



**Ngawurrangunarramayi
nginingawula ngirramini
nginingajingawula
maminikuwi**

**Sharing our Stories – keeping all of us women
strong, together**

28/10/2008

Warning: This document may contain the names and images of Aboriginal people now deceased.

*"Ngawurrangunarrumayi Nginingawula ngirramini
nginingajingawula maminikuwi;
Sharing Our stories - Keeping all of us women strong, together"*

Awanga, mamanta. (Hello my friends).

My name is Claudia Kantilla, I am a Tiwi woman. I come from the Nguiu community which is on Bathurst Island, part of the Tiwi Islands off the coast of Darwin.

I am speaking on behalf of other strong Tiwi women in our community.

In our community, sometimes families struggle very hard to support their loved ones. Elders like grandmothers and aunties are often depended on, to look after younger ones.

In our community today, all of our families are affected by alcohol and drugs in one way or another. Alcohol came to our island in the 1970's when a club was built in the town. In those early days, men were allowed to drink 4 cans and there was no violence. In the 1980's, the club relaxed their rules and women started to drink too. Gunja also started coming into the community from neighbouring, Melville Island.

Recently the Federal Government introduced restrictions on alcohol consumption, limiting the number of mid strength beers to 6. The club is now open four days a week for three hours. However, some community members still find a way to drink too much and this is causing stress to our families. In some cases, drinkers humbug family members for drinking tickets. Sometimes drug users become angry or jealous. And this can lead to domestic violence or fighting amongst the community.

We have a night patrol which operates every night picking up intoxicated people, children who are roaming the streets at night and returning old people to their homes. They often mediate with family members when there are problems or fights in the community.

People who are smoking gunja also put pressure on their families by humbugging for money. Some get in trouble with the law smuggling gunja to the island or in possession of drugs.

Many families find themselves short of money because of addiction issues within their family. Some of our community members, gamble hoping to win money for food and to pay bills.

Alcohol and drugs are affecting our kids and young people; it's destroying us, our family life, culture life. Our children are poor in spirit.

When mothers and fathers or other carers use money for grog and gunja, kids miss out on food and clothing. They sometimes miss out on school because they're not being looked after.

Our old people are not around anymore to pass on their cultural knowledge and understanding to the young ones.

We struggle with the continual loss of loved ones, through bad health and family not looking after themselves properly. We have had eight funerals in the past two months. Sometimes people drown their sorrows on grog. This is not part of our culture.

When problems come to the community, we say to ourselves we don't like it; we don't feel really strong within ourselves. Sometimes we get tired, and we are not doing things the proper way. We get burnt out because of the family surroundings.

Even though we have problems, there are many people who have been trying to cope and stay strong within their families, in groups and as leaders of the community.

Recently, 15 women from Nguiu came together to talk about what keeps them strong. This document has been created from their stories, shared around the campfire on a recent bush camp, away from the community. These are stories about how we cope, support each other, respond to problems and hold onto our culture.

Going Out Bush

Sometimes we have to run away when we can feel that something is not right for us and for our families. We go out camping in the bush, near the water or on our homelands. *"I can see the difference. I'm at the bush and they're at the community"*

"When we go that way (to Nguuu), maybe the water is dry, we thirst, so when we [come] here [out bush] you can feel everything is fresh."

We are doing active things, we are away from our children which is good, there are no worries, we're strong because we're still here. We have to leave them behind and do precious things for ourselves. They are still our children, we love them, but they have to learn that we need to look after ourselves.

We like going out to collect things that we want, things like pandanus and bush dye to make baskets.

All of us like to camp out bush because of that connection to the land, the sea, the creek. It gives us energies, strength, culture.

"It makes things a lot easier for us, makes us really strong inside because of Spirit in the bush. We feel pupini (good)."

Cultural knowledge

Our ancestors, grandparents and parents have given us knowledge and understanding of our Tiwi culture; it's part of our life, part of us, we belong to it, it keeps us strong.

"Our parents...they're the ones that gave us knowledge and understanding...by learning in those missionary days, the early days... and we are the ones now that carry on skills, knowledge and understanding. We pass it on to our children. We've still got it. We're taught when we're very young too, who you're related to, who you are allowed to marry.....how we keep our totem, which tribute you belong to, where you come from.....Those kids they know who they are now and who they're dreaming is."

"Ancestors, they're the ones....[our] culture people. We have to carry on the culture, the history of our ancestors, and our fathers and mothers. We have to teach our children too."

Our old people used to come to the school in the early days and teach us culture and how to make baskets.

Our parents taught us how to hunt for Bush Tucker and this plays a major part in the life of Tiwi people today.

We have to look for food, it's hard, but it's part of life, [we did it] for survival.

One woman remembers her father teaching her these skills.

"When I was a little girl, 5 years old I went hunting in the mangroves for mud muscle, mangrove worm and long bum. Dad was a good hunter; he used to catch possum, carpet snake, bandicoot and goanna. He used to share food with other family. I get this experience from him. I used to go out hunting every day. I take my children and grandchildren now. They ask me how I learnt to hunt. I teach them how to chop the tree for mangrove worm."

We had different role models growing up, but we have all held onto the cultural knowledge of our ancestors.

Connection to the land

We draw our strengths from our connection to the land, given to us by our ancestors.

"A long time ago...our great, great grandparents have lived....and survived on the land, hunting. Like the running water, even before the missionary came, they lived on the land, the food they hunt[ed] and today it's still carrying on now."

We have to live near the water, not dry land, because water is the spirit that gives us strength.

One of the women shared a story about her connection to her grandfather's land. *"I try and go back as much as I can...my husband's there.*

I can't live there...sometimes we go there...It's important because of my husband, that's his land, and my grandfather loved that land, Jikalaruw....we are the ones, we have to follow...."

Our ancestors talk to us. They give us warnings about bad news as well as messages of hope and happiness. That's our animal dreaming. One of the women said *"The other day, the crow, black crow, that's my dreaming, he was up in the tree. He was talking and talking. I knew there was something wrong, the way he was talking angry, he was really angry.....shouting and I knew....there is something wrong. That day I went to town, my brother's cousin's brother's son got hurt, someone stabbed him with a knife, they told me that happened in Darwin. Oh I said, that bird was telling me my dreaming. We know when the animals are talking the happy way, good stories, they're telling us good news, but when they are really angry we know there is something wrong, that is part of creation, a message, we believe that really strongly."*

Our ancestors also keep us safe when we are out bush. *"We call out to the spirit that gives us guidance to the land...walking through the bushes. We call out "We're here, look after us" while we are looking for good food, they give us something. Like today, we are sitting here and there maybe someone around, our ancestors, there is some family buried here, they could be around us now, looking around, guiding us, keeping us from danger. See a bird calling, that could be him calling, like a dreaming."*

When we go off in the wrong direction, it is the land that brings us back. When one of us got sick from depression *"I went back to my homeland in 2005 and I cried because I wasn't strong at the time. It was weighing me down like a big anchor after I lost my husband and I went out and then came back to the strong women. "*

As we walk on our land today, we draw on the strength of our ancestors who have walked before us.

Cultural traditions

There are other traditions that our ancestors have taught us that we are holding onto and that keep us strong.

"We dance, ceremony for the dead person, that's how we be strong, come together and have ceremony for that dead person, that's part of us"

today, we can't change, we've got cemetery poles, pukamani poles, we've got our own language; the Tiwi language."

When someone passes away, the strong women of the community gather around and write songs through the night. The words of these songs come to us from a message delivered by our ancestors. These songs are written and sung in Tiwi language and performed at the funeral mass.

"Culture makes us strong in ourself and is a medicine. It's a healing, the language, the singing, the melodies...animals and dances. Culture's a medicine."

Art and craft

Some of us have inherited skills of art and craftwork which have been passed down through the generations. This includes carving, painting, weaving, screenprinting and pottery.

Many of the women gather at the Women's Centre, at each others home's or under a tree and do weaving together. One of these ladies carries her weaving bag, packed with pandanus, dyes and half made baskets, wherever she goes. When things get really hard at home, when there is arguing or a problem going on, she picks up her bag and heads out the door.

"It's makes me strong, when I carry my bags and colours. The ladies too, they carry their bags around to the post office or store. I get my bag, I gotta look after myself, and so do the other ladies when there's a problem"

Teaching our children

From generation to generation, older people have been teaching younger ones about doing things the right way.

Us strong women today, we have the responsibility of passing on our knowledge, culture, traditions and values to our children and grandchildren. *"We are the Tiwi, we gotta be strong, to pass it on to our loved ones"*

Some of us go into the school to teach.

"We go take our pandanus. I get up, have shower, nice and clean, wear my uniform, nice skirt and top that ladies wear. I had my bag of pandanus, I wasn't shamed to walk on the street of Nguiu....I was carrying the pandanus, walking down the street to school. She had tunga (basket). So when we got to the school, we didn't talk, talk, talk to the girls, no. I had my basket there, Madeline had paint and tunga, then the girls had guitar, so we put it all together in one picture. Different way of teaching, basket weaving, singing, we got up to dance. Better than talking."

We take our teaching out bush too. Learning is reciprocal. We give something and they give us something back.

"We take girls out bush to talk about sexual health which is important for the generation, young teenagers, the girls, so our strong women have the responsibility of teaching, both ways learning and we become strong."

Some of us have been challenged by new technology, new ways of teaching. Children are learning two ways; our traditional way and the Western way.

"We can't teach those...you can teach that, you can do basket, you can do arts and culture. Then they can see, that's part of culture, but they've got their own way, machines, computers.....and mobile phones"

If the strong women were not at the school, computers might take over the lessons. Our teaching is making a difference.

"Our young ones...we can't change them....the way things are going, but I think if we're really strong in culture then we can break the cycle, the drugs and all that. We're not powerful, but if we are...strong people, strong women, strong men, fight this bad influence that are affecting our kids.....What will happen for the future generation but we gotta be strong, stay strong together."

Us Women Looking After each Other

Sometimes people drive us in the wrong direction, but as women we know that we have to keep strong and keep going.

For some of us, that means coming together as a group to share our feelings with other women, at church, at the women's centre, under the mango trees, out hunting and out bush.

"We can't hide these things inside...we share what we have. [We have been] getting more pressure from our families, we can't untie that rope, it's a knot. We untied the knot tonight, for together, we women are strong in a group, a voice, we get together and get stronger and stronger".

For others, it means supporting and helping each other when we are down.

"So lifting each other [up], like we are in the swimming pool or swimming hole, we can pull each other up, like if we have problems we go over to each other and sit, support each other, sharing pandanus, colours and laugh with the women."

Humour is important too.

"By gathering, we have our ups and downs, we argue, we come back and laugh".

There are many examples of Tiwi women standing up to be strong leaders in the community. Young women, mothers, grandmothers. Women working on night patrol, church leaders, women working at the screenprinting business enterprise, Wangatuna women working with those who have been living with domestic violence, health and mental health workers, school teachers and teachers aides, women supporting people affected by drugs and alcohol and women supporting their families.

"Tiwi women can, if there is a group of women that can lead, we can lead, we're the strong women"

In traditional Tiwi culture, women have always been strong supporting other women with their babies and children, discipline, about family and kinship, about right relationships. We have a tradition of caring, loving and feeding each others children.

"We'll be strong during hard times, we have skills all of us women, we have knowledge, we have beliefs, hopes and dreams for this community, but it's the young ones gotta see who we are, we the Tiwi women, root of the land, roots and branches."

"We [are] just filling ourselves with the strength and making ourself strong, renewing ourself to look at our beginning and that's [what] we are supposed to do in our own life today. Believe what you believe, you receive. We'll follow our dream".

Women helping themselves

Sometimes it doesn't matter how many people we have around us, talking to us, trying to help us, we have to be willing to get ourselves out of our problem. Some of us have had personal problems with drugs and alcohol and we have been able to get ourselves strong.

"I talked to some strong women here. I wasn't strong at that time. Years went by, it was myself, I put myself where I am today.....It was me, that I made it through, with some help, I made myself strong.....We've got a journey to see people drive us this way, then I fall down, like we're falling off a cliff. We go off and do silly things, like drinking, meripaka (grog), but it's not strong for me. I had friends, I got help."

Some women have been strong enough to go and seek services in the community that can help them.

"There's a lot of problem, I have with my family. And then, I went away for six months, I think, Five mile, I had to stay there. And then my grandmother passed away, and then I came back, and after that I came back again.

And [my] sister and mum [were] very sick... Still I had problems in my family, my brothers fighting, my sister. I can't have rest at night, what can I do, I said? Next day, I have to go and put their name up at the club and then I talked to them. It hurts me a lot for my family, my brothers, and they're all gone. I got two left now. One sister, younger sister, still drinking and I told my family, I care about you, stop drinking, but I didn't worry, no, I just go and do the program to help myself instead of worrying about them and I help myself....I went round to other family, like that lady there Judith and talking to her and helping me out with my problem. I shared with her."

Family – we support them and they support us

Kinship is the most important thing in Tiwi people's lives. Because we are all related, we are Tiwi, one people, one family. That means we look out for each other.

Some of us women have histories of living with a drinker or violent partner. We turned to our families for support.

One of us remembers "Before I went to five mile, I talk with family. Family told me not to worry about what my husband had been doing. Ignore him. Stay with the Sisters of Charity. Sometimes I would go to Snake Bay to stay with family. Sometimes they would take me out hunting. I always shared my problems with my family."

When our family members are hurting or in trouble, we have to be there and be strong for them.

"Like smoking gunja...we try to encourage them, try to support them but they have to listen to us too. We listen to them and they listen to us, both ways it works. It works if we help them, they help us talk to them properly."

Women have learnt to do the balancing act between supporting our family and looking after ourselves.

"Our kids have gotta learn, we keep talking to them, keep talking, even though you know you are stressing out, keep talking and give that support. [Then] sometimes we run away. Between the problems, we run away, come out bush camp."

Even though it can be stressful, when women are talking to their family about problems, they feel like they are doing good work. One woman said *"I [will] always be there and talk to them about looking after your girlfriend [with a] baby coming up....I need to support them, two ways for family too. I go to family when I need them, to support them. That's part of healing."*

To cope with family stress, some women in the community have learnt the skills of tough love. Tough love is when you love your family, but you have to be firm with them. You cannot keep giving all of the time.

One of the women said *"Sometimes I say 'No' to them like when they want money, when my payday comes. Can I borrow some money? they ask. No, that's not for your drugs, it's for food that we eat. Sometimes, I feel sorry for them, I feel sad, if I don't give them the money, but that's not the right thing to do. Sometimes they tell me lies. My son got paid on Friday, he didn't give me any money to buy food. He spent it all on grog and he came home drunk. I said 'Don't ask for food, because you spent it all at the club. So he realises he did the wrong thing. Sometimes they correct themselves and think about what they did.....I feel good about that."*

Tough love is not an easy thing to do. But we do it, so we don't wear ourselves out. One of us remembers *"When I went in the car, my grandchildren was crying. I have to leave you, I gotta look after myself....I had the tough love, I love my grandchildren, I cried for them. I have to come first. I have to look after myself. And I went walking, and I came back in the car and I was crying inside and I was really hurt, so the next day I went back. That was the weekend...so I saw them and they were happy for me"*

Our connection to family is what's makes us strong cousins, sisters, mothers and grandmothers.

Empowering ourselves with knowledge about alcohol and drugs

Many men, women and children are strong today because of what they have learned from alcohol and drug programs. These have been accessible for many years to the Tiwi people.

"I had six brothers, one sister and they [were] all alcoholics except me. All full you know, in pain, so one day I went down to the old presbytery, to see Sister Joan who was writing the AA program. I asked her 'Can you help me, sister?'. I got a problem with my family, they are all alcoholics and I'm the only one sober.....At first, I did the program in Darwin, CAAPS. And then I came back, after two weeks, I went to five mile. Just to help myself.....Now I'm good cause I've learned a lot, the program helped me a lot."

There has been a long history of volunteers supporting families struggling in the community with alcohol and drug problems, by training themselves to become skilled workers. Many women today have formal qualifications and use this in their everyday lives to speak with families.

"I think it's the program that's helped me. I started when I was in my twenties, maybe thirties. The program has started in my life, Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-anon.....and we organised for the young people an Al-Ateen, going through the program with the young ones, and...they learned a lot. Then one month later, when they went through the program then we decided to have a special mass for the people...and [presented] the Al-Ateens with the medals. So we celebrated with the elders...and that's how I've been strong by this program".

Tiwi women are stronger now because of their knowledge and understanding of alcohol and drugs from AA programs.

Relaxing and Letting Go

Women today feel good because we have learnt that it's OK to do something positive for ourselves.

One of us said: "Sometimes walking in the bush, singing, Tiwi Singing, singing in Tiwi in our own language, Tiwi song. We just walk along with all the birds, dancing whistling birds we have this feeling, you know, spirit coming...into us. When we [are] out bush, that's what I start [to] feel myself.... Open our hearts, then we can let that thing out, we can let it out....hurting too much to us, we gotta let it out, this is the most important thing to our lives today".

We have many different ways of coping with stress and we find our own ways of what works for us. This is one story.

"When I feel sick, stressed....when I feel it's too much, not only family but community problems, I get tied up, all of us women, so I went and freed myself, cooked damper and listened to the birds".

Some of us learn that our physical sickness is actually emotional stress and we can do a lot to heal ourselves.

"Sunday, that was my first day of my walking, we went around collecting some pandanus, and I felt that something's changed, I didn't have that short wind, I need puffer no, as a normal person I came back home. I realised that was my stress and then this is the second day and all my pain and all my stress is releasing. I never jumped in the water because

I thought ..., I was too fat, and you know I would be down under the water for how many hours?, but I went and jumped in the water and I came back again, and that's the difference.

And that's how I make myself strong, because my business is my business.

I'm the boss, my children are not boss of me, I do what I want, that's how I believe. That's my journey, that's my belief, that's my dream, follow your way."

Sometimes when it gets too hard, and we get angry with family we just have to learn to walk away and let go.

In touch with our spiritual side

Tiwi people have found ways of combining Christianity brought to the community by the missionaries and traditional Tiwi ceremony into their daily lives. Women bring their skills of singing, dancing, reading scripture and prayers of the faithful in Tiwi language to the Catholic mass.

One of us had these reflections.

"People come together at the church....[for] prayer, special things, prayer for the young ones, prayer for the children."

Prayer helps us stay strong.

"We learn to trust ourselves with prayer. When we're in the church, trust our selves in God"

We are women, Tiwi women together

Nguiu women know that they have the strength and support of women from the other communities on neighbouring Melville Island, within an hours journey by boat and bus. There are strong connections between the two islands and between tribes. Tiwi women are connected many ways, through art networks, the three women's community centres, the health sector, school sports carnivals and kinship connections.

One woman remembers: *"When they have ceremony over there, they ring and all the family go over there for the ceremony. We gotta get involved in that ceremony too. We have to go, together, be strong all the three countries, I mean Snake Bay, Garden Point and Bathurst, we're the same, together with the other one."*

"We come together...because we speak one language, Tiwi."

Conclusion

These are the stories that women have shared with us.

We came together one night and shared these stories with each other, around the campfire. This is a ritual, women in Nguiu have been doing for a long time. However, some of us were new to this experience and at the conclusion of the storytelling one woman offered this reflection.

"...This program today, I learnt a lot about our family, family life. I've never been to this program. And today, what we are doing at the community; it's all about this. We can reflect on ourselves today, our families. I was really thinking today, I feel something inside me, and I was listening as I was sitting at the back, cause wonderful stories came out of these strong women.

And it's like going through things in our life, it's about our life and our family life.....and going through the journey.....We come together like your group and us, we come as one. It's good. Our sisters here were talking.... It's very good sharing. It's making us strong, coming together."

We are continually sharing, listening and learning with each other and in groups. Every time we get together, we get stronger and stronger.

As we have traditionally done, at the end of gatherings such as this, we share with you the serenity prayer, which keeps all of us women strong together.

Wayajuwa

(insert Serenity prayer)

GOD GRANT ME THE
SERENITY

To Accept The Things
I CANNOT CHANGE

COURAGE

To Change The
THINGS I CAN AND

WISDOM

TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE