



Regan aged 12 of Manyallaluk Northern Territory

**The Literacy Empowerment Project  
Progress report  
31<sup>st</sup> December 2006**



**Australian Government**

**Department of Education, Science and Training**

## Introduction

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth is now in the fifth year of a long term effort to help improve the health and education of Aboriginal children in Australia's remote communities.

The Literacy Empowerment project began in the Jawoyn communities, east of Katherine in the Northern Territory. Its success has seen the project spread to Maningrida on the Arafura Sea, Yarrabah in North Queensland and soon to Bidyadanga in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. As well, the blueprint for the Literacy Backpacks was adapted by Tauondi Aboriginal College near Adelaide for an infant program.



Girls at Manyallaluk School (Eva Valley, Northern Territory)

The Federal Department of Education, Science and Training provided \$550,00 in October 2005, \$275,000 in February 2006 and \$253,000 in January 2007 .

The development of the Literacy Backpacks and associated projects has been boosted enormously by public donations and contributions from Credit Suisse Australia, Vodafone Australia Foundation, Kessler Group, Bestest Foundation, O'Neill Foundation and Morawetz Social Justice Fund.

### 1. Literacy Backpack Project

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth and Katherine Region Group Schools introduced Literacy Backpacks into four remote Arnhem Land communities at the start of the school year in 2006.

Encouraged by the Group School Principal, Stuart Dwyer, Minyerri (180 students), Wugularr (102 students), Barunga (65 students) and Manyallaluk (22 students) launched the project.

The local school principals, Aboriginal teachers, assistants and some very keen parents were the driving force. From the very beginning most of the children showed great enthusiasm for the Backpacks.

Every pupil in the four schools received a Literacy Backpack stamped "READ ME". Each week they took home books, newspapers and magazines for their entire families.

The books were bar coded and logged in a lap top computer to introduce the children to the library system of lending and sharing. Gail Dous from the NT Library Association helped assistant teachers and a former Principal, Alf Murray, coordinated the project throughout the four start up schools.

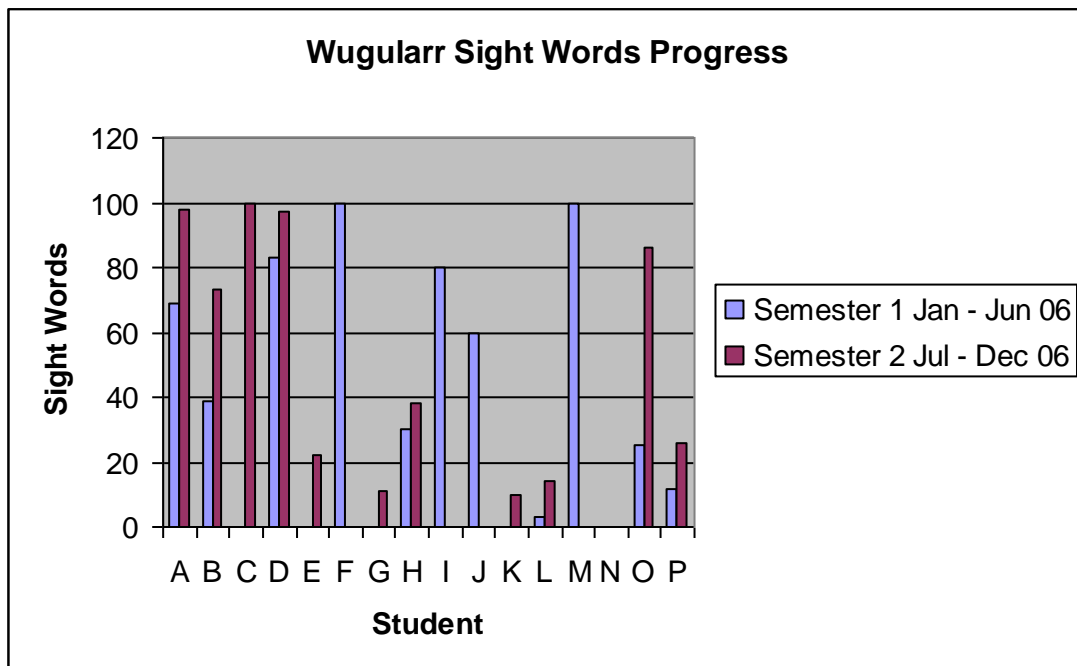
Good readers were rewarded with vouchers that could be redeemed at the Katherine Bookshop where the children could choose the first books most of them had ever owned. Bookshop owner Kerry Taylor gave additional support by driving thousands of kilometres to deliver books to the children as prizes for effort and attendance.

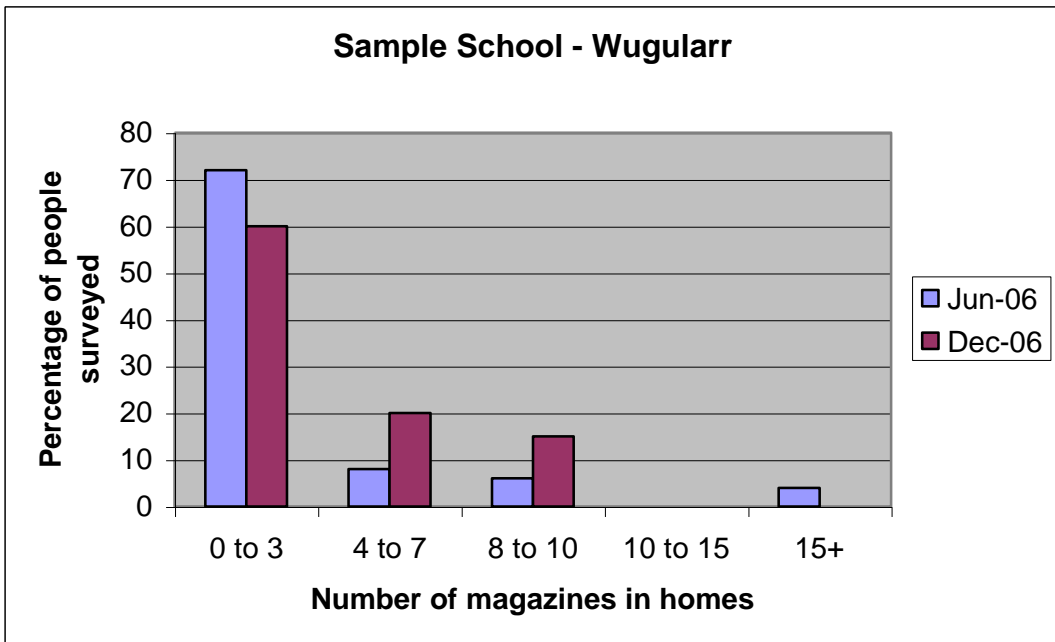
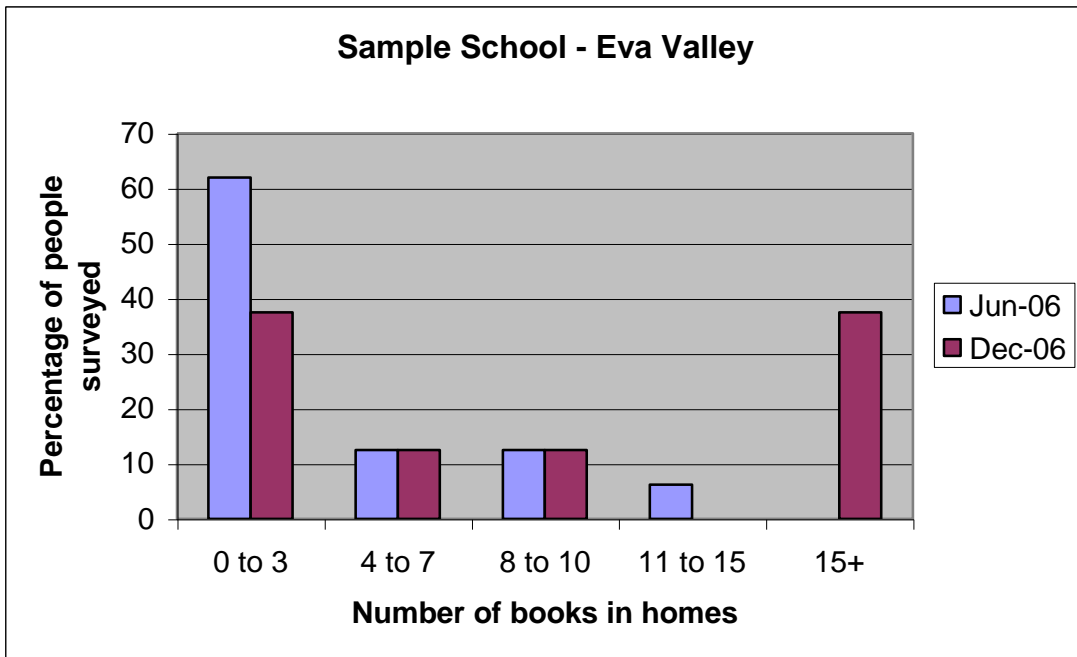
A survey of the homes in these communities had established that in the beginning most had fewer than three items of reading material, including old newspapers and magazines. In general these were bookless homes in bookless communities without public libraries and with an illiteracy rate of around 93%.

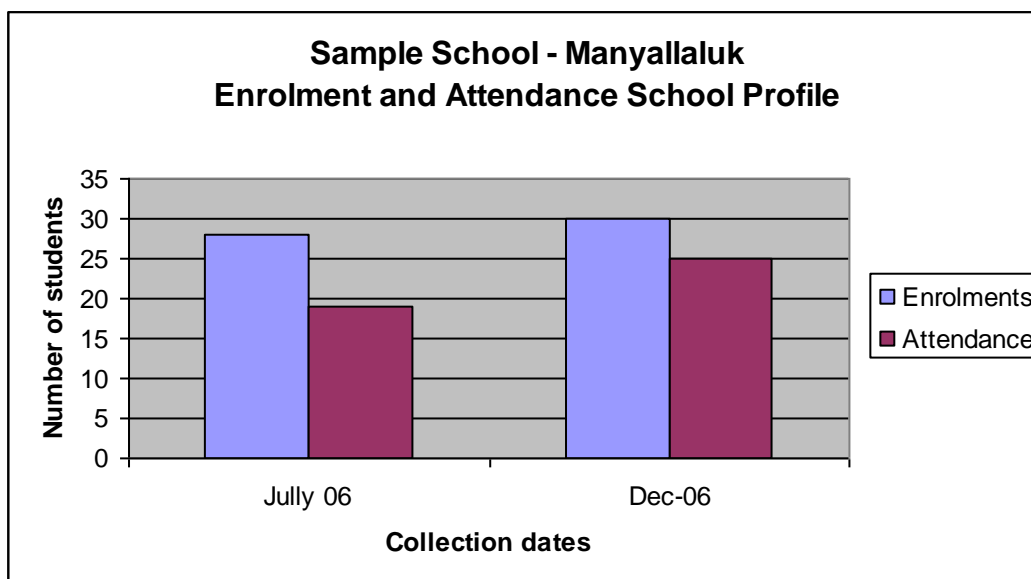
This began to change in 2006. There was great excitement among the students as they shared books with brothers and sisters. Each term the students were allowed to select a book they would keep from the Scholastic Book Club catalogues. In addition their parents surprised the teachers by spending hundreds of dollars ordering additional books for their children.

Some communities, including Wugularr, twice were devastated by massive flooding in 2006. Families lost most of their possessions. Literacy backpacks and books were replaced for these communities. School principals in the four Jawoyn communities reported to the Katherine Group Office a sharp increase in reading ability and a genuine interest in a wide range of reading materials.

Sight words and other commonly used methods of testing reading levels and comprehension indicated steady improvement.







At this stage of the project it is not clear how much of an impact the Literacy Backpacks have had on school attendance in all four communities. The smallest settlement, Manyallaluk, with just 160 people increased enrolments from 22 to 27 and attendance there has been very good. The enthusiasm of these children for choosing their own reading material, selecting books from the Scholastic Book club catalogue and spending their book vouchers, indicates the backpacks have stimulated a keener interest in school.

The most extraordinary impact of the Literacy backpacks, however, has been on whole families, many of whom began to engage with the students and the school process for the first time.

The Literacy Backpacks have been used to regularly distribute NT newspapers, Aboriginal publications including Vibe Magazine, the Koori Mail and the National Indigenous Times, as well as nutrition, cooking and baby care magazines popular among the women.

This has had an extremely positive impact on the adults. The Aboriginal assistant teachers said that reading material was shared around even among those who did not have children attending the schools. Many parents approached teachers seeking help on how to work with and read to their children. It was decided in 2007 to try to provide workshops for parents with

after school instruction on how to support their children, utilizing the materials from the Literacy backpacks for all members of the family.

This is among the most important achievements of the Literacy Backpacks. They have helped to close the space between school and community.

Parents have discovered how much enjoyment and benefit their children derive from reading and learning in general. Teachers have witnessed that even in a region with one of the lowest levels of literacy adults are willing to learn more and see their children improve.

When the Federal Minister for Education, Julie Bishop, visited Manyallaluk School (Eva Valley) on November 16<sup>th</sup> 2006 she listened to reading by students who only two years ago were lost or struggling. Some told the minister they now were considering continuing on to high-school, a huge challenge that would involve moving to a boarding school or hostel in Katherine or Darwin.

Teachers from other communities east of Katherine visited these four schools to observe the Literacy Backpacks in action and by the last term of 2006 they were introduced in Bulman (75 students) and Urapunga (40 students). Jilkminggan (100 students) will begin in the first term of 2007.

Finally, the Katherine Region Group Principal, Stuart Dwyer has applied to NT Education for the appointment of a special staff member to expand the Literacy Backpack project into remote schools west of Katherine with approximately 200 children.

To the north, Maningrida, a large remote community of some 2600 people about 350 kilometres east of Darwin, has asked to begin the Literacy Backpack project for many of its 470 students in 2007.

Edie Wright, Head of Aboriginal Education in Western Australia, is also planning to introduce the Literacy Backpacks for about 80 children at Bidyadanga in the Kimberley Region. This will require additional funds raised by Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth.

Yarrabah, near Cairns in North Queensland, has begun a "Books for Babies" program, connecting new parents to the importance of early stimulation of infants for development of language and reading skills. Funds provided by Dr David Morawetz's Social Justice Fund supported this start up.



**'Little steps forward'**

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

For much of 2006 the Literacy Backpack project was greatly assisted by a very experienced former Principal, Alf Murray.

This type of senior educator is highly sought after in the Northern Territory. It may be possible to organize retiring Principals, Deputies and senior teachers to contribute skills as part of a Literacy Brigade to help in many remote communities. There is a desperate shortage of adequately trained and experienced teachers.

#### **FINAL ASSESSMENT OF LITERACY BACKPACK PROJECT 2005-2007:**

By the end of 2007 we expect to see Literacy backpacks reaching almost 1300 Aboriginal children and their families.

Katherine Group Schools assessment criteria of the Literacy Backpacks will include:

1. Number of books introduced to homes.
2. Number of books borrowed from school/community reading room.
3. Snapshots from the Library data-base on titles and types.
4. Measurement of student reading levels.
5. Community survey with questions such as "Do you read at home? How often? What do you read? Do you read with your children? How many books do you read? Magazines? Newspapers? What reading do you find most interesting?"
6. Community views on other means of improving education.

## 2. Early Learning at the Women's Centres

To prepare young Aboriginal children for a stronger start at school books and other early learning materials have been introduced for Jawoyn infants and their mothers in Wugularr, Barunga, Manyallaluk and Minyerri.

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth used the federal funding to engage a highly experienced educator, Ms Kate King, as Early Start Project Officer with the Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation based in Katherine.

A survey of early childhood services and needs established that there were about 200 infants living in these four communities, plus up to 50 more infant visitors often there for several



**Minyerri Playgroup 2006**

months. Pre-school education has been either non-existent or haphazard, but it is certainly not well supported across this region due to many factors including a shortage of skilled staff and limited experience among parents of playgroup activities.

The Early Learning project built up relationships with young mothers at the schools, crèches and women's centres. Playgroups were organised by Kate King during women's softball games and this proved a popular and relaxed introduction to this type of learning activity for children.

Initially we have concentrated on durable materials for counting, sorting and identifying shapes and colours. Wooden learning toys were purchased from Playhouse Toys. Kurrajong Aboriginal products delivered additional alphabet and



**'Toddler at Minyerri Playgroup'**

number products, many made by Indigenous women prison inmates.

Most of the community stores do not sell infant books and they are scarce. So we decided to adapt the Literacy Backpacks for these infants and their mothers. An initial supply of infant books was distributed and then mothers were asked to help in ordering additional selections through the Wombat Book Club and Huggies Book Club. Alphabet and number books, large format and board books, and "lift the flap" animal books were the most frequently requested. Magabala provided the latest Aboriginal titles and we had guidance from Charles Darwin University's Accelerated Literacy staff.

Katherine Region Group Schools is about to introduce into some of these remote communities a pre-school program called "Age of Entry" for children from the age of three and a half year. Each morning the infants will have two hours introduction to the school routine and early learning. This will be an ideal point to offer early learning and literacy support. It may help overcome the severe difficulties that greatly impede adequate pre-school education for Aboriginal children in remote areas.

### **3. Life Skill Education**

In October 2005 Fountain for Youth provided the Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation with funds to continue the work of a health educator in the Jawoyn communities.

We have supported this project since 2003 and the focus is life skills education about ears, skin, nutrition, dental care, safety and general health.

The Sunrise CEO, Irene Fisher, believes it has contributed to an improvement in the well being of many children in communities at high risk of malnutrition, severe illnesses and long term learning disabilities.

The target group is 503 children under five years of age and 828 children between the ages of 5 and 15 across nine communities and outstations in the Sunrise Health Service operating region.

The Sunrise Child Health and Lifeskills Educator works closely with teachers and community people to promote a healthy lifestyle for children.

From October 2005 to December 2005 there were school expos on sexual health and a heavy emphasis on nutrition. In the first six months of 2006 nutrition was taught in the classroom and through cooking sessions at the crèches and women's centres.

The Life skills educator also discussed personal and community safety, self-esteem, a healthy attitude to alcohol and the dangers of drug abuse. There was a special focus at Wugularr on the damage caused by petrol sniffing. Actor, Tom Lewis and Djilpin Arts, produced a DVD with the children as actors, contributing to a clearer understanding of the effects of petrol sniffing.

Werenburn and Minyerri had extended sessions on ear health. Bulman held development classes for senior girls and Mataranka emphasized personal hygiene and healthy eating. The Health and Lifeskills education is flexible and tailored for each school and community's special needs.



**Ian Thorpe with Wugularr children**

The Sunrise staff all travel long distances often on treacherous roads to visit communities as far east as Ngukurr in the Roper River region and Bulman to the north east of Katherine. The demands on overworked staff have led to some gaps in the work of the Sunrise Lifeskills educator this year, with one worker leaving early in 2006 and duties taken up by others.

In December 2006 the position was again being advertised but it has proven difficult to attract the highly skilled educator required for this demanding work.

If the position can be filled, the Sunrise CEO hopes to add additional duties, enlisting the Child Health and Lifeskills Educator to coordinate the screening and monitoring of children to provide early detection of growth and development problems.

We continue to advocate a healthy blend of lifeskills education, cultural knowledge and mainstream learning as the best chance of improving the very poor health of many of these children.



**Wugularr kids strong and smart**

#### 4. Walking with Spirits Festival

At the 5<sup>th</sup> annual Walking with Spirits Festival, held on July 31st 2006 at Beswick Falls, near Wugularr, Aboriginal children from local communities staged their most ambitious program of dance, music and theatre.

Led by the Traditional Owner, Victor Hood and the festival's artistic director, Tom Lewis, songmen and dancers shared traditional performances with the children and visitors.

The children contributed films, animated shorts, spectacular displays of puppetry and dances lit by burning displays of animal images and abstract art.



Walking with Spirits Festival 2006



During a tranquil, alcohol free weekend, Aboriginal people drew on their strengths as part of the world's oldest continuous culture and shared some wonderful performances in a place of unforgettable beauty.

The Australian Shakespeare Company assisted with staging and the festival achieved a striking blend of music, dance and spectacle.

By working with local schools and bringing in creative artists to help with training, Tom Lewis, his partner, Fleur Parry and their Djilpin Arts troupe, have introduced the local Aboriginal children to a variety of new skills.

One young film crew is developing stories of local cultural significance. Another team assisted with the production of a series of animated digital features now displayed on the Dust Echoes website. Children also join in the construction of costumes and visual displays. This cultural and performance oriented learning stimulates their classroom activities for many months.



For the hundreds of white Australians who travel from afar to see this family oriented display of cultural pride it is also a chance for children to learn from one another.

The community leaders and teachers are united in their support of this cultural education program and it has led to the revival of several art forms at Wugularr and new projects in surrounding communities. These will be supported by private and corporate donations to Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth and are set out in the following sections of this report.



**Wugularr children at Walking with Spirits**

## 5. Ghunmarn Cultural Centre



In 2006 Aboriginal community leaders in Wugularr, NT, asked Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth to help create a new centre for Art and Culture.

Led by the Traditional Owner, Victor Hood, the actor and musician, Tom Lewis and the creative company, Djilpin Arts Aboriginal Corporation, the community is refurbishing an existing building known as the Red Barn, the Centre will be called 'Ghunmarn Cultural

Centre', (meaning all together).

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth has contributed \$120,000 to develop this facility which will further the Art and Cultural education of children and adults.



**Leroy and his artwork**

Credit Suisse has donated an additional \$36,000 to help equip the Ghunmarn Cultural Centre.

The upper floors of the Centre will be a gallery space to exhibit the outstanding David Blanas art collection left by one of Arnhem Land's most significant painters.

Downstairs there will be production rooms, a digital archive and a shop front for sale of work produced locally.

Djilpin Arts has been involved in training Aboriginal children in many remote communities in this region for diverse cultural projects that have included music, dance, film, animation and shadow puppetry theatre. The traditional owners believe the Art & Culture centre can give the community a sustainable enterprise and a place of cultural pride and achievement.

## 6. Australian Readers Challenge

In 2006 about 365 schools around Australia participated in the Australian Readers Challenge to promote literacy and raise awareness of the urgent needs of Indigenous children.

Ian Thorpe signed reward certificates for 11,000 participants whom each read at least ten books from a recommended list.

By registering on a website set up by Suzie Wilson, the owner of Riverbend Books, Bulimba, Queensland, children and adults donated \$5 towards the purchase of suitable books to be distributed to Aboriginal children by the Fred Hollows Foundation.

At a closing ceremony attended by the Governor of NSW, Her Excellency Marie Bashir, a cheque for \$78,000 was presented to Gabi Hollows of the Fred Hollows Foundation.

The Australian Booksellers Association and a number of leading publishers supported the Australian Readers Challenge.

## 7. Australian Support for Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth

In 2006 support by generous individuals and some outstanding corporations allowed Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth to extend the Literacy Backpack program, encourage new health education initiatives and help some of these remote communities develop better facilities for the health and education of their children.

<b>Credit Suisse Australia</b>	\$ 36,172	Literacy Backpacks
	\$ 36,609	Art & Cultural Centre
	\$ 10,000	Wugularr Basketball Court
<b>Bestest Foundation</b>	\$100,000	Literacy Backpacks
<b>Vodafone Australia</b>	\$ 50,000	Literacy Backpacks
<b>O'Neill Foundation</b>	\$ 30,000	Wugularr Basketball Court
<b>Norm &amp; Sue O'Neill</b>	\$ 10,000	Wugularr Basketball Court
<b>Dave &amp; Kerry Rickards</b>	\$ 10,000	Wugularr Basketball Court
<b>Kessler Group</b>	\$ 60,000	Literacy Backpacks
<b>Ian Thorpe &amp; Dave Flaskas</b>	\$ 25,000	Wugularr Basketball Court

## 8. Wugularr Basketball Court



The remote community of Wugularr, 120 kilometres southeast of Katherine has had half a dozen major floods cause extensive damage to the old school building.

In 2007 a new school will open on higher ground and Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth has led a fundraising drive to build a new basketball court.

The cost is an estimated \$90,000. Ian Thorpe and his manager, David Flaskas have led the way by donating generously to this project, as have the O'Neill and Rickards families. The O'Neill Foundation, Credit Suisse Australia and Vodafone Australia Foundation have lifted our funds to reach the first target.

### **Wugularr School grounds under flood in 2006**

In an area devoid of other recreational facilities the new basketball court will become a focus for youth programs run by community leaders and teachers.

By encouraging children who have already dropped out of school to engage in these healthy recreational programs it is hoped that some will return to their studies.

As a second stage of this project it is hoped to attract NT Government support to build a covered hall over the basketball court. This would be a vital facility for emergency relief operations during the regular heavy flooding in the area. It would also give the 450 residents of Wugularr their first community hall.

### **Summary**

Achieving genuine equality for Indigenous people remains Australia's greatest challenge. The truth is that the Children of the First Sunrise are usually thought of last.

In stepping down from an extraordinary sporting career, Ian Thorpe, reminded our nation of what remains to be done and of how he is determined to contribute.

All of the voluntary directors, families and corporate partners who support this blend of health and education believe that we can do far more to rapidly improve the lives of the ten thousand Aboriginal children born each year.

Jeff McMullen  
CEO  
Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth