



# Experiencing Elcho

David Pett shares the joys and challenges of living among the remote Yolŋu people and going the extra mile to show God's love

Story Stephanie Gidney Photos LuAnne Cadd, David and Jen Pett

**W**e're sitting on the sizzling veranda of the Bible Translation Centre and David Pett, former MAF Base Manager and Pilot, is telling me about MAF's work on Elcho Island, Arnhem Land. But we are interrupted. A lady wants to book a seat on the plane.

She pays, but David is unable to provide a receipt at that moment. Her reply speaks volumes, 'I always trust you.'

Elcho Island lies one mile off the coast of Australia's Northern Territory. It hosts the largest Yolŋu community in eastern Arnhem Land, and was home for the Pett family for eight years.

David, with his wife Jen and teenage sons Graham and Jonathan, were among the 5% of

*Balanda* (non-indigenous people) who make up the 2,500 population.

## Adopted

The community of Galiwin'ku was established in 1942, after Japanese planes bombed the nearby airfield and mission at Milingimbi, and many Yolŋu fled to Elcho. Later, in 1979, the community's atmosphere was significantly shaped by spiritual revival. Many Yolŋu then travelled to take the Gospel to the desert communities in central Australia.

David recalls, 'We arrived on Elcho at dusk, to a world we weren't expecting. At first, all we experienced was the rubbish and noise at night. It took a while to see the rugged beauty and the



open hearts of people.'

The value of relationship in Yolŋu society cannot be underestimated, because everyone is related and addressed by a relationship name.

'We were adopted into their kinship system so they knew how to relate to us,' David explains. 'Jen and I both have different "older sisters" who adopted us. Without adoption, it's hard to be accepted.'

'We asked our supporters to pray for appropriate adoptions, because it would set the tone for our time on the island. God answered by having two strong Christian families take us under their wing.'

## Challenges

But life on Elcho has been very different for their sons Graham and Jonathan who have spent their teenage years on the Island. 'The cultural differences and expectations are probably greatest at this stage of life, and therefore it has been easier for them to make connections with the adults,' shares David.

Arnhem Land can also be difficult for MAF staff. Pilots start work before the community rises, making it hard for them to take part fully in community life which tends to start in the late evening.

In this isolated place, there are many births but also many deaths. 'People are so closely related that every death on the island affects about half the community,' David says.

Life is heavily influenced by funeral ceremonies, which have to be sequenced throughout the year, each lasting eight to ten days. 'It can be a sad place to be,' he admits.

## Culture

Although they are largely dependent upon welfare payments from the Australian government, western culture is relatively new to the Yolŋu, who are traditionally a hunter-gatherer society. Many still enjoy turtle, wallabies, magpie-geese and mangrove worms.

'People have access to manufactured goods but the traditional culture teaches about the natural world,' David explains. 'For instance, extended families choose to live together in a modern house, but this can exacerbate health problems and spread illnesses which wouldn't be a problem in traditional airy shelters.'

But MAF's work is demonstrating the Gospel in very practical ways. 'We are a carrier of newborns, bringing new life to the Island. We are an ambulance for the sick, transporting medicines to clinics. We are a hearse for the deceased, taking them to their place of rest. These practical functions mirror Jesus' message of new life, healing and the promise of rest for the weary.'

## Getting stuck in

While David was flying, Jen and the boys found their niche by supporting the community and deepening friendships. From 2006, they held a stall in the weekly market, selling Christian resources to raise funds for the Bible Translation Centre. They threw themselves into church life



## 'It's been a privilege to walk alongside the Yolŋu, to share their journey'

– from preaching to Bible study, Sunday School to hospitality.

'It's been exciting to see the boys discover their own gifts and abilities!' smiles David. 'It's also exciting to see the Yolŋu understand new biblical truths. This is a key aspect of our calling as MAF personnel – helping them apply God's Word to their lives. We've seen individuals grow in faith and be led into their own effective ministries. God's Word is penetrating and is bringing freedom.'

Jen regularly witnessed change in small group settings. Reading the Bible in the Djambarrpuyŋu language, followed by some simple questions, really empowered local believers.

## Moving on

For the Pett family, 'It's been a privilege to walk alongside the Yolŋu, share their journey, learn their language and partake in the joy of a local Djambarrpuyŋu New Testament dedication.'

'Living in day-to-day relationship has allowed us to encourage and support their faith, provide access to Christian resources and offer helpful technology.'

In September, David began an induction course in Cairns to become a Training Captain for MAF. They are now based in Cairns, where MAF is currently setting up its MAF Training Centre at nearby Mareeba. But they've had to say goodbye to many special relationships in Elcho Island.

David concludes, 'I think it's fair to say that MAF has the hearts of many Yolŋu in Arnhem Land. We were part of a history of staff who have stayed for many years in Arnhem Land, and those relationships count for so much. We pray God's blessing and protection upon the believers of Elcho Island, and that God's grace and mercy will continue to flow.'

