



Christine Bennett and Giselle Wagner . . . want to set up a forum and safety house for people in crisis in Pittwater

# Dark side of Pittwater

by LIZ CUNNINGHAM

It takes just one offer of help and one small step to make a difference and that is what Christine Bennett and Giselle Wagner are doing to tackle an issue they believe is hidden behind the face of laid-back peninsula living. "There is a shadow face of Pittwater that no-one wants to talk about," Christine said. "Behind the laid-back surf culture and beachside lifestyle there are a lot of people in pain." Drug use, domestic violence and alcoholism have a profile in Pittwater that no-one wants to acknowledge according to Christine and the area has

an alarming number of young people in crisis. In fact the northern beaches has the second highest youth suicide rate in the state. (Manly youth council chairman Billy Cohen in Manly Daily August 1998.) "There are no support services for people in crisis in Pittwater," Christine said. Christine with her own private counselling service and solicitor Giselle Wagner are seeing people every day who are needing help. Women whose marriages have broken up can turn to alcohol, take on lovers, be abused and have to put an AVO on the guy and get to the point where they can't go back to their

## All Woman

home for fear of their safety. (A justified one, as the majority of murders of women are by males they know.) Christine said: "There is nowhere for these people to go. "No safe house." "Time and time again the refuge at Dee Why is chock a block," Christine said. Another problem is the laid back attitude to drug

use on the peninsula according to Christine. "Drugs have been handed out to kids on suburban buses." "The problem with drugs is that often people who are experiencing a crisis turn to drugs and find they make them feel even more depressed and can lead to feelings of suicide," Christine said. "Many kids coming from homes where the parents

have split up say they have no-one to talk to. "Others have no sense of self worth, of value, no sense of identity, or purpose. Christine said the underlying cause of most of these problems stemmed from a lack of self esteem or sense of identity. "Those questions are asked like 'who am I, what am I here for?"

"We need a sense of meaning in our lives." Christine said for youth part of the problem was a school system that placed students under so much pressure to perform well in the HSC to get high marks for university entrance so as to get a good job. "This whole concept of university being the be-all and end-all as if everyone is suited to it is wrong," she said. "It makes students with skills in other areas feel worthless. "There are many questions," Christine said. "Where do women and men go who are suffering from the ravages of

alcohol when they can't afford private clinics? "Where do women go when they are thrown out of their home in the middle of the night by an abusive partner? "Where do young people turn to when the family is not around? "These are only some questions relating to the shadow side of Pittwater and we hope that by bringing them out into the light of day some answers may come," Christine said. Taking the first step Christine and Giselle are starting a group called Walking with Purpose which will meet on the third Tuesday of every

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# 'We can heal the pain'

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month from 7pm to 9pm starting on April 20.

"We want to provide a safe forum free of charge for men, women and children of all ages who has suffered or is suffering from the effects of family's dysfunction."

Christine said the group aimed to establish a source of support within the local community for those who were suffering from the stress of family breakdown.

"We want to assist in developing self esteem and meaningful life purpose on a private and community level."

The group is also open to anyone interested in discussing these issues in a group situation with like minded individuals.

"It's a small step, to create a voice," Christine said.

"To get action from the council and government so we can start healing the pain on the peninsula together."

Meetings will be held at Mona Vale Conference Centre at Bassett St East.

For information call Giselle Wagner of the Northern Beaches Legal Service 9979 9622 or Christine Bennett on 9979 8931.