

Jenissa Ryan: the violent death of an Australian aboriginal teenager

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In early April, front-page articles appeared in the Melbourne and Sydney press reporting the horrific death of aboriginal teenager Jenissa Ryan in the remote outback town of Alice Springs, in central Australia.

Jenissa was only 15-years-old. She had been allegedly assaulted and raped by several teenagers. While her death had taken place several months earlier, it went unreported beyond the immediate locality—like most other tragedies affecting indigenous people. It only became newsworthy because Jenissa turned out to be the great granddaughter of one of the most famous Australian aboriginal artists, Albert Namatjira (1902-1959).

Details are scarce, but it appears that Jenissa was discovered, severely beaten and unconscious, lying near the entrance to the Centralian Secondary Senior College (CSSC) at around 10.30 a.m. on Saturday January 29. She had allegedly been assaulted by two young people, aged 15 and 16, several hours earlier, and had attempted to make her way home to Hidden Valley—one of many impoverished indigenous town camps on the outskirts of Alice Springs.

Jenissa collapsed before she got home, and was found by three other indigenous teenagers. Instead of calling for help, they took advantage of her vulnerability, and sexually assaulted her. A CSSC employee found her in the morning. She was taken by ambulance to Alice Springs hospital, and later flown to the Adelaide Women and Children's Hospital in a critical condition. Not long after, the young girl died.

Five teenagers have since been arrested. Two, a male and a female, have been charged with aggravated assault and causing grievous bodily harm. Three others, aged 14, 15 and 16, have been charged with sexual assault. All five were due to appear for a committal hearing in mid-April.

The greatest tragedy of all is that Jenissa's life and death were entirely unremarkable. Her fate has been, and continues to be, the same as that of countless other

aboriginal youth, forced to exist in poverty and neglect in camps such as Hidden Valley, with no jobs, no dignity and no hope.

In a physical sense, the five youth directly involved may be responsible for Jenissa's death. But in reality, responsibility lies with successive state, federal and territory governments, who continue to treat the vast majority of Australia's aboriginal population with contempt.

Nearly 50 years ago, Jenissa's great grandfather died in Alice Springs. He was the first indigenous artist to receive national recognition for his European-style watercolors of Central Australia, and was awarded the Queen's Coronation Medal for his extraordinary achievements. Aged 57, Albert Namatjira was charged with supplying alcohol to his relatives—a charge he denied. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to six months jail, where he suffered severe depression. He was released after two months, but suffered a heart attack soon after and died in the Alice Springs hospital. His entire life was marked by discrimination and neglect.

In the five decades since, nothing fundamental has changed.

There are 19 town camps in the area surrounding Alice Springs, with an indigenous population that has doubled in the last three years. Alice Springs itself has grown to be the second largest city in the Northern Territory with a population of 28,000.

In addition to being a hub for around half a million tourists each year, the town services over 260 remote communities, where around 30 percent of the region's indigenous population lives. Conditions in these communities are routinely described as "fourth world". There are no decent jobs, apart from CDEP schemes, which are nothing but "work-for-the-dole" schemes. There are no health facilities, no youth facilities and no educational institutions, beyond poorly-funded and badly-

resourced primary schools. Not surprisingly substance abuse, including alcoholism and epidemic levels of petrol/gasoline sniffing, is rife, and it regularly disables and kills many young people.

As more and more services have been eliminated through government cuts, many families and youth in the remote settlements have drifted into Alice Springs' town camps seeking health care, jobs, sporting events and entertainment. In the past five years, the camps' population has increased from 973 to well over 3,000.

The majority of the 192 houses in the camps are overcrowded and in a state of ruin. They have no proper kitchens, washing facilities or toilets. Each dwelling usually houses from 12 to 20 residents at any one time, becoming an inevitable breeding ground for health and other social problems, including alcoholism, crime, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Overcrowding and poor housing have long been recognised as key contributors to the high rates of infectious—particularly intestinal and respiratory—diseases, which continue to be the leading cause of hospitalisation of indigenous infants under 5 years of age. The rates of acute rheumatic fever and other serious chronic illnesses among Australia's indigenous children are now the highest in the world.

Among older people, official statistics show that 82 percent of hospital admissions are alcohol related, with 25 percent of these due to violence within the indigenous community. In the 12 months to December, the number of assaults in the camps, including sexual assault, jumped from 205 cases to 316. In the past eight months, 11 people in the camps—the vast majority indigenous—have died in violent circumstances.

One third of the camp population is less than 16 years of age, and these young people are forced to grow up surrounded by a vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and violence that must deeply influence the way they relate to each other. What happened to Jenissa Ryan simply echoes the experiences many teenagers in the camps have come to regard as commonplace.

In an interview with the *Melbourne Age*, Jenissa Ryan's mother referred to the brutality of life in the camps. The families there, she said, had "become ashamed, women were being bashed and children being neglected, made homeless and physically and sexually abused."

"Half the women fear for their children, who have been physically abused or have witnessed violence in their homes. Some children are too frightened to go back to

their parents." Calling for urgent action by governments she said that community organisations needed to protect those families who sought to nurture skills in young people.

Such calls on the government, however, will fall on deaf ears, as they have for decades. Responding to Jenissa Ryan's death, federal Community Services Minister Joe Hockey cried a few crocodile tears, compared Alice Springs' town camps with the nightmarish conditions of the Soweto shantytowns in South Africa, and then palmed off all responsibility to the Northern Territory government.

Blair McFarland, a youth worker with the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service, told WSWs that conditions for indigenous teenagers in the town camps were "third world". "The town camps are seriously under-resourced," he said. "You have 20 people living per three-bedroom house, with a constant drift through of people from remote communities."

McFarland explained that there had been a program for youth, funded by the Commonwealth government, in one of the camps, but that was due to cease in June. "It is tragic for that town camp," he said, "because that program was able to break a cycle of substance abuse that had run for three, four, five generations. Without ongoing support, the community will revert back to the old problems, the way it was before."

He pointed out that this had happened before. "It is always the problem of no recurrent funding. This was a trial program and it ran for five years and it proved that it worked. But now it will be cut off..."

Asked about the five teenagers charged over Jenissa Ryan's death, McFarland observed: "They are in the same boat as Jenissa. They are all as disadvantaged as her. If they are involved in substance abuse, with health damage, they are looking at dying 20 years earlier than most people... If they are imprisoned, and they come out into the same environment they left, then nothing will have changed."



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