



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

NGAANYATJARRA PITJANTJATJARA YANKUNYTJATJARA WOMEN'S COUNCIL (NPYWC) ABORIGINAL CORPORATION AND THE FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION

Aurukun Commissioners

We did not know what to expect when Commissioner Glasgow asked if we would like to host a group of ladies from the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPYWC) Aboriginal Corporation.

Although people tell us that there is lots of talk about the work the Commission does, and the work we do as Local Commissioners, we don't have many visitors wanting to see what we do in conference. Sometimes it is hard to get those people working in the community as service providers to attend conference, to see the process and outcomes of conferences, and here we had delegates from interstate requesting to visit and observe the working of the FRC conferences.

Commissioner Port and Commissioner Hart escorted the NPYWC delegates in Coen on the Monday. The delegates then flew on to Aurukun with Commissioner Glasgow to attend three days of conferencing. We had just started to settle into our work on the first day of conferencing when the delegates arrived. Yanyi Bandicha, the Chairperson, and Tjawina Roberts, a Director, arrived at our conference room with Andrea Mason, the NPYWC Coordinator. It was clear to us these women were important women, but they also wanted to listen and hear from us. All too often people come to visit us and try to squeeze the visit into a short schedule because they are only in Aurukun for a short time. These ladies understood that time was important, and made sure they were in Aurukun for all three days of sittings.

The NPYWC Delegates witnessed the conference process, and watched us dealing with the families who shouted and banged their fists on the table. Some discussions were around the issues impacting school attendance which cause Child Safety Services to do an investigation.

The delegates saw us speaking very frankly (in language) with our clients. We were hard on some clients, and when they told lie stories or made excuses, we told them they had to stop making excuses for bad behaviour. The delegates were starting to see what we were doing, bringing the issues to the table and addressing the behaviours that cause the issues.



*Andrea Mason, NPYWC Coordinator with Aurukun
Commissioner Wolmby*

The delegates informed us of the work they undertake with the NPYWC in Domestic and Family Violence, Disability Supports, Youth Supports, Child Nutrition and Maternal Welfare and Traditional Healing and Fibre Art. It showed us how much work could be done across three different states and territories by a group of determined women Elders.

Their visit has inspired us to keep working hard, and to deal with the problems facing our community by showing leadership, courage and harmony between families.

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There was also lots of fun and laughs; we shared dancing, singing and exchanged stories. We could not speak each other's language, but we could hear the love in their voices when they sang about their home and country.

We ate together, laughed together and made some tough decisions together.

Thank you for visiting our community and exchanging knowledge. When we all work together we can be assured that we are moving forward in a strong and positive way.

NPYWC Aboriginal Corporation

In mid-2013, after some discussion in NPYWC, the Directors proposed a visit to North Queensland. The Council had been advocating in recent years for income management across the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands on the basis that income management was available in the Northern Territory and South Australian member communities. It was considered timely to visit some communities in Far North Queensland where income management is available to get an understanding of how this measure is working to improve life opportunities for children, women and families.

Coen

The delegation travelled from Cairns to Coen with FRC senior staff, Local Commissioners Port and Hart and Commissioner Glasgow on Monday 19 November. Coen Commissioners Kepple and Peter joined the meeting once the conferencing commenced. Commissioner Glasgow sought permission from each community member who had been summoned to appear before the Commission to allow the delegation to sit in the meeting room to listen. Because there were no objections to this request, the delegation was able to witness firsthand the Commissioners administering their responsibilities, and were able to observe the level of administrative support the FRC staff provide to the Commissioners during the course of conferencing. The delegation observed a number of conferences dealing with issues from rent arrears to child safety. After a full day the delegation travelled on to Aurukun.



Back Row: Commissioner Glasgow and Andrea Mason NPYWC Coordinator. Front Row: Hope Vale Commissioner Hart, Tjawina Roberts, a Director of NPYWC, Yanyi Bandicha, Chairperson of NPYWC and Coen Commissioner Port

Aurukun

Three locally based Commissioners Wolmby, Woolla and Pootchemunka joined Commissioner Glasgow in the meeting once conferencing commenced. As had occurred in Coen, Commissioner Glasgow again sought permission from each community member who had been summoned to appear before the Commission to agree to the delegation observing proceedings. There were no objections to the presence of the delegation, so the delegates were able to observe the Commissioners administering their responsibilities. As conferencing commenced on Tuesday 20 November and concluded on the



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afternoon of Thursday 22 November, the delegation was able to spend considerable time observing the proceedings, in particular hearing the advice and instructions given to recipients and also recipients' response to advice.

Service Providers

As mentioned above, the FRC has significant records associated with each conference to provide evidence of either concerning or improving behaviour.

While the NPYWC delegation was in Aurukun the FRC set up meetings with service providers. The service providers included those who either provide data or receive referrals from the FRC including the Department for Housing and Public Works, Opportunity Hub and Parenting Program, Centrelink Income Management team, Women's Safe House and Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy.

In regard to the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy, the delegates observed firsthand students learning through the model of direct instruction. During a visit to the Academy in Aurukun the delegates were introduced to a classroom of kids of varying ages, but at the same literacy level. They were informed that at the start of the 2012 school year the kids in the class were unable to read, or had been assessed as having a very low level of reading competency. On the day that the school was visited in November, some ten months into the school year, these students were reading confidently, and undertaking their written school work under their own initiative, confidently writing up their responses.

Since the introduction of the Academy school attendance has increased. What impressed the delegation was that school attendance was coupled with a tailored curriculum that was providing every child with the opportunity to grasp the fundamentals of literacy, numeracy and comprehension. As there is no high school in Aurukun or Coen students apply to high schools in other localities. There is a tangible pride in the community at seeing an increasing number of children being offered places in elite boarding schools in Cairns and Brisbane based on academic merit.

Lessons learned

Integral to the FRC conferencing is the access each Commissioner has to accurate records and data that form the basis for each conference. The majority of documents were available electronically and prepared well before the conference commenced. Importantly data was tabled in every conference, providing the proof for the issues dealt with (child safety, housing, school attendance and Magistrates Court). In this regard the information provides important baseline information for the Commissioners and the recipient.

During conferencing NPYWC delegates saw that the work of the FRC is accepted as valid, in that community members accept the authority of the Commissioners and the role of the Commission in terms of encouraging community members to take responsibility for their behaviour and actions, while promoting the safety and wellbeing of children and other vulnerable persons.

The appointment of capable and well respected Commissioners is a key feature of the system. The delegation observed recipients give Commissioners considerable respect, and it was clear that their opinion was valued. This was demonstrated by observing recipients agreeing and even supporting considerations or findings of Commissioners. NPYWC delegates also observed Commissioners demonstrating their knowledge of kinship and family conflicts in their deliberations.

The visit has given NPYWC a lot to consider. In the coming months the lessons learned will be relayed to their members and in other forums in which NPYWC engages.