

Lifting Indigenous communities

The big question after Noel Pearson's address at the recent Company Directors Conference was how could business lend a hand in lifting Indigenous communities. **Domini Stuart** has found some answers.

Noel Pearson played a pivotal role in establishing the Cape York Land Council, worked on native title cases including the historic Wik decision and participated in the drafting of the Cape York Heads of Agreement. Since 2004, he has been director of the Cape York Institute. Yet, when he addressed this year's AICD national conference in Queensland, he cited sponsoring two Aboriginal girls through high school as one of his most worthwhile achievements.

"If you're interested in helping address the Indigenous predicament, there's no question that education is key because it addresses the core issues," says Andrew Penfold. A corporate lawyer and former investment banker, Penfold heads the Indigenous scholarship program at Sydney's St Joseph's College, where 69 Aboriginal students from 33 communities have studied during the past 10 years. He is also in the process of raising money to fund the newly-established Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF).

"The AIEF is a vehicle for bringing the corporate sector and the education sector together to enable Indigenous kids to go to a range of boarding schools," he says. "Rather than an individual investor saying 'I'd like to fund a scholarship' and then having to manage the process, we take care of all the administration. More than that, we offer a very well-managed, well governed, best practice and efficient vehicle for corporate investment with high levels of transparency and accountability."

Yalari Limited is another not-for-profit organisation dedicated to creating a national network of educational opportunities for Indigenous children. In October 2005, Yalari launched its first initiative, the *Rosemary Bishop Indigenous Education Scholarship Program*, which now supports 36 students attending schools in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

"Yalari has brought leading business thinking to the funding and management of the scholarship program," says director Llew Mullins.

"Critical to Yalari's success is its commitment to supporting the relationship between the students, their families, communities and their schools, as well as corporate sponsors and philanthropic donors."

A NEED FOR PASTORAL CARE

Djarragun College offers a different educational model, providing primary and secondary schooling specifically for students from remote and disadvantaged indigenous communities in northern Queensland.

"Between 80 - 90 per cent of our students commence schooling with literacy and numeracy levels significantly below the national benchmark," says principal Jean Illingworth. "Most would not usually be expected to engage with, or complete, school. Yet, we have achieved a high level of success compared to national Indigenous indices."

That success includes Year 10 completion rates up around 85 per cent, with year 12 completion rates that are even higher. During the past two years, some 70 per cent of Djarragun graduates either found work or continued their education. Illingworth believes this reflects the school's intensive and wide-ranging pastoral care program. Unfortunately, the Government funds education and nothing more.

"We cope because our staff do three jobs while they're being paid for one," she says. "We have to do everything - we wash and iron uniforms for traineeships, pick students up at 5.30 am for a 6 am start, pack their lunches, pick them up to take them home, get their uniforms off them to wash and iron them again so they're ready for the next day. Everyone is absolutely committed because they can see the difference the school is making, but it's not sustainable - everyone deserves some quality of life. We need to raise money for scholarships so that we can fully fund our pastoral care."

Reverend Chris Jones, CEO of Anglicare Tasmania and Vicar General and Missioner Bishop Diocese of Tasmania, acknowledges the need for some children to move out of their communities in order to thrive. He also suggests that there might be other ways for business to provide support - by helping to build the capacity of local schools and colleges such as Djarragun.

"In Tasmania, we have some education outside the normal school or college environment which is culturally appropriate for the Aboriginal community," he says. "This has been receiving strong support from the community and may well be worth encouraging."

WORKING OUTSIDE THE SQUARE

Bill Lawson is chairman of the Beacon Foundation, a national not-for-profit organisation that works in the area of youth unemployment. "Beacon receives 97 per cent of its funding from the private sector," he says. "We usually don't seek public sector funding because we like to work outside the square, trying new approaches."

A hybrid of Beacon's flagship *No dole* program is the *Midland Indigenous Youth Project* (MIYP) in Perth. This provides Indigenous students with continuous one-on-one support from Grade 10 to post-employment, helping them prepare for work and identify potential career paths. In the three years the program has been running, there has been an increase in school retention rates, a decrease in delinquent behaviour and illegal activity, a decrease in the number of young people who would be classified as at risk of continuing generational disadvantage and an increase in the youths' sense of pride and purpose.

"Most Indigenous students only go to school because they have to," says Tania Cavanagh, MIYP's manager of Aboriginal Education. "From their experience through parents, uncles, aunts and siblings there is nothing at the end of it, nothing out there, no hope. Sometimes this cycles through generations. MIYP breaks that. It shows that, yes, there are jobs and you can go on to further education."

Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM) is providing pro-bono project management to another Beacon project – a precast concrete manufacturing business in Kununurra. CEMEX Australia (formerly Readymix) also plays an integral role. Young local Aboriginal people have helped build a factory and are now manufacturing components for comfortable and affordable homes for remote communities in the East Kimberley.

"Some 18 months in, we have 15 Aboriginal kids attending work and TAFE 98 per cent of the time, compared with less than 16 per cent when we started," says Lawson. "Along with the factory, they've built four houses and two bridges and are just starting on another 15 houses."

Lawson, who is also SKM's principal and manager, Indigenous sector, says: "When I was first given the challenge, it was clear to me that a white fellow from Hobart leading the Indigenous charge just doesn't cut the mustard." So, he recruited an Indigenous Affairs Adviser, Jack Pearson – formerly senior adviser to

Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Amanda Vanstone. Pearson drafted SKM's Statement of Commitment to Indigenous Australians. SKM now supports a number of initiatives focussed on Aboriginal communities.

Another interesting project is the Gawura campus, which operates out of St Andrew's Cathedral School in Sydney and offers primary schooling to Indigenous children from the Redfern/Waterloo areas. Borrowing from a project for children in Soweto, South Africa, Gawura opened in April 2007 and now has 24 students who will finally attend St Andrew's for high schooling.

HIDDEN QUALITIES

Westpac is involved at board level and on the ground with an extensive skills transfer program. Around 50 employees spend a month each year at Cape York helping local communities build financial independence.

"One thing we've learned is that it's not just our people's technical skills that are of value. The hidden benefit is their life skills," says Graham Paterson, head of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability at Westpac.

"People in remote communities don't always have access to the wide variety of life skills that most companies have in their employee base. There are mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles ... people who run sporting organisations or who are involved in community groups. They do their job during the day, but they're also around at night and on weekends, talking and sharing their experiences and stories. Hopefully, through natural osmosis, they're leaving behind knowledge and skills that can help people in these communities think differently about the options they have."

Paterson says the impact of such an experience will inevitably benefit the company as a whole. "Employees engage with the ethic around their contribution to broader community," he says. "Also, being in a situation they're not totally familiar with helps them to develop leadership skills and teaches them to be a little more self-reliant. It also helps them to value the skills they have but have never recognised. Most come back feeling they've gained at least as much as they've contributed." ①

AICD Indigenous Governance Program

AICD is working with Indigenous Business Australia to develop and deliver customised director education programs to Indigenous boards across Australia. The first two programs have been piloted. Watch this space for more news!

