

YARNIN' UP

Recognising our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Access Workers and Services

NACLC believes that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should have access to dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services that are, as far as 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, giving 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.

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, through only a few of their stories, the expertise and work of Aboriginal access workers in CLCs and the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services across Australia: work that helps build strong, safe and informed individuals and communities.

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 (ATSILs) and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLSs). Some ATSILs and FVPLSs choose to join state associations of CLCs, and come under the NACLC umbrella.

ART: Jillian Lynch, Keringke Arts Centre

Mentoring men to stay out of prison

In order to reduce the rate of reoffending and overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the prison system, Prisoners' Legal Service Queensland (PLS QLD) has been running 3 Yarning Circles: a project that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to successfully reintegrate into their communities post-release.

Bart Tallis oversees the project. Bart, who has experience working with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, came to the project after he was an intern at PLS QLD, working with men eligible for probation and parole.

The origins of 3 Yarning Circles speaks to the importance of listening to clients, with the need for the project identified by a group of former prisoners, who were frustrated with attempting to navigate the complexities of lateral violence, applying for work and securing housing.

Each circle consists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mentors, who have preferably been out of prison for longer than 3 years; a cultural mentor to offer other avenues to the men to express their feelings and emotions such as through art or Corroboree; a drug and alcohol counsellor; a case manager; a support person and a PLS QLD staff member such as Bart.

"There needs to be support services in place, so it's not so overwhelming. Otherwise the men can go back to their old ways and sometimes look to go back inside, as that's the place that is safe and familiar, especially for those men who have been in prison for a very long time. 3 Yarning Circles provides an alternative and helps with reintegration," Bart explains.



Bart Tallis at the launch of Safe Way Home, a toolkit to assist men eligible for parole

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.

The week long healing retreats were 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*



The team at KCLS: Vanessa Lynch, Leiphire Brown, Ruth, Carlos Waina, Healema Ward and Erika Parsons



Building culturally responsive services

Back in 1999, when Kimberley Community Legal Services (KCLS) was first set-up in the Kununurra area, Ruth Abdullah was employed as the first Aboriginal Legal Liaison Officer in a small team of four staff. Since her first day at the service, Ruth has worked tirelessly to help KCLS identify community needs and develop programs to support and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Under Ruth's guidance, these programs have grown significantly, with KCLS now employing five Aboriginal workers. KCLS, which covers an area larger than Victoria, now has outreach locations all over the East Kimberley region. Staff usually stick around for several days, assisting clients with monthly court circuits or helping with issues like debt and credit, family violence and motor vehicle fines.

It is no small feat ensuring that KCLS is in touch with the current needs of all the communities in its catchment area and meets them in a way that is culturally safe and secure. To quote Ruth, it is worthwhile when she “sees the gratification on our people’s faces when we make them aware of their rights as citizens of this land and when they see that there are people who care for them and can offer them support.”

Indigenous staff at KCLS lead our service provision as a “community” legal centre. This is their country, this is their community. Their knowledge and perspective informs the whole of KCLS about what CLC assistance is needed and how it can be effectively delivered.

*Liz O'Brien, Director,
Kimberley Community Legal Services*

Breaking through language barriers

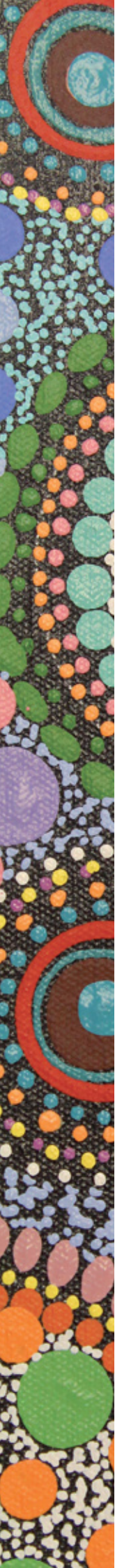
Speaking with a solicitor can be a daunting experience for anyone, but it is especially difficult for clients who speak a language other than English. In the remote communities around KCLS, over forty-five dialects are spoken.

Aboriginal outreach workers play a crucial role in breaking down these barriers between solicitors and clients. Workers not only help with communication, but also provide guidance in other areas like appropriate dress, tone of voice and body language.

On one desert outreach to Billiluna to assist with Stolen Wages applications, Ruth describes how “one of the solicitors was glad that I was there as she said some of her clients did not say more than three sentences to her on her own, but together with me they really gave her their full stories, because I am Aboriginal and they trusted me to translate what they were saying.”



Volunteer solicitor, Judy Harrison and Ruth Abdullah



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

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 in NSW, 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 in NSW, 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

Supporting communities to be free of violence

The Queensland Indigenous Family Violence Legal Services (QIFVLS) takes its motto 'No Way – It's Not our Way' very seriously and works at a grassroots level with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to challenge the perception that family violence is in any way acceptable.

With four offices located in Rockhampton, Townsville, Cairns and Mount Isa, QIFVLS solicitors travel to offer outreach legal advice, representation and deliver community legal education to communities from Bamaga on the tip of mainland Australia, west to the Northern Territory border and south to Yeppoon on the coastline. Every time a solicitor travels to one of these communities, an Indigenous Client Support Officer accompanies them. This is the QIFVLS team. For communities, this helps with building trust and ensures people receive culturally appropriate services.

Zoey Oliver, a Waanyi and Kuku Yalanji woman, was recently employed by QIFVLS as a paralegal. Richard Whitla, the first Aboriginal man to work as a solicitor with QIFVLS, joins Zoey. Since Richard started with QIFVLS, he has advocated energetically for clients in a court system that is often times unfamiliar and distressing.

"I am keen to get the QIFVLS name out there in the community so that Indigenous people know they have choices available to them in terms of which Indigenous organisations they can access. Many people believe there is only the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service and that if the other party accesses their services, then they may not feel that there is anywhere else that they can turn to for legal support," explains Zoey.



Indigenous Client Support Officers, Marie and Delwyn, participating in Domestic Violence Month

QIFVLS staff attend and organise many community events. At the Rockhampton office, International Women's Day 2013 was celebrated by having a MADS Day. MADS is the acronym for Mothers, Aunties, Daughters, Sisters. This event allowed women and children from the local Aboriginal communities to come together to enjoy lunch, participate in an art activity and listen to Dr Judy Tatow, an Aboriginal Elder and community worker, talk about her life.

As part of Domestic Violence Month 2013, QIFVLS was also invited to Weipa Hospital and the Napranum Clinic on the Cape York Peninsula. QIFVLS had the opportunity to work and join with the Weipa Hospital staff, providing promotional brochures as well as running a sausage sizzle. Such events build awareness, and allow people to get to know the work of QIFVLS and ask questions about family violence.

Zoey Oliver and Richard Whitla have joined the QIFVLS team



Staff at QIFVLS: Tammy Tatow, Amanda Hudson and Shardai Beazley at an International Women's Day event



Providing legal help where Aboriginal women feel safe

Prior to coming to the Top End Women's Legal Service (TEWLS) in Darwin in the Northern Territory as a solicitor in 2011, Annette Wilson worked in various roles with the Northern Territory Government and the Commonwealth Ombudsman. In these roles, Annette visited Aboriginal communities in remote areas, developing an insight into the unique strengths and challenges of different communities.

Annette continues to travel to small Aboriginal communities in Acacia, Amagal and to the Palmerston area to provide legal assistance. "With outreach, Aboriginal women don't need to travel to the city and instead can get help where safety is felt, in their own communities," Annette explains. TEWLS also provides a drop-in at their office, as some women feel more comfortable discussing issues away from their communities.

For women who have experienced domestic violence or other forms of violence, Annette provides much support. This involves advising the women about their legal and other options, and to assist with reporting the violence to police where required. In some instances, Annette also provides much needed court representation.

Another important area of Annette's work is helping women to make applications for victims' compensation. "It can take a while for women to feel comfortable to tell their story, so



Annette at an International Women's Day breakfast

sometimes the applications to the Crime Victims Services Unit are made out of time. I will help the women to explain why the application is late and often we are successful, especially when the Unit understands what the women have been through." For the women, this means they can receive counselling or financial support to help with the healing.

Annette has been with us now for almost two years, and her experience in living in the NT, and local knowledge is invaluable. Also significant is her understanding of issues facing some Aboriginal people in the NT, and her ability to relate well with Aboriginal clients.

*Nicki Petrou, Managing Solicitor,
Top End Women's Legal Service*

Building the skills of the next generation of Aboriginal solicitor

At the Tenants' Union of NSW, the work is very diverse. Barkindju woman, Gemma McKinnon, and Wiradjuri man, John Mewburn, run community legal education workshops alongside Aboriginal tenancy services in regional towns as well as 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.

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 asked Gemma and John to advocate on behalf of the tenants. As John said, "There was no alternative housing. People were talking about having to live in their cars down by the river."

Prior to the final hearing in the CTTT, the landlord made the decision to withdraw the application – people were able to keep their homes. Negotiations continue to ensure maintenance and repairs are completed. In small remote and regional communities, skilled negotiation sensitive to complex family, community and cultural issues is critical.

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 Bundjalung woman Nancy Walke from Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre in NSW.

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. 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.

Reaching out and yarning through radio

Tune in to 88.9 Richmond Valley Radio and you might hear 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 Generations, child protection matters and recommendations arising from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.





At the Sisters Day Out wellbeing workshops

Talking about family violence while improving wellbeing

Family violence can be a hard topic to broach, especially before someone asks for help. Staff at the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria came up with an effective, affirming way to bring Aboriginal women together, to empower them to take control in their own lives, and to assist women who have experienced family violence, through its Sisters Day Out wellbeing workshops. “I reckon it changed my life. I have stopped letting my partner control me,” said one of the workshop participants. “Knowledge is the key – when we get the correct information it empowers us,” another participant explained.

It is clear that these workshops have played a fundamental role in preventing Aboriginal women from experiencing family violence by promoting resilience and reducing vulnerability. Commonwealth funding was, however, cut from the Early Intervention and Prevention Program, resulting in the loss of funding for the Sisters Day Out program. FVPLS Victoria continues to seek alternative funding to run the Sisters Day Out wellbeing workshops.

A safe place for women

Picture a house where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can drop-in to have a yarn about their problems, where they can arrange to see a solicitor, get help filling out forms or find out where they can access services. A house which is a friendly environment for women to visit with their children, where they can take their time to speak with staff and join other women, sitting around and talking over tea.

This house is a project of the Indigenous Women’s Law and Justice Support Program in the ACT driven by Tracey Harris and Teletha Elemes at Women’s Legal Centre (ACT & Region). The key focus of this program is to address the lack of culturally appropriate law and justice services.

“Women walk in and it’s so calming and relaxing. There’s a big fence around the backyard so mothers can bring their kids and put them out the back to play. It’s a women-oriented space just for the program and a safe place for Aboriginal women,” says Teletha, a

Wiradjuri woman from Nanima Reserve in Wellington, NSW.

The house also offers a space for Tracey and Teletha to run women’s gatherings.

These gatherings cover themes including issues for younger women, kinship caring for Elders and employment rights for working women. The gatherings are an opportunity for community members to become comfortable with staff and connect-up with service providers such as refuges, financial counselling services and the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT.

Between running activities in the house Tracey and Teletha also juggle a number of other projects. The workers have carried out studies on the legal needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the ACT and the surrounding region and undertaken law reform, including a submission on constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.





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.

Advocating for children’s rights

Up at South West Brisbane Community Legal Centre, Terry Stedman is often on call, whether it be acting as a duty solicitor at the local court when child protection matters are listed, attending community meetings or advocating in the interests of young Aboriginal children in care.

As Terry explains, “Aboriginal children in care have a right to know about their culture, otherwise they risk losing their cultural ties and identity. Proper consideration of an appropriate placement for Children in Care is often lacking. There needs to be a real and sincere attempt to connect a child to their cultural needs and involve the child’s clan group in their lives.”

Terry, who has been a university lecturer at Griffith University, also spends time raising community awareness about the need for Aboriginal people to express their wishes in wills and powers of attorney. “Members of community in the urban environment are often entrusted with cultural items and these need to pass onto the proper person. Wills help this to happen,” says Terry.

Legal help for Aboriginal people about land and environmental laws

For over twenty years, the Environment Defender's Office (EDO) Victoria has striven to defend our natural heritage and protect people's right to a healthy environment. Throughout this time the CLC's work has had a strong focus on the relationship between disadvantaged communities and environmental issues.

Influenced by EDO NSW's employment of an Aboriginal environmental solicitor, EDO Victoria created a new, identified position to foster the professional development of an Aboriginal newly graduated solicitor, who was interested in pursuing a career in environmental law. The aim of the position was also to build the profile and relationship of EDO Victoria with Aboriginal communities.

With the help of funding from the Maddocks Foundation, EDO Victoria was excited to recruit Damien Loizou, a law graduate from Charles Darwin University, who came to EDO Victoria with a strong interest in Aboriginal community development. Previously, Damien, from the Warlpiri peoples, an Aboriginal language nation from the Tanami desert region of the Northern Territory, had previously worked as a junior solicitor, a senior policy officer administering the Northern Territory land rights legislation, and an Aboriginal community engagement officer.

Damien has hit the ground running with his efforts to raise the profile of EDO Victoria and to



Damien busy at work

facilitate meaningful and long-term engagement with Aboriginal communities in Victoria. Damien will also be assisting the EDO with its litigation and advice work.

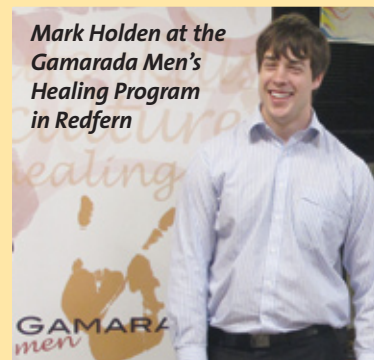
Damien grew up in the Northern Territory, in a time when Aboriginal desire for land rights became highly political. He has strong recollections of the historic dispute at 'Coronation Hill' (known as Guratba to the traditional owners), in which Aboriginal cultural and environmental conservation interests were threatened by mining. As Damien says, "Putting land and environment management issues in context to Aboriginal people equates with Aboriginal cultural and community preservation."

Sharing initiatives across states

EDO Victoria's employment of a dedicated Aboriginal solicitor was influenced by EDO NSW's Indigenous Engagement Program, which employs a dedicated Aboriginal solicitor. Mark Holden, from the Dunghutti peoples, is the solicitor in this role. Mark provides legal advice, education and representation for traditional owners. 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 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 helps the attendees to talk to government bodies, development proponents and Aboriginal Land Councils.

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, NSW 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.



Building confidence and financial independence through art

Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC) in Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia is a community-driven organisation that encourages and facilitates the safety and well-being of Aboriginal women through its innovative community programs and by auspicing the local Family Violence Prevention Legal Service (FVPLS) and Women's Shelter.

For women who have experienced family violence, achieving financial independence can build confidence and skills. In recognition of how micro and therapeutic social enterprise activity enables opportunities for creative expression and has an economic outcome for women, the organisation has begun creatively using social enterprise strategies to achieve these goals and create an environment that values the culture and skills of Aboriginal communities.

MWRC is very excited about the development of a recent project that started when three women, who were FVPLS clients staying at the Women's Shelter, painted nuts from the Boab tree and brought them in to sell at the Centre. The nuts were created as part of an art therapy approach, which helps women heal from their experiences through creative outlets. The Centre had just purchased the nuts when a representative from a corporate company saw them and asked for a large order to give to attendees at their fundraising ball.

The news got out among the surrounding communities, and painted and carved nuts started flowing into the Centre at a huge rate. This grassroots initiative has tapped into the unique skills of the community and provided additional income to pay for basic necessities such as food and bills.

"With very little initial financial outlay, this creative, authentic and fun project became a micro enterprise that the whole of the community – from children to Elders – could participate in," says MWRC CEO June Oscar, a Bunuba woman.



Community members responding to the project by collecting and painting Boab nuts

PHOTOS: PAUL MILLER & HELEN HARRINGTON-JOHNSON



Painted Boab nuts

PHOTO: LUCY WEMYSS

In this small booklet we could only capture a few of the many stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community access workers and services. We hope these stories give you an idea of the great variety of the work, its complexity and the long hours it can take.