

East Kimberley

A Secondee's Impact on an Indigenous Trust and a bank branch



Background

Gelganyem Trust is a key Indigenous organisation in the East Kimberley. It represents the interests of Traditional Owners as part of the mining agreement with Rio Tinto for the land associated with Argyle Diamond Mine. The mine has long provided jobs and economic investment to the region, but is due to close in 2021. In light of this, the proactive establishment of economic opportunities for Indigenous people after the closure is critical, and Gelganyem are at the forefront of this.

Gelganyem had worked with previous Jawun secondees to identify and draft a concept to develop a business case for a Rehabilitation and Seed Nursery business on Argyle Diamond Mine land, one which it was hoped would ultimately take up the contracts to supply native seed and labour for the rehabilitation of the mine site on closure in 2021. It would be an opportunity for Traditional Owners to use their knowledge of the country and its flora in an enterprise that, if successful, would contribute to the rehabilitation of the country while delivering real jobs for people living in the communities surrounding the mine. Designed and implemented well, it might also prove to be a variable business model with reach across or beyond the region.

Approach

Dearna Stojansek was a senior executive at NAB with 17 years' banking industry experience within Australia and internationally when she applied for a Jawun secondment. At the time she was Associate Director in the Sydney Lending Administration and Agency Operations team, leading thirteen staff and managing a \$70bn portfolio of syndicated lending facilities for NAB's Institutional banking arm. According to Dearna, she applied for a Jawun secondment for two reasons: *"I wanted to understand the purpose and importance of Aboriginal organisations and the complications they face; and to bring knowledge back to my workplace"*. She had had very little exposure to Indigenous communities but with her skills and experience soon found herself placed in one, in the town of Kununurra in the eastern extremity of the Kimberley Region, Western Australia.

While at Gelganyem, Dearna's project was to identify and document how a business model could involve the communities that surround the mine. One important element of this was engaging directly with Traditional Owners, to get their feedback on the business concept and consider how to secure their strong buy-in for the business. This work also included consultation with Argyle representatives to better understand the requirements of the mine in rehabilitation. Dearna was able to present the potential business model ideas to the Gelganyem Board and the next stage of the business development is now ready for more formal financial analysis once Argyle Diamond Mine has a better indication of the area and size of the rehabilitation required.

Outcomes

For Dearna, the highlight of her secondment was the interactions with Traditional Owners and Indigenous communities. She went out on country with Chris Garstone, Manager of Community Engagement with Gelganyem, and spent time with senior elder George Dixon at his home. Dearna also spent time with Ethel McLennon, Chairperson of Gelganyem Board, who helped her understand the importance of growing Gelganyem business capabilities to ensure the organisation would be sustainable after the mine closure. These connections and experiences made Dearna realise that her passion was with working directly with people. She said afterwards, *“The experience made me rethink what energises me. It made realise that face-to-face interaction with people is where my passions are, and it strengthened my confidence in my collaboration and leadership abilities.”* She also felt it strengthened her resilience, by giving her the chance to do something completely different and challenging. The physical, sociocultural and professional context was a far cry from her experiences working in big cities in Australia and overseas. Finally, Dearna was profoundly moved by the beauty of the East Kimberley and the strength of the Indigenous culture she encountered there.

In the final week of Dearna’s secondment she saw that NAB Kununurra was advertising for a Branch Manager, and went in to discuss the role with the existing Manager. The day after her return to Sydney she applied and was successful. As she wrote in her post-secondment survey, the Jawun experience had made her want to apply her improved understanding of the Indigenous context: *“There are many social issues impacting the region, but there is also real potential and opportunity for positive change. I am excited to be immersed in the region and to see where I can add value.”* Dearna took up her role in Kununurra with a focus on supporting people to deal with the mainstream economy and to better service local needs, while also building a successful new bank branch.

Dearna has now initiated a partnership with the well-known local Indigenous organisation Wunan, who are delivering financial advice and support as well as connecting Indigenous people to microfinance programs such as Step Up Loans. Through this, NAB and Wunan aim to provide people with suitable funding options. The relationship has also extended to IBA (Indigenous Business Australia), and now joint home lending is occurring to assist people with home ownership.

Because of Dearna’s appreciation of the need to provide employment opportunities for local Indigenous people, first emphasised by elders during her secondment, the local NAB Branch has recently taken on an Indigenous School Based Trainee in a Customer Advisor position. Dearna’s idea is already enhancing accessibility for new clients from remote areas: the local and familiar presence boosts confidence and increases the perception of the bank as a safe and comfortable place to enter.

Next Steps

NAB supported Dearna to go on a secondment that provided her professional development and growth opportunities, while strengthening the ability of Gelganyem to support communities. Proving that even further value can be added, Dearna then used new skills and understanding to help a NAB branch better connect with and support its Indigenous customer base – potentially relevant to how NAB and other organisations support and service Indigenous communities right across Australia.

Dearna reflects that she has learnt so much about culture, while experiencing enormous professional growth in the face of a new and exciting challenge. She aims to continue using her role at NAB to make a contribution to the lives of Indigenous people, and to spread this beyond her branch and beyond Kununurra. *“Kununurra is an incredible place. So to be able to give back to the community that welcomed me with open arms is very rewarding. I’m proud to call it home.”*

Kate Twyford, Coordinator of the Jawun program at NAB, sees Dearna’s experience as proof of the two-way value of secondments: *“Secondments are an opportunity for our employees to work on social and economic development projects that assist Aboriginal people in remote communities. They also support our employees to develop their capabilities and resilience, by challenging them to operate outside their comfort zone in an immersive cultural experience. It means making a positive contribution to an Indigenous organisation is good for us as an organisation too - a ‘win win’ situation.”*