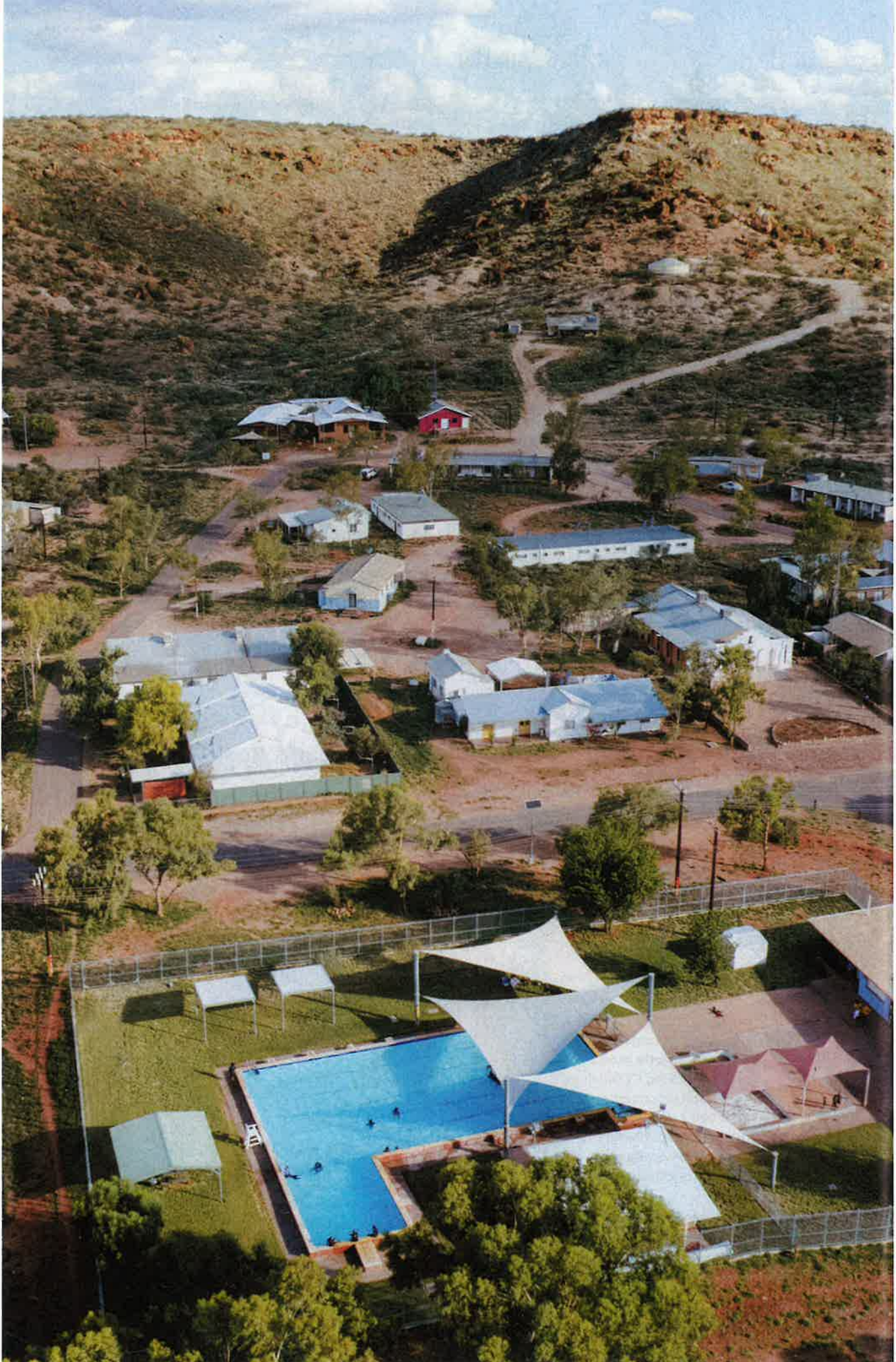


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# AN OASIS IN THE

A project to keep pools open in remote Indigenous communities is improving children's health, empowering locals and reducing drownings. It's also making for a whole lot of fun.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY *by* JESSICA HOWARD

# DESERT

## Community

**It's** Saturday afternoon on the brink of summer in one of Australia's hottest places and a crowd is forming outside the Ltyentye Apurte/Santa Teresa community pool. A four-wheel drive purges more passengers than it has seats and children appear from back streets – some on foot, others balancing on slow-moving pushbikes.

"Make a line," lifeguard Patricia Oliver orders in Eastern Arrernte, the language spoken in this Indigenous community 85 kilometres south-east of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

"The kids, they know the time," she says. "They come running and wait. This is our beach."

There's free entry for everyone, but under-10s are turned away unless they have an adult with them – a firm rule so lifeguards don't become babysitters. On a busy afternoon like this, Patricia has enough to deal with.

"I talk [Eastern Arrernte] language

to them when they argue or fight," she says, "and tell them to get out for 10 minutes. If they keep fighting – come back next day."

There are 18 pools in remote communities across the Northern Territory, but a handful are closed at any time because of operational or safety issues. As we go to print, this includes the facility at Walungurru/Kintore where a child drowned a little over three years ago. That's when the YMCA stepped in to establish the Remote Pools Project, reopening the facilities that had fallen into disrepair and making sure the rest operate safely and sustainably.

"These are the only pools in the entire community, the only bodies of water for hundreds of kilometres," program manager Kurt Herzog says. "Naturally we think, 'Oh, it's just a public pool. There are other things to do.' But there aren't, especially in December and January, when every other service shuts down. School shuts down, child care, youth sport and rec

– and it's 40-degree days back-to-back."

Pools do much more than occupy idle hands. Clean, chlorinated water helps a range of illnesses common in remote Indigenous communities. Poorer living conditions can result in skin, ear and eye infections that, if left untreated, can lead to kidney and heart failure, and loss of sight and hearing.

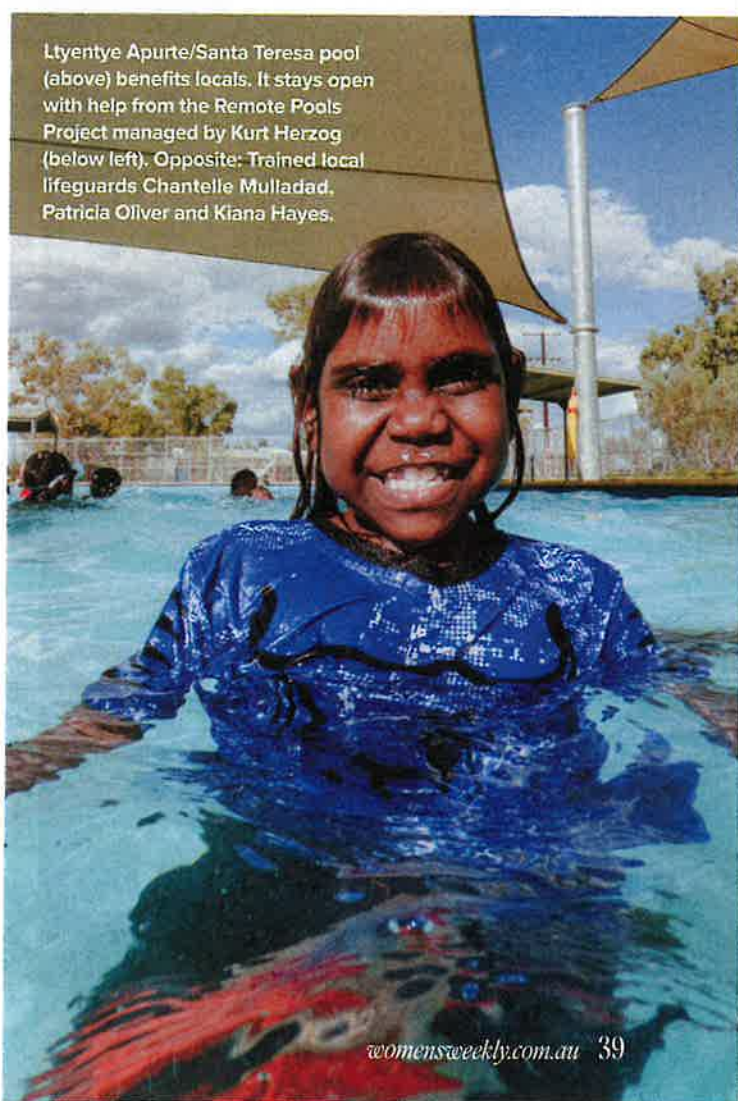
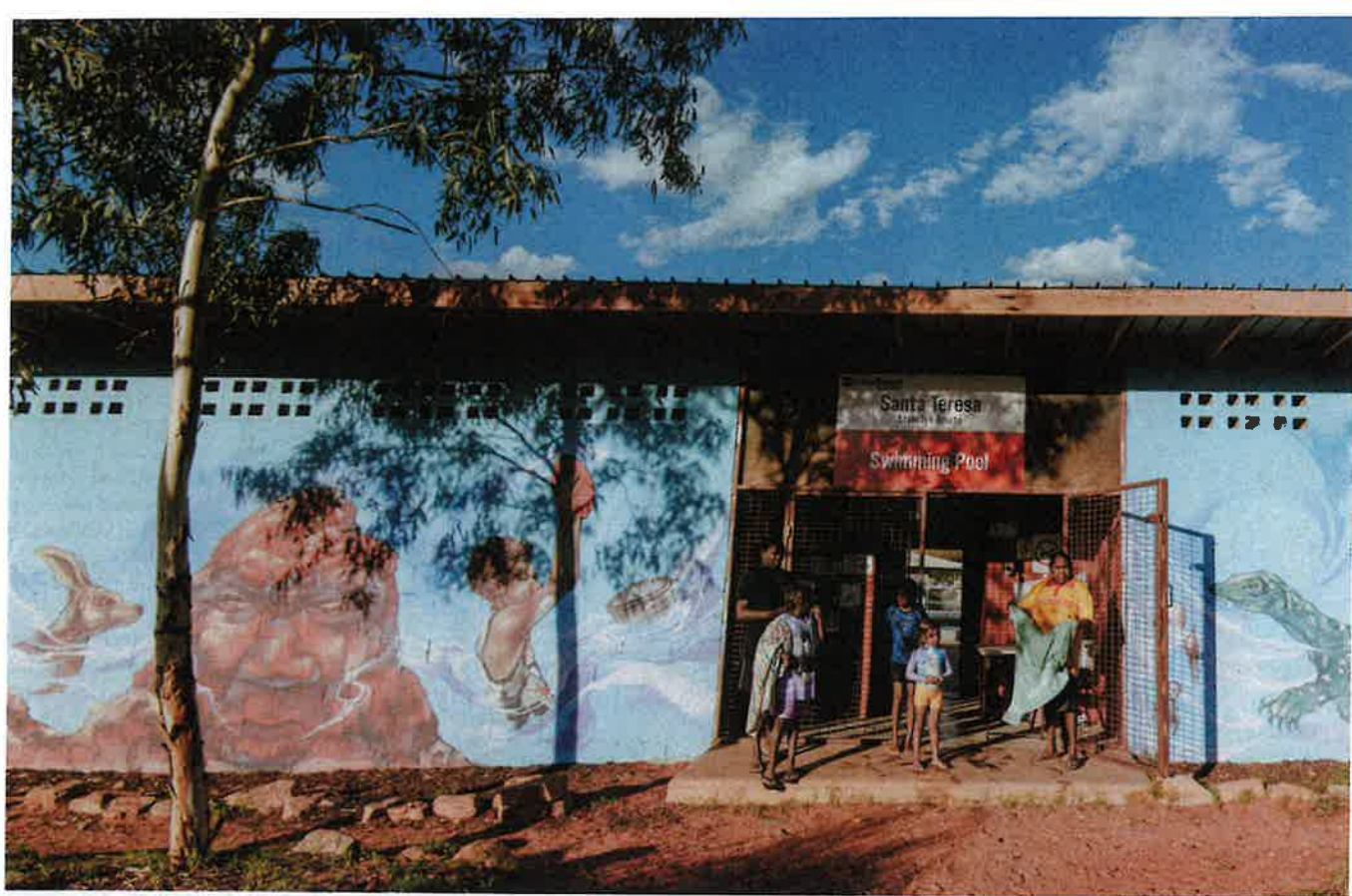
According to Royal Life Saving Australia, Indigenous children are 2.9 times more likely to drown than non-Indigenous kids, and every Remote Pools facility runs water safety classes through schools, which save lives.

"Our goal is to eventually train local swim teachers," Kurt says, "purely for better education because they know the best way to teach their own kids. Teaching in language helps accelerate the learning."

The Remote Pools Project already trains local lifeguards.

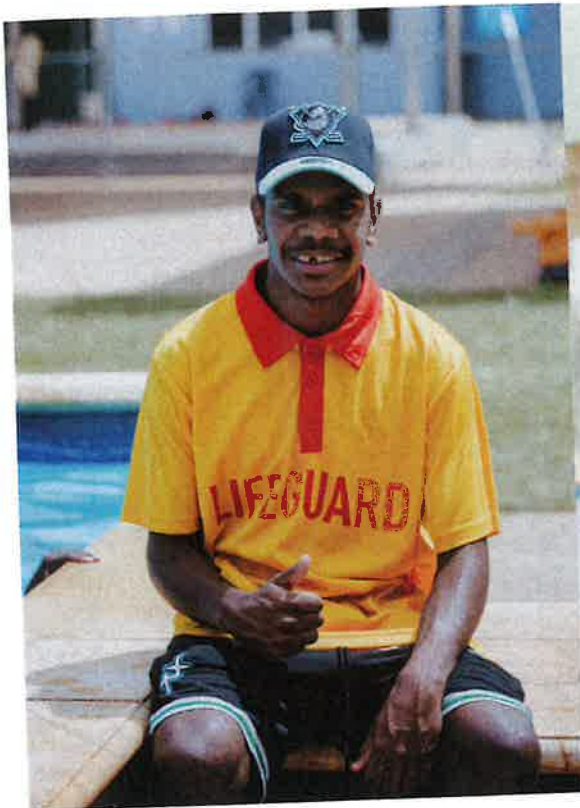
**T**he mercury peaks at 35 degrees when *The Weekly* visits Ltyentye Apurte and brumbies are cooling



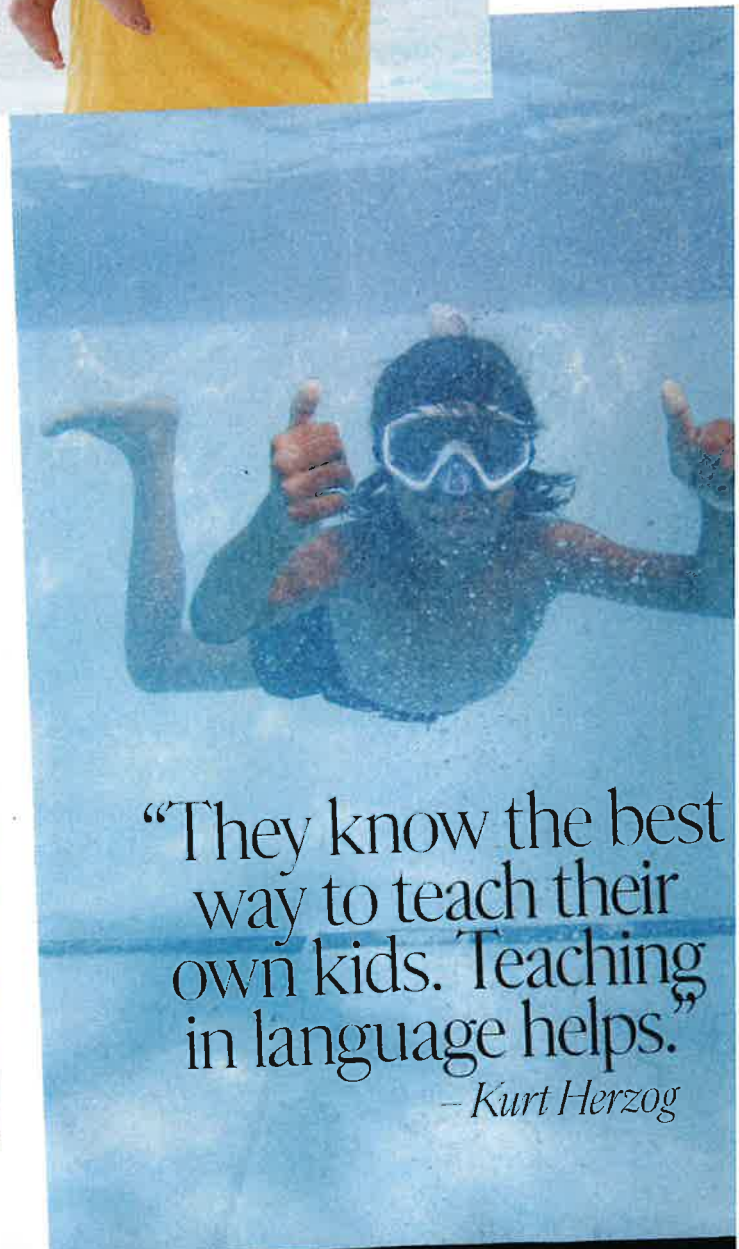
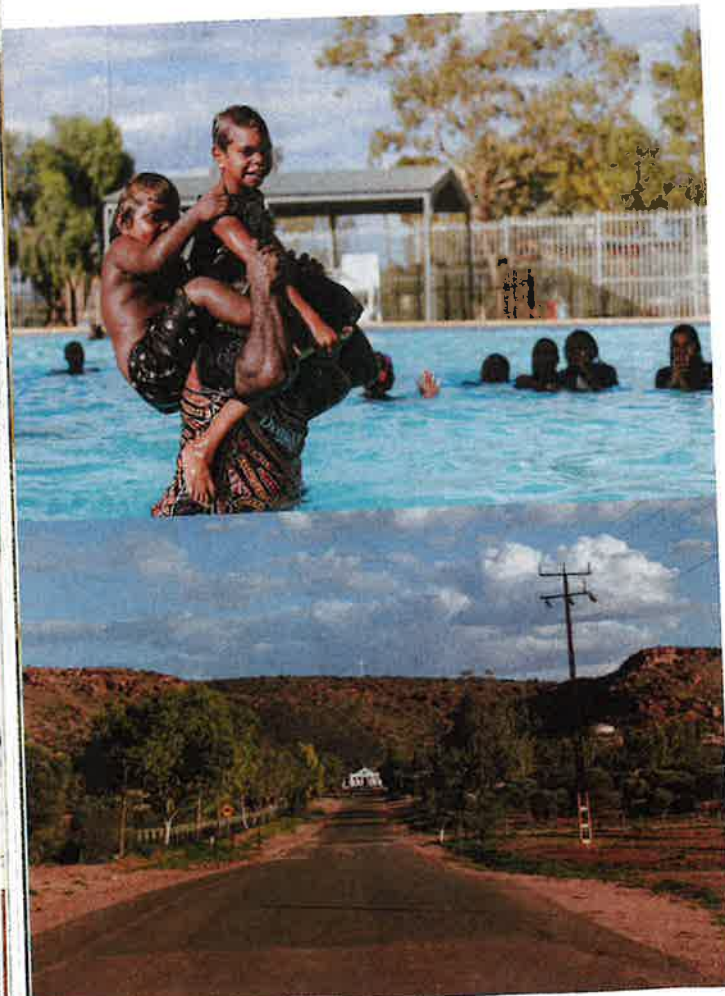


Ltyentye Apurte/Santa Teresa pool (above) benefits locals. It stays open with help from the Remote Pools Project managed by Kurt Herzog (below left). Opposite: Trained local lifeguards Chantelle Mulladad, Patricia Oliver and Kiana Hayes.

## Community



Clockwise from far left: Remote Pools Project has trained 11 local lifeguards so far, including Elijah Mulladad; traditional owner Justin Hayes has helped rejuvenate the pool; kids receive free swimming lessons; the town of Ltyentye Apurte/Santa Teresa; chlorine helps improve child health. Opposite: Swimming is one of few things to do when other services shut over summer.



“They know the best way to teach their own kids. Teaching in language helps.”

—Kurt Herzog



off in a waterhole at the entrance to the community. It's not thong-melting hot, but it's warm enough for the pool water to feel like a cold slap which makes goggle-wearing children shriek on first entry.

There's a speaker blaring desert reggae – a local brand of the genre with Eastern Arrernte lyrics – and mums balance babies on the water's edge under a shade cloth. A dad has at least two children on his shoulders in constant rotation, while 11-year-old Millie Mulladad dive-bombs in unison with her friends.

"My favourite stroke is freestyle," she says, "and the one where you float on your back." She wants to be a lifeguard when she grows up. That or a "professional horse-rider" – she hasn't decided.

Other organisations have operated remote Top End pools over the years, but they've been plagued by a lack of funds to pay staff and maintain facilities. Pools have been built then shuttered, and children have resorted to swimming in unsafe and unsupervised

waters. In the south Arnhem Land community of Ngukurr, that meant dips in the croc-infested Roper River, until the Remote Pools Project reopened facilities ahead of this summer.

There are now six pools in the program run in partnership with Territory councils and health charities, with plans to reopen another one in coming months. At Ltyentye Apurte alone, 11 local lifeguards have been trained, including traditional owner Justin Hayes, who also works as a groundskeeper and team leader.

"We're trying to make it look different," he says of the 50-year-old pool's modest transformation. "Cleaner, with better grass."

Over the past year, he and Kurt Herzog have nurtured the grounds – sowing, cutting and watering the lawn to create an oasis in the desert.

Communities are central to this project. Pools aren't just being run for them, they're being run with them.

"We set up an employment pathway for locals with the goal to take back their pool," Kurt says. "That could be

anywhere between a two- to a 10-year plan, depending on how long it takes to establish a relationship with the community. It's about creating the right culturally sensitive workplace and spending time investing in and nurturing people in these roles. Pools have never done that across the Territory, in my experience."

A storm is brewing over the rocky hills beyond Ltyentye Apurte, cracking and rumbling as it approaches.

"Everyone out of the pool," Kurt calls. There's a scramble to leave the water. The temperature drops as cool air from the front settles and the sky opens. On the way out of the community, a few children gather around the waterhole that had been full of brumbies.

With the pool closed for the day, have they found a new swimming hole?

"Nah," a girl responds, "too stinky."

Only clean, safe water for them – now, and hopefully forever. **AWW**

*If you would like to donate to or volunteer with the project, visit [remotepoolsproject.ymca.org.au](http://remotepoolsproject.ymca.org.au)*