

Building stronger men the indigenous way

BY LINDSAY MURDOCH KATHERINE

WOMEN are not welcome in bushland north of Katherine, where homeless Aborigines are using traditional "men's business" to stop drinking and turn their lives around.

"I was doing too much bad stuff — walking the streets, drinking and getting into trouble with the coppers," says Jonas-Joe Doctor, 18, who until three weeks ago was one of up to 500 Aborigines sleeping rough in Katherine, 250 kilometres south of Darwin.

"It was come out here or go to jail... I am happy with that," he says. "I want to find a good job and be safe and show some respect for my family."

Every day, up to 40 men are turning up at the StrongBala or Strong Man program set up near a centuries-old ceremonial ground, providing some hope

amid despair about chronic alcohol and drug abuse, violence, premature deaths, domestic violence and child abuse in Northern Territory indigenous communities.

In a few ramshackle buildings and shelters along a rutted track, the men clean themselves up, get health checks, eat healthy meals and receive training for jobs.

But there are no free handouts here. The men must do chores such as

mowing lawns, washing dishes or cleaning toilets, before getting any lunch. And those who arrive drunk are ordered to leave.

Senior Aboriginal health worker Travis Bruce says there are Aboriginal women's laws and men's laws, and it is important for the men to have a place to come to reconnect with their culture and restore their dignity and self-esteem.

"We talk here a lot about their culture and their spirit — their culture is their identity and that makes a man strong," he says. "The men come here not thinking too much of themselves, but by the end of a few months they walk away with a smile and their chest out, feeling proud of themselves."

Mr Bruce says coming

Jobs help avoid trouble.

PICTURE: GLENN CAMPBELL

to a men-only ceremonial place, they feel free to "talk about their problems and get things off their chests, rather than hoarding it all up and hiding their feelings".

Senior sexual health worker Patrick Ah Kit says he can speak openly to the men about health issues, including sexually transmitted infections, because they sit in a traditional men's place.

"We just couldn't have the frank exchanges we do if we were somewhere else," he says after a talk with six men in a room with a sign that reads "trouser snakes are deadly".

StrongBala's project coordinator Phil Richards says the program, run by Katherine's Wurlu Wurlujang Health Service, provides a "sense of belonging" while the men become physically and spiritually strong again before returning to their families.

Aboriginal elders who volunteer their time teach the men how to hunt in the traditional

way and gather bush medicine and tucker. There are plans for the men to take tourists on bush tucker walks and teach them how to throw boomerangs.

Mr Richards says that while the program is based on Aboriginal culture it also aims to train the men for jobs in construction, Aboriginal art and horticulture, as well as provide literacy and numeracy education.

The program's success has prompted calls to establish similar programs elsewhere.

Head of the Wurlu Wurlujang Health Service John Fletcher says the program desperately needs funding to continue to operate.

He says with the local court, police, legal and government agencies increasingly referring men to StrongBala, the program is saving offenders from jail.

"This is not 'poor bugger me' or bleeding hearts stuff, it's about men having a go to stand tall and be involved in their future."

