

Warriors on the wharf

By Penny Jones through Jawun

On 31 December 2012, the Mari Nawi will celebrate its first anniversary in action, with a New Year's Eve cruise. The Mari Nawi is the only Aboriginal owned and operated commercial vessel on Sydney Harbour. It belongs to the Redfern-based Tribal Warrior Association, which provides mentoring and job training to disadvantaged people.

It is also a boat with a traumatic past. Once known as the Katika – the Fun Boat – in December 2010 it was involved in a major crash on Sydney Harbour, charging into moored boats on Pyrmont Bay and causing serious injuries to several passengers.

In January 2011, the Tribal Warrior Association's original boat also suffered extensive damage. Shortly afterwards, Chief Executive Officer Shane Phillips heard that the Katika was up for sale.

Friends on the Harbour told Phillips not to buy the boat. The accident had caused major structural problems, and the boat would have to be rebuilt. Yet Phillips decided to borrow money and buy it, judging that it would provide work for the Tribal Warrior Association's participants, largely young men with troubled pasts, who were struggling to find work. He renamed it Mari Nawi, which means 'big canoe' in the Eora language.

To get the boat repaired, Phillips needed to find a shipwright. 'The first guy that we got was a complete racist,' he recalls. 'So we said, "we'll deal with this bloke, just to teach him; he might become good." He hardly turned up, and all he did was bag Aboriginal people. When it came to the crunch time, he said, "I don't want to do it. I've got better things I could be doing."'

Then fate intervened, in the form of the local Redfern-Waterloo butcher, Peter Page, who had fallen into debt and lost his business. The day before his butcher shop closed, Peter Page was at the pub, talking to a member of the Tribal Warrior Association, and he mentioned had thirty years' experience building boats, houses, units and bridges. When this news reached Phillips, he announced to his team, 'the butcher's coming to fix the boat'.

With the arrival of the new shipwright, the momentum grew. Phillips told his trainees that now was the time to work hard, and so they did – in the face of much skepticism. 'They got into it,' says Phillips. 'We were working daybreak to sundown, sometimes into the night. People down at the wharf were walking past and laughing at us. The tradies would leave when it was raining, but we'd be still working at it.'

The team put in a new stem, sponson and deck, often using second-hand timber which they salvaged, with Peter Page passing on his knowledge as they worked.

‘A lot of them would be next to me,’ Page remembers, ‘and they’d be asking me what I was doing. I’d tell them, “I’m putting seats here for lifejackets”, and I’d say, “if you want, you can sand it, or give it a coat of Everdure and we’ll paint it, and then it can be varnished.” ’

Then, a new person joined their crew. Barry Silva, then aged 41, had known and looked up to Shane Phillips since childhood. Struggling with an addiction to heroin, Silva found himself in court, on a pathway to jail. Phillips accompanied Silva to a forum at the Redfern Town Hall, and made a different proposal: Silva would participate in the Tribal Warrior’s program, run in partnership with the Redfern Police: boxing three times a week at 6am, life skills workshops and educational courses, and opportunities for work.

At first, Silva was a reluctant recruit. ‘I hated the training at 6 o’clock in the morning, I really did. But then I started to get to like it – eventually. I continued on with it, I just persevered.’ Silva also joined Babana Aboriginal Men’s Group, which he credits with keeping him on the right track, along with support from Redfern Police Commander, Luke Freudenstein. ‘I didn’t like coppers, but he proved himself to me. He respected me instead of just putting the bracelets on. He worked with the Redfern Aboriginal community, and he changed my opinion.’

Phillips invited Silva to come and help fix up the Mari Nawi. Silva recalls, ‘I knew a little bit about carpet-laying and a bit about carpentry. I’d learned a lot of skills over the years but I’d never really put them to the test. I’d never stayed on a job for long enough. I helped along with it, and I laid the carpet down, and I stayed with it, and Shane eventually asked me if I wanted to do some deckie work and train to become a mentor to help the young kids out.’ Silva relapsed a couple of times, succumbing to his addition, but he persevered with the Tribal Warrior program.

The pressure mounted when the Tribal Warrior Association organized a Harbour cruise on New Year’s Eve, and sold tickets to nearly 200 passengers. The boat had to be ready and accredited as a commercial vessel by 31 December, or the Association would have to pay back the booking fee – and face bankruptcy.

NSW Maritime began providing the Association with lists of deficiencies to be rectified, and the Association got to work fixing them. ‘As we got to the final stages, people were ripping us off,’ Phillips recalls. ‘Tradies were taking advantage of us when we needed them, and we allowed it. We said, “we’re desperate to get it done, we just have to take it.” ’

The day before New Year’s Eve, the Association expected to receive final approval from NSW Maritime, but at 5pm, NSW Maritime gave the Association another list of ten deficiencies, including electrical and plumbing issues. All ten deficiencies needed to be fixed by 10am the following day, if the cruise was to proceed.

Shane Phillips and his team worked into the night. Then at 10pm, Phillips told them all, ‘everyone, we’ve got to be here tomorrow morning, 6am. If you know

anyone who wants to help us try and get these deficiencies fixed, call them. If we don't make it, we're all gone.'

Phillips barely slept that night, worrying that he was going to be the person who brought the Tribal Warrior Association down. Yet the next morning, when he arrived at the wharf, he received a surprise. 'There were about thirty people there. There were people that we didn't even know. They were blackfellas and whitefellas who turned up, who heard about the cause and wanted to do something. There were tradies, there was a builder, there was a plumber, and there was an electrician. That was a special moment in my own life, because I saw something that I just never imagined happening. And these people got on the boat.'

Later that morning, NSW Maritime's inspectors subjected the boat to extreme pressures against their push bar, then climbed into the bulkhead with their torches to check for deficiencies. Just four hours before nearly 200 passengers were due to board for their New Years cruise, the inspectors came up with their verdict: 'a very nice job done'.

'Structurally, we had nailed everything,' recalls Phillips. 'Every little thing that had to be done, we did it. There were tears. I personally cried. We made it. As we came back into that wharf that day, those people that didn't talk to those kids, clapped them in. All of these people, all the boat owners, clapped these kids in. They even had a bottle of Moet there to give to us for when we finished our work that night.'

The Mari Nawi's first voyage was its cruise on Sydney Harbour, flying the Aboriginal flag, and leading the New Year's Eve parade under a blaze of fireworks.

For Barry Silva, New Year's Eve 2011 was a turning point. 'It gave us sense of pride and achievement. I've never felt that before. And now I just feel like trying to continue on with it. I want to feel that high again, from when we fixed the Mari Nawi up. It's a really great feeling.'

Now, every single one of the people who worked on that boat has a job, either on the wharf or elsewhere on the Harbour. Many are now mentors for a new generation of young people who need a little extra support to stay at school and find a job. One has become the first Aboriginal woman to work at Sydney Ferries.

Some of the Tribal Warrior men are also helping Page rebuild his new boat, a small wooden sailing vessel he has named Bits & Pieces, because he is reconstructing it out of found timber, like the Mari Nawi. He found his new mast out at Fisherman's Wharf. 'After planing and painting it, the Tribal Warrior boys helped me stand her up. It's an Oregon mast, so very heavy, and 11 metres long.'

Barry Silva, who previously struggled to hold down a job, now works full-time as a deckhand and maintenance worker for a cruise company on Sydney Harbour. 'I'm paying taxes, I'm on a thousand dollars a week, I'm progressing and

progressing. I'm out on double shifts and doing private functions. It's just a complete 180 for me. I used to think you have to go to jail to prove yourself as an Aboriginal man, but that's just total crap. I thought I was going to die in a gutter somewhere, but it's completely changed now. I've just knocked everything on the head and it's really great.'

As for the Mari Nawi, in just a year, it has become an icon. It takes Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people around the Harbour on cultural cruises, flying the Aboriginal flag. When other boats pass the Mari Nawi, sometimes they recognize it as the old Katika, transformed, and they say on their radios, 'very well done'.

On 31 December 2012, the Tribal Warrior Association will celebrate the Mari Nawi's first anniversary as an Aboriginal boat on Sydney Harbour. Tickets are still available. For further information, call the Tribal Warrior Association on (02) 9699 3491 or visit <http://tribalwarrior.org>.