

Spirit healers

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Communities in Central Australia are tackling the tragedy of petrol sniffing in new and imaginative ways, and the results are positive. Michael Bradley reports.

Under a blazing Northern Territory sun, and the equally intense gaze of her community, Mavis Malbunka fusses over the 17 assembled children.

She has been their guardian for 10 months, but today she returns them to their families. She straightens ties, offers words of praise and leads one final prayer before the children arrange themselves from shortest to tallest and enter Hermannsburg's Lutheran church.

Confirmation ceremonies are not new in Hermannsburg. Ned Kelly was still a free man when Lutheran missionaries began converting Aborigines in the MacDonnell Ranges, west of Alice Springs. But in the 130 years since, it's unlikely that any ceremony has intrigued the locals like this one.

Not long ago, these 17 children were chronic petrol sniffers who fought police, smashed cars and damaged buildings every night.

But for the past 10 months they have lived with Malbunka at Ipolera Outstation. And in the wake of last month's ceremony, the people of Hermannsburg believe sniffing can be added to the list of evils which have been overcome by prayer.

Five decades after it emerged as a problem, petrol sniffing is still a big issue in Central Australia. Depending on who you believe, there are 300 to 1000 regular sniffers in the region and sniffing led to six deaths last year. How many sniffers have been brain-damaged or disabled is unknown.

But communities are finding their own ways of dealing with the problem. A handful, like Hermannsburg, appear to have finally stopped sniffing. But many experts fear this will prove to be their first, rather than the final, hurdle.

The remote Aboriginal communities of Central Australia share some alarming traits. Industry and non-government income are generally non-existent, unemployment is usually higher than 90 per cent and substance abuse is common. For the bored and disengaged youth of these tiny towns there are no bike tracks or cinemas, and hundreds of kilometres separate them from their nearest video game or skateboard

ramp.

Few children go to school once they've turned 14 and attendance rates for the younger ones are usually about 60 per cent.

Those who work on sniffing-prevention programs believe some children sniff because of difficult upbringings or because their families are in Alice Springs drinking. But they also say that in most communities, most sniff simply because they have nothing to do.

It is an issue which has led the Northern Territory Police Force to spend more than \$15 million in three years on diversionary programs. The money, which was made available by the Federal Government after mandatory imprisonment was ended in 2000, has been distributed throughout communities to provide much needed infrastructure and facilities.

"The great problem in many of these places is that sniffing has become the dominant recreational activity," says Dave Oakes, the manager of the Nyangatjatjara Aboriginal Corporation's juvenile diversion program. "It is the social situation these kids find themselves in, not the substance itself, which makes the addiction chronic."

For adolescents living in suburban Australia, the provision of an air-conditioned shipping container with a table tennis table and a few musical instruments would hardly be considered life-changing. But to the youth of Imanpa, a community 250 kilometres south of Alice Springs, it will not only change lives, but possibly save a few as well.

Nyangatjatjara funded Imanpa's "recreation hall" and bankrolled youth workers in the other Pitjantjatjara communities of Docker River and Mutitjulu.

Oakes says it is far too early to tell whether the investment is producing benefits, but he is adamant things are moving in the right direction.

"We are effectively living in a Third World country out here and we have facilities to match," he says. "Our task is to give them something to do other than go straight to their can [of petrol] first thing every morning."

YOUTH drug use in Australia is common across all regions and socio-economic levels. But in these remote communities the problem is more serious because petrol is the only substance on the menu.

Many adolescents experiment with drugs, but few are as damaging as petrol. Petrol is a hydrocarbon that melts the fats within a sniffer's brain. Petrol sniffing-related deaths since 1999 number 18.

Long-term sniffers end up in a wheelchair, but any amount of sniffing can be deadly.

A 15-year-old first-timer asphyxiated last year after he fell asleep under a blanket with his can of petrol.

YUENDUMU is the Central Australian community which has, more than any other, come to terms with sniffing.

Since 1993 Yuendumu's sniffers have been sent to the Mount Theo Outstation for up to six weeks; by 2001, sniffing had largely been eradicated from the town.

The focus changed from rehabilitation to prevention and the Jaru Pirrjirdi project, which translates to "strong voices", was created. Along with sport and recreation programs, Jaru Pirrjirdi organises cultural excursions where children are encouraged to use video and radio to record and retell traditional stories.

But Jaru Pirrjirdi's most important role is to act as a forum in which Yuendumu's youth can discuss what they would like to change in their community. This led to the creation last year of "night school".

Like most communities, Yuendumu has struggled to keep teenagers at school. In the desert, teens often spend the night walking the street and playing basketball because it is too hot to sleep, leaving them tired and uninterested in school in the morning. They also have little incentive to get out of bed and go to school in an environment where fewer than 5 per cent of adults get up and go to work.

By the end of fourth term, up to 20 teenagers were spending their evenings at Yuendumu's school.

"They love the idea," says Karissa Preuss, Jaru Pirrjirdi's co-ordinator. "Not only because it is their own idea, but also because it gives them something constructive to do with their evenings. Getting kids to stop sniffing is great, but this program is all about getting them to engage in the community and address the reasons why they wanted to sniff in the first place."

Which is the challenge now faced by the people of Hermannsburg. So far, all the children sent to Ipolera have embraced the Lutheran Church and renounced sniffing. But whether their new-found faith will be enough to overcome the boredom and lack of opportunity which led them into sniffing is still to be seen.

At Ipolera, 60 kilometres west of Hermannsburg, Malbunka has been trying to create an environment in which traditional Aboriginal values are balanced with those of the Lutheran religion. She sees the church as the tool most capable of teaching discipline and respect to her disengaged charges.

A devout Lutheran, Malbunka, 60, believes that if a 15-year-old

Aboriginal boy can understand the value system inherent in the "whitefella's church", then comprehending the whitefella's education, health or legal system cannot be far behind.

"We still have blackfella culture, which is what we are trying to live day-to-day, but we now have two cultures out here," she says.

"I am a Lutheran, and I believe it has helped me understand whitefella culture and the whitefella way. In church today, I told these families their children are now part of this congregation, and they all need to be brought along."