

My Dust Up Experience 2023

(Perth-Kalgoorlie-Tjukayirla-Warakurna)

“Sorry, where are we going?”

For seven years I’ve been a Home Economics Teacher with my head in the sand, testing my nervous system on the daily, running between seven classrooms, connecting with my 150 plus students each week, running canteens and cafes with teenagers, pulling all-nighters to get a new assessment task just right and — like so many of my co-workers — exhausting myself. When the call came, I felt like an athlete getting a call-up from the head of an elite sports program. Prepare Produce Provide (PPP), via Head Chef Tanya Healy, was ringing: “We’re down a cook, how do you feel about coming to the desert for Dust Up?”

Having spent the better part of a decade between the Gascoyne and Pilbara regions, I pictured the red, dusty air, and could literally feel any moisture in my nose start to dry up. I had every excuse not to go. A handful of my Year 12s were behind with four weeks left in their school year. I had friends and family who needed me. I didn’t have a clue what I was in for, or if I could manage it. I shared the opportunity with a co-worker; her eyes lit up: “Oh Jacqui, it will be amazing!” Cue my dumbfounded look: of course, it would be amazing. You forget this when your head is buried.

Two weeks later I was frantically packing. After googling ‘Dust Up’ and learning where I was going (Hint: Ngaanyatjarra Lands) I decided some practical advice was needed. I had been given the phone number of a wonderful teacher who had taught in the lands for four years. “Don’t bring any red, it’s culturally inappropriate. Wear long, loose fitting clothes, pack for both the hot and the cold. The kids are great, not a lot of English out there, you’ll be fine!” I found a few insightful clips on YouTube, fun hip hop music videos made by the kids at each Dust Up event held in the last few years. The kids were having a blast as they sang and rapped a powerful message: ‘We want to have fun, eight communities as one ... Let’s be proud of where we are, look after the land!’ ‘D-U-S-T-U-P, Dust Up vibes, finally, Ngaanyatjarra Lands are the place to be!’ — this catchy tune would ring heavily in my ears for the entirety of the trip. I was getting excited.

The next few days were a blur. Comfort level within our two-car convoy developed quickly. Cath, the powerhouse Director behind PPP, facilitated the exchange of life stories, adding in her own anecdotes of hilarity and pressing for all of ours. This was important stuff, our crew of five were about to live and work together, at times outside of our comfort zones, for the next two weeks. The driving was incredible. Dirt track, popped tires, wild camels, the Central Ranges, art centres, bush tucker, wildflowers, the entrancing sway of spinifex — a new experience and sight at every hundred k’s or so. Good chats meant the time slipped away; really good chats meant we drove 30 kilometres past our accommodation on one occasion. Heading into our destination, we pass the Giles Weather Station and I notice a hand painted

sign reading 'No Tourists, Turn Back'. A bit late in the piece, but my imposter syndrome kicks in and I question what place I have in being here.

Tanya and Callum, now on their second trip, remind me that PPP are a welcomed fixture of the event, and that the food we're about to cook is a highlight of Dust Up for the students, staff, and community members. Tanya says it's all about the moment, "We're here to contribute to some beautiful ticks in time." I love it. I breathe through my neuroses, all moisture in my nose now completely dried up, and feel grateful for travelling with such a generous and capable crew.

Sitting in our new Warakurna backyard that night, engulfed in the ranges, I realise how quickly I've switched off and how fully present I've become to my surroundings. It may have something to do with my phone conking out, but I suspect it's mostly the magic of this place and an awareness that life out here has existed in a similar pace for tens of thousands of years. I get a sense that Uluru is not too far away. 350 kilometres to the east I later find out. Its closeness and similarity to our surroundings are a constant reminder that the nearby jurisdictional borders separating us from the NT and SA are of little significance to the Anangu in the NPY Lands.

The next morning, aprons are on and we're all in. Our base, the school kitchen, is in the centre of the Warakurna campus. It's a constant buzz of teachers, Anangu workers, police officers, service providers and students. I retreat to the coffee machine (my comfort zone) and take note that we'll be cooking for 350 people with four domestic ovens — holy, logistics! There is a series of heartfelt reunions between Tanya, Brit, Cath and several Warakurna students and staff. PPP's culinary camp, Djinda Ngardak, and their recent work at the World Indigenous Tourism Summit, has fostered special connections to kids in remote WA. It was very cool to see the young people light up in seeing their culinary mentors.

We divide and conquer (read: cook). The A-Team, made up of Tanya, Brit and Callum would visit four Ngaanyatjarra communities, running a series of polished cooking workshops and always taking on more than planned. It's impossible not to, the enthusiasm was contagious. The A-Team would cook a remarkable amount of food with each school, accessing the pantry of Food Bank donations and utilising the hands of every student and staff member. Cath and I would opt for a more chaotic approach; more is more was our game. Home-Economics lessons were conceived on the fly — it was a whirlwind of experiences at an unprecedented pace — barista training, morning teas, function preparation and a table serviced meal for the school community. The kids and their teachers were amazing. I loved every second. My favourite lesson was making omelette with the pre-primary kids. I heard there was a stash of mini chef hats around and I pleaded for them to be retrieved. We'd also need two tools not utilised in our city high schools: sturdy chairs to use as stools, so the kids could access the bench tops, and Anangu translators, so the kids had a chance at understanding us. What a day!

As the main event approached, the Dust Up buzz was palpable. Who was coming? What would the meals be? Which of teams would win the trophy? Spoiler alert. 16 Sydney hip hop dancers would arrive to teach dance, produce a hip-hop music video, curate a fashion show. Clown Doctors, including a former Play School actress, would be there to entertain and make us laugh. Tennis pros, jumping castles, cart races, fierce basketball games, and a firework display to rival Perth's Australia Day celebrations filled the three-day event. I feel confident

that the tonne of food prepared by PPP and their volunteers was a memorable highlight for the kids too. The team made up of Warakurna, Wanarn and Kiwirrkurra took home the trophy.

On the eve of Dust Up it finally occurred to me what we were there to do — power these kids up for Dust Up! A week of cooking and eating together, sharing stories, culture, and bush tucker. It was also our hope that we supported our DoE colleagues, lending a hand as they prepared for their highly anticipated three day, 24-7, interschool sports carnival. Though calling it a Sports Carnival doesn't quite do it justice.

Ultimately, I was there to sign off on ten days of professional development towards my industry currency as a VET teacher. In terms of PD, I'm not sure it could get any better — cooking *with* talented chefs *for* incredible people! Warakurna opened their community to us and everything about that was a privilege. I was reminded of how valuable hospitality is and what an epic skillset we possess. Universally, connection happens in kitchens and around tables full of empty plates and full bellies. On our last morning, we cleaned the kitchen one last time, caught the last of the relay races, and drove out feeling the best kind of exhaustion.

The most valuable aspect of my PD was meeting Aunt Daisy. An Elder, community leader, education assistant, activist, and all-round character. We spoke of land rights, the Voice, and how she had accurately painted country she'd not yet travelled to. A self-proclaimed Bush Woman and wildly talented artist, she taught us her belief that everyone is a teacher. How lucky I was, for a precious moment in time, to be student of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands?

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