



first
person

Speaking out on Wadeye

DOMINIC MCCORMACK, although non-Indigenous, speaks Murrinh-patha, the dominant language of the Thamarrurr region — location of the remote Aboriginal township of Wadeye. But it is his training in law that makes him uniquely qualified for his current work as an interpreter and cultural broker.

INTERVIEW

Helen Howard Zilko

PHOTOGRAPH

Barry Ledwidge

Wadeye was my home until I was sixteen.

In the early 1970s, at the beginning of the self-determination era, my parents returned to Port Keats, as it was then known, having worked there as lay missionaries in the late 1960s.

My father was principal of the school. As a child I was immersed in the local culture and language.

I fell into law at [the now] Charles Darwin University.

Initially I enrolled in Hospitality and Tourism Management, but ended up doing a combined Arts/Law degree. I soon left Arts behind; Law was the area for me.

I was considered an obvious choice to work on land claims for the NT Government.

After completing Articles, I worked in the NT Aboriginal Land Claims Unit. Later, to gain broader experience, I joined the private firm of De Silva Hebron, initially as a litigator and then as a commercial lawyer. In 2002, after pursuing other interests for two years, I resumed law in native title at Brisbane's Crown Law office.

For a long time I hadn't wanted to be involved in Aboriginal matters, particularly those at Wadeye.

The pressure can be intense, the relationship obligations enormous. Yet through my diverse career I had consistently asked the question, 'What unique contribution can I make?' Even though I'm not Indigenous, at a deeper level I knew it was the bicultural experience of Wadeye, my language capacity and legal/business experience that carved my difference.

With the advice of linguist and mentor, Dr Michael Cooke, my compass turned again.

He pointed me in the direction of the Aboriginal Interpreter Service (AIS) in Darwin. Four days after leaving Brisbane, I was in the Wadeye courtroom interpreting. That was March 2003.

I now run my own business, MARLUK Link-Up, which focuses on interpreting, training and cultural broking with the Aboriginal people of the Thamarrurr region.

Many Indigenous people, like those at Wadeye, do not understand an extraordinary range of western cultural concepts. It affects their ability to speak out, to interact with the wider world of information, and deal with the dominant western culture. In workshops we discuss western concepts in their language and cultural framework. I also teach other interpreters about working within the criminal justice system.

There is a desperate need for interpreters, but the reluctance to acknowledge this need is baffling.

While the AIS needs to improve the standard of interpreters by increasing bilingual capacity and confidence, many lawyers still refuse to utilise them. Of course, an interpreter will cause 'legal process' to occur more slowly, even though slowing down would assist the passage of justice.

Wadeye is under intense scrutiny as the NT's largest Aboriginal township and Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) trial site.

This trial has attempted to streamline services across all levels of government. After three years the situation is just as bad, if not worse. The trial has been a spectacular failure. It has created an additional level of bureaucracy and the people don't feel they're genuinely listened to or their concerns seriously actioned. They are doing their best to improve their lives, but 'programs' and 'solutions' often come from governments with little or no knowledge of the region's history and culture.

During May, Wadeye's so-called 'gang violence' was under intense media scrutiny.

We are seeing the continuation of tensions that have been occurring for aeons between the saltwater/coastal people and the freshwater/inland people. These tensions are generational, linked to clan/relationship affiliations and at various times flare up. The numbers of people — men and women, old and young — involved are growing, reflecting the explosion in population. Yes, property has been damaged, people's houses have been destroyed — but it's about bravado and creating fear between groups. Unlike Cronulla, these flare-ups did not lead to a single person requiring medical treatment. Wadeye continues to be described in the media as a 'war zone'; Iraq is a war zone, not Wadeye.

A staggering 18-plus different clan groups live at Wadeye — the land of just one clan group — speaking five languages and four dialects.

The influx of 'visitors' to Port Keats Mission over 1935–38, who then stayed, is the prime contributor to the so-called 'gang violence'. But over the past decade a way of life known as 'Thamarrurr' has re-emerged and the people now see a clearer path for themselves, which is moving back to their original lands. By doing so they will ensure their law and families are strong, while turning their hand to income generation through small business. They see this as the prime, though not sole, solution to the issues currently facing them.

Wider Australia must understand that a major fiscal response is unavoidable if the Thamarrurr people are to return to their homelands.

There is no region in the country with a non-Aboriginal service population of almost 3000 that does not have such basic infrastructure as an all-weather road-network; appropriate housing; a modern communications network; and complete schooling facilities. The process — operating in a bi-cultural world — is also extremely delicate. The starting point is listening to the people who live the issues.

Wadeye people have two prime priorities — their land and their families.

The Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, has offered two or three groups part-infrastructure [houses] on their own land. While this is a positive start, his process is about picking winners and losers. People here are interrelated and therefore interdependent, so some of the clan groups are already saying, 'We can't accept these houses because we have family in other clan groups who also need housing'. They certainly want to have nice things, but it's difficult to keep a three-bedroom house spotlessly clean when there are anywhere from 16 to 30 living under the one roof. I know of one family group of 87 people who live in three houses located side by side. Just picture that for one moment — 87 people. How many times does a fridge door open; how many times does the toilet get flushed; where does one find privacy?

Politicians need to genuinely listen to what the people are telling them.

There was a great contrast in the Opposition Leader Kim Beazley's visit in early August. He spent a day at Wadeye and said, 'I'm here to listen and learn'. When he asked questions, he genuinely listened. He didn't offer solutions or tell the people to 'paint your houses, pick up your rubbish, show that you have pride in where you live', as Mal Brough had done. The people were impressed with his thoughtful approach.

Aboriginal people DO want to see their kids receive the best bi-cultural education.

Last year seven students (all girls) from Wadeye completed Year 12, which is all the more meritorious when one considers it was achieved without a secondary school in the whole region. They're known as the school's Magnificent Seven.

I am just beginning to understand the incredible complexities of adult Murrinh-patha.

Learning more language will bolster my capacity to support the Thamarrurr people. It's very complex, but I am slowly becoming more adept at discussing the concepts of politics, law and culture at a deeper level.

I love the people of this region. They are very strong, but also patient and gracious. It is a privilege to work with them.

In the end, I want to see them control the rate and direction of change in their lives, and live their dreams.



WEB BYTE

MARLUK Link-Up's website www.marluk.com.au is a rich resource on Wadeye, and includes many papers and articles on interpreting, crime and language, and personal observations on current issues. It will point you to workshops and courses, translation/interpreting services and other useful links.