

Case Study – empowering Indigenous leadership



Rarrtjiwuy Melanie Herdman—a rising Yolŋu voice

Background

Rarrtjiwuy Melanie Herdman is a young Yolŋu woman from Arnhem Land. Rarrtjiwuy participated in the Jawun Emerging Leaders program in 2015, and soon after became acting CEO of Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation. She is also chairperson of Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation, and an active community advocate.

Jawun first met Rarrtjiwuy at Miwatj Health in 2014, when the partnership first started. The organisation's CEO Eddie Mulholland was keen to provide this up-and-coming young leader with exposure to opportunities and connections, so Rarrtjiwuy began coordinating Jawun secondees (including their induction week) and playing a key role in presenting Miwatj Health during Jawun Executive Visits.

Since then, Rarrtjiwuy's Yolŋu leadership journey has been an inspiring one, and Jawun has had the privilege to walk beside it.

This case study depicts how Rarrtjiwuy's leadership has grown through increasingly demanding community roles in North East Arnhem Land, and how she has been involved with various initiatives facilitated by Jawun – the secondment program since 2014, 'Stories of Female Leadership' since 2015, and the 'Emerging Leaders' development initiative in 2015.

Approach

As acting CEO, Rarrtjiwuy is proud of what Miwatj Health stands for: an Aboriginal community-controlled health organisation and a truly culturally accessible service for Yolŋu people. It was at Miwatj that Rarrtjiwuy began one of her first jobs, as Aboriginal Liaison Officer, and was exposed to the leadership of the organisation. Today she manages the all-Yolŋu team delivering a community-based program that tackles smoking as part of chronic disease prevention. Miwatj's statistics speak for itself: attendance rates at its clinics are among the highest in the region.¹ The organisation has expanded as a result: in recent years it has taken over the management of previously government run-health clinics across the region, with positive outcomes for both uptake of health services and local Yolŋu jobs in service delivery. Jawun secondees have played a role in this success, with 20 deployed since 2014 to support the organisation's HR and training, information management, advocacy and program expansion strategies.

Through the secondment program, Rarrtjiwuy learnt of Jawun's Emerging Leaders program, an experiential development opportunity for up and coming Indigenous leaders. Since 2011 there have been 40 participants in the Emerging Leaders program, which was created to help rising Indigenous leaders understand and meet the challenges of leadership roles. In 2015 Rarrtjiwuy and 9 other young Indigenous leaders travelled to Indigenous regions across the country, over the course of a year, to meet established leaders and see Indigenous-led development and reform initiatives in practice. As well as the connections made, the experience had a strong impact on Rarrtjiwuy:

"Emerging Leaders confirmed for me the theory I had on how I go about influencing and empowering people. It helped me answer the big questions I had: What moves do I make? What direction do I take to

reinforce what the old leaders were doing in the past? How do I become a young leader in my community? And how do I help plant the seed for the next generation?"

Outcomes

Not long after completing the Emerging Leaders program, Rarrtjiwuy took up the acting CEO position at Miwatj Health. She also stepped into a number of other important community leadership opportunities that she felt passionate about being a part of.

One of these was at Dhimurru Corporation, an organisation that manages the Indigenous Protected Area in the Gove Peninsula and recreational areas on Aboriginal land. It has been a partner of Jawun since 2013, facilitating around ten secondees to strengthen workplace safety and develop cultural tourism ideas. When the opportunity of a Board position at Dhimurru arose, Rarrtjiwuy nominated herself. She knew she was far younger than any prior board member, but she was confident. She knew the organisation well – she had worked there as a Permits Officer prior to working at Miwatj Health – and was passionate about its work:

"I've long been proud and inspired by how traditional owners entrusted Dhimurru to look after the land while also keeping it in the state that our elders walked on, and sharing that country with non-Indigenous people by having recreational areas that we manage."

Rarrtjiwuy was unanimously elected as a Dhimurru board member and its first young female chairperson. She now juggles that role with her position at Miwatj, as well with her active advocacy around key community social issues. Rarrtjiwuy speaks of being grateful to Miwatj Health's CEO Eddie Mulholland for continuously encouraging and supporting her growth in this and other ways.

Recently, Rarrtjiwuy advocated at state level in favour of a banned drinkers register to operate in licensed takeaway outlets, to curb the pervasive social destruction caused by alcohol. She then became part of a community committee working on the issue. Community elders urged her to step forward for this. She also had a very personal motivation:

"My own family members have passed away, ended up in prison, or been negatively affected because of alcohol. That's had a ripple effect on me and the rest of my family. That's why the values that I work towards are my values and I'm not afraid to share them. That's why I advocate for alcohol permit restrictions and for understanding and awareness of domestic violence."

I spoke about this on the news; I said we have a great permit system but one of the things I continue to see is our families crawling out of the pubs, being allowed to be that drunk that they go back and harass their families or disturb their children who are trying to sleep. This issue has and a huge impact to education, wellbeing and health of individuals, families and communities. It disrupts the social wellbeing of a functioning community.

This is an issue I want to deal with. If I'm passionate about something, I'll step up and be part of that."

Rarrtjiwuy also aims to set up a Regional Young Leaders Program, inspired by Jawun's Emerging Leaders program. She is determined to see it become a success and meet a real need in her region:

"I want this to be a program that supports young people build their confidence, enabling them to be on committees and boards and understand why it's important to consider to being a leader. In this region not many young people sit on boards and committees, or freely express their opinions. They need to use their full potential and participate at a full capacity, with support from the community and its leaders."

Rarrtjiwuy was keen to involve another rising leader in the region, Fiona Djerrkura. The two young Yolŋu women work together at Miwatj Health, and in late 2016 Rarrtjiwuy proposed Fiona for the next Jawun Emerging Leaders program (which Fiona went on to participate in). Together they presented the Regional Emerging Leaders idea at a Jawun Strategic Place-Based Review, seeking support from other North East Arnhem Land organisations.

The initiative is progressing, albeit slowly on account of both women's many other commitments within Miwatj and the community. Still determined, Rarrtjiwuy is working on a new strategy for rolling out the first stages in the months ahead.

Rarrtjiwuy considers herself an educator more than a leader, and thinks that the older leaders who inspired her were primarily educators as well:

"Throughout all my roles, I've always had an education role—whether educating about Yolŋu and their society and culture and language—or educating Yolŋu about things like policies and procedures and professional realities that a lot of people take for granted. It doesn't matter what it is I do, it's always about education. I feel like the people who raised me and went on to be my leaders, that's all they were doing, trying to educate people on how to balance living in this world of two cultures, how to walk in both worlds and use that to our advantage."

There are times when Rarrtjiwuy finds leadership a heavy burden:

"Once you step into a leadership role there's a high expectation on you, not just from your organisation but from your community as well."

She stays in touch with her fellow 2015–16 Emerging Leaders and is part of Jawun's Stories of Female Leadership network, a gathering of corporate and Indigenous female leaders united by the vision, *unlocking female leadership for a better nation*. Underscoring how challenging a demanding leadership role can be, Rarrtjiwuy considers both these networks 'a treat' for the way they energise and nurture her. She plays an active role in the Stories of Female Leadership workstream focused on leadership development. For this, she works closely with other Indigenous and corporate women to build an approach based on both the Kimberley concept for empowering your inner voice *Lyarn*, and on the Pitjantjatjara principle for reciprocity, Ngapartji Ngapartji. It is an exciting space to watch.

Next steps

Just 30 years old, Rarrtjiwuy has achieved an exceptional level of influence and trust in her community, among her peers and in the eyes of elders. She sees it simply as having a voice and respecting customary values of leadership:

"When I think of the values of those old leaders, it would be about not being afraid to say what you feel. It's about having a voice, opening your mouth and saying, 'This is not what I think is right'."

Talking about your values, whether in personal or professional contexts, is important. You need to accept your own path to leadership, not someone else's. That's one thing I learned from the elders we have here, that if you wait for a leader, they're never going to come. If you don't see a leader in front of you, then you need to step up into that position."

Rarrtjiwuy believes she was born into the responsibilities she has taken on:

"My name Rarrtjiwuy means 'from afar'. Literally it refers to an area just north-west of Gove that I've only ever flown over, but the meaning is just somewhere far away. Old people have a sense of what's the right name. I've reflected on my name a million times and I'm pretty sure they gave it to me because they thought I'd have to go far."

ⁱ Miwatj-run Yirrkala Clinic, for example, in the years since Miwatj took over its management from the Northern Territory Department of Health, saw a steady increase in 'episodes of care', an indicator used as proxy for accessibility in a region where community perceptions of the cultural inappropriateness of social services are a significant challenge and barrier.