

Case Study – supporting collaboration



Sean Gordon outside Barker Darkinjung and holding the CBA RAP; Barker Darkinjung classroom

Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council – collaborating for community

Background

Nine years ago, Sean Gordon became CEO of Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council in Wyong, New South Wales. The largest private landholder on the Central Coast, with direct accountability to its members and the community, Darkinjung seeks to effectively manage property assets to provide direct and tangible benefits to Indigenous people.

The organisation had sold a parcel of land to a major developer for tens of millions of dollars but was in administration. Funds were held in external entities, and Sean could see that a structured, well-governed organisation needed to be built from scratch.

Approach

Under Sean's leadership, Darkinjung developed land assets, housing and employment programs, and successful corporate partnerships to become an effective organisation living up to its mandate. It was supported by over 50 Jawun secondees working on project briefs ranging from business cases for commercial developments to human resources and work health and safety reviews.

Crucially, Sean has used connections with corporate partners, made through Jawun's network, to bring real returns for community. In 2014, James Corbett, Commonwealth Bank's regional general manager responsible for branches in New South Wales and the ACT, went on a Jawun Executive Visit to the Central Coast. He met Sean at Darkinjung, where 12 Commonwealth Bank employees have completed secondments since 2012. They agreed to work together to get Indigenous trainees into Commonwealth Bank branches on the Central Coast, in what became a feature of the bank's Reconciliation Action Plan. In 2017, seven Indigenous school-based trainees and four full-time trainees were working in Commonwealth Bank branches in Darkinjung Country. A 'technology traineeship' pilot is also underway, with five Indigenous trainees recruited through Darkinjung working in the bank's head office IT department but remotely, from their communities. Sean explains:

"We've managed to get a trainee in every Commonwealth Bank outlet on the Central Coast, and Darkinjung led the recruitment process. That worked extremely well and we've now got some back-end positions in IT in local branches too, ones that would normally be done in Sydney are now being done by Aboriginal trainees here on the Central Coast. One of the trainees is a former Darkinjung staff member who used to work in accounts. It's an attractive job that they can do right here locally, without having to sit for hours on a train every day. We're doing innovative work to make more local Commonwealth Bank positions possible through IT."

Since Jawun began operating on the Central Coast, Sean has become a member of Commonwealth Bank's Indigenous Advisory Committee, advising the bank on practical Indigenous inclusion and economic support strategies, and its Reconciliation Action Plan.

Another partnership was forged between Darkinjung and elite education provider Barker College. In 2014, Sean joined a Jawun Executive Visit to Cape York attended by Westpac executives. He met Ewen Crouch, a member of both the Westpac Board and the Jawun Board, who spoke of his close connection to Barker College through his wife Catherine Crouch, who is deputy chair of the school's council. The idea of a school partnership grew quickly:

"The Darkinjung Barker opportunity came through Jawun when Ewen and I met. I learned that Phillip [Heath, Head of Barker College] was interested in a model where a school partnered with an Indigenous community for a year. So Phillip and I met in June 2015, signed an MoU in September,

and had the school up and running by the end of January.”

Outcomes

Today, this unique campus is trialling a resource-intensive, focused means of closing the gap in education outcomes while promoting cultural identity. Twenty-eight Indigenous students attend Darkinjung Barker College, set in bushland near their homes, where they are taught by four teachers focused on academic achievement and cultural identity.

Testament to the power of relationships initiated by Jawun Executive Visits, Darkinjung Barker College was the highlight of an executive visit to the Central Coast in March 2017. Phillip Heath, and Ewen and Catherine Crouch attended, and with Sean led a tour showcasing the college to the senior corporate and government executive guests:

“For me, Darkinjung Barker is without a doubt our greatest achievement. When I asked the board last year what our greatest achievement had been, people pointed to our recent win in the land and environment court to protect a significant sacred women’s site. I asked, really? Is that our greatest achievement, fighting against state legislation to protect a significant women’s site? We shouldn’t have to spend \$300,000 to fight to protect an Aboriginal women’s site from a development. The reason I say Darkinjung Barker is our greatest achievement is that those kids will come through it and go on to be the next legislators and policymakers, and we won’t have to have those types of fights in the future.”

Sean also forged a successful partnership with global property company Lendlease. He met Craig Laslett on a Jawun Executive Visit to East Kimberley in 2012. They stayed in touch, with Sean saying afterwards that his time meeting leaders of industry had renewed his vision for Aboriginal people ‘to engage in the real economy’. Craig went on to become head of Lendlease’s Australian engineering unit and the friendship became a partnership.

When the NSW Government released its Aboriginal Participation in Construction Policy in 2015, the Gosford Hospital site on the Central Coast was first in line: 5% of its contracts had to be awarded to Indigenous contractors, and 5% of jobs had to go to Indigenous people.

“Lendlease was going out to tender. They came to us and said, let’s form a partnership and we went into the tender process as a partner. Our component was to manage the procurement and jobs aspect. To date, through direct placement of apprentices and so on, we’ve got 31 apprentices on site. All up we have 96 Aboriginal people employed on site, which is almost 30% of the whole project.

We also have an Aboriginal catering van down there, Bara Barang, which employs four young people. At peak, they feed up to 300 workers—a nice little social enterprise for them.

This experience has led to other initiatives with contractors for major projects on the Central Coast.”

Next steps

Darkinjung’s partnerships with Commonwealth Bank, Barker College and Lendlease prove that innovative, place-based solutions to major issues can arise through collaboration between effective Indigenous organisations and corporate partners. Sean intends to continue this focus on collaboration, making real a statement he gave in KPMG’s 2016 Igniting the Indigenous economy report to underline the importance of seizing partnership opportunities :

“The power of business must be enlisted to grow the capacity of Indigenous-controlled organisations, leaders and communities to meet the challenges they face today and into the future.”

Vignette: From opportunity to empowerment – Megan Wilkin and her family

Megan Wilkin is a young Indigenous mother and member of Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council. Her life took a series of upward turns after she asked Sean Gordon for a reference for social housing. Instead, he urged her to apply for Darkinjung’s affordable housing program. Megan was ‘shaking’ with nerves when she applied, but before long the family had moved from a cramped home causing financial stress, to a four-bedroom house with a big backyard that cost substantially less.

Through Darkinjung, the family was notified about Darkinjung Barker. Megan wasn't sure:

"I just thought it was an old boys' school and we nearly didn't do it. I um'ed and ah'ed but in the end I thought, 'What's the worst that can happen?'"

All three of Megan's children enrolled. Now the Darkinjung Barker bus picks them up and drops them home every school day. Benefiting from small class sizes and dedicated teaching resources, they are all improving in their subjects, and are loving school.

The school identified that Megan's eldest son had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which his previous school had missed, and a bespoke learning program was developed. This is paying off; he recently won 'Writer of the Week' for writing two full pages. For Megan, a mother who had seen him 'falling through the cracks' at his previous school, 'that was a big win, a day to treasure'. She was proud on Superheroes Day when he dressed as a doctor, his new ambition.

Culture plays an important role in the curriculum at Darkinjung Barker, 'where children learn to celebrate their aboriginality'. This impacted Megan too:

"When the kids come home and tell me things about our heritage and culture, it makes me proud to be part of that, and proud to know they're learning stuff I was never able to."

Darkinjung Barker aims to include parents and community members in school life and both Megan and her husband Shane enjoy volunteering. Shane aims to train as a teacher's aide and complete his placement at the school. Megan's confidence grew and after 10 years raising children she considered work options. She joined the Commonwealth Bank Indigenous traineeship scheme that Sean's partnership had initiated, completed the traineeship, then used her new-found skills and confidence to successfully apply for the finance officer role at Darkinjung. As Megan says, 'It's all fallen into place!'

Megan hopes most students will be eligible for scholarships to Barker College. She is amazed:

"I don't think people realise the enormity of what's happening. There's only 28 kids but what it's doing is life-changing. Not only for the kids, for the families as well."

From a simple trigger—Sean's advice, backed by real opportunities he forged through collaborations—a whole family is transforming. Megan says:

"You don't realise what you're capable of until you're given the chance to be capable. I look back and think of certain people who didn't believe in me. And I think, if only you could see me now."



Jawun-facilitated leadership initiatives also expand networks for Indigenous people (more details on Jawun-facilitated leadership initiatives are in [Section 5.5](#)). During this reporting period:

- **Emerging Leaders:** The **9 participants** of the 2017-18 program focused on Working with Government as part of the year's 'What it takes to drive change' theme, taking the total number of participants in this experiential development program to 40.
- **Stories of Female Leadership:** **40 female leaders**, 19 of whom were Indigenous, participated in the networking event hosted in Mossman Gorge as part of this unique Jawun initiative that brings together corporate and Indigenous female leaders.
- **Indigenous Corporate Leadership Program:** Of the first cohort of **three 'reverse secondees'**, established Indigenous leaders, two have completed the program and one will complete in early 2018. Also in this reporting period the 2018 participants were identified.