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Painting meets medicine for healing dream in country



Lend a healing land ... the NG Art Gallery is holding a fund-raising exhibition to help build a healing centre in East Arnhem Land.

Photo: *Ben Rushton*

Clare Morgan
February 15, 2008

ADRIAN NEWSTEAD has become a believer in the maxim "If you build it, they will come". But before they build it, there is the issue of money.

After establishing the Aboriginal Benefit Foundation in 2005 and funding small-scale indigenous health and welfare projects, the Aboriginal art specialist and gallery owner has set a goal of raising \$1 million this year. The plan is to build the Yirrkala Healing Centre in East Arnhem Land, which would offer a blend of Western and traditional medicine, meeting areas and counselling services.

The fund-raising kicked off this week with the opening of the exhibition *Utopia Revisited*, featuring works by female indigenous artists including Minnie Pwerle, Gloria Petyarre and Emily Kngwarreye.

The paintings have been provided by individuals and institutions and, after much complicated legal

work, any money or works donated will be income-tax exempt.

After spending three years funding small-scale projects, Newstead is excited about focusing on a large scheme.

"We haven't been overly keen to be inundated with requests for money, given that the foundation is only just beginning," he says.

"Then out of the blue came a request from Yirrkala for help in establishing a healing centre. At first it seemed an impossibly large project for us. But we were looking for a project that could not only make a huge difference to a lot of people but also to establish the foundation in the minds of Aboriginal art organisations here and around the world."

A feasibility study indicated the centre could succeed as a combined social welfare and business initiative, and found that with existing federal health programs and Medicare, it could become self-supporting within a few years.

"There could even be an opportunity for indigenous people to offer something to visitors by way of a unique indigenous healing experience," Newstead says.

"It would be an opportunity for white people and Yolngu people to interact, learn about indigenous bush foods and healing practices."

A three-day visit to the area gave Newstead first-hand experience of the need for the healing centre. "Youth suicide and substance abuse is rife and out of proportion with their ability to cope," he says. "Then there is the emotional fallout among the families and carers and loved ones who are constantly in a state of distress and despair."

"There is not one single mental health worker, and just one youth worker in north-east Arnhem Land to deal with this."

The centre would include men-only and women-only areas, group therapy, counselling and traditional and conventional medicine.

"It's all part of a holistic view of healing, physically and mentally and socially," Newstead says. "There is nothing like this around."

"The more we've delved into it, and the more it's been supported by the people involved, we've realised this is a template that could be used in other communities with similar problems. The knowledge of elders is being overlooked or discounted."

Newstead, who has been holed up at Byron Bay finishing a book on 100 Aboriginal artists ("I'm up to number 92"), has no doubt he will reach his \$1 million target, with dinners and art auctions organised and committees being set up in Melbourne and Perth.

"We have had a lot of people contact us offering their time, services, offering works of art, bequests in their will," he says. "Who knows - we might get a lot of it from one person."

Utopia Revisited is at NG Art Gallery, Chippendale, until March 8. Fund-raising dinners will be held at the gallery's Mission Restaurant Bar on February 19 and 26. Bookings on (02) 9318 0815.

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