

# HEALING OUR LIVES:

THE SPECIAL SKILLS AND  
KNOWLEDGE OF THE TIWI PEOPLE  
IN KEEPING FAMILIES STRONG



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This story tells of the ways Aboriginal people of the Tiwi Islands keep their families strong when times are hard. Tiwi people are drawing on many skills, values, cultural traditions and knowledge to get them through these times. These stories were gathered at a number of family healing bush camps in 2010 and 2011, where families had the opportunity to leave their community and go bush to leave their problems behind and reconnect with cultural traditions.

It is hoped that this document might be shared with other communities in Australia who are coping with the effects of grief and loss, substance misuse, violence and trauma.

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



## Honouring what the old people have taught us

The Elders have given us a message and it is our responsibility to pass on the knowledge of our ancestors to our children. Even during the mission days when we weren't allowed to speak our language our parents and grandparents found a way to teach us.

*My grandmother taught me my dreaming dance. I was 14... [it was] late, because we always stay[ed] in the dormitory... But we had a little bit of connect[ion] to our parents...at home when we go on the weekends. We go out, they take us out bush, leaving the convent. We were looked after by sisters in the convent [in the] early days, [but] we gotta follow our culture too. ...My second great grandmother taught me everything...I always go out bush with her. She make us growing up, to be a woman.*

Our old people showed us how to raise kids, by talking in strong ways to us when we were growing up and showing us the right way. The time we have spent out bush with our old people have taught us values like how to treat other people with respect.

*I remember all those memories come back to my parents and my great grandmother. Omo, sometimes she come and help me if I don't really do those good things. And you gotta pass [this knowledge] on to your kids. [My] Father in law helped me a lot with [my] kids. They helped me do things like hunting, washing up, clean the house and shopping. (Elaine)*

*I find it hard when kids are teasing each other....We talk to them as a parent at home. But [I first got this idea] out bush.....[The kids] learn from their grandmother too, when they was little. (Michaeline)*

Our old people taught us everything we need to know about being strong Tiwi people, culture way. We are also holding onto our Christian beliefs.



*We need to teach our young ones. We believe in our old days before. It was the time when our old people taught us how to [do] those things, like going hunting, going camping or walkabout. Kids, we need to carry them, like [the old people] used to carry us. The pieces are not together, we cannot fit them. [We need to] put the puzzle [together], we want to do it.*

*My father's mother, she too was a woman of wisdom, I learnt a lot culturally from her....We try to share with the young kids we teach today. Trying to pass on.*

*Let them see they can be proud of who they are. Have pride in the culture and themselves. Cause they are lucky people to have that. Many other indigenous people in the world, don't have that, this thing what we got today.*



## Our culture is alive, we carry on



Acknowledging the history of the Tiwi people is important. We have to know our story.

*"That's how we learn about our grandfather's history and our father's history. We are looking at the old history, we've got history about purukapali, that's our ancestors, and our creator history, mutungkala. She's a living thing.....History make us strong, just as we are, we have to stay as we are, the Tiwi people. We can keep our history, I mean the culture is alive. We will carry on. Keep on going."*

Many of us were brought up in the mission with the nuns. Even though we were only allowed to speak English at school, we managed to hold onto our language by speaking it at home with our families on weekends.

*"Our language we built today is our culture, because we learnt it outside. Somehow we believe in ourself, our language. We have to keep it inside today, in our convent area, our school area."*

We find ways of passing on the skills of our culture to our children.

*"He learns just by being there and hunting. He goes turtle hunting with the men.....He goes shooting and brings me back a wallaby.....He's learning as he grows up. The roles and responsibilities, but it's up to him, whether he takes on the responsibilities and the special roles. He's gotta attend special ceremony when he reaches an adolescent.... Maybe one day he'll turn out to be a medicine man. A healer."*

Some of us strong women take responsibility to teach culture at school.

*"There's a lot of singing there. The cultural program helping out with the children at school."*



## Telling Our Stories through Art

Some of us like to tell our stories through our paintings and carvings. The art reminds us of who we are and where we come from. This makes us feel good.

***"I like doing painting, art and painting culture stories. Makes me sit down and feel relaxed you know, keep all the problems away from me. So I like going to work at the art centre every day and do painting about Tiwi art and culture, so we can share our stories to all the people all over Australia and all over Tiwi."***

Many of us learnt how to paint from our fathers, mothers and grandparents as they passed stories down to us from our ancestors.



***I was a little girl growing and watching [my father] sing kulama ceremony, and ceremony for Tiwi people when they pass away. He travel all over three communities, make ceremony. So he's strong to put Tiwi Islands culture [into] painting, artwork, tell us stories, to make us feel strong too. They used to do that carving on tunga and bark painting. And they used to make a lot of ceremony poles and spears. We tell the story on our artwork. It's all about Tiwi art and culture to keep us strong."***

## Ceremonies are part of the healing process

Our healing ceremonies have been passed down to us from the old people. We learned when we were very young by watching the old people that perform these rituals.

***"When you lose someone in Tiwi society, you are often saddened by your loss, you have to go through the healing process. First it's the smoking ceremony, and if you've lost your husband or your son, you have to go through pukumani ceremony for three months. You have to wear arm bands, paint yourself with white clay and go do certain rituals. And after the rituals are finished there is a cleansing ceremony with water where you wash your face, your body, the cleansing, then you can move on with your life, but you never forget."***

Sometimes we share this special skill and knowledge we have for healing, with people from outside our community.

***"We decided to do a healing ceremony for them in Tiwi way. We have to paint them up in white clay....After the smoking ceremony, there was some singing, healing and some prayers were said....."***



***And the widow, who lost her husband and her children, she came and said to us "I feel fine, because of the healing" and she was at peace..."***

### **The power of the bush**

When the going gets tough, the strong get going. The power of the bush calls us to reconnect with the land and our spirituality.

***"When I'm depressed, I often go out camping with a group of women. So when I'm out with them doing stuff, like collecting and gathering pandanus, make colours...depression will go away, by doing those things....they keep me occupied, not thinking about the issues, problems I had, and they'd go away. Groups of women, because they also share....their feeling, what they've been through."***

***"Our land is connected to our life. Our land is our life. Everything that's connected to the land, like spirituality comes in there too."***

***"Spirituality is when we go out, our spirit is with us and our ancestor's spirit is with us too. We call out to our ancestor's spirit. By doing what our elders did long time ago, like gathering and collecting, that's our tradition. We'll continue to do that because you have to have culture strong".***

***"It helps them to move away from the unhealthy issues, like domestic [violence], keeps their mind healthy and strong. Gives them better wellbeing."***

When we show respect to our ancestors out bush, they look after us. And the land provides.

***"My great, great grandpa, that's his land over here. I use it every time I come here and I call out to him. Because that's what we believe...so that he can be looking at us tonight when we sleep. To look after us, all our kids, nothing happen to them when we go bush, look after them [in case] they get lost somewhere."***



***"Every time I go out bush, I call out to him "grandpa, grandpa, give me food, I'm hungry, I'm tired. So he always give me something easy to find. "Thank you, thank you" I say. I take it back, go back to bush and call out to him and we dance, thanks for giving us everything. We dance, we sing."***

## Memories and visions help us cope with our loss and grief

We all have special memories about our old people we hold onto. Strong beliefs and cultural traditions connect us to these memories. We continue to talk about the good times.

*[We remember] all the funny things, we used to fight.... We talk about the happy days....when he used to take us out hunting, camping....We used to camp ourself, me and him in the bush, he made bush bed, high one. (Virginia) And grandchildren used to tell me "can you tell a story about our grandpa?" and I used to tell them. When they bury him, they gave [the widow] a special thing... one feather. His culture from Maningrida. (Alberta)*

Even though our old people have left us, they come and visit us.

*Before her mother passed away, we said to her "When we bury you in your coffin you won't have to worry about us and the grandchildren". She said "No, I'll always be with you, wherever you are". So every time we come out to Wuluwunga here one of the grandchildren say "I saw that old lady". We know it's mum. [It's] comforting to know that she is there. She's here with us, even though she's gone.*

*We know that when we come here, she is here watching over us and our grandchildren. We always feel her. From 1989, we can still feel her.*

We take comfort knowing that the spirit of our old people goes back to their country to rest in peace.

Telling stories and having symbols that remind us about our loved ones is something we learnt from our parents. It's how we hold onto special memories.

## Crying together

Some of us cry together in our families especially when we lose our loved ones. It's a way of sharing our feelings.

*If I keep it inside and not tell my sister how I feel, that's when I have a fit. I get sick. Crying is a good thing because you can let it out. I think that helped me. Crying and sharing with my sister. Bringing it out, what I've got inside. I watched my mother cry, thinking about all the grandchildren that took their own life. Dad also left us when I was eight but Mum was OK. (Augusta)*

*I do the same thing when I think about my daughter. When I go to sleep, I cry into my pillow, then I just say a prayer.*



## Music can be healing

For some of us, when worry about our families becomes too much we listen to music or break out in song.

*When I put music on, it gives me ideas of how to cope with my family problems. Music helps me to relax and and think about things. I got this idea from an alcohol and drug rehabilitation program. The music makes me want to go for a walk, down to the beach or river, or go out bush, or talk to a friend. When we get together as a group of women, we sing along and dance. That makes us feel good. We gotta let go little by little anything we have bottling inside. Women have always been singing and dancing in our community at kulama ceremonies. It's our traditional way of life. (Elaine)*

*Every time when I'm down, I'll go look for that tape in my room and put it on. And I'll lie down... Makes me feel good, throw away all my worries, don't think about those other things, not heavy loaded, light, {I} feel good.*

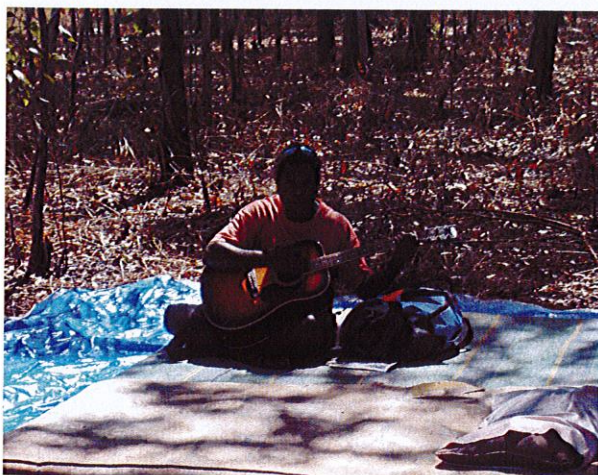
Sometimes, we use music to help cure sickness in our families. We tell the young people about the healing power of hymns.

*The old ladies, when they are sick, they love to be near the old Tiwi hymns from the mission days. When my sister was sick she asked for a tape of the music I was playing. She took it home, she said it makes her feel good. The songs help old people remember. I told a family to play old hymns to their mother in hospital who couldn't recognise her children, so that she would talk and remember that they were her children. (Alberta)*

We use music to cope with feelings of sadness when we lose our loved ones.

*I felt sad when I lost mum. I worried a lot so I used the spiritual singing, Tiwi music, to make me feel good. Music is like meditating. I put the music on in my room and lie down. It's a tradition when people lose their loved ones, to sing at church and mass. (Alberta)*

*It gives me strength singing about the land. Every time when we die, when they bury us, there's always a special song sung about your country. When she dies she'll be going back to that land.*



Some of us stay strong by making our own music to pass important stories onto our children.

*I play guitar. I sing about my ancestors because if my children lose their culture, things will change. It's very important to tell them stories about their culture, body painting, totem dance, traditional foods, history. I wrote a song for my children to remind them about their country.*



## The Magic of Prayer

In hard times some of us draw on our faith to get us through.

*Through prayer, the wind comes and takes all the negativity away. All the dead vibes we have. Let it go with the wind. My mother had the belief. She wanted us to learn the Christian values. One day an old lady said "I'm dying, can you pray for me?" I didn't know how. She taught me the rosary before she died.*

*"Don't worry, just be yourself, pray, don't think too much about it, those kids that took their lives". My sister was saying [that to me]. The more you think of them the more you make yourself sick, so just pray.*

Prayer brings healing to our families and keeps us safe.

*When I lost my little boy, a white lady friend from town bought me three bibles. She told me if I had problem just say a prayer and read the bible. When my daughter was really sick, I say a prayer and she got up happy next day. Now she holds my head and says a special prayer for me, like when I was sick with swine flu. "Jesus, make my mummy better". I keep telling my family, if you stress out, you pray. It opens up my feelings, make me won't stress out, open up my heart.*

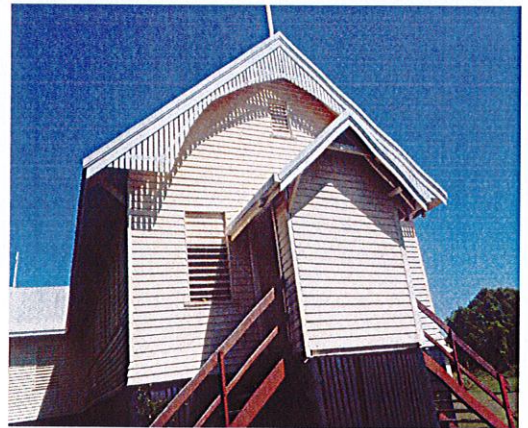
*When I hear people fighting, I always pray to St Michael for them. I always pray for him to be there for that man who is giving his wife a hard time, when he's drunk. And then everything settles down.*

*If we go out hunting, before travel, we say prayer, for guardians. And nothing happens. Even on the sea or in the air, we pray for safety. Even for kids when we got walk at night in darkness, we say prayer for guardian. I learnt how to pray from my mum."*

Many of us use the serenity prayer taught to us by the nuns.

*When someone says I'm going to kill myself, we hold hands and say that prayer. Everything is peace and quiet the next day. My sister has tried to hang herself three times, but there was someone always looking out for her. I call it a magic prayer.*

While many of us grew up going to the church for mass, some of us now take the rituals that we learnt into our homes.



## Our families support us to raise and protect Our Children

We have strong people around us helping us raise our children. Even when we think we can't cope and we have too much problems, our family talk to us in strong ways.

*"I wanted to kill her, have an abortion. But my daughter said "No, you keep that baby, it's a gift". And my Uncle too.....he said "you gotta have it because it's a gift from....[Jesus]". That's why I accept and have her."*

*I had help from my husband and his mum. When [my little girl] was about one, she lost a lot of weight, I used to go in and out of hospital. She sick, not much food, hard time. She's been there for me and the kids. I had to be strong. I used to go and share my feeling with mum. [I wanted] to be a good mother.*

Sometimes when family have worries about our kids they come and talk to us with tough love. They remind us of our responsibilities to care for our children.

*When I have problem with my partner, [my cousin] always comes to me. And she tells me if you kill your kids you won't be able to see them, they'll be going to welfare, you're never going to see them again. But I just sit, think really hard, you won't get your kids back, do the right thing for kids and yourself. I done that [domestic violence] program for six months. I was thinking, thinking, thinking. I gave up smoking, gunja, drinking. That's why I'm strong. And I support my kids. (Sharon)*

*I had a little bit problem with my husband. We used to argue...he drinks....he starts to argue. I had to walk away, stay with my mum, my dad. [The strength] came from me and I've got help too, family supporting me.*

To be strong for our kids, we have to stand up to the people who are abusing us. This is hard. But our families give us the strength to do the right thing like ring the police or take out a domestic violence order.

*I didn't have scary inside, frightened, no. I had to tell the truth about what happened...We went to Darwin and then we came back home - safe, happy, strong....I want to be strong for myself and for my children....I get this strength from my family, they support me and my children, I learn from them.....(Sharon)*

*He's gotta think, he's gotta cut down drink...and smoke, gunja. If he wanna come back with us, I should tell him straight. (Sharon).*

*[I have] strong heart. You have to stay away from problem, [like] jealousy. [Those] people are thinking other way round. Don't worry about it. That's their problem. (Sharon)*

We watched our mothers and grandmothers raise our kids. They teach us how to speak up strong to other family who pressure us to do the wrong thing like spend money wrong way.



*She taught me how to save money for kids. How you gonna use that money right way....My family they come humbug, I say "No", I can't give. I don't work for you people, I work for myself and my children. I can't give for drugs, I can't give them for beer and grog and gunja.... I have to stop. I learnt that when I left school and I had my first son. They was staying with their grandmother...She teach them right way, go school, get more education.*

### Tricks for coping with humbug

Sometimes we feel like running away from the humbug that family cause us in the community, but we can't leave. Instead, we have found sneaky ways of avoiding the stress.

*My uncle always comes to my home humbugging for cigarettes and my brother likes to smoke dope and he wants money. Even my Aunties ask for teabag, sugar or food. When they come knocking at the door, I don't answer. I just let them knock, knock, knock, hoping they'll get sick and tired. I act like I'm asleep. My partner told me to ignore them. I gamon sleep.*

*I got cheeky dog and she can see people from long distance. When she start barking I know someone coming. Then I put that AusStar on loud. They won't come in because of my dog. Then I can put the stereo down low and relax.*

Sometimes if they catch us at the shop and put pressure on us, we speak up loud and strong.

*I came home from out bush today, my brother came and started giving me a hard time for dope money. I said "I got no money and missed the shop". He said "well I'm gonna go and get credit". I said "No, you better stop this caper, you're a big boy now." I told him to get work.*

Saying no is hard but we can laugh about some of the tricks we use to cope with humbug. We are using tough love because we care about our families.

### Family support is about togetherness

Because we are all family, we are in this together. There is always someone you can go to for support. We know it is important to share your feelings, when there is a little bit of argument in the family.

*"I went to Elaine's place and sat down with her and her husband. I talked to them about my feeling. She said "Oh it's OK, this is your first time you come in and talk to me and share your feeling". I thought I might as well say sorry and just share a little bit of what I have. It's good to share my feeling to family, I feel alright, much better."*

*"Peace comes from being together as a family. When there is sadness, we gather together with our families at home after the mass service."*

Grandmothers play a big part in family supporting each other and teaching the next generation values like sharing.

*It's family looking after each other, pitching in. I learnt that from my grandmother, she take good care of us. It's come to us now, and we got to pass it on. We gotta look after this side of the grandchildren and pass it on. We learn through observation, you are basically taught on the spot. You learn how to make fire, how to cook your meals, how to cook damper, and if there's no man there you have to cut the wallaby.*

*"If someone needs help, if anything happened... we can share together. If kids are on the loose somewhere, playing around or not going to school, we help each other. I got kids coming to my place and I help those kids not to get into things that do not belong to them."*

### Keeping Our Children Close

Our children are so important to us, that when we make a decision for our family, we keep our children close.



*"The kids are important for me. If they go anywhere they have to get permission from me and Clancy. I feel sad when they go away. We are happy now [out bush together] because the kids are here.....I want my sister's children and my children to grow up together because me and my sister used to grow together, when we was kids with our grandmother."*

purpose for living. Even when we feel betrayed by we have to look after the children. One of us felt gal guardian for her sister's daughter.

*"When I'm tired, I just want to have a rest. But she comes to open my eyes. And says "Mum, sit down and play with me, talk to me." Then she grabs me by the hand and takes me outside, or to watch DVD together. That's why I think, if I don't have her around....I might just sleep forever."*

Sometimes we take on the responsibility for caring for other children, because our family are not able to. It's a lot of work but we know that keeping our children close is important.

*"I've had a lot of stress from caring for my step daughter while my sister drinks or goes partying. I worry about them but I'm feeling alright now."*



### We get strength from other women

Tiwi women have always been strong for each other. They are the leaders of the community, showing the children the way of the future.

***"I think it's the women that are leading...joining up with other women. The women are the backbone of the community. You join in with them and that's how we share things. That's how we help each other. Support each other."***

***"Sometimes I struggle, times get heavy on us, loaded down. Sometimes we go to a friend and talk to them to help us about our problems or maybe something to do with owning up.... We get better straight away."***

Nguiu women have always worked together to support each other in hard times.



These are just some of the stories that were shared with us around the campfire or over a cup of tea during the 2010 and 2011 family healing bush camps facilitated by Relationships Australia. They are stories about what keeps the Tiwi people strong in hard times. The skills, knowledge, values and cultural traditions that have been part of the lives of the Tiwi people for thousands of years are the same things that will keep them strong in the future.

We appreciate the willingness with which the Tiwi women and men participating in this project have opened their hearts with generosity and honesty.

***Elaine Tiparui***

***Alberta Puruntatameri***

***Jedda Puruntatameri***

***Virginia Galarla***

***Therese Puruntatameri***

***Nina Puruntatameri***

***Molly Munkara***

***Madeleine Puantulura***

***Sharon Kantilla***

***Augusta Tipungwuti***

***Clancy and Michaeline Puruntatameri***

***Veronica Patlas***

***Valerina Mungatopi***

***Michaela Tipungwuti***

***Gselle Tipungwuti***

***Relationships Australia.***

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