

Ethan's Story (from his case worker)

In September 2023 Ethan participated in a new program called *Warriors Again – beating our demons not each other*. The program, run in Katherine NT, was a culturally enriched therapeutic encounter for indigenous men released from prison, on bail or parole for domestic violence offences. Ethan described his involvement as 'turning his life around ... I see everything different now, me my mob everything' he said. But specifics beyond that were not forthcoming. As a case manager for similar indigenous men I was invited to observe the program and assess its effectiveness. The questions of particular importance were: did the encounter make a difference in the men's lives, and were the men able to make a difference in their community? This record of a follow-up interview six months later with Ethan provides an answer to these questions.

Q After the workshop in Katherine, I remember you saying 'I see everything different now'. Can you tell me how this has influenced your life since then?

E: Lots of ways. Biggest change is how I see myself – kinda like I am who I am meant to be.

Q Do you mean like a warrior?

E Yes, but braver and smarter. Not just a mad fighter like I was. Not afraid to fight proper demons like grog and gunja. Not in fights I didn't want to be in. Now I know what to fight and why we need to win. It makes more sense. I never saw that before.

Q In what other ways do you see yourself differently?

E I used to be a troublemaker and an outcast. Nobody liked me, not like that now. Since being off the grog, I think more and notice things. I know what leads to trouble and I stay away from it. Couldn't help myself before, now I can. People like me now, or most people, and young fellas look up to me – I like that. I still get into arguments but I can talk things out instead of hitting someone.

Q I am so pleased to hear that. Tell me about getting off the grog. How did you do that?

E A lot of people ask that. We were angry there was no grog at Katherine but after a while with all the yarning and good tucker we didn't miss it. Strange that. But I think for me the emu story helped a lot. The idea of someone watching out for me made me more careful not to do dumb stuff. That and thinking clearer. Before, I didn't think about anything, things just happened, mostly bad stuff. Now I can make better choices.

Q *You mentioned arguments. Are there some not happy about the changes you have made.*

E Yeah, some. I used to be like them and they don't like how I am now. It's bad enough I don't drink with them, but they hate how other people like me', and the effect I am having with young fellas. They should be glad about that but they aren't.

Q *So you argue with them, does that help?*

E No, you can't argue with someone who doesn't think – that's where Katherine had a big impact on me. I used to be like that, you just do what you do even if it doesn't make sense. We didn't know any different. Most of the arguing is with people who think the emu story is a return to the old ways – church people who think white man's god is the only one. I never thought the white man's god liked us black fellas anyway, so it has not been hard for me to go back to what worked for the old people centuries ago.

Q *Do these people see your point at all?*

E Nah, can't argue with people whose mind is made up and is not for changing. It doesn't matter because most of the changes in community are with younger ones and they are not churchy anyway.

Q *Can you talk me through these changes in community you mentioned?*

E Well the first thing I did was look at people in community who would be open to what I did at Katherine. A group of 12 women and a

group of 9 men, all people in a position to make things happen. Then we got the same people from Katherine to run similar things with us, lots of yarning, good tucker and away from everything so you could really get your head around stuff you had never thought about. I don't know how the old people passed on knowledge years ago but I think this would be how it was done. Not like school with someone up the front, more like mob gathering, bit like ceremony.

Q Can you tell me how yarning can make such a difference in people?

E It is hard to explain. I tried to tell the stories but it has no effect. They just say 'that's not true', or 'animals don't talk', things like that. But when people are relaxed and we are all together in a yarning circle, somehow the stories effect our brain. We sleep better and wake up clearer in our head somehow. It's like a happy dream, only more real.

Q When these people got back to community and were surrounded by the same old problems, how did they make changes?

E Slowly at first. We didn't do anything for a few weeks. Just looked at the problems in a different way. The people in Katherine kept in touch with us and we could talk to them anytime. They gave us good ideas and encouraged us. We did some things on our own, and some things together. It depended on where we were. One fella helps at the school so he got some money to take the boys on a camp. It had a lot of similar things to Katherine and it was amazing, they came back different kids. They had a focus instead of running amok.

Q What sort of focus, I mean what were they focusing on?

E At the camp they were shown lots of things, music, filmmaking, painting, dance, as well as fixing stuff, making things and helping at the school and clinic. And when the kids came back so keen, others in the community got on board. Some things kicked off

better than others. One group made a video. They started it at the camp with a grey nomad couple – retired teachers I think they were - who really got the kids fired up. They helped them write a script, and the couple came to our community and helped the kids film it. It went mad on the internet and the newspaper people from Darwin came and took photos, talked to the kids too ... not every day that happens.

Q Great, I can't wait to see it. And adults in the community, how did they get involved?

E The biggest project was old cars. The people in Katherine helped get funding for a car crusher that will be used all over NT communities. Some men from here went to Darwin to learn what to do with the old cars before the crusher comes. The cars have to be stripped of things like batteries and tyres and other stuff that can be sold. It has really taken off and kids help after school. One kid got his arm stuck against the mudguard somehow so they have had to be a lot more careful now so that's good.

Q That sounds like a great thing to do, involving other communities as well. What about the women did they get things going too?

E Yes. One thing they have wanted to do for years was getting water for growing things, trees veggies and more lawn around. Well Katherine people helped us there too. A guy came from some uni somewhere and walked around looking at the river, the camp, took photos and asked us about the wet season and things like that. He didn't say much but a few weeks later, he came back with some other people and we had a big meeting. They had drawings, photos and what the new water supply would look like. One of the biggest problems has always been getting a big enough digger all the way here by barge, the cost was too much. Well these guys said if we could dig a trench from the river to the bottom of the cliff, water could be pumped up into a reservoir from there. A big mining company fella

was there and told us his company would supply the pump and the pipes. Another company or government fella said they could use the digging of the reservoir as training for young fellas to use diggers and bulldozers. Might take longer but that doesn't matter. Then during the wet we will get enough water to last all year. Only thing was that trench that would have to be dug by us, well that's already started, fellas go down there every day. It is hard yakka. The women have already fenced a big area even though they don't have water yet.

Q Fantastic! And I heard about the big play the community put on, that was in the papers too.

E Yeah, I don't really know how that started but it sure has brought the community together. Some of us thought it was risky bringing all those people from everywhere to watch something that might have been a big flop and make us look stupid. But it was a big success.

Q It sure was, I read the write up about it. What else is happening that you are excited about?

E One of the things that I am pleased about is how the community is working together instead of in little mobs fighting. And grog is not so much of a problem now. Also we used to get sick of people coming into community thinking they were going to fix all our problems. Then they go away and things got worse. But now, we like people coming to our community to see what is happening, we don't have to feel ashamed any more.