The Indigenous Business Review

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THE PAY GAP

Indigenous workers $15,000 a year behind

BUILDING THE LEGACY

A daughter builds her father's Pilbara business



Taking the wheel

Traditional Owners run the ore feed at Prominent Hill

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Cover image: AMY board members Maisie Winton, Anthony Russell and David Brown

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Editorial: editor@theibr.com.au
Advertising: advertising@theibr.com.au
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2 Prowse St,
West Perth,
Western Australia,
6005

The Indigenous Business Review

Indigenous workers earn about $15,000 a year less than the average Australian worker. Our investigation on page 13 finds the gap is narrowest where awards set pay, at 2.9 per cent, and widest where employers set it themselves. That makes ownership a pay question. Deloitte modelling for the **BlakPrint** report finds Indigenous ownership puts about 8700 more Indigenous people into full-time equivalent work across the Northern Territory.

"A Reconciliation Action Plan does not pay anyone's wages," **NTIBN** chief executive Naomi Anstess says.

As our cover story details, **AMY Nominees**, has paid more than $18 million in wages to its local Indigenous community over the past decade. On July 1 it started a five-year, $60 million contract running the ore feed at BHP's Prominent Hill. Its advice to other native title groups: separate the business board from the native title board, and build systems a major miner will trust.

The routes to ownership in these pages vary. **Harry Mowarin** bought half of **Cherratta Lodge** through vendor finance and now houses **Woodside**'s Pluto workforce on the road named for the station where he grew up. **Jess Wilson** is building her late father's **Bugarrba** into a generational asset. **Karlka Pastoral** is testing whether **Nyiyaparli** beef can carry its own brand. **Geoff Johnson**'s **Gimarra** is putting Wiradjuri on a milk carton.

Ownership also keeps money moving locally. Eighty-five per cent of **Plate Events and Catering**'s supply chain is Indigenous, including more than 20 growers and wild harvesters. **Supply Nation** chief executive **Kate Russell** wants Australia's 537 councils, which spend an estimated $48 billion a year, to set the Indigenous procurement targets most of them lack.

October is **Indigenous Business Month**, and this year's theme is Local and Connected. The surest way to back an Indigenous business is to buy from one: the catering, the hamper, the tour, the milk. At the **Australian Native Food Festival** in September, many First Nations stallholders doubled their sales in a single weekend.

Plate founder **Matt Atkins** wants that custom to last all year.

"As soon as NAIDOC's over ... a lot of the corporates kind of forget that we exist, but we operate 52 weeks of the year," he says.



Reece Harley
Managing Editor



Karrina Nolan and Cissy Gore-Birch
PICTURE: JARRED CROSS

Power to the people

Remote communities are looking to plug into the clean energy rollout, **Jarred Cross** reports

With thousands of kilometres of power transition lines needed across the Australian continent, on Indigenous land, our people can and should play a strong role in the process.

This is the perspective of Karrina Nolan, director of the First Nations Clean Energy Network speaking at its national symposium in Djilang (Geelong) in April.

"If proponents engage with our communities earlier, not when something's designed, then the benefits really are genuine and long-term," Nolan tells the National Indigenous Times, adding self-determination on local benefit is critical.

This goes for large-scale and long-term projects, the ownership of assets and broader economic opportunity and also cases where communities just want cheaper power bills and more reliable power, she says.

The federal government has committed $70 million in investment over three years from 2025 via the First Nations Clean Energy Program.

Grants are available for clean energy projects.

During the symposium, Climate Change and Energy Minister Chris Bowen announced $10 million available for up to two Indigenous organisations to support projects with an expected capacity over 1MW, beyond feasibility and towards financial close.

Communities across the country are already seeing benefits from local projects.

Scott McDinny, with Original Power, says at home in Borroloola, the build of a 2.1 megawatt solar photovoltaic and 6.2 megawatt battery microgrid will reduce frequent power outages. It will also create jobs.

Original Power is an Indigenous-led not-for-profit supporting communities with the delivery of renewable energy projects. "It's a big project," he says, for a community currently relying on diesel generation, and looking at a much more reliable connection.

In Marlinja, Aleeta Dixon has been working to build her community's microgrid solar project for the past five years.

The solar system means more, and cheaper power, she says.

The symposium's conversations canvassed equity and co-ownership pathways, regional and remote energy equity, investment opportunities, utilities, policy and community benefit options.

Five years ago, there were 150 people at the first national symposium, First Nations Clean Energy Network's Cissy Gore-Birch says. This year, 500 people attended.

"Leaving no one behind" is a common theme, Gore-Birch says. As is government commitments and the role First Peoples play in clean energy, she says. "It's about bringing First Nations people together to talk about the issues around our communities, our regions, our states, and territories. To share knowledge and understanding of how fast this space is moving," Gore-Birch says of the symposium.

Nolan says some in the network are new to clean energy works, while others are 20 years in, already making community energy solutions a reality.

This extends to mitigating potential damage to sacred sites; economic wealth opportunities; and being reliable stakeholders on long-term projects.

This work is about lifting "the aspiration of our community to be part of the transition", Nolan says.

The First Nations Clean Energy Symposium was hosted at Nyaal Banyul Geelong Convention and Event Centre from August 18 to 20. ●



Outlook from Prominent Hill is bright

AMY board member and traditional owner Anthony Russell

AMY Nominees is working its own land in BHP operations in outback SA, reports **Reece Harley**

Four months into the largest stand-alone contract BHP has awarded to a Traditional Owner business in South Australia, AMY Nominees runs the ore feed at Prominent Hill around the clock with a workforce drawn heavily from its own people.

"About 50 per cent of our employees are Indigenous, and out of that probably 30 per cent from the local community," AMY Nominees general manager operations Lee Emmett says.

The company, the business arm of the Antakirinja Matu-Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal Corporation, started its five-year, $60 million run of mine contract on July 1, after eight years building capability on the same ground.

Emmett says AMY Nominees had turned over "a couple of million dollars a year" for most of the past six years.

"It's quite a big jump for us," he says. "This year alone, we've put on an extra six or seven key people just to get us up to the level that we need to be in to compete with the likes of BHP and tier one contractors."

BHP head of governance and social value procurement Jessica Simpson says longer contracts are BHP's response to what Traditional Owner and Indigenous suppliers had told the company.

"In listening to our Traditional Owner and Indigenous businesses on this journey with us, the importance of long-term, sustainable growth became critically apparent," Simpson says.

"Providing greater certainty through longer-term contracts gives businesses the confidence to invest in their people and equipment, build capability and create lasting opportunities for the future."

Keeping the crushers fed

AMY Nominees supplies the project management, safety, personnel and operating crews for the contract. About 12 operators work each shift, day and night, loading and hauling ore and waste from the pit to the run of mine pad or the waste dump to keep the crushers fed.

The crews also pull contaminated ore and tramp metal out of the feed, grade and water the haul roads, and break oversized rock before it goes to processing.

Prominent Hill sits between an hour and a half and two hours from Coober Pedy, so most of the workforce flies in and out, mainly from Port Augusta and the rest from Adelaide.

"There's still quite a large percentage of those are AMYAC people that just live in Port Augusta or Adelaide," Emmett says.

BHP general manager Prominent Hill Kirsty Liddicoat says the contract puts AMY Nominees at the centre of the mine.

"Through this partnership, AMY Nominees have long-term employment opportunities on their Country, working directly on the core operation of Prominent Hill and building capability and capacity in the community," Liddicoat says. "For BHP, we are able to support a valued Traditional Owner business, while also continuing to prioritise the safe, reliable and productive operation of Prominent Hill."

The work comes as Prominent Hill shifts from truck haulage to shaft hoisting through a new 1.3 kilometre shaft and materials handling system. The mine is one of three underground



Delrae Brady, an all-round operator for AMYNOMs/Anangu Mining at Prominent Hill; AMY board members Maisie Winton, Anthony Russell and David Brown, opposite
LEFT IMAGE: SPARKLABS CREATIVE

operations in BHP's Copper SA province, alongside Olympic Dam and Carrapateena. The province produced 321,000 tonnes of copper last financial year, and BHP plans to lift South Australian output to 500,000 tonnes a year through the 2030s.

On Country

AMYAC holds native title across about 77,000 square kilometres of far north South Australia, taking in Tarcoola, Coober Pedy and Cadney Park. Prominent Hill sits within it.

AMY Nominees board chairman and Traditional Owner Ian Crombie says the corporation set up its business arm to turn that land base into work.

"We're trying to utilise the mining areas to give our members employment, giving them upskills and capacity building and training, and to take the opportunity of being a miner working on the land," he says in a video case study on the partnership.

Operator Kandeana Steele came to the mine as a cleaner.

"I was only about three months into my cleaning contract, and then the boss came over and asked me if I wanted a job, to start training up in these big trucks," she Steele says. "I was so excited and I could not stop smiling. "My daughter is already looking at me as a role model. She can see the benefits of what I'm doing as a person and she can see the benefits at home."

Fellow operator Tracy Boland says the opportunities are there for those willing to take them. "There are a lot of opportunities here if they are willing to just put themselves out of their comfort zone a little bit and have a go," Boland says. "They will be very surprised at the support they will receive and what they can achieve with the support of AMY."

Earning the contract

AMY Nominees started at Prominent Hill with a waste management contract. It moved into small plant hire and supplying operators, and in 2018, it joined Thiess to win a $112 million, five-year contract for run of mine management, crusher feed and ore rehandling. The arrangement began under OZ Minerals and it continues after BHP bought the company in its $9.6 billion acquisition, the deal that created Copper SA.

When BHP announced the new contract in July, Emmett dated the work behind it to March 2024.

"From the first constructive site visit with BHP in March 2024, we have worked closely with our partners to develop our team and improve our operational capacity to enable us to secure the ROM contract in July 2026," he said at the time.

> **My daughter is looking at me as a role model. She can see the benefits of what I'm doing**

AMY Nominees company secretary Paul Case says the crews worked as one.

"I think the culture of the site is really strong," Case says said. "I don't think it's ever been seen as two crews. I think it's been seen as one team. I think that's what makes it work."

BHP mining manager David Johnson says the partnership serves both sides.

"As with any partnership, both parties move forward towards a common objective," Johnson says. "In this case, this enables BHP to meet what it needs to from its local stakeholders, but also, at a greater level, help support and build an organisation to get a foothold, to create that generational opportunity that perhaps wouldn't be available to them, and actually add a lot of value to the local community."

BHP general manager engineering, infrastructure and services for Copper SA Jess Balasso told the Tactic Conference in Port Augusta in July that the contract had been "years in the making".

"Through training, experience and partnership, AMY Nominees has built the capability to take on increasingly complex work," she said. "It will help unlock meaningful employment, support skills development and create pathways for future generations to



participate in the mining sector."

BHP spent $112 million with Indigenous suppliers last financial year and $292 million with local businesses in the Upper Spencer Gulf and Roxby Downs, and the company says it is lifting both figures.

Two boards, one objective

Emmett joined AMY Nominees late last year after three years in Papua New Guinea. More than a decade ago, he helped set up the first Indigenous civil contract at Olympic Dam. Asked if he had seen a resources company back a Traditional Owner business this way before, he says: "Not to the level of this one."

Asked what other native title groups should take from the AMY model, he points first to governance. AMYAC keeps its native title board and its business board separate, and professionals make the commercial calls.

"The decisions that are made at a business level are done by a team of people that are professionals and have longstanding experience in making those decisions," he says. "So they're not influenced by community.

"There seems to be a lot of delays and infighting sometimes with communities that get too involved in the business side of things, whereas we employ people to do that work, to make the decisions. The board still has to endorse and support them."

Emmett and his executive team report to the AMY Nominees board and present to the AMYAC board three or four times a year. Some directors sit on both. The company works to two, three and five-year business plans, checks them at every board meeting, and is bringing in a policy to rotate two directors every two years.

His second lesson is systems.

"A lot of the businesses, particularly Indigenous and TO businesses, may not be at the level they need to be to undertake contracts, especially in the mining and resources sector, where you have to have a very strong management system," he says.

"You need to have the right people within your business to implement them and maintain them to a level that BHP and other large miners expect."

Wages first

Most of AMY Nominees' earnings have gone back into the business, much of it into management systems. Emmett says the company had still paid more than $18 million in wages to the local Indigenous community over the past decade.

It also sponsors netball and football carnivals each year in Adelaide and Port Augusta, covering uniforms, accommodation and travel so members can compete.

"Hopefully there will be a day where we can pay a dividend back to the AMY community," Emmett says.

AMY Nominees contractual business adviser Rob Gibb says the return already shows in the community.

"When you look at what goes back to community now, that's where the difference is made," Gibb says. "Watching families grow, watching wages go back to community, watching what happens with that flow-on effect.

"It's also watching the growth of young Aboriginal people going on the site at Prominent Hill, knowing that they can hold their head up high and say, 'this is our land we're working on'."

Beyond the mine gate

AMY Nominees' strategic plan calls for diversification, and the company has already moved beyond the mine gate. It co-owns Macweld Crane Hire in Port Augusta with Fleurieu Cranes; it holds Mabel Creek Station near Coober Pedy; and this year, it completed a civil project in the defence sector worth $2 million to $3 million.

The station is subleased to a pastoralist, and Traditional Owners use it for cultural business. Emmett says the longer term plan is to upgrade its houses, sheds and infrastructure so the community can run it, with livestock and tourism close to the Ghan line and Coober Pedy.

"You'd experience not only that station working experience but also a traditional Aboriginal experience," he says.

The ROM contract has also brought miners on AMY country to the door, from early-stage explorers to operating mines.

"There's a lot of mining companies and small miners that are really keen to talk to us and understand our model and how we've managed to make it successful," Emmett says.

Crombie wants the partnership to take AMY people further.

"I hope the BHP partnership just continues to strengthen, and have other opportunities, not just in Prominent Hill but also outside of it," he says. ●

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Father's vision sets standard for next wave

A scaffolding company is reaching for the heights, writes David Prestipino



Jess Wilson balances motherhood and management with aplomb running Bugarrba's operations

When Jess Wilson took over the family business full-time after her father died about two years ago, she inherited more than a company.

She inherited a challenge from the man who started it.

"My job is to start it, your job is to build it," her dad told her.

Jess is now doing exactly that, evolving the Indigenous-owned scaffolding business he established into what she hopes will become a generational asset for her children and one that will provide opportunities for communities in the Pilbara.

Bugarrba, established about seven years ago, spent its first four years focused on capability and sustainability.

The company emerged from a partnership between Walganbung, the business owned by Terry and wife Gloria, a Yindjibarndi woman, with SRG Global (49 per cent), and structured to maintain majority Indigenous ownership and leverage the strengths of both organisations.

Fortescue relationship

Jess Wilson credits the company's first major mining contract with Fortescue with helping the young business gain relevant experience and credibility to pursue bigger opportunities. "I think 90 per cent of the people I know, all their businesses have started via Fortescue," she says.

Wilson says Bugarrba has become profitable in the past two years and that it is now focused on building assets to further secure contracts on projects operating across 42,000sq km of the Pilbara.

The business is heavily labour-based (it has 18 Indigenous employees, roughly 50 per cent of staff), and its workforce capability expands significantly when major shutdown projects require additional labour.

Bugarrba has since partnered with major Pilbara players such as BHP, Rio Tinto and Hancock, while its partnership with SRG goes beyond simply winning work.

Wilson took the opportunity to develop relationships with senior executives and build genuine partnerships with major listed companies. Her father had kept turning up to meetings and pushing for an opportunity despite being knocked back. She says the lesson she learnt from her late father, after he pursued meetings and pushed for opportunities in the face of rejection, is to take your chance when it comes.

"Grab the opportunities with both hands and run with it," the mother of three young kids says.

Bugarrba is now engaging SRG Infrastructure to build its capability in road maintenance. Wilson says growing the business is not simply about winning contracts, but turning her father's dream of it becoming a generational legacy.

Resilience after addiction battle

Jess's remarkable journey to running Bugarrba as managing director was far from straightforward. She struggled at school before completing Year 12; she began working young and later gained experience through opportunities with Rio Tinto and other mining-related employers, in between overcoming an addiction issue for several years.

Her parents remained a constant influence, instilling their work ethic she now applies as head of the business.

Now her focus is on ensuring what they started does not end with her.

"I'm building something that's going to be generational," she says. ●

The Indigenous Business Review

Back home to where it all began



> “It’s something that I’m really proud of because it’s all for my family

Cherratta Lodge has a history and a future for Harry Mowarin, writes **Dianne Bortoletto**

When Harry Mowarin was a boy, the trip to school in Roebourne, in the Pilbara, meant riding down Cherratta Road on the back of a flat-bed Bedford truck.

The road takes its name from Cherratta Station, where his father was station manager. So does Cherratta Lodge, the workforce accommodation village that now sits on that road in Karratha's industrial estate, and Mowarin, a Ngarluma man, now owns half the business that runs it.

Mowarin holds a 50 per cent stake in Cherratta Lodge Pty Ltd, alongside its four original owners. The partnership came together as Cherratta Lodge won a three-year, $35 million contract to house Woodside's Pluto Train 1 modifications workforce from January 1, 2025. Woodside says it is the first village accommodation contract it has awarded to a Traditional Owner-owned business.

“I just thought straight away, this is a good opportunity for me and my family to make something of it, set up for the rest of our life,” Mowarin says.

Mowarin, the youngest of eight children, grew up on Cherratta Station, about 35 kilometres from Karratha, mustering sheep on motorbikes and horses in the school holidays. Although no longer a working station, it's an Aboriginal community where he lives.

Mowarin is also a partner in GWA, an electrical, off-grid solar and building maintenance business of close to 50 staff, a business he continues to operate.

“I haven't got a trade or anything. I was just driving trucks and pushing lawnmowers for a living,” he says.

“To come to this stage now, it's something that I'm really proud of because it's all for my family. At the end of the day, they're going to benefit it more than I will.”

GWA's work at Cherratta Lodge brought Mowarin together with director Malcolm Wylie, who was born in Karratha and had been looking for an











Clockwise from far left: Harry Mowarin and Malcolm Wylie at Cherratta Station; Cherratta Lodge staff; a drone view of workforce accommodation; Cherratta staff in a team talk; Wylie and Mowarin at the lodge

Indigenous partner. Swapping stories, Wylie learned Mowarin had been raised on the station that gave the lodge its name.

"We offered half of the business to him and he accepted," Wylie says.

Without the assets for a bank loan, Mowarin bought in through vendor finance from the original owners, interest free at first. The share transfer was completed in August 2025, and bank finance is under way.

"The only thing that I think that will really help the community long term is commercialising and getting people into business," Wylie says. "An Indigenous business has got a way better chance of getting young people to feel inspired to work and giving them something to aspire to."

Mowarin's stake covers the operating business rather than the land and buildings, and he is talking to the banks about buying a share of those as well.

"I know there's maybe a bit of debt, but it's something that's needed in town, more accommodation for workers, so we know it's going to be making money," Mowarin says. "I've got seven grandkids, so I'm doing this for them, and the extended family ... oh, there's too many to count.

"Hopefully they'll go and work there or take over, in some way."

He leaves the daily running of the lodge to its team. "I still like to get involved a little bit, but it's not in the day-to-day stuff," he says.

Cherratta Lodge, which employs 23 people, has signed up to a return-to-work jobseeker program with the Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation. Roebourne students will start placements in its kitchen and maintenance teams next term.

"At the moment, if people want to get into mining, they got to go out on the mine sites and drive the big machines and all that stuff. That's well and good and good money, but they're away from family," says Mowarin, who turns 64 this year.

"If they want to stay in town, close to family, and still earn some good money, it gives them options," he says.

Mowarin says Woodside indicated it would prefer an Indigenous business for the contract, and "they sort of encouraged us to go down that track".

Woodside says its spending with Indigenous businesses had risen from $53.1 million in 2021 to $89.95 million in 2025, including $64.79 million with Traditional Owner businesses.

Woodside local procurement adviser for the North West, Julie Attwood, says Indigenous ownership was not a condition of the contract, and Cherratta still went through a competitive tender.

Attwood says Wylie and Mowarin approached Woodside to discuss the opportunity.

"They were looking to go into business together and wanted to understand a bit more about what that meant to Woodside," she says. "We had a deeper conversation with Harry to understand what the opportunity would mean to him, and to discuss in more detail how it would impact him and his involvement.

"It's not my job to tell someone how to run their business or set them up, but it is certainly important for us to do that bit of due diligence to understand that the relationships are genuine and that the individuals involved are feeling positive about moving forward."

Mowarin was the first Traditional Owner Attwood met when she arrived in Karratha four years ago.

"He's the sort of person I would bump into in town and, you know, we will stop and have a yarn," she says.

She says Woodside intends to keep working with Cherratta Lodge after the Pluto contract ends in 2027.

"We want this to be a long-term partnership and a long-term relationship. It's not just about ticking some KPIs," she says.

Mowarin's advice to other traditional owners is plain. "Explore opportunities. Just have a go at it all," he says. "When opportunities get put in front of you, just take them and run with it." ●

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MINERAL RESOURCES

Pay gap holding back people, communities

Some workers have been left lagging, **Reece Harley** and **Callan Morse** report



Indigenous primary and secondary school teachers are paid, on average, 1 per cent more per hour than their colleagues. Indigenous finance managers are paid 27 per cent less.

Teachers are paid on fixed scales set under industrial agreements. A finance manager's salary is negotiated, reviewed and adjusted by the employer.

The Towards Indigenous Pay Parity report, released on September 24 by the Centre for Indigenous People and Work at the University of Technology Sydney and Indigenous Business Australia, found that pattern across the workforce. Indigenous employees earn an average 15.9 per cent less per hour than the average Australian worker. The gap is 2.9 per cent for machinery operators and drivers, whose pay is tightly regulated by awards, and it is 19.5 per cent for professionals, whose pay is mostly set by employers.

IBA chief economist Dr Siddharth Shirodkar, who leads the Office of the Indigenous Economy, told IBR the gap narrows where awards set pay.

"Where employees are protected by award conditions, that gap really reduces quite markedly," Shirodkar says.

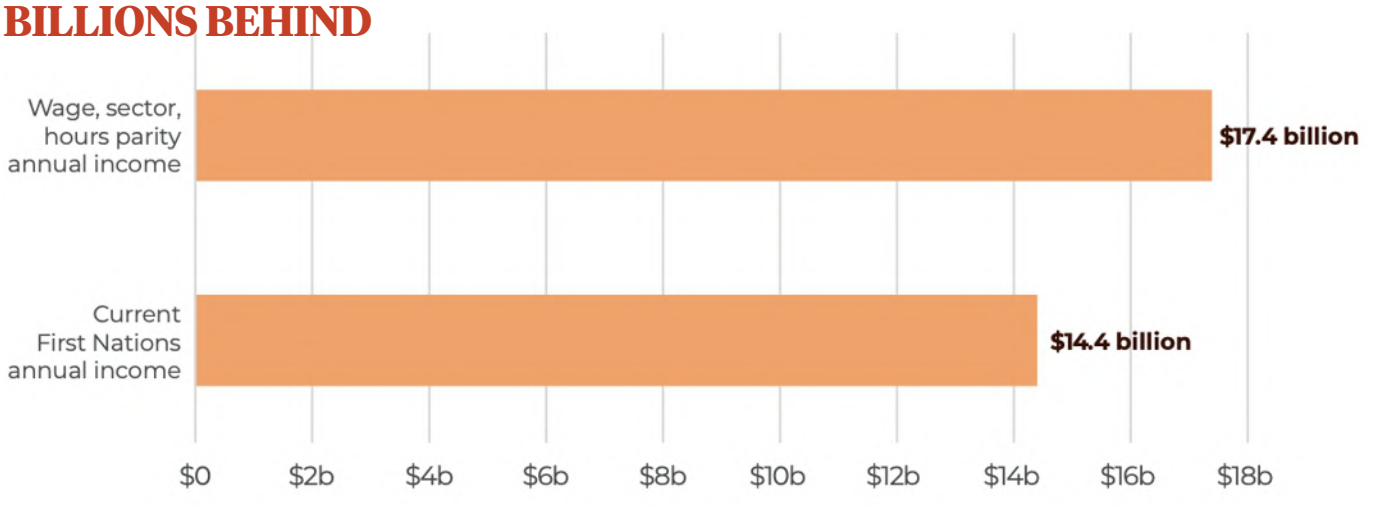
"That's the independent arbiter in the Fair Work Commission helping employers and employees come to that position. But particularly in managerial roles and professional roles, where there's much more discretion, we see that the gap lifts.

"When there is discretion, are we really valuing what a First Nations person is bringing into the workplace compared to other Australians? It's not particularly clear from this data that we are."

Awards narrow the gap without closing it. Aged and disabled carers, one of the largest occupations for Indigenous workers, still record a 15 per cent gap.

If employers' decisions drive the ❯

BILLIONS BEHIND



Source: JSA PLIDA Dataset 2022–23, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2021 and IBA-CIPW.

gap, who the employer is matters.

The pay parity report measures what Indigenous people earn as employees. The Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network measured the owners' side in its BlakPrint report, prepared with Deloitte Access Economics and Yamagigu Consulting.

"We did BlakPrint to measure what we already knew: when Blak people own the business, we employ our mob and more income reaches our households," NTIBN chief executive Naomi Anstess tells IBR.

BlakPrint estimates 854 majority Indigenous-owned businesses operated in the Territory in 2024-25, employing 11,600 full-time equivalent workers. Indigenous people held 86.9 per cent of those jobs. Deloitte estimates the businesses added $3.4 billion to the Territory economy, and that $542 million of that existed because the businesses were Indigenous-owned.

Deloitte's model compared the NT as it is with a Territory where the same businesses had non-Indigenous owners. Under Indigenous ownership, about 8700 more Indigenous people are in full-time equivalent work. An extra $24 million reaches Indigenous households, equivalent to a 15 per cent uplift in real wages per Indigenous full-time worker across the NT economy.

"That is the income effect of Blak ownership across the economy; it is not a claim that every Blak employer pays 15 per cent more for the same job," Anstess says.

The difference starts with recruitment, Anstess says.

"Blak businesses always start by looking for capability in our people, rather than reasons to rule them out," she says.

"We hire for potential and put the scaffolding around our employees, and the opportunities for growth in front of them so that they can succeed.

"We are also more likely to understand cultural obligations without treating them as a lack of commitment to work. Put simply, we provide culturally safe workplaces in action, rather than in flashy documents and policies that just sit on the shelf.

"Oh, and we pay more."

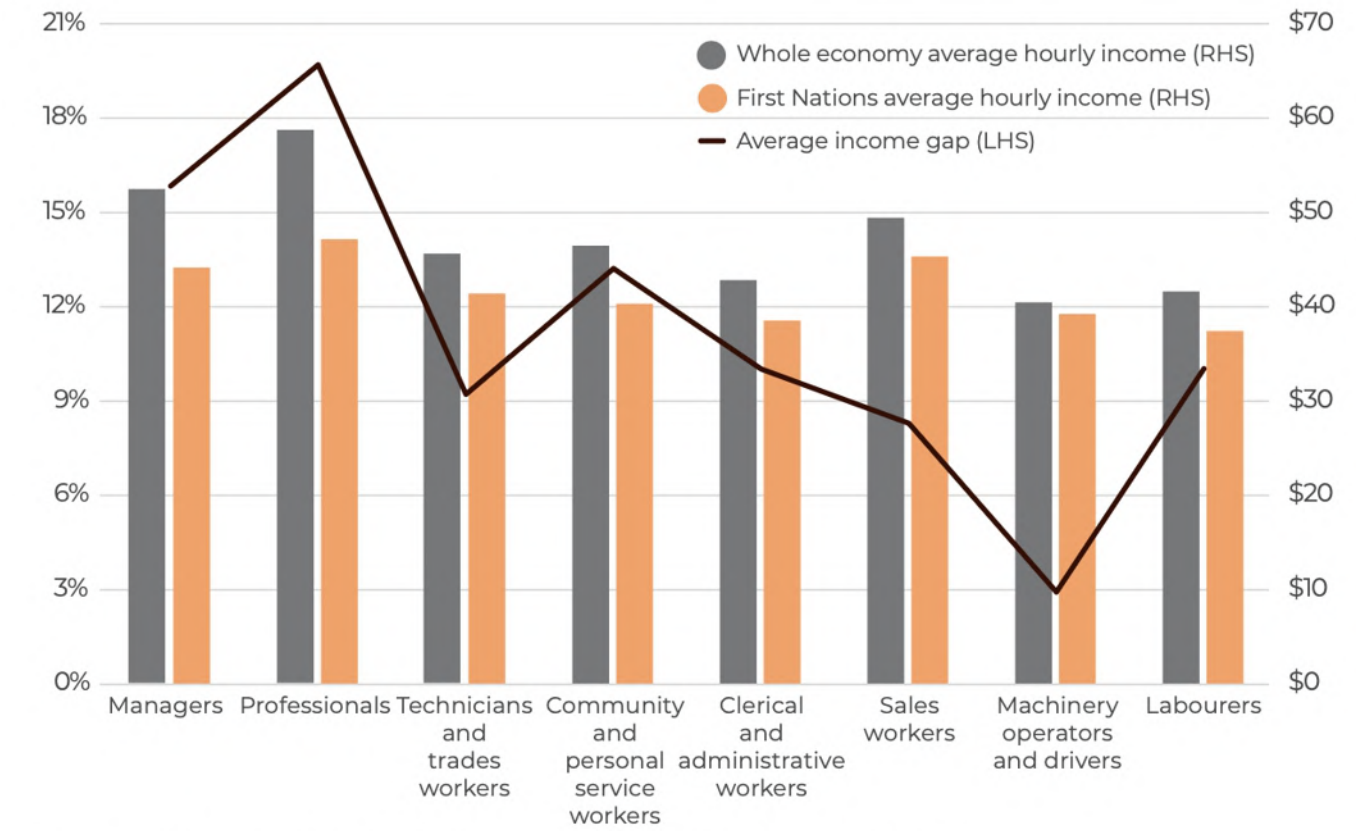
Anstess says the two reports measure different things, and together show where change is needed.

"We need to change who holds economic power, as well as examine pay decisions within every workplace," she says.

Indigenous-owned businesses cluster away from the sectors with the widest pay gaps. More than a quarter of the Territory's Indigenous-owned businesses work in construction, and BlakPrint records almost none in finance.

Shirodkar says: "We know that there is definitely greater need for more First Nations financial providers in the broader economy. We would support more Indigenous Australians wanting to supply credit, and we want to help build that ecosystem."

FALLING SHORT



Source: JSA PLIDA Dataset 2022–23, ABS Census of Population and Housing 2021 and IBA-CIPW.



Average shortfall $15,000 a year

The pay parity report, which draws on tax and Census data covering more than 211,000 Indigenous workers in 227 occupations, found a gap in three quarters of them. Measured annually, it is 18 per cent: the average Indigenous worker earned $68,308 in 2022-23, against $83,350 for all Australian workers.

"Having a figure like 16 per cent, it might seem a little bit innocuous," Shirodkar says. "But every hour a First Nations person works, they're getting paid 16 per cent less."

Across the Indigenous workforce, the gap cost $3 billion in 2022-23. At the report's release, CIPW director Professor Nareen Young says it could cost around $170 billion by 2050.

Shirodkar says the loss reaches whole communities.

"Indigenous people, when they spend money, often spend money locally,



Jane O'Leary (CIPW), Joshua Gilbert (CIPW), Jade Cordell (IBA), Nareen Young (UTS Business School, also pictured on opposite page), Tanya Hosch (CIPW Advisory Council), Michelle Lim (Contributor, Ladies Talk Money), Trevor Gauld (Jobs and Skills Australia), Siddharth Shirodkar (IBA chief economist), David Knights (IBA chief executive officer.

whereas for a lot of non-Indigenous people, particularly in regional and remote communities, a lot of that spending leaves the community," he says.

Hours and occupation together explain less than a third of the gap. The widest gaps sit in occupations that require a degree to enter, and the report found Indigenous workers at almost every level of education earn less than other Australians.

"What remains is the structural racism that keeps Indigenous workers' wages low, limits their career progression, and compounds disadvantage across their working lives," Young says.

Anstess says that shows up in daily decisions.

"Too often, Aboriginal staff are hired to tick a box, then expected to provide cultural knowledge for free while someone else is trusted with leadership," she says.

CIPW's Gari Yala research, cited in the report, found more than half of full-time Indigenous employees in non-Indigenous organisations perform an extra 48 hours of unpaid cultural work a year.

Some of the largest gaps sit in the occupations that set pay. Indigenous human resource professionals earn 24 per cent less per hour than their colleagues. Finance accounts for seven of the 50 occupations with the largest gaps, ranging from 18 to 33 per cent.

The Indigenous pay gap is larger than the gender pay gap, which the report puts at 9.9 per cent an hour, and Indigenous women carry both. They earn an average $40.85 an hour against $51.80 for all men, and across a year the gap reaches 37.9 per cent.

The gap is growing. The Melbourne Institute's HILDA survey puts it at around 10 per cent in 2014 and 16 per cent by 2021, where it has stayed.

"The really worrying thing was that there's evidence that the gap is actually increasing over time," Shirodkar says.

Buy Blak

The report calls for a positive duty on employers to prevent racial discrimination, and for Indigenous pay data to be reported through the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

Anstess says growing Indigenous business belongs in the same conversation.

"If we are serious about closing the pay gap, growing genuinely Blak-owned businesses has to be part of the response," she says. "The Commonwealth Indigenous Procurement Policy and the NT Aboriginal Procurement Policy need to deliver more substantial work, faster, to businesses that are genuinely Indigenous owned, managed and controlled.

"Frankly, [Reconciliation Action Plans] need to get in the bin as a measure of economic impact. A RAP does not pay anyone's wages."

She says Indigenous institutions should lead.

"IBA, Aboriginal Investment NT, land councils and the Aboriginal community-controlled sector all have purchasing power. It is time that they also put their money where their mouth is."

It's harder out bush

In the Territory, 2021 Census figures cited in BlakPrint put Indigenous labour force participation at 35 per cent, against 62 per cent for all Territorians, and Indigenous unemployment at 21 per cent, against 6 per cent. The pay parity report counts only people with an income. Shirodkar says business ownership follows the same line.

"The more remote you go for First Nations people, business ownership goes down. But for non-Indigenous people, business ownership goes up," he says.

"It really speaks to who's in charge of the factors of production in regional and remote Australia."

Anstess says the fix starts with the work already being bought on Country.

"What work is already being bought on Country? Who owns the businesses delivering it? Where do the wages and profits go? How much money leaves the community that could be circulating locally?" she says.

"Where local Blak businesses can deliver, quarantine suitable work for them and give them a real opportunity to lead.

"Bring them in before tenders are written. Pay them on time and offer enough certainty to hire and invest.

"When local people own the businesses, a contract can become local wages, skills, future managers and purchases from other local suppliers. More money stays on Country." ●



Gimarra managing director Geoff Johnson

Dreaming big on dairy supply

A retail first is coming soon, **Reece Harley** reports

Geoff Johnson wants Aboriginal families to walk into a supermarket and find their language on a carton of milk.

"It will carry a lot of pride for our people to walk into one of the biggest retailers in Australia and see an Aboriginal product that's an essential," he said.

Johnson is managing director of Gimarra, a majority Aboriginal-owned dairy supply company that officially launched this month. Gimarra means milk in Wiradjuri. Johnson said nobody in Australia had built an Aboriginal dairy supply company before.

The idea started on a park bench. Johnson and a friend were dreaming big about business ideas. Then the lights came on for me," Johnson said. "I said, 'Hold up. No one's done dairy. Leave it with me'."

Johnson is a Wiradjuri man of the Narrungdera clan, the group the NSW town of Narrandera takes its name from.

Work was scarce in a small town. He finished year 11 in Wagga Wagga, then worked on road crews, in an abattoir and as a labourer. Football took him to the NSW South Coast in his early 20s.

"I used to train myself silly, because it felt like football was going to be the only thing that gave me an opportunity," he says. After his second child was born, he took an employment role with Aboriginal organisation Habitat Personnel and spent a decade on Yuin Country recruiting and training Aboriginal workers for tier-one builders and local businesses.

"I was promoting our people to these businesses to give our mob an opportunity," he said.

In 2016 he started his own company, Marambul, a Wiradjuri word meaning good, correct and right. Its first contract was a national program mentoring Aboriginal recruits into Woolworths.

Johnson credits Uncle Stan Grant Snr with keeping Wiradjuri alive and he teaches it to his sons. One, a school captain, opens his speeches in language.

Johnson's cousin, Wiradjuri artist Shelby-Rae Lyons-Kschenka of Marara Designs, designed the Gimarra logo: red and yellow arches over two small black figures. "The arches represent two people of two different cultures, sitting with two children, discussing the history of each other's culture and teaching the young ones," Johnson said. "There's a lot of division across our country. I wanted my logo to represent unity." Gimarra runs on a partnership with Nick's Foods, whose transport network reaches from Melbourne to Cairns. A Sydney dispatch centre already delivers milk to corporate offices, and Johnson is in talks with food service groups including Compass Group and mining caterer Civeo, and with the major supermarkets.



The NSW Department of Primary Industries backed Gimarra's stand at Fine Food Australia in Melbourne, where a number of companies asked about export. Johnson is working with Austrade on the next step. "We've got to be mindful of going too big too quick," he says.

Former North Queensland Cowboys captain Johnathan Thurston has joined as ambassador and corporate relations manager, and Gimarra will back the Johnathan Thurston Academy. Once revenue builds, Johnson plans to direct a share of it to community programs through the Gimarra Foundation, using his community development background to choose where the money goes.

Gimarra's milk comes from Wiradjuri, Bangarang and Dja Dja Wurrung Country. ●



Cruising down the river

Saltwater Eco Tours keeps it real, right down to the seasonal menu, **Brendan Foster** reports

Born in Kabi Kabi Country on the Sunshine Coast and raised on a timber missionary boat on Thursday Island, Simon Thornalley has saltwater running through his veins.

The proud Kaurareg and Tjungundji man, with roots in North Queensland and the Torres Strait, knew he would one day combine his deep connection to sea country and boats.

In 2019, he set about restoring a 1908 heritage-listed sailing vessel, a Joshua Slocum Spray replica, a 58ft gaff-rigged Huon-pine ketch. Captain Joshua Slocum sailed the original Spray of the Coral Coast yacht, becoming the first person to circumnavigate the globe single handed, between April 1895 and June 1898.

After a year of painstaking work restoring the vessel, which is believed to be the oldest surviving Spray replica in Australia, Thornalley was ready to launch the yacht when COVID-19 hit.

He even came up with a name for the Sunshine Coast-based business that reflected his deep roots in his childhood home: Saltwater Eco Tours.

However, the venture was almost sunk before it began. As he was ineligible for government support because the company hadn't made any money before the pandemic, he had to come up with an plan to stay afloat.

"So, during the year of Covid, I hadn't got the full finance to pay for the boat," Thornalley tells the Indigenous Business Review.

"So, what I'd done was I'd lease the boat from the previous owner for 12 months on the condition that by the end of those 12 months, I would have an established business.

"And then I'd have to pay out the remaining amount by the end of those 12 months or give the boat back if it didn't work. So, the risk was all on me, but it worked out"

Some six years later, Thornalley runs a thriving tourism business that



offers up unique First Nations cultural experiences up and down the Mooloolah River, the lifeblood of local Kabi Kabi communities.

The 37-year-old also consulted with the traditional owners of the region because he wanted to preserve his people's cultural stories and traditional knowledge while also creating space for Indigenous voices in tourism.

"Consulting with the traditional owners is the right way to do things in our culture, and I wouldn't feel comfortable doing it any other way," he says.

"We work with Aunty Bridgette Chilly, who's an elder from the area who comes on the cruise, and she's part of our menu planning and everything, as well as what foods we use to align with the local law.

"We always have Aunty Bridgette's involvement in the Welcome to Country and smoking ceremonies to make sure we're aligning with local law but also extending that opportunity to the local traditional owners as well."

Thornalley runs several varied and interesting tours throughout the week but the most popular is the Bushtucker Cruise.

But no matter the tour, the father of two says he wants to provide a unique experience that fosters a connection to the Indigenous culture, the ocean and the local environment.

"Our Bushtucker tour is our flagship tour, so we try to be as authentic as possible in every aspect, from making the five-course menu from scratch in-house to doing everything ourselves.

"We share history about the area, history about my connection to the country and the foods that we're serving, so we tell a story with our menu.

"We have a seasonal menu that changes throughout the year, and a lot of plants that we're using that you would find by the river, you know, ground-covering succulents and fruits and berries and things that are local to the area."

The managing director and founder of Saltwater Eco Tours incorporates his passion and advocacy for sustainability, environmental stewardship and Indigenous culture in many of his tours and work.

The proud descendant of the Kaurareg (Horn Island) and Tjungundji (Western Cape York) peoples, has dedicated a lot





Simon Thornalley, far left, on the didgeridoo; Thornalley at the helm; Aunty Bridgette Chilly helps with Welcome to Country and smoking ceremonies

> **“It’s about creating that safe space so we can all work together**

of his life and work to protecting the diverse marine and coastal ecosystems of the Sunshine Coast.

But his activism and his love of the environment isn’t limited to his own Country. In 2015, he volunteered with Sea Shepherd as part of its international crew in Japan to stop the hunting of the Taiji dolphin. Working alongside activists from around the world, Thornalley helped document and raise awareness of these controversial practices, contributing to global efforts for marine conservation and animal rights.

He also sailed to Antarctica to work alongside scientists and wildlife observers in the pristine marine environment of the Southern Ocean, which further fuelled his dedication to ocean conservation.

“I watched a documentary years ago about the Taiji dolphin and was just gobsmacked at what was happening over there,” Thornalley says.

“So, I contacted Sea Shepherd and just put my hand up to volunteer straight away because I have a lot of respect for Sea Shepherd.

“So, I volunteered and went over there and took part in that campaign with Sea Shepherd, which was predominantly filming, live streaming and documenting what happens to the dolphins in the cove there.”

When not crusading for marine conservation and animal rights, Thornalley likes to give back to his community via his business.

He tries to foster relationships with Indigenous makers, local producers, artists and creatives to build a business rooted in community, sustainability and cultural connection.

“It's about creating that safe space so we can all work together and whatever opportunities that arise for us are opportunities for all of our community,” he says.

“There are a lot of things we do that are really putting that in the forefront; caring for country, which is again part of our law system, is at the forefront of our operations.

“And just making sure that everything that we do is authentic and true to ourselves and our values, whether it’s sharing stories or food and everything surrounding those things.”

So, does he have any plans to extend the fleet?

“I’ve got another commercial boat for my partner and two kids to live on so we could have a little bit of adventure away from work,” he says.

“But it will more than likely be part of the fleet because it is a commercially built boat. So, for some silly reason, I’m doing it all over again.” ●



Kuku Yalanji and Gumbaynggirr artist and speaker Jeremy Donovan with NSWICC chief executive Deb Barwick; Craig Madden delivers a Welcome to Country at the unveiling of the chamber's 20th anniversary bench at Cadi Jam Ora, Royal Botanic Garden Sydney, opposite; and a smoking ceremony at the celebration, below right

Chamber marks 20 years of growth

While real progress has been made, there's more to be done to ensure First Nations businesses continue to thrive, reports Brendan Foster

When Gamilaroi woman Deb Barwick established the first Aboriginal business chamber in Australia 20 years ago, First Nations companies' contribution to the economy was often under-recognised.

Barwick says when she founded the Mandurah Hunter Indigenous Business Chamber in 2006, which became the NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce (NSWICC) three years later, Indigenous companies were far less visible in mainstream supply chains and public policy. First Nations businesses today contribute more than $16 billion to the Australian economy, employ 116,795 people and pay $4.2 billion in wages.

"Those figures show a sector of real national importance, while also reminding us that many businesses — particularly small, regional and remote enterprises — remain undercounted," Barwick tells the Indigenous Business Review.

"Procurement policies have helped bring more visibility and opportunity, but the First Nations economy is much bigger than procurement. It includes the cafe, lawn-mowing business, trades business, consultancy, cultural enterprise and community organisation that gives people income, choice and the ability to stay connected to family, community and Country."

On September 22, the NSWICC celebrated its 20th anniversary at NSW Parliament, with Aboriginal Affairs and Treaty Minister David Harris and industry and First Nations business leaders marking 20 years of leadership for Indigenous companies in NSW.

After the parliament event, a commemorative bench at Cadi Jam Ora in the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney was unveiled as a lasting tribute to Indigenous business leadership.

Barwick says the NSWICC's biggest achievement has been growing from a small regional chamber in the Hunter into an enduring, independent peak body for Indigenous business in NSW.

She says the chamber now represents Indigenous business through advocacy, business support, supplier development, procurement capability, partnerships and connection. What is even more remarkable about the chamber's early success was that the federal government's Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) and the NSW Aboriginal Procurement Policy (APP) were still years in the making.

"Those policies have created valuable opportunities, but our purpose has always been broader: to support people's aspirations for financial independence through the establishment and growth of their own businesses," Barwick says.

"Our members are majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned and controlled businesses and organisations, and they are incredibly diverse: they include businesses competing for major

contracts as well as local operators mowing lawns, running cafes and providing the everyday goods and services that keep communities moving.

"NSWICC's role is to stand alongside them: to open doors, build capability, strengthen connections and advocate when systems are not working."

Barwick, who helped establish the First Australians Chamber of Commerce in 2015, says some of the challenges Indigenous businesses faced two decades ago remain prevalent today.

She said the biggest barrier was access to capital and stamping out the insidious practice of black cladding. Black cladding is when non-Indigenous companies boost their Indigenous shareholder base or claim to be First Nations businesses to win government contracts.

In July, the federal government strengthened the IPP's eligibility requirements to stamp out black cladding, so Indigenous businesses seeking access to federal government contracts must now be 51 per cent or more First Nations-owned and controlled.

The target for the commonwealth and portfolios to buy from First Nations businesses has increased to 3.25 per cent. The target will continue to increase by 0.25 per cent each year until it reaches four per cent by 2030.

"Progress has been real but complex procurement processes, limited networks, long payment terms, inconsistent buyer capability and the persistent assumption that Indigenous businesses are less capable are still barriers," Barwick says.

"We also need to confront practices that undermine genuine Indigenous enterprise, including black cladding.

> **"NSWICC's role is ... to open doors, build capability, strengthen connections and advocate when systems are not working**



"Businesses need fair access to opportunities, and buyers need the knowledge, accountability and confidence to build respectful, long-term commercial relationships."

Barwick says that while First Nations businesses get greater recognition than when she first set up the Mandurah Hunter Indigenous Business Chamber years ago, recognition must translate into commercial opportunity.

She says we should not confuse visibility with equity.

"Recognition cannot be confined to businesses tendering for government work; it must extend to every Indigenous entrepreneur building a local business, employing people and contributing to their community," she says.

"But recognition must translate into sustained commercial opportunity: fair procurement, investment, access to capital, strong partnerships and room for businesses to lead and grow.

"First Nations businesses deserve to be engaged as valued suppliers and economic leaders every day — not only during a campaign, a policy launch or a reconciliation week." ●



Accelerator program gets team on the hoof

‚An otherwise dry year has yielded big positives for a beef concern in the East Pilbara, **Reece Harley** reports

A Nyiyaparli beef brand has drawn interest from potential customers before a single cut carries the label.

Karlka Pastoral, the pastoral business of Karlka Nyiyaparli Aboriginal Corporation Registered Native Title Body Corporate, is testing whether premium beef from Nyiyaparli Country can carry a brand of its own.

"Even in these initial stages, our engagement with industry has generated substantial excitement and interest from potential customers," says Pine Tree Projects managing director Sonya Comiskey. "That early response is a strong signal that there may be a genuine market opportunity for a Nyiyaparli branded beef product."

The push follows a hard year in the East Pilbara. Karlka Pastoral runs cattle across Kutawa (Ethel Creek), Marillana and Walagunya stations, more than 830,000 hectares of arid spinifex country where extreme heat is the norm.

Well below average rainfall through 2026 forced management to cut stock numbers to protect animal welfare and the rangelands.

For the KNAC board, the dry spell reinforced the case for diversification and prompted a review of the corporation's current livestock markets and contracts.

KNAC chief executive officer Cate Ballantyne says: "On country pastoral operations form an important element of our investment strategy, due to its significant culture and heritage value to Nyiyaparli people.

"We are committed to expanding commercially, and providing training and employment opportunities."

KNAC co-funded the Nyiyaparli Branded Beef Accelerator Program through Meat & Livestock Australia's Pastoral Co-Innovation Program, the three-year partnership reported in the August edition. The accelerator examines markets from paddock to plate and looks for ways to maximise the value of the whole animal.

"The accelerator was designed to help KNAC explore the commercial potential of a branded beef enterprise while building the capability, market knowledge and industry connections needed to support future decision-making," says Joshua Whelan, MLA program manager innovation capability and tech fund.

"Importantly, the focus is on building KNAC's own capability in this area, so it is well placed to make informed commercial decisions and, if the model proves viable, it can develop a sustainable and investment-ready branded beef enterprise."

The program gives KNAC a structured way to test what a Nyiyaparli branded beef business could look like before it commits serious money. By working through customer discovery, supply chain design, product development and market opportunities, it aims to show where value sits in the chain and how more of it can stay within the business and the community.

For a pastoral operation that has sold cattle into other people's supply chains, the shift is from price-taker to brand owner, with a vertically integrated model built around Karlka Pastoral's production system, its land stewardship and its cultural story.

KNAC engaged industry experts to design and facilitate a tailored program.

Straight to the Source is one of Australia's leading food service consultancies, led by Lucy Allon and Tawnya Bahr, with deep relationships across food service decision-makers.

Pine Tree Projects brings agrifood innovation expertise. Comiskey combines a background in commercial beef production with agtech adoption, and through programs such as Farmers2Founders and AgFrontier, she has coached dozens of agrifood start-ups in Australia and overseas.



The Karlka Nyiyaparli Aboriginal Corporation team at a Sydney market immersion session; this year has been a dry one on Nyiyaparli Country

Participants train in the Lean Startup framework, idea validation, product development, supply chain development, go-to-market strategy and investment readiness, backed by one-on-one coaching, mentorship and access to industry connections.

Karlka Commerce general manager Angela Nicholls says: "The program's unique design enables KNAC employees to contribute directly to the feasibility study development through [an] integrated learning and mentoring model."

The program started in August with three days on Country. Nyiyaparli Kutawa field officers Tyros Handley and Haydn Allen, together with pastoral innovation manager Richard Gratte, joined facilitated planning and information sessions with Straight to the Source, Pine Tree Projects and MLA to set the direction for the next 12 months.

A Sydney market immersion tour followed in September, focusing on how large catering companies buy and how their procurement systems operate.

"It was a fantastic opportunity for Tyros, Haydn and myself to form some great connections and to tell the Karlka Pastoral story," Gratte says. "The Branded Beef Accelerator program is proving to be [a] great step towards KNAC hopefully having its own brand of beef."

KNAC credits the tour's success to its many hosts, who opened their businesses, shared their experience and heard the Karlka story. The corporation thanked each of them for their time and inspiration.

The tour also connected KNAC with supply chain partners, market channels and investment pathways through the delivery partners' networks.

"Using the Lean Startup methodology alongside the National Farmers' Federation Indigenous Agricultural Product Framework helps Karlka Pastoral test its assumptions and build the right brand, one that supports KNAC's strategic pillars of Country, Community, Culture, Commerce and Corporate," says Allon, director and co-founder of Straight to the Source.

"By validating the opportunity before committing significant resources, the process de-risks the pathway to market and gives the business a stronger chance of succeeding in what is a difficult market to enter."

The feasibility assessment will determine whether a Nyiyaparli branded beef enterprise has strong prospects for long-term success. KNAC's investment strategy sets out its commitment to Nyiyaparli employment and training and to working on Yurlu, and for KNAC chairman Leonard Stream, the program already delivers on both.

"The Nyiyaparli Branded Beef Accelerator Program is exciting for us because it provides unique training and employment opportunities for our people to learn more about the industry, beyond working on the pastoral station," Stream says. "It is great to see our members contributing to this program. We are excited to continue to grow the return on investment from our pastoral properties and proudly promote Nyiyaparli beef products." ●

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Woodside Energy

Helping hand for training, ‘real jobs’

Community Resources is now fully Aboriginal-run, **Giovanni Torre** reports



Community Resources’ Soft Landing workers Seth and Kain in Newcastle, NSW

Community Resources, a not-for-profit that has been working with Indigenous communities across Australia for 39 years, recently achieved a significant milestone; it has officially transitioned to being an Aboriginal-led organisation.

The organisation, now registered with Supply Nation and the NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce, says the move reflects “who we are today, where we have come from, and the direction we are continuing to build”.

Community Resources works with communities to deliver programs to create social and economic outcomes, spanning employment, training, community development, youth services and financial wellbeing.

Established as Great Lakes Community Resources in 1987 to provide training and employment opportunities for people experiencing disadvantage, today the organisation runs some of the largest social enterprises in the country and delivers a range of community services.

In 2024-25, Community Resources gave employment opportunities to 960 people, 822 through direct employment and 138 with third-party employers through Community Resources’ Work Readiness & Employment Programs.

That same financial year, the organisation diverted 18,625 tonnes of waste from landfill and it provided 63,633 instances of community services, including Homebase, which helps youth and Aboriginal people build skills and access opportunities, and the Great Lakes and Manning Youth Homelessness Service.

Community Resources’ social enterprises creating jobs for people experiencing barriers to work include Resource Recovery Australia (waste management), Soft Landing, which recycles mattresses, and Green Yakka; providing labour hire and zero waste services.

Community Resources co-chair Narelle Anderson is a proud Jagera woman and trailblazing entrepreneur.

The first Aboriginal woman to solely own a waste management company, and the founder and managing director of Envirobank Recycling, Anderson was honoured in 2015 as one of Australia’s top 50 influential female entrepreneurs.

“Aside from the actual operational outcomes, one of our key initiatives is becoming an Aboriginal-led organisation … from a cultural perspective, that we really consider this transition to becoming an Aboriginal-led organisation to be one of our keys to strengthen our self-determination,” she tells The Indigenous Business Review.

“We have a business that places Indigenous people (in work), and of course, we need consultation with Elders and Aboriginal people to be able to do that.

“We’re of the view that our services are stronger when they’re shaped by the people we’re trying to serve.

“So, all of those things linked together really talk to the many reasons why we’ve now gone back to our roots, if you like, and have become an Aboriginal-led organisation.”

Anderson says “one of the big standouts” of the work that Community Resources does is through its mattress recycling business, Soft Landing, which recently welcomed Governor-General Sam Mostyn, who is a patron of Community Resources, to its Smithfield facility.

“We have some technology that’s to land soon that will be state of the art. We continue to grow day by day,” Anderson says.

Community Resources CEO Martin Paech tells The Indigenous Business Review the organisation has always had two key purposes.

“Our mission is to provide employment for people, real jobs, meaningful work for people, and do that with a connection to Country and community,” he says.

“We are all about the people and all about the environment… It’s jobs for people and cleaning up Country.

“We deconstruct 450,000 mattresses every year and save them from going into landfill. We work with councils around the country, diverting waste from landfill.

“We have community services, predominantly in NSW, and they look at providing employment pathways for Aboriginal youth.”

The shift to being a majority Indigenous-led organisation was “a pretty natural transition”, Paech says.

“We’ve always been working together with the Aboriginal community right through our whole history. This is a really important milestone, kind of back to the roots… we’re now officially recognised as Aboriginal-led.”

Paech said Community Resources values “employment opportunities and the support we can give people in making their way in their career very highly”.

The organisation notes becoming formally recognised as Aboriginal-led means “our services will continue to operate as they do today. What changes is the clarity of our governance and leadership”.

“Aboriginal voices have a stronger role in guiding decisions, shaping priorities and ensuring we remain accountable to community,” he says.

Paech says the organisation believes “it strengthens communities and our employment base to give them the opportunity to be heard”.

“To listen, particularly when decisions are being made about what we’re going to do in the operation and how we’re going to run the business, you get a much better result that way.” ●



Festival's bush food for thought

The industry is cooking like never before, writes **Phoebe Blogg**

Some First Nations businesses at this year's Australian Native Food Festival made more money in one weekend than they usually make in a quarter.

The festival ran at Carriageworks in Sydney on September 26 and 27. Organiser and owner of Indigiearth Sharon Winsor said attendance doubled on last year. Many of the 30 First Nations-owned and run businesses doubled their sales, and some tripled their income.

Thirty years ago, government departments told Winsor, the festival's founder, that bush foods had no place on a restaurant plate.

"When I first started business 30 years ago, nobody wanted anything to do with bush foods and I was actually told by government departments that bush foods did not belong on a plate at a table in a restaurant … that my business idea would never work … stay in your government job and just go to the markets on the weekend," Winsor says.

"So here we are, 30 years later, and this is what we have created."

Winsor is a Weilwan woman from northwest NSW and the founder of Indigiearth. She curates the festival to share the oldest cuisine on earth and to recognise the Indigenous knowledge behind it.

Indigiearth produces the event with a tiny team. The festival runs on sponsorship and Winsor's own money. Carriageworks hosted it with support from ANZ, Breville, AV1 and the NSW government through Destination NSW and Aboriginal Affairs NSW. Accor came on as official accommodation partner, and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development sponsored the Industry Day.

"This festival has never been just about food for me," Winsor says.

"It's about our people, our country, our culture, our knowledge and the incredible opportunities that exist when we bring our people together."

Who shares in the value

On Friday September 25, the day before the public arrived, stallholders, media and industry figures met at Carriageworks for an Industry Day forum on how the native food sector works and who profits from it.

Nations Bushfood and Botanical Alliance Australia chair Rayleen Brown gave the keynote.

"The industry is growing. Native foods and botanicals are appearing in restaurants, tourism experiences, supermarkets, cosmetics, beverages, research programs and export







Clockwise from far left: Mamanyjun Tree Enterprises chief executive Pat Torres, Australian Native Food Festival founder Sharon Winsor, and Trading Blak founder Jarin Baigent; Rayleen Brown, owner of Kungkas Can Cook, and chair of First Nations Bushfoods and Botanicals Alliance Australia; a cooking demonstration with chefs Curtis Stone and Adam Liaw, facilitated by Jennifer Wong at the Australian Native Food Festival; and Governor-General Sam Mostyn with the Indigiearth catering team

conversations," Brown said. "That growth brings enormous opportunity, but there is still a question that must sit at the centre of that growth.

"As the value of our native foods and botanicals increases, how do First Nations people share fairly in that value?

"Our people are not newcomers to this industry. For thousands of generations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have known these plants.

"We have harvested them, managed them, cooked with them, and used them as medicine."

Trading Blak founder Jarin Baigent then led a panel with Pat Torres, Darryl Majid and Kerrie Saunders, alongside event partners. They covered economic development, Aboriginal ownership and the protection of cultural knowledge and intellectual property.

The panellists differed on where the sector is heading. They agreed that demand for native food is rising, and that the advocacy and education protecting First Nations interests need ongoing support.

> **I want to see everyone rise. I want to see the rise of all of us. And we're stronger together**

"There's more interest than ever before and it's really exciting. It is truly exciting to see the interest in the native food space and botanical space," Winsor said. "But with that interest comes responsibility. These foods are not just a trend. They are part of the oldest living, continuous culture on earth.

"So the conversation is not just about how big the industry can become. It's about who gets to benefit from that growth, who gets to lead it and what we want this future to look like.

"We need to talk honestly about opportunity, investment, supply chains, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, sustainability, business growth and pathways for the next generation.

"I believe bringing the right people into the room and having these conversations is where change starts."

The big weekend

Over the next two days, the public spent money on that growth.

Stalls sold native spices, wild tea ranges, bush beef jerky, gourmet chocolate, bush beauty and wellness products and handcrafted weaving.

Ngumpie Weaving, the NSW-based, female-led company founded by Barapa Barapa and Barkindji woman Tegan Murdock, ran a traditional Aboriginal basket weaving workshop for attendees each day.

On the demonstration stage, Aunty Beryl Van-Oploo, Kerrie Saunders, Mindy Woods and Zach Green cooked with the native ingredients they have championed for years. Kylie Kwong, Nat Thaipun, Adam Liaw, Lucy Tweed, Karima Hazim, Colin Fassnidge, Jason Roberts and Amber Doig joined them. The chefs donated their time.

Governor-General Sam Mostyn attended for the second year running. Organisers count her among the event's strongest supporters.

Winsor wants the whole sector to grow with her.

"I want to see everyone thrive and survive in this industry," she says. "I want to see everyone rise. This is not just about one business, one person. I want to see the rise of all of us. And we're stronger together."

The Indigenous Business Review

OPINION | KATE RUSSELL

Local councils a rich seam for procurement



During October's Indigenous Business Month, now is the time to reflect on the transformative potential of Australia's Indigenous business sector and ask where the next opportunity lies.

This year's theme, Local and Connected, reminds us that economic self-determination does not commence in boardrooms or parliament houses. It begins on Country, in local communities and through the everyday commercial relationships that connect people to place. That is why I believe local government is the missing piece in Australia's supplier diversity story.

At the federal and state levels, government procurement policy has laid important foundations. Participation targets have channelled significant public expenditure towards Indigenous-owned businesses and helped establish Indigenous procurement as a legitimate and increasingly mainstream component of economic policy. But national policy innovation has stalled.

Beyond incremental changes to numerical targets, including the Commonwealth's recent increase from 3 per cent to 3.25 per cent, we have largely seen refinements to an existing model rather than bold structural evolution.

The macro policy framework is maturing. But it is no longer pioneering.

The next wave of innovation needs to happen closer to the ground.

Australia has 537 local government entities, directing an estimated $48 billion in spending every year. That represents an enormous procurement opportunity.

Councils are the level of government closest to their communities. They understand local economies, local businesses and local needs. Yet, unlike many federal and state agencies, local governments across Australia generally operate without dedicated, enforceable Indigenous procurement spend targets.

There is a significant policy gap and an enormous opportunity.

Some councils are already demonstrating what is possible. In Sydney, Inner West Council has released a stand-alone Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Procurement Strategy, including a commitment to direct 1 per cent of its total addressable procurement expenditure towards Indigenous businesses.

Local Government Procurement NSW in partnership with Supply Nation has implemented a First Nations Procurement Scheme connecting NSW councils with verified Indigenous businesses for purchases under $250,000, no tender required.

City of Sydney, a founding member of Supply Nation, continues to be a strong supporter of supplier diversity and procurement from Indigenous businesses.

These examples matter because they show that local government does not need to wait for a national mandate to act. There is a clear opening for a state or territory to become the first in Australia to establish a comprehensive Indigenous procurement framework for its local governments.

The blueprint already exists. State governments across the country have demonstrated that Indigenous procurement targets can be embedded into public purchasing frameworks. The challenge now is to extend that experience into the communities where the economic impact can be most immediate and visible. This should not be difficult. It requires political will, practical support and implementation.

At Supply Nation, we know that the majority of contracts awarded to Indigenous businesses currently go to metropolitan businesses.

Local government has a local benefit mandate. That makes councils uniquely placed to create opportunities for Indigenous businesses in regional, rural and remote communities.

When councils buy locally, the benefits can stay local. A contract awarded to an Indigenous business in a regional community can mean local employment, local supply chains, local investment and money circulating through the local economy.

It can create opportunities for apprentices, strengthen other small businesses and build the capability of the next generation of entrepreneurs.

This is not about tokenism. It is about intentionality. Targets alone will not be enough. Local procurers need an enabling legislative and policy environment. They need education, practical tools, capability building and access to verified Indigenous suppliers. They need support to translate ambition into procurement practice. That is where governments, industry bodies and organisations such as Supply Nation have a role to play.

The federal playbook has given us a foundation. But the next chapter of Indigenous economic empowerment does not have to be written in Canberra. It can be written in council chambers, procurement offices and communities.

My question to leaders across Australia is simple.

The businesses are ready. The economic case is clear. The opportunity is sitting in our local economies. Will we see a tangible commitment to act? ●

■ *Kate Russell is a proud Awabakal woman and chief executive of Supply Nation*

Atkins' ambition is on the menu

Small business is cooking, **Dianne Bortoletto** reports

Smiling proudly on the cover of the NSW Small Business Commission's first Insights Paper is a chef who started his business at 19, with his mum beside him.

Matt Atkins, a Malyangapa and Barkindji man living on Dharug Country, founded Plate Events and Catering in Penrith in Sydney's west in 2009. The 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned business has grown into what he calls a house of brands that includes catering, food trucks, native food workshops, hampers and a bottled product line now heading for export. Each brands supports the other.

On October 1, Atkins joined NSW Small Business Minister Janelle Saffin and NSW Small Business Commission chief Kalina Koloff to launch NSW Small Business Month and release the paper, which identifies seven trends among the state's 893,000 small businesses. October is also Indigenous Business Month in NSW.

The paper found 57 per cent of NSW small businesses now serve customers beyond their local area, and 63 per cent have no employees, the finding that surprised Koloff most.

It also found purpose outranked



Plate Events and Catering founder Matt Atkins, a Malyangapa and Barkindji man living on Dharug Country



Matt Atkins, left; some of his creations; Matt with his mother Joanne Atkins, right





income for many owners.

Koloff says Plate Events and Catering shows a small business doesn't have to be a local one, pointing to its events in New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii and the US.

"He's absolutely punching above his weight," she says of Atkins.

Matt Atkins says his mother, Joanne, whom he calls his best friend, has been part of Plate since the first day.

"Even now, we sort of have to stop and stand back and we go, 'look at what we've done, Mum'," Atkins says.

"When we go out to an on-site event, it might be a big corporate or a big government agency, and I introduce her as Mum, and the people call her Mum while she's working at the event still."

At 19, straight out of his apprenticeship, Atkins opened a restaurant on a friend's winery in Mudgee, in NSW's Central West, then came home to start his own business.

His dad, a diesel mechanic, built Plate's custom food truck during COVID when his own work slumped. Atkins says the truck helped the business "grow exponentially".

The truck carries an artwork by his grandmother telling the family's story of disconnection from Country, when the men stayed out west as stockmen and drovers and the women were sent to Sydney as domestic maids.

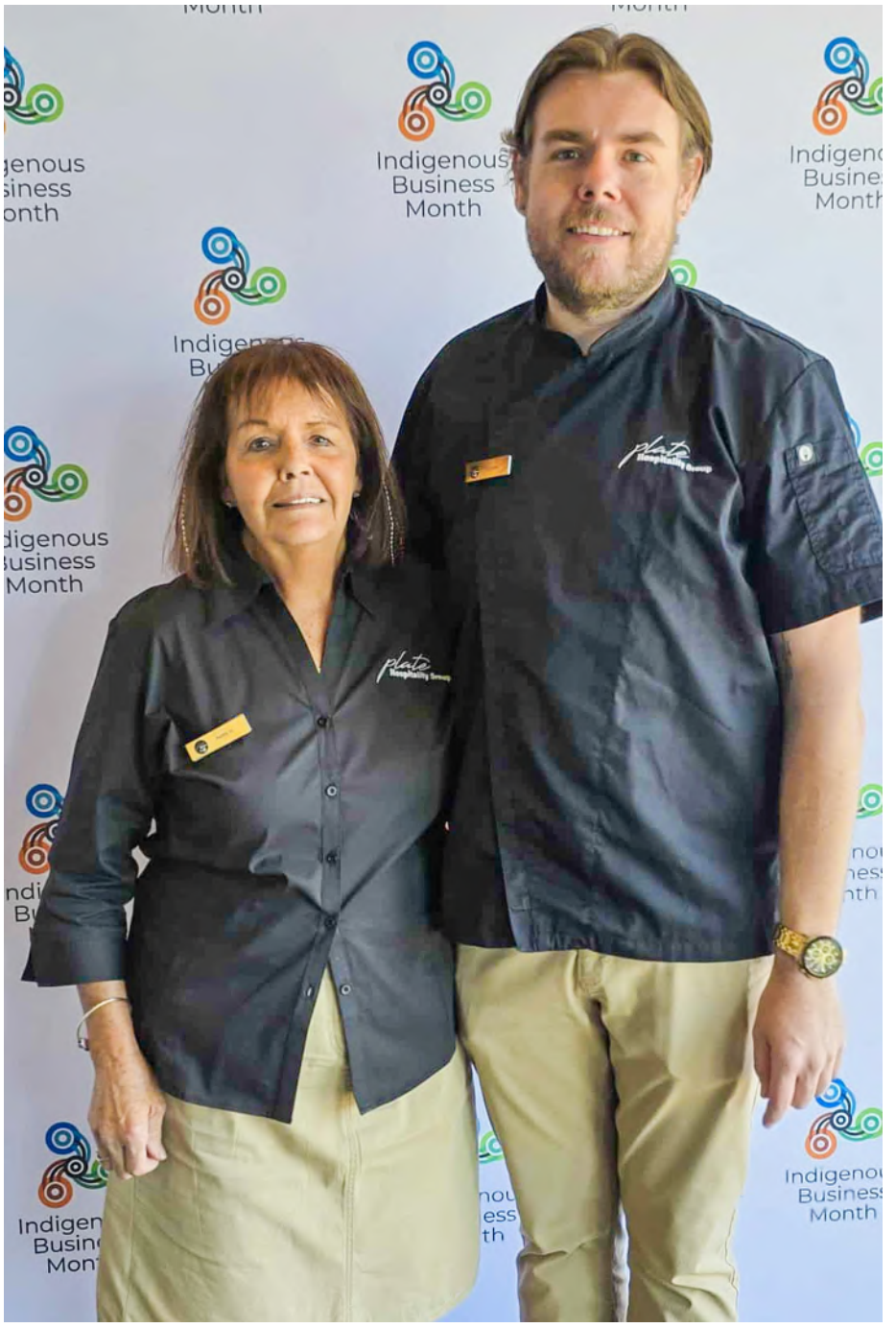
His grandmother grew up being told not to say she was Aboriginal, and his mother was raised the same, often claiming she was Mediterranean.

"It's almost like they weren't allowed to be proud," he says.

"Whereas my generation, it's kind of switched around."

Plate employs a team of 25, eight of them full-time, and it has a 75 per cent Indigenous employment rate.

Its supply chain is 85 per cent Indigenous, including more than 20 growers and wild harvesters and about 35 Indigenous businesses whose products it stocks.







“The goal would be to have a really nice fine dining restaurant in New York or Los Angeles

“Most of them don’t even have an email or a website,” Atkins says of the harvesters.

“It’s sort of going through the grapevine and finding them to be able to provide employment and the economical benefit back to Country.”

The turning point came in 2019, when Plate won the catering tender at Western Sydney Airport.

“As soon as we won that tender, it has gained a massive platform for us of exposure, where all these different federal and state government departments were coming and holding events,” he says.

“As soon as NAIDOC’s over, it’s a little bit sad to say, but a lot of the corporates kind of forget that we exist, but we operate 52 weeks of the year.”

When bookings are slow, the kitchen switches to jams and relishes to keep staff working.

The challenges of running a small business are real. Costs keep climbing and Atkins says the rent on his factory has increased by $1600 a month in four years.

“I’ve been quite lucky. I haven’t had to lay anyone off,” he says, citing diversification as a key element to success.

Koloff grew up in a small business family and currently owns a hospitality business, so she understands all too well the challenges faced by small business owners. “I don’t think there’s any two ways about the fact that it is a tough trading environment right now, absolutely,” she says.

Koloff points to changes aimed at getting more small businesses into NSW government supply chains. Businesses no longer need insurance in place to tender, and the government has committed to paying small business contractors within seven days.

“There’s nothing worse than doing a job and trying to cash flow it but no one pays you for 28 days or longer,” she says.

The free Small Business Advisory Service has recently returned, and Indigenous businesses have been named a priority cohort and given additional hours of one-on-one coaching.

The NSW government launched its first Aboriginal Business Strategy in September.

Koloff says strong Aboriginal business owners lead by example.

“All the kids in their family, all the people in their neighbourhood, all the network, see that it’s possible and it can be done,” she says.

“In some communities, that demonstration of leadership and ownership has all of these social and community benefits that go well beyond the economic bottom line.”

Atkins says dealing with government has become far easier since Plate’s early days. Investment NSW and the Department of Primary Industries are now helping his business reach export markets.

“People need to use the NSW government as a resource, because that’s why they exist and that’s why they’re funded,” he says.

“Small businesses don’t have to be small.”

The next business adventure for Atkins involves operating venues.

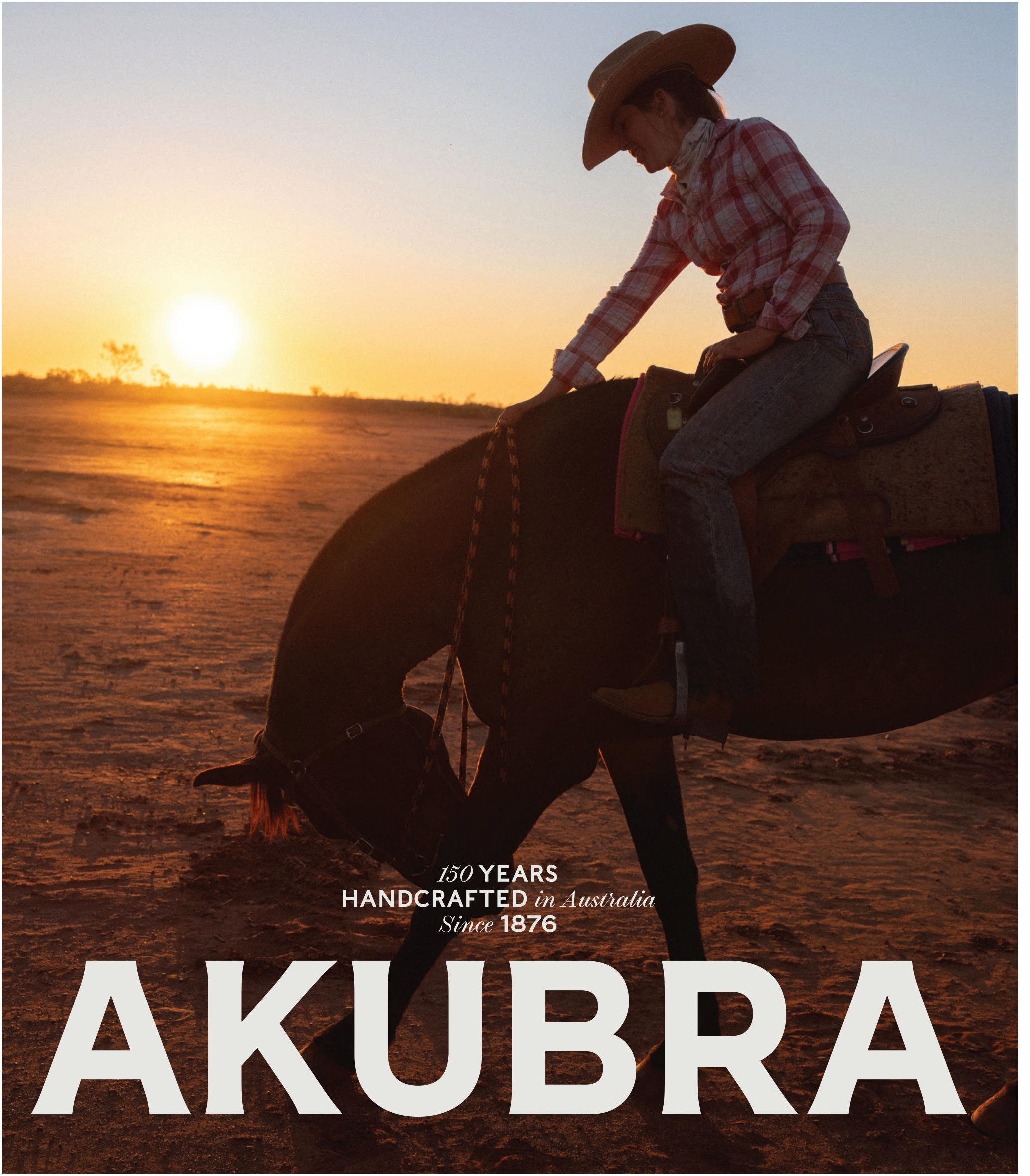
Plate has won a tender to open a cafe and function centre at Old Government House in Parramatta Park, now under construction.

“The eventual goal would be to have a really nice fine dining Aboriginal restaurant in New York or Los Angeles,” he says.

When asked what he is most proud of, Atkins names his culture.

“Without having my culture and the knowledge from my grandmother and my mother and my uncles passed down to me, I wouldn’t have been as successful,” he says.

“My business is built all around my culture.” ●


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