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A nest to nurture language

By [Vanessa Mills](#)

Miriwoong children in the east Kimberley will soon be immersed in games, songs, books and activities designed to create fluency in the endangered language



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A nest is a place where little chicks are nurtured until they can fly. It's an apt image for a new nest being built in Kununurra, which will help children learn Miriwoong language.

The *Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre* has started the Language Nest, which will fully immerse children in Miriwoong. The Aboriginal language of the traditional owners of the Kununurra region is listed as critically endangered, because there are so few fluent speakers.

Nest Language Officer Santar Ward says her grandfather was a Miriwoong speaker, but he died when she was a toddler and she never had the chance to learn until she was an adult. Her skills have improved as a speaker through her own work to develop the resources for children.

The team has produced books, songs and activities for local children to use when they're in the Nest, and no English will be spoken.

Nest Facilitator Stephanie Woerde says the model has been successfully used in New Zealand for many years for children to learn Maori.

She says the Nest's pilot program has had results already, and it will be officially launched early next year.

The Language and Culture Centre is also well known in Kununurra for its cultural teaching, books, excursions and Joonba gatherings.

Related Photos



Some of the Nest team Santar Ward, Alethea Ahwon, Kristara Carlton, Stephanie Woerde. The group is getting ready to carry out a special Language Nest session with children to celebrate National Indigenous Literacy Day (Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre)

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The Nest is a language program teaching children the traditional language of Kununurra. Stephanie Woerde tells Vanessa Mills on ABC Kimberley how successful the first few months have been

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CEO & SUPPORTERS VISIT TO KUNUNURRA - LANGUAGE NEST

Language Nest is a full-immersion program in the local Miriwoong language for pre-school – Year 1 children at schools in Kununurra.

Such is its impact that kids are teaching their parents the songs and stories at home, contributes to the pride and identity of our communities, as well as keeping the Miriwoong language alive and well.

The school kids demonstrated their fluency in Miriwoong to their red-shirted visitors who continued practising their Miriwoong and humming the songs at dinner that night.

Pre-Primary

ECE7 and ECE8's Excursion to the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre.

POSTED ON [DECEMBER 5, 2013](#)

Pre-primary classes ECE7 and ECE8 went on a fantastic excursion on Tuesday last week. We went to visit the [Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre](#). At the Centre we met some language teachers who taught us some Miriwoong language and a great song about a brolga. We are going to keep learning this song and we are going to sing it at a school concert. It was great fun!

This entry was posted in [Pre-Primary](#) and tagged [ECE 7](#), [ECE 8](#), [Kununurra District High School](#), [pre primary](#).

Miriwoong at KDHS

POSTED ON **AUGUST 7, 2014**

Every week Pre-Primary classes at Kununurra District High School have a fantastic opportunity to engage with the local Miriwoong language. Weekly Miriwoong lessons are provided by a team of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers from **Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre**. The Miriwoong Language Nest pilot program combines explicit teaching with immersion-based learning to introduce important aspects of the local Miriwoong language and culture. Pre-primary classes are able to engage with a range of Miriwoong linguistic-cultural activities such as simple talk, storytelling, songs, games and arts/crafts. The program aligns with the Australian Curriculum and helps students to develop a heightened sense of inter-cultural awareness, empathy and respect. The 20-30minute sessions are greeted with a wonderful amount of energy and enthusiasm and all classes are making great progress.

Article accessible online at: <http://kununurradistricthigh.com/2014/08/07/miriwoong-at-kdhs/>

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Louise is an amazing landscape photographer as well as being an Indigenous advisor for a national construction company currently working on secondment with an Aboriginal organisation in Kununurra, Western Australia. World Nomads sent her [Sanchez the camera](#) to help her give the families pictures of their own. She tells us about the “language nest” program she is a part of and how this experience was so rewarding, she has already gone out and bought her very own camera.

I have been privileged to have a number of experiences over the last couple of years that have involved my Nikon covered in ochre, red dust and [grappled by children’s hands](#). Many photographers may not consider such travesties to be a privilege however these experiences have taught me the power of a picture or photograph to break down barriers and overcome any real or imagined cultural and language barriers or differences.

On this occasion I was able to take the photo and give it back thanks to Portrait Equality. My work took me to the East Kimberley region of Western Australia for the last 3 months on a secondment to an Aboriginal development organization, [Wunan](#). The work component aside, the opportunities that the East Kimberley contains for a landscape photographer are endless! Intense sunsets, the majestic boab trees, carved ranges and some dramatic weather and cloud action – I've been in my element.



Whilst here I have also been able to participate in some community initiatives that have afforded me some great opportunities to give photos back to the region where I have taken so many. The work of the [Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre \(MDWg\)](#) in Kununurra began in the 1970s to preserve, analyse, record, document and transmit the language and culture of the Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng people.

A 'Language Nest' is an environment in which young children are exposed to new language experiences. There is strong evidence to demonstrate that language nests are a powerful tool in the revitalisation of endangered languages.

The Language Nest at MDWg is one of the first to operate for Indigenous languages in Australia. It will provide a critically important program for language transmission and use immersion techniques to enable young children to learn Miriwoong. Currently there is no structured learning program for Miriwoong for young children.

I was privileged to participate in one of these language nests, in order to take some photos for the language centre's use. Whilst there I had a fantastic chance to provide some family photos to the parents with their children, in fact it opened the door and gave me more opportunity to freely do the job that I was there to do. Any shyness and barriers dissolved and parents actively wanted me to take

their kids photos when they started to see the images developing and appearing in front of them! Naturally the kids loved it too! The delight was priceless and I became the most popular kid in school!

On another occasion I attended a BBQ that had been arranged by a local Aboriginal social reference group at the town pool to engage with street kids. My favourite moment was trying to get two one-year-old twins to stand still and next to each other so I could take a photo of them for their mother. We sort of got there! And the torrential downpour that hit did nothing to deter the kids.

I cannot express enough how great the Portrait Equality concept is. Everyone wins.

The issue of taking people's pictures whilst travelling and the question of paying for them or giving some material thing in return is highly debated and controversial amongst many photographers; to me this is the perfect solution.

In fact I love the concept so much and it's opened so many doors for me in this experience that I have now purchased my own camera for future travels and work. "[Sanchez](#)" played a part in allowing me to become a part of the community for a window of time in a small way.

Thank you Portrait Equality, FujiFilm, World Nomads and of course the community of Kununurra for having me!"

See more of Louise's beautiful images from the people and landscapes of the [Kimberleys on Portrait Equality](#).



About Portrait Equality

[Portrait Equality](#) is a Sydney based not-for-profit project that loans out instant cameras to photographers travelling in developing nations and remote communities so they can provide family portraits to those they meet. The goal is to give photos, not just take them, and perhaps give a villager their first family picture.

[World Nomads](#) has sponsored [Sanchez the camera](#) for available to globetrotting nomads, but anyone is free to [apply](#) to the project directly, or consider [donating](#) so we can give even more families a memory of their loved ones. Every \$1 is one more picture.

You can follow the experiences of our World Nomads photographers here, and the rest on the Portrait Equality [blog](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#).

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