

## With help, nation's troubled teens finding new futures in woop woop



Youth worker Allan Brahminy (foreground) and former resident Dean, now 19, at Mr Brahminy's camp for troubled youths south of Darwin.  
Photo: *Glenn Campbell*

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April 12, 2008

IT'S a centre for troubled youths, some of them Australia's worst teenage offenders.

But there are no high walls or armed guards at this camp south of Darwin, surrounded by a vast tropical wilderness infested with snakes and crocodiles.

Youth worker Allan Brahminy says young people usually arrive at one of his three Northern Territory camps kicking and screaming.

"By the time it comes to leave they are usually crying because they want to stay," says Mr Brahminy, whose camps are prompting a rethink about the way juvenile offenders are treated.

Dean, 19, believes he would have been dead before he reached 21 had he not been sent to one of the camps — so far removed from his life of drugs, paint sniffing, alcohol and crime in Melbourne, where case workers, police and judges had given up on him.

"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 didn't care about anybody, including myself."

Dean twice almost died from sniffing paint. But in the months before his 17th birthday, and facing jail if he violated parole, Mr Brahminy convinced Victorian authorities to give Dean one last chance. "I got here. There was nothing — no fences, just a room to sleep," Dean says. "I got to work digging fence post 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."

Dean, who goes by the name Bones, now 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."

Mr Brahminy and his wife Natasha have spent \$1.6 million of their money establishing the main camp south of Darwin over two years. Dean sometimes returns to the camps to speak to 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 says 98 teenagers, up to 15 at a time, have stayed at his camps in the past 26 months: 65 from Victoria and the rest from NSW, South Australia and, recently, the Northern Territory. The NT Government, struggling to deal with the highest rate of youth homelessness in the country, is sending 15 teenagers to the camps, some of them Aborigines.

Of those who stayed for more than three months, more than 90% have not reoffended, he says. Mr Brahminy was born into a stockman's camp, and abandoned shortly after birth. His parents left him in the care of Aborigines, but took his twin.

He has worked around the country as a youth worker, often with Aborigines. He says he usually takes the teenagers on a wilderness hike for two or three days before they arrive at one of his camps. They don't have a clue where they are.

Mr Brahminy will not reveal the exact locations of the camps; only that there's the main camp south of Darwin and makeshift camps in Arnhem Land and on the Cobourg Peninsula.

"The youths arrive at a spectacular location and start a natural detox — the first 10 days or so can be pretty tough," he 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 they start to feel safe. "When the confrontation stops we go fishing or ride horses and talk about how they got to that point," he says.

Mr Brahminy says Dean initially saw him as an authority figure, a "bastard". Now they are mates. All Dean needed, Mr Brahminy says, was faith in himself.

The main camp has an administration building, school room, animal hospital and science laboratory. Most of the teenagers, whose average age is 15, are sent to the camps under orders from juvenile justice agencies or courts as a last resort. Funding from such agencies covers staff wages.

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

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