

Dubbo community welcomes judicial officers

Kate Lumley

Publishing Manager, Judicial Commission of New South Wales



A group of judicial officers and guests visited the Dubbo Aboriginal communities on the weekend of 17–18 May. The visit was organised by the Judicial Commission's Ngara Yura committee. Ngara Yura means "to hear the people" in Eora, the language of the traditional owners of the Sydney Central Business District. The purpose of the visit was to meet, to hear, and to better understand Aboriginal culture and issues and an opportunity for the community to meet with judicial officers.

"This is a dream come true for me. To have you people from the courts come to visit so you can see the work we're doing," Uncle Ralph Naden tells us. The group of judicial officers representing the Supreme, District and Local Court and the Industrial Relations Commission, their partners, and Judicial Commission staff, has come to visit the Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin Aboriginal cultural camp 50 km north of Dubbo.

Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin means "to teach little sand goannas". The cultural camp's mission is to educate children in traditional ways so they can learn respect both for Indigenous and white customs and law.

In 1993, Uncle Ralph, a Wiradjuri Elder and shearer for 30 years, bought for one dollar from the Department of Lands a vacant rural block of land near Marthaguy Creek, a waterway that winds into the Macquarie marshes. With his wife Audrey and children Deirdre, Kim and Phillip, the Naden family has developed the camp into a self-funded respite centre. The camp is now a scenic property with sweeping lemon-scented gums and sheoaks, a campground, dancing and meeting areas. Many trees on the property have been scarred in the traditional way with wood-burned carvings of wildlife. The camp takes children referred

from government agencies such as the Department of Community Services and Juvenile Justice as well as anyone wanting to learn about Wiradjuri culture. Visitors to the camp can experience a smoking ceremony, eat bush tucker, listen to traditional stories, try their hand at carving and painting, and participate in dance performances and boomerang throwing.

Near the dance area, Uncle Ralph has lined a pathway with rocks from all the tribal lands in the western plains region in a symbolic gesture of reconciliation. This is significant because tensions between Aboriginal families from different regions of the State now living in the Dubbo area have periodically erupted into violence. In 2005–2006, riots resulted in the Department of Housing boarding up many homes in West Dubbo's Gordon housing estate and moving people on to other areas in Dubbo.

Uncle Ralph invites us to walk down the reconciliation pathway through the cleansing smoke of a ceremonial fire. We sit in a circle to watch a welcome dance performed by some young dancers as Uncle Ralph and his sons sing and sound tapsticks. The earthy sounds are mesmerising and many of us find the children's dance performance a moving experience.

The dancers then tell a traditional story about the Bugeen, a bad spirit who comes onto the country to pay back a wrongdoer. The moral, says Uncle Ralph, is that the Bugeen will always find you if you've done something wrong. He draws a parallel between the Bugeen and the impact of getting on the wrong side of "white man's law". "It's all about respect for the law," Uncle Ralph teaches his little sand goannas. In his storytelling, he constantly draws connections between the severe punishments for breaking traditional law with the consequences for Aboriginal people who get into trouble with Australian law today. Tammy Wright, the Judicial Commission's Aboriginal Project Officer and organiser of the weekend, reminds us that Aboriginal children are 18.6 times more likely to be imprisoned than other children.

The Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin cultural camp is one example of the many positive programmes being run in the Dubbo region as Indigenous people work to reclaim respect and overcome decades of disadvantage and discrimination. During the weekend we heard from local Elders Uncle Russ Ryan and Uncle Bill Phillips and community workers Mr Darren Toomey, Aboriginal Liaison Officer with Dubbo City Council, Mr Barry Coe, co-ordinator of the Aboriginal Community Justice Group, and Ms Leanne Greenaway, programme co-ordinator of the Dubbo Community Development Project. Government and non-government initiatives such as Circle Sentencing, the Community Night Patrol bus, the Yindyama Domestic Violence Offenders programme, the Gulbri Men's Group, and after-school and school holiday care are in place. Funding is a perennial problem for these programmes, but the determination and dedication of the Indigenous Elders and community workers is beyond doubt. Victor Wright, a Regional Project Officer for the Department of Corrective Services, spoke of the operation of Yetta Dhinnakkal ("the right pathway") 68 km from Brewarrina. This accommodates primarily Aboriginal inmates in an open establishment designed to provide employment skills and education about Aboriginal culture.

In acknowledging the Indigenous Elders and thanking them for their hospitality, Chair of the Ngara Yura committee, His Honour Judge Stephen Norrish QC, reflected on the value of our weekend visit to Dubbo:

"We seek a better understanding of matters which affect Aboriginal people which might prepare us better to treat Aboriginal people in our courts with the respect and dignity that they deserve and seek."

"Bill Phillips had these words of advice in relation to the sentencing of young Aboriginal offenders: 'keep them out of gaol otherwise that's the end of them!'".

Some of the main issues identified that need addressing include:

- mistrust of government agencies and dislike of authority
- lack of respect for elders by the younger generation
- loss of cultural identity particularly with young people
- hurt and anger over past government policies, particularly forced removal of children from their families
- community divisions arising from housing policies particularly placing people from different tribal groups together.



Uncle Bill Phillips and Mrs Phillips, Uncle Ralph Naden and Uncle Russ Ryan



Young dancers learning traditional ways from the Elders



Uncle Ralph Naden addressing judicial officers