

CLIENT PROFILE



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I am her Aunty

She is of my blood. I am her Aunty. The Local Commissioners are all her Aunty or Uncle. The Anglo chronology would be my cousin's daughter but she is my daughter. When we commenced our long journey as Local Commissioners over four years ago, I immediately thought of her. She would be one that we would help. She was going nowhere fast and I thought after a few short conferences she would take all the opportunities offered in the Cape York Welfare Reform trial.

She was in trouble from an early age. One minute she was a lively 10 year old running around the neighborhood with my daughters and nieces. The biggest decision of the school holidays was finding which Aunty had cooked the best dinner and they would all converge for the meal, filling the house with laughter, pigtailed and big appetites. In almost the flick of a horse's tail she was dropping out of boarding school, running with older boys, drinking, swearing and swaggering around the community with an attitude. Soon she was pregnant, with no work possibilities and very mad at the world and the opportunities that would never be hers.

We all knew she would be a client of ours in the first year of operation. A quick succession of children were born into this dysfunctional household. They rarely attended school, all had behavioural problems, kicking and screaming at discipline and unable to sit still. Child Safety Services started to visit the house on a regular basis. The volatility of the relationship fueled by grog and gunja provided the perfect storm of anger and pity, pitching the young children into a merry-go-round of uncertainty.

When the first notices came through from Education Queensland and Child Safety Services, we said to bring her in. The Local Coordinator tried to serve her the notice to attend. The language was unrepeatable. At the next family event she used even more severe language on us, her

Aunties and Uncles. She was very mad at us. She would not attend, she would not talk to us and, finally we placed the Income Management order on her. We knew we would face the wrath when she did attend. It was horrible. Here was a woman, the child we had all loved, now a mean and nasty adult who deep down we still loved, but we did not like her anymore. She refused our advice. She told us to go away and mind our own business.

At night I would reflect on my own upbringing and how my Elders would have dealt with this situation. I took guidance from that, knowing that it would work as I was the product of that upbringing. Maybe she had some of the same thoughts because she turned up at the next conference. It was tough talking, and some of the words from the Elders came to me and I passed them on.

The change in her was slow; it stopped and started. We were there all the way over years, not just days and weeks. Her relationship is on and off, but her parenting is good most of the time now that the grog and gunja is away from the children. The notices are reducing, but we still see her regularly. The conversations even include achievements of the children in sport and school attendance. She is not perfect, but she is persevering and trying her hardest. This is what we ask.

As Local Commissioners we get asked what we have done to change behaviours and make our clients more socially responsible. What we have done is we have given them permission to change. Some are held back by knowing no other behaviour, whilst some are confined by their peers or have so much anger and angst they are inert. We are here, be it for good or bad. Sometimes we are the excuse to change - "the Commissioners said I must", sometimes it might be to prove us wrong, and other times we just show the love is still there even though the pigtailed have gone. She is our blood, we love her, and now she is able to love her children.