

Garma Festival 2011

By Sarah Griffin

As law students at Monash, an internationally ranked university, we tend to view ourselves as global citizens. The continuing expansion of technology and the importance of it in our education only contributes to the development of such a perspective. The world is literally our oyster; everything is accessible and the Western concept of one's 'right to know' has, arguably, become more prevalent.

Such an approach of entitlement to all knowledge can be contrasted to the concept of obtaining knowledge as it is defined (albeit differently depending on the community) in Indigenous Australia. Knowledge in such contexts is regarded as a privilege. It is in considering and respecting this approach that a university student discovers the limitations placed on their ability to 'learn' about Indigenous Australian culture. Even if provided with the opportunity, there is also the issue of ensuring that one is learning about Indigenous knowledge and culture in an appropriate way. There are units on offer at Monash that focus on learning about Indigenous culture and knowledge, but how much can one truly learn about another culture within the confines of a classroom? Is the idea of manipulating such knowledge to fit within a Western curriculum structure appropriate, culturally respectful, and does it in fact do the knowledge justice?

It was with such limitations in mind, as well as concern about the lack of law electives with an Indigenous focus currently on offer at Monash, that I approached the Castan Centre with a proposal to organise a student trip to the Garma festival for 2011. Garma is an annual event that has been occurring since time immemorial and is held at Gulkala, a remotely located traditional meeting ground in Arnhem Land. As an initiative of the Yothu Yindi Foundation, Garma has today evolved to be regarded as Australia's leading cultural exchange event. It provides an opportunity for Indigenous people across the top end of Australia to celebrate cultural traditions and practices, through dance, song, music and art. The Garma festival is also host to a Key Forum involving academic discussions and presentations on language and culture, the theme of which changes annually and in 2011 was 'Academic Excellence and Cultural Integrity'. The scope of the Key Forum, however, is never limited to a narrow interpretation of the theme, with presentations in previous years covering legal, educational, social, cultural, economic and medical issues. With this diversity, I hoped that such an opportunity would have broad appeal and applicability to studies.

The Castan Centre staff were incredibly enthusiastic about organising such a trip, and together we set about promoting the opportunity on campus. Student applications from a number of different faculties began to flow in, the group of lecturers accompanying us continued to grow and before we knew it, we had arrived in Arnhem Land for the festival! Garma lived up to its reputation as a unique experience where the Yolngu people provide others with the privileges of living on Yolngu-owned land and learning about Indigenous cultures and issues.



Monash students before a festival event.

We commenced each day at the festival by eating breakfast overlooking the Gulf of Carpentaria. Each morning, despite having now attended the festival for three consecutive years, I found myself struck by the absolute privilege of being able to sit on that escarpment, look at that view and feel comfortable being there. The generosity of the Yolngu people in hosting others on their land, let alone such an enormous amount of people, is an aspect of this festival that perhaps is overlooked due to the humble nature of the Yolngu people. It is an aspect, however, that I believe is worthy of attention as it provides insight into the power of forgiveness and how this in turn allows for the creation and generation of an awareness of Indigenous cultures.

During the days, we floated between seminars that were conducted in shelters dotted around the campsite. Time's presence, as a Western concept, is not felt, with seminars tending to commence when those involved are ready. Adaptability is the key to enjoying the festival, as seminars may or may not run due to different reasons such as logistical difficulties in ensuring participants arrive at Gulkala. Seminar participants varied from academics, professionals, politicians, community workers and community leaders to Indigenous and non-Indigenous youths. Each is willing to share their experiences and provide their advice in the hope of contributing to the painting of a holistic image of the Indigenous issues in focus. This unique combination of speakers creates engaging, broad and open discussions of Indigenous issues, providing invaluable learning opportunities for all involved. These discussions represent the essence of the Garma experience; the positive representation of Indigenous cultures that is often sadly absent from the Australian media's portrayal of Indigenous cultures. It is difficult to articulate beyond this point the true value of the Garma experience. It is something that I strongly believe must in fact be 'experienced'. While one can read through the report that is compiled after each Garma Festival, it does not compare to having this information conveyed in an interactive environment while living in one of the most remote locations in the country. It is my hope that the Garma experience can be made accessible to all Monash students through funding of a subsidy or inclusion in the Monash Passport.

While the Garma festival does have this serious element woven through the forums on offer, it is also a lot of fun! With local bands performing every night, an art gallery in the bush, the opportunity to spend the evening stargazing with absolutely nothing obstructing one's view, and the chance to visit some of the most beautiful beaches one could ever find, this experience does not disappoint. Each night, as one lies in one's tent, the silence of the bush is only interrupted by the myriad of thoughts emanating from the stimulus of the day's experiences.



The Monash contingent at their campsite.