

Author Goes West

With my backpack on my shoulders, an early morning 4.30 am start, I was heading to the remotest part of The Kimberley, to share my books and passion for literacy with indigenous communities. But first the intensive and extensive checks. Everyone was relieved that I passed the criminal tests, got my working-with-children clearance, just scraped through my medical, had a passport which said I was older than 16 (much older), with my real photo on it. I was reassured that if a tiger snake bit me or I fell into a crocodile infested creek or was attacked by a dingo, that the Royal Flying Doctors would come for me, even in the most isolated far-flung spot. I was hoping to break a leg, so I'd be saved in a heroic flight to the local hospital in Derby or Darwin. No such luck.



Flying into Broome, I saw the stunning coastline of blue seas and sandy beaches. My first stop was a camel ride at sunset, bouncing along Cable Beach. That's when I met Ralph. I must admit, he did have a huge nose with many hairs sticking out of it, but after I patted him, we bonded and he nibbled my shirt. This trip was looking good, even though I hadn't done anything yet. That's when I met the female version of Indiana Jones. Kim wore those khaki shorts and shirt, with rough socks popping out over her boots and a slouch hat. She was the Project Manager for World Vision Australia, driving the huge four-wheel drive and pulling a storage trailer for camping gear, water and supplies. We were heading inland with a team

of wonderful 'true believers' from World Vision Australia, who are committed to empowering indigenous people to lead their own development, to create life in all its fullness for Australian indigenous children. I was on this trip as a children's author to witness the impact of the My Mob playgroups, promote literacy and to tell story.

Driving on dirt roads, eleven hours deep into country, there are no hotels, one outback petrol station, a couple of roadhouses run by community and stunning landscapes of bulbous boab trees, stretches of termite mounds, huge mountain ranges, dusty landscapes, bush, gorges, waterholes and rivers filled with crocodiles. It was special to be invited by traditional elders into their remote communities, which are not open to tourists and visitors. It is slow time there, where the women measured me up. I was accepted as I joined the My Mob playgroups, where mothers and children interacted with books and pre-reading skill activities in preparation for school. The women were being taught to lead these playgroups, so that World Vision Australia would eventually leave the indigenous women to run the play groups independently.

One of the great highlights was my visit to the Wananami Remote Community School inside a very distant community. It's a beautiful little school, with its small, struggling vegetable garden and its splash of green lawn, in a red and dry landscape. The young teachers are incredibly dedicated, their classrooms decorated with the children's art. The impressive traditional owner Deb Donation is committed to engendering pride in the children's

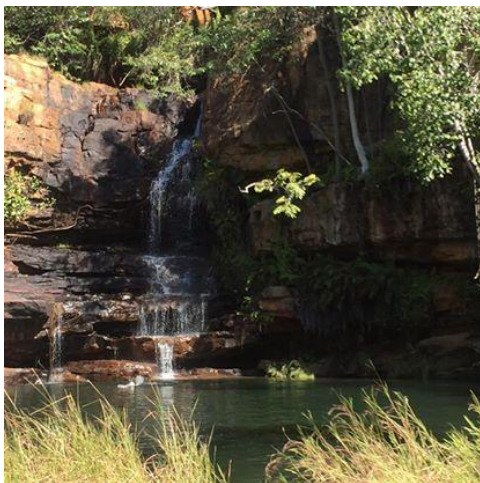


indigenous culture and teaches indigenous culture and language each week. As I read to the infants' children my picture book *Elephants Have Wings*, they became more and more engaged, moving closer and closer to me, until they were nearly inside the book. I was moved when they related their *Dreamtime* stories to *Elephants Have Wings*.

I shared my middle grade book *I Am Jack*, with the older girls. They read the book aloud and I was amazed that they enjoyed a story that was so different to their lives.

When I asked them about school, they said that they loved school, because they could learn. But they loved community more than school. Eleven year old Metaya told me, her favourite things were, 'Going bush and down to the creek. We catch crocodiles there. It's really good.' She meant to eat. Her girlfriend Tremaine agreed, but she liked it even more when all the family and extended family, went hunting. Kangaroo tails and goanna's legs were everyone's favourite. All the girls agreed that visiting town was boring, as there's nothing to do there, unlike in community. Gave me a new perspective. They didn't want me to leave, and I didn't want to leave either.

My accommodation was a donga. I got the best one, because it just fitted a double bed. The other dongas were singles. It's a container dumped in the middle of the Kimberley with a door and window punched through it. Showers and toilets are in another donga block and the kitchen is a lean-to with limited power. We had vegemite, so it was like being home. There was great camaraderie sharing our experiences as the sun set and we ate some very basic pasta. We all pitched in to cook it.



I swam in a water hole, where the spirit of Wandjina the supreme creator was painted at the dawn of creation, on the rock face. Chased a bush turkey unsuccessfully through the bush. Watched Kim, the Indiana Jones develop the respect of the elders. Stood in awe, at the enormous skies with their myriad of colours. Visited *Books in Homes My Mob* playgroups as well, where children and mothers were incredibly excited as the books arrived for the children to take home. I challenged the year 7 to 10 students at St Mary's Secondary College in Broome to become agents of change. When they support *World Vision Australia* and *Books in Homes*, it brings literacy to

indigenous children, and creates positive change for the children, themselves and Australia.

As I waved good-bye to Indiana Jones and flew over the vast outback home to Sydney, I was different. The land and our first Australians had become embedded inside me. Sharing story with the children and opening another pathway for them to tell their own stories, was moving and filled with hope.

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