



# How traditional tool-making is changing minds – and lives – for healthy futures

By Bridie Walsh, for CASSE\*

**M**EN from the Central Desert say connection to culture is the solution to violence and substance abuse and a unique program, the Men's Tjilirra Movement, run by CASSE (Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment) is supporting men to create their own path out.

Tjilirra is the Pintupi word for traditional tools such as boomerangs, spears and shields. During each Men's Tjilirra Movement (MTM) gathering, where Elders pass on the methods for making tjilirra, the men challenge each other to think about and resolve difficult social issues faced in community.

"It's about being strong," says Ngangkari Aboriginal mental health worker Martin Jugadai. He works across Haasts Bluff, Papunya, Mt Liebig and Kintore.

"When you lose culture you become a different person, a worse person," he says.

This sentiment is echoed by the senior men involved in the Men's Tjilirra Movement. They universally agree that the only way to interrupt cycles of disadvantage and violence is to reconnect to traditional culture, dreaming and story. They identify marijuana use as an increasing issue.

A young Luritja man from Mt Liebig says: "We want to get the Stolen Generation ('s knowledge) right back. I see lots of young fellas smoking dope, some young fellas will fight when they run out of dope. They think marijuana is good but they lose their culture with dope," he said.

Since its formal inception in March 2015, the Men's Tjilirra Movement has engaged 350 men across Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff), Watiyawanu (Mt Liebig), Walungurru (Kintore), Kiwirrkurra and Warumpi (Papunya) and Alice Springs.

"This program points out the strengths of culture as paths for people to strengthen and heal," says MTM program manager Jamie Tjupurulla Millier. He runs this unique mental health program for psychoanalytic organisation CASSE alongside Martin Jugadai and Aboriginal language interpreter Nathan Brown.

Millier overcame his own substance-abuse issues learning the art of traditional tool making from Ngangkari Elder B Whiskey. He can't pinpoint the moment of recovery, but four years of sitting at Whiskey's feet, hearing his story and dreaming and being heard led him out of a decade of drug use that started with the gateway drugs – cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana – and culminated with intravenous use of amphetamines and repeated trouble with the police.

Meanwhile, Jugadai was addressing his own battle with alcohol. He now drinks much less.



Drawing the line: Martin Jugadai and Bundi draw in the sand to explain the importance of culture, country and tradition, and living in two worlds.

**'Tjukurrpa witora kanyintjaku' – hold culture strong! Preparing for Pulapa, traditional ceremony and song, in Haasts Bluff(Ikuntji). Organised by MTM, it was the first community ceremony in 10 years.**



He attributes this to his journey in mental health education, better understanding and finding strength in culture.

"I was making boomerangs and spears, by myself, and sometimes with my brother," says Jugadai.

"Jamie was here (in Mt Liebig) then and was also making traditional tools."

Martin had the idea for the young and old men to get together and focus on mental health. Millier, Jugadai and mental health nurse David Beverage discussed the idea for a number of years then began discussions with CASSE, and Men's Tjilirra Movement (MTM) is the result.

During this time, Millier

continued to encourage youth to get more involved in traditional tool making.

"It takes the therapy room out into the bush," explains CASSE Director Pamela Nathan, a clinical and forensic psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist whose work with Aboriginal communities spans 35 years.

CASSE provides a psychological framework and monitoring and evaluation to ensure the ongoing and sustainable success of the program, in collaboration with Remote Jobs Community Program (RJCP) supported by the Royal Flying Doctors Service.

Typical psychological therapy

involves telling your story, being acknowledged for the suffering, hurt and pain you have experienced and taking on a new perspective – a new way of thinking – for healing to come.

Nathan describes the Men's Tjilirra Movement as a safe place to talk in the presence of another sitting with the tjilpi (old men) where therapy happens.

Tjilirra has a significant role to play.

"Tjilirra have been confiscated under Western law as weapons," she explains. "Yet they are the traditional tools of ancient ceremony, Aboriginal Dreamtime and law. They are instruments of cultural identity, cultural

continuity and belonging."

Jugadai explains the confusing effect of lost identity. "Stay with culture you'll be right, but if you go too far down the whitefella side you'll lose yourself," he says.

He describes the doubt and confusion that can set in: "(People start asking) 'Where's my country? Where's my culture?'"

By reconnecting to culture, men are reclaiming their identity and pride.

Some men are calling for more camps, and time learning culture, practising law and ceremony; and others have identified the economic opportunity of selling tjilirra to secure work for the future.

"I've not seen anything remotely close to the openness that men show in (the MTM) space," says Brown, who works closely with Millier and Jugadai as an interpreter to help foster dialogue.

"Men openly challenge themselves and talk about issues that are really difficult to deal with," he says. "They focus on how to stop and reduce the behaviours that rob people of a better quality of life."

"Rates of substance abuse, domestic violence and suicide are far higher in Aboriginal communities. It's on a different planet than mainstream world and largely related to cultural dispossession, and not knowing who they are."

One particularly worrying statistic is the rate of Aboriginal incarceration, especially in the Northern Territory with Indigenous representation reported as high as 84%.

"Where men were the leaders, protectors and providers of the family, they are now being taken out of the picture," says Millier.

Cultural dispossession has torn down the cornerstones of Aboriginal mental wellbeing – identity, culture and belonging. However, the Men's Tjilirra Movement intends to play its part in making culture and men strong, creating a safe space for men to talk through what matters and support Aboriginal determination.

The pride in being Aboriginal is powerfully transformative. As one young Aboriginal man speaking for many said: "I felt happy and my spirit was great and strong."

For more information about the Men's Tjilirra Movement and CASSE Australia, visit [www.casse.org.au](http://www.casse.org.au)

*\*CASSE is an organisation of dedicated psychological professionals who work with people and communities at their most vulnerable. The primary goal is to support and think together about how to develop secure relations and psychological wellbeing for today and the future. CASSE says that by changing minds it is saving lives. It is this simple vision that guides its work every day. – www.casse.org.au*