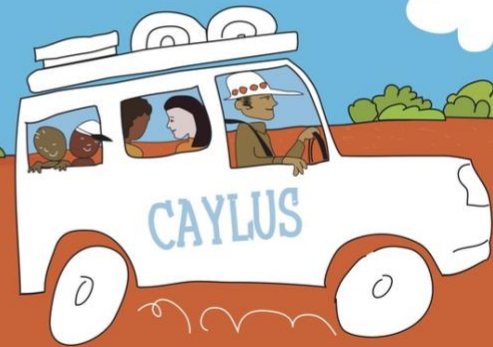


Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service

CAYLUS



Tangentyere Council

## Blue Book Youth Worker Stories

My Grandmother Took Me Everywhere

Getting Sucked into Other Projects

Snakes, Snakes Everywhere!

Check Out The Big Snake Track!

She's Sniffing All The Time

Grand Theft Auto... Almost

If you are a youth worker and would like to contribute a story to this section of the blue book, please contact [caylus@caylus.org.au](mailto:caylus@caylus.org.au)

## My Grandmother Took Me Everywhere

*As told by an Eastern Arrernte woman in Atitjere.... the storyteller chose to remain anonymous*

When I was a kid things were really different. Things are changing all the time, every year, every day.

When I was a kid my grandmother took me everywhere, to bush hunting and getting food, my grandmother and grandfather built our own humpies.

I remember the first time we saw a big bouncy ball, my Grandmother brought it from town, we were poking it with a stick, scared of it. We didn't know sport in those times, we had lots of other things to do, more traditional things.

These days we have to stay in one place for 9-5 work, for our kids to go to school, to report face to face to my pathways, to get paid from Centrelink, so we can't travel as much as we used to, only on the weekend.

Some of the old people are not as fit and healthy like in old times, when they could always take us bush.

Going to town is scary, it's not our place, it can be dangerous, we worry for family in town. Family go to town for visit, shopping, appointment, hospital, school, sport, sometimes there is trouble, sometimes lots of humbugs.

## Getting Sucked into Other Projects

I was based in a community for 2 months running a youth program. It was during the time of a horsemanship festival weekend - a magical event where the whole town becomes involved. Apart from running the normal activities for youth, I was asked by the sport & rec officer if I would like to be one of the judges for the event. I gladly said yes, not really knowing what this entailed. During the morning of the event I started to get an idea that this was no ordinary day. There were numerous categories and exceptional prizes and money to be won. I realised that the community took great pride in the event and spent weeks preparing. Winning was very significant. Judging was a massive responsibility.

The sport & rec officer also thought it a good idea to include the presentations for the end of year football awards, so he got caught up in that activity which left me to deal with the judging and presentations. I quickly got together two other people and asked for their support. Reluctantly they agreed. I was also told that there was also going to be a band at night which supported the handing out of the trophies, prizes etc.

The day started to become intense and I had that feeling of things getting out of control. Firstly, the judging of the horses, the horsemen and horsewomen became incredibly difficult. There were about 20 different categories. We didn't know everyone's names or what criteria we should use or who even to ask; while we stuffed around, the contestants all waited proudly to be judged. Eventually we got names down on paper. Then the traditional 5 km walk to some local springs started. I was meant to have prepared extra food & drink for the youth but I was now chasing my tail. I needed at least two more youth-workers. It was hot, kids walking, horses walking, tourists walking, + 20 baptisms, and a traffic jam all along the hwy! More games and events at the springs and then back to the community for the presentations.

Word had got around that the best and fairest footy awards were also going to be this night - a huge event on its own. Then it was decided that if the footballers were having their presentation night, then the basketballers should have theirs as well. Bigger than Ben Hur.

The trophies and prizes were all laid out on a massive table on the basketball court. The band started setting-up. There were about 400 people. The expectation was incredible. Then it was realised there was nobody to announce and present the awards (now numbering about 90). The sport & rec officer was hiding in his lists and trophies and was unable to be the front man. On a hiding to nothing I got a microphone shoved in my hand and suddenly I was the grand master of ceremonies on this dynamic but potentially edgy night.

We read out the winners of the horsemanship events which went down reasonably well, but as we entered the football awards, one of the band members came up to me and whispered; 'there is always a bit of controversy over who gets the best & fairest. Prepare for a bit of argy-bargy.'

After all awards were announced and collected, it suddenly became a powder keg. The night turned into an excessively long and stressful event, and alcohol had crept in. People started fighting each other and one drunk started swinging at me and cursing me. I couldn't even call the cops as I didn't have their number on me and no co-worker to run off and get them.

**Lesson:** Make sure your own program is covered before you collaborate on other activities. There was a point where I knew I had been conned but it was too late to get out. Runaway train.



## Snakes, Snakes Everywhere!

The desert is full of snakes. Seriously, full of snakes.

Whilst running a program of the summer holidays, we would retire at the door of our accommodation for some respite against the harsh sun.

We were debriefing about the days program when I saw something move next to my colleague's foot. I grabbed her arm and we both jumped up and bailed inside.

Shifting his long body about 10cm away from her foot was a brown snake.

The next morning we went to the CEO's office to tell him about the snake we had seen. He said he would send some of the fellas around to cut the grass around our accommodation. At around lunch time the same day we went out the same door to go for a bush trip, sure enough a different type of snake came hurtling towards our feet, we again ran inside squealing like lunatics.

We decided from then on to use the other door.

The next day whilst running evening program some fellas came down to the rec shed to warn us that they had seen a big brown snake hanging about in the front yard of our accommodation. Obviously the cutting of the grass had done nothing to deter our legless friend from wanting to get closer to us.

We thought we had come out on the other end of our snake ordeal when two days later after coming back from running evening program, my colleague had to pull me back from another super speedy snake coming at us.

The moral of this snake saga is to keep your wits about you. You never know when you'll be living on a snake pit.

## Check Out The Big Snake Track!

The diesel pump clicks, sub tank full. I check the tyre pressure and the oil. The back of the troopy is heavy with all manner of program equipment, the sat phone should be somewhere there, in among the media kits, bags of rice, a camp oven, eye shadow palettes, bush bags of winter clothes, Charlie Chaplain's favourite hat, bush medicine and two tripods. I hope the special treat golden syrup isn't leaking. I drive on and on and the three digits accumulate on the odometer's 'Trip A' of many. Eventually we slow, the troopy and I, the speed bump beside the 30kph and 'look for kids' sign lolls us into this warm place with a soft tarmac wave. I don't have to look far for kids, a trampoline is bouncing several waving smiles and excited hellos, before a bunch of boys race each other to my open window, clambering over one another with hands grabbing mine, the troopy, our transporter for all things adventure and fun for the next few months is bouncing around with all the welcome questions; What's your name? Where you from? You know my name? Disco tonight? Hullo Leyla! Nice to meet you Leyla! See you!! See You Leyla! See you!!

I laugh, and cruise on, this place won't be so hard to navigate, a grid around a town centre, though I do expect assigning a 'boss' as chief navigator on those late nights after those ever anticipated discos will help me, taking home sleepy kids jostled by the Michael Jacksons, the Freestyling Akons, the Barbie Girls and the Wipe Out booty shakers. A dog is bound to slink out at some stage too, probably having found refuge from all the excitement under one of the back seats, it would not be a surprise, as she, 'Funnyface' follows her boy to school and back, to the oval in the afternoons where she snoozes in the shade, her boy kicking up red dust and a new footy. She follows him to the shop for a chance of a fallen ice cream, and to disco, hoping she won't have to fight too many other dogs for fallen scraps of Bolognese.

My first week is full of slow and simple hellos. I chat with families about their home, about their sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, cousins, brothers and sisters, about their grandchildren. Everybody agrees that hunting and bush trips are number one, and dancing's gotta happen at disco. Cooking meals is another good one, and making songs, and computers, that's good for the young fellas too, and you can make 'im movie, and hair dressing, yeah but we like bush tucker, we gotta get 'im kanta, yakatjirri and agi, we can show you too, yeah, you can learn all about bush tucker, and bush medicine too, then you won't get sick. We might see porcupine too, true. Good taste that one, ooo yeah plenty around here true!

We talk about the petrol sniffing too, the break-ins at the school, the damage to the bowser at the shop, and to their own cars in late night siphoning attempts. We talk about the young fellas and girls up all night, sleeping all day, about the boredom, about the drinking at the nearby pub, staying in town and getting into trouble there, about not going to school, not listening to their families. We talk about the worry and not knowing what to do. I will be here for four months I say, let's try and get some fun things happening for that mob, let's see how we go. Maybe you could introduce me to some of these young fellas, to some of those girls, we might go for a drive ay? You might show me where they camp? East side first?

We drive around, the first couple of pick-ups are a bit uncertain, the guys are shy in the car, a USB stick is held up as a question, I nod and Farren plugs it in, the car stereo searches for the device as we search for more young fellas before heading out of town. Lucky Dube sings us to lower bore to check out the big snake track, 2Pac sends us over to the cattle yard to check out if there are any around, continual skipping through songs on the open road, before Iwantja Band take us back home in time for the last light of sunset. I drop the fellas off, trying to remember who lives where, hoping they will be happy to come with me, a girl, next time, hoping they will enjoy using the computers, like the idea of making movies, use the clippers I brought with me from town. I had noticed a few well manicured mohawks, with designs shaved above the ear and into eyebrows, and remind myself to ask those guys to teach me some of their skillz.

I anticipate it will be a bit easier in terms of first meetings with the girls, being female myself I have less

worries about building relationships with them. Before long we are dancing, filming ourselves with Photo Booth, the girls laugh at my dancing, and ask me where I learnt to dance Yappa style, I tell them where I used to stay, and they reel off names of family they have there. We make a song about all the things they love to do, full of the pride and love for their home, we put together a simple slide show of the photos of the night accompanied by the new song rustled up thanks to GarageBand and my new found knowledge via tutorial searches on YouTube earlier that day.

Throughout the first week I also go to the school, the shop, the clinic, the police station, the art centre, the shire office. I listen to the stories they have to tell, and make some arrangements with the art centre and the school for future collaboration. We talk about going on a bush trip to get wood for making number sevens, fighting boomerangs to sell at the gallery. I hope to be able to help encourage young fellas to go to the welding classes, and for me to attend the school's 'Stronger Sisters' program, and possibly even use the home economics facility at the school for cooking.

I do my best to get to know a good mix of young fellas, their older brothers, young uncles and fathers, and the same with the girls, their sisters, mums and little mums. I find that having had some longer afternoon into evening activities with the same groups pays off, we soon all feel pretty comfortable and none of the original shyness or uncertainty remains. I make a point of including young fellas and girls I know to worry for, and to invite a good number of less 'at risk' youth, making the group strong.

The program and relationships develop week by week, always trying to be innovative and creative, seeing how we can incorporate and develop existing interest in arts, media, film, cooking, hair and beauty, photography, IT and bush trips. Working with a defined group makes this easier, I know there are a million things I could be doing with little kids, and while they humbug me and ask me why I am always letting the older girls use the computers, or why I go on bush trip with the young fellas, I remind them, and myself what my role is. Having such a defined focus group is new experience for me, and for the first time I feel I get a real sense of the corrosive levels of boredom, and how it affects youth of this age group.

"I'm feeling weak, she be take photo of me all day!" Stellastina exclaims on the drive home after disco. She wears the new pink cardigan I gave her for her day's contribution and silver eyeliner sparkling with some pretty gorgeous pride. We had spent the afternoon getting made up, facial masks, body moisturiser, hair straightening and make up, plus a series of costume changes for the modelling photo shoot. The guys, a few days earlier, took turns with the clippers, manicured their beards, and carved some hair styles so impressive Spanish hippies would be jealous. The hair and beauty kit becomes a regular visitor to activities ranging from computer time to cooking, and the girls especially, expect to be able to do themselves up.

We invite the local community liaison police officer to events, so she can help girls with applying the liquid eyeliner, to share ideas with the fellas about which beats would sound good where in the latest song made on GarageBand. We talk to the shop about exhibiting the photos from the modelling shoot on one of their walls. The school invites me to bring along a troopy load of students to their end of term cultural day, a roo tail, sweet potato, cubbatea damper dipping feast. The football team are going strong in the local league and we film training highlights, and the junior boys team who host a game against the Blazers. Filmmaking becomes a favourite, and I spend some time with the young boys making films which prove to be universally funny, enjoyed by all. The young fellas and older girls help with the filming and editing of the films they are in themselves, and an ipad with a 4WD case kicks around the troopy for easy access to show finished films to proud and laughing families.

Throughout all the activities, however simple or complex their design may be, from carrying a box to the kitchen, to chopping onions, from setting up a photography studio, downloading songs for disco, applying make up, creating films, preparing and distributing food at disco to cleaning the car, I emphasise and

encourage teamwork, ownership, ideas and reflection. I did my best to feed imaginations by being creative, learning many new skills myself. I reminded families I was there, and if they felt I could do anything to support them specifically to talk with me.

I am unsure how much of an effect any of the activities I run will have on the high level of sniffing which brought me out here in the first place. I am unsure if I can possibly provide enough hours of program to make any impact on even one day in the lives of these young fellas and girls. Some days, when I am tired, I feel utterly useless, completely ineffective. Then I go for a run, make myself a good meal, take vitamin C, call a friend, watch an episode of the Vicar of Dibley, and go to sleep.

I wake up, and focus on the coming day. I allow things to simplify and the at times overwhelming big picture falls away. I allow myself to recognise what my role is, that I have been and will continue to try my best to fulfil that role. My anxieties soften, and I am once again able to turn up the songs to full volume, the car bouncing with energy, the dogs ravaging the wheels of the troopy as we speed away from them. I am again able to have seventeen things going on at the same time all around me, yes I can help straighten your hair, stir a burning pot, get those kids off the top of the troopy, find the lost keys, laugh at the humping dogs, remember that mobile phone I uploaded songs onto the night before for Samara. I can change a flat tyre, eat half an apple before Junior stretches his hand out for it, talk to this Mum about her son, avoid those cheeky dogs without so much as a single rock of ammunition, clean the post bush trip car, get to the shop before it shuts, help put the handlebars back on your bike, hold little Justin while his mum gets money out at the ATM, reply to three emails, get ready for movie night, and remember at some stage throughout the day to brush my hair.

Indeed, as the weeks went by, the days did not come without their challenges. The rec hall needed maintenance and the power was switched off just in time for the cold snap, leaving it without electricity for seven weeks. The power at the basketball court hadn't been working for a long time, so for movie night we lead an extension cable across the road for power from a nearby house. The back window of the troopy was smashed, taking it out of passenger action for a week. Both my personal and the work external hard drives mysteriously stopped working on the same day. I managed to smash my foot and simultaneously get a weird skin infection while I scratched my head furiously, both at my stupidity and to chase the nits around their home in my dry hair. The hospital staff in town prodded and x-rayed before nodding at each other and prescribing strong antibiotics while I wished I could just have some proper time off, free of the threat of crutches and having to extend my time off in Alice before heading back out bush.

I struggled to forgive myself for getting sick, but knew if I wasn't conservative about looking after myself it could spiral into an elongated period of bad health and low energy. Admittedly, when I did return it seemed I had learnt nothing and I returned to working way too many hours and expecting myself to be able to maintain the energy levels of my first few weeks. I found ways though; I tried to balance the easier, less energy intensive activities with the more demanding activities. I tried to recognise what was valuable and what was rubbish in terms of having time off. I tried to stop worrying when I wasn't running program, because I had in fact already held a good amount of well attended activities that week. I tried to be kind to myself when it was supposed to be time for me, time for me to eat a whole apple, stir the pot before it burnt and upload songs onto my own mobile phone.

The sniffing allegedly spiked at one point, too, and while all the service providers frantically threw information at and past each other about the crisis, I talked to the young fellas and girls who I was spending regular time with, and their families and they all claimed it was basically the same as it had been all along. I was left standing in the middle of this hurly-burly wondering which information was most important to hold down and work with. By this stage we had a good idea of who was sniffing most, and that these individuals may well be somewhat ringleaders. We were able to get one young fella and one girl help by sending them



to treatment at CAAPs in Darwin, and had many conversations with families about different options to help the young person in their family who was, or had been sniffing petrol. Mt Theo for Warlpiri mob? Bush Mob in Alice? Boarding school somewhere? Family in another community?

We spoke to the the different services in the early days and continuously about the status of their fuel; was it non-intoxicating Opal? Were they experiencing break-ins? Was it locked up? Do they require some sort of lockable cage for fuel storage? Do they want CAYLUS to buy their petrol off them and replace it with Opal fuel? Did they know that Opal is now fine to also use with 2-Stroke engines? While everyone was very cooperative in conversation, there was a need for continuous checking in and to share the various offers of support CAYLUS could provide. A need, as the the school Principal changed three times in four months, several teachers left within the first two months of my time, and the Shire Service Manager and Office Manager team changed to a new couple. It was important to re-introduce myself, have those chats about what CAYLUS is, what my role was, which young people I was working with, how their systems and policy may affect the community, and how we could work together.

The four months came to an end all too soon, and as things wound down and I tied up some loose ends, working out who to give the leftover damper flour and transferring three million photos from the CAYLUS laptops onto the local computers, I felt worried about the gap left in my absence. What would happen? What has happened? By the time of my leaving, of the four nearby roadhouses only one had changed their petrol over to Opal fuel. Petrol would still be available to be sniffed. In terms of my contribution as a youth worker, perhaps the most important legacy of the brief time I spent there, was the level of support I could offer by means of taking my time to listen and to share. Taking time to complement, encourage and care, to consistently boost that teen self-esteem. To see positives in each individual, to be sure to express every day that I believed in each individual. And to have fun.

## She's Sniffing All The Time

"She's sniffing all the time" .... this was the first thing I heard about her when I first moved to that community. She was only 14 at the time, really smart but she'd already left school and most of her nights were occupied with sniffing petrol and breaking into the community centre to play with the sports equipment, paint a picture, or use the computers.

"Can you help?", her mother and sisters were all worried. She was sniffing every day, married up, and wasn't listening to anyone. Almost everyone else called her a 'lost cause' and told me not to waste my time. Shit! What am I supposed to do? I'd never been out bush, was still very new to the community, and certainly never dealt with anyone who sniffed before – I was definitely out of my depth!

I talked to everyone about this – her family, friends, elders, young people interested in youth programs, clinic, teachers, store mob, council members – everyone! The vast majority told me they were concerned, but not to waste my time... She wouldn't engage in our programs, and history showed that punishing and shaming her repeatedly for sniffing and the break-ins made no difference. Some people thought that this may work, but she continued to sniff. Anyway, we were more worried for her than wanting to punish her.

For more than a year the ever-growing youth program tried to engage her in various ways. Sometimes she'd come along and play basketball, or hang out at the disco, but that was it. We'd actively seek her out, get her running some programs, talking to her about looking after her body, and slowly she became more interested. She was still sniffing a bit but when sober, would sometimes run the disco, and craft for kids.

Things really took a turn when she fell pregnant, for the better! She stopped sniffing, and started taking responsibility. She was only 17, but with her supports (especially family) she was looking after her little girl, and looking for an income. She began working for the youth program, running activities and soon became a role model for other young girls. She hasn't sniffed since, and is grateful to those who continuously supported her, including the youth program.

### Lessons:

1. Never underestimate the power of a good youth program!
2. With the right support, everyone can change!
3. Know your supports and talk to all of them – talking to CAYLUS earlier may have helped in engaging her sooner, or getting her to rehabilitation, as we didn't know of any useful facilities for girls. Now I know better!

## Grand Theft Auto... Almost

Setting up for a movie night one night a kid who we trusted very much said we should turn the lights off. I said "sure, how bout you do it for me", and handed him the keys to access the room with the switch. The lights went off and I finished off the setup and got the movie going.

I then asked the kids if they wanted some cake that had been baked that day and realized the keys weren't with me I asked the boy where they were he replied that one teenage girl claimed that he was supposed to give them to her.

On asking around no one knew where the keys or the girl were, but several girls said that three of them had planned to steal the car and drive to Alice Springs. The Night Patrol car drove past and I stopped them and told them of the story, they said they would look for them and within a short time there were many people and cars driving around looking for them.

We continued with the movie night in the hope that they would just come back, and at least we could keep an eye on the car and the storeroom. At the end of movie night I pulled the battery out of the car to eliminate the chance of them taking it, and found bolt cutters to change the padlock on the storeroom, which had all the media gear in it worth thousands.

I carried the battery and movie gear home and told my partner of the incident who went out walking around the bush with some other teenager girls calling out that they were not in big trouble and to just come out and return the keys. The girls were hiding in the bush for several hours.

With no luck in getting the keys back we were back at home and discussed how we were disheartened by the fact that these three girls had been engaging everyday in the program for the past 5 weeks.

At 1 in the morning there was a honk of the horn from the night patrol who were returning the keys, that had been given to them by a girl who wasn't involved in the theft. Immediately we went down to put the battery back in, and discovered that the girls had tried to start the car.

Response: Spoke to the families with the girls present and got apologies, the girls were asked to pick up rubbish as punishment for their act. The police were notified, as they are repeat offenders of car theft, the police spoke to the girls about the seriousness of their actions. The girls were then welcomed back to the program and have been participating since.

Morals of the story.... Unfortunately don't trust anyone with the keys.

Keep calm and notify appropriate community leaders of a serious situation immediately, as they can really help. Do everything possible to prevent the situation getting worse (ie the battery removal and change the padlock). Best way is to keep your keys on a sling and have them around your neck at all times when you are out and about.