

# YARNIN' UP

## Recognising our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Access Workers

NACLC believes that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be able to have access to dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services that are, as far as is practicably possible, staffed and managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As this is not always possible, NACLC supports community legal centres' (CLCs') offering culturally safe services to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples a choice of service provider.

To be able to provide culturally safe services, CLCs must connect with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, build relationships of trust and offer services in culturally appropriate ways. In doing so, the CLC sector can learn from the experts: our sector's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and community liaison workers.

This booklet explains and celebrates the work of Aboriginal access workers in NSW: work that helps build strong, safe and informed individuals and communities. A later publication will include stories from other states and territories.

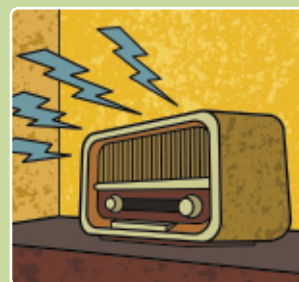
In this small booklet we could only capture a few of the many stories. We cannot show here the great variety of the work, its complexity or the long hours it can take. It is easy to see and count the number of times a lawyer gives advice or goes to court. It is much harder to demonstrate the many acts that over time build confidence, trust, resilience, knowledge and skills in an individual and in a community. Yet these are the things that can make the difference between whether or not a person will talk to a lawyer or will choose to take action to protect their rights.

*The National Association of Community Legal Centres Inc. (NACLC) is the national peak body of community legal centres. CLCs provide free legal and related services to disadvantaged people across Australia. CLCs are one of four public legal assistance services, working alongside government legal aid, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILSs) and the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLSs). Some ATSILSs and FVPLSs choose to join state associations of CLCs, and come under the NACLC umbrella.*

ART: Jiliany Lynch, Keringke Arts Centre

## Reaching out and yarning through radio

Tune in to 88.9 Richmond Valley Radio and you might hear Bundjalung woman Nancy Walke and Karin Ness, who are Aboriginal access workers at Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre, presenting their regular fortnightly program on legal issues in the community. The pair feature sessions on issues like family law, rights in public spaces, credit and debt, youth services and domestic violence. The program is an innovative way of getting legal information out into the community. As well as playing great music, Nancy and Karin conduct interviews with local community people, singers and songwriters, and spokespeople on relevant Aboriginal issues such as the Stolen Generation, child protection matters and recommendations arising from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.





At a legal information session in Tweed Heads



## Supporting Aboriginal women to live free of violence

Women stayed up late drumming, painting and sharing stories about violence in the community at an Aboriginal Women's Weekend held at Corindi Beach, about 30 kilometres north of Coffs Harbour. The camp was part of the *Mirrung Ngu Wanjarri* (Aboriginal Women Making Changes) project run by Nancy from Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre.

The project aims to raise awareness about family violence and increase the self-confidence of Aboriginal women to work on strategies to improve outcomes for families experiencing violence. In the past year, Nancy and her colleagues have also organised an anti-violence forum theatre play, leadership development camps for young women, grief and loss sessions, women's circles and talks with Aboriginal students at local high schools.

There is follow-through care for women who engage with *Mirrung Ngu Wanjarri*, with ongoing call-back sessions, talks on the phone and access to counselling. The workers have found that women are more likely to consider legal recourse where that option is one of a group of strategies the women have identified and developed themselves; and where other inter-related issues that may affect the family are considered and taken into account.

Drumming at Corindi Beach



*The Mirrung Ngu Wanjarri project worker focuses on community development strategies to address the impact of family violence on Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal legal access project worker works closely with Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre's Aboriginal Legal Access Program solicitor to deliver culturally appropriate legal services including education, advice and casework.*

*Angela Pollard, Centre Manager, Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre*



## Caring for Elders

Donna Hensen, a Wiradjura/Gamilaroi woman, coordinates the Indigenous Women's Legal Program at Women's Legal Services NSW to provide legal information and healing workshops for Elder Aboriginal women in the La Perouse, Campbelltown, Illawarra and Redfern areas.

Both of the week long healing retreats have been aimed at addressing Elder abuse in a safe and comfortable space. Donna invited specialist services to provide workshops on Elder abuse, kinship, dealing with Community Services NSW, planning ahead, and wills as well as funeral insurance and plans.

Fundamental to this work is the understanding that healing is a process, a path from individual and inter-generational trauma to well-being; that without acknowledgement of the trauma and the opportunity and support for healing, there cannot be reconciliation within oneself or with others.

"The retreats gave women the opportunity to relax and focus on their own needs. The workshops have been so successful that participants want to organise a reunion," explains Donna. "It's important to give legal and other information to women for them to make choices on what is best for them."



*Women's Legal Services NSW workshops  
for Elder Aboriginal women*



## Building trust with fun, sport and food

Over 200 people turned up for a touch football community day organised by the Aboriginal project workers at Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre, Caryn Carpenter and Steven Brandon, who are both from the Yuin peoples. It was a fun day out for the whole family (complete with a jumping castle) and a chance for centre workers to strengthen ties with the community and raise awareness of the availability of legal services.

People turned out from many of the community groups Caryn and Steven work with, including individuals from men's groups in the Shoalcoast area and young men from the local youth centre. Aboriginal organisations and services, the police and local court house staff participated in the Round Robin tournament, pitting their skills against teams from the Aboriginal community and having a good laugh together in the process.

"It was a good day because it got communities involved with organisations and services around

Nowra," said Steven. "We got the police to come down and they had a couple of games." Breaking down barriers and forming relationships between community members and people working in government and legal system services is one of the things that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community workers do best.

At Hawkesbury Nepean Community Legal Centre, Joanne Ravot from Wiradjuri land, organises barbeques where the local police go shopping, cook and eat with community members. "The conversation can get heated," explains Joanne, "but it is a safe space to air any issues Aboriginal people are having." The social gatherings give the community a chance to get to know their local police officers and influence the way in which they are policed. The barbeques have been very successful and Joanne says relationships are on the mend.



Shoalcoast touch football community day





Young people talking on the Think B4 U Click clip



## Engaging young people over cyber bullying

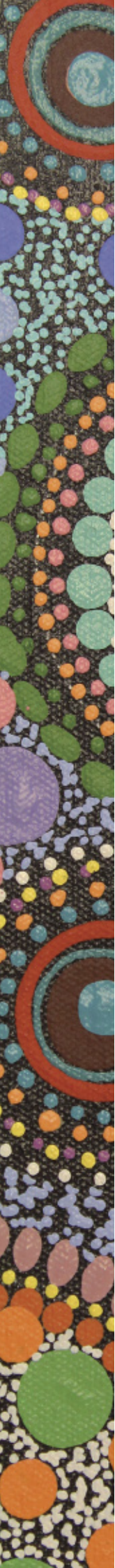
CLC workers have developed innovative ways to connect with young people by delivering their community legal education through social media. The Australian Consumers Communication Action Network and the Indigenous Women's Legal Program (IWLP) staff, coordinated by Donna at Women's Legal Services NSW, have produced a YouTube clip, *Think B4 U Click*, about cyber bullying. The clip features definitions, tips, and personal stories of young people's experiences with cyber bullying.

The social media clip is complemented by workshops held with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at secondary schools in rural and regional areas. Young people learn about their legal rights in relation to cyber bullying and are given practical tips on how to respond and how the law can help. These workshops are conducted by IWLP staff, with Elders who are respected by the young people present, helping them feel safe to share their stories and learn about bullying on social media sites. Donna says, "We can't go into a community and tell them what to do. We aim to give people the information and support to make changes from within."

***Working with Aboriginal colleagues is not only an effective way of providing appropriate and accessible services for our clients, it gives all our staff continuous access to guidance in cultural competencies as well. And we all enjoy NAIDOC activities together.***

*Helen Campbell, Executive Officer,  
Women's Legal Services NSW*





## Driving young people in the right direction

At Hawkesbury Nepean Community Legal Centre, Joanne runs a youth program to connect with young people in her area. The young people, aged 14 to 23, have named the program *Wellamabami*, which means ‘wherever you’re from’ in the Darug language, because attendees come from different schools and different tribes of Australia.

In addition to lessons about the law and their rights, young people are able to help choose what skills they would like to develop through the program. Joanne has to work fast to keep up with their enthusiasm. Already the young people have asked for sessions on university pathways, sexual health, playing the Didgeridoo, bush tucker and most recently, learning to drive.

While Joanne is struggling to find an instructor who will teach the young people for free, she is determined to fund the lessons somehow, because she feels that learning to drive is an important stepping stone for the young people’s futures, encouraging learning, empowering their independence and maybe helping them to get a job. Helping young people to get their drivers’



*Steven Brandon and Caryn Carpenter at Shoalcoast*

licence in a supported program can help ensure they learn safe driving skills and reduce deaths and injury among the young people in the community.

Sharing Joanne’s ambitions to increase opportunities for Aboriginal young people are Caryn and Steven from Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre. Both workers are currently working in partnership with the Red Cross to set up a Koori Driver Learning Program for young people whose parents don’t have a car or can’t afford to pay for driving lessons.

## Strengthening communities through outreach

Joanne also travels to provide legal information and assistance to people where they need it. As the Aboriginal access worker, Joanne holds outreaches at South Windsor, Kurrajong, Wilberforce, Women’s Cottage outreach and Sam Miguel Family Refuge.

For most sessions Joanne brings along someone from Centrelink, Housing, Health or Medicare, saving Aboriginal people from having to travel to the nearest government office. If someone lets her know about a specific problem in advance, Joanne does her best to bring someone who can help.

“I work across the board, whatever the community needs I try to get it for them,” explains Joanne.

As she builds relationships with more and more individuals, Joanne learns more about the legal and other needs of the Aboriginal community in her area, and how they want to resolve their issues.



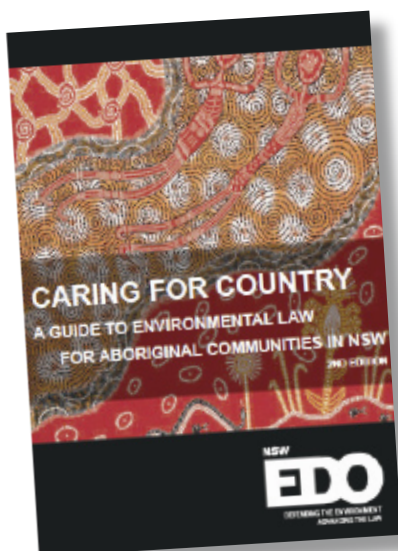
## Legal education and advice for people about land and environment laws

Mark Holden, from the Dunghutti peoples, is the Aboriginal solicitor at the Environmental Defender's Office NSW (EDO NSW). He provides legal advice, education and representation for traditional owners in relation to a number of environmental matters that include the health of the environment in general and through preserving Aboriginal cultural heritage.

For example, he recently ran a cultural heritage enforcement case on behalf of a Hunter Valley Aboriginal community where the activities of a mining company had impacted on their traditional lands.

Mark helps run workshops in NSW communities, including recent workshops in Gunnedah, Moree and Walgett. At these workshops, he helps the traditional owners to understand their legal rights under environmental, planning, heritage and natural resource management laws. This knowledge is useful for the participants to talk to government bodies, development proponents or other bodies such as their Local Aboriginal Land Council.

Mark's work with community does not stop there. He also attends and assists as a volunteer with the Gamarada Men's Healing Program in Redfern, where Aboriginal men share their stories and support each other in reaching back into their cultural roots to become stronger role models for the younger generations.



*EDO NSW's Caring for Country guide*



*Mark Holden at the Gamarada Men's Healing Program in Redfern*

***The EDO NSW's Indigenous Engagement Program, which employs a dedicated Aboriginal solicitor, has helped us to engage much more effectively with Aboriginal people and communities. It has allowed us to gain the trust of Aboriginal communities and individuals, enabling us to assist in litigation matters involving Aboriginal cultural heritage and to build Indigenous perspectives into our policy work. It is tough but important work, and we are committed to its ongoing success.***

*Jeff Smith, Executive Director,  
Environmental Defender's Office NSW*



# Building the skills of the next generation of Aboriginal lawyers

At the Tenants' Union of NSW, the dedicated Aboriginal legal team, comprising of an Aboriginal legal officer and paralegal, give legal advice and assistance, community legal education and provide strategic litigation services to the Aboriginal tenancy services and their clients across the State.

Barkindji woman, Gemma McKinnon, who has experience in the community sector and corporate law, is the Aboriginal legal officer. Prior to taking on the position of Aboriginal legal officer, Gemma worked in the Aboriginal paralegal position, now filled by Wiradjuri man John Mewburn. For Gemma, these positions provide much-needed professional development pathways. "As well as it being important for Aboriginal young people to engage in issues affecting their communities, the identified positions develop the legal knowledge and advocacy skills of Aboriginal law students and give these students a chance to work in the community legal centre sector," explains Gemma.

For Gemma and John, the work is diverse and takes them from running community legal education workshops alongside Aboriginal tenancy services in a regional town to making complex legal arguments in the NSW Supreme Court, when tenancy matters are appealed from the Consumer Trader and Tenancy Tribunal (CTTT), the main channel through which tenants and landlords negotiate disputes about their homes. The team has recorded a number of successes.

***Having an Aboriginal Legal team as part of the Tenants NSW informs and challenges our way of working on tenancy law and we are better for it. The Aboriginal team have the skills, credibility and relationships to ensure our work is effective with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal tenant advocates. We learn something everyday from Gemma and John.***

*Julia Foreman, Executive Officer, Tenants NSW*



*Kingsford Legal Centre's former Aboriginal access worker, Keith Ball, with a secondee on outreach at Yarra Bay house*

***It's vital to have an Aboriginal access worker as part of our staff at Kingsford Legal Centre because of the connection they provide with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It helps our Aboriginal clients to access our services through an outreach advice service and through innovative community education projects we can run. It also challenges us to be constantly alert to how we deliver our services and how we think about the law.***

*Anna Cody, Director, Kingsford Legal Centre*

Recently, the team was instrumental in advocating for eleven tenants who were facing eviction from their homes in a remote Aboriginal community. Due to the landlord failing to undertake necessary maintenance and repairs, the homes were becoming unliveable. When faced with eviction notices, the Aboriginal community turned to their local Aboriginal tenancy service who engaged Gemma and John to negotiate and advocate on behalf of the tenants with the landlord.

Prior to the final hearing in the CTTT, the landlord made the decision to withdraw the application – the tenants could keep their homes. As John said, "There is no alternative housing. People were talking about having to live in their cars down by the river."

Negotiations continue to ensure maintenance and repairs are completed. In small regional communities, skilled negotiation sensitive to complex family, community and cultural issues is critical.