



Like most city-dwellers, I spend an awful lot of time sitting at my computer. So, when I found myself on a bus surrounded by the red sandy expanse of Central Australia headed to Lilla for the 2023 Sports & Storytelling Festival, I felt a little out of my depth. I had *no* idea what to expect.

My name is Aimee and I write for the Watarrka Foundation. I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to go out to [Lilla](#), an outstation in the Watarrka National Park, for the annual Sports & Storytelling Festival in October. Chris from [Post Potion](#) joined us for the festival and he has put together a video of our time at Lilla with some great footage of some of the activities we ran with the kids and some insight into the mission of the festival. You can watch it below.



I've spent the last six weeks reflecting on my experience, and, like most writers, I do this sort of thing best through words, so let me tell you a bit about it.

As the big purple bus split through the open country, I was both nervous and excited for the week ahead. Us volunteers all got to know each other on the four and a bit hour drive from Alice to Lilla. We were a diverse bunch, from teachers to lawyers to creatives like Chris and I, but we all bonded over our passion for the festival and its mission. We spotted brumbies and circling hawks from the bus window while Reg from [Remote Tours NT](#) told us about the Desert Oak trees over loud speaker. You could tell Reg loved it out here, and I could see why, the landscape was enchanting. There wasn't a cloud in sight. It was my first time in Central Australia, and it's true what they say, the outback is big, but the outback sky is *bigger*.

We arrived at Lilla as the setting sun threw deep shades of orange across the mountain range. The whole place was glowing with colour and heat and life. After dinner, Vera and the Traditional Owners smoked us all into Country, and I crawled into my swag that night smelling of Emu Bush smoke and sunscreen. The milky way glittered above me, brighter than I'd ever seen it. *This place is special*, I thought as slipped into a deep, peaceful sleep.



The view from camp at Lilla

The next day was a flurry of action. We had breakfast before dawn and hiked Kings Canyon and walked the cultural sites at Lilla before lunch time. The kids were arriving soon, so we sat together after eating and went over our plan of action. The driving focus of the annual Sports & Storytelling Festival is to encourage young girls and boys who live in remote communities to attend school. I had no doubt that this was a worthy cause. School attendance rates in remote areas are **concerningly low** for Aboriginal children. I looked over our activity booklet, which had notes on how to play various sports, drama and arts games. I was full of anticipation. *I'm a writer*, I thought, *not a teacher*. I hoped that I would be fun.

The amazing thing about young people is that they can bring even the most shy adult out of their shell just by being themselves. Areyonga school arrived first, Papunya pulled up soon after, and before I knew it I was running around in the sand, giggling away and having the time of my life. Their joy was infectious. That afternoon, I danced my way through a [Poetry in Action](#) workshop, embracing my natural clumsiness to show some of the older girls that its okay to look silly sometimes, and then we did some activities in the Watarrka School classrooms to escape the afternoon heat. The [school closed in 2022](#) due to lack of funding by the NT government. It felt good to make use of these spaces built for education.



Cooking activities in the Watarrka school classroom

If I learnt one thing from my time at the festival, its that kids learn the most when they're having fun. *It's cool to go to school!* We all chanted in unison, and I really think that the message got through. Attending school doesn't just mean learning information, it means getting the opportunity to do new things, go new places and meet new people. With the help of NT AFL, the local rangers and the staff from Kings Canyon Resort, we helped really *show* the kids, not just tell them, that attending school is important and worthwhile.

One of the highlights of my time at Lilla was at about 9pm at night on the second day of the festival. I was bone tired, we all were, but we teamed together to help sort through the mountains of donated gifts, toys and school supplies we had to give the kids. I had helped run an art workshop earlier that afternoon where all the kids had designed their own tote bags. Sorting through those bags and seeing the unique and creative designs, I felt so grateful to be a part of the festival and to be involved with the Watarrka Foundation, who are doing such important work in the Watarrka region supporting the young people of these remote communities.



Art workshop

Landing back in Sydney, my lips were sunburnt and my skin was coated in layers of sunscreen and red sand but I had a full heart and an inspired mind. Projects like the Lilla Sports & Storytelling Festival are essential in supporting the youth of remote Australia and showing them the benefits of an education. My time at Lilla with the kids from Papunya and Areyonga was the highlight of my year. They taught me the importance of fun and play, that I am not so good at footy, and that having a good torch is like gold in the outback. These are kids who are proud of their Country and their culture, who have an unrivalled sense of community, and are kind and smart in equal measure. I can't wait to see everyone again next year.



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