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# Back to bush: the cultural program helping Indigenous youth regain identity

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**By teaching young people practical skills and a connection to country, this Indigenous-led initiative is giving youths a sense of purpose and self-worth.** Mona Aboriginal Corporation's cultural horsemanship program is a healing program for Mt Isa's Indigenous youth. (AIA Wayne Quilliam)Source: AIA Wayne Quilliam

By Laura Morelli

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"No identity: that's the problem for Aboriginal kids," says the horse-loving Queenslander, Patrick Cooke. "But what we're doing is empowering the youth of today and tomorrow by bringing them back to bush."

That's Cooke's mission. To teach, inspire and guide youth who feel disconnected from their culture. Together with his brothers Rex Ahone, David and his wife Angela Sammon, the Indigenous family unit created Mona Aboriginal Corporation's cultural horsemanship program in response to a lack of culturally appropriate healing initiatives in Queensland's Mt Isa.



Their program teaches young people skills such as mechanical training, meal preparation, fencing and yard building, and also offers Indigenous elements of cultural education, hunting, tracking and gathering.



Program founder, Angela Sammon says their focus is on restoring pride to Indigenous youth with spiritual guidance from Elders and support from mentors.

"We just saw such a huge problem with Aboriginal boys stuck in crime and feeling lost... we know what they need because we all share the same culture; we live by black rules not white rules," Sammon says.

Cooke recalls growing up in a harsh environment: his foster father was abusive and as a youth he got into drugs and ran wild. "I could have ended up in jail, but I turned myself around," Cooke explains.

This is why he believes the Mona program can teach young men to be stronger, physically and mentally.

"People aren't perfect, they will fall and also fail, but they have a support system here to back them."



An Indigenous elder involved in the program, Nana Joan says there's nothing for the kids in Mt Isa. She fears they will turn into zombies.

"All my stuff was learnt under a tree, we had a bush uni, not a school. Being out bush takes you back to where your ancestors roam, where you belong, where people were before you," Joan says.

"Nothing is better than back on country, because you're part of that. You can take an Aboriginal from the land but you can't take the land from the Aboriginal."





Nana Joan says children need this program to know who they are. She says once they're out in the space they belong, where their ancestors once were - there will be a change.

"In the last few months I counted 30 kids that hung themselves. That's not us. That's not our culture. Our culture is we care and we share. We don't have money to invest in... we have people and our families to invest in. But we don't have that anymore."

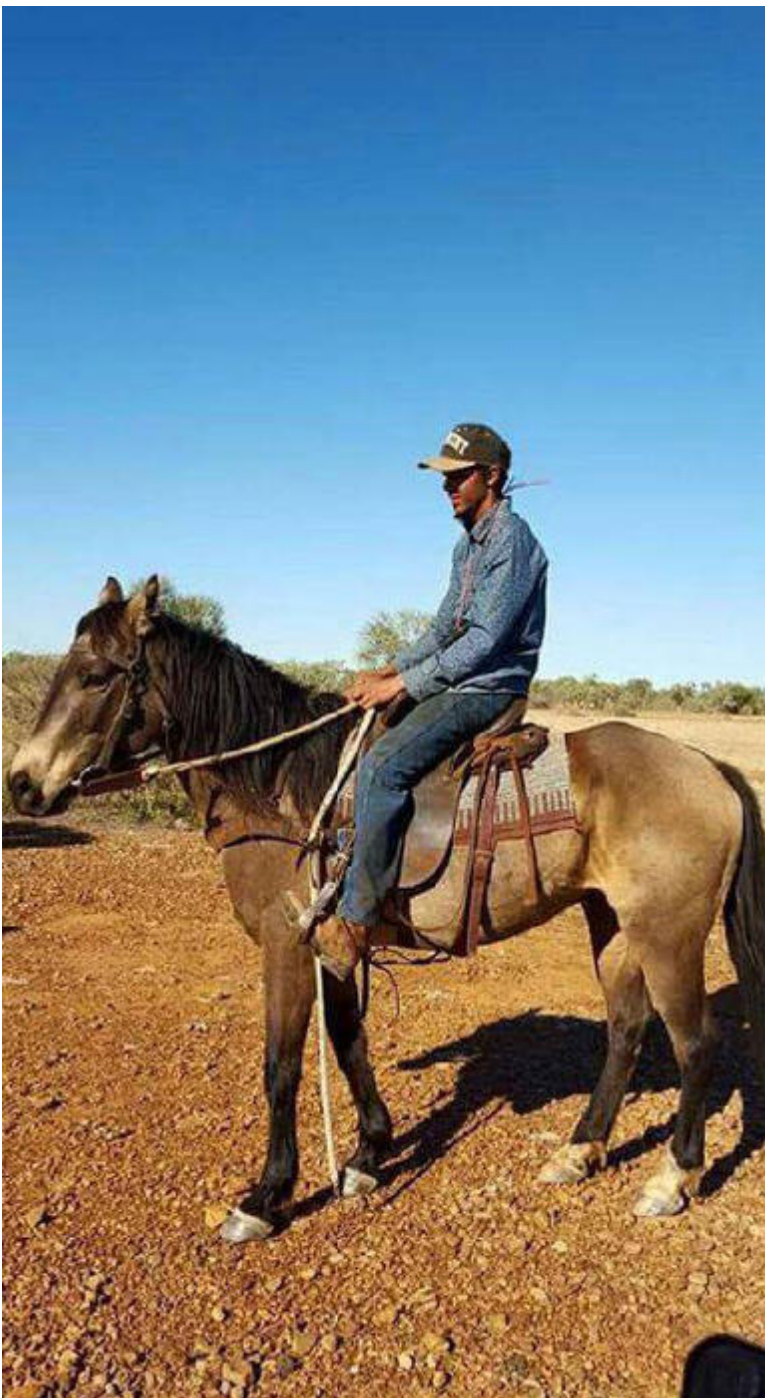
The importance for young men especially is to be able to talk yarns with other men, uncles they trust and look up to, basically just get stuff off their chest.

### **The people that make up the program**

#### **Meet Gordon**

For 18-year-old Gordon, this program has taught him that if you're not good at school, you can still be good at something else.

"Boys need to know there's other options," says Gordon. "There's groups of fellas here getting into trouble and I think they need to get out and go bush for a week to open their eyes."



### **Meet Herbert**

Looking back, Herbert could have landed himself in jail like some of his peers, but the 19-year-old says this program put him back on track to a better future.

"Things started getting bad when I was 15; boys were drinking, skipping school and stealing... I knew I needed to leave or I'd be next to them in jail. My parents dragged me to the program for cultural awareness and to escape the city."

"It teaches young fellas about bush, it keeps them out of trouble and gets them work ready for the future," he says.





### **Meet Jodi**

Mt Isa local, Jodi, says the Mona program started in result of the death of a number of younger males from the area. Several had committed suicide at a young age and Jodi believes this can be prevented through Indigenous-led initiatives like this.

"We need programs to take them out bush and get sh\*t off their mind. You need to grow when you're young, learn how to be in life... Need to be able to manage relationships and how to put tools in right places," she says.

"The importance for young men especially is to be able to talk yarns with other men, uncles they trust and look up to, basically just get stuff off their chest."



Jodi, a former prevention intervention worker says the big issue is when there's no cultural understanding of their roots, that's when youth feel isolated and depressed.

"We're losing all these older people who can pass their knowledge about hunting, gathering and they haven't taught everyone what they need to."



"These kids need to learn because it's going to be gone in the next generation. There are no books that teach you about Aboriginal history. There's nothing they can learn later unless they learn now."

### Meet the Mayor

Mt Isa's Mayor Joyce McCulloch says programs like this engage youth and guide them towards reaching their full potential.

"When you offer a program which teaches kids valuable skills within a nurturing environment, it can make all the difference in giving someone a purpose and a sense of self-worth."

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**First Contact** [ <http://www.sbs.com.au/programs/first-contact> ] (season 2) airs on 29 November, 30 November and 1 December 2016 at 8:30pm on SBS. Across 28 Days, six well-known Aussies take an epic journey into Aboriginal Australia. Watch the trailer [here](http://www.sbs.com.au/programs/first-contact) [ <http://www.sbs.com.au/programs/first-contact> ], and catch-up on episodes after the program airs via SBS On Demand [here](http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/) [ <http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/> ] .



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Jamie's Ministry of Food rolls into Indigenous Australia

Jamie's Ministry of Food mobile kitchen will deliver its unique brand of food education in Queensland's Mossman Gorge this June, marking the van's second ever visit to an Indigenous community in Australia.

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