

Crying in the wind

Message Stick: Crossing the Line
ABC, 6pm

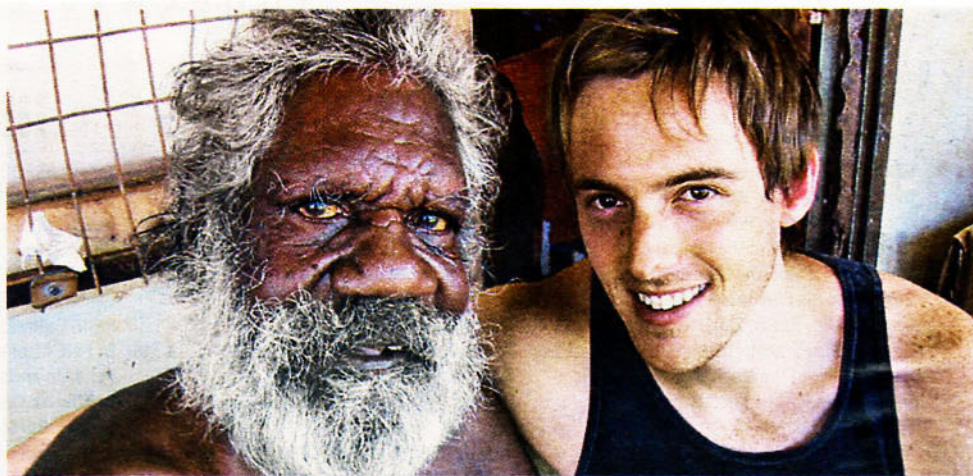
IF the decay of the public health system can be called a scandal, it sadly follows that indigenous health is nothing less than a national shame. Largely hidden from view because "we" do not have to deal with it except through disturbing news reports that often make us turn away, that repulsively apt phrase "compassion fatigue", simply confirms the situation.

Crossing the Line makes for a striking corrective to this alienated state of play. Director Kaye Harrison has wisely selected two young, white, middle-class medical students from the University of Tasmania as her focus. This documentary follows them as they cope with an eight-week clinical placement in the remote indigenous community of Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Paul Joffe, 24, has an idealistic and somewhat edgy self-image. "I think if you've got a confronting personality in life, you are asking for trouble — and I'm OK with that." Amy McCormack, 21, is a devout Christian with all the florid niceness you'd expect of such a protected background. Her view on heading out to Mornington Island is "that God's blessed me with an opportunity".

Both are in for a rattling. After a one-week orientation at the Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health, Paul and Amy fly to Mornington Island. Before long the negotiating masks of their identity are blown away as the medical students deal with everything from diabetes and leprosy to a frighteningly glimpsed full-moon night where a community on the piss can be heard in all its rumbling madness. This memorable if abruptly occluded scene gives added intensity to a fine theme song by Peter Archer and Lenny Paul about the voices of the local people "crying in the wind".

A knife injury, a woman's broken hand and the broken story that accompanies it, and a suicide attempt by a 12-year-old girl all swiftly follow the night. Such piecemeal incidents accumulate matter-of-factly over this two-part series, adding finely glimpsed layers to Amy's observation of the endless funerals going on in the community, creating what she



Forging a bond: Paul Joffe's relationship with diabetes patient Hector is a highlight

The medical students deal with everything from diabetes to a frightening full-moon night of a community on the piss

calls a constant "quietness, a sadness like a cloud".

It would be wrong, though, to paint the journey totally black. Paul's growing relationship with a charmingly wily diabetes patient called Hector brims with humour, even as it opens up grim absurdities. "What do you hope for?" Paul asks Hector during a blood test. "A can of beer," Hector laughs.

While it's initially easy to view Amy's Christianity as naively girlish, her journey is arguably deeper and more satisfying than Paul's. It's Amy's faith that gives her a pathway into the history of this formerly mission-run community and a kinship with the generations of women still keeping it together.

These intimate insights into Paul and Amy's experiences keep evolving as they engage with the community. They're intelligent and honest; they're trying hard. They're good people. And that makes you care and struggle with them. Though the style of the doco is hardly flashy or innovative, this plain-speaking, up-close approach works wonders. No person or subject is left neatly boxed in. Amy finds herself asking God, "What is going on?" Paul rails against the advice he gets in weekly teleconferences with the centre's doctors. "I didn't want to come here and just experience it ... I'm not a robot," he says. "[But] how can you give back if you don't know what they need?"

The wisdom of this documentary probably lies in Amy's words. She confesses she's "tired of the issues ... I just can't bear any more devastatingly tragic stories that don't have happy endings." And yet, reflecting on the women who have adopted her so warmly, she observes, "It's easy to get bogged down — but as long as there's interaction there is always going to be positive stuff."

Mark Mordue

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WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN February 5-11, 2005

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Paul and Amy are two fourth-year medical students from Tassie who, for their studies, volunteer to spend eight weeks on Mornington Island. Beginning tonight, this two-part series reveals how their initial awkwardness gives way to much elation, frustration and soul-searching.

It makes for remarkable, riveting viewing and gives a rare and unsentimental insight into one of Australia's remote indigenous communities. Don't miss it.

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Message Stick
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In the final of this two-part series, frustration, sadness and confusion evolve into an inspiration of sorts.

Several weeks into their eight-week residency on Mornington Island, two non-indigenous fourth-year medical students from Tasmania, Amy and Paul, are increasingly perplexed as they try to make a difference to the lives of people in this remote indigenous community. Amy struggles with her

own Christian faith when she discovers the role played by early island missionaries in causing the troubles and difficulties faced by community members.

Paul questions his usefulness when he is let down by patient Hector's apparent disregard for medical advice. There is no doubting the excellence and efficacy of this insightful program, a fact highlighted when, nine months after they leave the island, the documentary team visits Amy and Paul back home in Tasmania and finds them much changed.