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From: Miriam-Rose Baumann

"The Future for Aboriginal People"

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EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT
- THE FUTURE FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

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Presented in her absence and on her behalf by David Shoobridge, Town Clerk, Nauiyu Nambiyu Community Government Council.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

THANK YOU FOR ALLOWING ME TO SPEAK TO YOU TODAY ON A SUBJECT CLOSE TO MY HEART; EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES. I AM CONVINCED THAT IN ANY ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY, EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION ARE AT THE HEART OF MOST OF THE PROBLEMS. SOLVE THESE AND YOU WILL HAVE WORKED A MINOR MIRACLE.

I AM JUST ONE OF A LONG LINE OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE CONSIDERED THESE MATTERS AND I KNOW THAT I AM POSSIBLY NO CLOSER TO ANY SOLUTION TO THE MYRIAD OF PROBLEMS THAT ABOUND IN ALL SMALL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES. YET THEY ARE PROBLEMS WHICH I SEE DAILY. I LIKEN THESE COMMUNITIES TO A FAST RUNNING TRAIN SPEARING DOWNHILL. THE MORE DIFFICULTIES THAT PRESENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE, THE MORE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE SEEK REFUGE IN MIND NUMBING SOLUTIONS SUCH AS GROG, GUNJA OR DENIAL OF PERSONAL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES. WHEN THE BRAKES ARE NOT APPLIED, THE FASTER THE TRAIN GOES. INEVITABLY THE CRASH WILL COME.

EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION ARE TWO OF THE MOST SOUGHT AFTER OBJECTIVES OF GOVERNMENTS EVER EAGER TO PUT BANDAIDS ON THE ABORIGINAL PROBLEMS. YET IN MANY CASES I BELIEVE THE SIMPLEST SOLUTION IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED. SOLUTIONS ARE OFTEN BASED ON CAUCASIAN CULTURE WHICH CAN BE EXTREMELY COMPLEX. TO BE SUCCESSFUL ANY SUCH SOLUTION IS INVARIABLY SEEN AS FAR REACHING AND ALL EMBRACING. BUT OFTEN THE SELF-DOUBTS, CAUTION AND RESERVE OF THE COUNTRY ABORIGINAL PERSON ARE NOT CONSIDERED.

IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES WERE PROVIDED FOR SOCIAL REASONS NOT ECONOMIC. I BELIEVE COMMUNITY LEADERS ARE TRYING TO MAKE THE BEST OF THEIR SITUATIONS AND WITH THE HELP OF GOVERNMENTS, ARE INTRODUCING TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES WHICH WERE NOT AVAILABLE A GENERATION AGO. TO THE CREDIT OF COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNMENTS THE LEVEL OF OPPORTUNITY HAS NEVER BEEN BETTER. THE AVAILABILITY OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IS AVAILABLE TO ALL CHILDREN REGARDLESS OF FAMILY ECONOMICS OR BACKGROUND. YET IF THIS IS SO, WHY ARE MANY COMMUNITIES NOW SLOWLY DROWNING IN POOLS OF DESPAIR, WELL-MEANT WELFARE SYSTEMS AND LOW PERSONAL SELF-REGARD? WHY IS THE LEVEL OF YOUTH SUICIDE APPARENTLY RISING?. THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION APPEARS TO BE DROPPING. WHY?

THE ANSWERS ARE COMPLEX AND RELATE TO LACK OF FAMILY SUPPORT, STUDENT SELF DISCIPLINE, UNSYMPATHETIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS, READY SUPPLY OF ALCOHOL AND DRUGS, AND INCREASING JEALOUSY BETWEEN THOSE WHO HAVE AND THOSE WHO HAVE NOT AND THE CURRENT WELFARE DEPENDENCY.

I BELIEVE AUTHORITIES NEED TO CLOSELY EXAMINE THE APPLICATION RATE OF THOSE ATTENDING SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS. IN THE FIRST YEARS AFTER PRIMARY, THE ENROLMENT OF YOUNG ABORIGINAL STUDENTS FROM REMOTE COMMUNITIES IS HIGH BUT THERE IS A SHARP DROP OF AS THEY START TO PROGRESS. THERE IS OFTEN LITTLE FAMILY SUPPORT, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE USED TO THE CLOSENESS OF THE COMMUNITY. I BELIEVE SCHOOL AUTHORITIES DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE FEARS THAT ABOUND IN CITY INSTITUTIONS FOR THE KID FROM THE BUSH WHEN, POSSIBLY FOR THE FIRST TIME, THEY HAVE A NEED FOR THE EXERCISE OF SELF DISCIPLINE.

THE STUDENT DREAMS OF HOME AND THE RELATIVELY LITTLE DISCIPLINE OF THE COMMUNITY. AS THE HOMESICKNESS AND DIFFICULTIES OF ATTAINING AN EDUCATION FAR FROM HOME INCREASE, SO DOES THE ATTRACTION OF THAT LIFE BACK HOME. DO NOTHING BUT WHAT THE HEART FEELS. TO A YOUNG PERSON WHO HAS OFTEN HAD VERY LITTLE FAMILY SUPPORT OR ENCOURAGEMENT, THERE IS SIMPLY NOTHING TO CHALLENGE THE IMMEDIATE DREAM OF A LIFE OF INDOLENCE BACK WITH THE MATES FAR FROM DEMANDING TEACHERS AND SCHOOL WORK.

THERE IS NOTHING EXCITING OR EVEN LOGICAL ABOUT SCHOOL LIFE OR STUDIES OR EVEN LIFE IN THE LARGER URBAN CENTRES COMPARED TO FISHING, HANGING AROUND WITH MATES OR THE GROWN UP WORLD OF GROG AND GUNJA. AND THEY CERTAINLY KNOW HOW TO GET BACK THERE! SOON THE COMMUNITY HEARS THE WAIL OF THE TEACHERS OR PRINCIPAL OF THE CITY SECONDARY SCHOOL ANNOUNCING THE EXPULSION FOR MISBEHAVIOUR OF THE ERSTWHILE STUDENT. THE PARENT OFTEN HAS LITTLE CHOICE. BACK COMES THE FORMER STUDENT TO A FUTURE OF WHAT?

WE ALL ACCEPT THAT EDUCATION IS THE CORNERSTONE TO OPPORTUNITY. WITHOUT IT WHAT DO THE YOUNG HAVE? A WORLD OF CDEP OR WELFARE THAT BECKONS WITH LITTLE HOPE. NO WONDER IT'S OFTEN ALL TOO HARD. IN AN ARTICLE PRINTED IN THE FEBRUARY 2000 EDITION OF "ATSIC NEWS", BOB COLLINS STATED, "THE DOMINANT ISSUE LINKED TO POOR AND DETERIORATING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IS POOR AND DETERIORATING ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL. THE PATTERN THAT HAS DEVELOPED ACROSS THE TERRITORY IS FOR SPORADIC ATTENDANCE UP TO YEAR 7 AT WHICH POINT STUDENTS DROP OUT OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM COMPLETELY." AS A COMMUNITY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AND COMMUNITY LEADER, I COULD NOT AGREE MORE.

I BELIEVE THE WELFARE SYSTEMS OF TODAY, WHILE WELL MEANING IN INTENT, ARE SOWING THE VERY ROOTS OF DESTRUCTION OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. WELFARE IS NOT JUST ABOUT HANDING OUT MONEY. WELFARE IS VIEWED BY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AS THE TOTAL ABROGATION OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN. THROUGH WELFARE ANY VESTIGE OF CULTURE IS SLOWLY BEING ERODED. WELFARE MEANS SOME ELSE TAKES RESPONSIBILITY. THE SCHOOLS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR EDUCATION NOT THE PARENTS. THE COMMUNITY CLINIC IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HEALTH MATTERS, NOT THE INDIVIDUAL. THE COMMUNITY STORE WILL ENSURE THEY DO NOT STARVE AND COUNCILS WILL ENSURE THERE IS ALWAYS HOUSING. IF A SMALL CHILD DIES THROUGH POOR DIET, IT IS NOT THE FAULT OF THE MOTHER WHO LARGELY FED HER COKE AND ICE-CREAM, BUT THE CLINIC.

WHILE WE MAY FIND THESE EXAMPLES HARD TO ACCEPT, THEY ARE FOUND THROUGHOUT ALL COMMUNITIES, EVEN THOSE OF A LARGER URBAN NATURE. WELFARE TAKES AWAY THE RESPONSIBILITY FROM THE PEOPLE. GOVERNMENTS, COMMUNITY AUTHORITIES AND WELFARE ORGANISATIONS WILL ALWAYS ENSURE FOOD AND SHELTER. THERE IS NO ROOM FOR INDIVIDUAL THOUGHT AND OFTEN FAMILY VALUES CRUMBLE. THE FAMILY HAS LOST ITS POWER AND LIFE PLAN.

OTHER PROBLEMS PERTAIN TO RACE AND CULTURE. IF A PERSON TRIES HARD TO ACHIEVE ANY SUCCESS AND ATTAINS A MEASURE OF SECURE EMPLOYMENT THROUGH EDUCATION, BEGINS TO AMASS SOME ITEMS AS ARE COMMON IN THE MAINSTREAM POPULATION SUCH AS A CAR, BOAT ETC., HE OR SHE WILL BE RIDICULED BY THEIR ABORIGINAL PEERS AS A "WHITE FELLA" UNTIL THEY ACCEPT THAT IT IS EASIER TO "GO WITH THE FLOW". THEY WILL BE REMINDED CONSTANTLY THEY HAVE LOST THEIR CULTURE AND REVILED IN THE GENERAL COMMUNITY. THE TALL POPPY SYNDROME IS ALIVE AND WELL.

YET COMMUNITIES TODAY HAVE OPPORTUNITIES UNHEARD OF WHEN I WAS A YOUNG GIRL. MOST CAN SUPPLY TRAINEESHIPS IN ALL MANNER OF COURSES. FROM DRIVING HEAVY MACHINERY OR BUILDING MAINTENANCE TO MECHANICS, FROM GAINING SKILLS IN THE COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES THAT MANY AREAS HAVE, TO LEARNING IN THE COUNCIL OFFICE. THE OPPORTUNITIES IN ANY COMMUNITY FAR OUTWEIGH THOSE A YOUNG PERSON COULD POSSIBLY GET IN THE LARGER URBAN CENTRES WHERE HE OR SHE WOULD BE COMPETING WITH OTHERS ON A GREATER SCALE.

WHY DON'T MORE TAKE UP THESE OFFERINGS? PERHAPS A HOPELESSNESS SETS IN FROM A LACK OF SCHOOLING OR THE BREAKDOWN IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY VALUES. AS A RESULT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE CAN OFTEN BE IRREGULAR. AS A PRINCIPAL OF A COMMUNITY SCHOOL, ONE OF THE MORE DIFFICULT AND FRUSTRATING RESPONSIBILITIES IS TO GET CHILDREN TO EVEN ATTEND SCHOOL REGULARLY. MOST PARENTS UNDERSTAND BUT OFTEN SIMPLY DO NOT SEEM TO CARE OR FEEL IT IS SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITY. OFTEN THEY MAY NOT EVEN KNOW WHERE THEIR CHILDREN ARE. AS I SAID AT THE OUTSET, SOLVE THE EDUCATION PROBLEMS AND THE REST SHOULD FALL INTO PLACE.

TO FURTHER QUOTE BOB COLLINS, "WHAT ALL THIS MEANS AT THE END OF THE DAY IS THAT POOR LITERACY IS THE GREATEST SINGLE BARRIER TO THE EMPLOYMENT OF THOSE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT."

EDUCATION IS THE CORNERSTONE OF THE COMMUNITIES. THEIR VERY FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT. RESOLVE EDUCATION AND THE REMAINDER FOLLOW. HEALTH AND STANDARD OF LIVING GENERALLY WILL IMPROVE. LET ME QUOTE YOU SOME EXAMPLES. FOR MANY YEARS AT

NAUIYU, OUR MECHANIC HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN TRAINING YOUNG PEOPLE TO BECOME QUALIFIED MECHANICAL TRADESMEN. HE HAS HAD SOME LIMITED SUCCESS. HOWEVER, ANY TRAINING HE CAN OFFER IS DEPENDENT ON THE STANDARD OF LITERACY HIS APPRENTICE BRINGS TO THE JOB. IF HE DETAILS THE WORKINGS OF A STARTER MOTOR ONE AFTERNOON, IT MAY BE A FURTHER TWELVE MONTHS BEFORE THAT APPRENTICE HAS TO AGAIN CONSIDER A SIMILAR JOB. IF THE TRADESMAN IS NOT READILY AVAILABLE, WILL THE APPRENTICE CONSULT A MANUAL TO RECALL HOW TO BREAK DOWN AND REPAIR THE ITEM? OFTEN HIS STANDARD OF LITERACY IS SUCH THAT IT IS A BARRIER TO CARRYING OUT THIS SIMPLE TASK. NO WONDER MUCH OF WHAT IS LEARNT IS LEARNT BY ROTE.

AGAIN, OUR HOUSING MANAGER HAS HAD YEAR ELEVEN STUDENTS RETURN TO THE COMMUNITY UNABLE TO DECIPHER A BUILDING PLAN, READ A MEASURING TAPE OR COUNT THE NUMBER OF LOUVRES TO BE REPLACED IN HOUSE NO.WHICH ONE?

WHERE IS THEIR FUTURE AND THAT OF THEIR COMMUNITY WITHOUT EVEN A BASIC EDUCATION? EDUCATION SHOULD ALSO BE CONCERNED ABOUT COMMUNICATION AND COMPREHENSION. THE LANGUAGE OF INDUSTRY IS ENGLISH AND IT THEREFORE MUST FOLLOW THAT ALL EDUCATION MUST FOLLOW AN ENGLISH BASED CURRICULUM. WHILE IT IS CULTURALLY ACCEPTABLE TO BE ABLE TO CONVERSE IN LANGUAGE AND THIS SURELY SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED, IF A PERSON IS UNABLE TO CONVERSE AND COMPREHEND ENGLISH THEN ANY FUTURE EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS FOR THEM WILL BE NEGLIGIBLE IN TODAY'S SOCIETY, ESPECIALLY OUTSIDE THE COMMUNITY.

ANOTHER AREA I HAVE PROBLEMS WITH IS THE APPARENT NEED FOR GOVERNMENTS AND VISITING GOVERNMENT ADVISERS TO ALWAYS

ADOPT THE MOST COMPLEX RESOLUTION TO PROBLEMS. I BELIEVE WE SHOULD NOT IGNORE THE SIMPLEST AND SMALLEST STEPS TOWARDS ANY SOLUTION EVEN THOUGH THEY MAY BE THE HARDEST TO TAKE. FOR EXAMPLE, SOME YEARS AGO THE NAUIYU COUNCIL WAS CONCERNED AT THE INCREASING NUMBER OF COMMUNITY RESIDENTS WHO PREFERRED TO SIT DOWN ON THE DOLE RATHER THAN WORK ON COMMUNITY CDEP. AS A FIRST STEP, COUNCIL OFFICE STAFF WERE INSTRUCTED NOT TO HELP FILL OUT ANY UNEMPLOYMENT FORMS. THE UNEMPLOYMENT NUMBERS DROPPED AND THE LEVEL OF CDEP PARTICIPANTS ROSE. IF ANY ONE HERE HAS HAD TO FILL IN ANY TYPE OF UNEMPLOYMENT FORM, YOU CAN READILY APPRECIATE THE COMPLEXITY OF THEM.

NOW THAT TREND IS REVERSING AND THERE APPEARS TO BE A GROWING NUMBER OF PEOPLE ON THE DOLE. I BELIEVE THAT ATSIK'S POLICY THAT CDEP IS A VOLUNTARY SCHEME AND PARTICIPANTS CAN EXERCISE THEIR RIGHT TO ACCEPT UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS AND SIT IN THE SUN WHILE THEIR NEIGHBOUR WORKS ON THE COMMUNITY GRADER IS A FURTHER NAIL IN THE COFFIN.

RECENTLY, A BRICKLAYING TEAM CAME TO NAUIYU. THEIR LABOURER WAS ASKED IF HE WANTED HELP TO MOVE SOME SAND. HE REPLIED INDIGNANTLY THAT WAS HIS JOB AND IT WOULD ONLY TAKE TEN MINUTES. WAS IT THAT HE TOOK PRIDE IN HIS JOB OR WAS IT THAT HE KNEW THAT IF HE DID NOT ACHIEVE THESE SIMPLE TASKS HE FACED THE SACK? CONSIDER THIS SCENARIO IN RELATION TO CDEP PARTICIPANTS. IF THE SUPERVISOR SUGGESTED THAT ONLY ONE PERSON WOULD BE NEEDED TO DRIVE A TRUCK OR IF HE DEMANDED AN EXPLANATION WHY IT TOOK AN HOUR TO GET A PACKET OF NAILS FROM A NEARBY SHED, IT IS LIKELY THE PARTICIPANT WOULD SIMPLY SHRUG HIS SHOULDERS AND WALK AWAY. HE MAY APPLY FOR A TRANSFER TO ANOTHER CDEP

PROGRAMME OR HE MAY SIMPLY GO BACK ON THE DOLE. EITHER WAY HE KNOWS THE WELFARE SYSTEM WILL ENSURE HE GETS AN INCOME. UNDER CDEP NO-ONE CAN BE SACKED. AND SO LIFE CONTINUES WITHOUT ANYBODY HAVING TO TAKE ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR IT. I SUGGEST THAT A MANDATORY CDEP (IF POSITIONS WERE AVAILABLE) OR A WORK FOR THE DOLE SYSTEM, WHILE PERHAPS UNPALATABLE TO CANBERRA THEORISTS, MIGHT BE AN ULTIMATE SAVING GRACE FOR MANY COMMUNITIES. HOWEVER, THIS MUST BE LINKED TO EDUCATION.

AGAIN SOME YEARS AGO, MANY COMMUNITIES ENCOURAGED THEIR PEOPLE TO BECOME TEACHERS. NOT BY SETTING OFF TO STUDY TO BE A TEACHER BUT BY OFFERING THE INTERMEDIATE STEP OF LEARNING TO BECOME AN ASSISTANT TEACHER. EACH CLASS HAD ITS TEACHER ASSISTED BY AN ABORIGINAL ASSISTANT TEACHER. HOWEVER, THE POLICY OF TERRITORY EDUCATION HAS CHANGED. IN A MOOD FOR ABORIGINALISATION, OUR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS HAVE DECREED WHERE THERE IS AN ABORIGINAL TEACHER, THERE IS NO NEED FOR ASSISTANTS. A WHITE TEACHER CAN HAVE AN ABORIGINAL ASSISTANT BUT IT IS CONSIDERED AN ABORIGINAL TEACHER DOES NOT NEED ONE. HOWEVER THIS POLICY DOES NOT TAKE LANGUAGE INTO CONSIDERATION. IN COMMUNITIES WHERE THERE IS ONLY ONE LANGUAGE, THIS POLICY MIGHT BE ACCEPTABLE. AT NAUIYU WHERE THERE IS AT LEAST TEN DIFFERENT DIALECTS, THE SITUATION CAN BE QUITE INTOLERABLE. TEACHING POSITIONS ARE DEPENDENT ON STUDENT ATTENDANCES. IF STUDENTS DO NOT ATTEND REGULARLY FOR ANY REASON, FINANCE FOR EDUCATION IS CUT AND SO THE CIRCLE CONTINUES.

A FURTHER RESULT OF THE REDUCTION IN ASSISTANT TEACHERS IS THERE ARE LESS ABORIGINAL PEOPLE NOW TRYING TO BECOME EDUCATED AS TEACHERS. WHY CANNOT MORE FUNDS BE OFFERED TO

COMMUNITIES TO ENCOURAGE EDUCATION AND A RETURN TO REALITY. FEW YOUNG PERSONS WITHOUT ENCOURAGEMENT IN EDUCATION AT AN EARLY AGE CAN ACCEPT POSITIONS SUCH AS THE COMMUNITY BUILDING MANAGER OR THE TOWN CLERK WHICH IS OFTEN THE EUROPEAN IDEALS- YET SUCH POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY ARE ACHIEVABLE IF THEY HAVE A REASONABLE AND REALISTIC LEVEL OF EDUCATION. REINTRODUCE SOME INTERMEDIATE POSITIONS IN AREAS SUCH AS SCHOOLS; ADD A DASH OF LOCAL ENCOURAGEMENT AND RETURN A MEASURE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO FAMILIES FOR THEIR OWN DESTINY AND THE PRESENT TREND OF DEPENDENCY ON OTHERS MAY BE REVERSED.

IN OUR COMMUNITY THERE ARE MANY EXAMPLES OF PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT. MECHANICAL APPRENTICESHIPS COMPLETED ALBEIT IN SEVEN YEARS INSTEAD OF FOUR. TEACHERS GRADUATING WHO WERE ONCE ASSISTANTS. BUT THESE ARE LARGELY OF A PAST GENERATION. THERE ARE VERY FEW OF THE YOUNG ONES TODAY ACCEPTING THE OFFERINGS THAT ARE DANGLED BEFORE THEM. WHY? BECAUSE THE STEPS ARE TOO BIG. ACHIEVING A QUALIFICATION AS A TRADESMAN CARPENTER IS OFTEN UNTHINKABLE OR UNATTAINABLE WITHOUT BASIC EDUCATION BASED ON A REALISTIC CURRICULUM.

THE COMMUNITIES ARE CURRENTLY ON A ROAD TO NOWHERE. ABORIGINAL EDUCATION NEEDS TO BE THOROUGHLY RE-EXAMINED. WITHOUT A REALISTIC DEGREE OF LITERACY, ANY OPPORTUNITY IS REALLY JUST WINDOW DRESSING TO ANY POSSIBLE ASPIRANT. EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO THE FUTURE.

FOR HOW LONG ARE WE GOING TO PAY LIP SERVICE TO THIS IDEAL?