

JUST BECAUSE



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Students take first steps towards cultural change

IT IS always heartening to come across a balanced, well-reasoned piece of writing addressing an issue around which much emotion has been generated. I came across such a piece recently, and it gave me a great boost of hope and confidence. It is even more stirring, because it comes from some young women, and is the result of their reflection on a powerful experience which they shared during the last school holidays.

I'll let them tell you their story, and the concerns it raises for them, as expressed in a letter they have written to send with signed post-cards from a campaign they have mounted.

Dear Mr Rudd,

We are year 12 students of St Ursula's College, Toowoomba, and recently returned from a Mission Immersion on the Tiwi Islands, north of Darwin. While on the islands, we spent a week in the communities of Nguuu, Milikapiti and Pirlingimpi discovering a vibrant culture and meeting extraordinary people.

While on the Tiwi Islands we visited the Women's Safe House, which was part of the government's intervention scheme.

The women told us the positive impact that the safe house was having on their community.

They feel it is beneficial to the security of Tiwi women as they have a safe place to go to in troubling times.

In an attempt to understand these people and their way of life we asked



St Ursula's College student Moira Nolan makes friends on the Tiwi Islands. PICTURE: SUPPLIED

if there was anything they felt had a negative impact on the community due to the intervention.

Their answer was the basics card.

The women told us that they felt this card was discriminatory.

We learnt that the basics card separates their social security payments into two accounts.

The first account they do not get to touch as it pays for their living expenses, the second account is put onto the basics card, which is only accepted at certain outlets, for basic food and clothing.

However, it is accepted at very few outlets outside of their own communities.

This card also prevents them from accessing money to bring their children home from boarding school in the event of a family emergency.

The women that we spoke to at the safe house in Nguuu told us they feel as if they are treated like children.

They feel as if all responsibility has been stripped from them, just because they are Indigenous.

We were angered to find that this was introduced by lifting the anti-discrimination legislation which was re-introduced once the basics card was up and running.

We felt ashamed and embarrassed that our government would restrict the rights of our fellow Australians.

Despite the apology to the Stolen Generation, as the future of this country, we fear that the Aboriginal people are treated as second-class citizens.

This experience had such a dramatic impact on our lives and we feel it is our duty to make a change.

Listening to their stories is something that will remain with us forever, as it changed our perception of the Indigenous culture and our oneness with them.

Throughout our trip we discovered a people who had very little but a genuine love of life, a great sense of community and were accepting of everyone.

This experience changed our lives and we want to now help change lives for the better.

We do not want to target you personally but we feel that we are powerless in this issue, we are limited to spreading the word about this

injustice and although we can empower the people we cannot change the laws.

We have been raising awareness of this prejudice in our community and hopefully we can persuade you to review the basics card.

We understand that this card was introduced with a genuine concern for the Aboriginal people.

However, targeting the Indigenous people of the Northern Territory specifically is a gross oversight.

Realising the basics card was introduced to limit the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse amongst Indigenous Australians, we accept the intent of the program.

Nevertheless, we believe that instead of targeting the entire community, people should be individually assessed for this program.

We thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Micaela Cash and Moira Nolan

We have cause for hope for a future in which national reconciliation becomes a more tangible reality, because of people like Micaela and Moira, and the many other, generous, open-hearted and intelligent young people just like them, who are prepared to take the risk to immerse themselves in a different reality, and allow it to provoke genuine questions in their hearts.

That is the first step to change.

For more information, or to obtain post-cards go to www.tsjc.org