

Northern Territory love story ends in tragedy

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Broadcast: 09/10/2008

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A family in Arnhem Land is mourning the death of its young son and blames the Federal Government's intervention in the Northern Territory for his death.

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN, PRESENTER: The Federal Government's emergency intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory has received a mixed reception since it was declared in June last year.

Whatever judgements are finally made about the big picture impact of intervention, there is one family group in Arnhem Land that right now is blaming the policy for the death of a young man seven weeks ago.

According to his family, the young man fell in love and began a sexual relationship with a girl who was 15 years old. The police intervened because of her age, they arrested her boyfriend, leading to a series of event that ended in tragedy.

Murray McLaughlin reports. But first, a warning to Aboriginal viewers, this story, with family permission, shows photographs and records the name of the recently deceased young man.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN, REPORTER: A mother grieves.

NATASHA PAMKAL, MOTHER: That's my one and only son. I haven't got more son now.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: An aunty who taught him at school cherishes his memory.

ANNETTE MILLER, SCHOOL TEACHER: I've always looked up on him as a boy that will always come back and look after family.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: An uncle remembers a young man who loved life.

MANUEL PAMKAL, UNCLE: He love his job and also football and hunting, fishing, and he really loved that girl. They were really loved together.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: Aged 22, Clifton Pamkal was in love with a girl not yet

16. Their relationship began in a small Aboriginal community in central Arnhem Land. It was, in effect, a traditional marriage along proper skin lines, acknowledged by the family and the community.

MANUEL PAMKAL: They was happy. At least they were right skin no, right way to marry. From my side I didn't have problem.

ANNETTE MILLER: They got an okay from the parents and the people here and they were allowed to have that relationship.

RUPEN TAKUMBA, UNCLE: They were in love, yeah. True love. And he loved the girl, and the girl really loved him.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: The police learnt of the relationship early this year and charged Clifton Pamkal with various offences of carnal knowledge. Bailed on the condition that he not go near his young promised wife, he moved to another small community 200km away. But love soon drew him back.

But the police found out the young couple were back together. On August the 21st they arrested Clifton Pamkal for breaching his bail, and locked him up in the community police station. But he quickly escaped custody.

NATASHA PAMKAL: My son pushed the police, made the police fall down, and then ran out, and then he had lots of speed and ran and jump over the fence. But I don't know if they, I don't know if they was saying something to my son inside the cell.

MANUEL PAMKAL: That's what I think he was really worried, you know, he didn't want to go jail. But young people, you know, when they're in love, you can't stop them, okay. That's happen with everyone.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: The attempt by police to recapture Clifton Pamkal immediately escalated into a man hunt. Reinforcements were called in from as far away as Katherine, more than three hours drive away, and most of that over dirt roads. For hours they ranged the community.

PAUL MILLER, FRIEND: There was seven of them, seven police, and three paddy wagons.

GRAEME CAMPBELL, ABORIGINAL LEGAL AID: Very frightening, as though it was bin Laden or someone like that, he was just an innocent poor young fella in love. Why bring in all these people to frighten hell out of him like they did?

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: Police resumed their search early the next morning.

MAGGIE TJIKABAL, GRANDMOTHER: 5 o'clock in the morning. They come and wake me up, they're knocking door really rough. This is the first time in 2008 we had the policemen really pass, passing every room, every house.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: The young man covered a lot of ground during his flight

from police. That morning he was found dead about 10km from the police station. He had apparently shot himself from a gun taken from a buffalo hunting camp where he used to work. His mother, in hospital in Darwin, was not told by police until nearly 12 hours later. She had already heard the bad news from other sources.

NATASHA PAMKAL: The police never tell me anything, what happened to my son, or even when he ran out of the police station, the police never tell me anything. I don't know nothing. I can't get over what happened to my son.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: Northern Territory police have declined to comment because they are preparing a report for the coroner. The dead man's family wants an inquest so they can ask what cross cultural training was given to the police posted to this community. Two Federal Police officers were on duty while the man escaped custody. They'd arrived only a few days before, as part of the Federal Government's emergency intervention in the territory.

ANNETTE MILLER: They didn't know anyone, they didn't know who to go to. They were new. But to save that boy they could have run to the elders to go and get him.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: The intervention came to this community in central Arnhem Land late last year. There'd been no police station here before then.

GLENN DOOLEY, NT ABORIGINAL JUSTICE AGENCY (December 2007): The Government thought there were paedophiles out in the communities, and that the intervention would be about flushing them out and protecting kids.

The reality of what's happened is that such paedophiles have not been found. What, though, the police have come across are examples of basically young men having consensual sex with their teenage girlfriends.

MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: The impact and effectiveness is still under review by a Government appointed panel. But in this central Arnhem Land community, Aboriginal people are blaming the intervention for the death of Clifton Pamkal.

Why do you blame the intervention?

MANUEL PAMKAL: I think the rules change. We sort of go back to the white man's rule now. We sort of being dragged away now from our law. White man's law comes in, more powerful, once the intervention starts.

KERRY O'BRIEN: That report from Murray McLaughlin.