

New life beckons for a troubled youth

Lindsay Murdoch in Darwin

March 30, 2009



Change has come ... 17-year-old Abel Banjo rides with Allan Brahminy down a bush track at the Brahminy Group property in the Northern Territory. *Photo: Shannon Joyce*

AUTHORITIES had lost hope that Abel Banjo, 17, would end his life of crime.

Less than four months ago

he was locked up in a detention centre for juveniles, unwanted in the Aboriginal community where he had grown up and become an arbitrary thief and troublemaker.

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But a youth worker, Allan Brahminy, was prepared to give Mr Banjo a chance. He persuaded a Darwin magistrate to allow the youth to spend time at his camp for troubled youths in a vast tropical wilderness in the Northern Territory outback.

Mr Banjo was at first unrepentant, stealing a dollar and vandalising a vehicle. But, Mr Brahminy says, he soon settled in a familiar bush environment, started to respect himself and the people around him, and became a model member of what is officially the Brahminy Youth facility.

Mr Banjo will return to Daly River and become a mentor and interpreter for troubled youths. "I want this chance ... I can do something with my life," he says.

He was one of five Northern Territory Aboriginal youths sent last year to the Brahminy camps, widely seen as a model for reforming wayward youths. But Mr Brahminy says he is disappointed Northern Territory authorities have not sent more youths, as they had promised.

After a report on the camps in the *Herald* last April, Mr Brahminy said, parents with rebelling children from around Australia inundated him with requests to take them.

"We've had single mothers ringing up threatening to commit suicide, they were in such a predicament. But we couldn't accept any more because we were holding beds for youths for the territory.

"They didn't arrive ... I think because some bureaucrats in the territory appear incapable of thinking outside the square ... our type of operation is not in any book, so they can't comprehend it."

Staff at Mr Brahminy's camps are not afraid of old-fashioned discipline.

Last weekend youths in one camp were looking forward to a trip on Mr Brahminy's new eight-metre boat. It was called off due to the behaviour of one youth.

Mr Brahminy has taken 138 youths since he opened the camps almost three years ago.

Only six of them have been from the territory, where the Government is struggling to deal with the highest rate of homeless youths in the country. The average age of the youths sent to the camps is 15, and they usually stay for three to four months.

More than 90 per cent of those who stay for three months or more have not reoffended.

Mr Brahminy says he is so confident that Mr Banjo will not return to his life of crime that he is backing him in his role as mentor to other youths at Daly River.

"Abel knows that if he goes back to his old ways, there's nothing left for him but an adult jail ... he knows there's only one person who can make good his last chance, and that is him."