CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
Shawn Donnan
from the July 15, 2002 edition

In the outback, a campaign against gasoline-sniffing

An Australian Aboriginal community makes headway against a decades-old problem troubling its youths.

By Shawn Donnan | *Special to The Christian Science Monitor*

YUENDUMU, AUSTRALIA – For years central Australia's remote Aboriginal communities – dusty desert settlements of a few hundred renowned for their Third World living conditions – have watched their young seek escape from bleak realities by inhaling gasoline fumes.

And after years of government inaction and running up against cultural roadblocks, experts now say that the problem of gasoline sniffing is as bad as it has ever been and getting worse. "Now kids are sniffing much more intensively and over much longer periods, and there are whole cohorts of sniffers who reinforce each other," says Maggie Brady, an anthropologist who wrote the 1992 book "Heavy Metal: The Social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing in Australia."

But one community's efforts to rescue its children grew from an improvised program in 1994, to a model for other Aboriginal areas that struggle with the problem.

In 1994, Yuendumu, population about 800, was facing a crisis. Seventy kids – half the teenage population – had turned to sniffing. A whole row of abandoned houses they had taken over had become the center of kids' social lives. Worse still, after almost a year of trying, everything the community had done to stop the children from sniffing – including public floggings – had failed.

"We used to have 70 sniffers. Now we have two," says Andrew Stojanovski, the Mount Theo Petrol Sniffing Prevention Program's director. "And those two are out at Mount Theo right now."

Mount Theo is the name of the outstation, 80 miles from Yuendumu, that was donated by a local family as a place where sniffers are sent to dry out. It has since become the program's center.

The idea behind the program, which is funded by government grants and private donations, is simple. Kids sniffing in Yuendumu are identified by the

program's staff and, with the consent of their parents, taken to live at Mount Theo for a four-week stay, usually without the police or courts ever getting involved.

There, they learn traditional skills like hunting kangaroos and gathering wild food like witchetty grubs and bush tomatoes. At the end of their stay they are slowly reintegrated into the community.

If they are found sniffing again, they are immediately returned to Mount Theo – a collection of tin sheds ringed by sacred gum trees with the meager comforts of water, electricity, and two phones.

John, now 21, started sniffing when he was 13. He estimates he made 20 separate trips to Mount Theo before he stopped sniffing for good about a year ago.

What wore him down eventually was the impossibility of escaping the treatment center, the looming inevitability that if he sniffed, he would end up back at the remote outstation.

"We tried to walk back from there, but it was always too far," says John, whose name has been changed to protect his identity.

The successes in Yuendumu haven't been the result of an all stick and no carrot approach, though.

Alongside the deterrent of Mount Theo, the community has built a range of activities designed to keep kids busy, including dances, pool tables, and video games.

Simple upgrades to existing facilities – like adding lights to the basketball courts – have made the desert nights in Yuendumu more kid-friendly.

That doesn't mean sniffing has been vanquished wholly.

In the aftermath of a murder in the community in March, a half-dozen local kids turned to sniffing. And when flooding has cut off the road to Mount Theo in recent years, new outbreaks of sniffing have occurred as well.

But the solution has become so ingrained that any new outbreaks are tackled quickly. "If someone has sniffed petrol in Yuendumu, we know about it within 24 hours," says Stojanovski. "And within 48 hours of them sniffing, usually, they are out at Mount Theo."

Just how different that is from the norm in central Australia's remote

indigenous communities says a lot about the deep roots of a problem that has plagued young Aborigines for decades. Government inaction is partly to blame, Ms. Brady argues. Federal and state rehabilitation and diversion programs have come and gone too quickly to offer any long-term solution.

There have been practical missteps, as well. In the Northern Territory, where many of the remotest desert communities fall, for example, it is illegal to sell petrol to sniffers, but not to sniff. That means police are sometimes powerless to stop even the most brazen sniffers. Where sniffing is illegal, as in neighboring South Australia, other issues are raised due to the difficulties of policing small communities 100 miles apart.

In Mutitjulu, the Aboriginal settlement in the shadow of Uluru, the red monolith once known as Ayers Rock that rises from the plains of central Australia, community leaders are now trying to replicate Mount Theo to tackle an outbreak of sniffing. Already, more than $100,000 in profits from the community store has been set aside for an outstation more than 100 miles to the southwest.

But according to Anne Mosey, a health consultant who has long worked on the issue of sniffing, replicating Mount Theo won't be easy. "It's not just about setting up an outstation," she says. Yuendumu, according to Mosey, is unique because it overcame not only government neglect, but a number of barriers thrown up by Aboriginal culture as well.

Typically, traditional culture gives children a high level of autonomy, for example, and in communities where sniffing is rife, health workers often encounter tradition-bound parents reluctant to tell their kids what to do.

Poverty, welfare-dependency, and the issues that come with those are still a persisting burden, however. Visiting Yuendumu can be a confronting experience. Dust is ever-present and it sometimes seems as if there are as many abandoned buildings as inhabited ones. Those homes that are lived in are often crowded and disheveled, their yards home to cars torn apart for spares. Packs of dogs howl through the night.

But Mount Theo's success has helped the community address some underlying issues. An ancillary program called "Strong Voices" is meant to get Yuendumu's young people discussing what once seemed a rare concept – their hopes and aspirations. "It's better now," says Georgina Nampijinpa Scott, a 20-year-old student Aboriginal health worker. "There's a lot of things going on.