

2016 Nganmariyanga immersion experience

BY RAY AKHURST

The National Immersion Program provides a unique experience for Vincentians to get a taste of life in a remote Indigenous community. The 2016 program proved to be a powerful experience in terms of our interaction with the youth and adults of the community, and of our own growth in Vincentian spirituality.

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Immersion Program commenced in 2004 after an invitation from the remote Aboriginal community of Nganmariyanga to provide a program of activities for their children during the school holidays. The community asked for a long-term commitment, and the Society has delivered on that commitment each year since the inception of the program. The program is organised by members of the National Immersion Committee, who consider the applications and arrange interviews. After holding teleconference interviews, a team of nine was chosen for the 2016 Immersion.

This year's program was superbly led by Angela Versteegh (NSW), a veteran of four immersion programs, supported by Rosie Franco (WA) and the team's spiritual director, Br Greg MacDonald FMS (VIC). Seven of the team were very enthusiastic and energetic younger Vincentians (19–33 years), who made this oldest member of the team (69 years) feel very comfortable and welcome. The team was well-balanced in terms of expertise, interests and personalities, with the choice of team members being a credit to the selection panel.

We assembled in Darwin for an



orientation program on Saturday 26 March. After a period of prayer and reflection, a very important part of the immersion experience, we spent the morning learning more about the Nganmariyanga community and the logistics of the program. The afternoon was devoted to cross-cultural awareness training, which was provided by an indigenous woman. This was in addition to reading material that had been provided to us shortly after we had been notified of our selection.

On Easter Sunday, we participated in a Mass at the St Martin de Porres Aboriginal Community Church in Darwin. We were made very welcome, given a blessing by the elders at the end of Mass, and invited to join the community for a lunch to celebrate the Baptism of one of their adult men. We were also able to return to the same church when we returned from Nganmariyanga two weeks later, with two of our team giving a short report on our time in Nganmariyanga.

The road between Darwin and Nganmariyanga is inoperable during the wet season, so the immersion team had to fly into the community on Easter

Monday morning. After settling in and a brief orientation, we started on some painting projects around the school. We continued with the painting at various times during the week when a few of us could be spared from other activities.

We started the program in earnest on Tuesday, when school resumed after the Easter break. During school hours, we operated as teachers' aides (preschool to junior secondary), which gave us a good opportunity to meet and get to know the younger members of the community and their teachers. We then helped the sports and recreation officer conduct after school games (AFL, cricket, soccer, softball etc). During the second week, we conducted a holiday program for the children and youth of the community. In general, this involved some outdoor games in the morning and then movement to the Sport and Recreation Centre as the heat started to bite, where craft activities and indoor games were held, before lunch was provided for the attendees. In the late afternoon, we again ventured outdoors for more active games.

A vital part of the program was our morning and evening prayer and reflection sessions, which were organised by Br Greg. They provided a very important focus on Vincentian spirituality for our experience in the community and beyond.

Apart from the children, most of our interaction with the members of the Indigenous community was with the women elders and a few of the younger women. While they cooked damper and kangaroo tail for us after Mass on Sunday, the women elders happily chatted. They walked and talked with all of us later that afternoon as we visited the cemetery and also the graves of some particularly important members of the community who were buried in a separate place. The male members of our team were able to have several conversations with the senior male traditional owners and also with a young male Church leader.

Relations with the non-Indigenous community were very positive. We worked most closely with the teachers and sports and recreation officer but also with some others in the community. It was quite impressive to see the level of energy and enthusiasm that the non-Indigenous community members brought to their roles at Nganmarriyanga.

All members of the team were very enthusiastic about the immersion experience. We felt that there were valuable lessons learned, new questions raised, and an excellent feeling of Vincentian solidarity in the team. Several members of the team are exploring opportunities of making further contributions to giving a hand-up to people in remote Indigenous communities. We all look forward to bringing our experience in the Immersion Program to bear in our lives and activities in our respective communities. ♦



BY CLAIRE WHITE

Claire White was another Society member who took part in this year's program, which ran from 26 March to 10 April. She shared this reflection

An immersion program like this is complex in many ways. We went not really knowing what to expect, and in the two-day preparation before flying into Nganmarriyanga, we focused on letting go of assumptions and expectations and being fully open to the experience. Guided by daily spiritual reflection and debriefing, we were able to deeply immerse ourselves in the experience of

supporting the community through helping in the school classrooms and providing full-day holiday programs.

We each experienced a rollercoaster of emotions as we worked with members of the community—from babies to elders—sharing and smiling with them and supporting each other as a group. Questions without ready answers kept arising, and we were able to consider in new ways issues that we had only heard or read about prior to visiting Nganmarriyanga.

Was it a worthwhile experience? Absolutely. Would I recommend the Immersion Program to others who want to deepen their understanding of what it means to be an Indigenous Australian in a remote Australian community today? Without question. ♦

Joining the National Immersion Program

Each year the program commences with a call for applications from Vincentians aged 18–79 years through the national website (vinnies.org.au) in September. The application forms are assessed by a selection panel from the Society's National Immersion Committee. The panel assembles a team of 8 to 10 people with a range of experience and expertise to select team members based on written applications and a teleconference interview.