

These stories are like a healing  
Like a medicine...

The special skills and knowledge of  
the Aboriginal communities  
of Port Augusta, Yirrkala &  
Gunyangara (Ski Beach)

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>Part One: Stories from Port Augusta</b>	4
Chapter One:	5
Responding to so many losses: The special skills and knowledge of the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community	
<b>Part Two: Stories from Yolngu people of Yirrkala &amp; Gunyangara (Ski Beach)</b>	9
Chapter Two: The Elders	10
Dreams and visions for Yirrkala by Djuwalpi Marika	
Rebuilding safety, respect and unity in Gunyangara by Gulumbu Yunupingu	
Taking action together by Dhangal Gurruwiwi	
Chapter Three: Yolngu Women	14
Our special ways of dealing with grief	14
Special ways of understanding problems	18
Mothers taking action	20
The work of the Community Patrol	21
Honesty and love	25
Chapter Four: Stories from Yolngu Men	27
Chapter Five: Stories from young Yolngu men	31
Remembering those who have passed away	31
Trying hard to find a future	34
Carrying on when so many have been lost	37
Keeping culture strong	39
Sharing life	40
True Leadership by Wayne Dhurrkay	42
Chapter Six: Young people's special skills	46
Chapter Seven:	48
Caring for each other - A message to Port Augusta from a group of Long Grassers in Nhulunbuy	
<b>Part Three: Last words</b>	49
<b>The process of gathering and sharing these stories</b>	51

## Introduction

*We have been feeling for our community, but our hearts are for all people. We would like to share these words with others, with the wider world. We would like you to know about what is happening here. We would like to exchange ideas with other communities. We must not hide ourselves. We must openly share ourselves. We are alive and our words must travel, they must go on journeys, further and further to enable people to see us.* Djerrknu (Eunice) Marika, Senior Elder at Yirrkala.

Over the last six months, a number of Aboriginal communities, which are having hard times, have been sharing stories between them. These are stories about special skills, special knowledge, about hopes and dreams and the ways that people are holding onto these. They are also stories that honour history. This book contains these stories.

The first chapter comes from the Aboriginal Community of Port Augusta, in South Australia. Their words describe how they are responding to the very many losses they have experienced lately. The stories of the Port Augusta community were then shared with the Yolngu people of Yirrkala and Gunyangara – remote communities in Northern Territory. The stories from down south were so warmly appreciated up north that the Yolngu people wished to send messages back to Port Augusta, and so began a process of sharing stories backwards and forwards between communities.

This process has involved women's stories, men's stories and stories from young men, and young women. You will read in this book precious stories about how people are dealing with some of the most difficult things in their lives. They are stories of hopes, skills and special knowledge that too often gets neglected or over-looked. Once a story was shared from one community to another, then those who listened to it sent messages back to the authors of the story to let them know what it had meant to hear it. Community members have described this experience in many ways, including: 'These stories are like a healing, like a medicine'.

In the following chapters, you will read the stories that have been shared, and also the messages that have been conveyed back and forth between communities. The hope now is that the stories contained in these pages can be shared with other communities in different parts of Australia, and that further messages can be passed back and forth. In turn, it's hoped that this will lead to an ever richer understanding and appreciation of the many ways in which people are trying to turn around the difficulties that they are currently facing.

These stories are like a healing, like a medicine

# Part One:

## Stories from Port Augusta

## Chapter One: Responding to so many losses Special skills of the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community

Recently, there have been so many losses in our families and in our community. Some of these deaths have been particularly difficult as they have been deaths of young people, and death through suicide or violence. We have experienced so many losses, one after the other. It has been a real struggle to get through. There has been too much sadness. This document has been created from a discussion we had together in Port Augusta to talk about our grief, what is important to us, and the ways in which we have been responding to so many losses.

**Asking Questions** ~ When some deaths seem particularly unfair, when it seems so very wrong, it can make it harder to continue with life. When the person who has died should still be with us, this can leave us not knowing where to look, not knowing where to go, or who to turn to. At times like this, all we have left are questions: Why did this happen? What is going wrong if our young people are having such a hard time? How can we support other young people? What steps can be put in place to ensure this doesn't happen to others? These are important questions. They show respect for the person who has died. They show respect for all young people. They show respect for life.

**Dreams** ~ Some of us have dreams in which our loved ones visit us. Even though they have passed away they come to us in our dreams. We dream of walking together again across the land. These images sustain us, they convince us that we will walk together again one day. Sometimes we also have a sense that our lost loved one is communicating with us - telling us that everything is all right. On the anniversary of people's deaths, sometimes our loved one comes back to us in our dreams to tell us they are going now and not to worry about them. This can lift a weight from our shoulders. We know they are now okay. Sometimes our dreams have a different sort of message. One of us even dreamt that a lost loved one saw us at the pokies. He gave one of us a slap and then left! That seems a pretty clear message! Mostly though, our loved ones offer us comfort through dreams. Even though they are no longer with us here on earth they are still offering us comfort. Sometimes we also feel a touch on our shoulders and know it is our mother's touch. Or we feel her rubbing our back as she always did when we were children. Feeling the kindness of loved ones in our dreams or through their touch helps us to continue with our lives.

**Spirituality** ~ For some of us, spiritual beliefs and practices are what help us to get through. Faith that one day we will meet again with those who have passed away sustains us. Acts of prayer are also significant. Knowing that someone is listening and will answer our prayers can make a difference.

**Crying together** ~ When one of us is feeling low others feel it too. We have skills in feeling each other's pain and suffering. In this way we share grief. I remember one time, I was sitting in front of a photograph of my mother and I was crying when my relatives walked in. They sat down beside me, put their arms around me and they started to cry too. 'What are we crying about they said?' I told them and we sat in sadness together.

**Honouring the contribution of key figures in the community** ~ At times like these it is important to acknowledge the work done by key people in our community - people like Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ken. The police or counsellors can never be there 24 hours a day. But it is family members who are there for each other. Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ken have been there for so many people in our community, as have other elders. Whether it is the middle of the night or the middle of the day, they are always there to share stories, to take people in. They have shared stories of those who have passed away. During times of hardship it is important to acknowledge those in the community who support us, whom we can ring when we feel sad. Even if we just talk about the weather, there are key people in the community who keep us connected to each other and to our histories. We need to honour them. They offer us all so much.

**Remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away** ~ We have developed special skills in remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away. There are many ways in which we do this. We do not forget them. We honour and respect our loved ones. Here are some of the different ways that people spoke about remembering and staying connected to those who have passed away:

'I have a nice big photograph. It is a photograph of my mother and father. Both faces look directly out at you. When my dad passed away I put a candle in front of this photo and then lit the candle. I was thinking about my father and I heard my mother say, 'Don't forget me!' This ritual of lighting a candle in front of this photograph is one way that I remember and stay connected with my mother and father.

'Certain smells always remind me. I seek out these smells sometimes and spend time to remember those who have passed.'

'Some of us have also used writing to remember. Before one person's funeral, I asked a whole lot of nieces and nephews and other relatives to tell me stories and memories about the person who had died. Some of these stories were very funny as he could be a cheeky man! I wrote all these stories down in a long letter that I then read out at the funeral. People were laughing at some of these stories. There was tenderness and laughter.'

We all have different ways of remembering those who have passed away, or carrying them with us. There is one story that has always been very significant to me. This is of a particular woman here in Port Augusta. When her brother died, she used to carry his suitcase everywhere she went. This case had all his belongings inside, his clothes and other possessions and she would carry this case with her throughout life - to the shops, to the pub, wherever she was walking. Wherever she went, this sister carried her brother with her. This was a way of honouring him. She also spent a lot of time at his grave site. We all have different ways of carrying our loved ones with us.

**Young ones' skills of remembering and staying connected** ~ We pass on these skills of remembering and staying connected to our children. And we pass on the stories too. It's our job to remind them of those who have passed on. Our four year old knows all the photographs. He sits down with them and can tell stories about those who have passed on. He has dreams of his grandfather and he lets us know when he has met with him in his dreams. When he visits the cemetery he says hello to all those whose stories he knows. We encourage our young people to know the stories and to remain connected to those who have passed away.

**Unity** ~ In times of grief we need a united stand, not a divided one. Sharing grief is important. Coming together makes a difference. Unity is healing. We must come together to find ways to offer more for our young people. They are our future.

**Music** ~ Some of us write and record songs and this is a way of responding to loss. These include songs such as: 'He's alive for evermore', 'Risen from dead' or songs about the land. We may even write and record songs about 'walking together again' with our lost loved ones. When we make up a song, and when we sing it, or listen to it, it helps us to cope. Painting on calico can make a difference too. As can listening to certain songs. Many people have particular songs by which they are remembered. Whenever a certain Slim Dusty song comes on the radio, we all say, 'that's Pop's song'. Even our young one's say this. Before we pass away, we might identify a certain song as 'our song'. This means when we are no longer here, whenever a certain song is played, we will be remembered.

**Our families** ~ The first people we turn to are our children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunties, mothers, fathers, grandparents... it is our families who support each other the most. Turning to each other means a lot to us. Just hearing our mother's voice on the phone, just hearing that our relatives are okay, that they are with us, brings comfort. There are many ways in which we stay connected with each other. Sometimes we send kind messages over the radio... giving these and receiving them can make a difference to your day. Even if alcohol and drugs affect our families, there are still very significant connections. We talk together about everything. We can share secrets with the older generation... about our men for instance! We can laugh together. We trust each other and these relationships are sacred to us.

**Remembering the good times** ~ It helps us when we remember the good times of the past. For some of us, this means remembering certain times on the Missions when we used to go out with the whole family, camping and hunting. For others, we remember good times that we spent with the person who has died. These good memories are precious to us. We sit around together and talk about all the good things that we used to do together. Once we start talking, we all remember different things. This means we can put different stories together. We can put it all together when we are talking with each other.

**Acknowledging that people react to grief in different ways** ~ People respond to grief in many different ways. Some people drink, smoke, gamble. They do these things to escape from the pain. We can't criticize them for this. We need to find ways for them to be able to talk about what they have been going through. We need to help them, but without criticizing.

**Tears and Laughter** ~ For us, tears and laughter go together. As well as sharing sorrow together, we also re-tell the funny stories from a person's life. It's important we don't forget these funny stories. We talk about the good times, we laugh, this makes us feel sad, and then we laugh again. Sometimes looking at a particular photograph might bring tears, another time a burst of laughter! For us, tears and laughter go together. There are many very funny stories. For instance... when we asked one of our young ones if he could remember his grandfathers voice and what he used to say, this young one said, "Yes, sure, I remember him. I remember him

saying... Can you shut up you bastard!" It was very funny! Another time, we were coming back from a funeral on a bus and there was a lot of laughter as we hurried along. As the bus was going a little too fast one young guy yelled out, 'I don't think grandpa wants to see us again quite so soon... we only just said good bye to him!'. There are many ways in which we grieve with tears and laughter.

**Young people caring for us** ~ Sometimes it's our young people who offer us comfort. They can feel when we are upset and they might say 'Are you feeling okay? Can I come and camp with you? Can I come and sleep in your bed?' Or our older kids might say, 'Mum, have a rest. I'll cook tonight'. These acts of care mean a lot to us.

**They are with us forever** ~ Because we love them so much, we may grieve forever for those who have died. But we will never forget them. They might not be here with us but we have them in our hearts and in our minds.

### Responses to the people of Port Augusta from Yolngu Women

Their words speak for us. Their stories are so similar to what we experience. It is like they are talking for us as well. It's like we are sharing the same problems under the one tent. We know now that these things are not just happening in Arnhem Land but also down south. We are thinking of them and now we would like to pass on something to them. We want to share our stories with them, just like they shared their stories with us. We will speak about our experiences and then link these together with the experiences of those from Port Augusta. Then we can translate this all into our language and share this through our community. This is about sharing knowledge and sharing stories together.

Hearing the stories of the people of Port Augusta talk about their losses and the deaths of their young people made me feel quite emotional. They have experienced so many losses, one after the other. It has been a real struggle for them to get through and there has been too much sadness. This has made me think of what I have gone through as a mother and what our people have gone through. The stories from Port Augusta made me realise that what is happening here, is happening in their country as well. It is not different. We have also been going through very hard times and this makes it difficult to work out what is happening around us, what is affecting us.



## Part Two

# Stories from the Yolngu people of Yirrkala and Gunyangara (Ski Beach)

## Chapter Two: The Elders

### Dreams and visions for Yirrkala ~ Djuwalpi Marika

Yirrkala is a unique place. It is a physical paradise. We have a rich history and a strong cultural commitment. At the moment though, we are living with so many problems. We have had too many deaths, too many suicides. There has been so much sadness and loss. There is too much alcohol and other drugs. At night we hear fighting and breaking glass. It is like a nightmare.

We have visions and dreams for this community. We have held onto these dreams even through very hard times. We want to bring the community back to how it was before....at night you could hear music, the yidaki, and singing, not fighting. We are looking at these problems and identifying how to address them. We have a good network of people who are doing all that they can – a community patrol run by strong women, a drug and alcohol unit, a woman's safe house, young people who are writing and singing songs, and strong leadership in the council.

Many people are contributing to holding onto these dreams and visions. The young people of the community made a video. It is called 'A Vision for Yirrkala.' It has the voices of young people, of older people, and also voices from our past, our ancestors. Our vision is being held together by younger and older people.

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 again tomorrow. This knowledge helps us. Those of us from inland know that when the bushfires come, there are ways to break through and to survive. We watch the kangaroos. Where they break the line of the fire, this provides the opportunity. We know then where to break through the fire. At the moment it is like the water is rough, but we know it will be smooth again tomorrow. Or it is like when the bushfires are upon us and we are doing all we can to work out how to break through the fire.

These are difficult times, but we are holding onto our visions and dreams for Yirrkala. These dreams and visions have long histories. They were carried for thousands of years by our ancestors. They are now being carried in different ways by different members of our community, by council members, by strong women, by young people, and by children.

Everything starts from the grass roots. We need to sit together, on the ground, under the tree to share our visions. We wish to bring elders, young people, children together to share stories and to find ways forward. As our stories link together we will grow stronger. All the voices need to be heard. All of our skills, all of our knowledge, needs to be brought together. Every member of Yirrkala has stories and dreams for this place. We need to listen to them.

## Rebuilding safety, respect and unity in Gunyangara ~ Gulumbu Yunupingu

There was once a lot of respect in our community. But since the bauxite mob came the respect for people started to disappear. Alcohol and drugs came into the communities and the loss of respect has been very sad for us. At times, lately, we have also become divided from each other. There are divisions between us and this tears at our hearts. The reason this is so painful for us is because we know the importance of unity. We cannot afford to split apart. We are one family group. We are all connected by our histories and through our families. We have a commitment to unity that runs back through the years and through the generations. We must find ways to link ourselves together again.

We are now slowly re-building respect in our community. There are many different ways in which we are doing this. We are trying to make our community a safe place. When people are at risk, we try to bring them to safety because we know the importance of this. This knowledge about safety has long histories. Some of us have learnt about the importance of safety from our own lives. There have been times when we have not been safe that have taught us how important safety is. Others of us have done courses that have talked about safety. And some of us have a formal role in our families that involves ensuring that our family is safe. This role is passed down from generation to generation. In fact, the vision for this community, Gunyangara, when it was first set up, was about creating a safe place for all of us. We all have knowledge about safety. It is something that we value. It is something we are striving for.

We are now trying to work for a better future. This is in honour of those we have lost. They would want us to do this. We are trying to build a foundation for the community to stand upon. There are some steps that have already occurred. For instance, every year we have a woman's meeting where women can share sad stories and put our arms around one another. Then we have healing in the traditional ways. Each year, the number of women who come to this meeting gets bigger and bigger. We also have a community patrol now. This is being run by the women and we always treat people with kindness. We have an important program for young men and we are talking of developing one for young women. These programs are to ensure that our young people keep learning the old ways. Our ceremonies are still strong.

There are many difficulties that we are facing. It is the people, the land, and the community that are important to us. If we are caring for our people, our land, our children, then this will make this a healthy community. It will take some time, but we are re-building respect in our community. Our people know a lot about respect. Our respect has long histories. And we are slowly bringing it back.

## Taking action together ~ Dhangal Gurruwiwi

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 a 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.

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One person cannot handle it alone. We have found that it makes a difference when brothers and sisters work together, when we support each other. In our culture there are things that only men can do and things that only women can do. We have different knowledge, different skills. When brothers support sisters, and sisters support brothers, many things are possible. Sometimes as sisters, we have been inspired by the steps our brothers have taken, and then we also begin to take action. And when brothers support and encourage us, their sisters, it makes it more possible for us to continue.

### Messages back to Yolngu elders

*A gentle breeze and common-ground ~* We so appreciated that you shared these stories with us. As we listened to your stories, I visualised your words as a gentle breeze of strength and determination. This is a breeze that tells us that there are many similarities between our different communities. We are all going through the loss and the grief. As your words go on these journeys, the breeze is getting stronger and stronger. And as it gets stronger I think there'll be more participation, there'll be more ways we can take action to address the issues facing our families and our communities. It's like you are sending out a message on that gentle breeze, a message to all Aboriginal people. And you're trying to teach the white people too – teaching about the damage that's been done, and also teaching ways in which they can help fix the problems that they've created. Western culture might not understand how we have very close connections to other Aboriginal people. When we see other Aboriginal people suffering, we feel it as well. That gentle breeze that you are sending down to us, is to help us talk about suffering and ways of coming together. It's a gentle breeze that is now moving around Australia. You're sending a message out to all Aboriginal communities, a message of what's going on in your community, a message that we all need to deal with the issues we are facing before hopes and dreams are lost. It's a message about respect, and about respecting our homes. It's a message asking other people to respect our communities, not to abuse them. It's a message to keep our hopes and dreams alive. It's a message about not losing sight of our visions for the future. It's a breeze that is going to keep on touching different communities now. *(Aboriginal woman from Adelaide)*

*Going out bush again ~* It meant a lot to me when the people from up north spoke about how it used to be in the old days, when at night they would hear the clapsticks and the singing around the camp fires, and how they want to get back to this. When I was younger, and even now when I go back home, we never heard the clapsticks. We just had years of abuse and fighting all the time. So there's not that comparison to make. I think what they have had is so precious. I didn't grow up with the singing or dancing or clapsticks. Those of us who didn't grow up with these things sometimes have special knowledge about how precious and important our culture is. The only time we ever got to hear the clapsticks and singing was once a year when we'd go camping. We'd drive all day up to the Murray River. This was always a big family thing, all the cousins would go too, and my uncles, aunties. We'd take probably three vans and with our whole mob there'd be like 15-20 people! When we got there we would meet with locals who would take us to their special places. We'd camp by the river and they'd share with us their stories and their histories. At night we'd sit around the fire and there would be singing. As we got older, these camps stopped happening. The adults stopped going and people moved away. The abuse never stopped, but the trips did. We began to blend in, rather than being proud of our culture. I was the only Aboriginal kid at my school, and I had various identity issues, but somehow I held onto the knowledge of how precious our culture is. You know, after listening to those stories from up north, I know what I am going to do. I am going to go back home and speak to my aunties and my mum, and my uncle, and my little brother and sister. And we're all going to go out bush. That's where you can totally relax. And it will remind us all of nanna. It's been too long since we went out bush. My brothers have never been and I have to take them. The words from the people up north have reminded me of what I have to do. I've been thinking it for a while, but things happen for a reason, you know what I mean? You hear things for a reason and it's like their words have pushed me to take that next step. Please thank them for me. (*Young Wiradjuri woman now living in Adelaide*)

## Chapter Three: Yolngu Women

We have been talking together in the meeting rooms of council houses, at Shady Beach, and at Ski Beach. Our conversations have touched on sad topics but there has also been lots of laughter! The following stories focus on 'Our Special ways of dealing with grief', 'Special ways of understanding problems', 'Taking action' and 'Honesty and love'. We would like to share these stories with the women of Port Augusta.

### Our special ways of dealing with grief

There have been so many losses lately that there is much sadness here. We have all been trying to do what we can to respond to this grief. We have special ways of dealing with loss and grief.

**The first thunder of the year** ~ When the first thunder of the year occurs, this touches the heart of any mother who has had a loss. It reminds mothers who have lost a son that he will not be with them for Christmas. The first thunder of the year echoes in the hearts of mothers. We ask ourselves questions: Am I able to go on? Am I able to find ways that what I have experienced can be of help to others? How can I make sure that others don't go through the same thing?

**The cry of mothers** ~ When a family loses someone, the cry of mothers does not stop for years. In every rising sun, there is the cry of the mother. As the sun sets, this is the cry of the mother. Calls of grief echo through the lands. Our grief is also linked to the four winds – Lungurra, Bulunu, Barra and Djaladthun. This can continue for five years. There are foods we will not eat, places that will not be used. We treasure our children here, when we lose one of them, the cries of the mothers do not stop for years.

**So much pain** ~ Many of us mothers have gone through so much pain, so much suffering. I lost one son to suicide, and almost lost another. We have lost too many young people. Instead of young people singing for older people, it's been the other way around. Some of our young people have seen bad things. Some of them have lost people they dearly loved. Our young people are very important to us. We keep doing everything we can to keep them alive. Sometimes we don't know what to do to make our children safe. This is a terrible feeling. We do everything that we can, everything that we can think of. But what do you do to save a person who is planning suicide? Sometimes there is no answer. We can only keep doing everything that we can.

**Our concern for our young people** ~ We're living here across from the refinery. The land speaks to us. It speaks of the harm that has been done. It cries. It touches us as we listen. We are the senior elders of our community and we are concerned about our young people. The night is for us to sleep, but now we sit looking out at the road, waiting for our young people to come home. We sit all night with worry. Is he in trouble? Has there been an accident? The worry stays with us until we see the car come down the road, until we see that he is home. Sometimes we cry one whole night. Our tears think back to how our old people used to live. We have been holding onto dreams and poems.

*Silver Road*  
by Gayili Marika Yunupingu

*Last night  
I saw a silver road  
Go straight across the sea  
And quick as I raced along the shore  
That quick road followed me.*

*It followed me all around the bay  
Where small waves dance in tune  
And at the end of the silver road there  
Hung a silver moon*

*On a pale green sky  
With a pathway bright and broad  
Some night I shall bring that silver moon  
Across that silver road*

In the night, when waiting for our young people to come home, I think about the silver road. There have been signs recently that dreams are being carried on, that our young people are settling down, listening, going back to the homelands. They are holding onto their dreams and they are passing them on. They are trying hard to stay away from trouble. They are going fishing, camping, making spears. I will go away soon. But I will be happy in spirit because I will leave my children happy. There have been signs lately that the bondage is beginning to break. We will keep watching the silver road.

**Times when happiness is in our hearts** ~ Even when there is so much sadness around us, there are still times when there is happiness in our hearts. Despite it all, despite all that is happening, we still have times when happiness shines, when we say, 'Okay, that's it. Let's get in the car...let's go!' We camp out, share stories, sing. This has always been true. It is part of our way. Somehow, even during times of hardship, we find ways to ensure that happiness remains in our hearts.

**Dreams** ~ Sometimes our loved ones visit us in our dreams. They tell us that they are all right now and they offer us comfort through their words and their touch. We don't get frightened by this. We know they are caring for us. In this way, they still offer us comfort even though they are no longer here on earth. Sometimes, if they regret things that they did, or how they died, they may even come back in a dream to apologise to their mother or father about what took place. These dreams can be very comforting. We also feel their presence during our waking hours. We feel them when we least expect it. Certain smells or sounds evoke them. Our loved ones remain with us. They walk with us in life.

**Honouring life through making a special pole** ~ When a person dies, a special pole – a baburru – is made in their honour. This is given to the mother and father of the person who has died, or to their closest family member. And it is then passed down through the generations. It is a way of always remembering and honouring the person who has died. When we look at these poles, we also remember the things that we

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learnt from the person who has passed away. They help us to continually reflect and think about our own lives. These poles are important to us and we do whatever we can to protect them. During times when alcohol and drugs are affecting family members, if this means one of these poles is at risk we might hide it away, and only bring it out when respect has returned.

**Ceremonies** ~ There are also other traditional ways of grieving, ways of honouring and remembering those who have died. Some of these are men's business and are not for us to talk about. These involve song-lines and the journey of a person's spirit. These also involve formal ceremonies that are held here. A ceremony, without grog, is one of the most powerful and beautiful things that can be experienced.

**Spirituality** ~ For some of us, spirituality and faith is what assists us to get through. My faith has made it possible for us to survive, to be loved, to be supported. After my eldest son's death it was spirituality that restored me, that means I still live with love for myself and others.

### Cultural Ways of Grieving and Remembering From Aboriginal women in Port Augusta

The words from up north have led us to talk more about our own cultural ways of grieving and remembering. Here are some thoughts we wanted to send back to the Yolngu women.

*The special poles* ~ I was particularly drawn to the special poles that they make when people pass away. It's a beautiful thought that these poles are passed down from generation to generation to remember the life of a loved one. We also like to keep something to remind us of those who've passed away, some ornament that is continually with us. My mum and dad used to go to the side shows and circuses in the early 1950s and '60s. They used to compete in the skittles and once they won a particular prize. This was of a kookaburra and a ceramic dog and they always kept this on their kitchen cabinet. Now it's on my kitchen cupboard, and it constantly reminds me of them. When I am gone, my kids might use this to remind them of me. I appreciated when the woman said she sometimes needed to hide the special poles to protect them. I've also protected these ornaments which remind me of my parents.

I also really liked this idea of these special poles. Sometimes, lately, there have been so many losses in one immediate family that we get overwhelmed by emotion. We may not have had a chance to have grieved for one person when we're suddenly grieving for another. Having something physical like a pole to constantly remind you of each person who has passed away, sounds beautiful to me. This is something I will think more about. I will think about how we might be able to do something similar that can also be passed on down the generations.



*Remembering people through the lives of others* ~ Listening to the stories from up north about the ways that they grieve and remember has made me think more about our cultural ways down here. From where I come from, when a person has died, we have to get rid of any cup or any plate that they have eaten from. This is a way of honouring and respecting the person who has died. We also can't have photographs of them. And if anyone has the same name as the person who has died, we have to give them a different name. The main way that we remember someone is through a child who is born soon afterwards. If a little kid has the eyes or the nose or a certain way of doing things that reminds us of the person who has died, then we talk about this. When my little boy died, I had to get rid of all his clothes and I didn't have any photographs of him. But I kept the case that all his clothes were in. This case was given to me by a relative. I still have this case and it always makes me think of my son and the lady who gave it to me. When I had my next son, I saw a lot of resemblances in him. I look at him, daydream, remember, and think about my lost loved one. Please share this with the women up north.

*Sorry camps* ~ My name is Audrey, I'm from the Pitjantjatjara lands. The Yolngu women's stories remind me of what we do when someone passes away. We all stay together as a group in our own camp. We share our tucker and sometimes the old ladies paint themselves up. After the funeral we all stay in sorry camp. The others might go home but the family of the dead stay on for a number of weeks. When we go back we give our belongings away to those who have buried the young person – this is part of our cultural law. Hearing your stories made me think more about our ways.

*Community remembrance days* ~ When we have had a lot of losses, we sometimes hold community remembrance days down here. The ceremony is held outside. Last time we gathered together, we had Slim Dusty songs playing, and other songs that remind people of their loved ones. People sat and listened and talked together, and we wrote messages on balloons. These were messages to the people who have passed away. Some of us also wrote letters, and this process brought back memories. There were 40-50 people, and towards the end of the ceremony we released these balloons and they sailed up over the bay. These were the balloons with messages to our lost loved ones. At the moment they were released, a bit of rain came, and then a rainbow, and it made it very special. Hearing the Yolngu women's words made me think about how we need to hold another healing ceremony here to let go of 2005, a year that has been so full of losses and grief, so that we can have a new beginning.

*When this story was shared with Djapirri Mununggirritj, she thought it might be a good idea for Yirrkala to hold a similar community ceremony and that perhaps this could be held at the same time as the next one in Port Augusta. In this way the communities could show solidarity in grief, remembrance and honouring those who have passed away.*

*Laughter* ~ I liked hearing some of their funny stories too! I think it's true that we grieve through tears and laughter. When Auntie lost one of her children, we went over there and she started telling us stories of growing up as a young girl. This was after the funeral and it was a night of talking and talking. She told us stories of when she first fell in love, and all those sorts of things. It was one of the most moving experiences I've ever had. You know, we were all supposed to be there grieving, but it turned into a night of laughter. It was very special. Sometimes other people don't understand why we might be laughing at a funeral, but we're celebrating a person who has offered so much. When Auntie Joyce lost her youngest daughter, I had the privilege of reading the eulogy and all her sisters were carrying the coffin. To see that was so special. It brought such warmth. You know, we give grief a purpose – to celebrate the person who has offered so much. We celebrate the person with stories, with laughter, with tears, with songs, and with our memories.

## Special ways of understanding problems

Long before Nhulunbuy the town was formed, our elders set out a framework for our people to follow. These were ways of living together that are in accordance with the land, with our song-lines, and with the wishes of our ancestors. These were ways of living that linked all of us together with respect. When the mine came to our land, and when the town was created, it changed the life of our people. It has brought many effects to our people, including alcohol, drugs, loss of respect, and suicide. We feel that in some ways, all these changes have meant that we have gone off the track that was set out by our elders and our ancestors. We are now trying to find ways to get back on track and to live lives that are in accordance with the values of respect that have always been our way. How we understand the problems we are facing makes a real difference to how we try to solve them. Here are some of the special ways we have of understanding problems.

**Not individual problems** ~ The problems we are facing are not individual problems. If we see someone who is going through hard times, it is not just 'their problem'. It is everybody's problem. We are Yolngu people. We have relationships and kinship. These are our problems and we will need to solve them together.

**Coming together to stop the enemy** ~ It is time to stop blaming each other, when none of us are the enemy. The enemy is the grog. This is our enemy. It is an enemy to all of us. It comes to people when they are sad. It is no good arguing Yolngu to Yolngu. We have to find a way to stop this enemy before it destroys everybody's life, before it ends any more lives. This poison was brought into our lands. We did not bring it here. This poison is the enemy, and we must come together to find ways of stopping it from doing further harm.

**The importance of unity** ~ In order to deal with the problems we are facing, we need unity. Way back when our ancestors were here everyone came together once in a while. When there were important ceremonies, such as funeral ceremonies, all the different clans would come together and unite. At these times the clans would listen to each other. When everyone came together there was respect and harmony. Recently there have been so many losses, so much trouble, too many divisions. These days there are distractions, like The Grog and Kava. Even so, the voices of our ancestors remind us that we are all connected. We are all related to each other here. We are connected to each other for good. A bloodline never breaks. Things may be said when people are angry, but we are stuck with each other for good! This means we live in a circle of life. It also means we have to find our way together through the toughest of times, because we have always been connected, and we will be connected forever.

**Drawing people together** ~ After the death of my oldest son, I tried to draw everyone together. Me and my sisters sat down with everyone and had a long talk. We talked about not blaming anyone. I don't blame anyone for his death. I blame the grog. I blame the drugs. For my son's funeral, there was no grog involved in the ceremony. It was a dry ceremony. In this way, everyone respected him. And everyone came together.

**Depression** ~ My husband left me and our family. This was devastating to me. I felt as if life was not worth living. I did not know why he had left. I thought this meant he did not care about us. He did not say anything. Until one day, I watched a video in a training course. It was of an old man who was suffering from depression. It was only then that I realised that this was what was happening to my husband. I burst into tears. I told the other women that this is what my husband was feeling. I asked them to support me and they did. Depression is a frightening thing. It made my husband like a different person. He became so closed. This was the depression, it wasn't him. It has meant a lot to me to realise why my husband left. I discovered that he had left because he did not want to hurt us. He knew that he had to leave until his mind was clear. I have stayed in touch with him. Sometimes this has meant walking in the heat for miles and miles. Sometimes we have been able to work together against the depression, we have come up with some tricks that have worked sometimes. I have told him that we do not hate him, that we love him, that he is in our hearts. He is doing something for me now. He is going through old photographs, copying these and making plans. He is working out what we will do for Christmas. His mind is wide open. It has been a long journey, but it has been very helpful to realise that the problem has been depression.

**Possibilities for change** ~ Many of our children are experiencing a lot of trouble and suffering. For young people that have been lead astray by trouble, by alcohol or drugs, it is important for us women to stand strong in the belief that things can change for them. Somewhere along the line something can happen to a young person that is going through a hard time and things can turn around.

## Mothers taking action

A handful of ladies in this community have been trying for a long time to help those who are losing their way. Twenty years ago this house here was a refuge for the ladies. They used to come here when their husbands had beaten them. They came here for safety and for a good nights sleep when their own home was dangerous. This was in the 1980s when middle-aged men were drinking. We reached out to these men, talked to them about the children, about how they must be feeling. We did a lot of talking, took a lot of action, and things did quieten down. The heavy drinkers started to limit their drinks. Then in the 1990s everything changed. Young people started drinking. And as women we have started to take action again.

**Fighting back against the grog** ~ After my nephew died, recently, we have started taking more action. I told those who were drinkers that when they brought alcohol back into the community I would be waiting for them, with my club. They came back with a 30 pack of beer. We took it from them. I started to throw the cans up in the air and hit them with my club. My sister took a machete. She started doing the same as me, but slicing the cans. We burst wine casts with our fingernails, or with spears. When they hid the beer in lemonade cartons, we were not fooled. When they hid alcohol under their clothing, we burst them and the alcohol sometimes spilled down their legs. The enemy is the grog and now we are taking up weapons against the enemy. We used to be softball players and these skills are now coming in handy! We have a very good aim. And we have many very funny stories about our efforts to free this community from alcohol. There is a long history of taking action here. Things have quietened down here now. The drinking has not stopped but there is much less shouting, much less aggression. That has stopped. It is changing in our family. They are listening to us and it is changing.

**Reconnecting with our loved ones when drugs have taken them away** ~ It can be heartbreaking when our young people are using drugs or sniffing petrol. It is as if we lose them to the drugs. When a young person has left the community, left their family, and is hanging out in town, mothers sometimes don't know what to do. It is a very worrying situation. As mothers we do all we can. There was a time, in the past, when my son was sniffing petrol with a group of other young people on the beach. They were there for many months. I would drive to the beach and go down to where all the young people were, including my son, and I would say to them all, 'Has anyone seen my son? I am missing him very much. If anyone sees my son, could they tell him I miss him. His bedroom is still empty.' I would sometimes also bring food or some money for him and ask the other boys to give this to him if they saw him. He was always there, of course, listening, and I knew this. I could see him. I did this for month after month: just telling the group that I missed my son. Then, one day, he walked back into our home and into our lives. He never talked about what I had done. And he never went back to that lifestyle.

Sometimes we have been able to do this. Other times we have just continued to pass on the message: 'I love you. You know you have a bed and a home and parents who love you.' We have reached out to young people. We try to respect them and this makes it more possible for them to respect us. This is how we got rid of petrol sniffing in the community. But there is still so much to do in relation to issues of drugs and alcohol. We are looking for new ways of reconnecting with loved ones when drugs have taken them away.

## The work of the Community Patrol

We have a community patrol now. It started when women walked to bring food to those who were drunk on the outskirts of the community. Now we have a vehicle. We pick up people who are drunk, we treat them kindly, we bring them home, we put them to bed and tell them to stay safe. People listen to us because we have old women with us. Young people do listen. We wait until the next day, when they are sober, to talk with them. If they continue with the stupidity, we send them to a homeland, out bush for a couple of weeks, where there is no grog, no drugs. We always approach people with kindness, even if they are acting badly. We never hit them. We never approach them in ways that could make them fearful. We tell them, 'We care for you, we love you' and they take notice of this. We respect them, and in turn this means that they respect us.

**Filling the gap for those who are split from their family** ~ Family is very important to us. When people get disconnected from family, when problems get in the way and when relationships are strained, people become very lonely and this is when they are most at risk. This is because family is so important to us. Even people who think they don't have families who care about them, they do have families. We are all related to each other up here. All Yolngu are related to each other. If we see someone who is in trouble, and if their immediate family is no longer connected to them, then we reach out to them. We talk with them. We try to fill the gap between them and their family. And then we try to link them back with their family. For instance, I saw a young kid, who was very drunk lying by the side of the road. When I asked him what was wrong he said, 'My family don't love me. They don't care about me.' I took him to my home, put him to bed and gave him a big feed. The next day I took him back to his parents. We sat together and I relayed the boy's concerns. This made a big difference. I have seen him around lately and he is doing really well.

When we notice young people who are losing their way, we cry inside and love to sit down with them. It breaks my heart to see young people lose their talent, their talent is important to us, so I try to reach out to them. We talk together. We talk about getting of the trap. Alcohol and drugs are like a trap or a pit. We talk together about this, and about ways of getting out. I am always clear that trying to get out is their choice. I share stories with them. Stories about what it was like here when I grew up. How we saw the first pub being built. How we have seen so many changes. We share history. I also try to reconnect them with the spiritual side of life, to link them back to a sense of spirituality. When I talk to them, they start to picture themselves differently. They can see themselves in a bigger picture. When we speak about the trap, about the pit, they agree with me. They say, 'Someday I might start limiting my drinking. At the moment it is too hard. But sometime...'

We try to enable our young people to talk with us. We find ways to fill the gap and then link people back to their immediate family.

**How to respond when someone is despairing and may take their own life ~** When we are on community patrol we are sometimes called out to young people who are threatening to take their own life. There was a time when a young man had climbed up a pole and was saying he was going to hang himself. When I went up to him, I talked to him very gently, very calmly. And he listened to me and climbed down. There was another time when a young man was on the roof of a house and ready to hang himself. When we speak to them, people do listen to us and they do respond. This is because there are particular ways in which we approach people in this situation. If we are tense, or angry, or anxious, then they will notice this and react to it. Our calm voice calms them down. Sometimes family members take off at these times, it is too much to witness, or they are frightened, they don't know what to do. We turn towards young people at these times. We speak to them with kindness and care. We try to fill the gap between them and their families. Often we then take them off to a nearby beach so we can be alone and sit down and talk together. We talk in ways that enable us to find out what the problem is, why they are trying to harm themselves, what is bothering them. We talk with them in ways that will enable them to speak back.

It's not only about responding in these moments of crisis. We also keep a very close eye on people who are vulnerable. Other community members will tell us if they are worried about someone and once we know this we will keep an eye on them and have a quiet talk whenever it is needed. Some of these skills we have developed through training courses. We have done role-plays to work out how to respond to people when they are aggressive or when they can hardly talk. We bring all our experiences and abilities to this work. Some of these skills have long histories. Some of us have lost family members to suicide. We are dedicated to do what we can to prevent further losses of life. Our young ones are precious to us.

**Alcohol and drugs: hearing from people who have turned things around ~** For a long time now alcohol and drugs have been causing a lot of problems in our community. This has caused much heartache and strife between our people. We have been working to establish a Centre in town that will assist people to deal with these problems, and this will be opened soon. We also hope to soon be able to take people to a special healing place, two hours drive away, that is a Raypirri place. We have hopes that these things will make a difference. Even without this, we know of some people who have found ways to turn their lives around. We know some people who were nearly dead and yet have managed to stop drinking and start working. We want to find ways for these people to testify, to tell the stories of how they managed to turn their lives around.

**Responding to violence ~** We have also had to develop ways of responding to violence in our community. If we see violence taking place, a man hitting a woman, then we will always intervene. I remember one time when I saw a man hitting his wife. We went up to them and I said, firmly, 'Stop hitting your wife.' And then I made a joke, 'If blood starts to come out of her head you will have to drink it! Stop this. Let's go home.' This made them laugh. I was strong but I also used humour. The way in which you approach these situations is very important. There are skills involved in how to defuse these sorts of situations. Some of us, in the past, have used our own homes as safe houses, where women and children could stay the night if the man is being violent. In the past, we also developed a program to deal with domestic

violence in the community. We would hold a meeting with the man and woman and their parents and key community members. We would talk about how domestic violence is not part of our culture and how we must symbolically break all the weapons. We would get them thinking about the children's experiences. And we would always help the women who were having a hard time. We are proud of this history of how we have tried to deal with domestic violence in our community. There is still more to do. We hope one day that there will be a safe house in the community. This is something we are still working towards.

**Intervening in conflicts** ~ There is sometimes significant conflict between members of our community. There was an occasion recently when two groups were facing each other with spears. As women, we stood in between them. We broke the spears and threw some of them up on the roofs. There was another occasion when young men turned on the Police with machetes. It was the community patrol women who again intervened and ensured that no one got hurt. We have to stay calm in these situations. We have undergone self-defence training so that we have ways of responding. If we don't intervene there could be terrible consequences.

Lately, community members have started to call us instead of the Police when there is trouble. If we come across an aggressive person, but they are not harming anyone, we will let them be, we will come back later when they have calmed down. When we see people who are very drunk or affected by drugs we will pick them up and take them home. We will leave it until the next day to talk with them. The next day we will sit down with their whole family and talk it all through.

If the situation is tense, sometimes humour is very important. We joke together. They make us laugh and we make them laugh. For instance, if we see a man who is drunk and who is the right relation for marriage we might say, 'Come on, I'll take you home.' And there is much laughter! The other women will then say, 'No, come in our car, we'd better take you!'. These are very funny moments. They take away any awkwardness, or aggro, or shame.

Some of the older people in the community are having better sleeps now, because they know that the community patrol is out there. There has been so much to worry about. There is still a lot we are concerned about, but it is significant that there are women who are always available now to respond to those sorts of crisis, to respond to people with care, and to link them back to their families.

### Inspired by the work of mothers and the community patrol

As the stories of the community patrol have been shared down south, they have meant a lot to all that have heard them...

*Taking up weapons against the enemy* ~ What they said about the grog being the enemy, and that now they're taking on the enemy, was inspiring to me. And the story about them taking up weapons against the grog is fantastic! Their softball skills sure sound like they are coming in handy. They reminded me of a story of my own. When I was about 12 or 13 my dad and uncles came back from a fishing trip and they were all very drunk. I just got sick of it and so I went and broke into the car, grabbed all their cartons, dragged them across the road and into the bushes. Then I went to all the secret spots where they stashed grog in the front of the car. I grabbed each can and opened them and threw them on the road. I was really fed up. I liked hearing how the women up north have got fed up too. When my mum saw what was happening she thought it was so funny, that I was telling my dad off for drinking. But when my dad came out he saw what I was doing, he started to cry. This was the only time I saw my dad cry except for at funerals. He started to cry and said 'I'm sorry, I didn't realise'. So we had tears and laughter all at once. My mum thought it was hysterical! Can you share that story back with the women up north? (*Young Aboriginal woman from Ceduna*)

Listening to the story of how the women are taking action against the grog has reminded me of my nephew. It reminded me of chucking all his cans away when he was struggling with alcohol. All my nephews have passed away now. I will cry for them and I hold onto my memories of them. The trouble came from the drink. It was very good to hear these women's stories. It's good to be reminded of my nephew. It's good to be reminded that I also took action in the ways that I could. And it's good to hear that they are taking action in their place, in their community. My children are all grown up now and there is still strong respect between the generations, and there is strong caring for each other. Please tell those women that their stories have given us strength. (*Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta*)

*Community Patrol* ~ I loved hearing about the work of the community patrol. This is what we need here in Port Augusta. I loved hearing about how they take older women with them on these patrols and how people respect this. Maybe their work and their words will inspire us to do something like this down here in Port Augusta. (*Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta*)

*A message from an Aboriginal man to the women up north* ~ As an Aboriginal man I would like to acknowledge the stand that these women are taking against the grog. I think it is so important what they are doing. We all need to take these sorts of stands because I have seen what alcohol does to the men, and then what the men do to the women. I think what they are doing is fantastic. But I'm not so sure if softball bats are the way to go here! (Laughter). Seriously though, it meant a lot to me to hear those strong women's voices. In Aboriginal culture, the woman is probably the most powerful member of the family because they give birth to us. In Aboriginal culture the earth is the Mother Earth. We're born from her, we come from the earth, and when we die we are buried back in the ground. As an Aboriginal man, I really want to acknowledge our women, for the pain they're put through and for their strength. They have such strength when they give birth to babies, when they rear their family when their husband's not there or their partner leaves. I just want to really acknowledge them. (*Aboriginal man from Port Lincoln*)



## Honesty & love

We have been through so much. And when there has been trouble, sometimes we don't want to associate with other families when their son or daughter hurt one of our own. There has been too much pain, too much division. Now it is time for honesty. It is a time to share and to help each other through honesty. It is time to sit down together and sort things out.

We know that the only way of dealing with bad feelings is to come together face-to-face. After this happens, everything settles down. The bad feelings go away. If we don't deal with things face-to-face, people get sick, families get divided, many things go wrong between us. This brings us great sadness. We live in a small community, we must live our lives together. Dealing with things face-to-face is a tradition round here. It is one of our ways of healing. It generates clear understandings. It helps us to join. Our people know a lot about this.

It is a time for us to get up and meet with those with whom we have had trouble. It is a time for honesty. One of the things we have been thinking about a lot is love and how we treat our children. We would like to share our thoughts with you.

**Love is like a medicine** ~ Love is like a medicine. We can heal people with it, those who are sad and lonely. We know ways in which love can flow from one person to another, ways to help each other. Our people have known these ways for a very long time. Our caring ways are linked to our Gurrutu system. This is our relationship system, how we fit together, how we care for each other. When we are connected we have a fire deep inside of us. It warms us.

**How we treat our children** ~ Some of us are thinking about ways we treat our children. I was very tough, very hard on my first children. I treated them very roughly when I thought they had done wrong. I used to hit them, whip them, as this was the way I had learnt. This was the only way I knew. It was what I learnt when I was younger. And there was no father around. In recent years, I have treated my younger child in different ways. Some of us as adults are trying to do things differently now. We try to be strong, but not to hurt our children. We are looking at other ways. We all want what is best for our children.

**Many mothers** ~ It helps that no one has just one mum. Here, your mother's sisters are your mothers too. Any aunty can step in to care and love a young person who is experiencing trouble. For every mother there are lots of helpers. When a mother is away, the sisters are called on.

### Messages from Aboriginal mothers in Port Augusta

*Love and respect* ~ When the Yolngu mothers spoke about love, this made us think about our loving ways here. When we were growing up and walked around, different adults would always say something to us if we were getting off-track, not just our parents. Other community members would show care and concern. That is much harder now, living in a city, but we must try to find ways that we can show care and concern for people in our community, not just in our families. Also, there is much respect and families get together when someone dies. So much love is shown. There are long histories of this in our community. Now we want to try to spread this out, to extend it so that it is not just when someone dies. Everyone needs support and not only around funeral time.

We are also trying to find ways to live in two worlds. In the past our parents did not usually tell us that they loved us. It was shown more than said. Love wasn't an every-day word. If we cried, they would cry with us, and they would show love in different ways, perhaps by taking us out bush. Now, though, we are trying to think about whether we need to express our love in words to our children. But this is not always so easy. Sometimes we might feel shame to say 'I love you'. There is a lot of stigma. Because I never heard my mum say 'I love you' when I was small, if she says it now, I feel it all through my body. I love her with all my heart, but I don't know how to say it. It's complicated. We know we want to show love, and we're thinking a lot about how to do this.

For some of our families, love was broken when people were taken away and placed in homes. I grew up away from my parents. I grew up without love, and so when I had children I didn't know how to react to them. It wasn't until I had my last child that I experienced love for a child. Some of us have had to go back to our culture and experience love and family, because if you were taken away you don't experience it. Some people don't understand this, but our histories still affect our families, it is not just the past.

Now, many of us are trying to learn to appreciate our children more. If a kid does a bad thing we are quick to say: 'Bloody stupid little idiot'. But if they are given an award at school, sometimes we don't do enough to acknowledge this. We may give a lot, but this is different than acknowledging our children and what they do. If we only discipline them, and do this for a long time, then the chances are they won't listen to us. We are thinking a lot about love these days, and we would like to share these conversations with the mothers up north.

You know what? My kids show their love by jumping into my bed. Only trouble is, they're 23, 21, 19 and 18. It's a double bed, but they can't all fit in at once. So usually one of them will yell at the other one to get out before they jump in. There are lots of different ways of showing love!

A statue showing the strength and love of Aboriginal women ~ For me, as an Aboriginal woman, after hearing the stories from the women up north, I'd like to stand next to them and put my arms around them! When there are a lot of deaths in a community, there is always conflict that divides the women also. But it sounds like they are finding ways to bring the women together because we all want to go for that one goal. Those women's words reinforced this to me. We have had a lot of deaths in our community recently and there is a lot of division. But their words have encouraged me to try to bring the women together. You know what? As I think about this, and about their stories, I'd love to see a big black woman statue somewhere! A huge statue showing the strength and love of Aboriginal women! (*Aboriginal woman from Port Lincoln*)

*When this message was shared with the Yolngu women, the question was asked, 'Well, where shall we put this statue?!' Someone suggested between Port Augusta and East Arnhem!*

## Chapter Four: Stories from Yolngu men

As Yolngu men, we want to share our stories with men in other Aboriginal communities. We hope that we can share ideas and stories about dealing with hard times. There have been many losses lately in our communities, and there are special ways that Yolngu men deal with hard times.

**We know when someone is still with us** ~ We don't just feel the spirits are there, we know they are there. We know when a lost loved one is there with us. This mostly happens when I am alone, when hunting, fishing, walking along the beach or eating oysters. This is when I feel someone is following me. If we have a very good catch - a stingray, big turtle, red kangaroo or emu - then we know we have been looked after. We know our lost loved one is looking out for us. When close relations pass away and I go fishing on my own, sometimes I whisper to them. I talk to them, to catch them up with whatever is going on. This is a spiritual communication I guess. It feels good to do this, and I think it is also good for our lost loved ones. It shows them that there is still a place for them here.

**Supporting each other** ~ When someone dies, there are ways we try to support each other. There are ceremonial ways in which we respond. There are songs that we sing together, we do manikay together, and we cry together. This is our last farewell. It is our way of saying a big thankyou to the person for being with us in life, and it is our way of expressing a big sorrow. We cry together and we sing together. We try to comfort each other by coming together. We go to the family's house and sit and sing and talk.

**Homelands** ~ If someone is still very sad, if they have lost someone very close to them, they might choose to stay out on the homeland for sometime. They might stay out there for a few years as this is where they can remain closest to the person who has gone. This is where we can look after our lost loved one at their resting place. It's a way of appreciating them. Our grandfathers would have done same so many years ago. This is a way of carrying on Yolngu knowledge.

**Helping young people live in two worlds** ~ Some of us are now trying to help our young people to be educated in both Yolngu way and Ngapaki way. As kids, we grew up in missionary days. We were forced to learn English and there were beltings. At the time, we didn't think that learning English was going to be important. And we did all we can to hold onto Yolngu ways. This was a time when they were trying to get rid of our culture. But we held onto it. We learnt from our fathers and grandfathers. We found ways to stand up for our rights. We learnt how to speak in Yolngu way and in our tribal languages. We picked up the song cycles, the painting. We learnt how to do the ceremonies by watching the elders. This was our foundation. We didn't know the mine was coming then. We didn't know how important it was to have learned English. Some of our key leaders were able to fight for our rights because they had a good Ngapaki education. Now we are trying to help our young people to be able to live in both worlds. When we hear our young people talking about how they value Yolngu culture, it is perfect. It makes us feel proud. Even through many hardships our people are holding onto our culture. We held onto it when we were young. And now young people of this generation are doing the same.

**Listening to our young people** ~ Some young people are sending a message to us, that we need to listen to them, to respond to them, in order to support them. At times when we are very worried about our young people, we keep telling them what to do and what not to do. But this doesn't really work. As adults, we need to fit into young people's world. We need to discuss things with them before we make decisions so that we can all work together.

**Learning by our mistakes** ~ Many of us are trying to learn by our mistakes. There are things that we regret, that we wish we had done differently. What we can do now, is learn from these mistakes. There are different events in our lives that make us realise that we have to make a change. For me, I was drinking too much. My son was growing up and I did not want him to go through the same channel I went through. My son was the main reason why I turned things around. I wanted him to have a good life. I was worried that if I kept going as I was that he might have an accident, or get into trouble, or use syringes. I was worried he might die before his time. It was my love and concern for my son that made me cut down my drinking and get a job. In Yolngu way, fathers and sons do not talk so much directly. But he would know that I care about him. Once he would have seen me going into town having drinks. But now he would see a change. It is a slow process. It can take us some time to be able to turn our lives around. It was a commitment to my son that made a difference for me. This commitment started when I saw what too much drinking was doing to other families, the grief it brings. I realised this a few years ago. I realised that if I kept going I would lose myself and my son would lose me as a father. This commitment of mine has come from making mistakes. I think this is true for many other men here. They also have wishes and hopes for their lives and for their children. It can just take a while to turn your life around. If my mother and father were still alive, they would be very happy that I have limited my drinking. They would gather everybody around, all the family, to talk about it. They would want to talk about how I have been able to turn things around. They would want to talk about this in the hope that it would also help their grandson. We deeply care about our children and this is helping us to learn from our mistakes.

**The courage to encourage others** ~ For many years we have been sticking to our culture, standing up for our rights and listening to the elders in the community. We try to find ways to be strong so that we have the courage to encourage others. This is a special sort of courage. It comes when we talk with each other. It comes when we go out bush and listen to the old men. This courage to encourage others is needed now. There are many difficulties facing the community. We are doing what we can to find this courage.

### Messages to Yolngu men from Aboriginal men in Port Augusta

*Waking up to myself* ~ Those men's words from up north have meant a lot to me. They've reminded me about my own stories of waking up to myself. Some years back now, I'd been drinking a lot and travelling across the country trying to find work, but when I came home I realised my daughter didn't even know me. I started to ask what it was all doing to my family. I came back home and I started teaching language at a local school. My father passed away 3 or 4 years ago, before then he'd been teaching language in schools here, so now I am continuing a tradition. It was very good to hear the men from up north talking about learning from our mistakes. We all make mistakes, and I think we can all learn from them. It might take a while, but it can happen. I have a grandson who I have been looking after since he was 2 or 3. His father left him, so I have been teaching language and culture, and taking him out bush. He's now 13 and he's doing pretty well. I'm sure we can do this with our people. Hearing the words from those men up north has made me feel even stronger about this. Their words will encourage me to do more after these recent losses.

*Grieving differently* ~ It meant a lot to me to hear those men talk about how everyone grieves differently. Some people like to come together and talk. But I go out bush, that's where I remember him. It was good for me to hear that this is true also for other men. I'd like to talk more about this.

*Teaching our kids about living in two worlds* ~ They are lucky up there that they've still got a firm hold of culture. It's so good that they can try to pass this onto their children. I lost my language and therefore part of my culture, and I can feel sadness about this. But when I hear them talking about passing on what they know to their children, we are also trying to teach our kids to live in two worlds. We have to. And their stories will encourage me to keep doing this here.

*History and getting up again* ~ Our men used to be employed and have roles and responsibilities and take pride in this. But with changes of policy we lost all that. We were kicked down so often that for some of us it's hard to get up again. These men's words may be able to help others to get up again.

## Messages to Yolngu men from Aboriginal women of Port Augusta

*Our men's contributions* ~ As an Aboriginal woman, I want to speak in defense of our men. There have been many men in my life who have done so much for me as a woman. My dad, my brother-in-law, and others. Even though my dad used to drink a lot, he was a very strong person. He taught us, if you want something you go and ask for it, don't be shamed. People thought he was just an alcoholic, but he was a very strong man. I see men making changes in their lives. There are lots of strong men in my life. I hope my nephews and nieces will see this and remember it, that they will see what these men left behind. These are men who were there for us when we were dealing with grief and loss.

*A lot of wisdom* ~ Listening to that man's story about learning from your mistakes meant a lot to me as an Aboriginal woman. He was speaking with a lot of wisdom. This man needs to be acknowledged for his wisdom. I work in child protection as one of the few Aboriginal workers, and I see how so many men have a difficult time trying to straddle two cultures. So often, men's knowledge is under-valued and excluded. Even if some men are drinking or fighting, it's important to acknowledge their wisdoms. My family is from the Pit-lands, and his words have reminded me of family members, and some of the more traditional men in my home place. Hearing his story means that I will now talk up more about how our men's wisdoms need to be heard and included. In my life I have experienced things from men about which I have every right to be very angry. But it's also important to look more broadly and to look into our hearts. This man's words will encourage me to gather others together and collectively speak up to organizations like the Welfare because they can't keep taking our children away, whether these are little kids or whether these are young people ending up in Juvenile Justice. He was talking with a lot of wisdom. I want to acknowledge this and to thank him for it. Please take these words back to him. Could you also please see if his son or other family members could be present when you read out my message to him. Thank you.

## A final message from an Aboriginal man from Port Augusta

*The courage to encourage others* ~ It only takes one man to make a difference in the lives of many young men. As Aboriginal men, we can't wait to motivate someone, we have to motivate them now. Our young men are worth something. We need to encourage them. I liked that man's words about having the 'courage to encourage'. Those of us who have had an education have a responsibility to offer something back to others, to pass on information. This is all about offering respect to others and finding ways that men and young men can have respect for themselves. I always say: 'Put your head up – if you walk with your head down you'll miss everything'. I can imagine these men up north with their heads up high, these men who sent their words down to us. Please tell them we appreciated hearing from them.

## Chapter Five: Stories from young Yolngu men

Lately, as young men, we have seen many bad things. There has been a lot of fighting and a lot of alcohol and drugs. And there have been too many suicides. We have our own ways of trying to deal with all of this. The chapter has been created from different conversations we've had while on the sand at Rocky Bay eating chicken, at the Yirrkala school, sitting under trees, and during a 'Strong Boys Group' meeting at Gunyangara (Ski Beach). We hope our ideas and stories can assist young men in other Aboriginal communities. We especially hope they will be helpful to young men in Port Augusta, because we really appreciated the people of Port Augusta sending us their stories. The words from Port Augusta are like a healing, a medicine. We can come together in our similarities, and in our struggles. We are passing this message back to you now and we hope to get to meet up with you some day.

### Remembering those who have passed away

There have been too many losses here lately and it is important to us to remember and honour those who have passed away. We do this in many different ways. Sometimes there are bark paintings that were painted by the person who has died. Nephews and sons, and all kinds of relations, look at this painting and remember the person. Sometimes this gives us sadness, other times, it brings tenderness. Often, remembering them this way makes us feel somewhere between sadness and happiness. This is a form of remembrance.

When someone sings really beautifully this also makes us cry and remember. On the last day of a Yolngu funeral, a special song is sung about the person who has died. This song is written especially about the person and when it is sung we are all joined. We remember these songs, and those who have passed away.

We also remember the times that we spent together with those who are no longer with us. I remember times when I was younger at the outstations, with my father and grandfather. We made many different kinds of spear together. My grandfather would help me to get the wire straight. He used to say this politely, although I used to show him more respect than he would show me – because he was older. It is very nice to remember these times that we spent together. It keeps me going. It reminds me to keep going to make spears and to go hunting. These memories encourage me to do things in my life now.

Sometimes a lost loved one touches us on the shoulder. This is to show us that they respect us. It shows us that there is someone standing behind us, showing us respect. This is a very good thing. It shows us, it tells us, that someone is there for us. It makes us feel less alone. When times are tough, having an extra bit of respect from those who have passed away can make a difference.

Sometimes we feel the spirit of those who have passed away. It is as if they are walking with us. It's a good thing when you are feeling lonely if their spirit comes forward and comforts you. It is most common when we're hunting or fishing. Especially if we go hunting alone or we sleep out. The spirits come and try to wake us up. They show us the way to go fishing or to look for sting ray, turtles or mud crabs.

These stories are like a healing, like a medicine

We sometimes feel the spirit of our dads, aunties, mothers, grandmothers, little brother, cousins. Sometimes, if we are sleeping in the house alone, they even show their face. At these times we might start crying. We miss them and our tears honour the person. We are sad because we care about them very much. We remember the things we did together: sharing clothes, going hunting, fishing. If your best friend passes away, you feel all alone. But he will be there looking after you. Sometimes when you walk, he will be there.

### Messages back to the Yolngu young men

*Remembering people ~* Listening to them talk about remembering people who have died ... they're comforting words. Does it make us feel good? It's like half and half. There is sadness remembering people who have gone, but it's comforting too. (Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta)

*Thank you for helping me remember my daughter ~* These tears are because I'm remembering my daughter. She died five years ago. She died through cot death. I was holding her in my arms, running for help, but I couldn't do anything. I'm crying because I worry that other people might no longer remember her. Hearing their words was good for me because it's good to remember. I remember her a lot. If I watch the other children I think about what she'd be like if she was playing with them. If I could see her one more time I would tell her I love her. And if she could listen to me talking now, and if she could talk to me, I think she'd say 'Hi Dad, I love you'. Her name was Edith Barbara Ann Nash. Please tell the young men up there that their words have helped me to remember her, and thank them for me. (Man who lives with Aboriginal community in Port Augusta)

*When this message was read out to a boy in Yirrkala, he clapped his hands and said: 'It's a good message. This reminds me of people too. Now we're thinking of her (his daughter) too.'*

*Feeling more protected ~* Listening to their stories about remembering people who have gone has made me think about my brother. It makes me feel as if my brother is still around and that he's still touching us. Feeling his spirit makes me feel more protected. (Aboriginal woman from Port Augusta)

*Being tapped on the shoulder ~* I really liked to hear about how they get tapped on the shoulder every now and again, or visited by people that have passed on. I just think how comforting that would be. It's just lovely to hear that. Even though it would bring sadness sometimes, it would be really comforting I think. It'd help you to sort of realise that you're not on your own. Especially because it sounded like they come to you when you are alone. It's a beautiful thing.



*My sister ~* Hearing them talk about being touched on the shoulder brought back the memory of my sister. She died of lung cancer and I was with her before she died. This was in Darwin. Before she became bed-ridden, we'd walk her around the garden. She'd put her hand on my shoulder so that I could guide her. She didn't want her hand held, she just wanted to rest her hand on my shoulder. When we went back to the house after her funeral, I could feel her hand on my shoulder the whole time we were there. Something about their words reminded me of this, reminded me of my sister. I felt privileged to hear their words. They were sharing things that they might not have talked about before and their words meant a lot to me. It's lovely to remember my sister. I just wish the very, very best for those young people in reaching their goals and their future. And I'll be remembering their stories and telling others about them in Cooper Pedy. *(Aboriginal woman from Cooper Pedy)*

*Connection and spirituality ~* When I was listening to the young men's stories it was like there was a big gold thread weaving them together. This thread stood for connection and spirituality. I can really relate to the stories they told of remembering those who have been lost, of keeping dreams alive. I lost my own mum when my own daughter was only 18 months old. And we have this thing where she goes outside to have a look at a special star to say goodnight to her nanna. It's a way for her to keep connection with her nanna. To me, when they were talking of passing things onto the next generation, this was a spiritual thing. It's about keeping alive the legacies of those who have died. It's about carrying on their values, and hopes and dreams into the future. Their determination to keep going for the next generation really moved me. They will encourage me down here in Mt Gambier to keep thinking about connections and spirituality. *(Aboriginal woman from Mt Gambier)*

*Fellowship: A response from a young Samoan man ~* Their words are soulful, deep. They made me think a lot. There was a lot of symbolism in how they share ideas. This is similar to our people. We use symbols and proverbs to describe knowledge and how we see things. These links are interesting. Their sentiment that tears honour people who have died is very beautiful. I can really appreciate how tears are honouring of those we have lost. It's a good thing to realise that our ways are so similar.

In terms of remembering those who have passed away, we do that too. I learn from those who have passed on. Rather than focus on the emptiness, I enjoy the time we spent together, reminisce on experiences we had. The words of the young people from Arnhem Land reminded me of fellowship. Our people share in the grief process too. Although sometimes it's good to be alone, mostly we come together in times of sadness.

In Samoa, there are a lot of stories about people who have gone onto the next phase of and still make themselves present to us. I have also experienced the tap on the shoulder. Or I smell a particular fragrance and suddenly the person who has died is there beside me. These are some of the ways in which people make themselves present to us. The words from the Yolngu people reminded me of this, they reminded me of fellowship. This will make a difference to me.

## Trying hard to find a future

Some of us are doing all we can to try to find a future. One of the ways I do this is to try to stay away from trouble. When my family members are drinking everyday, when they come back from town drunk, I know I don't want to end up like this. I think about doing some work, or doing something for the day. Making a plan to do something is important. I might go hunting for the day, or do some work. That's better than hanging around doing nothing. It can be hard to hold onto dreams for the future when things are tough in your family, and when there have been a lot of losses. You can use some help from a friend - someone who knows you very well. A friend can say something, give you a little idea that might help with your situation. And then they keep in touch to see how things are going. This makes a difference to me. It helps me to keep trying to find a future. I am 19 years old now. I have been trying hard for a future since I was 15. I have two more years to go. If I get to 21 I will have a future. At 21, I will break the line. It's like there is a line that we have to break. We have to break out. Inside the line there is all this trouble. It is all around us. We have to find ways to hold onto our dreams and then we can break the line.

I have known about this since I was 15. This knowledge came from school and from old men who talked to me about this. They talked to me so many times about having a future. This was when we were at outstations, doing ceremony business. After the dancing we would sit down and they would talk to me and encourage me.

A lot of things have happened since then. It has sometimes been very hard to hold onto a future. If the old men could hear me talking about this now, if they could hear that I have still remembered what they said to me, and that it has helped me to hold onto a future, I think they would say, 'I'm really surprised. I'm pleased. Thank you for listening.'

These old men also had a vision for the future. They had the same thinking. It was their hope for the future and now I am saying it. It was like they put a seed in the sand. Next, my kids will be saying it. When I have a kid I will pass the 'hope for a future' onto them. I will hand this vision over to my son. The seeds turn into trees, with branches. My aunty told me this image.

When it gets hard to hold onto these hopes for a future, sometimes I go back to the outstation and stay there for a while. That's the best place to be to get reconnected. That's where the story came from in the first place.

Other people probably don't know I have this vision. I have not talked about it. It's good to share these things with other people. I have a little nephew. He is three months old. He is someone who will take up the message and he can pass it onto his kids when he has children. When he gets to five I will start encouraging him to make spears, to go hunting. I will tell him the stories that the old man said to me. While he is still very small, I will tell him to watch me doing things. I will take him to watch me using a spear. In this way the seed can go into his mind. It can start to work its way. That's what I am here for, to carry on this message and share it amongst the little ones.

We are trying hard to find a future.

### This story is deadly

*The following words are from members of the Port Augusta Aboriginal community. These are their responses to the story 'Trying hard to find a future'. These people in Port Augusta have all experienced many losses lately, including losses of young people through suicide. Many of them have also attempted suicide themselves, and many of them are struggling with issues of alcohol and other drug use. The stories 'Trying to find a future' was read out under an overpass near the water in Port Augusta. After this story was read, one community member encouraged others to huddle around and listen to these important stories from up north. The words from up north were treated with great respect and they wanted very much to send these messages back to the young men of Yirrkala and Gunyangara.*

*It touches our hearts ~* Listening to the young men's stories from up north was good stuff. It's deadly. The way it expresses what they're going through. It touches your heart. It's like they're reaching out to us to touch our hearts. The things they're talking about are happening here today – too many drugs, alcohol, and too many deaths. A young girl committed suicide here recently. If she'd heard something like this she might still be alive. These sorts of stories are important. They can keep hope alive.

*On the same track ~* Listening to their story about trying hard to find a future was good stuff. It was inspirational. It was something I'd never heard before, and it was a good thing to hear. I'm trying to be on that track too. It's like I'm halfway on the track. Sometimes I get off track, and sometimes I'm on the track. It's a bloody good story.

*Life is precious ~* Their words made us think about how life is precious, about how we only live once and there's no point in throwing it away. Their words have made me think of my family, my kids, grandparents, brothers and sisters. If I am feeling hopeless and I think of all of them, it stops me from cutting myself up. Their words have made me think about how precious life is. Please tell this to those young people.

### Responses from other Aboriginal people:

*Pathways to the future ~* As an Aboriginal man, listening to these young men talk about finding a pathway into the future meant a lot to me. They are looking for ways of getting through the barrier... to get into the future. It's like trying to find a way through the fire. When they spoke about remembering people who had passed away, it was like they are using the past to make a pathway for the future. That really touched me. They are remembering the old people and using the past to help break through the barriers that they have to pass through. There was a lot drug and alcohol abuse in my family. When I was younger I was drinking a lot. But I changed the path I was on. I also used the past to set a target, to make a new pathway. Hearing from these young guys, took me back to when I was young man. It takes a lot of time and effort to find a pathway to the future. I have a sense of how hard they are trying, how much effort they are putting in. And even though they know it's a real struggle to find a future, they are already thinking about the lives of their nephews, the lives of the next generation. Hearing their stories makes me feel very proud of what they are trying to do, because it is very hard work. It's very hard to do something when there is a problem of alcohol and drugs. But they are committing themselves. I can see how hard they are trying. Once I broke that barrier, then I started to use my past, and the past of my family and friends, to talk with others to help them to work towards a better future. They are taking the next step and I think they should be proud that they are trying to do this. It sounds like they are chipping at that barrier and that they will get there one day. I'd just like to say to them to keep chipping away and the barrier will fall away. As an Aboriginal man I feel proud of what they are doing. The ages they are now, 15, 17, 19, 21, they are the ages when drugs and alcohol is part of your life. They are the tough years. If they are looking so hard for a future now, then that's very hopeful to me. These young people will one day be leaders in their community.

*Powerful stuff* ~ As a young Aboriginal woman (from Ceduna, South Australia), these stories were powerful for me to hear. I could tell how they don't want to take the pathway of alcohol and drugs. They'd rather go hunting and keep themselves active. These days I'd rather stare at a wall than go to the pub and sit down with my friends and watch them get pissed and think they're having a good time. Their words were significant to me because they are trying to keep their minds strong. I've seen the cost of alcohol and drugs. I've seen my family go through that. I've lost family members through it. It was so powerful to hear these young men's words because they've got so much wisdom and so much knowledge. It's like they're old souls. I'm only young, but I've been told that I'm an old soul. I can really relate to what they were saying – that they want to make a difference, they want to keep that spirit alive and keep the energy living and pass it down to their kids. That's just so powerful. It is to do with connection and bloodline and history. It's spirituality in a sense, you know what I mean? It's just like 'Wow'. Their words give me more encouragement. I realise now that I'm not the only one who thinks like this. It is really hard when your family are drinking and on drugs and all this sort of stuff is happening. Those young people just want to make a difference, and they have a lot of potential. They've learnt from history and they sound strong-minded. They're not only learning, they are also going to be teaching, leading, guiding. They'll be ancestors one day. They'll make history for our next generation. I'd really like to meet them one day. Their stories are inspiring man. It's powerful stuff.

## Carrying on when so many have been lost

It is so hard to go ahead sometimes. It can seem as if there is no way forward. It is so hard because my brother, my father and my grandfather are all gone. We have also lost uncles and aunties. It is hard to talk about this. It is so painful because we care so much about them.

When my older brother died, my mother wasn't here, she was far away from Yirrkala. When I heard about my brother's death it was a real shock. I had to try to respond in some way. According to Yolngu way, we couldn't let my mother know about his death until she returned home. She was away for a few months. All this time, I knew about the death but my mother did not. When she came back, we held the proper ceremony with the girls on one side and the boys on the other. We had to tell her in Yolngu way. At a certain point in the ceremony, the crowds cleared and as her son, I walked towards her. This was the first time she had seen me and it was then that she knew it was my brother who had died. I knew it was very important that my mother found out this way, Yolngu way. It would have been harder for her if she had found out any other way. Doing it this way, we were showing care and concern for my mother. We were also following the old people's footsteps. They used these ceremonies a long time ago. As younger people, we know about our leaders from the past. We know about our law. I learnt about these forms of sorry business when my father passed away. My grandfather came looking for me then. He cared a lot about me. He was my father's father. He taught me how to do the sorry business for my father's death. If he could hear us talking now, if he heard about how I responded to my brother's death in Yolngu way, he would be pleased. He would be proud that I followed in his footsteps. I still feel him with me sometimes, and my brother too. When I am at the homeland, or when I'm alone I can feel them with me.

My grandfather used to take me and my brother into the bush together, to teach us men's business, special knowledge. Just the three of us. I was 15 and my brother was about 20. My brother sometimes taught me singing and dancing also. But my grandfather was the main leader of our homeland. He was a significant person. He took us and taught us to be what he was. He showed us how to be strong in the culture and he noticed me learning things. He noticed me learning the dances, the singing, the hunting and the caring. He noticed that I was caring. There was a Balanda teacher some years back who also noticed that I cared about people.

I have my brother's kids to look after now. They are five and four years old. They are with my mother but I want to help to look after them. I can't just let them grow up by themselves. If my brother heard me saying this he would be manmarrk, he'd be pleased. We must pass on the dancing and singing. And we must pass on the caring ways too. These are like roads or paths that we have to continue. They started in the past, we must carry them on now in the present and into the future.

### What this story meant to an Aboriginal mother from Port Lincoln

This story about the young man who lost his brother really touched me as an Aboriginal mother. I can't imagine how I could hold something like that back from my mother. If I had to try to live according to traditional way, I would find that so hard. I really take pride in how he was able to do this. It's amazing to me. I don't know if this was as hard for him as it would have been for me, but I can really praise that person up for being able to do that. I've got two teenage sons and we have had a lot of deaths in the community this year. When somebody passes away that they are related to, I try to encourage them to be part of the funeral. But since dad passed away they don't like it. I try to tell them that playing a part in the funerals is about showing respect to the person who has passed away. I try to explain this to them. This is about me upholding what I believe in and passing this on to my sons. It's also about making them strong and having respect for their people. I know that they do, but it's hard when they lose someone close to them. Something about this young man's story will give me more encouragement to tell my sons how important it is that they show respect to the person who has died, that they go to the funerals. At the end of the day, I can't make them come, but I will keep telling them because one day they will become adult men. This young man's story will influence how I talk to my sons.

## Keeping culture strong

If I was to pass a message onto another community, it would be about keeping culture strong and keeping our feet on the ground. I learnt this from my grandfather, my grandmother and father.

Here at Yirrkala, all us boys learn how to hunt. We start when we are quite young. We are taught by elders in our families. We learn to make spears. We catch fish and sting ray. We also get oysters. As we get older we also learn how to catch turtle and to shoot kangaroo. These are important skills. They have been passed down from generation to generation. If our families do not have enough to eat, we go out hunting and bring it home. We make plans first. We meet together and talk about where we will go. We gather what we need to bring, plenty of water, and our spears. We then go out all day and don't come back until the sun sets. We talk and laugh together as we do this. We do it every weekend – unless we are sleeping! We learnt these skills from the older men and we will pass them on to the next generation. This is the Yolngu way.

There have been many hard times here recently and too much alcohol. But we haven't forgotten about the importance of our culture. Sometimes, when things are bad, I go out bush and stay out there with my father. This has helped me to remember the importance of our culture. My mum also tells me stories from the past and this helps me to stay connected. I am able to listen to her stories, because I say to myself, 'just think about what you are doing.' Then I listen. My grandparents would be pleased that I have not forgotten about the importance of keeping our culture strong. They would be pleased that I still have in my mind what they told me. They would be happy that I am talking to someone about this because it reminds me of things I need to do in my life now – like working on the Yirrkala farm. We all need to keep our culture strong.

### What this story meant to a non-Aboriginal man in Adelaide

I thought it was a really good thing to hear those words coming from young fellas, about how important culture is for them, their culture, not someone else's culture. And how they are remembering the things that they did with their elders or their uncles or their fathers so that they can pass this on. I thought that was really special to hear. I don't hear many young fellas talk like that, because talking is not always so easy. Or you might just be going with the crowd and with the mob and lose sight of who you are and take on someone else's culture. Knowing what's good about your own culture at a young age, that's really special. I've only really started getting in touch with my culture over recent years and I'm 35 years old now. These young men's stories have encouraged me to think more about my cultural histories and stories and pass these onto my children when I have them. My people are from the former Yugoslavia and the words of these young fellas have helped me think about my own cultural traditions.

## Sharing life

There have been hard times lately and young men here deal with things in different ways. Some of us drink, smoke, gamble. When there is not enough food, sometimes there are break-ins. When things are going wrong, an adult might hit a young person and this only makes it worse. Some young men get very sad and think about suicide. If someone is feeling very low, we try to reach out to them. We might take them out hunting, especially on Saturdays. We make spears together and then go out looking for fish or stingray. We share food together. We share stories together. We share life. Even when alcohol is around we still find ways to share life.

We learnt about sharing life from our families, or from school teachers. Some of us learnt from brothers, when they are not drunk. We have known about the importance of sharing life for a long time. It is a tradition of the Yolngu people. Our old people tell us stories, dreamtime stories, stories about people of the past and about the land. They tell us stories about how we are related to different people. They tell stories about people who have passed away. They speak about all our connections so we know we are not different from other people. We know we are all connected. We are connected to each other now, and we are all connected to those who have passed away. These stories are about how our ancestors shared life together.

These are hard times now and we are still sharing life. If our grandfathers and grandmothers could hear us talking about this now they would say it was a good thing. They would say it is the best thing. They would say that we are carrying on a tradition of sharing life, and that this tradition is important. They'd also say that we are growing up. They'd notice that we have knowledge of Yolngu ways. This would be good for them to hear. They would respect us because we respect them as our older leaders. When older people pass away we have to walk in their footsteps. We have been through formal ceremonies of Raypirri, of respect and discipline. If our old people could hear us talking about this they would also say that we should not touch the grog. Sometimes we sit around town drinking beer. When we do this, we are telling stories and sharing life, but sometimes the grog makes things a bit crazy. We fight with each other and do stupid things. Sometimes grog gets in the way of sharing life. Our grandfathers and grandmothers, if they were here now, they would tell us not to touch the grog because they care about us. We are the future. They would acknowledge our importance, they would acknowledge the importance of sharing life.



### What the stories from Yolngu young men meant to young Samoans living in New Zealand

We have heard your stories. We respect that these are treasured stories. We would like to thank you and to offer this reply.

It's the same here. We share life around here too and we're also trying hard to find a future. Some of us have lots of opportunities but are too lazy or would rather do other things than think about our futures. And then there are others who don't have the opportunities and chances and are having a really hard life. Both groups are trying to find a future. When surrounded by people who aren't talking about these things, it's hard. It's hard to see it. And you don't know what people will say if you mention the things that are important to you. It's not something you hear about everyday, unless it comes from an adult... and then you don't take it seriously. Hearing this from people my own age... it's easier to take it in. It's really good to hear them talking about all these things, their hopes, their dreams for a future. Because they are telling their stories, other people won't feel ashamed to talk about their ways of finding a future. It will mean that other young people won't feel ashamed to want to have a better life. It can make us not feel ashamed to want these things too.

These young men spoke of people often getting drunk in front of him. This must be very discouraging. But somehow they are holding onto their vision. My parents came to New Zealand from Samoa because they had a vision of a better life for us and our big family. This vision has been passed onto us. But we are in a new world now. It is more complex. We share similar themes to the young people in Amhem Land. There are now a lot of outside influences that sway us from where we want to go. After hearing their words, though, I know now where I want to go. I always have had a hope for the future. I try to hold onto our Samoan roots. But I also learn from people's experiences, other people's stories. They help me to get a sense of where I want to go. They help me to get an image of myself in the future. I've found it's really important to get a particular image, a particular vision of where I want to go. Please tell them that their words have helped to me to focus more... I know what my next steps are going to be now.

## True Leadership

by Wayne Dhurrkay a young man from Gunyangara (Ski Beach)

We're going through the same cycles, the same hardship as every other Indigenous community. We are trying to put people on the right track but it's really hard when there is so much negative energy around. Sometimes around here, it seems like hope is a candle in the wind. Here in North East Arnhem, our culture is strong, but culture is not a barrier to the negativity.

The key issue in Indigenous communities, I believe, is leadership. True leaders can make a difference, but there are only a few of these true leaders around. I remember one leader, a former chairman of ATSIC who knew all about balance. He brought in non-indigenous people to offer guidance and training, but then their roles would be taken over by indigenous people once we were trained and qualified. He had the vision to enable our people to 'be somebody', to be their own bosses, not to take orders from somebody else – especially here on our own land. He was passionate about our people, and I was about twelve when I first noticed what a difference he was making. He had a real positive vibe. Sometimes you can just feel it. I felt it in his work. He died some time ago but I have remembered his vision. If he knew this, if he heard me talking about this, I think he would be proud that he has left a legacy. I know that I would be. We need more people who are willing to do the hard yards, to genuinely get the job done. Leadership is not just about getting your pay-check; it's about making sure everyone else gets their pay-check too.

My uncle also sends a real strong vibe. From a distance you could feel intimidated by him, but he is a really welcoming strong leader, not only culturally but spiritually. If you've got a problem he will listen, and if you've done something wrong, he'll straighten you out. The thing is, when you talk to a true leader, when they look at you, you can sense straight away that they are not ignorant or arrogant. They are still with you at the grassroots. You can't help people if you think you are up above them, if you think you are at a higher level. If you try to help people from a higher level, all you can succeed in doing is plucking them from their roots, pulling them away from what is most important to them.

I've been thinking a lot about leadership lately. For instance when things happen, like a fight breaks out in the community, members of one family might come up to you and ask you to get involved. They might expect you to take some action on their behalf, they might even expect you to take on whoever it is that they think were in the wrong. True leadership, though, is about realising that there are always two sides of the coin. We have to listen to both stories. True leadership involves hanging in there, and sorting things out early on before they can escalate. It's also about being patient and about being strong, strong as a rock.

To be a leader, is to be somebody who is caring, kind and loving to people. You have to give respect to get respect. And in our communities, we need to respect everyone, even if it's just a little kid with a snotty nose. That little kid might be a leader one day. And we have to respond to them now with respect.

This is a task for everyone. Not everyone will be the leader of the community, but everyone can be a leader in the community. We can't afford for anyone to take a back

seat. All of us can be possible leaders in our own family, in our households and so on. And there are so many different ways of showing leadership. See those four little kids over there, playing on those logs... The oldest one there, he isn't just telling the others to do this or do that. He's showing good leadership. He's showing care to them... look at that... he's looking out for them.

When people are led into darkness, it is so sad. If there is no help, no direction, no care then this is when you get the suicides, the substance abuse. Guiding people in the wrong direction is often due to bad leadership. Leadership is not only about building economy, infrastructure and getting grants and so on. It's also about guiding people mentally and emotionally. When people are saying that they are drinking to drown their sorrows, leadership involves pointing out that sorrow floats, it doesn't drown. When alcohol is weakening people, leaders have to be strong.

The other thing is, we need to protect leadership from going wrong. Sometimes when people begin to move in more powerful circles, their leadership can suffer. Staying down at the grassroots, living with the people, can make a real difference, a positive difference. Once you set yourself as a rock, as a leader, you can't move your house onto a hill with a beautiful view. Putting yourself higher and giving yourself more than everyone else is one of the many temptations of bad leadership, it can corrupt you. Once the rock is set, don't move it. I don't mean you have to go without to be a leader, because we also need to live with pride and show people what we can do. Looking after yourself and having pride in your life can make a difference. But we have to stay connected to the grass roots.

'Up on the hill' leadership can leave the people looking up at you, and when you walk around the community, the people may feel too intimidated to talk to you. If you stay at the grassroots, though, when you walk about the community, the kids will come up to you, they will say hello. They will know your name. It's like a spider web. Everything is connected and as a leader you need to be at the centre of it, at the centre of connections.

People often think that a leader has to be the voice of the community. They think that a leader is the person who talks to the government. I believe this stereotyping of leadership is the biggest crisis in indigenous communities. The person who talks to government is only one type of leader that we need. That's not the only type of leader you can be. What about the leader who people talk to about cultural issues? What about the person you turn to when you have a problem with hunting turtle? Or the person you turn to when you are upset? These are all different types of leaders we need in the community. Just imagine how much better a community would be if we recognised this. We have to recognise that certain people in the community, men and women, don't talk so much, but when they do everyone listens. They don't talk their lungs away. But they are firm, they are like rocks, they are leaders in their own way.

If our understandings of leadership can keep changing, if we keep acknowledging the leadership that everyone in the community can offer, then it's going to be awesome. If kids can grow up seeing a whole lot of leaders, not just one, then imagine how many leaders we will have tomorrow! We'll be able to address poverty, health, unemployment, crime, education etc through our own leaders and not have to rely on outside help.

These stories are like a healing, like a medicine

To leave leadership to the known leaders is wrong. If you don't like something that is going on in the community, then you don't necessarily have to say something publicly but you can do something positive, make some changes, people will notice. Just like ants in some way. Ants don't leave it up to one ant to do all the work. Everyone does the work, everyone benefits. Even if we don't feel we can speak out in public, or do a big job, we can be leaders in our own ways. Don't fit yourself into doing it in a way that you are no good at... you will only set yourself up to fail. And if you feel like you could be a leader, don't let people push you into it. If you are pushed into leadership when you are not ready then it could damage your mind and future as a leader. Just like, if you can't swim and you are pushed in at the deep end, you might get scared and never go swimming again. Find your own form of leadership.

There are many forms of leadership that we are developing, including forms of emotional leadership. For instance, my nephew and I recently found a young girl who was in the process of committing suicide. We found her by chance and just in time. I brought her down from the tree, put her in the car and drove her back home. I made sure I gave her plenty of emotional support to ease her mind and make her feel better. Sometimes here, families don't know how to respond when a young one has attempted suicide. They often get angry and might even flog them to tell them that what they have done is wrong. They do this because they care about the young person but it only makes the situation much worse. Emotional leadership includes talking with families about other ways of responding. It involves caring for people when they are depressed. Trying to get people out of depression is a vital form of leadership. Our whole community in some way is in depression, and we are trying to take leadership to draw the community out of this. Leadership is support, support is leadership.

In talking about leadership, there is one other person who I must mention. My brother, who passed away recently, was the biggest influence in my life. Ever since I was small, when I first started to walk and think for myself, he was there and he was a like a leader to me. In my eyes, he was the greatest person on earth. I listened to him more than I did to my Mother and Father, because they were drinking and fighting as much as anyone else around here. He put me on a positive track. Because of him, I didn't drink until I was 25 and I have never used drugs of any sort and never will. When he made it to the elite level and played professional (AFL) football this just confirmed his status to me even more. In recent years, he spread his leadership to everyone in the community. He was trying everything he could to draw the community out of depression, to work out a better life for our people. His death was a big loss to all of us, our family and the whole region. He had time for people. His life wasn't just about him, it was about others.

If he could hear the things I was talking about today, he would agree with me one hundred percent. The steps that I am now taking in my life I am doing in his honour. His legacy is continuing. I am carrying on his work and honouring him in the process. But it is more than this. He is the greatest influence in my life, but I am not just doing things for him. We are taking leadership now for the present and the future, for all the people of our community. And we are changing how we understand leadership. Leadership is about all of us.

## Responses from across the seas

### What this story about 'True Leadership' has meant to young Samoans and young Maori in New Zealand

*Message from Samoan young man living in New Zealand:* This story is really beautiful. What he describes is true here also in New Zealand. There are lots of different ways of showing leadership. He said that he learnt this from his brother. Well, I didn't learn it from my brother, because my brother was trouble. But I learnt the same lessons from my aunties and cousins, my mum and dad. His words mean a lot to me, but it's hard to find the words to describe this. His words made me think about the lessons I have learned about how leaders are supposed to be normal people, not 'up there' removed from others. This is important here. If you are a leader and you are 'up on the hill' then people will just be scared of you. But if you stay in touch, then people will come up to you and talk, they will not be scared. His story was inspiring. It will inspire me to not depend on other people and to try to be a leader myself. His story will touch heaps of people. There are some lovely words in there.

*Message from a young Maori man:* His words about leadership make me think of our stories. I remember being at a family funeral up the coast where my people are from. It was the first time I was involved in a funeral from start to finish. I saw that people had very different roles. There were those who did the welcome, those who give the speeches. But there were also people playing different leadership roles. We have a saying, 'Ka pai a muri, ka pai a mua'. This means 'If what happens out the back is in order then what happens out front will be in order.' There was a time during the funeral when my dad asked me, 'Who do you think is in charge of the kitchen?' During Maori funerals food is very important. It is vital that everyone is fed properly, that there is enough to eat and that it is on time. There has to be a lot of co-ordination in the kitchen so leading this is a very important leadership role. I looked around and I couldn't work out who was in charge. I had no idea. No one seemed to be telling others what to do or giving instructions. My father then pointed to the quietest man of the lot. He did not lead the conversation, he was quiet, but he was in charge. He never gave an order. He would just start doing certain things and the others would follow, they would know this was a signal for them to start playing their parts. The story from up north reminded me of this quiet man, and of his leadership.

His story reminded me of other things too. Here we have a term, 'mana'. This doesn't translate well into English but it has connotations of power, authority and respect. Mana is an essence of leadership here. It is like the 'x-factor' that is passed on from the gods. And yet, mana has to be recognised by the people. It is not enough just to have the right genealogy or be the strongest or loudest person, your mana has to be recognised *by the people*. Often those who gain the most respect from the people are the quietest ones who show their leadership through their actions that demonstrate a care for their community. I think this is similar to what the young man up north was talking about. His words also reminded me of another saying we have here: 'the kumara doesn't talk about its own sweetness'. A true leader doesn't need to proclaim themselves.

His words have been significant to me. They have reinforced to me that leadership can be shown in many ways. We don't have to limit our leadership. We must do the best we can in the role that we feel we can do the most. This has lightened the load in some way. It has released the pressure to be everything to everyone. We must do what we are good at and we must do it together.

## Chapter Six: Young people's special skills

This chapter is about some of the special skills and knowledge of young women and young men in Yirrkala and Gunyangara. Our hope is that our stories can be shared with other young people in different Aboriginal communities. This chapter was created from a number of conversations. The first one took place with young girls in the Sport and Rec Building at Yirrkala. Further discussions then took place in the Yirrkala school with young women and young men.

**Living in two worlds ~** We are learning to live in two worlds. We know how to speak Yolngu and we are learning our song-lines and our culture around the fire and in the bush. We are learning about bush foods, about hunting, fishing, about following currents in the ocean. We are learning our ceremonial dances. We are learning about Raypirri and about Gurrutu. At the same time we are also learning about the wider world. We are learning to play and sing songs in two languages. We are learning to speak and write in English. We are learning how to get around in Nhulunbuy, how to be with Ngapaki. With technology now, we learn about people from many different parts of the world. In the future, we will need to live in two worlds. We are not afraid of the changes. We are learning everything we can about the Yolngu world, and also about other worlds out there. We are developing skills in living in two worlds.

**Skills in survival, in looking after ourselves ~** Some of us are from families in which there are troubles, drinking, fighting. And we have had to develop skills in looking after ourselves. We have had to develop skills of survival. Sometimes we have to fend for ourselves. We have to work out where to go to try and find a good nights sleep, or where to go for food. Some of us as children, eight, nine, or ten years old, have had to learn how to fend for ourselves. If mum and dad are not around, or if they are fighting, we use our extended Yolngu family. We know where we can go. We know how we are connected to others in the community through cultural ways, and this knowledge helps us. We know ways of reaching out to people. Sometimes we might also go up to white people, and ask them for help. We know how to do this, how to make it work. When we can't find help from our adults, we support each other. Yolngu people have always had to learn how to survive in difficult times. We are carrying on this tradition. We have developed skills in survival.

**Our own young people's ways ~** We are also developing our own young people's ways of being Yolngu. We listen to the old ways and we respect these. We listen to the stories about our history, and about our cultural traditions. We also learn from the wider world, from different places. Along the way, we are finding our own ways. We have even developed our own forms of language. It is like a young people's clan language. We are finding our own ways but they are linked to the histories and culture of the Yolngu people. We are proud to be Yolngu people, and we are finding our own ways to live Yolngu way.

**When a friend is sad ~** Recently, there have been too many losses and a lot of sadness in our community. There has also been fighting and drinking. We have been trying to find our own ways to deal with this sadness. If you have seen someone suicide, you might keep thinking about this, it might go around and around in your head. If this happens too much you might have an accident, or run away forever, or

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you might even suicide. We know some things about what to do if a friend is sad. If a friend is sad, we feel sad with them. We don't leave them alone with their sadness. We show them that we care about them. We spend time with them. We wait for them so that they know we want to be with them. We share something with them, money, clothes. Sometimes, if they are very sad, or if it gets to be too much, some of us stay away for a while. We might go to the beach or to the bush until we can get everything together. When people have seen bad things we try to help them. We take them to a place where we know they will not keep thinking about the terrible things that they have seen. We might take them to an outstation, or somewhere to fish. We know that it is important sometimes to take people to a different place. So, if a friend is sad we invite them to our homeland to spend time with us. We collect honey together, or bush plums, bush fruit or turtle! The important thing is, if someone feels sad, we feel it with them and support them.

**Knowing our culture, our history** ~ As young people, we are the future of the Yolngu people. Yolngu people for so long have cherished this land and this water and we cherish it too. We will cherish it forever. This is our land, this is our knowledge and our water of life. We are learning everything we can about Yolngu ways so that we stay strong. One day we will be passing stories onto the younger generations. Some of us have written a song about this. Its words include:

*Sharing stories around the campfire about our history.  
Traditional stories about our families  
Passing down to the next generations  
Keeping strong, staying strong  
For future generations  
(Wild Honey Band)*

## Chapter Seven: Caring for each other

### A message to Port Augusta from a group of Long Grassers

The following message is from a group of us people who are known as long grassers because we live in the grassy areas or on the beach in Nhulunbuy. Like in Port Augusta, there have been so many losses round here, and sometimes trouble in the family too. It's happening all around the Northern Territory, all around Australia. We want to thank the people from Port Augusta for sharing their stories with us and we'd like to send this message back to them. Here are some of the ways we are trying to respond to the losses we have experienced. We hope these stories are helpful all the way back in Port Augusta.

**Caring for each other** ~ All us long grassers, we have to look after each other. We care for each other and help each person to look after themselves. If someone is sick we take them to the hospital. If someone is hungry we go hunting – for stingray, mud crabs, fish or oysters. We have to feed each other. Sometimes there is arguing, but this doesn't mean we stop caring for each other. Helping other people is a way to stop the cycle of trouble. Laughing together is another way of showing care. My cousins tell me stories and make me laugh. Sometimes when we think about the past we also have a laugh together. I am like the father of all of them and I love all of them. I have to take care of everyone. I make sure everyone has food. I will put a blanket down for someone who needs it. I keep on the lookout and if there is trouble coming, if people are coming for us, I move everyone to a safe place. People come to me if there is a problem and I listen to them. If someone has to go to court I will go with them. I look after our rights too and when an injustice has occurred I make a formal complaint. Everyone having one dad helps us stay connected and united.

**Staying connected to lost loved ones** ~ Like in Port Augusta, we stay connected to lost loved ones. They sometimes visit us in our dreams. I have two wives and although they are no longer alive, when I sleep they're always with me, comforting me. When I'm cold I feel them with me. My mother and father live on in my memory and it makes me feel proud to remember them. My mother taught me art and my father taught me songs. I still sing traditional songs and use clap-sticks today.

**Connections with nature** ~ When we're living on the beach, we watch the blue water, watch the waves, and look out to sea... to the island out there. We think of the people we have lost and watching the sea helps us to feel more comfortable. Sometimes it's good to go out somewhere by yourself and reconnect with the land. This has to do with our spirit.

**Passing on knowledge to our children** ~ It's important to pass on what I know to my sons. I tell them about our laws and the good ways to live. It's challenging because I know that when I was young I didn't listen to my father, didn't understand him. I didn't know what my future would be. Now I know, so I am encouraging my sons to stay away from fighting and drinking, or if they want to drink, how to stay away from trouble. I teach them about the importance of looking after other people and I make sure they stay protected. I want them to take my knowledge about our ways and our laws to the next generation, to keep the Aboriginal way alive. Then, when the little ones grow up, they will tell their kids. I want them to understand, and even if they don't now, I know that they will when they are older. I don't want to bury my sons. I want my sons to bury me.

These are some of the stories we would like to share back with the people from Port Augusta. Their stories meant a lot to us. We feel the same. Hearing their stories made us feel very loving to the people of Port Augusta. Thank you for sharing your stories with us. We look forward to sharing more stories.



These stories are like a healing, like a medicine

## Part Three:

# Some last words

## A message to the Aboriginal Community of Port Augusta

### From Djuwalpi Marika

Even though the distance is far  
The spirits have become one  
We are joined  
Your words and our words are matching  
Our two spirits  
From north and south  
Are sitting around the fire  
Their spirits have come to agreement  
  
Our two spirits are shaking hands  
Sharing knowledge

We have been lost in the darkness and need to find the place where the water is. Wherever there is water, we know that there is also the sound of the frogs. When we hear this, the frog leads us to the streams, to where water is running. We have been lost in darkness, looking for a way to survive. These stories are like the call of the frog. We can't see the frog in darkness but the sound tells us that the water is there, the future is there. We must follow the sound of the frog. We must follow these stories to where they will lead us.

## About the process of sharing stories between communities

This book contains significant stories about people's special cultural skills and knowledge in responding to some of the current difficulties facing Aboriginal communities. Making it possible for these sorts of stories to be shared between communities can enable conversations to take place about difficult issues, and about people's hopes and dreams, in ways that don't put individuals on the spot. These are topics that otherwise don't often get talked about. This sort of sharing of stories can make it more possible for people to reconnect with their skills and knowledge and to take further action in reclaiming their communities. This process also provides a rich form of acknowledgement for the significant initiatives that community members are already taking to try to address current predicaments. Significantly, this process can enable the older generation and the younger generation in communities to listen and learn from each other about what is most important to them in their lives. And, at the same time, this process enables links between communities to develop. This means, far from feeling so alone in current difficulties, it becomes possible to see that one's community might have something very significant to offer other communities who are dealing with similar issues. This has clearly been the case in relation to Yirrkala, Gunyangara and Port Augusta. This brings a broader sense of meaning and purpose to all the efforts that people are already making. We hope now that the stories included in this book can be shared with further communities and that messages can continue to be sent back and forth. We hope that this will offer support to all those in Aboriginal communities who are doing everything that they can to reclaim community life from some of the difficulties that they are currently facing. As the stories in this book testify, there are so many ways in which people are holding on to their hopes and dreams and are taking action for the benefit of all.

The process of documenting and sharing these stories has only been possible due to the generosity and good will of the members of Yirrkala, Gunyangara and Port Augusta. At all times, throughout this project everyone who was approached responded with enthusiasm to the idea of being linked with people in other Aboriginal communities. Every person who was approached expressed a willingness to participate in sharing stories in ways that might assist others in moving through hard times. A number of people from Port Augusta made particularly significant contributions to this project – including the staff of Pika Wiya Aboriginal Health Service, and Carolyn Koolmatrie and her family. In Yirrkala and Gunyangara, there have also been those who have played vital roles in making the process possible. These have included Djuwalpi Marika, Gulumbu Yunupingu and Dhangal Gurruwiwi. The assistance of Beth Davis and Scott Beverstock has also been really appreciated. Most significant has been the kindness, thoughtfulness and wide ranging contributions of Djapirri Mununggirritj - without whom this project would simply not have been possible.

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