

Tennant Creek, Northern Territory

## **J.B. & H.E. THOMSON MUSTERING & BORE MAINTENANCE CONTRACTORS & JUNO HORSE CENTRE**

Jamie and Helen Thomson started a cattle mustering and bore maintenance contracting business, which today has developed into a business challenge of monumental proportions. Jamie, a 40 year old Kalkadoon man and his wife Helen, a 45 year old Gildja woman, reflect the very epitome of Aboriginal strength and tenacity by showing what Aboriginal people can, given half a chance, achieve. Out of frustration with their original employment, they decided self employment was the only way to achieve financial independence. They decided to do it tough, start with nothing and absolutely follow their dream of creating a cattle mustering and bore maintenance business that had no equal in the Northern Territory. Important in their dream was to develop an internal training program for Indigenous youth at risk, by teaching them the skills necessary to become valuable stockmen and women.

### **The Story So Far . . .**

In 2002, Jamie was working as an employee of a cattle mustering contractor and became very frustrated at the methodology that his employer used to muster cattle and maintain outback bores. Experience said there were better and more efficient ways to do this work. Jamie also identified that many Indigenous young people were 'at risk' and were not being given the opportunity to develop their natural skills as some of the best stockmen / women in the world.



**BUILDING THE FUTURE THROUGH ENTERPRISE**  
**Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs**

*Juno Grounds*

Jamie's wife Helen, a Community Welfare Worker for six years had become frustrated at continued discussion and no action. *'Enough was enough'* for Helen! She resigned from the security of a weekly pay cheque to join Jamie and pursue the vision of their own business.



*Thomson and workers*

From the start, they knew it was going to be *'hard yakka'*. Living out in the bush, experiencing dust every day, all in following a dream of becoming financially independent and providing some security for their family.

For Jamie, with a reputation as one of the finest stockmen in the Northern Territory, the experience having his wife working alongside him mustering cattle was valuable in itself. Helen has always shared a deep love of the Australian Bush, so for her it seemed a natural step to saddle up alongside Jamie.

From business start-up, recruiting skilled stockmen to help muster their client's cattle was a challenge. They were confronted with the daunting question *'how do we find the right people for this work, when there is already an extreme shortage of skilled stockmen?'*

Jamie recalls – *'Mount Ebenezer Road House was our very first client. They needed a new bore motor fitted. From these humble beginnings the word got around, and J.B. & H. E. Thomson Mustering and Bore Maintenance Contractors was born.'*

Helen continues the story – *'We built our first purpose built 'Bull Catcher' around the time Numery Station became our first mustering client. The people at Numery were delighted with our work, and the competitive contract price we offered. From a past association, we again met up with Tim Edmonds from T & R Pastoral Company from Murray Bridge in South*

## Building The Future Through Enterprise – Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

*Australia. Tim has not only become a close friend, but a very consistent client, as T & R Pastoral has substantial interests in the Northern Territory.'*

Both Helen and Jamie recall *'none of this has been easy, it's been a bloody struggle, we've had heaps of heartache, and some challenging arguments. Every time when you think the business is going to collapse, or we can't pay our bills, another door amazingly opens. We just keep pushing ahead one step at a time.'*

During the tough times, their dreams also kept them going - in particular their dream of making a difference to the lives of young Indigenous people.



*One of the workers*

As Helen shares *'we feel we have a responsibility to these young Aboriginal men and women to keep on trying, to give them good work opportunities and wages, so that they can keep in touch with the "land" and have a better understanding of where the future is going to take them.'*

The Thomsons have also been challenged by the constant *'put downs'* of extended family, who almost fear other Aboriginal people being successful. As Jamie puts it - *'It's sometimes very hard to turn the other cheek and walk away from the crap, it can be very disheartening.'*

Over the last 2 years, they have purchased a number of vehicles. On each occasion, they have used commercial finance. Until recently nobody has put up their hand, been prepared to listen to what they want to achieve and share their dreams.

Early in 2005 the Thomson's visited the Juno Horse Centre in Tennant Creek and met owner, Malcolm McAskill. There was an immediate sense of *'being home'* as Malcolm shared the development story of the Juno Horse Centre. Malcolm had obtained outstanding results running two training courses in basic life skills, stock handling and horsemanship with Aboriginal youth at risk,. Helen and Jamie visited every *'corner'* of the

## BUILDING THE FUTURE THROUGH ENTERPRISE Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

Juno Horse Centre and knew this is where their future lay. Luckily for them, Juno was for sale as Malcolm, now 65, was seeking to retire from the business.

Upon returning to Alice Springs, the Thomson's shared their dreams with Gina and Rayleen of Kungka's Can Cook, who suggested to Helen and Jamie that it they meet Roger Green from the Enterprise Development Centre in Adelaide, and discuss their business aspirations and dreams.

They met with Roger in May 2005. As Roger recalls – *'I was so impressed with Helen's passion and commitment to helping Aboriginal youth at risk, supported by an existing business enterprise that had survived. They both shared clear "dreams" for the future. I gladly offered my help to them to make the Juno Horse Centre at Tennant Creek a reality.'*



*An employee*

With Roger's technical support, and practical assistance from the Northern Territory Government, the Thomson's have begun to fuse their passion for mustering and 'youth at risk' into the Juno Horse Centre.

The challenge over the coming months is to prepare a detailed business plan with credible financial details that achieves their next goal of owning the Juno Horse Centre at Tennant Creek. Both Jamie and Helen are confident that with Roger Green's assistance and that of the Northern Territory and Australian Governments, their vision will become a reality.

## The Impact

Over a period of less than 30 months, Jamie and Helen have built a substantial business which now turns over in excess of \$200,000. The business is constantly growing. With the opportunity to move to Tennant Creek and take over the Juno Horse Centre, with its training focus, the combination of both business ventures will substantially assist the local Tennant Creek economy.

Today, on an *'as needs basis'*, they employ up to four Indigenous men, most of whom Jamie and Helen have trained themselves. They plan to continue and expand their policy of employing and providing on the job training for Aboriginal 'youth at risk'. In Helen's word's *'Aboriginal people have a natural ability and affinity to be outstanding stockmen - it gives us great pleasure to give them the opportunity of meaningful employment.'*

## Success Factors

The Thomson's have identified six critical factors to the success of their business.

### *Faith in Your Own Ability*

This attitude is captured so well in Jamie's words *'it's easy to become just another statistic of an Aboriginal business that has not succeeded, especially when Governments in the past have adopted a policy of throwing money at an Aboriginal challenge, and hoped the problem would disappear. Today, this attitude is changing, and it is more important than ever that we as Aboriginal business proprietors have true faith in our own ability to succeed in business.'*



*Horse Training*

### *Ignoring the Knockers*

Avoiding the knockers and the "negative energy suckers" is essential, especially within one's extended family. As Jamie reports – *'It's easy to let the negative comments get you down; I guess it's the faith that Helen and I have in each other that gets us through. We focus on the task at hand and charge*

#### **SUCCESS FACTORS**

- Faith in Your Own Ability
- Ignoring the Knockers
- Focusing on Your Dreams
- 'Never Say Die' Attitude
- Pride in One's Aboriginal Heritage and Skills

*forward as hard as we can, ignoring the negative people.'*

Helen and Jamie can feel justly proud of the outstanding character they have shown in building a very tough business in a harsh environment, especially with the constant "put downs" they have endured.

Roger Green from the Enterprise Development Centre states – *'Jamie and Helen have shown to me the intense level of passion, commitment and determination that I look for in any business proprietor. Nothing that is worthwhile in life is easy; but Jamie and Helen have displayed to me that rare quality of being able to withstand the 'put downs' and remain focused on the task at hand. They are outstanding Australians.'*

### ***Focusing on Your Dreams***

The Thomson's have had challenges on a day to day basis. It would have been easy to have been distracted from the task at hand and more importantly the big picture dream – where they wanted to be in the future. However, as Helen states *'whatever happens, it is very important you remain focused on the future. It is like taking to sea in a boat, knowing your final destination, but not having a clue of how you're going to get there. Remaining focused is critical to your long term success.'*

### ***'Never Say Die' Attitude***

*'In business today, it is essential to have a 'never say die' attitude, this is especially so for Aboriginal business proprietors',* says Jamie *'you need the hide of a rhinoceros and that animal's constant charging forward attitude.'*

### ***Pride in One's Aboriginal Heritage and Skills***

As Roger Green says *'being an Australian Aboriginal is a proud heritage bestowed on a few; it has over 40,000 years of history, culture and heritage.'* The Thomson's believe this reality. The Thomson's also believe they have an excellent competitive advantage in the

mustering business – *‘Aboriginal people simply make the best stockmen and women in the world.’*

## **Advice to other Indigenous people contemplating the enterprise option**

Simply the Thomson’s advice is – *‘Remember it is a bloody hard option to follow but be proud, hold your heads up high. Remember Aboriginal people have a unique advantage in business when promoted with pride and integrity.’*

## **For Further Information**

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