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Balgo Hills Settlement, Kimberley Desert, WA



Balgo Hills (Wirrimanu), is a remote Aboriginal community located in the Southeast Kimberley region of Western Australia, eleven hours by road from Alice Springs. The summers are very hot, often reaching forty-five degrees, and the winters cool right down to an icy five degrees. The population total is 490 people, and traditional Aboriginal Art is the major source of employment, besides working as a Teacher's Aide at the local school.

The De La Salle Brothers, a Catholic religious order of men whose core mission is to provide a human and Christian education to young people, especially the poor and the marginalized, were asked to work in Balgo Hills because there were difficulties finding willing administrators and teachers for the school.

In Balgo Hills, education is vital in giving local youths' employment opportunities and lifestyle options. Here, the Brothers are highly valued members of the community providing hope and guidance to young people. Most of the children are of non-English speaking backgrounds with limited educational opportunities. The Brothers oversee the integration of traditional indigenous values and customs with the education required to survive in the 21st century.

In many remote communities such as Balgo Hills in outback Australia, the quality of life for Aboriginal people is limited by their access to education, health, employment and recreation services.

Since 1983, the Brothers have been working to improve the quality of education serving as Principals or teachers at the local school Luurnpa Catholic, the Adult Education Centre or the Language Centre.

There are currently four brothers along with a dozen teachers who run the school which educates 100 students from pre-school to Year 10. The school is regularly chosen by government authorities to pilot innovations in indigenous education such as the National Acceleration Literacy Program.

Aboriginal communities often face instability in so many areas of their lives because of changing Government policies. The Brothers provide stability in teaching staff and education, and a stable curriculum that goes beyond the short term.

There are numerous challenges to education faced daily at Balgo Hills:

School attendance is an issue due to a variety of reasons. With a nomadic tradition, this often means that the population is transient. Family issues and attitudes towards education can also present obstacles to school attendance, often depending on whether the parents

want their children to come to school and if the children are interested in what they are learning.

Secondary School attendance rate is lower than Primary, as students tend to drop out after Year Eight. Over the years, the Brothers have improved attendance levels significantly, which is now at 67%.

Health care, particularly hearing loss, is a major problem for Aboriginal children, often caused by chronic infections and runny noses which affect their eardrums. The De La Salle Brothers have improved the acoustics in the classrooms, assisting greatly with concentration and comfort levels.

Nutrition can be lacking with many children coming to school having had no breakfast or very little to eat. The Brothers have offered practical assistance, providing breakfast and lunch to help sustain them throughout the school day. Children sometimes leave school directly after lunch and Brothers continue to work with their families to ensure that they return to their education for a full day.

Boredom is a major community problem. Being remotely situated, there is little to do in the community. To help eradicate this, the Brothers run activity programs for children and an Adult Education Program throughout the whole year. Volunteers come from metro areas to keep children occupied so that they don't resort to mischief in order to entertain themselves.

Obtaining the right staff who can work effectively with the Aboriginal Teacher's Aides, is also quite challenging. Although many wonderful volunteers come to assist, often they don't stay for an extended period. Teachers who come to work at the community need an induction program so they can understand and connect with Aboriginal culture. The Brothers have managed to secure a number of high quality teachers who have now stayed for a few years at a time.

A tremendous achievement and testament to the Brother's hard work is the team of Indigenous Teacher's Aides who have overcome adversity to become dedicated and highly reliable members of staff, who assist daily in developing a brighter future for the settlement.