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NT stockmen's program turning young Indigenous lives around

A Tennant Creek organisation teaching Indigenous youth traditional stockmen's skills has been recognised for turning around the lives of its participants.

The Barkly Youth Services' *Equine Assisted Therapy* program targets at-risk Indigenous youth aged from 10 to 17 who are not attending school and who have had dealings with the juvenile justice system.

Barkly Youth Services is among five finalists in the Organisation category of the 2015 HESTA Community Sector Awards. The Awards recognise those in the community sector who have made an exceptional contribution to social justice in Australia by enhancing the wellbeing of disadvantaged individuals and communities.

Program leader, Stewart Willey, said the program aimed to get Indigenous youth facing a range of family, health and other difficulties into an equine environment as creating a connection with a horse promoted participants' own physical and emotional growth.

"The program began as a school holiday activity designed to prepare chronically disengaged young people to return to school," Mr Willey said.

"After working with the horses, all of the kids returned to school – some for the first time in three years. The experience also fostered leadership skills and gave participants a greater sense of responsibility."

"Now we run the initiative throughout the school year as a reward for staying on track and, so far, none of the participants has reoffended which is an achievement, considering that the Barkly Region's recidivism rate is usually up around 95 per cent."

The program, which started in June 2013, is run in partnership with local tour operator Gerry Kelly — a well-known local Indigenous elder — who encourages participants to care for country and reconnect to their culture.

"There's a rich tradition to uphold, given that Indigenous stockmen from the Barkly region were once famed for their prowess on horseback," Mr Willey said.

"In recent decades very few young people have followed a career path into the cattle industry but that's now changing. Some of our participants are planning to work in the cattle industry or get into farming, while others are training to become parks and wildlife rangers or work for Indigenous land councils."

Mr Willey said the first group of participants in the program had become role models for their peers and siblings.

"Little by little, through them, we hope to try and break the cycle of entrenched welfare dependency by restoring a sense of pride among these young Indigenous people."

The Organisation Award winner will receive a \$10,000 development grant, courtesy of proud Awards sponsor **ME**. There are two other categories — *Unsung Hero* and *Social Impact* and the winners of those Awards will each receive \$5,000 in a **ME EveryDay** Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant, also courtesy of **ME**.

Finalists will be flown to Sydney for the awards dinner on 25 June 2015, where the winners will be revealed.

The HESTA Community Sector Awards are presented in partnership with the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) as part of the ACOSS National Conference 2015 and have been sponsored by ME since they started in 2012.

Learn more about the awards at hestaawards.com.au

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