

The healing power of song

By Nicol Taylor

A chance reunion of two women from opposite ends of the State after 30 years led to a positive project that helped heal a town after years of alcohol-inflicted pain. Reference Group member Nicol Taylor reports.



When Halls Creek teacher Doreen Green heard a group singing in Aboriginal languages with joy and pride she knew that positive energy was just what her home town of Halls Creek needed at a difficult time, so she tracked down the group to invite them to the Kimberley.

With great delight she discovered her former teacher from Geraldton, Jo Randell, was leading the group and an invitation to visit Halls Creek was soon underway. Jo leads the Madjitil Moorna singers who meet weekly on the outskirts of Perth to sing Aboriginal songs. The group has Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal singers of all ages, many from regional areas of WA. They have performed across Perth at major events to promote respect for Aboriginal language and culture.

After a flurry of planning and fundraising, a group of 28 singers headed to Halls Creek in May with a simple aim: to spend time with the school kids and the community to share their songs, perform a community concert and share their wide range of skills to help around the town in any way they could. During the week the group worked with the kids and local groups in art and crafts, cooking, manual arts, story telling, writing workshops and career counselling.

A town recovering

Halls Creek is undergoing a transformation with a ban on the sale of full strength takeaway alcohol providing respite from the alcohol-fuelled troubles that plagued the town in recent years.

The kids are back on the oval kicking their footys, the town is peaceful at night, there is a dramatic drop in the cases presenting to the hospital emergency and the incidents attended by police.

Spokesperson Doreen Green (edition 48 of Network News) is greatly encouraged and says there is renewed pride and a sense of freedom to make plans and strengthen their community, and people are still talking about the choir that brought so much positive energy to their town.



Madjitil Moorna musical director, George Walley, with Halls Creek teacher, Doreen Green.
Photograph by Sylvia Andrews

One singer's orthodontist husband completed hundreds of free dental checks and has returned to perform urgent dentistry work. Sadly 38 per cent of children were found to have serious dental problems needing urgent treatment and another 18 per cent need treatment within six months. He has since enlisted the help of colleagues and aims to make the fly-in dental clinic an ongoing project. The orthodontist is a helicopter pilot and to the delight of the children, he landed on the school oval and decreed all the children who had their teeth checked went into a draw to win a helicopter ride: three lucky children were the ecstatic recipients.

Led by Noongar musicians Della Rae Morrison and George Walley, the singers comfortably melded into the community and school and were soon performing at the local schools, the hospital, and the frail aged centre to the delight of the residents.

Much has been written about the healing power of song, but this group put the theory into action and worked with the children towards a community concert that proudly displayed a banner made by the kids: 'Respect yourself, respect your culture'.

The concert was the highlight of the week with hundreds of children cramming onto the town's outdoor stage to sing with Madjitil Moorna, eagerly watched by their families, local residents and people who had driven in from outlying communities to enjoy the music, dancing and safe family fun.

A Madjitil Moorna singer, a newly discovered operatic soprano, stopped the crowd in their tracks with her soaring, hauntingly beautiful and proudly Aboriginal voice. Halls Creek had never heard such a beautiful sound. Local band The Walkabout Boys from Yiyili Community soon had everyone on their feet and raising the red Kimberley dust.

It was very moving for the singers to be approached by local elders after the event who, with tears in their eyes, shook our hands and thanked us for helping Halls Creek to celebrate as a proud community once again. Events like this were simply never held in a town in crisis. Everyone was home in bed by 9pm, Halls Creek had a peaceful night and most importantly the kids had a night they'll remember for years for all the right reasons.

Madjitil Moorna ended the week with a performance with some of the Halls Creek kids at the indigenous Barramundi Concert in Kununurra. With such an enthusiastic and warm response the group is already planning a return visit to the Kimberley next year to build on the connections and friendships made.



Pat Oakley shared her newly discovered soprano operatic voice with a stunned Halls Creek crowd. Photograph by Sylvia Andrews



Madjitil Moorna singers get some help with a song from the Halls Creek kids. Photograph by Mark Sewell

My Time at Halls Creek

My knowledge of Halls Creek consisted only of what I had seen on television, so I was expecting lacking services and riddled with all sorts of issues. I experienced quite the opposite. I found beautiful, inspiring people who had a lot of love and positive spirit in their hearts.

The wonderful Kija and Jaru people I met were rich in culture and strong of heart. I know that Halls Creek has had its fair share of problems but doesn't everywhere? I think there should be a greater focus on the positive side of Halls Creek and what this wonderful town has to offer.



Sylvia Andrews is welcomed to Halls Creek by local elders.

The Halls Creek children were so attentive and affectionate. I thought it would take a while to win over their trust and respect but it was quite the opposite. These children were so open to new people and new things. I think they loved the fact that the sole reason for us being there was to sing and have fun with them: no hidden agenda, just quality time between two very different groups from opposite ends of the State. I loved every moment spent with the children and my highlight was singing with the kids at the concerts. Together on stage in front of everyone, sharing a special bond through song: it was magical!

Everyone I met in Halls Creek was most welcoming. I really enjoyed doing some beading craft with the women from the TAFE art class. These women were so talented and I felt privileged sitting amongst these women, many of whom are respected Jaru and Kija elders.

I couldn't believe how accepting everyone was of us. I really felt a part of something wonderful and I can't wait to return again.

By Sylvia Andrews

Nicol Taylor : agknowledge@echidna.id.au