

Principal
Rev M L Doecke BTh BA DipEd MED

29 July 2008

The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Yirara College Report re Petrol Sniffing and substance abuse in Central Australia

Dear Sir/Madam

Yirara College based in Alice Springs has been serving the needs of Indigenous secondary aged students from remote communities as a residential college for over 30 years (the last 17, at the request of Aboriginal people, under the control of the Finke River Mission).

The following report concentrates on the progression of the programs and strategies we have attempted in relation to students at risk of petrol sniffing. Much of these have been initiated and staffed by a houseparent from the College, Tim Conaghan, who has a real 'heart' for students at risk. We then conclude with some recommendations.

The following report is not a definite attempt to address all of the matters raised in the inquiry. However, it is the story of one school's attempt – particularly one person's passion – to address in practical ways the problem of petrol sniffing.

Yirara's Involvement in Petrol Sniffing Initiatives

In 2002, at the initiation of BP Australia, Yirara was challenged to consider doing something more than the normal care we were providing to Indigenous teenagers from remote communities. The SARDS (Students at risk diversionary scheme) committee was established to come up with ideas and programs to help children at risk, especially petrol sniffers. Some of those initiatives included holiday camps, supporting students at court, visiting communities and the current 'Sand Play' therapy program.

Yirara set up a program in October 2004 to cater for eight boys in an outstation 100km from Alice Springs. We provided 24 hour supervision including schooling, with only one full time staff member (Tim Conaghan). However, the isolation and lack of facilities and staff, made it difficult to maintain and the program closed after six months. Yirara funded the program.

The majority of those students had come from Papunya (300 km from Alice Springs) and Hermannsburg (120 km). After the program was closed the staff member spent three weeks living in Papunya in the June/July School Holidays in 2005. He spent much of his time there walking the streets during the day and at night, often going into the sniffer houses and talking to the teenagers. During most days he took a troop carrier of children and teenagers to local water holes for picnics.

A similar program was run at another community with a high number of children at risk of petrol sniffing – Hermannsburg. Being closer to Alice Springs it was more practical for the staff member, who was still a full time boarding assistant at the college, to travel regularly to Hermannsburg in his time off, visiting and talking to children and teenagers, and encouraging them to return to school at Yirara.

Tim was beginning to build a rapport with several of the Hermannsburg students (and their families) based on their time at the 'time out' outstation program and his regular trips to their community. During the Christmas holidays of 2005/6, he found six kids sniffing out of bottles in the creek. These young people accepted Tim's invitation to return with him to Yirara for a few safe days. However whenever we helped these students, they still returned to sniffing.

From term one in 2006 Tim had a Teen Challenge Counsellor come into his dormitory (boys aged from 13 to 15) once a week for an hour session. This has proven very popular and she still comes to this day.

In Easter (2006) Tim spent two weeks in a vacant teacher's house in Hermannsburg. Each day he took a Troopie load of students for an outing in much the same manner as he had done at Papunya the previous year. A condition of Tim's stay (by the local School Principal), was that the kids were not allowed in the house. Nevertheless the two weeks seemed to be very successful. The Council was very supportive and Tim set up the Youth Center with 'drop in' type activities including a television for videos. The Teen Challenge Counsellor even came out and ran a session. There seemed to be less sniffing and vandalism in this period.

The philosophy of our programs has been to limit the amount of time children have to get involved in risk-taking behaviours, such as petrol sniffing. To that end the daily diversionary program in Hermannsburg during the holidays was achieving its goals.

During the June/July School Holidays, we were able to take the program one step further. A house used for meetings was made available and so eligible students were able to both sleep and eat there for the two week residential program. Once again Yirara funded the exercise which totaled \$700.

Tim felt that this was the most rewarding program that he had been involved with since the SARDS committee was formed. Running the house for two weeks provided the children with constancy, boundaries, freedom, food, understanding, loyalty, shelter, and rapport. Rules included curfews, no swearing, chores and good behaviour (which was achieved most of the time). Activities included play station and videos and daily outings.

Two of the most challenging students we have had at Yirara, stayed every night of the project and they responded positively to the standards. The fortnight provided both dramas and moments of amazing team work. An average of 20 kids attended daily and an average of eight slept over every night. The Teen Challenge Counsellor once again ran a session. Tim continued with his occasional visits during the School term and carried out weekly picnics during the September/ October holiday period. In December 2006 Tim left Yirara and Alice Springs.

One of the Yirara students that attended Tim's activities consistently throughout 2006 was Kenny Malthouse. During the June/July holiday he slept all but three of the nights. Many of Tim's reports in

2006 mentioned Kenny as a loyal but troubled participant. His petrol sniffing was well known. Kenny died in the Easter School Holiday period, on 13th April 2007, aged 12. The coroner concluded he had died from suffocation after sniffing opal fuel.

Tim returned to Yirara in July 2007. He has continued to visit Hermannsburg and to do holiday picnics. The house that was used is no longer available, so there has been no further residential holiday program. However Tim went to Hermannsburg every week of the 2007/8 Christmas holidays.

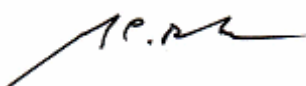
Recommendations

There needs to be funding for holiday residential programs, based on the type of program that Tim has operated in several communities. Funding for schools or other agencies involved in communities to run such programs would be necessary, as schools are not normally funded for these kinds of activities off-campus. A full time holiday program such as the June/July 2006 residential program could work. This would require staff who are skillful and committed. Afternoon outings would be for those who participated in the day program. It would include voluntary service (picking up rubbish), a few short educationally based classes (standard School subjects as well as bike fixing, basic mechanics). Meals and even sleeping arrangements would be provided (if kids meet the requirements). Activities will not be held during school time. Every measure must be taken to ensure that they stay at school.

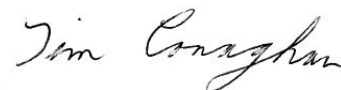
The program would encourage students to use their time more productively with the aim to encourage and support students returning to regular daily attendance at their community school and encourage eligible students to attending Yirara College (and supporting the transition).

The co-writer of this submission, Tim Conaghan, believes that young people are bored in their communities but they don't want the commitment of school. Youth vandalism is a major problem in Hermannsburg (and in several other communities). A full time program would address some of these issues. Getting teenagers involved positively in the community will give them a better image. Perhaps teenagers could even earn money for picking up rubbish or other supervised community projects. For many youth the program will enhance their quality of life. For others it could maintain life itself (therefore avoiding another Kenny tragedy). The project needs full funding, which Yirara has not been able to provide because it is an Alice Springs based boarding school. A full submission could follow this report if required.

Yours faithfully



(Rev) MARK L DOECKE
Principal



TIM CONAGHAN
Acting Deputy Senior Houseparent