

## **Shanika's Story**

Note: this article is another in a series answering the question: "What would it look like if these ideas took off in our community?" It is written as though it has already taken place (even though it hasn't) to provide working examples of what is possible. While it is fiction, it is based on what has been done in similar circumstances and it is the writer's belief that the story is entirely possible.

*(A news report in a Darwin paper some time into the future)*

A group of young people are preparing to travel to South Dakota in the US to present their unique film and dance routine. They have been invited by the Lakota First Nations people of the Cheyenne River Reservation in the belief that the film will have a similar influence on improved life experiences for people living in remote and socially marginalized communities. The young people have just completed a tour of six remote communities in Arnhem Land, and on their return, they will lead workshops for other First Nations young people being held at facilities in Batchelor and Katherine.

Shanika Daniels has been involved in the project from its beginning in 2023. Her uncle had been released from prison and then he participated in a special program that turned his life around. "He was a wild man and the grog made him violent, but after this program you wouldn't know it was the same fella" Shanika told us. "Not long after they ran a similar program for women and they came back to the mob all fired up to shake the place up". "Real movers and shakers they were, and while some people got their backs up, most of us younger kids knew it was for real" she said.

The young people approached the same organisation that ran the special program to see if a similar one was possible for them, many of whom were not working. An event was set up and was attended by nearly a hundred including many from neighbouring communities. What made the program unique was the central focus on storytelling, a vital way for people, especially indigenous people, to make sense of themselves and their world. The ideas are based on a new approach to emotional health and clear thinking from the UK. Instead

of an emphasis on job-readiness and work skills, the young people were exposed to many of the stories the adults had heard, ones dealing with meaning and purpose, addictions, abuse and suicide.

In addition to the stories, they heard from indigenous sportspeople, filmmakers, dancers, writers and musicians, who each helped inspire Shanika and her friends. "It was like a whole new world opening up ... one full of possibilities". "It was exciting and we all knew we had to do something with it" she said. What they did is remarkable. A sound and light show with music, dance and film, including special effects and animation. Acclaimed as a 'world first', it is destined to go far and wide, including America. Shanika described the early days: "It took a while to get started, but once it got going and more people became involved it just took off. It has been one hell of a ride!" A ride that is just beginning, it seems.

*(A radio station in Darwin presents this story some time into the future)*

*A group of our young people from East Arnhem Land are off to see the bright city lights of the USA next month. We speak to Shanika and Dan this morning about how this all came about, Welcome.*

Thanks for having us

**Host** *Perhaps you could tell us what has sparked such an interest that you get an invitation and funding to travel to the US.*

**Shanika** Well we have been working on a film and dance routine for a couple of years now to try and help remote communities work their way out of the problems of boredom, abuse, grog, porn and drugs. We have taken it to six communities in the Top End and everyone is pretty happy about it. It has been an amazing reaction, and it looks like we have finally hit on something that works.

**Host** *Well done! I read that it was the change in your uncle that sparked these changes. Can you tell us about that?*

**Shanika** Yes he came back a different fella, we couldn't believe it. Mainly because he has been in jail a lot and had lots of counselling

but it never made any difference. Mob were saying we need more of that, whatever 'that' is.

**Host** *Do you know what changed him?*

**Shanika** Sort of. They call it 'culturally sensitive therapeutic storytelling'. Like the way our old people used to do it. All sitting around relaxed and thinking in pictures, a bit like dreaming because birds and animals come alive and talk, often with ancient wisdom. It certainly is the key to making a difference, and it is what we have done in our routine.

**Host** *I'm curious. What sort of stories?*

**Shanika** We have a set of stories each dealing with a specific issue like gambling, addiction, abuse or suicide for example. Stories that, if I read one out to you it wouldn't have much effect. But if you were in a circle with your friends, after a good feed just relaxed and yarning, concentrating on nothing but the smell of trees and your breathing, the story comes alive. They say it has an effect on a different part of our brain, the deeper emotional part.

**Host** *This is so interesting. How do you present those stories in the film and dance show?*

**Dan** The first thing we do is set up an environment so people can really listen, not just be there to be entertained. Music helps, then the different stories are played out, a film on a big curved screen, some animation but most filmed around the Top End, then with special lighting effects we have indigenous dancers playing out the storyline. Most of it traditional dance style but also some rap.

**Host** *Yes, I have seen the YouTube video that has gone viral. It looks amazing. Do you plan to produce some more videos?*

**Dan** No we don't. We were unhappy about that video because it is not meant to be shown just like a movie, that's missing the point of it. What we do is an immersive experience because we are about bringing our people out of the hopelessness; helping those who have lost their way toward being a proud people again with dignity and purpose. If you just entertain people that doesn't happen.

**Shanika** The video did get us noticed though. That's how we got the invite from the Lakota people, they have similar issues in their communities.

**Host** *Simply amazing! Could you tell us how you got the show together. I mean filmmakers and dance instructors are few and far between where you live?*

**Shanika** I did two years of filmmaking after I left boarding school, so I had some idea, but the big push came when the team of professionals did workshops with us. It was like they gave us a map of what is possible, and of course they inspired us to reach for the stars so to speak.

**Dan** And they kept in touch with us, and also put us in touch with a lot of other people who managed to get a lot of equipment that we needed, mainly for film and lighting, but also sound. We could never afford what organisations gave us or what big companies paid for.

**Host** *But that sort of support doesn't just come along because you have a good idea or a good friend in the industry; what else were they impressed by to be so supportive?*

**Shanika** We really pushed the storytelling idea, and the new insights that explain its value. Also we talked about what changes it had brought about for individuals and our communities. That got their attention because it is not every day you get a success story like that.

**Dan** And we knew pretty much what we wanted to produce. We had a vision that included special effects in film and lighting. It was unique and essentially our vision – an indigenous vision for change that we knew was possible. Providing we kept it ours. That's why we are not happy about the pressure on us to take the show to the cities. We think it doesn't belong there, it is for our people. Fortunately, most of the big companies respect that.

**Host** *And after your time in the US you plan to hold workshops here for other First Nations young people, tell us about that.*

**Shanika** The time with the Lakota people will help us refine the sharing of the ideas so others can do similar things. While the core is universal, meaning it doesn't matter about race, gender or culture, the location needs to be one the people can relate to. When we were at Nhulunbuy, for example, we realised there is no coastal or ocean themes in our show and that made it specific to our location, not theirs. The workshops will enable young people to use our model but set it locally.

**Host** *There must have been a lot of organising to get the show on the road. Can you tell us how you handled that?*

**Dan** The simple answer is 'Grey Nomads'. We couldn't have got where we are without them. In the early stages it was suggested we contact their central information hub with what we could offer and what expertise we were looking for. We were nearly overwhelmed with their offers, it was like we had lifted the lid on a deep well of resources.

**Host** *What did you offer them?*

**Dan** The opportunity to travel and be in remote indigenous communities where they otherwise couldn't be. And, what we didn't know at the time, the thing they wanted most after all this 'voice' stuff was the chance to do something practical for First Nations people.

**Shanika** And without exception, they could not have done more for us. You see they have a lifetime of skills in a whole host of areas – farming, business, education, law, and even medicine. They have their self-contained accommodation and transport sorted, and while they have a reputation for being tight with their money, they were so generous and supportive with us.

**Host** *That's amazing! What sort of things did they do for you?*

**Shanika** Early on we used a group already running the information hub to look after the selection of people with skills in film, dance, sound, and lighting equipment, and give them plenty of time to be ready when we needed them. Then another team of nomads looked after the special screen, its design, manufacture, and to travel with us because it had to be assembled and taken down in each place.

The largest group of nomads provided food and accommodation for the entire cast so we don't have to worry about that in isolated communities.

**Dan** One guy is a legend. He and his wife used to run an electrical business and they took on the power supply for everything – the generator, the switch panels, fuses, leads, the lot. And a back-up as well. Pity help anyone who messes with it, they will have his wife to deal with. They have lots of connections in the industry, and she put the word on them to help pay for stuff. They are coming with us to America, with some of their gear.

**Shanika** Several others are coming with us too. They are hiring big motorhomes for our time there, that takes care of our land transport, food and accommodation. We think what we are doing gives them something to focus on, something that they need to stay relevant and needed. They treat us as family and we know how much this all means to them.

**Host** *I am so impressed; this is such an amazing story. Is there anything to add, anything you would like to say to listeners?*

**Shanika** I mean we are getting all the attention, but there are so many people behind us that share our passion, and have such a commitment to see it spread to other communities. I thank them all. But perhaps the special thanks goes to Veronica Williams and her company, Building Indigenous Capability in Katherine, because it was her courage to take on domestic violence with new ideas of what could really make a difference. It has paid off, for the central ideas in what we are offering to communities come from her original vision.

**Dan** Yeah, thanks everyone. We are so glad you saw something in what we wanted to do, and were prepared to come alongside us and make it happen. We hope we make you proud.