

# The Reality of Youth in Isolation

Jane Danzi

**W**eipa is a small mining town with a population of 3,000, located on the west coast of far North Queensland. The mining of bauxite and kaolin by Comalco Mineral Products provide the reason for Weipa's existence.

Frequently described as a 'closed town', Weipa has no local government authority. All housing is supplied by Comalco and most of the working population is employed by the company. Those not employed by Comalco are mostly government employees or service personnel. Now twenty-six years old, Weipa is facing a possible change from company control to local government management, a move referred to as 'normalisation', and one which has evoked mixed feelings.

Weipa is very isolated and residents cannot just drive to the nearest town to socialise or to escape pressures. Although accessible by air, sea and road, the access is not without its toll financially and in terms of time. A return plane ticket from Weipa to Cairns costs \$418 with only one flight per day. By sea, a berth costs \$200 for a two day trip to Karumba on a cargo barge departing weekly. Alternatively, a drive of 650 kilometres on a dirt road can be undertaken before reaching the bitumen section of the 874 kilometre trip to Cairns. This road is impassable during the wet season.

Many people feel trapped. Although Weipa is a very social place, the same people are encountered in all spheres of life. Some people avoid close relationships because of the realistic fear that their friends will move away. Privacy is difficult in Weipa and gossip and rumours are commonplace. Most people pick up the phone and dial long distance when feeling lonely.

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There are three main reasons why people move to Weipa: to make money and progress in their profession; to escape a problem; or because they enjoy the life of mining towns. Many people love the lifestyle, but others find the isolation and the weather difficult and become depressed. There is a problem in retaining school-teachers because of the isolation and climate. Weipa can be a very hard town in which to live, especially for women trapped at home all day, and an alarming number of marital breakdowns occur.

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Weipa is minimally serviced by established facilities and also fly-in services. However, most of the town's residents feel that there are insufficient facilities to meet their needs. The hospital is not equipped to cater for births, requiring all expectant mothers to fly out of town one month before the baby is due. The problems continue on their return because of the lack of extended family support. Although Family Day Care operates successfully, Comalco has resisted approaches to establish a child-minding centre for its employees.

From May to July 1991, Comalco retrenched 130 workers from their Weipa operations. This resulted in most of these workers leaving town with their families, causing serious problems for the families with nowhere to go, and having major repercussions in the town.

## Youth: The Forgotten Resource

Young people in Weipa experience a number of problems. One is a loss of friendships which occurs each year as some parents choose to send their

children away to boarding school, often to avoid the peer pressure that exists in the town. Some parents feel that it is not in their daughters' best interests to remain in the town because of the high percentage of sexually active teenagers. Some of these young people however, return from boarding schools, unable to cope with the stress of being separated from their families and protective environment.

The 'normalisation' process is having its impact on youth as it is affecting the security of the young people's futures. In the past, Comalco guaranteed children of local residents an apprenticeship, the number now being offered has declined dramatically. It is virtually impossible to live in Weipa and be unemployed. Housing is only supplied with the job and there are no privately-owned properties for rental.

The problems experienced by the young people were compounded in April 1991, when, at a get-together of teenagers at a local recreation spot, there was a fatal motor-bike accident. Members of the youth group watched their friend die, despite their attempts to revive him. This trauma has been prolonged for his friends by having to give evidence in court. It was also the third sudden death of a friend to be experienced by this particular group of teenagers in a three year period. The grieving process following the accident was exacerbated by the retrenchments only one week later, which meant many of their peers would have to leave town.

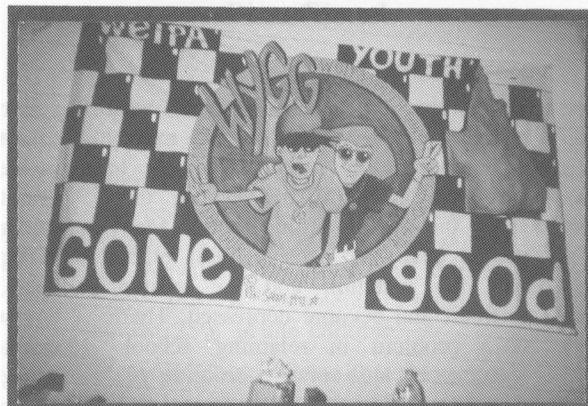
Like most mining towns, Weipa is a male dominated community. The unbalanced ratio of available males to available females results in a very competitive social life amongst the men. Single men frequently turn to younger teenage girls and the married women. At the age of 14, many young women find it flattering to have an older man lavish affection and presents upon them.

These young people have been referred to as 'the forgotten children'. In their eyes, the future looks very bleak. As a reaction to this, they tend to live life to the fullest, experimenting with drugs, alcohol and sex from a very early age. The teenagers tend to close ranks to create privacy for themselves as they are a highly visible group in this small community. By coming together as a group they create a protective environment for each other, and a code of silence is guaranteed and kept by all. This strong peer group pressure is seen as a result of non-existent extended family support, and also as a survival factor in coping with isolation and inadequate facilities, over which the young people have no control. Community attitudes have been generally negative towards the youth of Weipa, particularly in the light of increases in vandalism and other disturbing behaviour.

### Weipa Youth Gone Good

To try to create a more positive public image of the young people, a youth group named 'Weipa Youth Gone Good' was established by teenagers and parents in January 1991. The name was chosen in contrast to that of a song, 'Youth Gone Wild'. In choosing the name, the members wanted to make a statement about themselves and to let people know that they had a

positive future and were positive people. Basically they decided that they would change their anti-social ways and 'go good'.



Weipa Youth Gone Good has an adult committee, but each adult committee member is shadowed by a teenage committee member. The members of the teenage committee assist their adult counterparts in completing tasks, and provide opinions on all issues.

There are two groups of children in Weipa, those who follow and join in and those who will not conform. Weipa Youth Gone Good is made up of the former, who hope to change their lifestyles and create a more positive public image. The youth group usually meets once a week on a Friday and either runs a planned activity or holds a drop-in session. Smoking is tolerated, but not alcohol or drugs. The members police each other, and so far the group

has been extremely successful. A sense of intense comradeship amongst members is evident.

Observing these teenagers during social activities, one can sense the growth and change in them. The older ones are able to see the younger participants making the same mistakes they themselves made only twelve months before. They are willing to stand back, allowing others to make mistakes without being judgemental, while waiting in the wings to be supportive when the need arises. A change in the community's attitude towards them is occurring gradually.

### Not all is grim in Weipa

Weipa is a somewhat contradictory place for despite its problems and the isolation, many residents find a sense of freedom and a quiet life. At most times, children are safe and able to wander the streets unharmed. Although families find this an ideal setting for young children, major decisions need to be made once they reach teenage years.

The population of the town is swelled each year by the 5,000 tourists who visit Weipa to taste the tropical lifestyle. They would no doubt join with the locals in proclaiming that Weipa is "a town like no other". ♦

## REDUCING ISOLATION: AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF RURAL AND REMOTE HUMAN SERVICES PRACTITIONERS

Most rural welfare practitioners suffer a sense of isolation and the more remote the community, the more severe the isolation. Associated with problems of distance is a lack of opportunity to share practice wisdom. Throughout rural and remote areas of Australia, social and community workers are adopting innovative and creative approaches, but until recently, forums in which to discuss their work have been limited.

To address these problems, the Australian Association of Rural and Remote Human Service Practitioners was formally established in Kalgoorlie at the second Rural/Remote Areas conference held in July, 1991. This had been the second successful occasion for bringing together isolated practitioners, the first being Cooper Pedy in December, 1989.

The Association has representatives from each state. One of the first tasks of the new organisation will be to plan the next conference to be held in Broken Hill in 1993. Association members are also able to keep in touch through the Rural/Remote Area Newsletter, distributed at regular intervals.

Enquiries about the Association should be made to Jim Laffer, Department for Community Services, 189 Royal Street, East Perth; telephone (09) 222 2833. Newsletter subscriptions (\$5.00 per annum) and information can be obtained from Peter Munn, School of Social Studies, University of South Australia, Nicolson Avenue, Whyalla Norrie, South Australia, 5608; telephone (086) 45 7744. Contributions to the newsletter are invited.