

Senate Regional & Remote Indigenous Communities Committee

Visit to Derby Youth Centre 22cd August 2008

I have written down a few of my thoughts regarding the issues surrounding “at risk” indigenous young people gained from my working with them over the past few years. I define “at risk young people” as being deprived of their need for adequate food, secure housing, life skills and an education to enter adulthood.

I have had earlier experiences at Timber Creek in the East Kimberley and more recently 2 years in the Wujal Wujal Community in the Daintree Rainforest, Cape York, and for the last 8 months in Derby, West Kimberley.

I want to stress these are my thoughts and opinions as a Derby resident and were gained in the main from my time outside of the Derby Community working in sport & recreation and youth services.

“Do not place your own standards on another’s culture.”

A Senior Lecturer I respect reiterated this throughout my most recent studies, and this reinforced and stated an approach I often found useful when working within indigenous communities.

Issues and Possible Remedies.

1. Male and Female Youth.

I have found (along with research) indigenous females to be more able than their male counter part and with the greater potential to fit in our idea of mainstream society and employment opportunities. A genuine attachment to their lands causes a reluctance to leave their community and a lifestyle we judge as being unsuitable.

Within the “at risk” group are capable young people wanting a better lifestyle within their community, become frustrated and succumb in the end to peer pressure to accept their allocated station in life, suicide and drug abuse is often the dire eventuality.

This group should be targeted in the first instance by Governments and agencies and assisted to realise their own goals.

The recent Federal announcement of building hostels, for school and working aged young people across the West Kimberley is a major start and should be expedited as quickly as possible with the appropriate level of support services. The successes from this approach will then result in more youths being aware of alternate lifestyles.

The opportunity to live in a suitable (safe) environment to facilitate and encourage schooling and a career path is not present for the majority of “at risk” indigenous youths at the moment, and despite the best of intentions by agencies and their workers until this is addressed, little progress will be made. Only the exceptionally strong of any culture could reasonably overcome living in such dysfunctional circumstances to achieve in life.

2. Issues arising from overcrowding in housing.

A recurring explanation for a family of “at risk” young people is the death of a grandmother/carer who had been looking after the children.

Living in “open house” homes of 18+ people, sleeping groups of 9+ youths in a room because the family unit does not have a permanent house of their own or are having an extended visiting stay is not uncommon in the communities. A hostel type accommodation in Derby seems to be an option that is working in that it provides a small community (tribal) support base for the youths living there.

Schooling, agency programs and life skill and sporting activities are frustrated by the itinerant nature of the attendee lifestyle, which I believe is partly caused by a lack of suitable housing’s stable environment.

This contributes to the high level of sexual harassment, abuse and anti-social behaviour reported in indigenous communities.

The above is hardly groundbreaking revelations, identifying the “at risk” young people who want a better lot in life and then supporting them is the key. The effective and functional indigenous families in Derby and other communities are achieving positive outcomes for their children; unfortunately there is a developing chasm between the “at risk” young people and those from more functional families.

The other most noticeable observation I have experienced in communities is the benefit both academically and in personal development young people achieve by going away to attend boarding school and enjoying a stable environment.

Boarding School is not for all indigenous youth, many do not adapt and invariably don’t complete their studies while the ones who do seem to make a gigantic step (often temporary) toward reaching their own potential.

Resources should be directed to identify, assist or utilise these graduate students. Providing a transition to a consistent working ethos could be achieved by them returning to a now familiar hostel facility in their community rather than their former overcrowded housing and associated social issues.

Past indigenous program’s “broad brush” approach to correct circumstances for people who may not recognise/regard themselves as being in need of correction have not delivered outcomes expected.

I believe Indigenous Australians are a “subtle” and a “very patient” people, these features are an asset and a liability, and I believe Governments and programs need to abide this subtlety and patience, the indigenous will make this happen anyway.

Youth Centre’s basic life skill programs include behaving within boundaries, respecting other attendee’s feelings and rights, actually fulfilling disciplinary measures, the more advanced programs include healthy cooking and eating, music, art and participating in community events.

However, possibly the most important service a Youth Centre provides for the “at risk” attendees is attention, time and somewhere where an interest is taken in them as young people and their schooling, these basic parenting skills often don’t exist in indigenous families affected by drugs, alcohol and conflict.

The Youth Centres could be developed further as an interim preparatory station for “at risk” youths and those moving into possible hostel accommodation, by way of providing toilet, shower, laundry and locker facilities to augment what little some attendees currently have.

I believe the “at risk” Indigenous Young People, 0 to 18 years require:

1. The NT intervention model to be duplicated to other states
2. Quarantine social welfare payments away from alcohol, cigarettes and drugs.
3. Zero tolerance of abuse of young people.
4. Youth hostel proposals with the necessary support structures.

The above four recommendations will and have received criticism from many areas in the line of them removing/diminishing self determination or empowerment of indigenous communities and individuals etc.

However the collateral damage occurring at the moment to the indigenous young people is totally unacceptable for any culture, government or country in the cause of maintaining political correctness.

I reiterate these are my own opinions as a resident who has worked in youth services in remote and regional indigenous communities and do not represent those of the Shire of Derby West/Kimberley

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