

The young Aboriginal people inspiring their peers to reject welfare and strive for careers

AM / Jane Bardon

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Dallas Mugarra rode 3,800 kilometres from Victoria to the Northern Territory to raise the profile of a youth mentoring program. *(Supplied: Thamarrurr Youth Indigenous Corporation)*

As a young teenager, PJ Crocombe had no idea about the career and life opportunities available outside his remote Northern Territory community of Wadeye.

But at age 13 he got a place on the Thamarrurr Youth Indigenous Corporation's program giving boys and girls from the Daly River region the chance to go to Bright in regional Victoria to finish school.

"Bright has opened so many opportunities for me," he said.

"I did Year 7 and 8 there. Then in Year 9 I got offered a full scholarship at Scotch College in Melbourne, and now I'm at Melbourne Uni doing a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Indigenous studies."

He is now 21 and a director and mentor himself on the corporation's program helping young people in Wadeye break out of a cycle of welfare dependence.

Key points:

- Young people from Wadeye are helping mentor their peers to finish school
- Youth group helps parents send their children to school in regional Victoria
- Mentors who have been through the program help school leavers find their first jobs



PJ Crocombe says the program changed his life. (ABC News: Jane Bardon)

While attending school in Bright the young people are cared for and mentored by Aboriginal house parents in two group homes for girls and boys.

When they finish school their mentors help them prepare for and secure their first jobs.

Many of them start working in the Dumu Balcony training cafe in Bright.

"And also at the brewery, we had someone working there, and then at the school, two people graduated last year and they're working at the school. And then we have another one working in carpet laying," Mr Crocombe said.



Dallas Mugarra, Benny Mullumbuk, PJ Crocombe and Leon Kinthari all took part in the ride. (ABC News: Jane Bardon)

He said he and other young people from Wadeye had to learn basic life skills as part of their training.

"So, for example, time is a different concept in Wadeye, if you tell someone to show up, at say, one, they'll show up at three, or show up earlier and say: you weren't there," he said.

"So training them to really be on time is one of the key parts of the training, and then just work readiness."

Ride to spread message that 'anything is possible'

Wadeye is one of the NT's largest remote communities, with a population of 2,300, and half of working-age adults registered as unemployed.

The town is periodically riven by inter-clan violence.

Three of the program's mentors, with their Dumu cafe cook Benny Mullumbuk, recently rode motorbikes 3,800 kilometres from Bright to Darwin to raise the profile of the program.

Dallas Mugarra is among the program's mentors who completed the ride this week.



Dallas Mugarra is a mentor in the program. (ABC News: Jane Bardon)

"In our communities a lot of young people depend on dole and there's not enough jobs, so we're doing something that makes people understand how to not have to depend on someone else to solve your problem, you have to go and do it yourself, take control of your life," he said.

The ride included stops at remote communities along the way, where the mentors compared their program with those run by other Aboriginal community groups.

"This ride was to raise awareness and send a message that anything is possible, to anyone out there who is struggling," Bright house parent and mentor Leon Kinthari said.

"On the way we saw and met some of the Indigenous people out there who are doing similar things, and to raise money for the program that we have.

"Because in remote communities like Wadeye young people are not getting a chance.

"It's really hard for them to stay focused and understand about the western world that is out there."



Young indigenous mentors helping their peers break welfare cycle

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The Thamarrurr Youth Indigenous Corporation mentors shared their success story with communities on the way during their journey. *(Supplied: Thamarrurr Youth Indigenous Corporation)*

Mr Crocombe said even after starting university he saw how it easy it was to get sucked into violence between Wadeye's Aboriginal clans.

"I came back and I was in Wadeye working on a youth program during the holidays and I got caught up in the family ruffles, and that was not good," he said.

"Then I thought, 'I need to get back to Melbourne', so I moved back down, got myself sorted.

"It is really easy to get sucked into it."

With the new perspective he has gained from travelling around Australia and overseas, he has realised how limiting life can be for young people who never have the opportunity to leave Wadeye.

"It's really challenging, because where you grew up is all you know," he said.

The group can't offer enough places to families who want them.

Mr Kinthari is happy his son Marcus has now had the opportunity to go through the program.



Leon Kinthari's son got his first job after finishing his studies at Bright in Victoria and going through the program. (ABC News: Jane Bardon)

"He went through school, right up to Year 12 and then graduated, and he chose to be a PE teacher in [a] Bright school, so I'm really happy with him, I'm really proud, and I guess when he grows up, he's already focused on chasing his goal," he said.

Following their ride, the mentors are continuing to share their message through social media.

"It's about staying focused, keep going to school, and just smile a lot," Mr Kinthari said.