

The journey of the Groupwork Centre and Commonground

Through Co-founder Glen Ochre's life story

Glen Ochre, 1944-2014, Founding Director of both the Groupwork Centre and Commonground Training Resources Inc.



Cover of Glen Ochre's book,
*Child of the Earth: An
Autobiography*

A pioneer of collaborative work practices and group work, Glen Ochre was a giant of the facilitation movement in Australia. She co-founded the intentional community and workshop space, Commonground, in Seymour, Victoria, and the Melbourne-based collaborative education institute, the Groupwork Centre.

Glen was driven by a passion for a just, nonviolent and sustainable world that arose from her own experience of violence, poverty and discrimination. These same forces propelled her work as an activist, counsellor, social worker, nurse, educator, facilitator and group worker that influenced thousands of people.

Glen died at the age of 69 on Tuesday, 13 May, 2014, after wrestling with pancreatic cancer for 15 months. Cancer was one of many setbacks that marked her life of great achievement. These included an abusive and difficult childhood, the poverty of living as a single mother and the death of two of her six children.

From adversity, though, Glen drew on her warm and generous spirit to start afresh, building new and better ways of doing things. Her legacy lives on in the collaborative structures and processes she created, and in the loving spirit that helped form strong and lasting connections with everyone around her.

Glen's youth

Glen was born in Fairfield in Sydney's west in 1944. Her twin brother and sister, Bland and Annie, were born nine years later. Her parents were communists and fled the city during the anti-communist witch-hunts of the era for a small farm at Ulan, near Mudgee in central NSW.

This was a deeply unhappy time for Glen. She was sexually abused by her father from the age of three. Even when this stopped, she was physically and psychologically abused by her father until she fled her home at age 15. In among this, she was gang raped at the age of 13.

Development of Glen's values

As a young girl, Glen was already developing survival strategies. By the time she was five, she regularly sought sanctuary in the bush. Within two years, what started as day walks

became camping trips. She would build a gunyah from saplings and cook and fend for herself. She spent hours contemplating natural wonders – a majestic tree, a wasp nest or a bubbling creek. She had no doubt the connection she felt with the bush saved her life.

Safe in Mother Earth's embrace, Glen began to tap into one of the great gifts that nourished her life – her spiritual affinity with the natural world. Later she identified the healing power of the special place that is within all of us, the 'sacred centre' as she called it.

This profound intimacy with the natural world that she shared with Indigenous people, and with the Gypsy heritage of her mother's family, became integral to her work. It formed the basis of her model of self-awareness, the Community of Selves. In Glen's candid language, this model shows us how to 'deal with our own shit before we start to deal with everyone else's'. It remains a core element of the Groupwork Centre course in group facilitation.

Practical feminism

The deep scars from her experience of brutality took many years to heal. Glen did a lot of therapeutic work throughout her life coming to terms with the shame, bitterness and hurt. As always, though, there was an upside. The therapy laid the groundwork for her powerful counselling techniques. It also strengthened her commitment to what she called 'practical feminism', providing personal and political support for women and children and to many groups struggling to throw off the chains of patriarchy.

When Glen fled the farm for Melbourne, she trained at the Alfred Hospital as a nurse. Her mother falsified Glen's age on her birth certificate so she could get in. The country girl blossomed in the heady days of rock 'n' roll. She discovered make-up, hair curlers, electric lighting and cow's milk. On the farm milk came from goats and evening light from a Tilley lamp.

Her friendship with a young university student, Bob Alderson, grew into a relationship and they married by the time Glen was 17. They had four children together – David, Brian, Jodie and Cherie.

Development of Glen's political activity

As the daughter of communists, Glen was socially aware from a young age. Now she became increasingly politically active. She was part of the movement against capital punishment spurred by Ronald Ryan's hanging in 1967 and harboured draft dodgers during the Vietnam War. She was actively involved in the women's movement from way back when it was organised around women's kitchen tables. Glen learnt much from this movement, and in turn gave much back. Her commitment to feminism enabled her to begin crafting more effective ways to work together as collectives.

It was a busy and happy time for Glen, but it was not to last. The strain of the devastating death of her first daughter, Jodie, from cancer in 1969 when she was just two and a half, was too much for Bob and they split up. Years of poverty followed as Glen struggled to raise her three children on her nursing wage. And then the children lost their father when Bob died in a car accident in 1975.

Glen's shift to social work

By this time Glen had left nursing and was working on a support program at the Brotherhood of St Laurence for those doing it tough. It was the perfect fit. The job also launched Glen into a social work degree, where she honed her skills in group work. The education strengthened her analytical framework for her widening political focus.

After graduating in 1979, she returned to the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's then CEO, Peter Hollingworth, was a great ally in Glen's biggest project, the establishment of the Commonground Co-operative on 38 hectares near Seymour. He got the Brotherhood to stump up significant funds towards the endeavour.

It was at the Brotherhood that she met Ed McKinley, her second husband. They made a strong team with Ed giving her the support to take the next step with her dreams. They had two children together – Dan and Ruby.

The vision and reality of Commonground

Always the revolutionary, Glen had a passionate dream for a better way to live, to raise children and to build an effective platform to pursue collaborative endeavours – facilitating groups, campaigns for women's rights, support to the marginalised, nonviolence and social justice. Together with her friends Phil Bourne, Kate Lewer, Terry Melvin and Ed, Glen created Commonground Co-operative, a venture in communal living and working together. There were many years of working bees, fundraising and robust meetings. Commonground thrives today as an intentional community and a workshop space for activist and community groups.

In 1999 Glen and Ed moved back to Melbourne where their son Dan had gone to continue his schooling. Dan needed support as a result of severe ear damage, causing chronic tinnitus.

Groupwork Institute (now Groupwork Centre) founded

After years of working with groups to improve their skills Glen Ochre and Ed McKinley decided to launch the Groupwork Institute of Australia (now Groupwork Centre) to offer more substantial collaborative education. The first full-year course in facilitation started in 2000. This later became registered as the world's first nationally accredited facilitation qualification.

Glen's experience with death and new life

Tragedy struck again in 2010 when Cherie, Glen's daughter who had cerebral palsy, died of cancer at age 42. Also by this time Glen's reputation as a 'doula' (lay midwife) had enabled about 60 women to be better supported as they brought their newborn into the world. It is remarkable that she fitted this in on the side, although she was deeply appreciative of the nourishment it gave her back.

Glen's view: Providing skills for work, values for life

Glen's profound teachings brought together the three strands of her life's philosophy:

- the spiritual connection we share with the Earth and all living creatures that centres us;
- the emotional realm that guides us, especially the power of love; and
- the understanding of the structural and political forces that operate around us.

The hundreds of graduates who have participated in the year-long courses, and the thousands who have participated in the short courses have benefited deeply from the 'stickability' of the innovative techniques and skills Glen has crafted.

Glen Ochre's published work

Glen left a written legacy as well. In addition to her published work now available, we are currently working on manuscripts Glen developed for future release.

[Getting our Act Together: How to harness the power of groups](#) was her first book, published in 2013. The practical wisdom it contains can be applied in all sorts of group settings – community, workplace, therapy, lobbying – wherever people come together to work collaboratively.

[Child of the Earth: An Autobiography](#) is an absorbing and inspiring read. Written in the year before her death, Glen gives us a rich blend of her extraordinary personal story and reflections on her approach to life, giving us insight into how she became such a remarkable woman who developed such life-changing work.

Glen's family

Glen is survived by her children, David, Brian, Dan and Ruby, her partner, Ed, grandchildren Robbie, Finn, Nathan, Lachie, Frankie and Scout, her sorta daughter Emily and sorta son Jimmy and their parents Phil and Kate who have held the Commonground space with Glen and Ed since its inception. And then there is Glen's huge extended mob.

Glen Ochre, returned to Mother Earth