

CASE STUDY 5

The Indigenous Friends Program, Australia Red Cross Victoria



INDUSTRY: Non-government organisations and communities

THE PROJECT:

The Friends Program aims to build a friendship between an urban and a remote Indigenous community (Wathaurong Community and Warmun Community respectively) for the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

THE BACKGROUND:

The Australian Red Cross (ARC) Friends Program had been operational for some time. Jennifer facilitated the first Indigenous Friends program after ARC Board agreed to her suggestion that they create a program where remote and urban Indigenous communities could come together to share their cultural knowledge, and exchange ideas and skills.

Jennifer had been approached by a young Indigenous woman from an urban Indigenous group who wanted to meet women elders who she could learn from so that she could, in turn, pass that knowledge on to the urban children who she was teaching about cultural performance. In the remote community Jennifer worked with, there was a lack of knowledge about management of organisations and how to negotiate with governments. The ARC Friends Program provided an opportunity to bring the urban and remote communities together for mutual benefit.

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of the program were to develop a relationship between urban and remote communities in order to foster an exchange of skills and knowledge for mutual benefit, and to build a relationship between ARC and Indigenous groups. By fostering a relationship between ARC and Indigenous groups ARC would have an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of Indigenous peoples needs, directly from the people themselves.

THE ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN:

It was during NAIDOC celebrations at Wathaurong, an urban based Indigenous community, that Jennifer learnt of the desire of some Wathaurong people to meet remote elders so they could learn about the ways the elders passed on their cultural practices to their young people. At the same time, Jennifer was aware of the desire of ARC Victoria to build relationships with Indigenous groups. Having worked for many years in remote areas with struggling communities, Jennifer also recognised the value the urban group could bring to that community. Each of these cultures (Red Cross also having its own distinct culture) had a value that could be greatly enhanced through a cultural exchange with each other.

Seeing this great opportunity for everyone, Jennifer approached ARC management with the idea of supporting the development of this relationship through the Friends Program, which aimed to develop mutually beneficial friendships for disadvantaged groups. The ARC were very enthusiastic, but needed Jennifer to win over the ARC Board Members to secure funding the program activities. Securing funding was critical, as the two groups, who lived thousands of kilometres apart, would need to come together to build their friendship.

CHALLENGES:

To initiate the relationship, two members of the urban community (the male and female cultural leaders) were taken to meet the cultural leaders of the remote community. They were taken out into the bush by three female elders to be welcomed to their land in the traditional way.

The Wathaurong leaders were then introduced to the community and spent a week in their presence, learning and exchanging knowledge and ideas. Both of them were extremely moved by the experience and returned to their community full of enthusiasm for continuing the relationship.

Warmun Community were also greatly moved by the experience and were very keen to visit Wathaurong Community to see how they 'did business', what their organisation was like, what opportunities they had, and to discover how they could work together.

Following this first visit it was apparent that both groups wanted to go on with the Friends Program. Jennifer told ARC about the success of the first visit, and more funds were provided to continue the Program.

Warmun Community were so enthusiastic about the visit to Wathaurong that the community council approved funding for several more community members, including the chairman, to go on the visit. All participants had high hopes of what could be achieved, as each community had so much to offer the other.

Wathaurong Cooperative put a lot of effort into welcoming the Warmun Community. A day was set aside for ceremonies to take place, and speeches and cultural performances were the order of the day. A large crowd gathered, including the ARC management and board members. Everyone agreed that the day was a huge success and an important first step in what could be an empowering strategy.

This was another step, I feel, in getting culture back on track, where a visit from Warmun Community opened the eyes of a lot of (city people), Indigenous and non Indigenous. It was because of my visit to Warmun Community that I could see there is a lot that can be done. Done in a sense of bringing home cultural heritage awareness back into the Community here, sharing.

Allan Browning

OUTCOMES:

Red Cross were remarkable in their openness and support of this idea. The difficulty came in sustaining both the understanding of the importance of the relationship, and financial support for it.

Allan Browning, the cultural leader and Heritage Officer of Wathaurong Cooperative, realised the value of this relationship immediately, as had Peggy Patrick, a senior law woman of Warmun Community, who immediately took Allan under her wing and claimed him as her son. They both expressed very clearly the benefits to each other's community that the friendship would provide. This was an opportunity for Indigenous people to help each other, but there was no funding that could be applied for – the situation was not seen to be important.

The original request from the young woman at Wathaurong was for support to learn about culture and about how to pass on that knowledge, the strength of her people. Allan said that the program was a way of getting culture back on track. For urban people who had been severely impacted by white settlement, the opportunity to get their culture 'back on track' with support from elders from a remote region was very significant. Yet, as hard as he tried, Allan could not get support to continue this relationship, either from the government or from any other sources he approached. The program was not seen as a priority.

Peggy had a great impact on Allan, and part of her speech to Wathaurong shows that she recognised that the Warmun elders could support urban people in strengthening their culture:

He made me cry when I bin see that paint (ochre) come to me. Some time paint tell you story any sort of paint, red, yellow, white, black from ground we get 'im, and he tell you story. Some time like a red ochre he fall to pieces, yellow one, if anyone don't own 'em, nobody this time, nobody using 'em. No but we still get 'em, we still use 'em, we still remind people where we come from properly – we from ground, we bin born with it, Ngarranggani, Dreamtime for us he remind you where you really come from and what is mean to you.

Country sometime he come in you, he don't know you sometime, when you don't own 'im, he don't know you. Some other people can understand this kind of um, stories, but now we bin come just to remind this young fella, remind this place Wathaurong, we be just come to remind this place an' open their thinking, open their heart, what dis country mean to them.

That what we bin come for, to open their heart and think where they belong to.

Peggy Patrick

Tragically, Allan passed away before he could fulfil his dream to return to Warmun, and to Peggy.

For more information see the full report in additional resources on the case study page.



1. Listening to the Chairman of Warmun invite Wathaurong to develop a relationship with Warmun. 2. The two communities meet. 3. The two communities greet each other and prepare for their performances. 4. Quenton, Jennifer and Max, chairperson of Warmun Community listen to the speeches. 5. Allan talks with Red Cross Executive, they applaud him on the performances. 6. Partnerships, Warmun welcoming Wathaurong. 7. Peggy leads the way into the ceremonial circle. 8. Peggy receives the red ochre from Wathaurong. 9. Warmun perform for the Wathaurong community. 10. Women visit Red Cross. 11. Visiting the Wathaurong glass workshop.