

## ***A sign of hope for petrol sniffers***

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For seven years Walpiri elder Mr Johnny Japangardi Miller has offered a desert sanctuary to wean his young people off petrol-sniffing.

The young sniffers, some not even teenagers, are brought 160 kilometres from Yuendumu to his station at Mount Theo to get away from the fumes and learn about the old ways of their culture.

Mr Miller, 65, troubled by eye disease, says he opened his place to the sniffers because of his despair at seeing parents lose control of their children.

He's had some success, even if the kids, up to 40 in a group, have to doss down in tin sheds at his place. For a few weeks at a time he teaches his young captives about the land, bush tucker and their language.

They need leadership more than anything, he said through an interpreter yesterday.

According to conservative estimates there are 500 "full-time" petrol sniffers in Central Australia. In Yuendumu, five sniffers have suffered serious burns after being engulfed in flames. Besides the violence and hallucinations triggered by sniffing, at least two young adults in Yuendumu have suffered permanent brain damage. But even with the relatively organised campaign against sniffing in Yuendumu, too many slip back, caught by the idleness of a remote community with no jobs, no training and nothing else to do.

Mr Miller came to Canberra this week with representatives of the Yuendumu Substance Misuse Aboriginal Corporation to plead for more Federal Government help to end the cycle of idleness and sniffing .

According to the group leader, Mr Otto Sims, even a relatively large community like Yuendumu offers too little to fill the days of its young people. What they need is education, training and recreation.

Education ends at primary school in Yuendumu, says Mr Sims. There is no secondary school even though Yuendumu is centre to a district population of about 2,500 .

Few youngsters have jobs. There is the nearby Granites goldmine. That employs only a handful of local people. Mr Sims says few of the youngsters have even the basis literacy skills required.

The Education Minister, Dr Kemp, one of four ministers the Yuendumu group got to see this week, yesterday expressed sympathy for their predicament and undertook to consider establishing a vocational training program.

The Democrats Leader, Senator Lees, saw the evidence of petrol-driven vandalism on the local youth centre when she visited Yuendumu last month.

This week she asked Parliament: "Where is the outrage here, when kids of eight or nine are regularly holding cans of petrol up to their noses, literally melting their brains?"