



When the 19-metre catamaran *Pelican 1* (right) swept into Cooktown Harbour, it brought a glimmer of hope to the people of Hope Vale, as well as the chance to help out on deck or enjoy the view.



Pelican 1's initial plan was to take 30 youngsters on a two-week trip, exploring their traditional lands around Cooktown. By the time the crew arrived, more than 100 locals wanted to take part.

HOPE FLOATS

Peter Malcolm had a dream to build a boat that could make a difference. Little did he know that the planned expedition would prove a lifeline for a troubled Far North community. By Jane Hutchinson. Photographed by Alex Jennings

It all began with a letter – a cry for help from a young woman on the edge of despair. “Dear Peter,” began Coraleen Bowen in her meticulous handwriting. “I live in an Aboriginal community called Hope Vale, situated in the Cape York region, Queensland. The reason I’m writing is to ask for your assistance.” She went on to explain that in the space of a few years she had lost a much-loved uncle and two teenage cousins to suicide. “And today we buried my 15-year-old niece. She hung herself with a cord... Again alcohol, drugs, boredom, loneliness, senseless direction, low self-esteem, etc [were to blame]... My fear is that if nothing is done now, a lot of teenagers are going to head in the same direction... Please, I’m desperate for your help.”

The 28-year-old single mother had just watched a television documentary about a voyage on an old pearling lugger that had taken a group of troubled teens off the mean streets of Melbourne and given them a new perspective on life on the treacherous seas of Bass Strait. She saw in those kids and in the boat’s inspiring skipper, a glimmer of hope, a lifeline for herself and her community. She decided to write to the man at the helm, Peter Malcolm.

It was a plea he couldn’t ignore. A former Royal Navy helicopter pilot, who had mounted the first

of several Antarctic expeditions at 28 and sailed the world campaigning for Greenpeace, Malcolm called Bowen as soon as he received her letter, promising to mount an expedition to help her community. The only problem was she would need to be patient – he had recently sold the lugger and, together with a small team of like-minded souls, was in the process of building a new boat. “I told her it might take three years, but not to worry, we would definitely do something,” he recalls.

In fact, the new boat took far longer and cost far more than he, or any of the team, had imagined. It was five years before the 19-metre timber and fibreglass catamaran, *Pelican 1*, was complete, but Malcolm had not forgotten his promise. In March 2004, he dialled the number he’d kept safe all those years and asked for Coraleen. There was an agonising pause at the end of the line. “You’re too late,” came the reply. She had taken her own life just four months before, leaving behind a baby daughter and a 15-year-old son – as well as grief-stricken parents, still mourning the loss of her younger brother to suicide just seven months earlier.

“It doesn’t bear thinking about,” says Malcolm, covering his face with his hands as he speaks. “I didn’t keep in touch because I didn’t want to get her hopes up. I just wanted to ring up one day



Peter Malcolm (above right, at front of boat) was inspired by a letter from a young Hope Vale mother to launch an expedition to help the children of the troubled community. Although Hope Vale is 30 minutes from the coast, some of the kids hadn't seen the ocean before the trip.

and say, 'We're ready'. I can't help thinking that if I'd kept in touch, she may not have killed herself. I was absolutely gutted. But I thought, we can still do something for the community. In fact, I felt we had to do something, to honour her."

And so, five months later, as *Pelican 1* made its way around Australia on its maiden voyage, the crew – now helmed by Garry McKechnie, a youth worker and film-maker who had sold his house and lived in a boatshed while he built the boat – called in at the desolate township of Hope Vale. They met Coraleen's parents, Des and Estelle Bowen, and took about 30 locals on a couple of three-hour sailing trips out of Cooktown. It was a touching gesture, a glimmer of light for a town fogged in by despair. But the visitors knew it was not enough. As they spent time with the community, getting to know people worn down by hopelessness, addictions and suicide, they resolved to find the funding they needed to return with something bigger and better.

On September 10 this year, buoyed by a \$35,000 windfall from the ANZ Bank, *Pelican 1*'s soaring sails swept into Cooktown's palm-fringed harbour, ready for what had now been christened the inaugural Hope Vale Youth Project. The initial plan was to take 30 youngsters on a two-week trip of a lifetime, exploring their traditional lands around Cape York, learning the old customs and stories from their elders, and gradually building a sense of hope and self-esteem. But when the crew arrived, Des and Estelle told them that more than 100 locals, young and old, wanted a piece of the action. Seventy had already set up camp on

Hummock Beach, a bone-rattling three hours four-wheel-driving north of Cooktown.

"This whole story has developed iconic status," says Malcolm, a rangy 49-year-old Englishman with a gentle voice and wisdom in his steel-grey eyes. "The fact that we came back after Coraleen wrote to us created this huge response in the community. When the people on the beach first saw the boat, some of the women were crying because it has become such a symbol of hope for them."

It quickly became obvious that the whole community, not just the kids, needed something to buoy their spirits, so the crew adjusted their plans to take out as many people as possible on daytrips and overnight excursions to nearby Lizard Island. Although the island is best known for its uber-luxury resort, it is also part of the traditional land of the Guugu Yimidjirr people of Hope Vale, and the kids on board were the first traditional owners to visit the island in three generations.

Over the next two weeks, 135 Hope Vale residents, aged from eight months to 80, got their chance to feel the thrill of a majestic ship under sail and, just maybe, catch a glimpse of hope on the horizon. On *Pelican 1*'s broad decks they fished for mackerel, learnt to handle the sails and steer, and listened while Des Bowen told mystical stories about their land and history. On the beach, they camped and played football and helped rangers from the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service tag turtles and release them back into the sea.

Though Hope Vale is just a 30-minute drive from the coast, lack of money and transport mean many of the kids have had little experience of the

sea, let alone sailing on a million-dollar catamaran. And while some of the elders tell traditional stories back in town, Des Bowen says the youngsters just don't listen any more. "They see some of the elders staggering around the place and they lose respect for them," he says. "But once you get them in the bush, it makes a difference. On this trip we've been talking to the kids about their land and how to care for it. We want to teach the kids responsibility and leadership. The penny doesn't drop until they see [the land], until they take their shoes off and make that connection with their country."

Malcolm, who makes his living in Melbourne giving motivational talks on the corporate and school circuits, introduces each outing with an inspiring spiel about setting goals and turning

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dreams into reality. On a balmy September afternoon in Cooktown's marina, wide-eyed children with bare feet sit enthralled on deck as he explains how the boat began as a dream six years ago. "It's the same with you guys," he continues. "If you have a goal – like you want to muster cattle or whatever – we can help open things up for you. It's like this project. Coraleen wrote to me in 1999 and look at us now: we're doing it. And we're going to do it every year."

The kids seem lost in their thoughts until the crew unties the boat and casts off into the harbour. Their smooth brown faces beam as they watch the land recede and turn their eyes to the horizon.

Malcolm is determined that this trip will not be a one-off, but part of an ongoing commitment to the community. On Lizard Island, he has arranged for the young people on board to tour the \$765-a-day resort and the Great Barrier Reef Research Station there. "We wanted to plant a seed in the kids' minds as to what they might aspire to."

Afterwards, back on the mainland, a group of girls are asked what they want to do when they grow up. They all reply that they want to be housemaids on Lizard Island. It seems such a modest ambition, but, as Des Bowen explains, for children who may have never seen their parents work and whose faith in the future has been cruelly stripped away, it's a significant breakthrough. "If you asked them that in town, they'd just shrug and say, I don't know. Now

they have dreams. They're saying, I'm going to be this and I'm going to be that – a policeman, a diver. This *Pelican* is like a healing dove on the ocean."

"We've just seen the kids light up," agrees Malcolm. While on Lizard Island he approached the resort and research station, as well as a cruise ship that happened to be in port, about offering traineeships to some of Hope Vale's young people. The local Department of Primary Industries and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service have also expressed interest in getting them involved in land and conservation projects. "We don't want this to be the end of it," says Malcolm. "We





"PELICAN HAS MADE US SEE SOMETHING GOOD HAS COME OF CORALEEN'S DEATH"



Estelle and Des Bowen (top) have lost two children to suicide in a town where alcohol abuse, boredom and lack of community facilities have stripped away the dreams of the young. "There's nothing here for the young people," laments Des Bowen. "They just wander around - there's no drop-in centre."



want to come back every year, but we also want to set things in motion so the opportunities keep opening when we're not here."

Roughly 1500 people live crammed into the squat, concrete-block houses that line the desolate streets of Hope Vale. A large majority don't work and those who do might spend a day or two a week picking up rubbish or cleaning offices for the local CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) Work-for-the-Dole scheme. Although the town is a "dry" community - no alcohol can be sold there - it's only half an hour's drive from Cooktown's pubs and alcohol abuse is rampant. Marijuana is the drug of choice for youngsters with little else to do, and it's no surprise that harder drugs are infiltrating a community looking for ways to ease its pain. Domestic violence is endemic in homes where 15 or more people from three generations must share three bedrooms and one bathroom, due to a chronic housing shortage. And suicide is at epidemic proportions. Estelle Bowen, an astonishingly stoic woman who works for the local mental health service and has herself lost two children to suicide, says the town has suffered 10 suicides in the past five years and 60 to 70 attempted suicides. "We get called out almost every night."

"There's nothing here for the young people," laments her sad-eyed husband, as he stares at the snapshots of his children lining the stained walls of the family's living room. "They just wander around. There's no transport to go to the coast. There's no drop-in centre. A lot of them drop out of school, they haven't got any work and they join the group drinking and drugging. Coraleen had problems

with drugs also. She realised there was so much hopelessness in the community."

By all accounts an exceptionally bright and artistic young woman, Coraleen had been working with her father to start a cultural tourism business, and her death knocked all sense of hope out of the old man. He spent time at a psychiatric unit in Cairns and has since moved out of the family home to live on his traditional land up north. "After I spend three or four hours in town I have to get out. I get too uptight. There's too many bad memories."

He admits he was sceptical when Malcolm first proposed doing something to help the community. "I didn't want to be part of the whole thing. But at the same time, I thought, this is Coraleen's last wish - she wouldn't want us to turn our backs on it. I just couldn't understand why these complete strangers living at the other end of the country would want to do something like this for us. I was really surprised when he actually turned up with the boat."

But Coraleen's letter had had a powerful impact, not just on the crew of *Pelican 1*, but also on two young executives from ANZ. Paul Morton and Adrian Morgan, who look after the bank's call-centre technology, had attended one of Malcolm's motivational sessions, talking about his first Antarctic expedition and his current dream of using *Pelican 1* to pursue inspiring projects with a social or environmental bent. They were so impressed they called him afterwards to see if they could help with any projects. He told them about his plans for Hope Vale and showed them Coraleen's letter. "That was it for me," says Morton. "I thought, imagine if that were happening in my family."

The two lobbied inside the bank to secure some of the money earmarked for community projects for the Hope Vale expedition. Four months later they had a commitment for \$35,000 and permission to join Malcolm and his team on the trip. "It's been such an eye-opener," says Morton, tanned and beaming after two weeks on board. "We've had 135 people through the boat and every one of them is transformed," says Morgan. "They're happy."

He noticed the biggest transformation in Coraleen's older sister, Julianne, a dark-eyed woman worn down by, not only the deaths of two of her siblings, but also years of domestic violence and caring for a 12-year-old daughter with spina bifida. "When I first saw her, she just looked hard, like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders," says Morgan. "Next time I saw her she was smiling, she looked 10 years younger."

Back in Hope Vale, Julianne's mother says this is the first time her troubled daughter has seen the rest of the family since Coraleen's death almost two years ago. "There's been a lot of healing," says Estelle Bowen, quietly. "*Pelican* has made us see something good has come of Coraleen's death. It's lifted us up. She wrote in her letter that Hope Vale is hopeless; now we have hope." ■

ANZ is currently reviewing the possibility of an ongoing contribution to the Hope Vale Youth Project. Lizard Island Resort has agreed to start a pilot work-experience program for Hope Vale youngsters, and Peter Malcolm and his team are continuing discussions with other potential employers.

For more information about Pelican Expeditions visit www.pelicanexpeditions.com.au