



Narrogin, Western Australia: Priscilla Kickett and her children Warren, Kameesha and Keely. Priscilla says counselling has helped her recover from grief and take positive steps forward. Photo: Lara McKinley/OxfamAUS.

Morditj warniny (strong change)



In 2008, the Noongar community in the Western Australian town of Narrogin was devastated by a series of suicides. Two years on, there are promising signs the community is beginning to heal.

On first appearances, Narrogin, on the outskirts of Western Australia's wheat belt, is a pleasant country town: elegant historic buildings line clean, wide streets. People greet you with a broad smile. But beneath this bright veneer lies a sombre reality for the local Aboriginal people.

In 2008, the 350-strong Noongar community was devastated when eight men took their own lives. Four others also made the attempt. All but two were Aboriginal men, and even then those non-Indigenous young men had close ties with the Aboriginal community.

John* lost his son to suicide. While it is culturally difficult for him to talk about the dead, he wants the wider Australian community to understand what is happening in Narrogin.

"My son was suffering from mental illness for 12 years. We knew it was going to come to something like this," he says in a carefully measured voice.

"When I found him deceased I went numb. I had to be strong. I had to try to cope with everyday life, with not seeing him around. That hurt me."

"Four [of the] boys took their lives within a couple of months. It was devastating. All the boys would hang around together. It was chaos in Narrogin. Things were not good. There was no assistance."

Janine Terry is the coordinator of the Narrogin Aboriginal Community Reference Group and an adopted Noongar woman. "A great sense of grief and loss descended on the community," she says.

"There wasn't a family that wasn't affected. And it went on. There was a period where attempted suicides were every week. Self-harming was every week."

*Name has been changed to protect identity.

"There was a feeling in the families that had lost their loved ones that they didn't have anywhere to go to overcome their sense of grief. There were non-government agencies that provided a service, but none of them provided a service that was relevant to the Aboriginal community."

"The normal way for Aboriginal people is not to talk about ones they've lost. So getting to the point that they'll talk about the dead is very hard to do."

In response to the crisis, local Noongar leaders in the Narrogin Aboriginal Community Reference Group rallied to help families who had lost loved ones. A community forum was held and Aboriginal psychologist Darrell Henry was invited to come to Narrogin to provide urgent counselling services.

The group also requested government support but no state or federal funding was forthcoming. Desperate for culturally appropriate psychological services, the community turned to Oxfam Australia for help. In response, we committed emergency funding and advocated for two family support workers to be appointed in Narrogin.

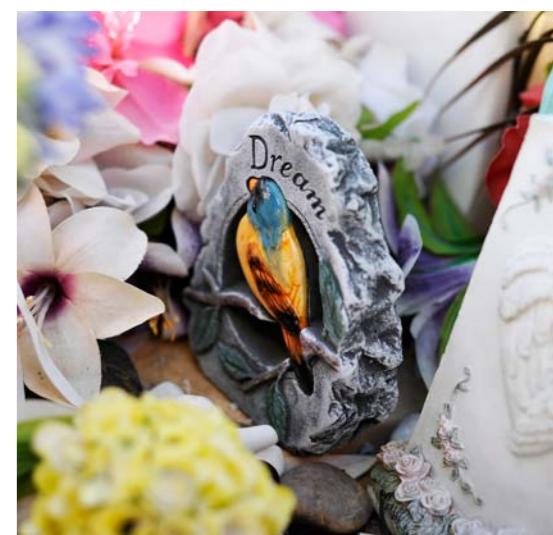
"This was not just a tragedy, but an emergency that needed to be addressed urgently," says Oxfam Australia Director of Public Policy and Outreach James Ensor.

"As an international development agency, Oxfam Australia does not usually provide essential services in our own country. But in this instance, we felt we had an over-riding responsibility to support the community's request for assistance."

Priscilla Kickett is the Chairperson of the Narrogin Aboriginal Community Reference Group and says Oxfam Australia was the only agency that really listened to what the community needed.

"Oxfam has been really great in Narrogin. They provided funding for Darrell Henry to come in. If they didn't come in when we really needed it, then I think we would have fell in a big hole."

"Darrell gave me counselling. I lost my de facto to suicide in 1999 [and] then my cousin in 2004. In 2008 all the other suicides happened. It was very emotional for the families."



Narrogin, Western Australia: Flowers and sculptures remember the life of one of the young men who committed suicide in 2008. Photo: Lara McKinley/OxfamAUS.

"Darrell has helped me take the next step to get over the grieving process. [It] brought a lot of memories back — teary-eyed I was — but it made a lot of difference. It made me focus more on what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go. It helped me with my children and grandchildren, to take the next step and get over the grieving process."

Darrell Henry also worked with John to cope with the loss of his son, let go of the guilt he was feeling and to understand his son was mentally ill.





Dryandra Woodland, Western Australia: Ashton Kickett and Trevor Mead share a laugh during a photography workshop run by Oxfam Australia at the request of the Narrogin community. Photo: Lara McKinley/OxfamAUS.

"Darrell spoke to us, to strengthen us and let us know it wasn't our fault. He was a great help," says John.

Both Priscilla and John were identified by Darrell Henry as 'strong people' — community leaders who, with support, counselling and training, could learn the warning signs of suicide and build a 'circle of safety' around people at risk.

"No matter what community you go to, what reputation it's got, you can always find the pillars of the community, people who have almost statesmen-like capacities," says Darrell.

"These people are generally working flat out, providing wise advice, giving nurture. We haven't gone to 'fix Narrogin up', we've gone to work with people and give them support."

"When you work together with the community you can bring about significant change. I keep saying the crisis hasn't gone away, but the immediate manifestation has eased and now we need to do the real work. We need vision and strength and commitment that go for more than a generation if we are going to break this."

"People get so disheartened when they consider Aboriginal issues. I think it's a cheap and dangerous place to be. You can do very powerful change actions in communities if you work right up close with our people, in spirit, in culture, where their beliefs are now, as long as you are willing to give power."

Priscilla Kickett agrees with Darrell Henry and acknowledges there is a long way to go.

"It is a long process. There was feuding amongst the families before Christmas. It got out of control and was really scary. The town is divided and still needs to heal. The reference group is not going to go away. We want to focus on new things, get on with our work and come together as a community. It might take a long time, but I think that will happen."

There are promising signs of healing. In January 2010, Oxfam Australia was invited by the reference group to conduct a four-day photography workshop for 15 Aboriginal young people. The workshop was designed to teach photography basics and give young people the tools to tell their own stories.

Most of the images captured what was good about Narrogin, and what the young photographers wanted to change. "I want to show people there is more to Narrogin than what they hear," says 14-year-old Kameesha Thorne.

At the photographers' request, Oxfam Australia helped to facilitate an exhibition of their work. The exhibition, which they named *Morditj Warniny* (strong change), opened at Western Australia's Parliament House on National Close the Gap Day in March and has since toured to Perth.

The young participants' energy, enthusiasm and optimism are evident in the photos. That is the part of their story they focused on, so now we, as adults, can too.

Postscript: In February, the Federal Government announced a \$1.5 million grant over three years to fund culturally appropriate mental health services in Narrogin. Oxfam Australia welcomes this commitment.

Story by Oxfam Australia
Photo Editor Lara McKinley.

FIND OUT MORE...

To see images from the *Morditj Warniny* exhibition visit www.oxfam.org/strong-change



Four-legged friends



In Malawi, Oxfam's goat loans are providing orphans with the security they need to be able to continue their education and pay for basic necessities such as food and medication.

Austin sits reading a textbook on the step of the one-room house he shares with his grandmother. He's studying for an exam that will hopefully see him accepted into secondary school next year.

"I would like to continue my studies, do well at school and become a school teacher," Austin, aged 14, from Subili village in Malawi, says. "Thanks to my goats, I have that chance," he adds, casting a glance towards four goats that graze nearby.

Not too long ago, Austin's future looked grim. An orphan since the death of his mother seven years ago, Austin was forced to do piece work — work in other people's gardens and fields to earn money to feed himself, his grandmother and his cousin. School and study took a back seat and as a result he failed Grade 8.

"My grandmother is elderly and can't support me, which means I have to do most of the things on my own. So it means when I knock off from school, I have to do some piece work to get some money to buy clothes, food, soap, exercise books and other basic necessities in my life. That affects my education," Austin says.

"[In 2008] I failed to get selected for secondary school because I didn't have time to read and study because I had to work and do other things to support myself."

For one million orphans across Malawi, life is a daily struggle. Already burdened with the loss of their parents, often from AIDS-related illnesses, many orphans must miss school to support their siblings and

grandparents. Oxfam is helping them by providing goats, pigs, chickens, tools and seeds, helping to pay school fees and providing training in livelihood skills.

Austin's turning point came when he was selected to take part in a goat project that Subili village leaders started in conjunction with Oxfam partner Blantyre Synod to support orphans in their community.

Every year, 10 orphans are selected to take part in the program, each receiving an adult goat to care for and keep. They are taught how to feed the goat and keep it healthy, graduating from the program once their goat has a kid. This young goat is then given to another orphan who is chosen to take the next place in the group. The program has so far benefited 43 local orphans.

"Our objective is to reach out to all the orphans in the community so that each of them has a goat to start from ... and use during emergencies," Subili village goat project coordinator Rogers Namantosa says.

Since graduating from the program, Austin has bred a further four goats, with another one due any day. He recently sold one of his goats for 4,000 kwacha (\$29) and used the money to buy clothes, maize and pay for a practice exam to get into secondary school.

"In our zone, 672 students sat the practice examination and I finished 17th. I'm now hopeful that I pass the national examination and get into secondary school," Austin says.

"Whenever I run into an emergency, I'll be able to sell a goat ... I don't have to rely on doing as much piece work and that means I have more time to study, read and do my school work."

Story by Oxfam Australia Editor
Maureen Bathgate.



Subili, Blantyre, Malawi: Austin with one of his goats. "Having the goats gives me security because I know that whenever I run into any emergency I'll be able to sell a goat," he says. Photo: Maureen Bathgate/OxfamAUS.

FIND OUT MORE...

To view a short film about another one of our goat projects for orphans in Mozambique, visit www.oxfam.org.au/goats-that-give

