

Breathing fresh air
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An outback Aboriginal community has shown how to beat the curse of petrol sniffing, with little outside help, writes Michael Bradley.

Yuendumu was not unusual for an outback Aboriginal community in 1993 - the year Andrew Stojanovski became the town's school liaison officer. The Tanami Desert community of 1000 Warlpiri people 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs, was a town facing monumental problems. Stojanovski said upward of 70 children were sniffing petrol in the school grounds at night, more than were attending classes during the day. Property-related crime ran at levels most Australians would find inconceivable.

The senior police officer at Yuendumu, Sergeant Steve Hall, said as recently as 1999, he was spending his evenings dealing with the consequences of the teenagers' sniffing. Each of the town's two stores were being robbed repeatedly, every night. "We'd no sooner grab one lot and get them up to the station and we'd get another call telling us there were more there."

It was a routine which caused thousands of dollars worth of damage, while often procuring the perpetrators nothing more than \$20 worth of chips and cordial. Stojanovski said the kids who sniffed committed crime because sniffing caused them to lose all inhibitions and awareness of their actions.

"Kids have told me that when they sniff, they hallucinate and they can't tell the difference between dreaming and reality. Petrol is a solvent capable of dissolving grease and fat and what it does is dissolve the neurological pathways within a sniffer's brain," he said.

Three years ago in a neighbouring community, the hallucinations of a sniffer ended in tragedy, when a 16-year-old boy bludgeoned a fellow sniffer to death: he claimed he thought his friend was the devil.

But now, Yuendumu is a town transformed. Petrol sniffing is seen among the youth as a fad well passed and Sergeant Hall says several months have gone by since he had to respond to sniffing-related crime.

What has wrought the change is the success of the Mt Theo Program, which is managed by Stojanovski and a committee representing various family groups within Yuendumu. It is a simple yet highly controversial scheme that has seen troubled teenagers sent away from their families to an outstation.

Mt Theo is a petrol-free place. There's a collection of tin sheds, a windmill and solar-powered telephone. It's 170 kilometres north-west of Yuendumu, in a land of red sand and spinifex, 360-degree horizons, exasperating heat and dust, and relentless flies.

Since February 1994, the petrol sniffers of Yuendumu have been sent to Mt Theo for four-week periods. There are no fences or security guards at Mt Theo. Its remoteness - Yuendumu being the nearest settlement - rules out the need.

Stojanovski said: "Drug addicts of any sort don't care about the long-term consequences of their behaviour.

"Sniffers know it might give them brain damage, or they might get really badly burnt, but when they see other sniffers, who seem perfectly healthy and normal, these things don't carry much weight. Going to Mt Theo is an immediate consequence."

At Mt Theo, the sniffers are cared for by the area's traditional owner, Johnny Japangardi Miller, and his sister-in-law and program-founder, Peggy Nampijinpa Brown.

In busier times (the number of children on the out-station has at times exceeded 25), volunteer teachers have run classes, but generally, education has been the responsibility of Johnny.

He was born close to Mt Theo, possibly around 1925, and he had a traditional Warlpiri hunter-gatherer upbringing. He has a rich understanding of how his people lived prior to European settlement, which he passes on to younger generations with pride. Stories of his country's colonisation are also passed on.

He remembers the sight of the mounted police responsible for the 1928 Coniston massacre, the final act of Australia's frontier war, passing through his land. He also remembers how one local cattle station owner chained 40 members of his tribe together and walked them 360 kilometres through the desert to the Alice Springs police station, because none would confess to the slaying of one of his goats. Johnny's stories are heart-wrenching, but he is not one to dwell on the injustices of the past.

"In the older days things were hard, but now we're all working together," he says.

The project's second component is a diversionary program addressing youth boredom in Yuendumu.

Behind its barred windows, the Yuendumu Youth Centre offers kids sanctuary in the form of a pool table, video games, discos, and roller-skating, every night of the week. The program's basketball and football competitions are community obsessions.

Through its eight years, the Mt Theo Program has successfully rehabilitated dozens of chronic sniffers, while simultaneously preventing other children from duplicating this addiction. While they are reluctant to speak to reporters about their former addiction, it seems sniffing is no longer fashionable in Yuendumu. "Mt Theo's success has not been about changing any particular individual, but

changing what's groovy or cool in Yuendumu," Stojanovski said. "We've successfully brought up a petrol-free generation."

Another remarkable aspect of the program's success is that between 1994 and 1997, it received no government funding. Johnny and Peggy bought food and fuel using pension money and private vehicles - their own and others borrowed from Yuendumu - were used. As Stojanovski recalls the program's retired fleet, the communities willingness to sacrifice their most prized possessions (and the state of the roads), becomes apparent.

"We originally had Peggy's 4WD, then we had the Hilux, that didn't last long, then we had Peggy's yellow ute, we had that truck we had Johnny's station wagon ... I don't know how many cars we've had, but it's been a few," Stojanovski said.

Yet the lack of funding has never been resented. In fact it has actually been seen as a blessing by the program's management, who believe excessive government funding of projects replicating Mt Theo may be counter-productive.

"You can't buy what we have achieved here," Stojanovski said. "Limited resources are a project's strength, because if you've got no resources, then you know everyone is working for a cause.

"To put money and a Toyota into a community, attracts a lot of people who want money and a Toyota. It can re-focus the community away from the issue of sniffing and turn the whole program into a personal resource hunt.

"What's happened here is the people started this program, then the Federal and Territory governments came behind with funding support. While we really appreciate the governments' support, the community's commitment is still the key ingredient."

Stojanovski is aware the program has its critics. Its detractors say sending kids to Mt Theo against their will equates to a human rights abuse, while the diversionary activities lack meaning and are a short-term fix, unable to provide the improved education and employment opportunities so desperately required.

Yet Stojanovski and his colleagues believe the placement of sniffers at Mt Theo is no greater abuse of human rights than the sending of a troubled urban white teenager to live with a country cousin. And with regard to claims that the community youth activities lack meaning, Stojanovski appeals to the program's critics to appreciate its intrinsic advantages. He likens the distraction from petrol sniffing to the prevention of a bushfire: it won't necessarily improve your farmland, but it will at least stop it from getting burnt out.

"I put on disco, football, pool table and these are life-giving things. It's not the answer to every problem, but Mt Theo is a solution to something very destructive. Of course we want people to have education, empowerment, and employment, but all that stuff is like launching planes off an aircraft carrier. Petrol sniffing prevention may not in itself be about launching planes, but it is about stopping

the aircraft carrier from sinking."

Laws are broken to make a future

Part of the success of Mt Theo has come from the willingness of the Warlpiri people to adapt their law and custom, and make it relevant to their contemporary setting. The program's establishment required no radical thinking, yet its implementation has been incredibly complex due to the limitations imposed by Warlpiri tribal law.

Andrew Stojanovski said: "In Aboriginal culture you're not allowed to look after children from other people's family groups, yet at Mt Theo, Peggy and Johnny do just that and it exposes them to a great level of risk. If any kid was to get sick or injured or even die, then under tribal law, whether they've had anything to do with the incident or not, Peggy and Johnny could be punished, quite possibly by spearing."

Because of this, the program cannot accommodate sniffers from non-Warlpiri communities. Only after eight years of perseverance can Peggy and Johnny comfortably deal with other people's children from Yuendumu. Another example of the program breaking with tradition relates to the fact some sniffers don't really want to be at Mt Theo. In Warlpiri culture, initiated men (over 12 years of age) have the right to act with autonomy. In the program's beginning, Peggy or Johnny often felt obliged to return sniffers to Yuendumu, while family and friends would also come and retrieve them.

More serious breaches have been necessary to sustain the program. In June 2000, the senior traditional owner of Mt Theo (Peggy's husband and Johnny's brother) died. Adherence to tribal law would have resulted in Mt Theo's abandonment for 12 months. Yet the importance of the work being done on the site was recognised: the out-station was re-opened within two weeks.

Stojanovski says the community has willingly compromised its law, because the program was deemed to be a worthy cause.

"Yuendumu's situation has not improved because of anything whitefellas have changed. Mt Theo is about Aboriginal people being pro-active."