

Time out from violence – youth camp in June

By Anthony Hopkins, barrister and solicitor, NTLAC

Domestic violence is rife in our community. The Alice Springs court list on any given day is a sobering testament to our society's failure to protect women and children from violence – though undoubtedly the court lists merely scratch the surface of a widespread problem.

Sadly, for many, violence is seen as a 'normal' part of domestic relationships. A culture of acceptance of male domination and control has grown up through the exposure of children and young people to violence perpetrated by males against mothers, aunties, sisters and other significant women in their lives.

Against this background, the Alice Springs Domestic Violence Legal Service, in collaboration with Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Service, Reconnect and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, organised a three day camp for disadvantaged young males and females from the ages of 13 to 21.

It is tragic to learn that all 40 or so of the largely Indigenous participants are exposed to domestic violence on a day to day basis.

Aptly, one of the young participants named the camp *Time out from Violence* as, in addition to its other aims, the camp was intended to provide respite from constant exposure to violence.

Separate camps for the males and females were set up – some five kilometres apart – at Harts Range with a program of workshops to take place at each camp aimed at countering the culture of acceptance of violence, facilitating access to support services and legal protection, encouraging healthy relationships and building self-esteem.

The Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission along with the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service were invited to conduct workshops at the male camp aimed at conveying legislative and judicial intolerance of domestic violence. The Central Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Unit conducted workshops for the women with an emphasis on accessing protection.

Through the extensive use of role plays, the legal workshops focused on violent conduct which will amount to a criminal offence, and violent conduct which though not attracting a criminal sanction entitles the victim to a restraining order under the *Domestic Violence Act*. The penal consequences of conviction for assault and breach of a Restraining Order were discussed, including mandatory imprisonment for recidivist offenders.

Participants were asked to act out examples of escalating arguments – with the realism being supplied by the participant's frequent experiences – ending in conduct variously of sufficient seriousness to justify the imposition of criminal sanctions or restraining orders.



Top and above: Central Australian kids having some time out from violence at the three day camp.

The high point of these examples was demonstrated by those participants who were requested to end their argument through de-escalation and walking away.

Campers were also selected to play the roles of victim, perpetrator, arresting and charging police officer, prosecutor, defence lawyer and Magistrate within an assault to incarceration drama; the clear message being that imprisonment is the almost certain consequence of violence against women.

On the last night of the camp, having completed the workshops, the men joined the women at the women's camp for a BBQ and outdoor disco to celebrate what had been a successful camp for all involved.

Atitjere Community were invited, with virtually all community members attending for the high volume, high spirited dance in the dirt. Despite the cold, all in attendance danced in a space ringed by fire drums until the Community children had to leave after 9pm.

All in all "Time Out from Violence" was a positive step on the path to addressing the culture of acceptance of violence, and a great chance for the legal community to get in amongst it with young people in a situation where they are not being represented as victims or perpetrators. ①