



Suicide Safer Communities

Workshop in East Arnhem

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“We have had enough. We have had enough of the losses, the sorrow, the lost lives. Sometimes we feel the pain so much that it is hard to go on. Our people believe that we paddle a canoe on our last journey. We are a part of the land and we return to where we come from. But there are things we need to do here before we go. We have had enough of what is happening here. We are fed up with it because we care about this place, this community. It is time for a new way of living. We are determined to do whatever we can to make a new life for us, our families, our community.” (Dhungal Gurruwiwi, Yirrkala)

IT WAS sticky and humid and the wet season wasn't quite over when Brian Kennedy and I landed on the Gove Peninsula in late April. The tropics smelt of saltwater and the vegetation seemed so overwhelmingly alive, green and invasive. Time in the desert transforms our experiences elsewhere ...

We had three days there on the invitation of Anglicare-NT to share information with the Yolgnu people of this region about the work of Life Promotion in Central Australia. I was

already familiar with the stories of sadness and hope that were gathered as a process of narrative therapy and healing by the Dulwich Centre in 2006.

Prior to this work, the Officer in Charge of the Nhulunbuy Police Station had produced a report on Aboriginal suicides in north-east Arnhem Land for 2003 and 2004. He was attempting to raise community awareness of the disturbing trend in deaths by suicide and attempted suicides in the region. Gunyangara (pop. 300)—also known as

Ski Beach—had been experiencing a worrying spate of deaths by suicide and attempted suicides, and consequently received a questionable and infamous status as having the highest rates of suicide in the world.

A warm welcome ...

In Yirrkala, we were greeted by about 30 local people, mostly men in blue shirts representing the Laynhapuy Homelands Association Inc. (LHAI). They shook our hands and introduced themselves! Different mobs, different country and different histories of contact. These men had been released from work to attend this workshop and many had already received training in ASIST (applied suicide intervention skills training).

The workshop was a mix of serious talk about the next steps in addressing the issue of suicide in this community, and belly-aching laughter over the production of a film with local people acting out a suicide intervention; there aren't many occasions for laughter in this line of work and it was contagious. Here I got the chance to introduce the work that was being done in Central Australia through the Life Promotion Program and other suicide prevention initiatives, as well as show a brief introduction to “Suicide Story.”

Dedicated workers

Anglicare-NT's office in Nhulunbuy is a cramped space with some great people on the payroll who deliver a range of programs, including a 6-month community development initiative focusing on suicide prevention. Wayalwanga Marika is a senior Yolgnu



Left: Brian & Laurencia from LPP (centre) with dedicated staff from Anglicare-NT - Nathan Evans, Gavin Cohan and Emily Connell

woman from Yirrkala who is ASIST trained and able to facilitate the delivery in language. Nathan also speaks language and has a special connection to these people, their stories and land.

There is no doubt that the ability to speak the local language goes a long way. Allowing people to grapple with this difficult and foreign problem in their own language is essential, as is having Aboriginal people deliver training in ASIST and alternative suicide awareness programs in language.

Yirrkala overlooks a spectacular view of a sandy cove viewed through pandanus palms and cycads. At Gunyangara (Ski Beach) we heard a story about the cycad. This plant was used as a metaphor for suicide by the Gumatj people. Its seeds are poisonous in their natural state and must be treated using water, sunshine and local knowledge before they are edible. We listened to this story and its connection to suicide and grog as the poisons and the cleansing process necessary to allow for healing.

Preserving Yolgnu culture

In Gunyangara, the day's workshop was conducted from the music studio and open air stage of the Yothu Yindi Foundation, positioned in a garden of

Right: One of several workshops held over the 3-days, with the participants and trainers alike grateful for the rich sharing of information



bush medicine and pandanus palms overlooking the Arafura Sea. It was here that the well-known band members recorded and performed their music. Mundawuy Yunupingu founded Yothu Yindi (which means child and mother) to take positive messages about the Yolgnu culture to the world. Mundawuy had a vision that he spoke of back in the early 1990's to spend the wealth created through touring and producing records with Yothu Yindi on the formation of a foundation to support, maintain and develop the potential of Yolgnu cultural life.

As we sat in this special place acknowledging the pride and strength of the Yolgnu people, we listened as Margaret Yunupingu and other respected women and men of this community talked of losing too many young people to suicide, and drew on their new skills and old ways of knowing to map out a way forward for their community.

The stories from Mia Mulladad, from Santa Teresa, Raymond Campbell from Alice Springs, Anaclita from Tiwi Islands, Valda Shannon and Ronald Plummer from Tennant Creek and Edna Isles from Katherine were shared with the Yolgnu people that day. The stories were the same as the stories we heard from the Yolgnu families: shared pain, shared sorrow, shared confusion, shared strength and shared hope for

a way through to a place of meaning and connection for all their people.

An invaluable opportunity

Brian and I were very grateful for this opportunity and the generosity of the Yolgnu people and the Anglicare staff. We felt that we were given a part to play in Mundawuy's vision for his people.

"We came from the arid desert communities of Central Australia to this land of tropical green forests, plentiful rain and deep blue oceans and talked of the common problem of suicide. The words and images from the "Freshwater people" gave the local "Saltwater people" much comfort to know that they are not alone in their search for a way through." (Brian Kennedy)

"Despite all the trouble happening around us, we are holding onto our dreams and visions for this community. Saltwater people know that the water can be rough today and yet smooth tomorrow. This knowledge helps us." (Djuwalpi Marika, Yirrkala) ✘



Above & right: Laurencia presenting Suicide Story to a receptive group at the Yothu Yindi Foundation



With many thanks to the Yirrkala and Gunyangara people quoted in this article, and the Dulwich Centre for the use of their material.