Warakurna Artists from The Place That Calls You Home

*Jane Menzies is the Manager of Warakurna Artists. The remote community of Warakurna is situated on the Great Central Road in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands of Western Australia. It is about 330km from Uluru near the border with the Northern Territory.***What is special about the community of Warakurna?**

We're blessed to live here. It's a beautiful landscape. The community itself is nestled within the Rawlinson Ranges. The locals and the artists here call the ranges "Purli Yurliya". They say that when you're away from home, they cry for you to come back. There's a strong pulling power back to Warakurna. It can make you homesick, even when you are an outsider like me. Sometimes when I leave and I can't wait to come back.

Three Communities

Can you tell us a little bit about the group of communities in this area?

Warakurna Artists is lucky working with the community and artists of Warakurna as well as running a weekly painting programme at the Aged Care Centre in Wanarn. In July 2015 Warakurna merged with Kayili Artists, which is based out of the renowned artist community of Patjarr. So we're fortunate to have the opportunity to work with the artists from three different communities.

They have different stories as well as coming from different homelands. Warakurna Artists provides us with a base in Warakurna, that's where we run our administration. We run the weekly programme at Wanarn Aged Care and then an outreach programme to the Kayili Artists in Patjarr.

The artists of Patjarr are quite transient. There is a core set of artists who live and work there. We conduct an outreach programmme usually once a month, so that we can connect the artists to country and Tjukurrpa providing an outlet for them to paint while on country. *(Tjukurrpa refers to origins and powers embodied in country, places, objects, songs and stories.*)*

The Art Centre

What is the Art Centre like? How are the working conditions there?

We've got one here in Warakurna, it's a shed essentially. We've got air conditioning, we've got clean working areas, but it's pretty rustic. We have a main shed, which is where the artists paint. Then we've got an adjoining area out the back, which is where we do our canvas preparation and it's our stockroom to store artwork. We do a lot of the studio work of mixing paints, priming canvas, being on hand for the artists in the main shed area. We're actually hoping to obtain a grant this year to develop a new art centre, so fingers crossed we can get that over the line this year.

We need to really be moving with the times. I'd like to organise a working area where the younger artists can operate, to be more enfranchised in the Art Centre while having their own space. I'd also love to have different spaces for female artists, male artists and younger artists, as well as the communal area where people can gather. That way people feel like they've got space to do different activities. At the moment it's just one relatively small area servicing many different functions.

Do the communities of Warakurna and Kayili work separately or together?

I'd like to start bringing some of the Warakurna artists, just a couple, to work and do the occasional workshop as part of our outreach program. Patjarr does have some beautiful sites that are significant for many different reasons, and significant to different families in Warakurna and Patjarr. We have combined bush trips when the Patjarr artists and Warakurna artists all come together to share those places and be on country together. I think that's important and it forms part of how we move forward together.

How's the role of men and women in relation to the Art Centre? Do they do different types of work?

They have different stories that they paint, so there's different Tjukurrpa for women and different Tjukurrpa for men. Their artworks will vary because of that. The women in the Art Centre will paint women's stories and men will paint their stories.

Values

What are the main values and priorities of the Art Centre?

The main values and priorities of the people of the community within the Art Centre are to maintain the Art Centre for cultural longevity. They want to keep the practises and culture alive and strong. They also want to be able to provide an avenue or an outlet for educating the younger people as well through their stories and through their paintings. The Art Centre acts as an intermediary in that it provides artists with an opportunity to pass down important Tjukurrpa and culture. They want to pass down the legacy to future generations.

Cultural Knowledge Shared

How do the older artists to pass on their knowledge to the younger artists?

They do this through an ongoing process of bush trips on Country that involve young people. That is mostly how the transfer of information and knowledge occurs. Some of the money from the sale of art provides artists with the means to be taken back on Country with young people. That is the greatest opportunity for that transfer of knowledge to happen.

The Wanarn painting programme was developed with that priority in mind. It was designed to provide the older artists with an opportunity to share their culture and their knowledge through painting. Each week, at the Wanarn painting programme, there'll be families that might stop by and younger people that might stop by. We often take members from Warakurna who have family at Wanarn Aged Care to be with family so that can happen.

There have been barriers definitely, and I guess the way to get around those barriers is to provide a means by which people are able to get back on Country to share those really important stories.