Wellspring of hope in town's dusty soil

Paul Kent: The Daily Telegraph January 01, 2011

Ethan Whyman jumps from a bridge into the Darling River in Wilcannia, north west of NSW. Picture: Liam Driver. Source: The Daily Telegraph

ROGER Whyman is a lucky one. He's 38 and he walks out of the Wilcannia Club Hotel, the only pub in town, and crosses the road to a 4WD just pulled up.

He looks at Ray Price, and squints to check it really is him. Next to him is Brett Kenny. Also there are Graeme Atkins and David Liddiard.

"Oh man, I love these guys," he says. The average life expectancy of Aboriginal men in Wilcannia, the little town where Roger Whyman was bred and born, is 37.5 years. Whyman is over the bump.

Wilcannia, once so big it boasted the third-largest inland port in Australia - yes, right out there on the border, as part of the Murray Darling system - is on life support. There are few jobs, and even fewer prospects. "I pretty much worked here all my life," he says. Whyman now works on the council. "There's not much opportunity - there's not much work."

But he is too honest a man than to say it any other way than it is. "There's nobody doing anything," he says. "So a lot of people just drink. There's no way to get out. "There's nothing for anybody to do here. That's the main problem." And you look around and there is ... nothing. There is no traffic in Wilcannia. No construction noise in the background, not a hammer hitting a nail or a cement mixer sluicing wet cement. The only sounds that wake the town are occasional; the road trains rumbling through. The hearts of the people have been stomped on, and they are only just hanging on.

The town dies, the people die too. Whyman says: "It leads into boredom. It leads into drugs. It leads into health problems. "You know ..." He clicks his fingers to show how easy it is to find drugs. "It's not heavy, just yardi [marijuana]." Kids as young as 10 are hooked on dope.

Unknown to Whyman, hard drugs have hit town, with teenagers now slaves to the needle. There is no doubt some of them will die. In 2010, four townspeople died in a single week. A man, 37, died of a heart attack; another man, 36, drank until his liver quit first, then his body; there was a cancer death, a suicide. In this town, youth suicide is another problem. In 2009, 24 people died, a quarter of them under 20. All these problems in a town that is dying, and here comes Liddiard, a man brought up not to quit. Their champion arrives. He is the son of an Aboriginal mother. He grew up to play first-grade rugby league with Parramatta, which included premierships and great glory ... and yet the football career was only ever his beginning. He retired at 34 and formed his company, National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy, to carry on the work with Aboriginal people he had already begun at the Eels. Liddiard now runs CorporateConnectAb, an organisation connecting corporate Australia with Aboriginal communities in regional Australia. He is the best they have.

In Wilcannia, Janelle Whitehead, the chief executive of Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation, listens to him and says: "David's right, the stars are aligning." A week before he left for Wilcannia, Liddiard reached into his contact book and invited the biggest hitters he had to lunch. They included the head of Commonwealth Bank's indigenous arm, Peter Harm, John Hartigan, chairman and chief executive of News Limited, Lend Lease's project director Warwick McInnes and social sustainability head Liz Potter, Ernst & Young CEO Rob McLeod, Susan Ferrier, the people and development director at law firm Allens Arthur Robinson, and the NRL's Melbourne Storm chief, Ron Gauci. They are all committed to his plan, as are others. This year Liddiard will fly the group, which will include Commonwealth Bank CEO Sir Ralph Norris, to Wilcannia to listen to the locals. Invitations are also going to Indigenous Employment and Economic Development and Sports Minister Mark Arbib, Jenny Macklin, who is Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Minister, Regional Australia Minister Simon Crean and Social Inclusion Minister Tanya Plibersek. Who else could do this? The people of Wilcannia are waiting. They have their answers. They just need the right ears to hear them.

"What we're trying to do is build sustainability in the community, rather than just focusing on one stream within the community like housing, or health, or enterprise," says Ross Hampton, chief executive of Murdi Paaki Regional Housing.

"We want to try and pull it together so, at the end of it, we have a sustainable community and real outcomes in the community, in terms of real jobs, good housing, health initiatives. The whole range of social wellbeing." Their motto is "a hand up, not a hand out". Too often, a great push comes to improve, say, health in the region, and while that's being undertaken education will crumble. Next they'll concentrate on education and, with the eye off housing, it will fail.

Governments, driven by election cycles, pay barely enough attention to properly commit and solve one project at a time. This tremendous squandering of money is driven by a simple truth: government is not interested in actually fixing the problems, but in giving the appearance of fixing the problems. "We can't get government to sign off on anything for more than two years," Whitehead says. They will not commit to anything that takes more than a year or two to complete because it will not show up in their key performance indicators before the next election. They are merely ticking boxes.
As community leader, local radio DJ, and the Wilcannia Boomerangs' captain-coach Brendon Adams says, "millions and millions of dollars comes into this community every year. And they waste it because they do such a piss-poor job". The people are stifled by inaction and bureaucracy. "Fifty-seven government agencies provide support for this community," Whitehead says. "That's 57 cheques for about 600 people." And that is why Wilcannia costs governments so many millions every year. Recently, for instance, the Government pledged a $6 million housing project. It was terrific - but exactly what they didn't need. "They employed people from outside, so no one got any employment or training," Adams says. "They came in here really quick, built them up, did a really piss-poor effort because they wanted to get out, and then they left.

"And housing was in a worse state than it was to begin with." Once repairs to the shoddy work were included, the budget blew out to $13 million. They are only ever given Band-Aid solutions, in a place where it is death by a thousand cuts. The flipside is, if there is any greatness in our governments, as they should aspire to, their time is now. There is opportunity. What greater legacy for a government than to solve the nation's indigenous issues by bringing the Aboriginal people in line with the rest of Australia?

What we heard in Wilcannia - that is we, the taxpayers who fund the wasted money our governments pour into Wilcannia - is that the town's people are trying. Two years back, the men of Wilcannia pledged themselves to the NRL's program against domestic violence. "Four years ago you would say," says Adams, "out of 28 players we had registered, 23 to 24 would have been a part of domestic violence. "This year we only had two people and they were minor. All one did was get drunk when he wasn't meant to, but he was breaching the code." The football team has formed a men's group, committed to reconnecting adult Aboriginal men with their children. A whole generation, says Adams, had lacked paternal influence growing up, to the point where it felt normal. Wilcannia is now looking to mend that. "The community is getting together," he says. "It also helps to create leadership, the development of stronger men, stronger families. It creates discipline." And it is now time for that spirit to grow. "We're trying to get the buy-in from corporates to generate support from government," Whitehead says. To maintain government interest, Liddiard is getting corporate Australia involved. To act as their conscience, in a way.

Not driven by election cycles, big business will commit their own expertise and help to see out the problems long-term. Commonwealth Bank boss Norris has told him whatever is needed, as have the other businesses already on board. In Wilcannia, Liddiard stood and informed the committee of the Matawinji board of management -- which contained elders and others who are highly regarded in the Aboriginal community, of his intentions. He told them about getting these people out here so they can actually listen to what the people need. And then to implement a system that will deliver it, so when one rises, they all rise. He spoke for only several minutes, and when he finished they all clapped. Then from nowhere came a voice, loud and strong with the dignity of her people. Said Maureen O'Donnell, a yellow ribbon tied in her hair: "Just on what you're talking about, we've been trying for years. We tell government and it goes in one ear and out the other. But that what you're talking about, working together ... that's wonderful. That's a wonderful idea."