MY TOWN

Tom Price

It's the birthplace of Australia's iron-ore industry and named for a steel executive. But the locals in this Pilbara town 1500 kilometres north of Perth have another name for themselves: "ferals". **Susan Horsburgh** meets six members of this rock-solid community. Photography by Frances Andrijich.



NAIL TECHNICIAN, SNAKE CATCHER AND TRUCK DRIVER

Jenny Ryle

When you've been in town for 10 to 15 years, you're classified as a "local" and after 15 years you're a "feral". I moved here with my parents in 1995, when I was 14. Both my parents worked at the mine: my dad was a fitter and turner and my mum drove buses.

About five months ago, I started working for the mine, driving the big haul trucks. They're like Tonka trucks on steroids! I'd never done it before but I was after job security for me and my kids – I have a 10-year-old girl and 16-year-old boy. People said I'd hate the driving, being alone, but it's amazing. I'm a real people person and this is my me time.

I've also got a caravan decked out with a pedi-spa, fairy lights and more than 200 colours of nail polish. It's called Jen's Nail Studio and I've got around 35 regular customers I see over a five-day fortnight. I've covered the van in glitter so it sparkles in the sun. I love the one-on-one contact with my ladies. I have two sayings: "What's said in Jen's den, stays in Jen's den" and "You come for your therapy session with a free set of nails". I started because years ago, when I fell pregnant, my nails split and a lady put a set on me. I was like, "Wow! I've gone from being a tomboy wearing steel-cap boots to having fancy nails!" Nails just make you feel elegant.

I'm also a qualified wildlife carer and snake catcher. Snakes have always intrigued me – they're mysterious. I catch and release them first thing in the morning, at least 10 kilometres out of town. Sometimes they look back and I like to think they thank me, because I've saved them from the shovel.

A while back, the local football team hit an owl at Halfway Creek, 40 ks out. They didn't think much of it but when the guy got to Paraburdoo, he checked the front of the bus for damage and the owl was still in the grill. He said it was the scariest thing because the owl had its back to him but turned its head a full 180 degrees. We let it go a week later.

People come and go from Tom Price but I'm here for the long haul. I don't know anything different. This is home to me.

"Everyone rallies around you when you need them. It took us over an hour to return everyone's baking dishes from all the food we were given when I broke my arm!"



EVENT MANAGER

Sonia Powell

Tom Price is an oasis in the middle of nowhere, in the most amazing landscape. It has a really clean, beautiful feel about it compared with some other Pilbara towns. I'm from Albany [in Western Australia's Great Southern region] and we moved here 15 years ago for my husband's work. He's a driller with Rio Tinto.

Everyone who comes to Tom Price has a one- or five-year plan so a lot of people don't put down roots. But the way we're going, we're never going to leave. I'm breaking out my white linen now, not saving it for when we move south. The red dust is so fine that it doesn't matter how clean miners are after a shower; their bodies will excrete iron-ore dust at night so all your white bed linen goes pink.

Tom Price is the ultimate mining town to live in. Everyone rallies around you when you need them. It took us over an hour to return everyone's baking dishes from all the food we were given when I broke my arm!

I took over as event manager of the Karijini Experience three years ago. It's this amazing event in the heart of Karijini National Park [16 to 21 April], with arts, music, food and culture, all on country. We set up a village on the airstrip – there's no power or water; we bring everything in and everyone hangs out under our tent, having the most beautiful time.

Every morning there's a health and wellbeing activity, like yoga in the Fortescue Falls gorge. There's Aboriginal tool- and weapon-making and a Yarning with the Elders workshop, where ladies and men from around the Pilbara tell their stories, show their photos and sing their songs. It's a real merging of cultures.

We also do a three-course meal for 152 people, with round tables of eight, under the stars. We have opera in Kalamina Gorge and last year we created a new event called Songs in the Gorge, with Mark Atkins on the didjeridu and Gina Williams and Guy Ghouse storytelling and singing. It was just bone-tingling – this intimate performance for 100 people, acoustics bouncing off the rocks. So magical.



SCHOOL NURSE

Deb Thomas

I'd been nursing in Saudi Arabia but I came home to Townsville, where I grew up, then I had itchy feet so I came here in 2004. I walked through the hospital, thinking it was like *A Country Practice* – it had that personal touch. It was meant to be just two and a half months but I met my husband at a barbecue.

About four years ago I started as a nurse for the primary and secondary schools; it's probably the most satisfying position I've had. You can have so many wins. Adolescence can be difficult and these kids are in a small, remote place so there's a bit more of that boredom factor. Also, if you're having problems with friendships, like most adolescents do, there's not much room to move. There are children with negative past experiences or trauma and [you can] help them get on the right path and become independent, confident teenagers. You'll see them at Coles and have a quick conversation and you watch their growth – that strength and perseverance.

It's the people who make Tom Price but it's also the environment. It's hard to find a town as pretty as this one. As you drive in, there are these beautiful green lawns and great big fields and you're surrounded by the Hamersley Range. Summer is very hot, there are lots of flies and dust – but then the rain starts to fall and these beautiful waterholes just fill up. Sometimes my kids will come home from school and we'll drive to the most amazing little swimming hole.

We can still connect to the outside world. My son video-links with a drumming teacher in Townsville and my daughter is doing violin the same way with a teacher in Brisbane; they've both learned piano with a local teacher here in Tom Price. The isolation doesn't have to stop you.

MINE LABORATORY SUPERVISOR

Brad Malingre

We came to Tom Price nine years ago from Mandurah, which is where I grew up, an hour south of Perth. You get off the plane at Paraburdoo and it's a 45-minute drive to Tom Price. There's nothing to see – just red dirt and scrub – and my wife and I were looking at each other thinking, "What are we doing?" But then you come up over this hill and we couldn't believe how green it was. It looks like a little holiday town.

I'm a lab supervisor at the mine. This was the first place they found iron ore in Australia. The town has about 3000 people and half of them would be Rio Tinto employees.

Every year, I pretty much fly the flag for Movember, the campaign that raises awareness of men's health, particularly prostate and testicular cancer and suicide. You start the month clean-shaven and grow a moustache and that generates conversation because people ask, "What's that thing on your face?" My son, who was born on 23 November, doesn't have any birthday photos that don't show his dad with a seedy moustache. I've raised $55,000 over the past 10 years. I say, "You can pick on my moustache all you like but every time you laugh at it, it costs you $5."

We lost my brother to suicide in 2008 and my dad to brain cancer in 2012 so Movember keeps them fresh in our memory and it's a way to get people opening up. At least one person every year will come up and say, "Thanks for telling your story – I've lost a family member or I've been struggling a bit myself." If only one person comes out of the woodwork, it's 100 per cent worth doing.

I love the community feel of Tom Price. You can live your life here knowing that you're in a safe town where everybody's got everyone else's back.

If you are experiencing personal difficulties, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.





BAPTIST CHURCH PASTOR

Gavin Douglas

My father and grandfather were also pastors. My father pastored in WA's North West and Grandad was a linguist and missionary in Indigenous communities for 60 years. My family was part of that narrative – the Stolen Generation – and it's difficult to come to terms with, although they were deeply respected among the Indigenous people.

When I was 18, I did a Bachelor of Ministry and ended up in prison chaplaincy for four and a half years. It was challenging. The line is a lot thinner than we think between doing good and doing evil. I saw good people doing terrible things and things became a lot greyer than I thought they were.

I have hemiplegia, which affects one side of my body – spastic paralysis, where the muscles tighten up. It's helped me see people on the outside of the community and I can connect with those in pain because I experience pain.

"I remember flying into Paraburdoo, seeing red dirt and spinifex, and I welled up and said, 'This is home.'"

I moved here with my wife, who's the school chaplain, and our two boys in 2014. I remember flying into Paraburdoo, seeing red dirt and spinifex, and I welled up and said, "This is home." Tom Price is the pick of the Pilbara.

On Tuesdays we run the Fun Factory after school for 60 kids. We have this overarching rule: "Build people up, help people grow, because people matter." So we don't let kids use put-downs – they encourage each other.

Around one of the town's ovals is a nine-hole disc-golf course. It's a combination of golf and Frisbee; like golf, each hole has a par. Naturally, I'm an evangelist so I want to share it with everyone. I walk along with players and ask, "How's life?" As a kid I was teased for walking funny so I'd jump in and tell the joke before the bully could get me. With disc golf, I go, "Hey, it's a gimmick, it's silly. But come have a throw." I've done that with my faith as well: "I believe in an invisible god – that's a bit crazy but hear my story of how that's important to me."

EASTERN
GURUMA ELDER

Wayne Stevens

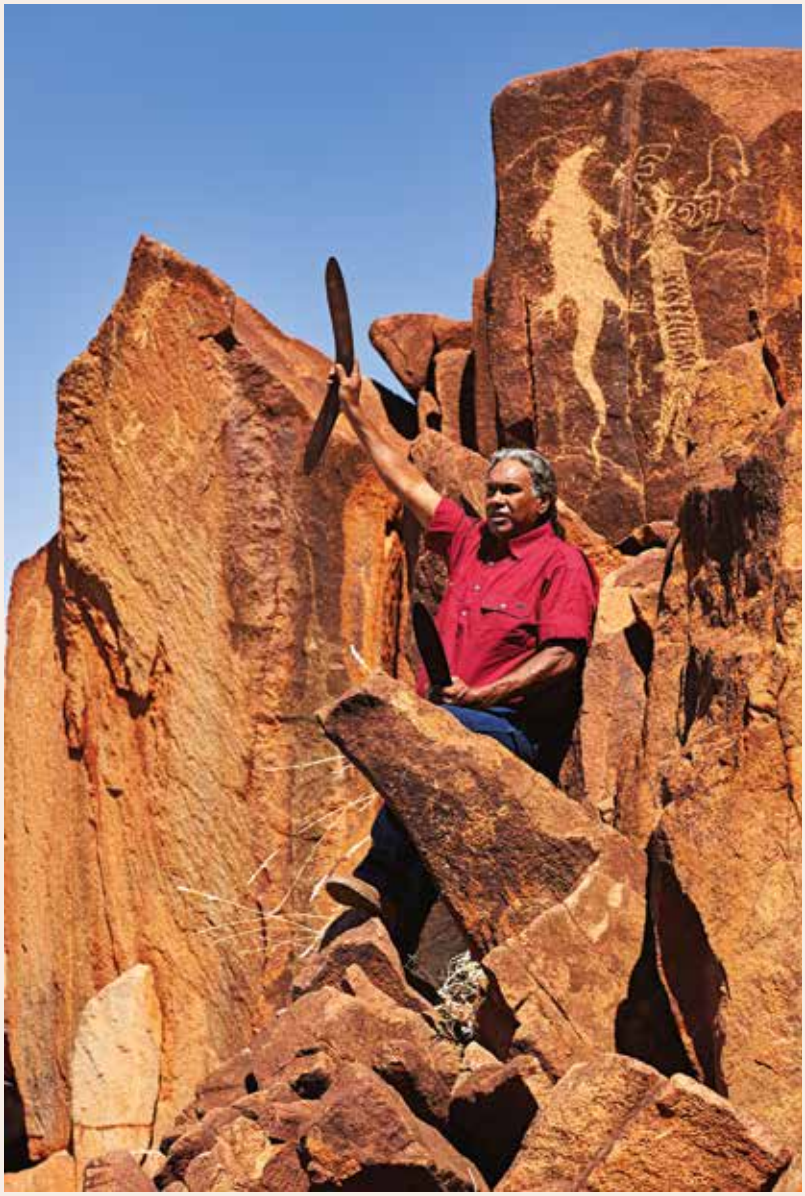
The country here is pretty harsh – very arid – and the temperature can rise up to 57 degrees in summer. You have to come from here to be able to put with it.

I live alone, 35 kilometres west of Tom Price on the Beasley River. I don't feel isolated. It's something you come to love because it's part of you. You're born into the country and the more you understand the songs and the language, [the more you] put the story together. It's like a big storybook and you're reading it as you move along.

I'm CEO of Wirddan Gudu Media Cultural Arts and Tours. *Wirddan Gudu* means the young and the old, hand in hand, learning. Tourists come from all over and I do rock-art tours to give them inside information about our ways and traditions. I've done a lot of schooling; I graduated from Western school and my traditional school, learning the songs and stories of my country, just to make me feel a bit more complete.

I also do cultural mapping using drones, to map out the waterholes and care for country. No-one is paying me – it's what needs to be done to preserve [the culture] for the next generation. I document, transcribe and digitise the stories of my country. I carve the hunting spear, the woomera and boomerangs. The killer boomerang is really big with a sharp edge. You throw it at flocks of birds but if it whacks you on the head, it can do a lot of damage.

I've got a single out called *Welcome to Country*. I sing and play the six-string guitar and the tapping sticks. I've featured on an album, *Sounds of Tom Price*. I've always kept my music in the closet because my dad showed me a work ethic – [you should] be able to do a hard day's work but I've done that. I used to work in the pit digging iron ore but as an Aboriginal person from this country, I've had other concerns that have led me down a different path. It's a bit like hunting Moby Dick.



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