heart", which was directed and produced by northern rivers-based film-maker. The documentary won a Real Life on Film Award and was a finalist in the UN Human Rights Awards for Media and the ATOM Awards. Five years on, Christopher Edwards-Haines has gone from strength to strength, being invaluable on the SCU campus for his role in community based work, and his beautiful artwork which adorns Gnibi College.

His art collected at Gnibi College can be accessed through the web at <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gnibi/gallery/>. Further contact with Christopher can be facilitated through Dr. Atkinson at judy.atkinson@scu.edu.au.

Examples of his extraordinary artwork can be seen throughout this special issue of *GH Review*.

