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Tropical North Queensland

April 2006



THE FREEMANS

Next Step From Tjapukai

Steve Moon – Saving Aceh

Tammy Barker – Stunt Woman

THE
Don & Judy
SHOW



Judy and Don Freeman, co-founders of Tjapukai Cultural Centre, have been an integral part of the Cairns tourism industry for the better part of two decades. Linda Cooper headed to their stunning Kuranda home and discovered that while many know them as international award-winning business operators, not many are aware that this extraordinary couple have been awarded a Federal Government contract to help indigenous Australians. Photography by Nim de Swardt. ▶



It was many things, but most importantly, the performance provided Judy and Don with their first chance to work with indigenous theatre. "At that point we worked out we had to make a living out of this," says Judy. "Tourism had started to take off so we approached the Tjapukai community and said 'let's write a play'. Ten of us worked from a basement and off we went. We wrote a play, put a sign up on the street and charged \$7 a ticket. We knew we had a hit and from then on it didn't stop. That was the birth of the Tjapukai Dance Centre." Ironically, it took a Canadian and a New Yorker to see the possibilities of what has become one of the biggest national and international award-winning attractions in this region. The talent has been lying on our doorstep the whole time.

The face of the region changed in 1996 with the unveiling of many new icons; Skyrail, Cairns Central, the Convention Centre, Reef Hotel Casino and the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park in Smithfield. With the Chapman Group, and other local specialists, including Terry Martin, an architect, and the local Tjapukai and Yirrigandji communities, the new centre was built. It has become an integral part of the Cairns tourism industry, employing hundreds of local indigenous people, and giving them a platform for theatrical art that has been thousands of years in the making.

The Freemans have, to a certain degree, become the white voice of the indigenous people. Their prominence in the industry, and their connection with the indigenous population, has propelled them into a whole new realm. Late last year the Federal Government, as part of the 'Indigenous Business Ready Program', appointed them as consultants. It is a two-year \$2 million project that has been specifically created to assist long-term, and sustainable, aboriginal tourism projects.

"It is no state secret that a lot of money has been thrown at aboriginal tourism in the past," explains Don. "The problem, however, is that there have been no long-term mentors that have stuck around. Sure, money has been handed over and projects have been set up but then these operators are left to cope on their own."

Six consultative groups have been set up around the country, with a mandate in the next two years to produce up to 60 viable businesses. Judy and Don are responsible for 10, which they have hand-selected as highly likely to succeed.

Many of these operators have a limited concept of business or marketing, so it is Judy and Don's responsibility to change that, and help create solid businesses that will add to the burgeoning indigenous tourism market.

They have already selected, and began working with, ten Queensland businesses. The projects are diverse; the Cape York Turtle Rescue project is owned by the Mapoon community and is aimed at environmental travellers who can become involved in programs to save the turtles; the Aurukun Fishing and Wetland Charters; the Walker family in Bloomfield have a real chance of success with Bloomfield walking tours; and Gangaligan Aboriginal Safaris, feral pig-shooting expeditions run by Warren Clements. Another six projects flesh out their program, which takes them to the far corners of the region. It is a huge responsibility and Don and Judy are aware of what's at stake. "We have to make this work," says Judy, who is also a board member of 'Indigenous Tourism Australia'. "We've been given public money to play with and we're completely aware that the Federal Government has spent 20 years trying to make things work."

Those who know Don and Judy will not expect them to fail. Building relationships with indigenous communities is not easy so the fact that they have managed to do it successfully speaks for itself. Judy has also recently been appointed to the newly-formed tourism panel of the 'Indigenous Land Corporation'. Don is kept busy as a board member of Festival Cairns, and holds a position with 'Collette', a major American tour wholesaler.

Regardless of their responsibilities, they both agree they'd like to create at least one more major cultural tourism project, this time in Jerusalem. Their ultimate goal is to provide a 'theme park' that brings three major religions together; Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Spirituality runs through the core of this enigmatic couple but they are blunt in saying, "It's time to drop all the bullshit and for people of all faiths to learn how to get along. That's what we'd love to do – create a 'religious theme park' that embraces everyone."

If a Canadian and New Yorker can propel our superb Tjapukai talent onto the world-stage, then I have no doubt they will discover the same magic in the religious human spirit. CL



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◀ Judy and Don are an engaging couple. Judy chats away with a side-splitting grin on her face, while Don is far more contemplative. They make an unlikely duo and yet admit to being soul mates, discovering each other in the golden bowels of Guatemala in 1977. Judy was selling embroidered American-Indian Mandalas (spiritual symbols) in a flea market. Don, on a sojourn from his frenetic New York lifestyle, plonked his one-year-old son Zadek on the ground next to her one-year-old daughter Oryana, and they began talking. They were both still married and platonically, ended up living next door to each other in a Guatemalan compound – with their respective partners.

Their Guatemalan adventure is just one of many in a lifetime of adventures. They are intrepid travellers, gypsy nomads, and since their union have explored remote, and spiritual places – connecting to exotic locations in ways that transcend the normal boundaries of shopping and tourism. They still own a home in Anjuna Beach, Goa (India), a place they describe as the precursor to the international dance party scene. “Our kids grew up there,” says Don. “In the 70s it was totally organic with no electricity and no running water. It was a primitive village on the beach where world-travelling hippies would converge. But it’s also a party place and a popular spot for Italian and French fashion designers and a ton of celebrities.” Oryana, Judy’s daughter from her first marriage is currently making a documentary on the village and the cesspit of talent that has emerged from the extraordinary cross-section of cultures.

They are spiritual people, trained in the ways of Vipassana, living their life under Buddhism principles. Initially it appears a contradiction, their lifestyle of parties and socialising and the beliefs of Buddhism. I am ignorant in the teachings of Buddhism but fascinated with their ‘silent retreats’. “It’s empowering,” she explains. “For 14 hours a day you sit in complete silence with your own thoughts. I figure that when you’re dead, you’re dead for a long time, so you might as well get used to living with yourself. The retreats teach you to focus – it’s helped build the strength and inspiration I’ve needed to do what I’ve done.”

Don agrees. “I’m not religious but the retreats give me 10 days of clarity. Your mind comes out like a razor, everything is so clear and sharp. It’s difficult and if I

asked myself honestly if I prefer to lie on a beach or do absolutely nothing for 10 days, I’d probably choose the beach. But it’s worth it.”

Although this spirituality has very much been a part of their lives, it is light moons away from their upbringing. “I was a head cheerleader, the Queen of the high school prom,” laughs Judy, who is from Montreal, Canada. “I think the movie ‘Legally Blonde’ was a send-up of my life.” Don, a New Yorker who has been involved in theatre since the 60s, spent months hanging out with William Shatner (Star Trek, Miss Congeniality, Boston Legal).

Consequently, their joint love of theatre and spirituality is what attracted them to Cairns. Don explains that outside of India, it was the only tropical place that had an English-speaking democratic government. Strangely enough, they are always drawn to locations at 17° latitude (Goa, Cairns, Vanuatu – where they have recently purchased land).

Arriving in 1982, the couple spent four months in Cairns before heading to Bali. Upon return, Judy gave birth to Cody, their only son together, (the couple have a child each with their previous partners) and while he automatically became an Australian citizen, the couple were visiting on a tourist visa and had to leave on its expiry. “We travelled everywhere,” remembers Judy, “in search of someone who would give us an Australian visa. In the end, it was given to us by a consulate back in Don’s home town of New York.”

The visa was granted with the understanding that the Freemans would set up a professional theatre outside an Australian capital city. The significance of them creating the world award-winning Tjapukai is not lost on either of them. But they had it tough at the beginning. Launching ‘The Odyssey You’ll Never See’ in 1985 at the Kuranda Amphitheatre, in conjunction with renowned didgeridoo player David Hudson, Judy and Don began their love affair with the indigenous culture, and the people.

“That musical was the start of it all,” recalls Don, who was responsible for creating a show, the likes of which Kuranda had never seen before. “It was a musical comedy with many themes, but the most significant was to show the coming of white man, in the eyes of the Tjapukai people.”

Tourist attraction.



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