

Grace notes from the northern tip



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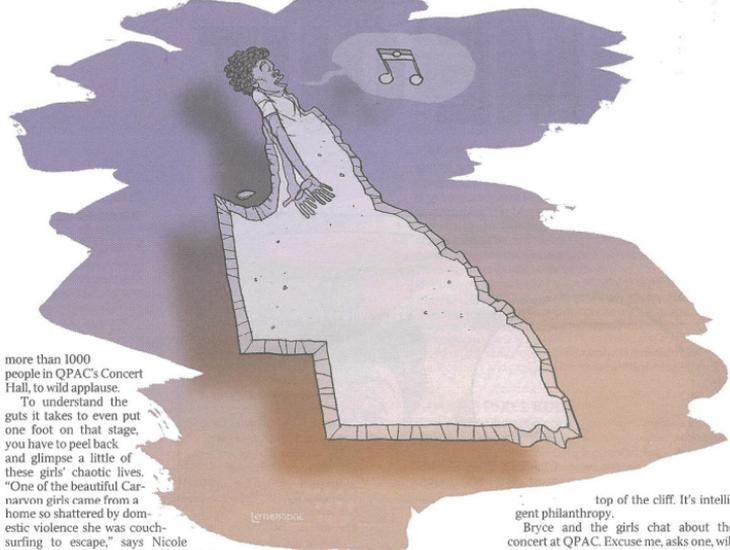
Eight tired girls sprawl in a room at the Queensland University of Technology. They've come a long way. Not just physically. Disadvantage throws up roadblocks the size of Everest and pitfalls as deep as the Mariana ocean trench. These girls come from Lockhart River community on the eastern side of the tip of Cape York Peninsula, about as remote as you can get, and are now in the elegant office of one of the most influential women in the land. Their new shoes are biting. They aren't in Kansas any more.

Minutes ago, gathered outside, they were fractious, tired from a big day. Now they're in Quentin Bryce's office for afternoon tea, politely sitting up straight. "They were ratty before. How come they're good for you?" I ask the former governor-general. "Well, I know their grandmothers," she says. Bryce is patron of Girls from Oz and has a long connection with Lockhart River, first visiting 15 years ago, sleeping on a mattress on a concrete floor back then, sitting down with the women to listen.

Google Lockhart River and the aerial photographs show pale, clear water lapping the land's edge. It's that crazy mix of incredible beauty, utter remoteness with abundant barramundi fishing; hugely talented artists such as Rosella Namok producing paintings the world wants; and shocking statistics: suicide rate six times the national average, life expectancy 20 years lower than the rest of the country. Numeracy and literacy rates lag far behind. It's not an easy place to be a young female.

Enter Girls from Oz. A decade ago, the Australian Girls Choir board wanted to enhance the lives of girls who lacked access to opportunities because of location or financial limitations. Today, that vision involves 63 week-long performing arts intensives – 33 in Halls Creek in the East Kimberley, 21 in Camarvon, also in Western Australia, and nine in Lockhart River.

The Lockhart River girls have travelled to Brisbane for a packed visit to see the Australian Ballet, South Bank, the *Wizard of Oz* production at QPAC and time with the Queensland Fire women cricketers at the Gabba, culminating in joining the Australian Girls Choir for their 2017 annual concert. The AGC has sung for the Queen, Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela. Together, the AGC girls and Lockhart girls perform Clean Bandit's *Rather Be* in front of



more than 1000 people in QPAC's Concert Hall, to wild applause.

To understand the guts it takes to even put one foot on that stage, you have to peel back and glimpse a little of these girls' chaotic lives. "One of the beautiful Carnarvon girls came from a home so shattered by domestic violence she was couch-surfing to escape," says Nicole Muir, CEO of the Australian School of Performing Arts. In Halls Creek, one of the girls' sisters, aged 15 years, had taken her own life. One of the Lockhart River girls displayed behavioural issues with extreme swearing after her mother recently walked out, leaving behind four children. Dad is in jail and the 75-year-old grandad is struggling to care for them. ("I'd be swearing too, if that were me.")

The disadvantage some of these girls face is acute and corrosive. If your family has five generations on welfare, how do you learn something without seeing it role-modelled? Yet, given their chance, boy, oh boy, these girls grab it and run with it. One of the girls is now in Perth, living in college at the University of WA, undertaking a bridging course to get into Health Science. She'd never been on a plane before, never ridden in a lift. How's that for a leap? Muir says the majority of these girls continue to study or are working. That's a minor miracle in itself.

Australia has a vast, inglorious history of well-meaning "fixes" that don't work in disadvantaged communities. If you think you're going to fly in as the great white saviour, solve the problems and fly out, you will follow in the footsteps of many doomed good samaritans. Lockhart's history is a shameful mess of displacement, relocation and forced assimilation. No wonder there's dysfunction.

Lockhart's motivated elders know what

Donating to Girls from Oz is like putting safety rails at the top of the cliff

works, inviting back Girls from Oz each year. Girls who couldn't look anyone in the eye are now up on stage, singing, dancing, not realising they've absorbed life lessons sneakily packed in: confidence, self-worth, routine, training, discipline, persistence, sitting and listening, and language skills. Mawella, 11, has been in the choir for two years. "I plan to be a musician and an artist". Eva's the smallest of this group from Lockhart, a package of sass and curls who can dance and sing up a storm like her idol, Jessica Mauboy.

Girls from Oz does potent, targeted, nuanced and intelligent work. It knows if you educate a girl, you educate a community. In a world where we tend to park the ambulances at the bottom of the cliff and pour money into pick-up-the-pieces services, donating to Girls from Oz (girlsfrom-oz.org.au) is like putting safety rails at the

top of the cliff. It's intelligent philanthropy.

Bryce and the girls chat about the concert at QPAC. Excuse me, asks one, will there be that mouldy cheese at the theatre? I think she's saying "Malterses", "Oh," says the former G-G, "the mouldy cheese! That's right, you liked the mouldy blue cheese and crackers we had as snacks last time." Back then, this young girl didn't know she liked mouldy cheese. None of us do until we try it and realise that although it is mouldy it is delicious. It's called expanding your horizons. You can't know about something you don't know exists. You can't be what you can't see. You can't imagine a different life if you've never glimpsed over the horizon. You don't know you have a voice until you're encouraged to open your mouth.

I leave and walk back over the Goodwill Bridge, a light breeze ruffling up the brown water of Brisbane River. It's a long way from the barramundi-rich waters of Lockhart. I'm thinking of that enthusiastic blue cheese-eater and one of Australia's most powerful women, planting seeds, saying, what about coming to uni down here? Have you thought of that? I'll be here. So finish school and keep that in mind.

It's been a hell of a big week in the capital city, population 2.3 million, for these kids. "How many people in Lockhart River?" Bryce asks. Six hundred people. "You know the place where I grew up, Ilfracombe, in Central West Queensland, had 140 people?" The look on their faces says it all. Man, she is really from the sticks. And she did OK.

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