The Indigenous Business Review

ISSUE 2 | OCTOBER 2024

THE GAME CHANGERS

Ten of Australia's Indigenous business leaders

GLOBAL GAINS

Indigenous enterprises making it big overseas

Simone Kenmore

On culture, connection & kulila at CommBank

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The Indigenous Business Review

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The Indigenous Business Review

Last month, I spent some time in Fitzroy Crossing, a remote town where nearly 80 per cent of the population is Aboriginal. Located 400km east of Broome, deep into the desert, and more than 2500km north of Perth, Fitzroy Crossing is as far away as driving from Sydney to Brisbane and back again.

In this small town, under the searing heat, we gathered for a job expo. The aim was simple: to come together and offer the people of Fitzroy Crossing and the wider valley community opportunities for jobs and a brighter future.

One of the businesses I own, Kolbang, an electrical construction services company, was among nearly 50 other businesses and agencies present. We were overwhelmed by the community's interest in these brighter opportunities.

The story of Fitzroy Crossing reflects a broader narrative unfolding across our country: more and more Indigenous people are eager to work, start their own businesses and employ each other. This represents a meaningful push toward economic independence, which is long overdue.

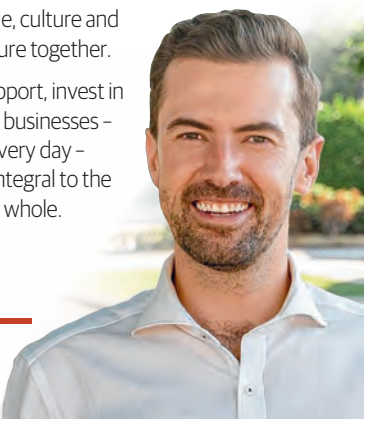
In this edition of The Indigenous Business Review, you will read about Indigenous business leaders from across Australia who have achieved excellence, from the boardrooms of ASX-listed companies to those who have started small enterprises and grown them at an impressive pace.

As Australians, we should be proud of the progress our country is making because when Indigenous Australians thrive, our entire nation benefits.

In October, we celebrate 10 years of Indigenous Business Month, and I hope this month brings you the opportunity to work with or buy from an Indigenous-owned business.

The progress we see today in places like Fitzroy Crossing is just the beginning. As more Indigenous businesses emerge and succeed, we are reminded that economic empowerment is not just about numbers or statistics; it is about people, culture and community building a future together.

So, let's continue to support, invest in and celebrate Indigenous businesses – not just this month, but every day – because their success is integral to the success of our nation as a whole.



Zak Kirkup
Managing Editor

Collective contribution ‘gigantic’

Indigenous businesses have a huge impact on the economy and allow continuation of culture

Indigenous Business Month co-founders Mayrah Sonter, Dr Michelle Evans and Leesa Watego; Adam Sarota of Bridgeman, who won an IBM award two years ago; and a 2015 summit with Evans, Owen Walsh and Jason Eades.

Declan Brennan

‘What can you do as a collective to have impact?”

That was the question asked to a group of First Nations entrepreneurs enrolled in the MURRA Indigenous Business Masterclass, in a Melbourne Business School classroom in 2015.

For two members of that class, Mayrah Sonter and Leesa Watego, as well as the program co-founder Dr Michelle Evans, the question formulated itself into the idea of showcasing the power, skills, and success of the Indigenous business sector.

“When we enrolled in MURRA, the program was only a few years old,” Watego, the director of Iscariot Media notes.

“But I remembered being struck by the diversity of the business sector in my MURRA cohort and wondering why these amazing enterprises were unknown in the wider business sector.”

Watego says that for herself and Sonter – both working in communications – there was a strong feeling these stories needed to be told, displayed and celebrated.

It was from this belief that the Indigenous Business Month (IBM) was born. Now in its 10th year, IBM’s growth and journey has closely mirrored the sector’s expansion, which continues to expand.

MURRA participants are asked to reframe their ideas: moving from the individual level to the collective, as well as reimagining what is possible with a combined mentality.

When she began MURRA in 2012, Evans says that the Indigenous business sector was only beginning to fully emerge.

“The Indigenous Procurement Policy was introduced a few years later and the public’s perception of Indigenous businesses was mostly limited to arts, culture and tourism,” she says.

From that time, the expansion of the industry has been profound, with the Snapshot report – a yearly research report – tracking the Indigenous sector.

“Working with data custodians, we match the ABNs of Indigenous businesses to administrative data held by the government such as tax and payroll data,” Evans says.

“This gives us a view of where businesses are trading, the industries, revenue and employment numbers.”

Despite an incomplete snapshot – with many business owners choosing not to identify themselves as an Indigenous business on registries – research from Dilin Duwa, Woi Wurrung for “Everlasting Flow”, found the “Indigenous ecosystem” makes an important contribution to the Australian economy.

“We invite First Nations businesses to tell the stories

It saw 13,693 active and alive (trading) businesses and corporations in 2022, which generated $16.1bn in revenue; employing 116,795 people and paying $4.2bn in wages.

Evans says First Nations businesses are making a “gigantic contribution” to the economy, arguing they are making their mark in “every sector, state and industry”.

“This tells us that First Australians are using business as a vehicle for economic self-determination, bringing employment opportunities and wealth creation to their community and allowing them to stay on-country,” she says.

“As impressive as the economic and revenue numbers are, equally important is the continuation of culture and connectedness to country which makes us who we are.”

Senator Jana Stewart recently told National Indigenous Times that evidence before the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs showed Indigenous businesses thrived when they were culturally safe.

Furthermore, they employed up to 100 times more First Nations people than non-Indigenous businesses.

“It is to your economic detriment that your workplace isn’t inclusive,” she said. “It’s not just a kind of woke lefty thing to do. It’s actually really important for your company’s bottom line.”

Evans agrees, saying over the past decade of promoting the distinction of Indigenous businesses, “We have seen how Indigenous entrepreneurs have continually contributed to better communities, better opportunities, better relationships, and better ways of doing business.”

Fellow IBM co-founder and director of 33 Creative, Mayrah Sonter, says they introduced IBM awards in four categories: Ingenuity, Digital Inventiveness, Indigenous Business-2-Business, and Regional Excellence.

“Business owners are nominated by their peers and the decision is made by a judging panel of Indigenous business and thought leaders,” Sonter says.

“I think what’s most incredible to observe over the last 10 years is the Indigenous business to business partnerships that have been formed, and our collaboration amongst one another to meet the needs of our communities.”

She says in 2024, IBM invites all nations to consider the “wave of Indigenous entrepreneurship” across Australia which is redefining what First Nations’ businesses are all about by showcasing modern excellence.

“We invite First Nations businesses and their allies to tell the stories and celebrate our ways of doing business,” she says.

In celebration of 10 years of IBM, this year’s IBM Awards Announcement and Networking breakfast with previous awards winners, local Indigenous businesses and local MURRA Alumni, will take place on October 24 at the Bangarra Dance Theatre, Sydney. ●

The Indigenous Business Review

World in their hands

First Nations businesses across the country continue to thrive and break new ground on the competitive global stage

Paul Vandenberg is the director of Indigenous wine label Munda Wines and commercial fishing company Wanna Mar; a chardonay from the Munda range; and Australe Trade and Investment Commissioner Melanie Harris.

Brendan Foster & Cassandra Baldini

On the sea floor of the warm, shallow waters stretching from the Kimberley coast to northeast Arnhem Land live slimy, round trepang.

This delicacy, also known as sea cucumber, is reported to have initiated the first international trading relationship between First Nations people and Makassar fishermen from the island of Sulawesi, now part of Indonesia.

Starting in the early 1700s, Makassar fishermen travelled to Australia to farm and trade trepang, distributing it across Indonesia and mainland China. In return, the fishermen traded goods, including metal, with Aboriginal communities.

Today, First Nations businesses across Australia are making significant strides internationally in various sectors, including tourism, information technology, fashion, food and beverage, logistics, and professional services.

Wirangu and Kokatha man Paul Vandenberg is the director of the commercial fishing company Wanna Mar and the Indigenous wine label Munda Wines. Five years ago, he expanded globally by exporting tuna to Japan and later began exporting his wine to Canada. Harnessing his cultural knowledge, he highlighted the undeniable value of Indigenous-owned brands on the global stage.

"After receiving a huge order from Canada, Munda Wines was unexpectedly picked up in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, and recently we've received interest from the Native American Chamber of Commerce to supply casinos across the United States," he says.

"I think the opportunity for us as First Nations people lies in our products and in utilising 65,000 years of culture. One of the reasons Munda Wines secured the opportunity in Malaysia, I believe, is the historical sea cucumber trade that existed for hundreds of years."

While acknowledging that exporting goods requires tenacity and drive, Vandenberg explains that success also hinges on building strong relationships.

"I always emphasise to people, especially young Indigenous people, that relationships are key. That's how I got started – through the relationships I formed with non-Indigenous business owners and allies," he says.

"I spend at least 50 to 60 per cent of my time engaging with people, talking to them, and picking their brains."

Vandenberg says that expanding globally provided an opportunity to continue educating others about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

"Internationally, First Nations businesses are taking off. We're showcasing what an Indigenous brand looks like," he says.

"Our designs, our colours mean a lot to our people, and our language.

"A lot of that has been invisible to our global counterparts.

"So, it comes down to this. I'm not building a wine company; I'm building a storytelling company."

First Nations Business Succeeding Internationally

In August, the federal government released a landmark report looking at the impact of First Nations trade and tourism on the global stage.

Supply Nation, Austrade and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) teamed up to launch the First Nations Businesses Succeeding Internationally report which examined more than 2600 Indigenous companies.

The study found that First Nations exporters generated nearly $18m in exports, employed over 2300 workers, paid more than $124m in wages, and achieved over $670m in turnover. With the typical exporter recording over 21 per cent annual growth in turnover over the past four years.

> "Our trading history is a story the world should know

Australia's First Indigenous Trade Commissioner

Austrade Trade and Investment Commissioner Melanie Harris says we are only starting to see the true potential of First Nations business in exporting to international markets.

Austrade is the federal government's trade and investment promotion agency, helping Australian businesses go global.

The proud Yuin woman, who became the first female Indigenous Trade and Investment Commissioner in 2021, says First Nations businesses are succeeding across Australia's goods and services exports.

"The Australian government is supporting this success through an inclusive First Nations trade and investment agenda that has the potential to deliver economic growth and economic prosperity for First Nation businesses and their communities," she told the National Indigenous Times.

"We are incorporating First Nations business interests into our trade negotiations, global engagements, bilateral and regional relationships and export growth strategies."

Harris says First Nations businesses at home and abroad are finally getting the recognition Indigenous companies deserve.

She says her ancestors were the first traders and diplomats and had been trading knowledge and technology with the world for centuries.

"I think Indigenous businesses are an untapped sector, and for me personally, I believe I should be using my voice and role to talk about those businesses that are doing great things both domestically and globally," she says.

"Our trading history is a story the world should know. That story continues to unfold, with trade routes for Indigenous-led goods and services now springing off from Australia to all parts of the globe.

"There is a rich continuous history; from trading goods with Makassan seafarers in Indonesia for generations, to now exporting native botanicals, art, design, cyber and clean energy solutions to world markets."

Harris says Indigenous exporters made a great contribution to communities and to the broader Australian economy.

She says it's well-known that First Nations businesses were more likely to train and employ Indigenous staff and channel profits back into their communities.

The value of Indigenous trade is felt back along the supply chain and into communities on-country where jobs and wealth are created.

"I'm proud that Austrade took the first step to celebrate Indigenous exporters through sponsorship of the Supply Nation's Indigenous Exporter of the Year since 2021," she says.

"This year Elephant in the Room, a professional services company, won, highlighting the breadth and diversity of Indigenous exporters and joining the previous winners, Tagai Management Consultants, Kalinda IT and Aldridge Railway."

With Southeast Asia expected to become the fourth largest economy by 2040, Harris's role in helping to grow Australia's business in the region is more important than ever.

One of her critical roles is helping Indigenous businesses expand into the region through support at trade shows, trade missions and testing their products in the market.

"Australia and Southeast Asia share highly complementary economies," she says. "Regional proximity and close economic ties are expected to deliver strong growth across energy transformation, advanced manufacturing and tech and commodities to meet the needs of a rapidly growing middle class.

"As part of my role, I support the Australia Southeast Asia Business Exchange program that aims to increase two-way trade between Australia and Southeast Asia.

"As part of this I have supported Australian delegations across digital, cyber and green energy sectors including First Nations businesses including Baidam Cyber Security and Garli Group."

When Harris landed the Trade and Investment

Aboard a Wanna Mar commercial fishing vessel.

Commission job in early late 2019, she was planning to move to Malaysia once her daughter finished year 12. However, just before jetting off to Southeast Asia to start the plum role she was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML).

After 18 months of treatment, she finally started at the Trade and Investment Commission in December 2021.

"I don't have a typical Trade and Investment Commissioner story as I don't come from industry, from an international background," she says.

"What I found though is when I got to work in the front-of-house roles, I really enjoyed meeting all different types of people, listening to their stories and experiences and finding innovative solutions to their problems."

Harris believes that leaders at Austrade who championed diversity created an environment where she felt comfortable bringing her full self to work.

This gave her the confidence to apply for the Trade and Investment Commissioner role in Malaysia and Brunei. ●

> **It's crucial to build really tight relationships and do thorough research on the country you want to enter**

Breaking into Southeast Asia

Kakadu Organics is another First Nations business that has cracked the Southeast Asian market.

Murrumburr woman and founder of Kakadu Organics, Kylie-Lee Bradford, pictured, says that building relationships has also been important to her overseas expansion.

"I think it's crucial to build really tight relationships and do thorough research on the country you want to enter. It's not a quick process, especially in markets like Asia, which are heavily focused on relationship building," she says.

Bradford says soon her Queensland company, which specialises in eco-friendly wellness products and native foods will be in high demand overseas.

She began researching global markets and worked with Austrade and Trade Investment Queensland to understand the legalities and requirements needed to branch out.

"We went on our first mission to Singapore with Austrade and secured a deal with Ryan's Grocery, which involves distribution across six stores in Singapore," she says. "This marked our first exporting mission.

"We're also about to start exporting to the UK, we're close to finalising a deal there.

"You might not get an order right away. It took six or seven months of me building a relationship with the owner of Ryan's Grocery, becoming a trusted partnership, before they placed their first order."

Bradford says a significant challenge she faces is balancing the expectations that Western society places on First Nations businesses.

"Because of the complexity, you just need to have one foot in each world," she says.

Despite this, Bradford has never been one to back away from a challenge and urges other First Nations business owners to feel empowered to do the same.

"I'm driven by the challenge of proving people wrong. We've had many knock-backs, even six years ago, people said we wouldn't succeed. We've managed to push through, and now they're chasing us to get our products on their shelves. Stick to your values and mission, don't waver," she says.

Melanie Harris says any First Nations businesses looking at breaking into international markets needed to do some research before taking the leap of faith.

"Everyone's export journey is different, some will be export straight away and others will focus on the domestic market first," she says.

"Do your research, attend trade shows and missions, talk to others who have exported and, of course, talk to Austrade, and/or your state and territory government trade promotion agency. A great place to start is the Go Global Toolkit (export.business.gov.au).

"The toolkit is designed to help Australian businesses at every stage of their export journey including export guides for Australian businesses; laws and regulations in your target markets; tools to help you find export markets and check your readiness to export." ●

Creating strong relationships

Kinaway Chamber of Commerce is a powerful advocate for First Nations businesses to compete in national and international markets

Brendan Foster

Acting Kinaway Chamber of Commerce chief executive Donald Betts might be just warming the chair until the organisation finds a new First Nations person to take the reins, but he's getting on with business.

The former US Kansas State Senator joined Kinaway, based in Victoria, a year ago as the acting deputy chief executive. Within two weeks, he was elevated to the top job after the chief executive left.

One of his first tasks was to stamp out the unfair practice of "black cladding".

Black cladding is when a company uses a First Nations person as a figurehead to secure lucrative, taxpayer-funded contracts under the federal government's Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP).

Under the IPP an Aboriginal business is defined as a business with at least 51 per cent Indigenous ownership.

"I'm not here for a long time, I'm here for a good time to make things significantly better," Betts told the National Indigenous Times.

"We have about 60-70 businesses waiting to be certified through Kinaway but the board will not move unless all the criteria is met. Kinaway is probably the most difficult organisation to get certification out of all of Australia.

"We just don't certify anyone; we don't care how much money you want to bring to the table."

The Melbourne-based chamber provides business support and advice to Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and helps improve the visibility and networks of First Nations businesses, strengthening relationships and creating opportunities.

Betts is driven to help Victorian First Nations businesses and Indigenous communities around the globe to be self-governing, independent, and growing.

The corporate lawyer, who is the managing principal of Betts Law Company is also determined to beef-up Kinaway's membership and oversee the growth of the company. "We opened up the Global Alliance – Friends of Kinaway – because I found if you want to grow, you can't grow within your own little hub," he says.

"We brought in different chambers of commerce – we brought in the Sri Lankan Chamber, the Finnish Chamber, the Italian Chamber and next week we will be signing an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with the Canadian Consulate General's Office, so now the door is open.

"Also, on the back of that, we took the largest First Nations delegations in the history of Australia to the Midwest of America.

"Not only the first time a delegation from Australia has gone to the Midwest but the first time more than 40 businesses have gone anywhere outside of Australia to do trade and businesses."

Betts says the biggest issue facing new First Nations businesses is access to capital.

He says Kinaway would do everything within its powers to assist Indigenous companies to participate not only in the national economy but to compete in international markets.

"We talk to them about the programs offered by the IBA (Indigenous Business Australia)," he says. "If they're in the construction space, one of our corporate partners, ANZ, is always available.

"There was this one story where a woman made about 300-400 candles, but the selling part was hard.

"So our operations manager rang one of our corporate partners and said: 'Look, I have a member with 400 candles she can't get sold' and the corporate partner said: 'We will take all 400 and we will put in another pre-order for another 400 candles next year.'

"It's all about advocacy. We are here to work for them." ●

Donald Betts and the Kinaway team.

The Indigenous Business Review

OPINION | Senator The Hon Malarndirri McCarthy

Remote Australia's untapped potential

Remote Australia, with its vast landscapes and sparse populations, is a region rich in potential.

Having grown up in Borroloola, about 1000km from Darwin in the Northern Territory, I have experienced first-hand both the challenges and possibilities that exist in remote communities.

For many people living in remote small towns, finding a job can be difficult – and sometimes daunting.

Labour markets are vastly different to those in regional and urban areas.

There is no large shopping centre, no local fast-food chain where young people in the city typically get their first job.

Opportunities are limited and barriers such as availability of jobs, access to training and capacity of employers are very real.

Removing these barriers is the driving force behind the Albanese Labor Government's approach to reforming remote employment and delivering on our commitment to replace the failed Community Development Program, or CDP.

To do this, we need to remember what a job means.

A job doesn't just put money in someone's pocket, it gives them purpose.

Financial security through meaningful employment is key to building strong futures.

I've seen time and time again the impact that a job can have, not just for an individual, but also for their family and their community.

I have experienced this in my own life.

When I was in year 12, my English teacher encouraged me to apply for a cadetship with the ABC in Darwin – something I'd never considered.

That belief in me changed my path.

The cadetship opened doors I didn't know existed, leading to a 16-year career as a journalist, which ultimately gave me the experience and confidence to step into politics.

As Minister for Indigenous Australians, what I want for First Nations people in remote communities is what my teacher gave me – the belief that opportunities exist and are within reach.

I want our young people to hear someone say, 'I think you should go for this job', just like I heard all those years ago.

The difference today is we need to see these opportunities in remote communities.

The idea that you need to leave home, move to a big city or a regional centre to find work is something we must change.

People deserve the chance to thrive in their own communities – and this is the goal of our Remote Jobs and Economic Development program.

It's no easy task, but it is possible. And we are determined to continue working with First Nations communities to get better outcomes.

In fact, we've already seen remarkable success stories.

Take Lily Lagoon, a resort just outside Kununurra in Western Australia, one of the few Aboriginal-owned and operated tourism and hospitality operations in the Kimberley.

As part of the government's Remote Jobs trial, they've created 17 new jobs for First Nations people – food and beverage attendants, guest services, kitchen hands, maintenance workers and more.

These jobs have not only provided employment for 17 people but have helped the resort meet the growing demand from tourists.

This is just one example but shows what's possible when we work alongside remote communities to create real, lasting opportunities.

If we are serious about changing employment outcomes in remote Australia, it's about imagining jobs where they haven't existed before.

It's about giving local businesses the means to flourish. By doing this, we not only change lives, we realise the potential of our people in remote Australia. ●

■ *Senator Malarndirri McCarthy is Minister for Indigenous Australians*

OPINION | Michelle Evans

A flourishing ecosystem is good for business

Great opportunities lead the promise of a self-determined future for Indigenous Australia

The Indigenous business ecosystem is diverse, dynamic and operates in every part of the country. When we think about a broader Indigenous business ecosystem we are including all kinds of businesses – for profit, not for profit, community controlled or privately held, corporations and partnerships.

It's important for us to think about these Indigenous led vehicles as a collective because many of our organisations, corporations and businesses work together, service and support the same communities and draw upon the talent and knowledge of Indigenous communities, both locally and nationally.

Viewing the business landscape as an ecosystem aligns with our commitment to building thriving circular economies in regional and remote areas across the nation as well as contributing to the broader Australian economy.

The Indigenous business ecosystem is ensuring intergenerational transfer of wealth and custodianship to the next generation. Evidence reports that Indigenous people are establishing businesses at a rate of 8.29 per cent year on year on average and this compares to 3 per cent a year for all Australian businesses[1].

The Indigenous business ecosystem is very healthy. Through our research, we can see the growth in the number of businesses across the country, the diversity of industries and the number of people employed. The Indigenous business sector is employing at least 116,795 people[2], and qualitative evidence points to the fact that Indigenous businesses and corporations are recruiting and developing Indigenous employees. Employing, training, promoting and inspiring Indigenous employees in Indigenous led businesses, corporations and organisations strengthen the Indigenous workforce by providing culturally safe workplaces and opportunities for Indigenous employment futures.

There are great opportunities ahead for the Indigenous business sector – international trade, clean energy and AI (Artificial Intelligence) are all leading areas for new business opportunities.

One mega trend that the Indigenous business ecosystem must seize for a productive and profitable future is AI both in terms of generative AI and enterprise AI – all those new software and systems that are proliferating to make running your business in a productive way.

AI presents a significant opportunity. However, it also brings challenges, particularly in terms of cybersecurity and Indigenous data governance, which require considerable organisational vigilance and planning.

However, to best make sense of these future opportunities of Indigenous business, Indigenous employment and mega trends that will impact us all like AI, we need to work collectively.

The idea of an ecosystem providing support and nourishment allows us to do so.

It embodies the relationships between all Indigenous led entities.

It encourages the value exchange and nourishment of Indigenous knowledges, innovation and talent. Above all, it holds promise to bring together the economic potential of Indigenous Australia towards a self-determined economic future. ●

■ *Dr Michelle Evas is an Associate Professor (Leadership); Director, Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership; Associate Dean (Indigenous) Faculty Business and Economics at the Melbourne Business School*

1 Evans, M., Polidano, C., Dahmann, S. C., Kalera, Y., Ruiz, M., Moschion, J., Blackman, M. (2024); *Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0.* The University of Melbourne. **2** Evans, M., Polidano, C., Dahmann, S. C., Kalera, Y., Ruiz, M., Moschion, J., Blackman, M. (2024); *Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0.* The University of Melbourne.

The Indigenous Business Review

OPINION | Naomi Anstess

The power of change should be in our hands

There is no winning in the business of Indigenous economic development for those actually in the business.

As I write this opinion piece, the "Coalition of the Peaks", with the Australian National University, are positioning to be the voice of blak economic development in Australia. They are positioning for funding and the right to be the advisers and deciders. They have caught on that Indigenous economic development is the new "fad' where there is money to be had, and they are running hard at it, considering how they can appropriate it to their respective areas of specialty – health, housing, land and sea, justice, education.

For the past 60 years, the blak not-for-profit and blak organisation sector have been funded by government and royalties. For the past 60 years, we have watched Indigenous organisations being run and ruined by non-Indigenous Australians.

Today, the vast majority of Aboriginal community-controlled orgs (ACCOs) and entities are headed by non-Indigenous people, who employ their family and mates, placing our countrymen and women in the lowest-paying jobs, outsourcing work to their friend consultants at exorbitant rates. They regularly go into administration, and we continue to hear about fraudulent behaviour, maladministration and misappropriation of funds.

More than this, the supply chain of our blak orgs is more than 90 per cent non-Indigenous. How is it that blak orgs won't preference or engage blak business? How is it that we are not partnering together for the most important outcomes and real wealth generation, jobs and skills transfer for our communities? How is it that we are not blak-to-blak contracting on a scale that would indeed "close the gap"?

The concept of "blak Boards" being enough to ensure blak decision-making and integrity in the organisation is a falsehood. True blak control comes from mob being well represented in decision-making positions in the operations of the entity – not just at the board level.

The blak Business sector is proven to demonstrate outcomes well beyond the ACCOs and the blak business sector is proven to invest more into local communities and to create the flexibility for our communities to have "real jobs".

The for-profit, privately owned blak business sector is where the change is at. We live in a nation that thinks of blak for-profit as "dirty" and "wrong". To be clear – ALL blak business enterprises benefit Indigenous communities by the sheer nature of how they operate. The data proves this.

It is my opinion that the private blak business sector is the place where a real difference is being made and action towards closing the gap is occurring.

Self-determined generational wealth, where WE can decide, where WE can take action, where WE can make a difference, is in the "for-profit" blak business sector. Where we can MAKE A JOB and not just take a job.

Blakfullas are generous people. Blak control looks and feels like the power to choose for ourselves. The Indigenous business chambers and networks are the peaks who need to lead this conversation. The people who are the experts. Because buying blak is the game changer. When ACCOs and blak business work together and the other blak peaks allow the business sector to lead the economic development conversation – we will wield the power of change. ●

Naomi Anstess is principal consultant with SaltBlack and Big Boss NTIBN

> **Blak control looks and feels like the power to choose for ourselves**

Managing money matters

Phil Usher is determined to help financially empower all First Nations Australians

Dianne Bortoletto

One of six children raised in an Aboriginal Housing Commission home in Tamworth on Gomeroi country, Wiradjuri man and CEO of First Nations Foundation (FNF), Phil Usher, witnessed his parents live from pay cheque to pay cheque.

At the age of 10, his parents were able to buy a small hobby farm, and as equity in the property grew, his parents accessed it to buy cars and consumer goods.

"Like many Aboriginal people, they were never taught how to manage money, probably because they didn't have money, a story that goes back generations with 'stolen wages'," Usher says. "My father always wanted more for us, he knew there was a better life, but he didn't have the financial education, and he didn't know how to access it."

His father worked in a mill while his mother stayed home to raise the children.

"My sister bought me a business book for my 16th birthday, and it was the most interesting thing I'd read – it covered things like inflation and how tax was calculated," Usher says.

"I thought to myself, one day I'm going to work in business so I might as well understand it."

After completing Year 12, Usher secured a Centrelink cadetship with the Australian public service, which covered his HECS fees for a Bachelor of Business at the University of Newcastle. After nine years at the APS in various roles including HR, Indigenous community development and financial services, he became business adviser at The Business Centre.

In 2017, Usher joined the board of FNF as treasurer and was appointed CEO three years later.

Founded in 1999 in partnership with First Nations Credit Union, FNF was established to provide culturally appropriate banking services to Indigenous customers. From a team of three in 2020, it has now grown to 16 staff.

With a mission to achieve financial literacy and prosperity for First Nations people, FNF provides individual and group financial training and train-the-trainer for an On Country program, a point of pride for Usher.

"Our On Country program is very effective – the local community delivers our content in a way that works for them, they know their people, their challenges and nuances, it's far more effective than flying our team in and out of regional areas.

"All training sessions start with an hour of truth telling including Aboriginal policies from the '60s and '70s, how Aboriginal people were paid in rations, tea, blankets, and paid money that was held in trust, but they never saw.

"As Aboriginal people, we've never had an opportunity to manage money up until now – our people are getting bigger roles, earning good money and are able to save, however many are still not engaged with the financial services sector."

FNF runs several programs that focus on superannuation, investing, home ownership, and others tailored to women as well as initiatives such as Financial Wellness Week.

In 2023, FNF reconnected Indigenous communities with $1.2m in superannuation, adding the overall total of super it has located to $25.2m. "We have a clear purpose at FNF and that's to financially empower all First Nations Australians," Usher says.

BHP

Discover how Peter and his colleagues are helping Aboriginal people find and excel at work in the building and construction industry.

Scan for more.

A journey of kulila, purpose and leadership

The sense of culture and connection she felt at just five years old had a lasting impact on CommBank's Simone Kenmore, Zak Kirkup discovers

Simone Kenmore is an exceptional force – a mother, an executive and a steadfast advocate for Indigenous businesses. Leading Commonwealth Bank's Indigenous Business Banking, she balances the demands of a bustling family life with her partner and three boys while driving key strategic initiatives within one of Australia's largest financial institutions.

Her story is one of passion, resilience, and a deep-rooted commitment to community – shaped by her early years spent navigating between the contrasting worlds of Adelaide and the remote South Australian Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands.

This unique upbringing instilled in her a powerful sense of purpose, which she has carried into every stage of her professional journey, from grassroots community development to the boardrooms of corporate Australia.

The Power of kulila

Central to Simone's approach is the concept of "kulila", a Pitjantjatjara term meaning "to listen". For her, listening is not a passive act but an active commitment to understanding and respecting the needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities. "Kulila is a fundamental leadership skill that has served me well over my career," she says.

Simone's earliest memories are filled with experiences that shaped her path into advocacy and leadership. She recalls travelling with her family to the APY Lands from Adelaide when she was just five years old where she was taken into a white weatherboard hall filled with women engaged in mourning, a practice she would later understand as part of "sorry business", the traditional grieving and healing process for Aboriginal communities.

This experience, where she sat quietly on the lap of her grandmother amid the wailing and expressions of grief, was her first encounter with the cultural depth and communal connection of her people.

It was a moment that left a lasting impression on her, opening her eyes to the complex realities of her community's traditions and the stark contrast between her life in Adelaide and the experiences of her cousins living on country.

For Simone, this early exposure to "sorry business" deepened her resolve to listen, understand, and commit herself to advocating for her community throughout her life.

"We have to genuinely listen to the stories and experiences of our communities if we are to advocate effectively for them," she says.

Her journey from community-based roles to a corporate leadership position at CommBank is a testament to the power of listening deeply and acting with purpose.

A father's influence: The foundation of advocacy

Her father, George Kenmore, played a pivotal role in shaping her life and values. A member of the Stolen Generation, George endured the traumatic consequences of Australia's oppressive policies toward Aboriginal people. Despite this, he remained a staunch advocate for his community and passed on this commitment to Simone.

"Dad passed away a couple of years ago, and

Simone Kenmore with her family, and right, her late father.

before he passed, I thanked him for giving me my purpose. He was a really strong advocate for his family on the APY Lands and the broader Aboriginal community across Australia. I always knew my purpose was to contribute to my community, it's always driven me."

His influence guided her as she pursued a career path initially aimed at accounting but soon diverted to community work, where she could more directly affect change.

Her father's resilience and teachings reinforced the importance of "kulila" in her own life: to listen, to learn, and to advocate from a place of genuine understanding. "Dad was a stockman in his early years, he always had a strong work ethic which served him well as a small-business owner later in life.

"Dad always gave back to community, it was embedded in his business model."

Transition to corporate leadership: A new chapter

After years of contributing to community development and advocacy across various sectors including health, education and disability and youth services, Simone made a significant transition to the corporate world by joining CommBank in 2022.

Her entry into the bank as the Executive Manager of Indigenous Business Banking marked the beginning of a new chapter – one that would allow her to leverage the bank's platform for a broader impact.

"I'm still working for community, just in a different way," she notes, acknowledging that her role at CommBank enables her to drive systemic change from within one of Australia's most significant financial institutions.

CommBank's journey towards meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities began in earnest in 2008 when the bank launched its first Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). This marked the start of a dedicated effort to build stronger relationships with First Nations peoples – a commitment that has only deepened over time.

Building a foundation: CommBank's commitment to Indigenous communities

The bank launched its second RAP in 2009 and became a founding member of Supply Nation, a key partner in supporting Indigenous businesses.

Over the years, CommBank introduced numerous programs to support Indigenous communities, including the Indigenous Customer Assistance Line, a commitment to increase representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to 3 per cent and a cultural learning program for employees.

In 2019, CommBank strengthened its longstanding partnership with Supply Nation to support their Capability Hub, which provides targeted support and guidance to Indigenous businesses, and Supply Nation's corporate and government members to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses into their business operations, procurement processes and supply chains.

The journey continues with the introduction of the First Nations Reach program in 2024 to support financial inclusion and empowerment and access to banking for remote Indigenous Australians.

Simone Kenmore leads the Commonwealth Bank's Indigenous Business Banking unit, and below, a younger Simone with her nanna.

Simone's role has been pivotal to these efforts. As one of the founders and inaugural Co-Chair of CommBank's Indigenous Leadership Team (ILT), she has been instrumental in ensuring that Indigenous voices are included in decision-making processes at every level of the bank.

"I am really proud of the ILT, we meet regularly with our CEO and Group Executives to co-design better outcomes for our people and customers, it's important we are at the table with the key decision makers," she says.

"Part of my role at CommBank is to educate and advocate for change.

"It is really important for financial institutions to understand the impacts of past legislation on Indigenous businesses today; historically, Indigenous people were excluded from fully participating in the economy, leading to a lack of intergenerational wealth."

Connecting communities and corporate culture

For businesses looking to engage with CommBank, Simone highlights the importance of the bank's Indigenous Business Concierge, a specialist team that works closely with Simone and has access to ongoing progressive cultural education to ensure safe and respectful interactions, who are uniquely positioned to support Indigenous businesses with accessing a range of financial solutions to accelerate growth and simplify their operations.

"We understand the importance of accessibility, culturally safe engagement and making sure our customers are informed about the products and services available to them."

More than providing financial services, Simone and the Indigenous Business Banking team are dedicated to fostering relationships and crafting solutions that meet the unique needs of Indigenous businesses.

"We've got a great team of experienced bankers championing these efforts," she adds.

Vision to build capacity and resilience

Looking ahead, CommBank remains committed to its vision of a thriving Indigenous business sector that is self-determined and resilient.

Simone envisions further expansion of support initiatives like the Indigenous Business Education Series, a partnership with Supply Nation to deliver business capacity-building workshops.

> **Our aim is to make sure Indigenous businesses not only survive but thrive**

"There's so much opportunity to help our businesses grow," she says. "By using our platforms to profile Indigenous businesses, we can help demonstrate that these are not just Indigenous businesses, but strong, industry leading businesses in their own right."

CommBank's focus on capacity building and financial literacy is designed to help Indigenous businesses overcome common challenges, such as cash flow management and access to capital.

"Our aim is to make sure Indigenous businesses not only survive but thrive," Simone notes, pointing to the bank's commitment to fostering economic empowerment.

Inspiring the next generation

For young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals considering a career in the financial sector, Simone offers an encouraging perspective.

"There are lots of career opportunities at CommBank," she says. "You don't need a degree in finance or commerce. We have Indigenous people working in our cafes as chefs, in technology, procurement, human resources."

She believes the bank needs more people with community experience, not just bankers, to drive meaningful change.

"There is a place for Indigenous people of all ages and lived experiences at CommBank. We need people with diverse perspectives to help us grow and evolve as an organisation."

Listening for the future: A commitment to community and growth

Simone's journey is a powerful testament to the strength of purpose and the profound impact of one person's unwavering commitment to community and advocacy. At the core of her vision and leadership is the principle of "kulila" – to listen deeply and intentionally. "Listening is about understanding the lived experiences of our people and using that knowledge to guide our actions," she emphasises, illustrating how this concept has shaped her approach both within and outside the walls of CommBank.

As CommBank continues to deepen its engagement with Indigenous communities, Simone's leadership ensures that listening remains central to every effort – whether it's building trust, driving growth or fostering genuine partnerships.

She has helped create a space where voices are heard and respected, shaping solutions that are inclusive and responsive to the real needs of Indigenous businesses across our country.

Through her dedication, Simone is forging new pathways for collaboration, growth, and mutual respect between CommBank and the Indigenous communities it serves. Her work exemplifies a future where both the bank and the businesses it supports can grow and flourish together, creating a more equitable and prosperous Australia.

Simone, together with CommBank, stand as a bridge between corporate Australia and First Nations peoples, driving towards a future where Indigenous businesses are empowered, communities are self-determined, and the principles of listening and respect are woven into the fabric of all that they do. ●

WORKING ON **COUNTRY**

together in the Pilbara

"After 52 years of mining on my Country, this is the first time we get an opportunity like this."

BEVAN WALLY
Djeleanna co-owner

ABOUT US

Djeleanna is a 100% Aboriginal-owned and operated business, dedicated to servicing the Pilbara community with expertise across mining, earthworks, road maintenance and pastoral solutions.

DJELEANNA

PARTNERED WITH MINERAL RESOURCES

The game changers

Cassandra Baldini, Zak Kirkup and **David Prestipino** turn the spotlight on 10 Indigenous business leaders, highlighting their influential roles across diverse sectors, showcasing their contributions as drivers of economic and social change in our country. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a glimpse into the varied and multifaceted careers these leaders excel in, from corporate boardrooms to grassroots enterprises

Colleen Hayward AM

Colleen Hayward's appointment as an independent non-executive director at Mineral Resources (MinRes) is more than just a boardroom position, it's a testament to the company's commitment to meaningful Indigenous engagement and leadership.

As a highly respected Noongar Elder from Western Australia with extensive experience across health, education, and community development, Hayward brings a unique and invaluable perspective to the operations of Mineral Resources.

Throughout her life, Hayward has been resolute about the importance of authentic engagement with Aboriginal people.

"Every bit of business that happens in this country happens on Aboriginal land," she points out, underscoring the need for businesses to recognise and respect this reality by engaging meaningfully with traditional owners and Indigenous communities.

This mission is evident in MinRes' procurement strategy, which has seen an extraordinary increase in spending with Indigenous-owned businesses.

From just $2.6m in FY21, the company's engagement skyrocketed to $68m in FY24, benefiting 44 Indigenous businesses.

This growth is not just about meeting targets; it's about fostering real, sustainable economic development.

"It's not procurement for procurement's sake," Hayward explains. "It's about partnering with the most capable individuals to deliver the services we require."

MinRes' approach goes beyond transactional relationships, with a range of program in place to support Indigenous businesses through initiatives such as Business Startup Grants, tailored finance solutions through dedicated finance facilities, and in-house support for business set-up and sustainable growth.

The impact of these efforts is perhaps best illustrated by the personal stories that emerge from MinRes' collaborations. Hayward shares one particularly inspiring example: "I was at a lunch recently, and there were a couple of the traditional owners there ... and they were over the moon in terms of their personal experience. In 10 months, because of their engagement with MinRes they were buying their own house, and they had never been able to do that before."

This story, one of many, underscores the transformative potential of MinRes' strategic support for Indigenous businesses, enabling them to achieve economic stability and growth in ways that have a profound impact on the broader community.

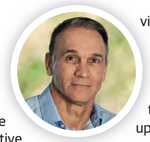
Despite these achievements, Hayward acknowledges that there is still a long way to go, particularly in increasing Indigenous representation at the highest levels in corporate Australia.

Currently, there are only four Indigenous directors on ASX 300 boards. This figure starkly contrasts with the increased public sentiment calling for greater Indigenous involvement.

"People don't know the skills and expertise that we can bring ... and when you don't know, you get a bit scared. Fear breeds paralysis. But it's actually time, in this country, for everyone to be a bit brave," she says.

It's clear that companies like MinRes continue to make bold steps to address this disparity across the country, and in so doing not only enhance their own governance and community engagement but also lead by example for others to follow. Hayward's leadership at MinRes serves as a powerful reminder of what can be achieved when Indigenous voices are not just included but are actively shaping the future of corporate Australia.

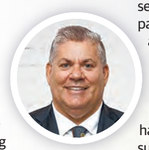
Mike Westerman



Glencore Copper industrial lead Mike Westerman oversees a global workforce of 30,000 employees. His formative years growing up on sheep and cattle stations, combined with his education in the Tom Price community in the Pilbara, gave him a first-hand introduction to the mining industry and shaped his leadership style. Drawing on his rural and Indigenous heritage, Westerman emphasises the importance of fostering strong relationships at both grassroots and corporate levels. In discussing the First Nations business landscape, he highlights that true success lies in the ability to add value and deliver tangible results, affirming that dedication and effectiveness can drive achievement in any endeavour.

"My career has involved a fair bit of sacrifice, including living in places others wouldn't and taking on responsibilities others didn't want. There have also been some risks involved, such as moving to new locations or taking on challenging jobs. And, of course, a bit of luck – being in the right place at the right time and showing up when needed."

Gordon Cole



Noongar man and Cole Supplies chief executive Gordon Cole has a strong entrepreneurial spirit that has led him to work across various industries within the Indigenous business sector. Since co-founding the Indigenous-owned wholesaler in 2013, specialising in workwear, safety, health, medical and industrial products, Cole has held key roles, including board director at First Australians Capital and chair of the Noongar Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He describes the Indigenous business sector as vibrant, healthy and on an unprecedented growth trajectory.

"I've really enjoyed my time in business and have started to explore further opportunities for our sector in business, trade and investment, where we aim to scale up and become greater participants in the economy."

Wayne Bergmann

Wayne Bergmann is the managing director of Leedal Pty Ltd, where he focuses on fostering economic independence and opportunities for Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley region. He previously served as the CEO of the Kimberley Land Council, negotiating multibillion-dollar native title agreement. He is executive chair of the National Indigenous Times and Professor of Practice at the University of NSW.

A published author, Bergmann's strategic leadership has driven commercial success by advocating for Indigenous business participation, securing significant investments and facilitating partnerships that empower Aboriginal people to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

"All my life in business I have been told 'you can't do that', such as with the National Indigenous Times. To see the things that I've put effort into, in the Indigenous space, where it has failed in the past, and to see it become successful, has become an incredible feeling to make things happen that no one else believed could happen. With grit and determination you can do anything."

"Business has been a single value of my whole life. Working for a living. But for the first 30 years, most of my life was about social justice and the biggest challenge was pivoting and finding the balance between that mission and being an entrepreneur."

Noel Pearson

Hailing from the Guugu Yimidhirr community of Hope Vale on the southeastern Cape York Peninsula, Noel Pearson is a prominent Indigenous lawyer, academic and activist who founded the Cape York Partnership in 2004. The non-profit organisation focuses on empowering Indigenous families and communities to pursue lives of value, freedom and prosperity. Pearson has long championed Indigenous self-determination and economic development, with a focus on tackling systemic inequalities and promoting practical solutions for community empowerment. His influential work has shaped national discussions on reconciliation, Indigenous policy reform and economic participation. Recently, Pearson was appointed to the board of Fortescue Metals Group, further extending his influence into corporate leadership and the resource sector.

> **All my life in business I have been told 'you can't do that' ... with grit and determination you can do anything**

Adam Goodes

Former AFL legend, two-time premiership winner and dual Brownlow Medallist Adam Goodes is a proud Adnyamathanha and Narungga man, celebrated for his contributions both on and off the field. Known for his strong advocacy for Indigenous rights and anti-racism efforts, Goodes has shifted his focus to community work since retiring from football. In 2009, he co-founded the GO Foundation, which supports Indigenous youth through education initiatives. Goodes believes education is the key to a better future, which inspired the foundation's launch.

Amanda Healy

Under Amanda Healy's leadership, Warrikal has become one of Australia's most successful Indigenous-owned engineering companies, providing significant employment and training opportunities for Indigenous people in the resources sector.

Simultaneously, as CEO of Kirrikin, she champions Indigenous artists by transforming their works into globally recognised fashion statements, bridging culture and commerce.

Healy has spoken extensively about her leadership journey, and the impact she aims to make through her businesses. Reflecting on her early career in the mining industry, she notes she had to be tough to succeed in a male-dominated environment, but she has always focused on building strong relationships with both employees and traditional owners. She emphasises the importance of leading by example and leveraging entrepreneurship to support Indigenous artists and communities, such as through Kirrikin, her luxury fashion brand that returns profits to the artists and supports small Indigenous businesses.

At Warrikal, Healy aims to provide opportunities for Indigenous workers and has grown the company to a significant size with a diverse workforce. She acknowledges the challenges in achieving a 20 per cent Indigenous workforce target but remains committed to expanding opportunities for Indigenous participation in the industry. Healy is also passionate about using her platform to address the lack of generational wealth among Indigenous communities, a challenge she has personally faced and strives to overcome through her business ventures.

Amanda is clear on the future when it comes to Indigenous business leaders: "We need to have a bigger say in it and we're never going to get there unless we are taken seriously, unless people start to see us functioning and operating at the highest possible level, and understand that we're just as smart as everyone."

Ben Wyatt

Renowned as the first Indigenous treasurer (WA) for any Australian state or territory and the first Indigenous person appointed to the board of an ASX-200 company, Yamatji man Ben Wyatt continues to be a significant force in economic reforms and fiscal management. Speaking on the positive growth within the Indigenous business landscape, Wyatt highlights the increasing opportunity for Indigenous entrepreneurs. In his current role as an independent non-executive director on the boards of Rio Tinto and Woodside Energy, he emphasises that the resources sector can play a pivotal role by ensuring Indigenous communities are included in economic opportunities through partnerships, procurement and investment in Indigenous-owned businesses.

Daniel Tucker AM

Wongatha and Mirning man Daniel Tucker AM founded and sits at the helm of Carey Group, a First Nations mining, construction and training company, as its managing director. With more than 30 years of experience in the mining industry and a background in senior executive roles within ASX-listed companies, Tucker established the Carey Education Trust in 2007 to support Aboriginal education. Honoured with an Order of Australia Medal in 2020, he is a prominent champion for reconciliation, cultural preservation and community development. Tucker continues to advocate for greater investment in Indigenous-led education and the need to address systemic inequalities within Indigenous communities.

Sharna Collard

Balladong and Wilmen woman Sharna Collard's leadership journey began in 2015 with the launch of Australia's first Indigenous-led and owned fleet company, Kooya. As the current chief executive, Collard reflects on the family-run enterprise's mission to address the critical need for Indigenous-owned businesses in the fleet sector.

"We diversified into the fleet sector with Kooya because there were no other Aboriginal businesses in this space. Recognising this untapped market gave us the confidence to fulfil this need," she explains.

Collard, alongside her father Kim, who initially served as chief executive before transitioning to chair, have been instrumental in driving the company's growth. Starting as fleet manager, Collard quickly showcased her potential, advancing to general manager in 2018 and assuming the top role a year later.

"I've grown with the business and now understand every facet of it," she says.

"'The importance of Aboriginal leadership in business cannot be overstated. While Aboriginal ownership is crucial, effective management and leadership are essential for maintaining the company's cultural integrity."

Reflecting on Kooya's early challenges, Collard admits it wasn't an easy start.

"I don't mind admitting it was certainly trying," she says.

"There was some hesitance from businesses to engage with Kooya because we are in the professional and financial services sectors, where Aboriginal businesses are under-represented."

Despite these initial obstacles, Kooya quickly established itself in the market.

"Kooya has stood the test of time, and now, looking at our customer base, we have a series of blue-chip clients, including Fortescue, BHP, Telstra and Chevron," Collard says.

Fortescue began its partnership with Kooya in 2018, initially leasing services for 34 assets on a single mine site. At the end of last year, the contract was renewed and expanded to include 110 electric Tuatara Ultra Terrain Vehicles for Fortescue's Pilbara sites. Kooya now manages leasing activities across three mine sites for Fortescue: Solomon, Eliwana and Iron Bridge.

"The key to the success between Kooya and Fortescue has been incremental growth. It began as a small opportunity, which required Kooya to prove our worth by providing excellent customer service and be competitive, as is often the case in business," Collard says.

She highlights that the partnership is built on a shared mission to drive Fortescue's decarbonisation goals.

"There is a strong synergy and alignment between First Nation businesses and our commitment to decarbonisation. Over the past 12 months, we executed the exclusive master decarbonisation contract with Fortescue, allowing us to work closely with them towards their decarbonisation objectives."

Beyond business, Collard's leadership is deeply connected to social impact. The Bibbulmun Fund, established in 2014, channels 5 per cent of Kooya's net profits into community initiatives. The fund supports leadership and entrepreneurship programs and contributes to health initiatives such as the Purple House Foundation's renal dialysis support.

"A crucial aspect of Kooya's offering is its focus on the Aboriginal social impact. My dad and I and many Aboriginal people/individuals recognise that governance is rooted in reciprocity and giving back. To embody this principle, we established the Bibbulmun Fund to support and contribute to our communities," she says.

Reflecting on her journey so far, Collard expresses pride in what she's achieved.

"As a proud Aboriginal woman in a male-dominated field, I take great pride in my role as a leader. I strive to create change and lead by example, demonstrating the impact of Aboriginal leadership in driving progress and inspiring others," she says. •

Machinists at the R.M. Williams workshop, and below, the Percy St store which opened for business in Prospect, South Australia, in 1932.

Aussie icon R.M. Williams celebrates a century of Indigenous ties

The ties that bind

David Prestipino

A century ago, Indigenous hands helped put the soul into Australia's most famous boot.

Aboriginal man "Dollar Mick" met Reginald Murray Williams and helped "RM" develop the leather craft techniques for the first R.M.Williams boot.

It all started when a young RM, living on Adnyamathanha country in the Flinders Ranges, met travelling stockman Michael George Smith – Dollar Mick – at RM's camp at Italowie Gorge.

Dollar Mick shared his knowledge of leatherwork and soon the "one piece of leather" design – a variation on the Chelsea boot – was born. "My success began the night Dollar came in his mule buggy and asked to stay," Williams, who died in 2003, wrote in his 1984 autobiography.

Soon the Adnyamathanha people – who refer to themselves as Yura – were collaborating with RM in his original workshop at the Nepabunna mission during the Great Depression, helping source the skin RM wanted to shape the boots, as well as the whips and leather bags he also began crafting.

Nearly a century later, the bond between R.M. Williams and First Nations Australians remains strong, much like the durability of the boots themselves. This connection remains strong today, with investment firm Tattarang buying R.M.Williams in 2020 for an estimated $190m.

The R.M.Williams boot is a powerful symbol, central to the image Australia conveys to the world. Successive prime ministers have gifted pairs to their counterparts overseas.

Originally renowned for its premium, handcrafted footwear, R.M.Williams has since expanded its reputation to include a comprehensive range of fashion apparel, all embodying the quality and craftsmanship for which it is known.

R.M.Williams CEO Paul Grosmann says the origin story of Australia's most iconic footwear is steeped in First Nations craftsmanship and lore.

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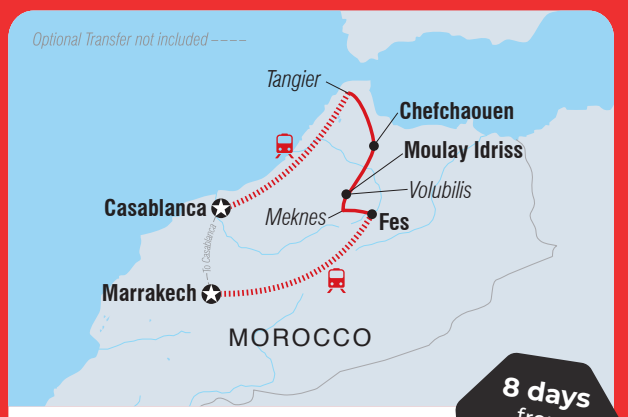

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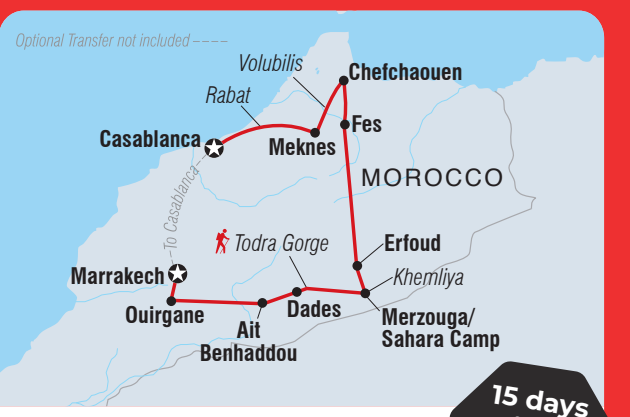

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RMW sole stitcher Steve Glenie at work; Sarah Reid-Finefeuiaki at the company's Indooroopilly store in Brisbane; and junior womenswear designer Charles Kennedy at the head office in Sydney.

"The influence and creativity of First Nations peoples – and their unwavering connection to Country – has been at the heart of our business since the start," Grosmann says.

"It was Dollar Mick, an Aboriginal man that RM met on his travels, who helped our founder develop the leather craft techniques needed to make the very first R.M.Williams boot. His ingenuity lives on today, with every pair of boots crafted in our Adelaide workshop."

R.M.Williams' commitment to Indigenous collaboration continues today. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent 3.8 per cent of the Australian population. In contrast, a survey of R.M.Williams employees this year found 4.3 per cent identified as First Nations Australians.

Kamilaroi woman and R.M.Williams employee Sarah Reid-Finefeuiaki, at the company's Indooroopilly store in Brisbane, shares stories of her family and Country with customers.

"Customers get excited when they hear I'm a First Nations person, and where I'm from ... and they see the smile on my face and how proud I am to talk about my family and where they are from (Toowoomba)," she says.

Another key part of R.M.Williams' journey has been Steve Glenie who has been an integral part of the team for almost eight years, primarily as a sole stitcher, stitching the rubber sole to the welt strip on the iconic boots. "I've got many roles, but I'm mainly a sole stitcher," Glenie says, highlighting the precision required in his craft.

His journey to RMW wasn't straightforward. "I applied many times to work at R.M.Williams," he recalls, mentioning a one-week course at Salisbury that included a workshop tour and job trial. "I heard back the same day after the trial and got the job. I cracked open a bottle of champagne when I got the job."

For Glenie, teamwork and good hand-eye co-ordination are essential skills in his role, especially when using special hand techniques to ensure the boots are stitched correctly.

The camaraderie is what he values most. "The people and working as a team," he says, is the best part of his job.

As for opportunities at R.M.Williams, Glenie notes: "We get offered to change and learn new things in production. There are always new roles popping up in other areas of the business."

At its womenswear workshop in Sydney, R.M.Williams junior designer Charles Kennedy is incorporating native bush designs on embroidery for an upcoming collection.

Kennedy studied fashion design at TAFE in Ultimo, winning the Gili Award for outstanding First Nations student, and having his designs featured at Sydney Fashion Week as a student. Soon he was working for renowned designer Alex Perry before R.M.Williams came knocking a few years later. He's extremely proud of the company's legacy of working with First Nations craftsmen and how it honours its Indigenous roots.

"There aren't many companies, especially in Australia, that in the 1930s were working so directly with First Nations craftsmen and artisans," Kennedy says. "I think it's an amazing legacy and something we proudly hold on to. To come into a company like this that pays such homage to that, it does feel like a bit of a homecoming."

The 27-year-old – whose family are Jawoyn people from the Northern Territory – was born and raised in Sydney and is also proud to contribute to R.M. Williams' sustainable and ethical commitment, including a pledge for 100 per cent preferred fibres by 2025 and using organic and regenerative materials.

"We prioritise natural fibres, and are increasing our use of low impact materials like Good Earth Cotton," he says.

R.M.Williams is developing a strategy and target for procurement spend from First Nations businesses.

Grosmann says the company is proud of its historical Indigenous ties and will always support its First Nations workers to aspire and achieve their dreams, a stance that extended to First Nations Australians outside the organisation.

"We remain wholeheartedly committed to championing and celebrating the contributions of all First Nations people, both inside our organisation and in our wider community," Grosmann says. ●

PROFILE | Des Headland

AFL great still in top form off the field

From recruitment to health care, Des Headland is a businessman driven to help others succeed

Dianne Bortoletto

Noongar-Yamatji man Des Headland might be better known for his 166-game AFL career, but the 43-year-old is kicking goals in the business world too.

On the field, Headland needed sticky fingers to mark the ball and score 177 AFL goals. Now, long after the final siren, those fingers are involved in many proverbial pies.

Headland is one of the owners, a director and CEO of Spartan First, an Indigenous mainstream occupational health service.

He is also the co-chairman of Aboriginal-owned IronMerge Group which has two divisions: IronMerge People providing recruitment and labour for mining and construction, and IronMerge Industrial which provides PPE and hardware.

His latest venture is Paradigm Entertainment where he's an owner and director. Paradigm's first event was promoting the world title fight of young Noongar boxer Alex Winwood, who lost his fifth professional fight to WBA minimum-weight world champion Thammanoon Niyomtrong.

And then there's Madalah, an organisation that assists Indigenous students with scholarships to Perth boarding schools, which lists Headland as an ambassador.

That's a lot of balls in the air. The parallels between Headland's business pursuits and his footy career are numerous.

To play well, and importantly to win, one needs to be surrounded by a good and cohesive team, and the 2002 Brisbane premiership player is full of praise for his work colleagues.

"It might seem like a lot, but there are good people running those companies," the former Fremantle Docker says.

"My day-to-day work is as CEO of Spartan First, and I'm really excited that we've opened our first radiology centre in Kalgoorlie."

Spartan First began in 2018 after Headland was approached by Clinton Wolf, now Spartan's executive chair.

It began with one medical centre conducting pre-employment medical examinations for mining, defence and government in Perth in 2018 and has since expanded to nine medical centres in WA and Queensland with a tenth due to open early next year.

Spartan First Imaging in Kalgoorlie Boulder is Australia's first Indigenous media imaging service.

"I used to be the one lying on a medical table being X-rayed and examined by physios – the technology and equipment now days is miles ahead," Headland says.

"We'll be looking to expand with more radiology centres in the future."

Spartan First also has a dental clinic in Subiaco in Perth, GP clinics in Perth and Bunbury.

"When we can employ Aboriginal medical practitioners and staff, we do, but the focus is on employing the best person for the job," Headland says. "We take great pride in delivering a high-quality service for everyone, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal."

When it comes to business, Headland's journey has been anything but linear.

He experienced significant losses with an energy drinks business he started in India during his AFL playing days, losing two houses in the process. Despite this, he's not one to dwell on the past.

"I learnt some lessons the hard way, that's for sure, but footy taught me about adversity, things can happen, and what's important is to look forward and move on, and that's what I do."

"I was dropped from the Brisbane Lions in 2001 and missed the Grand Final and I was devastated. But that made me train harder to be a better player, and I made it into the 2002 premiership team," he says.

After hanging up his boots in 2010 after 114 games for the Fremantle Dockers, he moved to Broome with his wife and three children where he stayed for three years.

It was in Broome Headland entered the political arena after being selected in July 2013 as a candidate for the Palmer United Party for the Federal seat of Durack. He then became an adviser to Senator Dio Wan, a former WA senator in the Palmer United Party.

"I'd just finished footy, and I didn't have political knowledge – it was a steep learning curve and I learnt just how hard politicians work.

"During my first week in Canberra, I was going to a meeting with Clive Palmer and we walked into a meeting room and in there is the Prime Minister of Australia Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey – I was there to take notes – and afterwards I thought, 'I've just sat with the most powerful people in Australia, and if I can do that, nothing scares me anymore'.

"I was in Canberra, when a new thing called Supply Nation started, I went to the launch and I saw an opportunity for Indigenous businesses.

"I helped a few friends who had a business in the NT set up in WA, then I did some consultancy for the Njamal Trustee in the Pilbara for a year, and that's when I met Clinton who talked about setting up an occupational health business, and the rest is history."

Like all competitive sportsmen, Headland is looking for his next challenge, thinking ahead to his next move. "Our goal is to make medical services accessible to everyone." ●

> **... footy taught me about adversity, things can happen, and what's important is to look forward ... and that's what I do**

Owner, director and CEO of Spartan First Des Headland; celebrating a goal for the Dockers at Subiaco Oval in 2010; and in full fight for the Brisbane Lions during the team's AFL Grand Final win over Collingwood in 2002.

A business that goes way beyond a job

Killara's founding principles – engage, employ, empower – have served them well, creating opportunities for others

Dianne Bortoletto

Courage, empathy, grit and the ability to adapt to employees' needs are what co-founder of Killara Services Jasmine Newman attributes to their success.

Killara Services is Australia's largest Aboriginal cleaning company. Established in 2017 by Jasmine and her husband Max Newman, their first job, after winning a tender, was just five days after the birth of their daughter.

Now they have almost 600 people employed across Australia, 48 per cent of whom identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

The couple met while working at another start-up cleaning company where Max was general manager and hired Jasmine as the national Indigenous engagement manager.

Over the next four years, they helped grow the company to $14m in revenue.

When that business was sold, the duo left because they felt the company's values no longer aligned with their own.

To get Killara off the ground, Jasmine presented a joint venture opportunity to one of Australia's largest cleaning companies, GJK Services.

"The owner, George Stamas, understood and backed our business dream, allowing us the flexibility to make every decision ourselves, to make it a culturally appropriate Indigenous business," Jasmine says.

"Two weeks into our joint venture, we were sued for $100,000 and restrained from operating for three months – we had a non-compete clause in our previous employment contract."

They have since repaid the original capital investment from GJK Services, and the interest-free loan for the legal claim. "The advantage of starting as a joint venture was that I could borrow systems and processes that worked, as well as enact my own, for example, HR processes in a non-Indigenous organisation don't fit a black fella business."

Killara Services founders Jasmine and Max Newman with their daughter; some of the proud staff; the team on the job; and Jasmine collecting the 2024 Certified Supplier of the Year award for Killara, Australia's largest Aboriginal cleaning company.

Growing up on Dharug country in Western Sydney with five siblings, Jasmine recalls a childhood marked by instability.

"We were 'houso kids', brought up in housing commissions, we moved around a lot – I went to 12 schools before year 7," she says.

"It builds resilience, and it made me ensure that my kids didn't grow up that way," the mother-of-four says.

After completing Year 12 in Liverpool, Jasmine's first job was in employment services with a disability support agency.

She then moved into Aboriginal employment strategy, general recruitment and then group training, supporting host employers with challenges and barriers they may have had with school-based trainees.

"If trainees were turning up to work late, or their behaviour was not right from a workplace perspective, or if school dropped off, it was my job to offer holistic support to help get them back on track," she says.

"I found it really fulfilling in Indigenous recruitment, because I was helping to make a real change in someone's life."

That same holistic approach is applied in her own business.

"I feel a responsibility as an Indigenous business owner," Jasmine explains.

> **The more Aboriginal people we hire, the greater the positive impact on communities**

She describes how she has supported domestic violence applications, helped women plan to leave and go to emergency housing or temporary accommodation at the expense of Killara, as well as supplying food vouchers and Opal (public transport) cards.

"We employed an incredible lady on a Defence cleaning contract, a grandmother, and her kid, the primary care giver to her grandchildren, got locked up, so we approached the client and shifted her roster so she could pick up her grandchildren after school.

"This has a domino effect – the kids see Nan going to work, they see the positives that can happen because of work.

"It means so much to be able to help and retain staff who wouldn't or couldn't work in a corporate organisation."

It's clear that the extra support given to employees is rewarded with loyalty and a growing positive reputation.

"Word got around and a shift happened, we became an employer of choice for mob – we have mob wanting to work for us and that was an 'oh wow' moment in our journey," Jasmine says.

"The more Aboriginal people we hire, the greater the positive impact on communities.

"We've been able to fix the barriers of employment, identify people into career pathways, into our business or our clients' businesses and we've been able to secure some amazing opportunities."

The foundation of Killara Services is based on three principles, engage, employ and empower.

Its corporate client list includes some of the biggest organisations in the country including Coles, CBRE, Honeywell and Canva along with NSW government departments such as Education, Communities and Justice, and Family and Community Services and the Australian Federal Police.

"I started the businesses to continue my great-grandfather's legacy – Bert Groves who was an Aboriginal activist in the '60s and '70s and played a crucial role in the 1967 referendum," she says.

"Pop advocated the rights for our people and, for me, it's about creating the opportunity for our people that Pop was fighting for."

Killara means "always there" in Dhurag language, a fitting name for a business that goes beyond the job. ●

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Carol Vale with her daughters Rebecca McGuinness and Deborah Hoger; Carol with Rebecca, Deborah, her son Matthew Hammond and Jacinta Vale; and accepting the Indigenous Businesswoman of the Year award.

PROFILE | Carol Vale

Collegiality encourages women

Camaraderie among female entrepreneurs is driven by their aim for economic empowerment to break the cycle of poverty

Brendan Foster

A day after winning Supply Nation's Indigenous Businesswoman of the Year, Carol Vale was already planning how to empower other First Nations female entrepreneurs.

Vale recently won the prestigious award for her work with Murawin, a consultancy firm dedicated to social justice and the empowerment of First Nations communities and marginalised groups.

A proud Dunghutti woman, she founded the Brisbane-based company in 2014 with her late partner Greg.

"I plan on leveraging this platform to amplify even further First Nations women in business, so I've already put the call to Westpac who is the sponsor of this award, to say 'let's make something tangible and work with it'," she told the National Indigenous Times.

"I'm meeting with Supply Nation shortly and Kate Russell (chief executive) and her team to say, how do we leverage off this.

"I'm going to travel around Australia so I'm going to take the opportunity while I'm in these places to connect with others and tell my story.

"So hopefully there might be someone in that room that is inspired by it, to say, 'Well, yep, if Sister can do it, I can do it'."

> **"We're the first business in my family**

The 59-year-old, who has connections to the Gumbaynggirr and Anaiwan peoples, says while you must be competitive to survive in business, there was a camaraderie among First Nations women entrepreneurs.

She says many Indigenous businesswomen wanted the same thing for their communities: economic empowerment.

"These women are my competitors in the business world, but female consultants have sent work my way and I've sent work their way," she says.

"So, there is camaraderie there ... there is collegiality there because we all come from the same boat.

"We know the power of business in breaking cycles of poverty."

The founder and chief executive of Murawin says while it's exciting to see so many First Nations women succeeding in business there are still hurdles in place for Indigenous female entrepreneurs.

"We have to make it more than most because of the racism, because of the lack of trust, because you've sort of got that stuff that we have to contend with," she says.

"But also, we've got the stuff we have to contend with that we can't afford to fail because if I fail, my family misses out, my community misses out and I won't go there."

Vale says her success has inspired other family members to start their own business.

She has also funded several First Nations start-ups.

"We're the first business in my family and so over the last few years there are many other businesses now that have come up, like my niece and her husband have a cleaning service, and my daughter has an early education learning service," she says.

"We've funded female Indigenous businesses in start-ups, so one's a counselling service and one's a service that supports the NDIS.

"It's not always about the money, it's about the connections that I've been able to gather over my career and also my business journey that I can introduce others into that space and I think that's been very valuable as well."

The Australian icon, made in Australia.