Good evening to you all.

Allow me to tell you of my friendship with Eric Johnston in whose memory this event occurs each year.

Eric, whom we all knew as Commodore Johnston was the Administrator of the Northern Territory in the 1980s. I was Principal of the school at Wurrumiyanga (Bathurst Island). It was on his several visits to the Tiwi Islands that our friendship cemented. Eric was known for his interest in and support of Indigenous people. He didn’t try to make remote areas into urbanised outer suburbs of Darwin. He respected the people and the communities for who and what they were.

Eric and his wife, Joan, even made time amidst their many commitments to visit me and stay a night at the convent. During his illness, I was among the privileged few to be allowed to visit him in hospital. I was also privileged to be invited to his cremation.

So, Eric, I will do my best, to honour you tonight.

Where to begin, I ask myself? Am I talking about Health or Education? Answering this query is easy, for there can be very little education if health issues are neglected. I have been privileged to educate many Tiwi children and work with their families who experience all the illnesses of third world countries in our first world nation. The health issues impact greatly on the delivery of quality education.

What I have learned over many years working with the Tiwi is that LISTENING to them is essential... communication is the key.
There are indigenous ways of teaching and there are western ways of teaching.
There are indigenous ways of healing and there are western ways of healing.

I would like to quote words written by Bishop Francis Xavier Gsell, founder of the mission on Bathurst Island in 1911. He wrote these words towards the end of his earthly life. His words speak to me of a man who felt he had in some way failed his flock. He speaks of his lack of ability to communicate with the people themselves. I quote...

“Fifty years ago, when I started my missionary life, anthropology was still in its infancy. If it had been developed, it would have been very useful to me and would have helped me avoid many mistakes. I had to establish contact with the Tiwi alone, prudently, slowly. I had to endeavour to the best of my ability to learn their habits and customs so as to penetrate into their minds and hearts without hurt or shock. I was the humble instrument of a divine task.”

Seventy-nine years later, Sister Teresa Ward, in her book, “Towards an Understanding of the Tiwi Language/Cultural Context”, written for non-Tiwi teachers, understands the Bishop’s honesty. Sister Teresa writes,

“cultural transmission is the primary function of education in any culture.”  Sister goes on to say, “all elements within Tiwi culture tend towards integration, whilst at the same time are continually adapting and changing in order to deal with life, yet retain the coherence which is of particular importance to them, a oneness with people, the land and all within it.”

How many times have Tiwi people been presented with changes thrust upon them by our policy makers, be it in education or in health? What is it within them that can still hold on to culture and language? Sister Teresa answers with question when we read....

“the Tiwi people of Bathurst and Melville Islands have a unique way of looking at the world...their world view. It is expressed through their whole way of life, in the way they do things, they perceive things, it is expressed in their language, in the way in which they see themselves in relationship to other Tiwi and other physical entities, in their way of explaining reality, in their myths, legends and philosophies.”
Let us pause here to dwell on the phrase ‘their world view’.

Let us place it beside the Government’s view for education set out in a paper written by Nina Burridge and Andrew Chodkiewicz (chodkivich), titled ‘An Historical Overview of Aboriginal Education Policies in the Australian Context’. It is not my intention to dwell on the many policies and statements found in this document. What I want to point out is that in 2010, when the National Action Plan was written, governments then agreed to six ambitious targets of which the Action Plan is one and I quote from the paper....

“Governments across Australia have agreed to take urgent action to try to close the gap between the life outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, including a special focus on pre-school education.”

In these six targets, there is not one mention of language or culture. There is not one mention of local ownership of education, nor of educating children in the languages they understand, in addition to the additional languages they are learning.

No, the targets read, and I give them to you as written in the document...

- Close the life expectancy gap within a generation
- Halve the gap in mortality rate for Indigenous children under five yrs in a decade
- Ensure all indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013)
- Halve the gap in indigenous students’ reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018)
- At least halve the gap in indigenous Yr 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates (by 2020)
- Halve the gap in employment outcomes between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians within a decade (by 2018).

All Australian State and Territory Governments agreed with these six targets. As a long-serving member of a remote community I think I can honestly say

“are these just words to satisfy governments that they are seen to be doing something for our Indigenous people?”
I see that these are policies designed from outside of the communities and outside of the opinions/ideas of remote Indigenous people. Well intentioned they may be, but where are the indigenous voices of the people I live with and work alongside?

Note the word ‘gap’ is mentioned in five of the six targets, and it either has to be closed or halved. To me this is a very negative approach to our modern-day education. It is time to stop talking about closing the GAP and start talking about ‘building bridges’ as it is not as simple as putting in a few stitches to close the gap. As pointed out there is no mention of language and culture in these targets, no mention of ownership of future life pathways.

This little video was shown to me not so long ago

*Play video https://youtu.be/0P9FRacTji0*

Food for thought. What might the potential be if there is a two-way bridge across that river? One where people’s language and culture is safe while they have access and understanding of the western English-speaking one as well? UNESCO thinks this is a good idea. Along with this, our response could be to change our thinking; to realise that we are not communicating in the right way, and to work with the people to build that two-way bridge for those who don’t have the support to become swimmers.

To help everyone (indigenous and non-indigenous) to use the two-way bridge, I’d like to honour ERIC by looking at his name in a new light. I think policies to really assist indigenous people in both health and education would make sure they include the wisdom of ERIC.

Yes, the name ERIC. Break it down into each letter and what it could stand for and I think we have a document that could be used to build bridges and enhance both our own lives and those of the indigenous people we serve.

‘E’ for Eric.... Empowerment through ENGAGEMENT. Engaging with others, the people we work with, can result in a level of personal and community empowerment when we work together. I had to learn how to engage with Tiwi people to the point where I felt honoured to be able to hand over the leadership of the school to a Tiwi leadership group.
‘R’ in ERIC.... Respect the people we work with, RESPECT their knowledge, RESPECT their views, RESPECT their beliefs, RESPECT their values, RESPECT their lives. The Patakijali Museum honours the Tiwi reality both before and since contact with non-Tiwi. Tiwi women now manage that knowledge resource for the Tiwi people.

‘I’ in ERIC.... INCLUDE the person, the community, in both learning (education) and healing (health) processes; take them along with you, share knowledge in addition to information, about education and health. Too often, in education, we have delivered information, but not taught students ‘how to know’ about their own culture and ours, and the relationship between the two.

Information and knowledge are two very different concepts. Let’s think about it for a moment. Knowledge is critical if we want to achieve successful health outcomes in indigenous communities. I think you (and I) need knowledge of the people we serve. It is important to be able to predict what might happen as a result of providing information alone, across different cultural world views.

An example.... I was talking with one of my co-workers in the museum one day. We were talking about food and eating. She said,

“I have to have three breakfasts”

I said “Why? You will get really big, and that will be very unhealthy, kidney disease etc.”

This is a very intelligent woman, highly literate in both Tiwi and English, and cross-culturally competent in many ways. She takes three tablets and was told on separate occasions, as each tablet was added, to take it after breakfast. It might sound funny, but in fact, it is tragic. She was given the information, but not the knowledge about how the tablets work. She took the information literally. It is information that is culturally unfamiliar, therefore, taken at face value. She wasn’t included in her health management. She was told what to do, she was given the information.

Of course, embarrassment followed in this instance, but as a good friend of mine, she was pleased to learn about and to know that the tablets worked after one breakfast.
When we know the people we serve, we may predict such possibilities. Serving is different to ‘providing a service’. The latter is what we are used to doing in education, and I suspect, in health as well, in the western culture.

LASTLY the ‘C’ in ERIC...COLLABORATE with the students, the people, the community to develop solutions and pathways to better health and education outcomes. Each community is different. There is no one solution for all communities.

We’ll only achieve a more positive situation when we work with each other, alongside each other, share the power of decision-making and walk the path together.

Thank you.