

Dan's Story – with a little help from Amy

Dan grew up in Kaltukatjara, a remote Indigenous community southwest of Alice Springs and gravitated to the Alice in his early teens. The excitement of young people running amok attracted him, and he had, in his own words, found his mob. Or the mob found him. Either way Dan found something to do; no longer irrelevant and on the sidelines of society, but centre stage in an exciting and dangerous drama playing out on the streets at night. The fact that people got hurt and stuff got broken did not register in the excitement of a police chase, the sound of breaking glass and the smell of burning cars. More police patrols only added to the excitement, and court sentences and longer jail time made no difference.

Until, that is, a retired policewoman from Redfern decided to come back to the city where she grew up. She had seen it all – the heartbreak and the heartache of her people neglected, misunderstood and of course dealt ‘fixes’ and ‘gap-closers’ that made things worse. The local paper could rely on her for a pithy quote, and they described her in one article as one who didn’t take no for an answer; ‘barging her way through systems that clearly didn’t share her vision, or endorse her methods’. Dan and his mates came to rely, not on her words, but on her actions.

People ask how Amy (actually known affectionately as ‘Big Amy’) fixed the kids running amok in Alice Springs and other places. They mostly want a short answer but there isn’t one. All Amy would say is “When we understood the problem it was clear what we had to do to fix it”. She continued: “Understanding it was the hardest because many ‘fixers’ – mostly government people and their advisers – had definite

ideas of what the problem was. They focused on grog and couldn't, or I say wouldn't, look at the deeper problems going on in those kid's lives. Then they talked about increasing police patrols and more surveillance equipment, tougher prison sentences, and street curfews. None of which made any difference of course. They were 'solutions' offered by people flown in and that sounded good on telly while they were there." The optics, it seems, were more important than the options.

Amy knew from her Redfern days that street madness will happen anywhere because the quickest way to get several important emotional needs met is through violence. As Dan found out, joining a gang met the need for belonging, meaning and significance, and gave him and his mob a sense of control over their lives. Amy understood the anti-social behaviour as an emotional issue, and appeals to reason and intellect would not bring necessary change. Her understanding of why the kids were running amok brought the realisation that the cycle will continue despite more police patrols and cameras; it will only change when those vital emotional needs can be met in a way that serves the young people better and leads to pro-social instead of anti-social engagement with their community. And those vital needs will only be met in a context of relationships that matter. Fixing the problem then came out of this understanding – replacing running amok with the young men getting a new perception of themselves and their world.

Relationships that matter. Amy's police and social work career, centered as it had on Indigenous people, had informed her basic approach to running amok of all kinds – abuse, addictions, violence, stuff getting broken and people bleeding. Many the time she had taken handcuffs off for the nurse who would ask while dressing dreadful wounds: "What on earth was he thinking ..." "He wasn't", said Amy.

She knew poor sleep, poor diet, feeling overwhelmed and out of control, his thinking was hijacked by emotion, depriving him of patterns that add nuance and context. Relationships hold the key to better thinking, they raise awareness and with awareness comes better choices including those related to food and sleep.

One of the things Amy missed while away from country was attending the Gama festival every year. She understood now why the Gama and other festivals are so successful and necessary for Indigenous people. They have colour, movement, music, mob and country; essentials, Amy believed for the sort of behaviour change she had in mind for Dan and his mates. Something had to be done, for the running amok crew had now blazed the national stage (even the Prime Minister attended for a cameo role) and locals were walking out in disgust. They had seen enough.

You could say Amy had seen enough too, but instead of looking or walking away, she had a plan. She also had a vast network of friends and associates, people who respected her and took notice of what she said. And Amy had been in enough dramas to develop an impeccable sense of timing. The time was perfect, she reasoned, for the Alice problem to be fixed and in the process show what clear-headed thinking and radical action could achieve, especially in bringing people together after a time of such division. Amy was all for win-win: her people would benefit from the present distress being dealt with, and the nation would gain the sense that at last some gaps can be closed. The national audience, one could say, would be applauding instead of throwing things.

Amy's plan was indeed radical. Instead of social workers and legal aid solicitors for when Dan and his mates were arrested, she had set up a different approach – a festival. Along with some fifty young men from

all over the NT, their first encounter on arrival at a remote facility for their six-week stay was with indigenous bands. The bands had 'roadies'; selected indigenous men from National Parks, police force, local government and companies, for this plan had gone from a brave woman 'barging through' to a nationally supported initiative. Both the band members and their 'roadies' had been trained to run culturally enriched therapeutic encounters involving yarnning circles, where, relaxed and without coercion, the young men experience the profound effects of therapeutic storytelling. Music was used extensively, along with men secure with their identity and purpose coming alongside those who weren't.

The festival/retreat took place at a former boarding school in the NT. This self-sufficient facility, complete with accommodation, training and recreation facilities was recommissioned to operational status. Catering professionals were brought in, because this retreat was to expose participants to the benefits of good food. Physical exercise was promoted to raise the prospect for sound sleep. No phone reception meant virtual social interaction was real instead – very real.

The insistence on good sleep was intentional. A recent insight into why humans dream, or more particularly what happens during the REM sleep phase, has led to a better understanding of the role emotion plays in everything we do. This includes the quest for getting our physical and emotional needs met, but it is at the emotional brain level that vital sense-making takes place. The emotional brain is a pattern matching organ and clear thinking relies on a repertoire of appropriate patterns. The question becomes: "How can a person expand their repertoire of patterns so they don't act impulsively and in such a destructive way?"

Forget counselling and talk therapy. This sense-making process is below awareness, and is pre-thought and pre-language. The emotional, sometimes called the 'primal' brain, has a language all its own: metaphor, or stories with metaphorical concepts embedded in them. Therapeutic storytelling became the core focus of the festival/retreat, with music playing a vital role in creating a sense of calm and providing a setting for deep relaxation. Something Dan and his mates had not experienced for a long time, given the transient dysfunctional living arrangements many of them had experienced.

While the storytelling in yarning circles became a daily focus, opportunities to explore the area, swim at the waterholes, fish in the ocean and visit the huge indigenous owned cattle property nearby were offered on a conditional basis. No cooperation – no treats, and serious resistance to the retreat's intentions resulted in remand in Darwin. Right from the start Dan was all in, and his attitude certainly had a positive influence on the others. Given the culturally enriched activities were not hurried and essentially unscripted, the idea of resisting just didn't gain traction.

The remaining three weeks of the festival had a focus on the young men's return to community. Now with the capacity for thinking more expansively, and with the benefits of good food and healthy sleep, Dan was ready for exposure to new possibilities, something his intermittent experience with schooling had never done. Without this exposure, the chance for better engagement with life and more purposeful action would be slim.

The term 'exposure' is used intentionally to distinguish it from anything like job-readiness training. It is an opportunity for these lost and disenfranchised young men to find preferences and talents hitherto unknown.

They were surrounded by opportunities to immerse themselves in music, dance, painting, filmmaking and acting, as well as using the facilities for 'fixing' (auto engine and body repair), 'making' (metal fabrication and timber construction), and 'look after' (basic healthcare, teaching and childcare). These activities were run by indigenous men with a few grey nomads helping out. As it turned out, were just waiting to be asked to bring their skills and self-contained accommodation to come alongside young men on the cusp of a better future.

Dan was encouraged to try several activities during week four, and he then identified the one to concentrate on for the next two weeks - dance. Moving to music was something he had done all his life, and when he found out there was more to learn, it was like a whole new stage opened up. His talent was identified quickly by a grey nomad (actually, in this case bright pink) called Naomi, a dance and drama teacher from Perth. She retired early, bought a campervan and with her disabled son, headed north. They say 'once a teacher always a teacher', so Naomi's progress was slow because she couldn't help herself from calling into small remote schools and offering her services. The teachers were delighted to have such talent available, but what they didn't realise was that Naomi had never seen such development in her teenage son as the kids gathered around his wheelchair to talk and play. She was doing it for herself and him as much as the children. However, when she found out about Amy's call for volunteers to assist the run-amok Dans of the NT to find their gifts and passion, she headed north.

The 'Dans' found their gifts and passions, and also much more. The young men were surrounded by people who cared, initially all Indigenous, but later non-indigenous adults of all gender. An experience of relationship outside peers, and one that promoted a

move from emotional chaos to a stable and positive orientation based on example. Instead of drama in the shadows and being pursued in the night, it had become acting and movement in the spotlight that drew hearty applause.

After the festival/retreat the boys returned to their communities reflective and grounded, they became part of, not disconnected from their mob. And, more than their mob, for Naomi with her vast network of event and performance people now involved, Dan and his mates were surrounded by professionals eager to help the young men take their place centre stage. We know this because the message of how the shift from running amok to meaningful and purposeful action can be done, is being applauded, especially by other communities looking for ways to fix things. And the message is also a welcome one to give a nation a sense of hope in a better future for the Dans and Shanikas all over Australia.