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A bad spirit in the women's shelter

By [Rachel Hayter](#)

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Transcript

Sabra Lane: When a group of Aboriginal women in north-eastern NSW warned that a local family violence shelter had bad spirits, management took it seriously. When the search for a qualified woman to cleanse the building failed, they started a smoking ceremony training program that's transformed the way the shelter approaches care. Rachel Hayter reports.

Rachel Hayter: In the northern tablelands of NSW, residents at a local women's shelter had a bad feeling about the place, and something had to be done.

Penny Lamaro: We wanted to have a smoking ceremony at our women's shelter to remove some negative spirits that some of our residents felt were in the building.

Rachel Hayter: Penny Lamaro is the CEO of Armidale Women's Shelter. It's been running since 1977 and every year supports 600 clients who don't have a safe place to call home, more than half of them Indigenous.

Penny Lamaro: When we were going through the process of trying to do that smoking ceremony, we realised that there were no women, no Anewan women living in Armidale who had the training to do that smoking ceremony. We had to use a man.

Rachel Hayter: Anewan are the Aboriginal people of the northern tablelands, and bringing

a man into a women's space had its own issues. So the shelter went through a painstaking year-long consultation process in partnership with Neywater Aboriginal Corporation to develop a women's smoking ceremony training program. Anewan man David Widders is dedicated to reviving culture harmed through colonisation.

David Widders: It's a great opportunity to come out, get the knowledge off the men that know how they're doing at the moment, to teach our women, and then have our women teach our girls, and make this, again, a story that's been reignited, that'll be around for many thousands of years.

Rachel Hayter: Hazel Vale is a local elder who learned the women's smoking ritual at the shelter.

Hazel Vale: It's cleansing, you know, it's bringing healing, it's, yeah, I'm excited about what's happening.

Opinion: For the smoke, we call that rahta. Oh, that's smoke's strong there.

Rachel Hayter: Among the younger women who learned to cleanse with smoke was 19-year-old Nami Collins-Widders, an Anewan woman and visual designer with Neywater. Narmi grew up surrounded by family, but largely without culture.

Narmi Collins-Widders: When I was younger, it was something I would struggle with, especially being a pasty black. I would be confused with my identity. I didn't get to grow up hearing about the dreamings.

Rachel Hayter: Being on country, shown which bark to use and songs to sing was relaxing for Narmi, and she's grateful to learn a ceremony that was almost erased.

Narmi Collins-Widders: It was a very powerful thing. It's definitely made me more confident in who I am.

Rachel Hayter: One day, she wants to teach her own children how to cleanse with smoke.

Narmi Collins-Widders: I want our history to be changed into, yes, bad things happen, but

we are so much more than that.

Rachel Hayter: Penny Lamaro says the Anewan Law Revival Program transformed the way the shelter approaches culture and helped the community feel like they own the organisation.

Penny Lamaro: It really changes people's idea of healing, what healing is, and how they can be a part of healing their own lives, and us just giving people the space, the capacity

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Credits

- **Rachel Hayter, Reporter**

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