

School of Health and Human Sciences

School of Health and Human Sciences Papers

Southern Cross University

Year 2002

Room 137

Stephen Kermode
Southern Cross University

This paper is posted at ePublications@SCU.

http://epubs.scu.edu.au/hahs_pubs/9

Kermode, S 2002, 'Room 137', *Byron Child*, pp. 35-36 This article was first published in *Kindred* magazine <http://www.kindredmagazine.com.au>

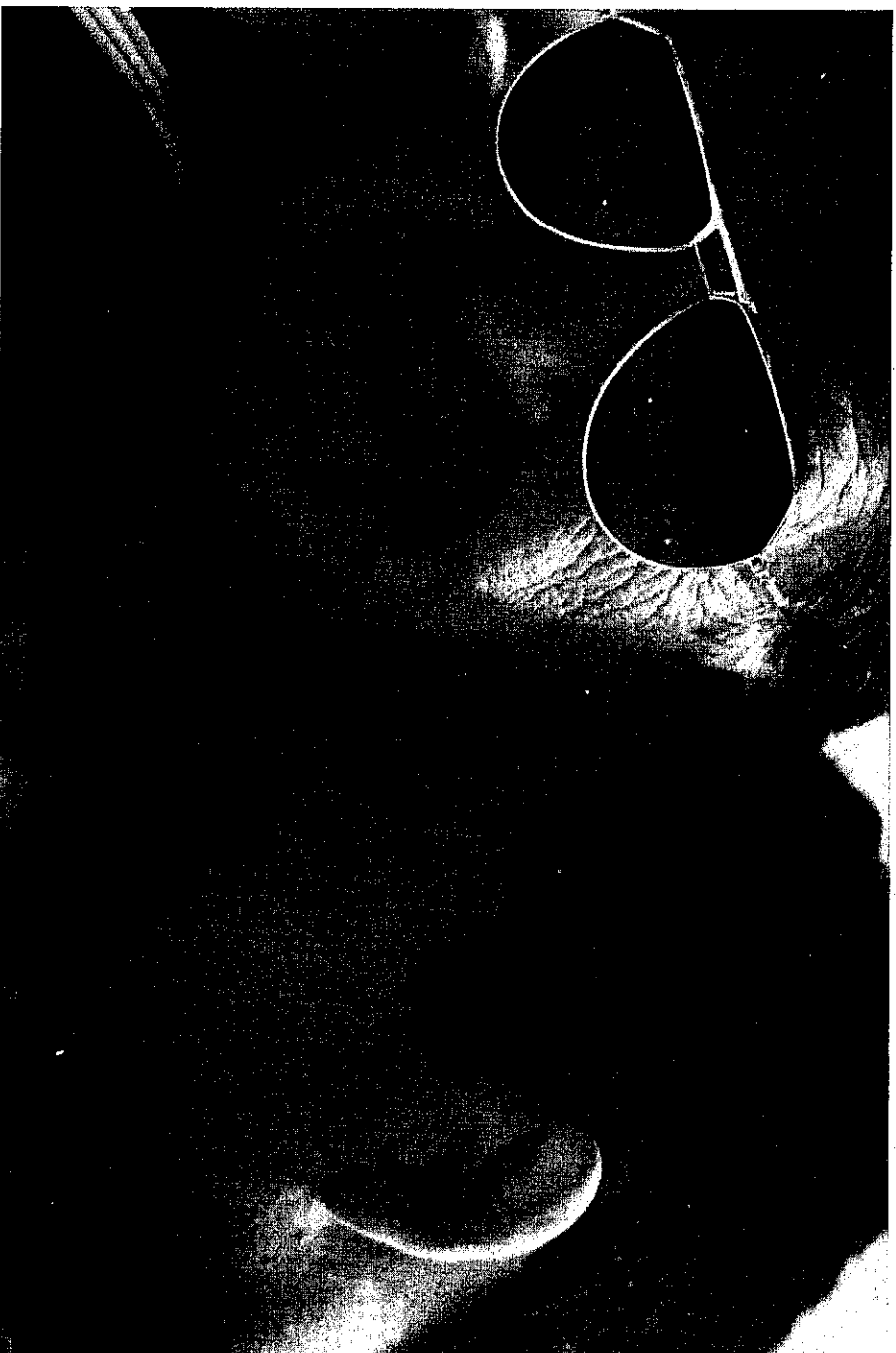
ROOM 137

By Dr. Steve Kermode

On the east coast of Australia, in a secluded location in the rainforest-covered hills of the hinterland, is a community known as Room 137. Not a very evocative name, but one with a special significance.

Room 137 of a Brisbane inner-city apartment block was the room in which Peter, the founder of the community, hanged himself from the door-jam of the bathroom. He had done a very efficient job of securing a strong webbing belt to the timber stud at the top of the doorway, and was clinically dead when his flamate arrived home.

While his body hung in the doorway, Peter had a profound out-of-body experience. He found himself floating up to the corner of the lounge room looking back at his corporeal entity. He was perfectly calm, and despite the subtle sensation of



Photograph by Niten

growing men

expectancy, he had no emotions at all. His paternal grandfather appeared before him, levitating above the lounge room floor. He had never met his grandfather, but he knew intimately who it was. And for what seemed like an eternity, he just floated there looking into Peter's eyes. There was no conversation, and no movement, but the powerful sense of connection and intent in the encounter pierced Peter's chest and flowed up into his head like a warm gush of hope – it felt like generations of missed opportunity had just been shown the door to possibility, and invited in. His grandfather slowly reached out and touched Peter's head and there was a flash of white light, a rattling chaos, and pain.

His resuscitation was successful, but his flatmate had been a bit heavy handed on the cardiac compression and had left Peter with several broken ribs. As he lay on the trolley bed in the Accident and Emergency Unit of the local hospital his chest ached, but he felt unexpectedly alive. Alive in a way that he had not felt since he was a young boy.

In the years that followed, Peter made a number of close friends with men who had all reached the very end and rebounded from it. In all, six of them had started the community called Room 137. The men who set it up came from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. Ex-convicts, professional men and artisans. It really didn't matter what they had once been, because in their new lives they wanted to simply be good men. This was their choice and this was the task they set themselves. They never thought of themselves as teachers, but slowly they attracted others to their community, and many of these others looked to them for inspiration and leadership.

In time, with some seed funding from a government grant, the community set up a formal rehabilitation program for young men who had run out of options. There was only one rule: live in the community as a willing participant or leave. After one full year, participants were required to leave for a year. Very few left before their time was up. A small number would return after their year away, usually to bring gifts and to tell stories to the current community participants. None ever returned to start again. Peter kept a record of every man who passed through Room 137, and while he never claimed a 100% success rate, he knew that ex-Roomies were doing much better than most in being good men. The local magistrates continued to refer clients to him, as did the Education Department and the Community Services Department.

While Room 137 was set up to be self-sustaining, it also had an outreach program that saw some of the young men involved in work and community service activities in other communities. Life in Room 137 was about finding power through personal growth and development. The day started at sunrise with Tai Chi and ended in the evenings with Yoga. Every man became skilled in at least one form of unarmed martial art. Every man learned a musical instrument, an art or a craft. Some became poets and story-tellers. Every man learned a technical skill – some maintained the community vehicles, while some learned to work with timber or metal. Every man sought to find their power and to develop it.

The men learned that real power came from the heart and mind – not from muscles. They learned that strength without flexibility was brittle and self-limiting, and eventually immo-

bilising – that real power involved strength and flexibility. They learned that risk-taking behaviour was necessary to grow – but that the risks had to be meaningful and not simply for self-glorification. Each week the older men organised supervised risk-taking activities for the younger men. Some activities relied on individual power, while other activities relied on group power. Men learned that there were times when solitary action was appropriate and times when group action was appropriate. Survival strategies were explored and tested. Men learned to find the limits of their own endurance, and to celebrate the discovery.

The younger men, when they began to reach the stage that they could open themselves up to the other men, were challenged by the others to talk about their place in the world. By talking about their place in the world, they could not ignore their place in the universe – so spiritual and metaphysical discourse became common after-dinner discussion topics. There was no dogma and there were no rituals other than those associated with finding and developing your power. Men would choose when they wished to reveal their power to the other men – it was not compulsory, it was not competitive and it was always followed by a celebration in which all men participated. Men learned to celebrate other men and to cherish diversity. This was the closest thing in the community to a ritual.

The ages of the men ranged from 15 years to 73 years of age. Peter was among the oldest, at 53 years. The age range gave opportunities to develop lifelong perspectives on the issues that faced all of the men. The older men, for instance, questioned the younger men about love and relationships. They did so by telling stories about themselves and asking the younger men to comment. In this way the younger men got to see the scars, the grief and the struggles that go with trying to find a life partner. Gay men and straight men learned to understand each other's perspectives on love and relationships. Men learned to find their hearts and to disentangle them from their hormones.

The older men also talked about their relationships with their sons and their daughters and the younger men spoke of their relationships with their fathers and their mothers. Fatherhood was given a special place in Room 137. Each man who was a father was given time and opportunity to explain to the younger men how fatherhood had changed their lives. Many of the stories were harrowing. Men who were abused as children revealed how the cycle of abuse perpetuated itself in them as fathers. Every man spoke of the father they had and their experience of being a son. Old men and young men alike wept for the fathers they never had a chance to know. The few men who were close to their fathers revealed the joy of having a powerful, loving and significant man at their side in their times of struggle.

Room 137 is a place where manhood is fashioned. It is a furnace, a crib and a canvas all at once. It is the door that Peter's grandfather opened. It is there for every man – if we could only find it.

Dr. Steve Kernode is 50 and a single father of 5 kids. Currently Associate Professor of Nursing in the School of Nursing & Health Care Practices at Southern Cross University. He teaches sociology, research and health studies. 