

Camp hope turns lost kids around

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Hard work, a bush environment and some old-fashioned discipline are saving wayward teenage lives, writes Lindsay Murdoch.

IT'S officially called a facility for troubled youths, among them Australia's worst teenage offenders. But there are no high walls or armed guards here, just a vast threatening tropical wilderness infested with snakes and crocodiles.

"They usually arrive kicking and screaming," says Allan Brahminy, whose youth camps in the Northern Territory are prompting a rethink about the way juvenile offenders are handled. "By the time it comes to leave, they are usually crying because they want to stay," he says.

Dean, 19, says he would have been dead before turning 21 if he had not been given the chance to build his future in the Territory away from a life of drugs, paint-sniffing, alcohol and crime in Melbourne. Some of his case workers, police and judges had given up hope he could be rehabilitated.

"I was out of control from the age of 10 when they started putting me in the foster homes," Dean says. "Stealing cars, breaking and entering, sniffing drugs, alcohol ... I'd go on benders for days.

"I'd break into a house, cook myself a meal and leave the dishes ... I didn't care about anybody including myself."

Dean twice almost died from sniffing paint.

But in the months before Dean's 17th birthday, when he faced jail if he violated parole, Mr Brahminy convinced Victorian authorities to give him one last chance, even though he was seen as high risk.

"Until then nobody had been prepared to give me the benefit of the doubt," Dean says.

"I got here. There was nothing ... no fences, just a room to sleep. I got to work digging fencepost holes and feeding animals.

"I snapped out of it. I came good. I realised that to get something from people, you have to give a bit ... that life is a two-way street."

Now Dean, who prefers the nickname Bones, earns good money mustering cattle on Territory stations and has not taken drugs or offended for two years.

"I enjoy a rum or two around the campfire at the end of a hard day's work," he says.

"But that's it ... I've got idiot mates down south who are hung up on drugs. I'm not going back to that."

Dean sometimes returns to Brahminy Youth camps, which have been established at

undisclosed locations, to speak to the troubled teenagers.

"I often look at them boasting about crimes they've committed and think that I was far worse than them 12 months ago," he says.

Mr Brahminy's camps, where staff are not afraid of old-fashioned discipline, have been sent 98 teenagers in 26 months, 65 of them from Victoria but others from NSW, South Australia and, recently, the Northern Territory.

More than 90 per cent of those who spent three months or more at one of the camps have not reoffended, an incredible success rate.

Mr Brahminy, who grew up in an Aboriginal family in the Territory after his parents abandoned him, says the camps aim to take troubled teenagers out of their comfort zones and engage them.

They don't know where they are, having usually arrived at the camp after a one-, two- or three-day hike through the wilderness.

"The youths arrive at a spectacular location and start a natural detox ... the first 10 days or so can be pretty tough," Mr Brahminy says.

"Often they won't eat or drink, they smash things and assault staff. I have been stabbed twice, had my teeth knocked out and shot once.

"But we set strong moral boundaries. We don't get involved in violence, unless it is to restrain someone who is out of control, but they do not get away with abusing other people."

Mr Brahminy says that once the teenagers get through the anger period, "they start to feel safe".

"They need people around them who are strong." When the youths are screaming abuse "there's usually trauma there".

"When the confrontation stops, we go fishing or ride horses and talk about how they got to that point."

Dean once saw Mr Brahminy as an authority figure, a "bastard" who used to lay down the law. He now sees him as a mate.

"No one thought Bones would make it but all he needed was faith in himself," Mr Brahminy says.

Mr Brahminy and his wife Natasha have spent \$1.6 million building the main camp, south of Darwin. They also have makeshift camps in Arnhem Land and on the Cobourgh Peninsula.

The main camp has an administration building, schoolroom, animal hospital and science laboratory. The place teems with wallabies and other wildlife.

Usually, only Mr Brahminy's staff are paid by the authorities that send the teenagers, both male and female, whose average age is about 15.

The Northern Territory Government, struggling to deal with the highest rate of homeless youths in the country, is sending 15 teenagers to the camps, some of them Aborigines.

Government officials in Darwin see the Brahminy camps as a model for reforming wayward Aboriginal teenagers in the future. The camp has had the support of the Salvation Army and several other non-government organisations.

Mr Brahminy is building an eight-metre boat which will take the teenagers fishing and on excursions to clean up the coast.

Working with park rangers, they will also help save threatened dugongs and turtles.

"The kids have an incredible time ... it's a great learning experience," Mr Brahminy says. "We keep them active and engaged 24 hours a day. Our motto is anything is possible."