The Indigenous Business Review
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ANALYSIS
Closing the Gap needs capital

TUNE IN
Evolve FM Scaling Up

# Jawun: Capability, not charity

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# The Indigenous Business Review

This edition advances a simple idea: enduring Indigenous economic progress is built shoulder to shoulder, through partnership.

Our cover feature on Jawun and its CEO, Shane Webster, examines one of the most effective partnership models operating in the Indigenous economy. Jawun's demand-driven secondments align community priorities with external expertise.

Troy Rugless' Evolve FM shows what happens when Indigenous businesses reject procurement ceilings and compete as lead providers, while redirecting work to Indigenous suppliers. Robby Mallard's expansion in mining, construction and demolition in Western Australia show that serious contracts generate apprenticeships, employment and reinvestment. Wurrba's use of laser surface-cleaning technology signals Indigenous entry into advanced industrial capability, with training embedded into delivery.

Narelle Anderson's Envirobank demonstrates how Indigenous ownership can turn recycling into national market infrastructure. Ochre Ventures confronts the "missing middle" of finance that stalls businesses between grants and bank debt. Native Secrets shows how cultural knowledge and modern science can combine to produce globally competitive products.

Two stories focus on long-term pipelines. CareerTrackers CEO Adam Davids says internships, networks and mastery of new tools are essential if education is to translate into wealth. Murawin's transition to Rebecca McGuinness as CEO signals the emergence of a new generation.

From SETAC's acquisition of The Cannery in Tasmania to Rosanna Angus' tourism on the Dampier Peninsula, this edition is grounded in place, assets and authority.

Our analysis (P24) ties these threads together. Closing the Gap will not be achieved unless Indigenous economic prosperity is at the centre of policy and practice at every level.

**Reece Harley**
Managing Editor

The Indigenous Business Review

Wiradjuri and Torres Strait Islander man Troy Rugless has spent much of his business life pushing back against the low expectations that can still shape attitudes toward Indigenous enterprise, particularly the idea that Indigenous businesses exist to satisfy minimum procurement targets rather than to operate as capable, competitive partners.

He understands the role of policy and reform, but he has seen how progress stalls when ambition gives way to box-ticking.

Before business, there was rugby league. Rugless signed with the Sydney Roosters while still at school, embarking on a professional career that eventually took him to the London Broncos. Years later, his son Kobe would follow in his footsteps, making them the first father-and-son combination to represent the Broncos.

"I played with the Roosters and South Sydney, went to England, came back to play with Souths again and I did my knee," he says. "I joined the fire brigade when I was about 26. My father was a fireman. Years went by and I wanted to do something else.

"So, I started a business which did cleaning, maintenance and construction. We started working for major facility management providers like JLL and CBRE."

It was there that Rugless began to see the limits of the Indigenous Procurement Policy in practice.

"The IPP was in place, but what I noticed was that once facilities management providers hit their 3 per cent target, the work stopped," he says. "I'd ask, 'Why do we only get this amount of work?'. And the answer was, 'Because we've met our target'. When I asked if there was a problem with how we performed, they said no — 'we were great'. I thought 'well that's not right'."

Rugless set out to change the system.

He approached a facility management provider with a proposal to form a joint venture. The ambition was not just to deliver services, but to become a full facilities management provider that could control the pipeline of work and open doors for Indigenous contractors.

"We said, 'We're going to use the best contractors we can, Indigenous and

# Shrugging off the shackles of minimum targets

**Troy Rugless is taking building management to the next level, Giovanni Torre reports**

non-Indigenous. But I know there are a lot of strong Indigenous businesses that should be getting more work," he says.

That partnership developed into Evolve FM. JLL eventually took a 49 per cent stake in the new entity. Rugless retained 51 per cent ownership.

"We learned a lot from JLL over our 10-year affiliation but the goal was always to become a 100 per cent Indigenous-owned business, a vision shared and supported by JLL" he says.

Evolve FM's growth accelerated after it secured a Whole of Australian Government contract. As the contract approached re-tender, Rugless made a decisive call. "We realised we were big enough to do it ourselves," he says. "So, I bought out JLL's share of Evolve in June of 2025.

Today, Evolve FM is Australia's first and only 100 per cent Indigenous-owned full-service facilities management and real estate solutions business operating at national scale. Since its inception, the business has directed more than $92 million of work to Indigenous suppliers across their portfolio of contracts.

"That's the proudest thing for me," Rugless says. "What we do with other Indigenous businesses."

Evolve FM now operates from offices in Canberra and Mascot and conducts business with more than 20 major clients Australia-wide, including contracts with the federal and NSW governments. Via a recent expansion into the Sydney market, Evolve is delivering facility management services to more than 470 schools across the Sydney metropolitan region.


**The Evolve FM team at the First Nations Engagement in School Infrastructure program at a school-leavers careers expo**

"We've got almost a hundred Indigenous businesses on our books in Sydney in only two and a half years, and it's growing every day," Rugless says.

"We're working with local land councils, especially La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council, and we're getting young Indigenous men and women straight out of school into real jobs. We are also supporting university students with meaningful jobs while they study."

Just as important, Rugless says, is helping businesses navigate the back-of-house complexity that comes with government work. "A lot of Indigenous businesses are really good at their jobs, but the paperwork and back-of-house requirements for state or federal government work are overwhelming," he says. "You need someone who has been through that process, knows how to get you through, and will get on board to nurture and assist you through the process."

For Rugless, this is where the procurement conversation still falls short. "Too often, being Indigenous is the first thing people see," he says. "What they should be seeing is that we're a really good business that competes with the best in Australia. We just happen to be Indigenous-owned."

He believes the IPP was necessary, but that its target-driven mindset has become a constraint, although he acknowledges that change is slowly occurring, with the establishment of Indigenous engagement teams in several government departments.

"That's why I started Evolve FM, because I was saying, 'you just told us we're really good and we're the best, but you stop when you hit your target'. Why wouldn't you reward your best business, that you've got the most trust and faith in, with more work?"

Inside Evolve FM, Rugless says purpose has become a powerful unifier.

"I've got Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who want their work to mean something, who want reconciliation" he says. "My business gives them the tools and opportunities to step towards reconciliation on a daily basis, and not just my team, everyone that partners with Evolve FM."

Looking ahead, Rugless is clear about Evolve FM's direction.

"Now that Evolve FM is 100 per cent (Indigenous-owned), it's all about growth, building a business to the biggest Indigenous FM business, and Australian-owned. I've always had aspirations of becoming the first Indigenous business to float on the stock exchange.

"We've always got to have goals, and we're going step by step. We're not at that stage yet, but it's all about growth now and getting the right people into the business." ●


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Yardi Mining Services' Robe River Kuruma members Nathan and Daniel Evans

# Care for land a core calling

**Yardi Mining Services' success built on pillars of cultural knowledge and custodianship, Reece Harley reports**

Yardi Mining Services is positioning Aboriginal-led environmental rehabilitation as core business, not an add-on, as resource companies face growing scrutiny over how work on Country delivers a lasting benefit.

Operating across Robe River Kuruma Country in Western Australia's Pilbara, Yardi is a majority Aboriginal-owned mining services company established as a joint venture between Robe River Services, owned by the Robe River Kuruma people, and CSI Mining Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of Mineral Resources.

The company specialises in complex civil works and environmental rehabilitation, with cultural authority embedded into project design and delivery. Chair Josie Alec said operating on Robe River Kuruma Country carried an obligation that went beyond compliance. "Working on our Country comes with responsibility, not just to deliver the job, but to protect heritage, create opportunities for our people and make sure the benefits flow back into community," she said.

Environmental rehabilitation has become a central pillar of Yardi's work, with projects shaped by cultural and environmental assessments undertaken before activity begins.

Rehabilitation programs include erosion control, ecological restoration and revegetation using native species, informed by traditional ecological knowledge.

Alec said the aim was not simply to repair disturbance, but to leave Country in a condition future generations could be proud of. Yardi's operating model requires early and ongoing consultation with Elders, ensuring cultural knowledge informs planning and on-ground decision-making. That approach, the company says, has strengthened trust with clients navigating increasingly complex heritage and environmental expectations.

> "Our ancestors fought to protect culture and Country

Director of Yardi and chief executive of Mineral Resources' mining services division, Mike Grey, said clients were looking for partners who could combine technical capability with cultural understanding. "Mining is not just about extraction. It is about how you operate on Country and what you leave behind," he said.

Alongside environmental outcomes, Yardi has embedded Aboriginal employment and training targets into its operations, creating pathways for local people into long-term careers in mining services and land management.

For Alec, the commercial growth of Aboriginal-owned enterprises like Yardi represents a continuation of cultural responsibility rather than a departure from it.

"Our ancestors fought to protect culture and Country," she said. "Now we have the chance to build strong businesses that do the same. That is what success looks like for us."

As pressure grows on the resources sector to demonstrate genuine social and environmental value, Yardi's model offers a glimpse of how Indigenous ownership, cultural authority and operational delivery can be aligned rather than traded off. •

The Indigenous Business Review

# Can-do attitude makes circular economy work

## A strong work ethic, agility and innovation power this recycling company, **Reece Harley** reports

When Narelle Anderson talks about recycling, she does not frame it as a lifestyle choice or a moral gesture. She talks about systems. About incentives. About responsibility.

"For us, this work is caring for Country," she says. "But it's also about people. Jobs. Opportunity. That's where the real impact is."

As the founder of Envirobank, Anderson has spent more than two decades building one of Australia's largest Indigenous-owned recycling businesses, operating across NSW, Queensland, Victoria and the Northern Territory.

Today, Envirobank processes tens of millions of containers each year. The scale is significant, but the harder work was building a business long before the market, and the policy framework, were ready for it.

### An early starter

Anderson left school at 16 and entered the workforce even earlier, securing her first job at 14 and nine months after counting down the days until she was legally allowed to work. She did not follow a university pathway. Instead, she learned business on the job, developing a work ethic shaped by necessity rather than credentials.

She has often traced her sense of identity and independence to an early government program that paid Aboriginal students a small weekly amount to attend school. The payment itself was modest, but the impact was not. It made her conscious, at a young age, of her Aboriginal identity and the responsibilities that came with it. "I learned early that opportunity doesn't always come dressed the way people expect it to," she has said. "You take it, and you build from there."

Her entry into waste management came almost by accident. While waiting to start a corporate role, Anderson crossed paths with the owner of a small waste business. She quickly saw what it needed: stronger sales, tighter financial discipline and a clearer commercial direction. When the owner decided to exit, Anderson negotiated a deal to buy the business through sweat equity.

"I didn't have any money," she says. "So I had to structure a deal that relied on hard work."

She ran that first business for nine years before selling it to a public company. What stayed with her was not the exit, but a recurring frustration she saw again and again.

Public place recycling, she realised, was failing. Bins were contaminated. Signage was confusing. People wanted to do the right thing, but the system made it difficult.

### Ahead of curve

The idea that would

become Envirobank emerged from that frustration. A young employee mentioned that in the US, recycling was incentivised through deposit schemes and reverse vending machines. Anderson did not wait for validation. She boarded a plane.

In the US, she encountered reverse vending technology for the first time and secured distribution rights to bring it to Australia. The logic seemed obvious. Reward people, and behaviour changes.

What she underestimated was how far ahead of the policy curve she was.

At the time, South Australia was the only jurisdiction with container deposit legislation. Beverage manufacturers were hostile, and elsewhere there was no regulatory framework to support large-scale deployment.

"My naivety was thinking that because it was a good idea, it would automatically get traction," she says.

Instead of retreating, Anderson adapted. In the absence of deposit legislation, she built a digital rewards platform, Crunch, allowing people to earn value from recycling even without a formal container deposit scheme. For four years, she worked without drawing a salary while the business took shape, reinvesting every dollar back into the company.

That persistence led to commercial partnerships, including with 7-Eleven, which was seeking a way to recover branded Slurpee cups before container deposit schemes existed in NSW. Envirobank reprogrammed its machines to read barcodes rather than eligible containers, creating a closed-loop return system tied to customer rewards.

"That's always been our strength," Anderson says. "Using technology to solve problems even when the framework doesn't exist yet."

## National exposure

When container deposit schemes eventually rolled out across Australia, Envirobank was ready.

Today, the business operates as both a technology company and a bricks-and-mortar recycling operator. It runs depots, reverse vending kiosks and pick-up services across four jurisdictions. In the Northern Territory, Envirobank also acts as a scheme co-ordinator, helping facilitate depot licensing and material flows, including in remote communities.

The volumes are substantial. In the past year alone, Envirobank processed around 38 million containers in NSW, about 20 million in Queensland and close to 70 million in Victoria.


**Envirobank was ahead of the curve on container deposit schemes; left, Narelle Anderson**

But Anderson is clear that container deposit schemes are not simply environmental programs. They are markets. Clean, source-separated materials become commodities rather than waste, creating value that underwrites the system.

"If it's contaminated, it's rubbish," she says. "If it's clean, it's a resource."

That distinction explains why Envirobank has consistently invested in technology, logistics and data rather than treating recycling as a low-margin service. Through its digital platform, customers can manage their earnings, donate to charities or convert refunds into other benefits, reinforcing the idea that waste, handled properly, becomes currency.

## Respect for staff

Despite the technical complexity of the business, Anderson is clear about what matters most.

Envirobank employs around 120 people nationally. "That's 120 families," she says. "You don't take that lightly."

Many staff have been with the business for a decade or more. Anderson attributes that longevity to a leadership approach grounded in respect and open dialogue. "I might have the idea," she says, "but it's my team's job to tell me whether it's a good one."

That philosophy extends to Envirobank's community partnerships. The company works with social enterprises, disability organisations and Indigenous communities, not as beneficiaries but as genuine partners. In the Northern Territory, Envirobank has supported councils and communities, including in Arnhem Land, where container collection provides both environmental outcomes and income.

"If we're going to say we're values-led, then we have to pay properly," Anderson says. "Otherwise it's just branding."

Envirobank's status as an Indigenous-owned business is not incidental to its mission. For Anderson, recycling and circular economy work sit within cultural obligations to care for Country. But she is equally direct about the need for commercial discipline and integrity.

She has spoken about the damage caused by black-cladding, where large companies create Indigenous-branded entities to access contracts without transferring control or value.

"It's insulting," she says. "We worked hard to build a sector, and now we see it hollowed out."

Her position is pragmatic. Indigenous businesses are not asking for grants, she says, but for genuine access to contracts that allow sustainable growth.

"If you give us real work, we'll build real businesses," she says.

"That's how you create intergenerational opportunity."

## Looking forward

Three years ago, Anderson appointed a chief executive to manage Envirobank's day-to-day operations, freeing her to focus on mentoring, culture and long-term strategy. Her priorities remain firmly domestic.

While international expansion remains a possibility, she believes Australia still has significant work to do, from expanding commercial pick-up services to addressing emerging waste streams.

"My mum used to say charity begins at home," Anderson says.

"There's still a lot we can do here."

After more than two decades in the sector, Anderson's legacy is not simply that she built a recycling company. It is that she turned an environmental idea into market infrastructure, while demonstrating what Indigenous women's leadership looks like at scale: commercially rigorous, people-centred and uncompromising on integrity. ●

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Woodside Jawun secondees with the Ngarrindjeri Ruwe Empowered Communities team

# A friend to walk beside

**The goal of Jawun, an organisation that partners corporates with Indigenous business, is for the First Nations companies to be confident enough to thrive independently, Reece Harley reports**

On Ngarrindjeri Country in South Australia, a project engineer sits alongside Elders, listening to stories of resilience and cultural survival. Moments like these, says Jawun CEO Shane Webster, are where true partnership begins. "You think you're going to give something," says one secondee, "but you end up receiving so much more."

Webster, a proud Torres Strait Islander and a former public servant, leads Jawun with a mission to redefine how corporate Australia partners with Indigenous communities and businesses. As CEO of this innovative not-for-profit, Webster brings deep cross-sector insight and a passion for Indigenous self-determination. His journey from policy adviser in South Australia to leading Jawun exemplifies how authentic partnerships can foster long-term, community-led prosperity.

## 'Head and heart'

Webster's career is steeped in heritage and service. He began in public service and politics, contributing to the historic amendment of South Australia's Constitution that recognised Aboriginal custodianship of lands and waters. He describes this moment as bridging "both the head and the heart". Joining Jawun in 2012, he served in regional leadership roles before being appointed CEO in 2021. He became the first Indigenous person to lead the organisation. With over a decade of experience in the organisation, Webster is now steering it through its third phase, aligning with the evolving landscape of Indigenous enterprise and leadership.

When long-time CEO Karyn Baylis passed the torch, Jawun's board recognised Webster's strategic vision

and cultural insight as pivotal to its future. Supported by tailored mentorship, he embraced the transition into the CEO role, collaborating closely with chair Ilana Atlas. Their dynamic of leadership, described as working shoulder to shoulder, exemplifies the ethos they promote across all Jawun partnerships.

## The Jawun model

Founded in 2001 by Indigenous leader Noel Pearson in partnership with Westpac and Boston Consulting Group, Jawun (meaning "friend/family" in the Kuku Yalanji language) was born from a bold concept: embedding corporate and government professionals with Indigenous organisations to build capacity through secondments.

Under Jawun's model, Indigenous partners identify their own priorities. Jawun then brokers skilled secondees from leading corporations and public agencies to support these goals. These secondments, typically six-week immersions, cover everything from strategic planning and governance to finance and IT. What makes this approach exceptional is its two-way value. Indigenous communities gain targeted expertise while secondees return with deeper cultural understanding and renewed purpose.

"Jawun is built on a partnership model that puts the emphasis on working with Indigenous people, rather than providing services to them," Webster says. Over the past two decades, more than 5000 secondees have participated across 12 regions, from Cape York and the Kimberley to inner Sydney and the Lower Murray, building partnerships with more than 100 Indigenous organisations.

Corporate partners such as Qantas, the Commonwealth Bank and Woodside have all made longstanding contributions. Qantas has championed cultural immersion programs and leadership development. The Commonwealth Bank has embedded professionals across regions, contributing finance and strategic insights to Indigenous-led projects. Woodside, representing the energy sector, has provided more than 100 employees to work alongside Indigenous organisations and businesses across Australia. More than 50 of its executives and leaders have participated in community visits, connecting with local leaders and organisations to exchange knowledge and improve cultural understanding.

> "You think you're going to give, but you end up receiving

"Our partnership with Jawun is genuine and mutually beneficial, built over time and based on trust," says Tony Cudmore, executive vice president – sustainability, policy and external affairs at Woodside. "We're so proud that more than 100 of our employees have devoted their time and expertise to collaborate with Indigenous organisations across Australia, supporting locally driven aspirations and improving long-term community outcomes."

## Success stories

One recent example is Harry Chapman, a project engineer at Woodside, who completed his secondment on Ngarrindjeri Country in South Australia's Lower River Murray, Lakes and Coorong region. There, he worked with RUWE Aboriginal Corporation to develop a project execution plan for a solar panel recycling facility, a joint venture between RUWE and Pan Pacific Recycling. Chapman also collaborated with Kuti Co, a pipi harvesting business, designing a business plan to help transition its current harvesting crew from employees into business owners.

"I was lucky to spend time in the Country, take part in board meetings and sit with the community," Chapman says. "You think you're going to give something, but you end up receiving so much more."

He also describes visiting former mission sites and joining weaving workshops with the Mardawi Sister Weavers. "It was confronting, moving and full of meaning," he says.


**Jawun's 2025 secondees at Camp Coorong, top; Jawun CEO Shane Webster and his younger sister, Samantha, as children; A burnie bean, painted with Jawun's logo by Ivy Minniecon, right**

"The Jawun experience changed how I think. It made me want to understand more about the culture around me, including right here on Whadjuk Country."

In other regions, similar stories of transformation unfold. In South Australia's Ngarrindjeri Nation, a looming funding cut threatened the livelihoods of Indigenous rangers. Rather than accept defeat, community leaders worked with Jawun secondees to develop a sustainable business model. The result was Kuti Co, a thriving Indigenous-owned fishery that became one of the most profitable in the country. "That business broke the mould of what good partnering should look like," Webster says.

In Western Australia, the Kimberley Land Council tapped into Jawun's network to build capacity around a pioneering carbon trading initiative. Through traditional fire management practices, KLC rangers reduce emissions and generate carbon credits sold in national markets. With business planning and legal expertise supported by Jawun secondees, the initiative has become both an environmental success and an economic lifeline for remote communities.

Each of these stories illustrates the transformative power of capacity-building when Indigenous organisations retain control and set the agenda.

## A trusted bridge

After more than two decades, Jawun is seen as a trusted bridge between sectors. Economically, its contributions have enabled Indigenous businesses to scale, access new markets and create jobs. Socially, it has improved governance and service delivery across sectors like education, health and housing. But the most profound impact

lies in long-term capacity-building.

Webster is candid about Jawun's philosophy: the goal is for Indigenous partners to achieve the capability and confidence to operate independently, without ongoing external support. He says true success means no longer being needed.

"We only exist if we are making a difference," he says. "Our aim is to build capability, not dependency."

This philosophy extends to secondees, 80 per cent of whom report transformational experiences. Many return to their companies as advocates for Indigenous inclusion and cultural competence. This two-way capacity-building creates a multiplier effect, enriching Indigenous communities and the organisations that support them.

## Looking ahead

Webster is particularly excited about future opportunities for Indigenous business in the climate economy and digital innovation. Land stewardship is a strategic advantage, he says, pointing to the potential of Indigenous-led carbon projects, conservation enterprises and renewable energy ventures.

He also highlights the need for Indigenous inclusion in the fourth industrial revolution.

Digital platforms, AI and data sovereignty must include Indigenous voices. Webster envisions initiatives like a national impact capital marketplace and digital hubs to connect communities and share knowledge securely.

Another concept gaining traction is group Indigenous economics, co-operative ventures that allow communities to pool resources and scale collectively. A concrete example is the Kimberley Agriculture and Pastoral Company, a consortium of Aboriginal-owned cattle stations.

Shared ownership spreads risk and enhances sustainability, echoing traditional Indigenous values.

## Empowerment

Webster's leadership and Jawun's work reflect a powerful shift towards Indigenous-led, place-based reform. By respecting local decision-making and walking shoulder to shoulder with Indigenous organisations, Jawun is helping redefine what true allyship and economic inclusion look like.

"The emerging trend is local voices finding local solutions, with local leaders leading national change," Webster says. In this model, Jawun is not the hero. It is the enabler, the facilitator, the friend walking beside. That is reshaping the approach to Indigenous empowerment, one partnership at a time.

In a country still reckoning with its history, Jawun's work offers a road map for inclusive growth built on respect, resilience and reciprocal learning. And with leaders like Webster at the helm, the journey towards Indigenous prosperity is not only possible. It is already well under way. •

### BURNIE BEAN A SYMBOL OF LASTING FRIENDSHIP

**The burnie bean is a rainforest seed that comes from the matchbox vine; this particular seed comes from Mossman Gorge. It is believed to have medicinal values and is also used to store kindling from the wet.**

**Besides the historic value this seed holds, children from Mossman Gorge have another use for it: they like to rub the bean on hot bitumen and then put the heated end on a friend's arm to burn them, hence the name burnie bean.**

**The Indigenous artist who paints the Jawun logo on the seeds for us is Ivy Minniecon. Ivy is a remarkable woman and she feels privileged to paint these gifts for our 'Jawun' (friends).**

**Today, the burnie bean is Jawun's way of saying thank you for your contribution. We ask you to keep this burnie bean somewhere visible and every time you look at it, think about the friendships you made, your contribution to an amazing agenda, spreading the word, and perhaps returning one day.**


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# Make way for the new generation

## A second wave of commerce-savvy entrepreneurs is now coming to the fore, **Brendan Foster** reports

First Nations consultancy firm Murawin has appointed Rebecca McGuinness as new chief executive in a generational transition at the Indigenous-owned company founded more than a decade ago.

McGuinness, a proud Dunghutti woman with links to the Gumbaynggirr and Anaiwan peoples, succeeds her mother, Carol Vale, who co-founded the Brisbane-based business with her late partner, Greg McKenzie, in 2014.

The appointment reflects a shift in the First Nations economy towards formal succession and continuity.

McGuinness has held senior operational and leadership roles at Murawin, most recently as director of business operations. She says discussions about succession began early in her career at the firm.

"The first time Carol and Greg mentioned succession was on my first day working full-time for Murawin," McGuinness says. "Now their generation is at a point where they can hand over the reins to their adult children, like myself, who are stepping into the leadership roles and continuing to build on the legacy for the next generation."

She says the transition reflects a maturing Indigenous business ecosystem. "Succession planning has existed in many industries for thousands of years," she says. "But we are only now starting to see it emerge in the Indigenous business sector in Australia."

McGuinness says historical exclusion from capital, markets and opportunity has limited the ability of First Nations families to build enterprises capable of enduring across generations.

"Mob have passed knowledge down for more than 60,000 years," she says. "But we have not always had the opportunity to build strong, sustainable economic businesses that last."

Murawin was established as a values-led consultancy specialising in social justice, policy reform and the empowerment of First Nations communities. The firm has since expanded nationally, employing more than 25 staff and delivering work across research, evaluation, community engagement and place-based strategy.

Vale says the business grew from a single-consultant operation into a national firm operating in Indigenous, multicultural and international contexts.

"We will always work in the Indigenous space," she says. "We have also been working internationally and in the multicultural arena."

She also speaks about the barriers faced by Indigenous business owners, including racism, mistrust and diminished perceptions of commercial value. "We have to deal with the same challenges as any business," she says. "But we also contend with racism, patronising attitudes and assumptions that Aboriginal businesses cannot deliver quality services."

The entrepreneur says Indigenous companies often had to exceed expectations to counter discrimination.

"The commercial value of Indigenous businesses is often assumed to be lower," she says. "In reality, it has to be superior."

**Carol Vale, right, is proud of her daughter Rebecca McGuinness, who will take over the family company, which she plans to expand**

Vale was named Supply Nation's Indigenous Businesswoman of the Year in 2024. She was also nominated for the Dr Dean Jarrett Award, which recognises outstanding contribution to Indigenous business and economic development.

She credits Murawin's success to collective effort, including from of her late partner, Greg McKenzie.

"Murawin would not be where it is today without Greg's dedication and commitment," she said in 2024.

McGuinness said growing up alongside the business gave her an early understanding of the demands. She says her parents worked long hours to establish the firm.

"That gave me a rare insight into what it takes to build and sustain a family-led organisation," she says. She says similar leadership transitions are now occurring in the Indigenous business sector as first-generation founders prepare to hand over control.

"It is exciting not just for me," she says. "I am seeing it happen in other Indigenous businesses as well."

Murawin will continue delivering its core services nationally and there are plans to expand how the firm shares knowledge and insights, including through visual and creative formats.

Murawin intends to increase its use of First Nations-designed video, animation and storytelling tools to support engagement with communities, governments and clients.

Vale, who will remain involved in the business, says the leadership transition was a family milestone and a signal for the broader Indigenous business sector.

"Seeing second-generation Indigenous business owners step into leadership is incredibly powerful," Vale says. "I am immensely proud of Rebecca."

The Indigenous Busi

# Success beyond the sports field

A First Nations body is helping people build long-term wealth through careers, **Reece Harley** reports

Adam Davids' career has been shaped as much by what he did not see growing up as by what he did.

Raised between southwest Sydney and Wagga Wagga, Davids grew up in communities where sport offered one of the few clearly visible routes to opportunity for Aboriginal boys. He played widely, excelled early and saw how readily clubs and coaches stepped forward when talent appeared.

What struck him later was the contrast.

"I experienced the positive outreach from presidents of football clubs really early on," Davids says. "But I didn't see that same energy coming from other institutions."

That absence of encouragement and expectation has quietly informed the work he has gone on to lead.

Davids is a proud Aboriginal man from Wiradjuri mob through his mother. One of his earliest formative memories comes from primary school, when his school raised the Aboriginal flag for the first time. As the oldest Aboriginal student, he was asked to raise it each day. At the time, it felt ceremonial. In retrospect, he sees it as something more consequential.

"It was the first time I felt I had responsibility," he says. "Something that mattered beyond myself."

At home, Davids watched his mother work in the social sector, supporting women experiencing domestic violence. Those spaces shaped his understanding


**Adam Davids as a youngster; and in his role with CareerTrackers, right**

of service, dignity and accountability. Financial security was fragile. He took his first paid job as soon as he was legally able, working at KFC, and he began thinking about how people build futures from modest beginnings.

As a teenager, he arranged a meeting with a financial planner, eager to learn about investing. He suggested he might be able to put together $500. The meeting ended quickly.

"That moment stayed with me," Davids says. "Not because of the money, but because of the message. Aspiration wasn't taken seriously."

By the end of high school, Davids had begun to question the narrow futures often mapped for Aboriginal students. He stepped away from sport and leaned into business studies. Career aptitude tests pointed him towards policing or emergency services. A teacher suggested university. Davids followed the latter advice.

He enrolled in a bachelor of commerce at the University of NSW and entered a world structured by privilege, networks and inherited confidence. Sitting alongside students from elite private schools, he carried the lived experience of a single-parent household and limited financial security.

The transition was challenging. The academic demands were steep, particularly in mathematics. What sustained him, he says, was conviction and connection. Indigenous centres, scholarships and student networks provided both practical support and a

> **"The pipeline has improved but the ceilings are still there**

sense of belonging. As graduation approached, Davids faced a decision familiar to many Indigenous students. He could pursue the most lucrative graduate pathway available, or commit to work grounded in community purpose. At the same time, he had been working with a youth program in Sydney's south, supporting Indigenous young people through transitions into secondary school. He had also met the founder of a fledgling organisation with a bold proposition, CareerTrackers.

CareerTrackers was founded on a simple but powerful idea. Indigenous university students should not have to rely on chance to access professional networks, paid experience and meaningful career opportunities. Through structured, paid internships aligned with students' fields of study, the organisation sought to bridge the gap between education and professional life. Davids joined as the organisation's second employee. Over the next decade, he helped shape its strategy, partnerships and national footprint.

"The original language was very direct," he says. "It was about seeing Indigenous Australians in the boardrooms of corporate Australia."

That framing has since evolved to encompass leadership across professions such as science, engineering, finance and law. The purpose, however, remains consistent.

"We are not talking about representation for its own sake," Davids says. "We are talking about excellence. About Indigenous people being present in decision-making roles because they are capable and prepared."

Today, CareerTrackers has supported more than 9000 internships and built an alumni network of over 1600 Indigenous professionals. Davids acknowledges that the environment has shifted since the organisation's early days. Reconciliation Action Plans are now common. Indigenous employment pathways exist in banking, government, consulting and resources.

But he is cautious about overstating progress. Indigenous Australians remain under-represented in senior professional, executive and board roles. "The pipeline has improved," he says. "But the ceilings are still there."

In 2019, Davids' thinking deepened further when he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to the US. His research there examined internship-based equity programs that emerged from the US civil rights era and what decades of experience might offer Indigenous economic development in Australia.

That work sharpened his focus on wealth. Not simply employment outcomes, but long-term economic security.

"We talk a lot about participation," Davids says. "But we do not have a clear national picture of Indigenous household wealth. That matters, because wealth (or net worth) is what creates resilience."

Those insights led to the establishment of First Nations Equity Partners, a research-driven initiative focused on measuring how ASX200 organisations perform on First Nations outcomes. The aim is to move beyond commitments and towards tangible results, and to equip institutional investors to act as more informed stewards.

"This is not just a moral conversation," Davids says. "There are real economic and reputational risks for organisations that do not take this seriously."

After returning to Australia, Davids re-entered CareerTrackers as CEO. He describes it lightly as a "summer internship" after his earlier decade of service, but his focus is clear. Scale what works, deepen capability, and prepare Indigenous talent for the next economic transition.

That transition is under way.

Artificial intelligence and digital transformation are reshaping the workforce, and Davids is concerned that familiar inequalities could be reproduced in new forms.

"When generative AI emerged, elite institutions moved quickly to teach it," he says. "Others tried to ban it. That is structural."

His advice to Indigenous students and early career professionals is practical. Learn the tools, master them, and use them early, while holding on to what matters.

"Listening, respect and responsibility are strengths our people have carried for tens of thousands of years," Davids says. "They are also exactly the qualities future leaders will need."

For Adam Davids, the work is not about opening doors once. It is about building pathways that endure, and ensuring the people who walk them are equipped to stay. ●

# Cannery's new core calling

**The Port Cygnet cannery in southeastern Tasmania is being redefined into a business hub, Callan Morse reports**

The former Port Cygnet cannery has occupied a prominent place in the Huon Valley's economic history for more than a century.

Established during the peak of Tasmania's apple industry, the site was originally developed as an industrial processing facility, receiving fruit from surrounding orchards and canning it for domestic consumption and export.

For much of the 20th century, it was a significant local employer and a key piece of infrastructure in a region shaped by agriculture, river transport and seasonal labour.

As the Tasmanian apple industry declined in the latter half of the century, the cannery's original function diminished. The site was later repurposed and adapted, retaining its industrial character while transitioning into a mixed-use precinct.

Its location on the banks of the Agnes Rivulet, just south of the Cygnet township, has remained a defining feature, linking the site to both the working history and natural landscape of the Huon Valley.

That site has now entered a new phase of ownership and purpose after being purchased by an Aboriginal corporation with lofty ambitions of supporting Indigenous business enterprise in the area.

The South East Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation, which has been operating for 35 years, purchased the property last year with the intention of using the former apple canning factory as its Huon Valley hub.

For many years, SETAC has offered health, social and cultural support from a number of facilities in Cygnet and across the broader Huon region, services that will all locate to The Cannery once renovations are complete.

SETAC was established in the late 1980s to deliver culturally appropriate services to Tasmanian Aboriginal people living in the southeast of the state.

Over time, it has expanded its scope to include primary health care, family support, disability services, youth programs and cultural initiatives.

The organisation is Aboriginal governed and employs local Aboriginal staff. Its work is shaped by community priorities and regional need.

However, it is the Aboriginal business enterprise opportunities created by purchasing The Cannery that most excite the organisation's deputy chief executive and business enterprise manager, Tracey Dillon.

The Butchulla woman, whose people are the traditional custodians of the Queensland island of K'gari, was integral in SETAC's acquisition of the precinct. The purchase was preferred to "throwing quite a substantial amount of money" at the organisation's previous Channel Highway home.

"It made sense that we would then have a brand new, purpose-built building that would suit our needs, not just continually adding to an existing heritage building," Dillon says of SETAC's purchase of The Cannery.

Once refurbishment is complete, The Cannery will house SETAC's entire suite of services while also operating as a commercial cafe and restaurant, currently known as The Kitchen, offering hospitality training and employment for Aboriginal people.

Dillon says the concept has broad community support, reflecting the site's longstanding role as a place of work and



Clockwise from main: Cygnet and surrounds, southeast Tasmania; SETAC's Tracey Dillon at right; the new cannery, outside; and inside, space for functions and meetings

gathering within Cygnet. "What we want to do is engage a chef who will support us to have trainees, a little bit like what TAFE does," Dillon says.

"It's going to create more jobs for our mob, and we will be able to then get the employment stats up because we've got some place for them to work."

Employment pathways form a central part of SETAC's longer term planning for the precinct, particularly for Aboriginal people who face barriers to entering the workforce in regional areas.

Dillon says there are plans to combine The Cannery's cafe and restaurant offerings with tours of the local area once "we get our legs and get the place operating".

"We've always talked about cultural tourism, and you just have to walk up the road and do a tour," she says. "We want to do cultural tourism. We want to do that with food.

"[But] in the initial stages we want to do food, but just seasonal food because we want to move to an Indigenous culinary experience."

> "It's going to create more jobs for our mob

The Agnes Rivulet and surrounding landscape have long been central to local industry and settlement. SETAC's plans seek to connect that history with contemporary tourism, drawing on food, place and cultural interpretation rather than large-scale commercial development. The size of The Cannery precinct will also provide SETAC with the opportunity to construct leasable spaces, which will support local independent businesses while generating additional cashflow.

"We've also set aside a space for an Indigenous-led business," Dillon says, "because we want to make sure that one of our Indigenous businesses can operate from here."

Dillon says SETAC also has plans to convert an additional building on site into a working artspace and gift shop, where Aboriginal people can demonstrate their expertise and sell their arts and crafts.

They include mob skilled in painting, screen printing, weaving, jewellery making and using animal skins.

"Once we've got the built-in spaces, then we can put our people in there," Dillon says.

"Then we're more self-determining, and we're building some economic security for our community.

"Some of it is to go back into this establishment, but we also want individuals to prosper as well."

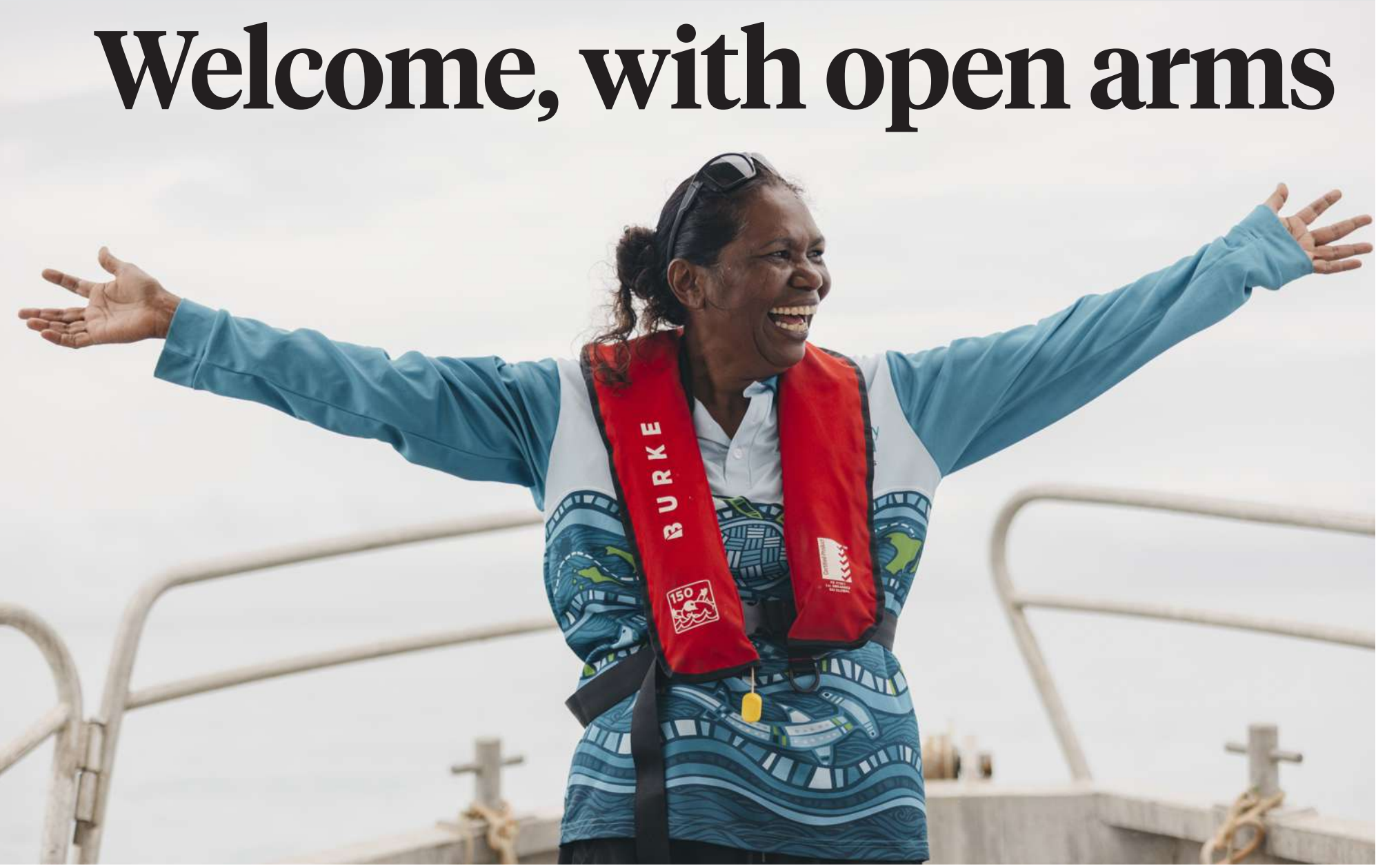
For SETAC, the acquisition represents more than a property transaction. It consolidates service delivery, creates physical space for enterprise and secures a long-term asset in a region where Aboriginal presence is often overlooked.

Dillon says The Cannery's new chapter under SETAC's ownership is "a recognition of our cultural heritage".

"People don't believe that there's still Tasmanian Aboriginal people in this country," Dillon says. "So that in itself acknowledges that there are Tasmanian Aboriginal people living here and thriving. That's really what's important about it, making sure that the cultural heritage is acknowledged."

The fit-out of The Cannery is expected to begin early this year. ●

# Welcome, with open arms




## Rosanna Angus is a tourism dynamo blending business nous with cultural practice, **Dianne Bortoletto** reports

The best tourism businesses deliver authentic, moving experiences, creating memories that last long after the holiday ends. They come from a deeper place, a place of connection and of stories.

It's how Rosanna Angus' business, Oolin Sunday Island Cultural Tours, was born, along with a desire to build a future for her people, create economic sovereignty and share what has always belonged to them.

Based in Cygnet Bay (Bardi country), north of Broome on Western Australia's Dampier Peninsula, Oolin Sunday Island Cultural Tours navigates the planet's largest tropical tides as it cruises through Jawi country, through King Sounds Middle Passage to Sunday Island, telling the story of the "Tide Drifters".

The history of Ewuny (Sunday Island) is little known. Sunday Island Mission, originally a sea cucumber and pearling station relying on Aboriginal labour and Indigenous knowledge of the reefs, was established in 1899 and closed in the early 1970s.

The tour follows the journey of Angus' ancestors in those pre-Mission days. On rafts made from mangrove wood, they would navigate the constant shifting waters and whirlpools metres wide to hunt for fish and trade on the mainland.

Her tour ran aground before it set sail when the pandemic struck. In 2021, it started in earnest, and like the king tides, it keeps rising. In 2023, Angus claimed gold in the Top Tour Guide category at the Australian Tourism Awards, a national accolade that's validated everything her business represents.

"I love it. It's beautiful and I love bringing people to Jawi country," Angus says. "Aboriginal tourism is the top of the list of what visitors want to do when they come to WA.

"Tourism is not only a business opportunity but an opportunity to build relationships, network, create immersive experiences, build partnerships, bridge the gaps and provide a level of cultural understanding."

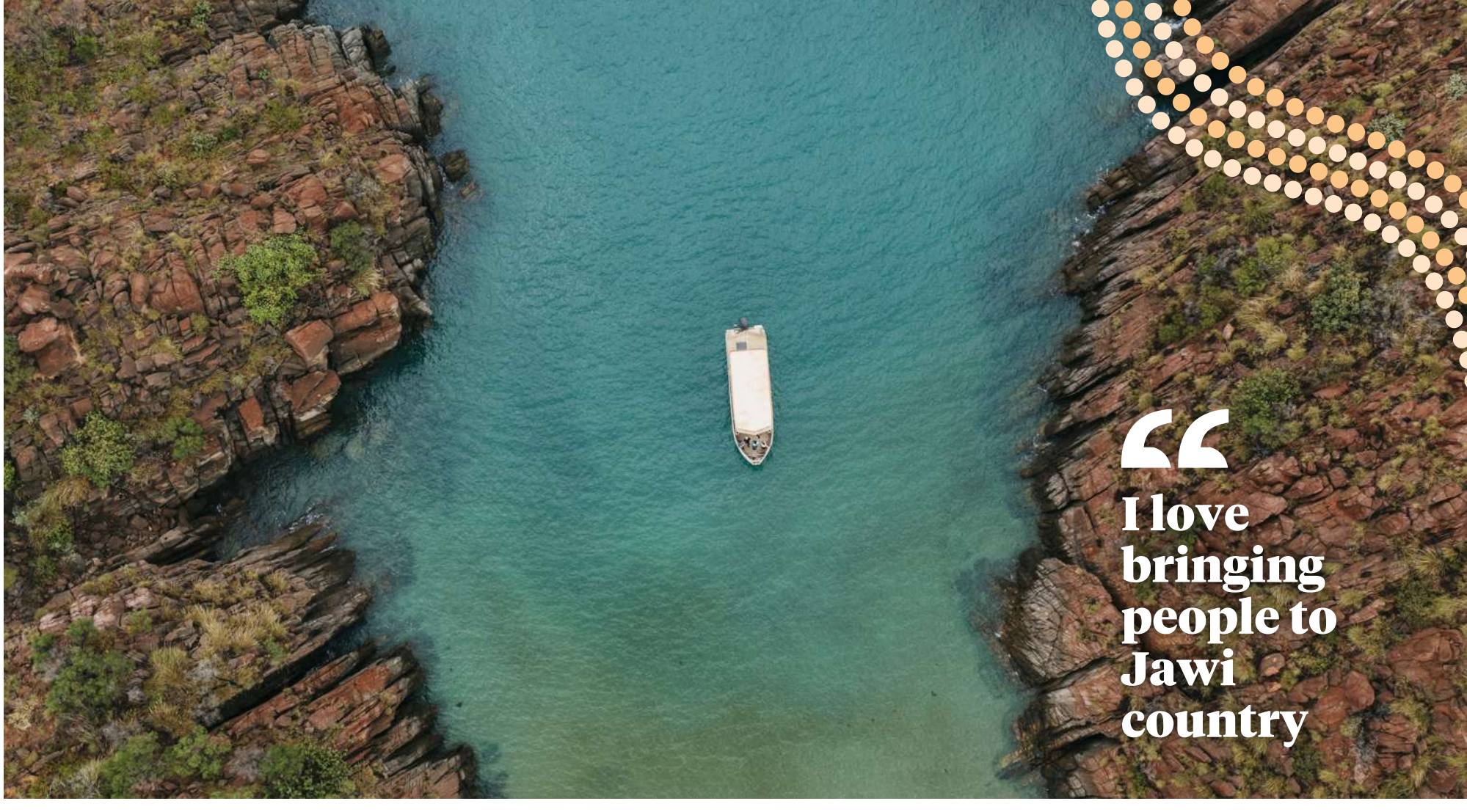
Angus has partnered with Cygnet Bay Pearls, who manage the bookings for Oolin Sunday Island Tours, and with Australian Geographic Tours, for whom she runs a three-night, women-only Bardi and Jawi cultural experience.

Angus is possibly one of the most over-qualified tourism business owners in the Indigenous tourism sector.

When she established herself as the Dampier Peninsula's first Indigenous woman owner-operator guide, Angus already held a diploma in primary education and a bachelor of applied science in health care administration and management.

In December 2025, she completed an MBA from Adelaide University.

The eldest of six, Angus, a proud Bardi Jawi woman, grew up in One Arm Point



> **I love bringing people to Jawi country**

Some of the stunning sights on offer on the Island Hopping Cultural Tour with Oolin Sunday Island Cultural Tours' Rosanna Angus

on the Dampier Peninsula, with an ingrained responsibility to care for her family.

At 13, she was sent to boarding school in Perth, leaving at 16 to return home and help Kooljaman at Cape Leveque ready itself for tourism.

"The community decided they wanted tourism. There was 10 of us, and we'd jump on the tray back and go to work building paperbark cabins and doing landscaping, that sort of thing. I loved it," Angus says.

Closed since Covid, Kooljaman (accommodation and camping) was Angus' first taste of tourism.

At 18, she became a single mum and moved herself to Darwin with her baby to study and work. Since then, her career has spanned primary school teaching, healthcare and outreach work and volunteer work and she's served on numerous councils, committees and boards, all as a single mother of three. Nowadays, she counts six grandchildren.

To Angus, individual success means little without broader systemic change.

From 2017 to 2023, she served on the board of the Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council, an organisation created to support Indigenous tourism businesses.

She has also been a corporate director of the Bardi and Jawi Prescribed Body since 2008, and a board member of the Kooljaman Land Aboriginal Corporation since 2007.

Angus sits on the current board of Tourism Western Australia, where her expertise can help shape policy and strategy to grow authentic Aboriginal tourism.

"Tourism is the vehicle, an enabler, and business can be all shapes and forms in tourism," Angus says. "We are bringing kids into the industry. Some are not confident talking, so we show them there's opportunities to work in the back end with marketing, for example."

Through the First Nations Tourism Mentoring Program, Angus actively shares what she's learnt in business. Rather than focus on her own empire, Angus is helping build industry capacity.

A repeated theme throughout Angus' career is that she has never been satisfied with a single stream of impact.

In 2025, she launched Lanje, a skincare line she developed in partnership with Dr Pia Winberg at PhycoHealth and in collaboration Marine Bioproducts Co-operative Research Centre. The Lanje products use pearl oyster, Kakadu plum and seaweed extracts from Bardi and Jawi country.

Her Indigenous entrepreneurship combines culture and commerce, tradition and innovation, and personal success and community benefit. She's building businesses that strengthen cultural practice and employ locals while attracting international acclaim.

The tides that once carried her forebears continue to swell with new possibilities.

Angus understands that the most powerful businesses are those rooted in place, sustained by purpose and that create opportunities for future generations. ●

# Protecting INDUSTRY

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PARTNERED WITH MINERAL RESOURCES

# Capital plus right partners equals success

**A timely injection of finance can turn a small concept into a prosperous livelihood, Giovanni Torre reports**

Ochre Ventures, Australia's first specialist venture capital fund dedicated to First Nations entrepreneurship, is working to address a longstanding gap in the Indigenous business finance landscape. It has a $100m funding target and a growing portfolio of high-impact investments.

Venture analyst and proud Dhungatti man Aidan Devitt says the fund was established to tackle what Ochre Ventures describes as the "missing middle" in business finance.

"We feel like venture capital is very important to meet that missing middle," Devitt told Indigenous Business Review.

"We have a lot of our people who can access grants to help them start their business, and those grants play an important role early on.

"At the other end of the scale, banks come in once there is sufficient revenue and collateral. But between those two points, there is a real gap."

That gap, he said, often emerges once a business has outgrown grant funding but is not yet in a position to secure traditional debt finance.

"That's where we come in," Devitt says. "We provide access to equity capital. In return, we take a minority stake and then work alongside the business to grow and scale its value."

As of December 2025, Ochre Ventures has made five investments, including follow-on investments in two portfolio companies where growth has accelerated. "We can see the traction," Devitt says. "They've gone through a growth spurt, their market positioning has improved, and we get really excited about their prospects."

Ochre Ventures analyst and proud Dhungatti man Aidan Devitt: "You can't scale a business on grants alone"

One of those investments is Cooee Cookies, founded by Terri-Anne Daniel. Devitt says the business exemplifies the kind of founder and opportunity Ochre Ventures is seeking to support.

"She started from something very simple, sharing an allergen-free Christmas cake recipe on Facebook," he says. "A local IGA asked for 50 cakes, and from there she identified a real opportunity. Today, her business has diversified into pet foods and secured customers like Qantas."

Devitt says stories like Daniel's highlight the potential of Indigenous entrepreneurship when the right capital and partners are in place. "I'd like to see more founders like Tezzi, where we can provide capital and expertise, build strong businesses, and create role models for our people," he says.

After transitioning from the public sector, Devitt says adjusting to the regulatory demands of venture capital has been a steep learning curve.

"The regulatory landscape is complex, but one thing is clear," he says. "You can't scale a business on grants alone."

Ochre Ventures is now actively seeking both Indigenous founders and aligned investors, including governments and philanthropists.

"We're keen to hear from businesses and investors alike," Devitt says. "Providing access to the right kind of capital at the right time is critical if we're serious about growing the Indigenous business sector." ●

The Indigenous Business Review

ANALYSIS | REECE HARLEY, MANAGING EDITOR

# Economic foundation key to Closing the Gap


Five years into the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the national data points to uneven and fragile progress.

The Productivity Commission reports that, of the targets with sufficient data to assess, only a small number are on track, while several are either improving too slowly, showing no change, or worsening.

Improved transparency through annual reporting has clarified where progress is and is not occurring, but transparency alone has not translated into systemic improvement.

The emerging picture is of a framework constrained by a structural weakness. Outcomes linked to economic security are not yet strong enough to anchor progress across the system.

Employment outcomes illustrate both the potential and the limits of current settings. Nationally, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25 to 64 who are employed increased between the 2016 baseline and the 2021 Census, and the Productivity Commission assesses the employment target as on track nationally. At the same time, the data shows uneven outcomes by remoteness, with employment participation worsening in remote and very remote areas. This unevenness matters, because employment and income security sit upstream of many of the targets that continue to deteriorate.

Those downstream indicators are stark. The Commission reports that adult incarceration rates, child removal into out-of-home care, children's developmental outcomes at school entry, and suicide rates are all worsening nationally. These outcomes are not isolated failures. They reflect pressures on families and communities that are closely associated with economic insecurity, housing stress and limited access to stable employment.

Where income is unstable or opportunities are scarce, progress on health, education and justice outcomes becomes structurally constrained.

The policy architecture of the National Agreement recognises these

interconnections. Economic participation, employment and community-controlled development are embedded across multiple targets and priority reforms. However, the data suggests that progress in economic participation has not yet translated into broad-based improvements across the system. This points to a gap between policy intent and policy impact, rather than an absence of policy recognition.

The Indigenous economy itself is not marginal. The Productivity Commission draws on national Indigenous business data showing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses make a substantial contribution to the Australian economy, employ a large workforce, and pay billions of dollars in wages annually. The Commission also highlights evidence that Indigenous businesses are significantly more likely to employ Indigenous people than non-Indigenous firms. This is not incidental. It is structural.

Yet, the Closing the Gap data indicates that this economic potential is not being fully harnessed as a system-wide lever. While employment is improving nationally, the persistence, and in some cases deterioration, of justice, child wellbeing and mental health outcomes suggests that economic participation is not yet operating at the scale or depth required to stabilise families and communities, particularly in regional and remote areas.

The Commission's reporting underscores that national averages conceal deep variation. Outcomes worsen with remoteness across multiple targets, including employment, incarceration and child protection.

These are precisely the settings where local economies are thinner, labour markets are weaker, and Indigenous-owned enterprises can play an outsized role in creating employment and retaining wealth locally. Without stronger economic engines in these places, progress elsewhere is unlikely to compensate.

This is not a failure of concept. The data shows that where Indigenous economic participation is strong, employment outcomes improve. The challenge lies in translating economic activity into sustained, place-based stability that flows through to other domains.

**Indigenous businesses are significantly more likely to employ Indigenous people than non-Indigenous firms, the Productivity Commission notes**

The Agreement's targets most closely associated with safety, childhood development and wellbeing continue to move in the wrong direction because the underlying economic foundations remain uneven.

The policy response implied by the data is not radical. The Productivity Commission repeatedly emphasises the need for stronger implementation, clearer accountability, and sustained investment in community-led solutions. Economic participation must be treated not as one outcome among many, but as a central driver that enables progress across the framework.

> **Without wealth creation, Closing the Gap remains a cycle of intervention rather than a process of transformation**

The proposition that Indigenous Australians should be wealthy in their own country is not rhetorical. Wealth underpins choice. It stabilises families, improves health outcomes, supports education and reduces justice system contact. Without wealth creation, Closing the Gap remains a cycle of intervention rather than a process of transformation.

Five years of data now make this clear. Social policy alone will not close the gap. Economic participation is not an adjunct to Closing the Gap. It is the foundation. Indigenous businesses already demonstrate what works. If governments continue to exempt themselves from economic commitments, Closing the Gap will remain a reporting exercise rather than a reform agenda. •

# Bush balms a salve for stressed skin

Native Secrets skincare products are tapping a growing demand for complementary medicine, **Dianne Bortoletto** reports

Starting with a chainsaw 13 years ago to readying themselves to take delivery of specialist extraction machinery to make complementary medicine, skincare brand Native Secrets is on the cusp of global expansion.

The skincare products are now supplied to Qantas, used in kits for those with delayed luggage, and to Tarango Zoo, which uses all their products in hotel rooms in Sydney and at Western Plains Zoo in Dubbo. There are about 30 stockists along the eastern seaboard, too.

Founded by husband and wife Phil and Cherie Thompson in Wiradjuri Country (Dubbo), Native Secrets began by making hard bar soap from olive oil and native plants such as gidgee quandong and gambi gambi.

Since then, Native Secrets has won the 2023 NSW Telstra Business Award for Building Communities and it was a finalist in Indigenous Business in 2025, 2026 First Nations Winner of the KPMG Nature Positive Challenge, and the Dubbo Business Chamber Green Rhino Award for Excellence in Sustainability.

> **“We are just scratching the surface of medical plants. This can be shared**

Phil, a proud Bidjara man from central western Queensland, moved to Dubbo for a government contract 16

years ago. "I met Cherie the old-fashioned way before online and swipe left, at the Dubbo Bowling Club, and she approached me," says Phil.

Cherie, a Wailwan woman from the NSW Central West, worked as an early education teacher for 15 years and completed an MBA in 2023.

She says they had the same vision, to use native ingredients to start conversations.

"We noticed a disconnect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and Native Secrets is a vehicle that can bring us together," Cherie says.

"We chose skincare as a way to keep stories and culture alive."

Phil says that where he's from, there's cohesion in the community and a mutual respect for knowledge and culture.

"Around Dubbo, there are different issues here, lots of different mobs and we still have a lot to reconcile between ourselves as well as with non-Indigenous people," Phil says.

That's where they see Native Secrets playing a pivotal role, by being able to offer training and jobs to Indigenous people.

Going back a few steps, the duo formed a close relationship with senior Wiradjuri Elder Uncle Peter Peckham, whom Phil describes as one of the last knowledge holders in the region.

Working with Uncle Peter and organisations like the CSIRO, science-backed medicinal qualities have been found in a range of native plants.

"It's blending knowledge from Australia's first scientists with modern science and technology," says Phil.

"Working with the CSIRO, we tested five extraction methods and found the best one that extracts the good bioactives. We potentially have a natural treatment for eczema and for gout, and that's from just one plant.

"We are just scratching the surface of medical plants and what excites me is that this technology can be shared with other Aboriginal communities. There's plenty of chocolate for everybody."

Phil says the native Cypress Pine, now considered an invasive species in NSW, is full of medicinal qualities.

"For the past 250 years, the Cypress Pine hasn't been managed, and it's growing everywhere and too close to each other. When there's space, they can grow over 30 metres tall," he says.

"The Cypress Pine wood oil is hypo-allergenic and a great base oil for cosmetics, and the leaf oil has anti-inflammatory properties. Traditionally it was heated and used as a skin ointment for sores."

Native Secrets also works in biodiversity management, drawing on traditional land management techniques.

"As part of caring for Country, trees thinned through land management are used to produce essential oils based on traditional knowledge," Phil says.

"By bringing manufacturing in-house, the business increasingly controls the supply chain from land management and essential oil production through to formulation and finished skincare."

The business is expanding and is in the process of purchasing 100 acres, an abandoned mine site. They plan to regenerate the land by planting native species for essential oils, bush tucker and complementary medicine.

Phil's big dream is to rehabilitate abandoned mine sites using this model, to export products around the world and to tell their story, while providing opportunity for Indigenous people.

"The best thing about this business model is that you don't have to leave your community," he says.

"There's growing demand for complementary medicine and this new technology can potentially enable communities to use it for self-determination."

Phil says he has concerns about the older generation because they don't share information unless they feel safe.

"We need to create safe spaces for them so they feel comfortable sharing, so we can protect their knowledge."

In 2025, Native Secrets attended trade shows in Dubai and China to positive feedback, even picking up an unexpected award for Global Beauty Excellence in China.

"We've come a long way and we're currently recruiting Indigenous people for our training program," Phil says. "We're open to those who don't have any experience. We're going to place people in roles where they are best suited, what interests them." ●


**Native Secrets founders Phil and Cherie Thompson, far left; Phil with knowledge holder, Wiradjuri Elder Uncle Peter Peckham, above; Phil and Cherie in the factory; Native Secrets skincare products are sold widely around Australia**

The Indigenous Business Review

# Just starting out? Make that first call


## Building towards a career post-footy was a big focus for ex-St Kilda player Raphael Clarke, **Brendan Foster** reports

When First Nations entrepreneur Raphael Clarke first set up his company in 2020, he was shocked that the phone did not ring for the first six months.

Clarke and born-and-bred Territorian David Lih co-founded Darwin-based business Wurrba, specialising in project management and construction, because he wanted to create real opportunities for Indigenous people.

He says many people think that if you open a business, contracts will come flooding in.

"Yeah, it was definitely stressful," he told the Indigenous Business Review.

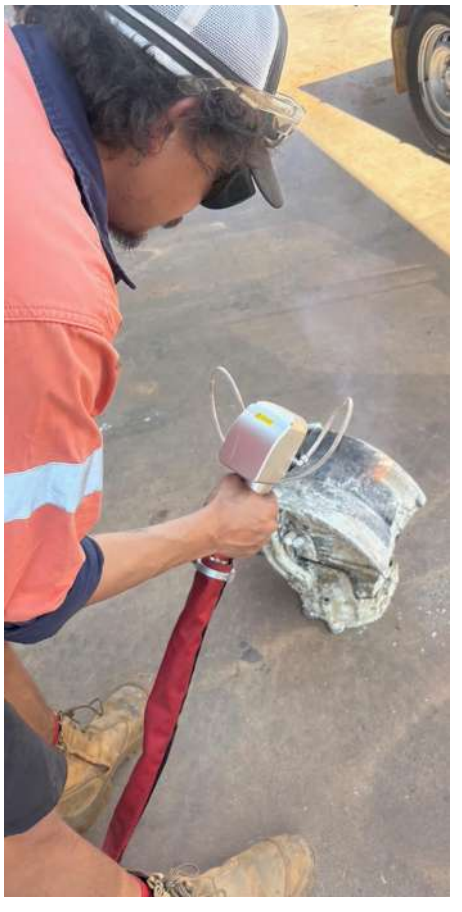
"But I was quite lucky with my business partner because he was still running his own business, so I could do some carpentry work while still running around, advertising my business, applying for tenders and projects.

"I was working with a couple of other companies for a year or two, and then I saw the opportunity to grow and start my own Indigenous project management business."

The proud Marri Amu, Marri Tjevin, and Larrakia man named his company Wurrba after the skin name bestowed on him by the Marri Amu and Marri Tjevin clans of the Moyle River flood plains.

Since those early teething days, Clarke's business has gone from strength to strength, winning several defence contracts and expanding its Indigenous workforce.

While he's excited about taking on more defence work, he wants to expand into private and other government projects, including remote residential building and maintenance.



Despite the business's growth, the 40-year-old's philosophy hasn't changed: he wants to create genuine employment, training and long-term career pathways for Indigenous people across the Territory.

"I think that's the best thing about our business for other businesses as well, and you know, Territory businesses, but also all the indigenous businesses.

> "I'm used to talking to people and being out there

"Our No. 1 priority is finding Indigenous companies to work with," he says.

"We might work with three or four different companies that are Indigenous-owned.

"There might be only three or four Indigenous lads in our office at the moment, but all the projects we work on and the companies we work with are all Indigenous companies."

The former AFL player, who spent nine years with St Kilda, says that being an elite athlete has given him the confidence to start his own business.

But he had already planned for life after footy at the end of his playing days by training to be a carpenter.

"The main thing I didn't want to do was to just rely on football for my whole career," he says. "So that one made me want to be on the tools and learn how to trade myself.

"I don't think being a former player helps you win work, but it definitely gave me the confidence to start the business because I'm used to talking to people and being out there."

Clarke's company was the first business in the Top End to offer advanced laser surface-cleaning technology in the Territory, supported by the Northern Territory government's Advanced Manufacturing Ecosystem Fund.

Not only will the new technology

mean businesses in the NT won't have to engage interstate or overseas suppliers, but laser cleaning is also faster, cleaner, and more environmentally friendly than traditional blasting.

The game-changing technology will also enable Wurrba to upskill staff and employ more First Nations people.

"Of the boys I've trained up on the lasers, four of them are Indigenous boys as well," Clarke says.

"A new Indigenous seafood company started up in the Territory a few months back, and we put the flooring for their cool rooms last week. So hopefully we can continue the growth and bring on some more Indigenous First Nations staff as well.

"We want to keep helping other Territory businesses when we win the projects and help us deliver the works, and we'll grow together."

The Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network board member says that, despite running a company for less than six years, he's already learnt valuable lessons.

While reaching out and talking to mob is critical, Clarke says the main thing he probably would've done differently was to seek more grant support.

"Maybe not using money out of your own pocket and using your savings and stuff like that," he says. "But maybe if I invested in a warehouse or an office, that would have been another one, so I'm hoping to purchase our own commercial office space in the next few months. But being part of the [Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network] allows you to meet all these other businesses, catch up, and discuss what you can use each other for and the types of work and projects you can work together on."

And his advice for any young First Nations people wanting to go into business? Don't be afraid to make that first phone call.

"I think the main thing is that people need to understand which area they want to get into and be aware of the support they can get these days from all the different businesses out there to help with their funding and set-up," he says.

"There is help for you to set up businesses or help you get certificates here and there and different training facilities, so people should chat with as many people as possible.

"Just back yourself and make that first phone call, because it is the hardest one." ●

The Indigenous Business Review

# Man on a leadership mission to build for the future

Robby Mallard lives the values his father taught him, **Reece Harley** reports

Robby Mallard receives the Indigenous in Business award from Prime Minister Anthony Albanese; Mallard with some of his crew; and delivering mattresses

From a childhood on sand floors to partnering with mining giants, this Wajarri-Nanda entrepreneur is forging opportunities for his people while honouring those who came before him.

## About the business

Mallard Contracting is a 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned construction and maintenance and demolition company founded in 2011 by Robby Mallard, a proud Wajarri-Nanda man. Based in Western Australia's Pilbara, Midwest and Gascoyne regions, the company delivers turnkey projects across mining, community housing, demolition and infrastructure, from wastewater plants and training centres to remote camp facilities. But what truly sets Mallard Contracting apart is its purpose-driven mission.

As Mallard says: "The core of our ethos is helping improve the lives of Indigenous people through training, development opportunities and sustainable employment."

The business acts as a springboard for Aboriginal talent: "We are focused on using our company as an incubator for young people to commence and complete apprenticeships," Mallard says, "while enabling them to access mentoring opportunities with highly skilled and experienced trade personnel. We support our team at all hours."

## The journey

Mallard's journey begins in humble circumstances. Born in 1971 in Carnarvon, he grew up in a tiny tin house with sand floors, crowded with extended family. "We didn't have much at all," he says. Mallard gained his respect and etiquette from attending the local PCYC.

His father was his inspiration. At just 14, his dad began working as a cattle musterer. He eventually earned a job with Main Roads WA, rising from a labourer to supervisor. "Dad was referred to as a leader rather than a boss," Mallard says. "And I've tried to adopt that trait myself every day."

In his twenties, Mallard launched a one-man plumbing and gas business with $2500 in start-up capital from Indigenous Business Australia. For five years, he worked across Western Australia, servicing Aboriginal communities. That experience planted the seed of a bigger idea: he could be not just a tradesman, but an employer of his people.

The turning point came in 2010, when Rio Tinto began encouraging Indigenous entrepreneurship. Mallard attended a workshop in Roeburne and immediately

> **“I use my company as an incubator for our people. If someone’s had a bad hand dealt to them, we’ll give them a second chance to turn their life around**

sensed an opportunity. “Rio Tinto basically said: ‘there’s work out there, why shouldn’t Aboriginal businesses be doing it?’.” Inspired, he founded Mallard Contracting in 2011. From there, he expanded into three more companies, including Widi Ngaruwa Pty Ltd (meaning black duck in Wajarri) a nod to his surname and cultural totem. “We’ve now got our fingers in a few pies,” he says. “What ties all these ventures together is our commitment to uplifting Aboriginal people.”

## Positive impact

Mallard Contracting has grown into a thriving enterprise that employs dozens of Indigenous workers and subcontracts many Indigenous-owned suppliers.

A landmark moment came with a contract worth $11 million with Fortescue Metals Group to build facilities at the Eliwana iron ore mine. The project created over 100 jobs for people in the Pilbara, Carnarvon and Perth

Closer to home, the company’s Inclusion and Diversity Program provides culturally responsive onboarding, mentoring and flexible work arrangements. “Some of our fellows just need someone to believe in them,” Mallard says. “When I hire a young Aboriginal apprentice and a few years later he’s running a crew, providing for his family – that’s everything.”

Mallard turns mine closures into opportunities to give back, redirecting fridges, mattresses and TVs to Aboriginal communities. He speaks with Elders and delivers what’s needed himself. “Giving back to the communities is a big part of what we are about,” he says.

## Challenges, lessons

Breaking into the mining construction sector as an Aboriginal contractor wasn’t easy. Early on, Mallard Contracting had to prove itself to sceptical clients.

“There were people who doubted an Aboriginal company could deliver on major contracts,” Mallard says. “We had to prove ourselves by delivering on our promises and letting our work speak for itself.”

Mallard credits the Indigenous procurement teams at Rio Tinto, BHP and Fortescue for creating critical opportunities.

“Those procurement folks, they’re unsung heroes. They created critical opportunities for businesses like mine,” he says.

He also highlights Tier 1 contractors who supported Mallard Contracting’s journey, Whitten’s and Delta Group. “They didn’t have to help us, but they did. They took us under their wing and shared their standards.”

The support of suppliers has also been critical with support from Galvins Plumbing, Europcar, Direct Trades Supply and freight company’s MJK and Northfleet.

“The people behind these companies have supported all the way,” he says.

His family, particularly his wife, has been a foundation throughout.

“My wife has been there from day one, keeping me grounded. Behind every one of my achievements, there’s my family, my team, and my community. I never forget that.”

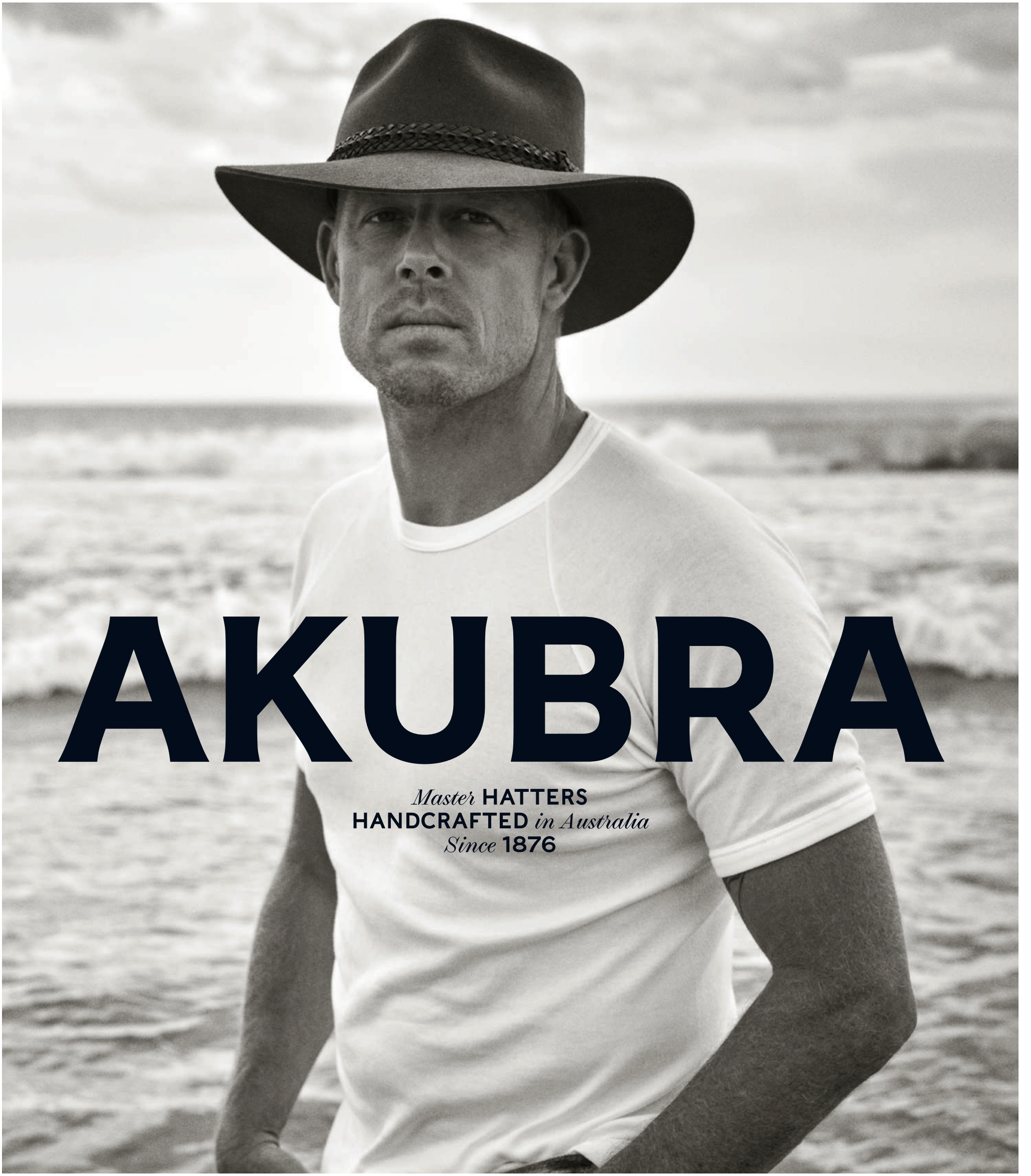
## Looking forward

Mallard remains ambitious. He dreams of making Mallard Contracting the largest employer of Aboriginal apprentices in the country. He also wants to mentor the next generation of Indigenous business leaders, just as he was inspired by pioneers like Peter Hicks and Barry Taylor.

“We all started around the same time in 2011, business owners like Freddy Springs, Michael Hayden, and Tammy O’Connor and now they are thriving in our industry showing what is possible,” he says. “Barry Taylor showed us what was possible. He paved the way so guys like me could run through.”

His vision is to multiply opportunity, extend the path further, and one day see an Aboriginal business not just subcontracting on a mine expansion, but leading one.

Robby Mallard is still building: his business, his people and a legacy rooted in community, culture and courage. And the best, it seems, is yet to come.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