

WARLPIRI ELDERS WORK WITH PETROL SNIFFERS

by Liam Campbell and Andrew Stojanovski

for the INDIGENOUS LAW BULLETIN 2001, 5 (6) July. 8–11.

'When the Ash Wednesday bushfires went through Victoria and South Australia all of Australia came to the rescue, government and volunteers. Petrol sniffing is like a bushfire slowly destroying Aboriginal youth and it needs to be stopped now... We as the Indigenous community of Yuendumu want to put dignity back into our younger generation through educating them so they can have respect for themselves and others plus positive attitudes, skills and higher self esteem. Then in that way we can empower them to have more control over their lives when they get off the habit of sniffing petrol.' Otto Jungarrayi Sims, in a letter to Senator Meg Lees, September 2000.

The Mount Theo – Yuendumu Substance Misuse Aboriginal Corporation (MYSMAC) and associated diversionary programs are Yuendumu community's current best strategy for dealing with substance misuse amongst its young people.

The Mt Theo Petrol Sniffing Program began in 1994 as a community response to the crisis of petrol sniffing. At that time, Yuendumu (pop. 900) was plagued with problems associated with petrol sniffing. There were gangs of petrol sniffers roaming the streets every night. There were over 70 young people sniffing petrol at that time, approximately half of the young people at Yuendumu.

Petrol sniffing at Yuendumu

Yuendumu community has a history of dealing with outbreaks of petrol sniffing that extends back to the early 1980s. Strategies such as banishment, public floggings of sniffers, night patrol and the replacement of petrol with aviation fuel seemed to have no long-term impact.¹ The Healthy Aboriginal Life Team (HALT) ran a successful family counselling program in the 1980s explaining the detrimental effects of petrol sniffing.² HALT worked in Yuendumu as part of an overall strategy with ten of eleven sniffers giving up.³ The success of the HALT program contributed to the community's feeling of empowerment to continue to deal with the problem of sniffing in the 1990s.

At community meetings in Yuendumu, people discussed what was likely to occur if they did not try to stop petrol sniffing: petrol sniffing culture would become entrenched, school attendance would continue to suffer, and there would be more crime, violence, health and family problems involving young people.⁴ The idea of

¹ Attempts were also made by the Local Government Council to create a by-law against petrol sniffing.

² The effects of petrol sniffing, both medical and social, have been well documented in Brady, M (1992) *Heavy Metal: The Social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing in Australia* (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra).

⁴ Stojanovski, A (1999) 'Mt Theo Story 1999 – Tribal Elders working with Petrol Sniffers', paper presented at the Australasian Conference on Drugs Strategy, Adelaide, April 1999.

sending petrol sniffers to an outstation was suggested over and over again by Aboriginal people. In February 1994 a meeting was held to begin such a program.

Mt Theo Outstation

It was decided that Peggy Nampijinpa Brown, her husband (an Aboriginal Owner, now deceased) and her brother-in-law, Johnny Japangardi Miller (Aboriginal Owner) move out to Mt Theo (Puturlu) Outstation with family members who were chronic petrol sniffers. Peggy and her husband said that if they got support to live at Mt Theo they would look after other petrol sniffers from Yuendumu.

Mt Theo was an ideal location to run the program because it is geographically isolated, being 50 kilometres from the nearest main road, too far for the kids to run away. It also had a telephone and reliable water supply. Warlpiri people refer to Mt Theo as being a spiritually powerful place with strong Jukurrpa (Dreaming). It was appropriate that young people go there and be cared for by the Aboriginal Owners of the area.

The program at Mt Theo involved initially removing the young people from the environment where they sniff (with the support of their families) to a place where they were cared for by Warlpiri elders. The young people were given a chance to learn about the country and the Jukurrpa of the area. They were involved with activities on the outstation including: hunting for bush tucker, day trips from the outstation, and occasional visits from CDEP and educational instructors. This was an important positive emotional and physical health strategy. Before residing at Mt Theo, many of the young people were suffering the detrimental effects of prolonged petrol inhalation and Peggy Brown made an effort to make them strong again, collecting bush tucker and cooking healthy food and encouraging them to put on weight:

I bin love the young people and make healthy. I bin care about. I bin ask all the church leaders to pray for young people and teenagers. I give them bushtucker, bush saltana, bush yam, goanna, kangaroo and wild turkey to make young people strong and healthy again.

From 1994–1997 the program operated wholly through the assistance of unpaid volunteers, fundraising within the community and some financial and practical assistance from community organisations and a small grant from the Drug and Alcohol Services Association (DASA). In 1997, in response to the proven success of the program, the dedication of workers like Peggy Brown and Johnny Miller, and the development of a Service Delivery Model, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care provided financial support to operate Mt Theo for nine months of the year. Peggy Brown was employed part time as Outstation Manager at Mt Theo and a non-Indigenous Coordinator was employed at Yuendumu. Many others continued to work as volunteers.

As a result of the support from Commonwealth Health, the program was able to build upon the initial enthusiasm and commitment of the volunteers and to expand its activities to include more sport and recreation at Yuendumu as well as greater liaison with the police and families to involve more young people in the program, specifically those identified at risk from the NT mandatory sentencing legislation. At

this time, Correctional Services investigated establishing a Juvenile Offender Placement Program (JOPP) at Mt Theo. While this did not eventuate, the police bailed many young people to Mt Theo and the courts enforced orders to reside at Mt Theo as a condition of bonds for juvenile offenders. This was welcomed by the community and the offenders themselves, as the alternative was sending young people to Alice Springs Gaol or the Don Dale Juvenile Detention Centre in Darwin. It was also in keeping with Recommendation 2.4 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report to 'enable elders to rehabilitate the offender according to their own culture.'⁵

In 2000, the community established a Warlpiri committee to oversee the newly incorporated MYSMAC. A small group of workers and appointed committee members travelled to Canberra to talk about the program. Senator Meg Lees visited Yuendumu and raised the issue in the Senate on 5 September 2000. At the time, there was considerable interest in the petrol sniffing problem in the media.⁶ In February 2001, at the invitation of the community, Senator Bill Heffernan and Aboriginal Affairs Minister Phillip Ruddock visited Mt Theo outstation.

The Youth Program

The Youth Program at Yuendumu aims to address the most common reasons why young people sniff petrol. Through sport and recreational activities, the program offers an alternative to sniffing. It is not unusual to have over 200 young people involved in the activities. In 2000, the MYSMAC Tanami Football League was established. The community supported this Yuendumu-based competition as an integral part of attempts to reduce petrol sniffing numbers as well as deal with alcohol abuse. Unlike other football competitions, games were played seven days a week and were well attended by the whole community. Eight teams were involved, including entries from other Warlpiri and Anmatjerre communities. Results of the games were reported in local papers and radio, and as a result many young people previously living in Alice Springs returned to the community. Much prestige was associated with being involved and those young men identified as sniffing petrol had to convince their coaches and team mates they were not sniffing before being allowed to play.

The success of the Mt Theo Program

The Mt Theo Program has been successful because of the commitment of the individuals who support it. It has also been the result of the community's strong resolve to refuse to allow petrol sniffing as an acceptable activity among its young people. It is a unique program, requiring a high level of ongoing commitment from those involved. It privileges a community-based Warlpiri approach to dealing with substance misuse and is an example of an ongoing commitment from yapa (Warlpiri) and kardiya (non-Indigenous) community members working together with government support to deal with petrol sniffing, associated family breakdown and

⁵ Langton, et al (1990) *Too Much Sorry Business: The Submission of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Issues Unit of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody to Commissioner Elliot Johnson, July 1990*, p 228.

⁶ See Toohey, P, *The Weekend Australian*, 5-6/8/00, 12-13/8/00. Prime Minister John Howard said he had been deeply affected by Paul Toohey's series of articles on petrol sniffing and in February launched, from Darwin, a \$1 million program to combat the problem.

juvenile crime. As such, it takes its toll on its workers, with an accumulative effect of long, often irregular hours under stressful conditions. The outstation is quite remote, so a lot of time is involved in logistical support. Yet, after many years and while other similar programs have closed, Mt Theo continues to operate.

The Mt Theo program has developed from its humble beginnings with the Brown family at Mt Theo with no vehicles, volunteer support and community contributions, into a program supported by Commonwealth Health that maintains two vehicles, an outstation with its own electricity supply and hosts regular visits from politicians, government departments and the media whilst maintaining a focus on dealing with petrol sniffing amidst the day to day demands of living in a Warlpiri community. It is about elders caring for young people, re-establishing relationships within families and integrating people back into the community at Yuendumu after Mt Theo. It is one community's attempt to deal with the problem of petrol sniffing, mandatory sentencing and a lack of resources for young people.

The key to its success lies in the community-based approach. The Warlpiri workers and volunteers are held in high regard by the community and outside agencies. Logistical support for the outstation is maintained at regular intervals. The Yuendumu based workers and volunteers work closely with the police, night patrol, NT Health and families to deal with outbreaks of petrol sniffing when they occur. When possible, a strong, vibrant sport and recreation program is maintained in conjunction with school activities. Non-Indigenous and Indigenous people work in a close partnership together that is symbiotic, drawing strength and experience from both cultures. They maintain an ongoing dialogue with the police, community organisations, the education department, NT and Commonwealth Health and funding bodies on sniffing and youth issues. A service delivery model is followed for the rehabilitative process at Mt Theo with a view to reintroducing young people back into the community in consultation with their family support network.

The program aims to reach the levels of success that it achieved in 1999 when sniffing was totally absent from the community. It is looking at building partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young Australians. It hopes to build an exchange between the two cultures where young people in Yuendumu are offered meaningful and realistic opportunities for creating positive and vibrant futures.

MYSMAC welcomes enquiries from those interested in working as volunteers on the program, particularly anyone with community youth work experience or tertiary students or graduates with an interest in Indigenous youth. Please direct all enquiries to The Manager on 08-89564188 or email mttheo@bigpond.com. Mailing address is: MYSMAC, Yuendumu LPO, NT 0872.

Liam Campbell lives in Yuendumu and has supported the Mt Theo and Yuendumu programs since 1995. He is currently enrolled in Honours at the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies at Monash University.

Andrew Stojanovski is a long term resident of Yuendumu. Along with Johnny Japangardi Miller and other founding members of the Mt Theo team, he continues to help and support the young people of Yuendumu.

1998 Mt Theo Program – Outcomes

Total number of young people identified as sniffing petrol:	67	
Maximum number of young people sniffing at any one time:	35	
Young people involved in the program:		63
Young people who stayed at Mt Theo in 1998:		45
Young people who stopped sniffing after staying at Mt Theo:	29	
Young people who had intervention from the program but didn't go to Mt Theo:		18
Young people who stopped sniffing following intervention:	18	
Total who stopped sniffing:		47