

Crisis High

Warmun's high school became the community's centre at a time of flood

On the 14th of March this year, staff at Ngalangangpum School in Warmun north western Australia – the jumping off point to the Bungle Bungles National Park – watched as the water began to rise.

The usually bone dry country had, like most of the north in early 2011, seen its share of rain but that Monday was different.

By midday, Turkey Creek down the road was two metres above its bridge. Kim-Ann Walters, a teacher at Ngalangangpum School thought nothing of it though as the creek had been high several times in the past weeks.

But the water kept coming and coming, and at 3 pm Ms Walters received a picture on her mobile of knee high water in the school's admin block from school principal Leanne Hodge. The building had been quarantined because of asbestos though, so no biggie. Ms Walters continued cooking the dinner she was preparing for a guest.

Then the first carload of kids arrived at Walters' house with an ATA asking whether she could leave them there while she picked up another load. By about 7 pm the community was officially in trouble. All had been given shelter either at the teachers' homes, the roadhouse, or the spirituality centre, the whole of one side of Warmun was under water.

A meeting was held by the police to inform the community that theirs was a disaster area; the power had gone and therefore the pumping equipment, it was time for evacuation.

"The community was up in arms, they were unwilling to move and much of that came from a mistrust of the person delivering the news," Ms Walters says.

The time of crisis brought principal Leanne Hodge's efforts into stark relief. She found herself to be one of the few non-aboriginal people in the community that had the indigenous population's trust after spending five years in Warmun working on building relationships and affinity with the locals.

The people in Warmun place a huge premium on personal connections and because she had shown the community how committed she was to it and its children's education Leanne Hodge was able to convince the community to evacuate to Kununurra on the helicopters that had begun to arrive.

"Warmun is a dry community and many of the elders had misgivings about the influence that being closer to a big town would have on the younger people, had there not been a connection with the principal things might have turned out much for the worse."



Unfortunately Ms Walters says that very quickly the move has impacted on the numbers attending class, six out of 21 is the regular roll.

"We went back to school quickly, perhaps too quickly," she says.

To compound matters there had been a funeral and a fatal car accident just two days before the flood rolled in, "A lot of the kids were pretty damaged beforehand, if you take all stability away it just makes things worse," she says.

And then there's the uncertainty, the government has estimated the damage to be in the region of \$680 million, roads and bridges are still out and most of Warmun's residents are still in temporary accommodation with no real time frame for their return home.

For Walters and the staff at Ngalangangpum the flood was another incident in what had been a very torrid time. Teaching and living in the outback is always challenging and the school has always had more than its fair share of tribulation.

There is a definite disconnect between the Warmun Community and the wider Australian society, the consequences of which come to the fore in times of crisis. Walters says that the people of Warmun see white people as transient, they come and they go without ever making the kinds of connections that are so intrinsic to the Aboriginal way of thinking.

Talk to us

Kim-Ann Walters contacted ET with her story after reading Dennis Sleight's article on crisis management in the Term 1 issue. If you have a story or a response to one of ours, don't hesitate to email on minnis@minnisjournals.com.au

The school suffers from a chronic shortage of resources, and because of its isolation teachers are hard to attract and retain.

"Getting the school up and running in January and coping with the lack of resources and facilities was in some ways a good preparation for organising the flood evacuation," Walters says.

At the time of writing Kim-Ann Walters was about to go on a holiday to the US and she says that the kids were highly suspicious that she wouldn't return.

"We've had seven teachers in five years, so I'm often asked, 'how long you staying?' they even gave me a hard time when I took a day off sick," Walters says.

Having the school's principal as one of the few white people to show a real commitment to the Warmun Community has been invaluable.

"The humanity and strength that Leanne has shown both before and after the flood was a real inspiration for us." **ET**