

# "I needed to see what else was in the world"

## Bomber cult figure's long journey to AFL overnight success story

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This story started more than seven years ago. It wasn't even about football, at first. It began when a kid called Anthony Tipungwuti looked around his classroom on Melville Island one day, and wondered what he was doing there. He couldn't really read and he couldn't really write. He could speak just a little bit of English. He wasn't even at school all that often; he had a bed at his auntie's house but mostly looked after himself, a 16-year-old going on 26 with either

too much or not enough to do. His father had died when he was a baby, his grandmother was gone too, his mother wasn't around much and he spent a lot of his time on the streets, thinking about the things he didn't know.

"One day I just sat there at school and something clicked, something said to me that I needed to get out of there and see what else was in the world," he said. "It was a bit terrible growing up in that sort of environment just always thinking, 'how will I get out?' Something just came into my head and made me think, you have to make a chance."

He wasn't sure how to do that, exactly. But he did know someone who could help. Jane McDonald was on the Tiwi Islands at the time with one of her daughters, who was working as a house parent at the local school. She had recently lost her husband, and was taking time away to clear her head and heal.

## Question 1

**a** What was the initial trigger for the change that gradually occurred in Anthony Tipungwuti's life? Write a sentence.

**b** What hardships had Tipungwuti already experienced? Write dot points.

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**c** In the underlined words/phrases above, find alternative ways of expressing each of the following ideas and write them beside each phrase below:

**i** How can I hope to escape this existence? \_\_\_\_\_

**ii** A sudden revelation; he realized something important \_\_\_\_\_

**iii** He was old for his age because of many harsh experiences. \_\_\_\_\_

**iv** Think something through in order to overcome grief or distress \_\_\_\_\_

Tipungwuti wasn't the only kid who would turn up at her house seeking snacks. But he was the first to ask if he could go back with her for Christmas, to stay with her and her four kids in Longwarry, and clearly the most persistent.

Before Anthony went home, one of McDonald's sons took him for a look at their local school. Chairo College looked big, so much bigger than his school. He could see himself there, and knew straight away that he wanted to come back and stay.

"Have you called that school yet? When are you calling that school?" he kept asking McDonald when they got back to the Tiwis. She had, but it was complicated; Tipungwuti was effectively his own guardian, looking out for himself, but his Tiwi family still needed to entrust him to Jane before so that he could be enrolled. "I kept bugging her about it all the time," he said, "because the opportunity was there, and I didn't want to let it slip."

He still couldn't speak much English when he started there. "That was ... interesting!" he said, but he never felt out of place or like the other kids looked at him wondering what he was doing there. Sport – football, netball, whatever else was going – helped him settle in and it didn't take long for the Gippsland Power to recruit him into their team: he was smart, skilful and could do some special things. "At first it was hard just to communicate. I was shy, and I was thinking 'what are all the kids talking about,' " he said. "But sport helped me put my personality out there, to be more of myself." Tipungwuti loved football, and had always been good at it: he played his first game for the Tiwi Bombers before he turned 15. There were things he needed to work on if he wanted to go further with it and people kept telling him what they were. He needed to lose some weight, to work on his fitness and run harder for longer, but it was hard. He went into year nine at Chairo College, but was really still at primary school level and had so much catching up to do.

In a way things got easier when he was diagnosed with a learning disability shortly after starting: he had help, he found new ways to do things, and he thrived. Within two years he had made it to year 11 level, done a sport and recreation course and started working as a teacher's aide. But where other kids would head straight to training after school, he had hours of extra work to get through first.

"For three or four hours every day he'd sit there getting through his school work," said Jane. "It was mentally exhausting. I'm not sure many people knew how hard he was working."

## Question 2

**a** List some steps that Anthony Tipungwuti took in order to change his own life. Write dot points.

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**b** Give some examples of help and support that Tipungwuti gained from others. Write dot points.

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**c** Find underlined words or phrases in the text for each phrase below:

i to enrol someone to join your team after checking his/her suitability: \_\_\_\_\_

ii one who perseveres and doesn't give up: \_\_\_\_\_

iii to get used to a new environment and feel at home there: \_\_\_\_\_

iv complex, difficult: \_\_\_\_\_

v flourished, grew fast, functioned well: \_\_\_\_\_

vi pestering, badgering: \_\_\_\_\_

vii to miss out on something, not grasp an opportunity: \_\_\_\_\_

Tipungwuti was disappointed when he missed out on being drafted at the end of 2012. It had been hard not to get his hopes up. He felt like some clubs presumed he would end up back on Melville Island; that never crossed his mind.

One day an Essendon recruiter came to see him at home. Merv Keane threw some ground balls at him in the front yard, testing out a niggling back problem that took a long while to get right, and spoke to him. The Bombers had seen all the things he could do, but the big question was whether he could get himself fit enough to do them at the highest, hardest level. It didn't seem like a bad idea to go and play for their VFL team.

Hayden Skipworth was coaching the club's VFL side back then, and would watch him head off to do extra running sessions and turn up the day after games for a swim. He could see his desire; it was there every day. He knew from the start his best spot was in the back line, but would play him in other positions to make sure he could keep him in the team as AFL players were dropped back, and so that he could expose him to new things. He also helped him improve in other ways, given all the new information he needed to absorb.

At times that was hard. "That was an issue initially," Skipworth said, "but he spoke to us about his background and the difficulties he'd had. Jane spoke to us as well and, to be honest, he's improved that side of things as much if not more than he's improved his fitness. He did a lot of extra reading, a lot of extra studying. His ability to learn and understand – to ask questions and speak up and create discussion – has just improved so much."

It wasn't enough to get drafted, though. Not at the end of 2013, when Tipungwuti wondered whether he should keep going. "I thought for a while I should stop," he said. "I wanted to stop. To miss out at that moment, it was hard for me to take in." It was tougher again the next year because he had worked for it even harder, asking Jane late in the season if she would train him, coach him, push him and help him achieve his dream.

He also had other things going on around him: some big decisions to make and some parts of his life to find out more about. Tipungwuti became Anthony Watson McDonald-Tipungwuti a little over two years ago. It was the obvious thing to do because Jane had become his mother and because ever since he had met them, Michael, Mitchell, Kellianne and Nikki had seemed like siblings. "It was very important to me because I already felt like part of the family. They *were* my family," he said. "It meant a lot to me, to make that decision in my life."

It also created some challenges. "It was hard for the people back home, for the Tiwi families up there. They were saying 'why is he changing his name?' and it was hard for me to explain why I wanted that and hard for them to accept," said McDonald-Tipungwuti, whose heritage is hugely important to him, and to his adoptive family. He is proud to be from the Tiwis, he uses his childhood nickname 'Walla,' he wants his story to give hope to kids up there and is finding out more about his own life story all the time.

### Question 3

Find underlined words in the passage above for each word or phrase below:

- a** at the beginning \_\_\_\_\_
- b** background, origins: \_\_\_\_\_
- c** brothers and sisters: \_\_\_\_\_
- d** entered his thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_
- e** persistently irritating: \_\_\_\_\_
- f** take in, understand: \_\_\_\_\_

**g** strong wish, hope: \_\_\_\_\_

**h** supposed that something was the case:  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Question 4

**a** In what ways did Tipungwuti grow and develop, according to Skipworth? Use your own words to describe his personal growth. (2 sentences)

**b** What did Tipungwuti still need to find out and decide? (2 sentences)

Growing up, he could never be entirely sure that his father was his father. He had passed away when Anthony was just a few months old. But he has begun to research and read up on him, finding out that he was a talented, well-known artist who left home as a teenager to go to Sydney and start a career of his own.

"That was a problem for me growing up, because Dad died early and I didn't grow up learning about him and who he was," said McDonald-Tipungwuti. "That sort of gave me doubt in my mind that he really was my dad, but that's what I want to do - find out what he did and who he was. It's very important to me. We found a picture of him hanging his painting up on the wall and the first thing my sister Nikki said was, 'Is that Anthony?' He did what I did, he travelled away from home for his dream, and everyone now keeps saying to me, 'You look just the same as your dad.' "

He found comfort in another decision made at around the same time, to become a Christian. "Everything changed when I accepted God into my life," he said. "I went to the church down the road last year and the pastor had a talk and it was the right time for me to go to that path like my brothers and sisters, and change my life. It gives me a lot of strength and courage to know that He's there, to help me and guide me through."

There was one last, little step to take. McDonald-Tipungwuti was fitter, by the end of last season. He had more muscles. He was still quick, he was still a brilliant kick and he still did things that made the people watching him think "wow". But to convince the recruiting team to pick him up as a rookie he had to tick off one last thing: run two kilometres in less than six minutes and 40 seconds. He got there - 6:39 - and when his phone rang during a school visit two days before the draft he looked down and saw Adrian Dodoro's name come up. "It's finally happening," he thought, and it was, it really was. "It was good," he said. "I thought, I guess have my chance now."

It still feels that way. Like the start. Like a brand new chapter. McDonald-Tipungwuti has played in every game so far this season. He has brought some joy to his team at a difficult time, and to the people who go and watch them play every weekend.

He has had help, from so many people. He wouldn't have done it without his mum. He isn't sure what he would be doing if he hadn't turned around that day and wondered whether there was something more out there. Whether he'd be living on the streets; whether he'd still even be alive. He's come a long, long, way but is still just getting started. "I guess it's the start of a whole new journey," he said. "I've had a few of them so far. But I hope this is the longest one and I hope it's the best one."

## Question 5

Find the underlined words or phrases in the text for these words or phrases.

**a** beginner: \_\_\_\_\_

**b** gifted, highly capable: \_\_\_\_\_

**c** opportunity: \_\_\_\_\_

**d** complete, achieve, get done: \_\_\_\_\_

**e** a new start: \_\_\_\_\_

## Question 6

Create a concept map about Tipungwuti's life by placing his name and perhaps a picture of him in the middle of a page and then writing notes under each of these branches:

- origin
- hardships
- support received from others
- acts of personal courage, determination or perseverance
- decisions he had to make
- important parts of his personal journey
- hopes and disappointments

