

"I want to be an example to my own people"

"My children, my husband and my Aboriginal people come first," says Essie Coffey. "They're so down and out. If others can see me doing things and improving myself then they will too. To cut it short, I want to be an example for my own people. I don't want to see them down in the ashes."

Essie is the recently appointed community health worker at Brewarrina. She is a vigorous, outspoken woman, both ambitious for her people and confident that with enough effort and determination the people will get what they want.

"We've got faith in ourselves that we can do something. And if we stand on our feet we'll get what we want eventually."

Essie, who took up her position in January, will be working with the district community health nurse, Sister Evelyn Hamlyn.

Her main concern is West Brewarrina, or "Dodge City" as it is known.

Of the rowdiness that frequently afflicts "Dodge", Essie says, "It's the only way people can take out their bitterness and dissatisfaction. I have rows with people, but tomorrow we'll be talking to one another again. You can't wish for better people when they're sober. I'm not going to move out of 'Dodge City'. I'm happy here."

Essie Coffey (nee Shillingsworth) was born at Goodooga. Later she moved to Weilmoringle Station. "That's my home," she says. "My mother is buried there. I'll be helping the people there in my job. Weilmoringle will always be my home. I wouldn't see it destroyed for anything."

Fifteen years ago Essie married and moved to Brewarrina, where she lived on the river bank till almost two years ago. She helped organize the petition which resulted in Steve Gordon's being appointed field officer in the area and has been working on a petition to have conditions at "Dodge" improved. When Brewarrina people are in trouble they always go to Steve or Essie. Steve is now stationed at Brewarrina as a liaison officer for the Directorate of Aboriginal Welfare.

"If people want to stay in 'Dodge'," she says, "let them stay. If they want to move, let them move. I'm quite contented here if the house is



Essie Coffey

fixed and some fences are put around the place for privacy and for the children's safety. I don't want to move into town."

The Brewarrina Aboriginal Progress Association, of which Essie is vice-president, aims at getting the people improved living and working conditions. She became involved in the association last year.

"In my opinion," she says, "it's got the people thinking they can do certain things and stand up for their rights, even though they've got little to show for it at the moment. But before the association was formed they wouldn't even speak up. Now they've got more strength among themselves."

Essie's growing involvement in the problems of Brewarrina led to her accepting the job as a health worker. Last year she used to go to the school with Sister Hamlyn and help out with mothercraft training. Sister Hamlyn suggested the idea of becoming a health worker. The title is a misleading one to the extent that the work involved includes handling just about any difficulty or problem being faced by the people.

Sister Hamlyn is based in Bourke but comes to Brewarrina once a week. She and Essie will also be looking after Weilmoringle and Goodooga.

Essie has six children, four of school age and two attending preschool. "If I didn't get the health worker job," she says, "I would have liked to have got involved in the preschool. I'm also interested in starting an adult education class. I need more education myself. There are about eight or ten men interested in the idea."

Essie Coffey is a person who gives the impression that if she really wants something, nothing will stop her getting it. Certainly there can be no doubt about her determination.

"I'm really interested in the work and I can do something for my people. You're never too old to do anything. And," she adds, "my children will also learn to do things for themselves and understand their rights."