



QSA Notes

Working with Indigenous groups

JACKIE PERKINS | QSA EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATOR



Many meetings, TV news presentations, forums and conventions now begin with an acknowledgement of country, paying respect to First Nations Elders past, present and emerging. This is a relatively recent innovation, encouraged no doubt by the Uluru Statement From the Heart¹, and recognising knowledge so long denied. Working alongside and supporting First Nations communities was a feature of QSA's initial work. QSA was created in 1959, by a small group of dedicated Friends, determined to see that Quakers have a visible presence in making the world a better place, beginning in their own backyard, and this continues after 62 years.

Each area of QSA's support to First Nations communities has ideas in common. The financial support is not large, and it is usually given in stages as progression occurs and ideas evolve. With all projects supported by QSA, the idea and expression of the need come from the communities themselves. Sometimes QSA is made aware of a community's need by a Quaker who has visited the area and learned what they are planning to achieve. Similarly, all ideas from First Nations communities come to QSA via Friends or through the Yearly Meeting First Nations Peoples' Concerns Committee, with which QSA has been involved for many years. Throughout QSA's history of community support, a working relationship has been considered key, and these relationships continue beyond the life of funding support. However, there is a critical difference between QSA projects in Australia and those overseas in how relationships are formed. For projects overseas, the relationship evolves as the project evolves, and for this reason, support for project partners tends to be

long term. In our work with First Nations communities, the relationship must develop first.

In an interview with Heather Saville, working on her book *Friends in Deed*², written to celebrate 50 years of Quaker Service Australia, Sue Doessel (Queensland Regional Meeting) commented,

... relationship-centred orientation of Aboriginal culture, in which it is seen as more important that things happen in their proper order than by a certain time'

She then goes on to say,

*That what is gained cannot be measured simply in terms of achievement of concrete objectives, but must also include what has been learned, that has made us wiser, and less likely to repeat the same mistakes, what has been healed, what difficulties and belly laughs have been shared, and what heart we have given one another to continue this work.*³

This quote helps explain a project which, after many months of conversations, was agreed and commenced in December 2021 to support the Jundi Mibunn Beenleigh Housing and Development Company Limited (BHDC)⁴, based in Queensland. Its chief executive officer, Will Davis, and advisor and supporter Norm Sheehan have gathered together a team, including some university students, to work with local Indigenous groups to research a better way to define community needs and key performance indicators that use deep learning culturally-based circles and connective art, and that can be replicated. From this work comes an understanding of how this approach can relate to donor criteria. The frustration experienced by Will and Norm in securing funding to achieve significant changes

for First Nations groups via BHDC led to conversations firstly with Queensland Regional Meeting and then with QSA. Connecting to traditional lands and culture is a common theme in QSA projects with First Nations communities. A lack of connection can lead to self-harm among young people and violence and domestic abuse among adults. Another QSA project entitled "Healing Our Way Together" started recently in South Australia and will run for much of 2022 led by Tod Stokes, known to QSA for several years from a former project with Korner Winmil Yunti in South Australia, where he undertook similar work. It consists of a social and emotional well-being therapeutic program using a narrative therapy group format in a culturally appropriate way to support positive and strong cultural identity and connection. Local Elders have a significant role in this project, working with Tod and First Nations trainees to expand the reach of this work.

Some First Nations communities have requested resources from QSA rather than funding for a time-framed project. QSA has provided industrial strength washing machines to two Men's Sheds in the Northern Territory, a vehicle to collect students to attend school, cyclone proof sheds for the Doomadgee Aboriginal Community in the Gulf region of north west Queensland, and water tanks, to name a few. QSA has also supported training courses and schools, including the Yipirinya School in Alice Springs, the ecumenical Nungalinya College in Darwin offering vocational training, TAFE courses and theological studies, support for student nurses through the Eleanor Duncan Clinic on the Central Coast of NSW, and support for students attending



Bush camp, Balgo Community, Western Australia: Photo credit: Balgo Community

Cunnamulla High School in Queensland. Sometimes the support is smaller and more personal, such as catering equipment for a café (with training for a few young people) located near to the courts in Brisbane, and personal toiletries and a range of clothing from a local op shop enabling people appearing before the courts to make a better first impression. Some projects are of longer duration. Many Friends, I am sure, will remember the Purga Native Plant Nursery near Ipswich in Queensland. Support began in 2001 and lasted for a number of years. We saw the initiative mature from a simple shed to an established plant nursery with a watering system, shade cloth covered areas and vocational training to teach valuable skills. QSA learned some valuable lessons from the Purga nursery project, a project started by one person with the support of others. What happens when that person is no longer around to provide the enthusiasm and drive? What happens when the family of Elders changes in a community? From other projects, QSA has learned

that speaking and writing in English is not a strong feature in many remote communities, so when the correspondent moves on, there is often no way of knowing the situation they have left behind or if QSA's help is still needed. From the Federal Government, we have learned about many issues surrounding the introduction of GST, and the rationalisation of banking outlets has made the transfer of funds more complex. There is never a dull moment. The issues surrounding the Purga project are quite well known among First Nations communities in the region. This is evident in a recent conversation with two Elders from the Djungan People who are keen to discuss income generating ideas for the Kondaparinga Station in Queensland. They want to start a plant nursery, but are firstly seeking financial support from QSA to draft a business and marketing plan, and then to select the best site with sufficient water resources before setting up an indigenous plant nursery. QSA is still discussing this idea with the community, and they are keen to learn from what

they know of the situation for the Purga nursery and create a venture providing employment, stewardship of the land and its water resources, and income for the community.

I urge Friends who wish to learn more about QSA's support of First Nations projects to read Chapter 3 (pages 65-92) of *Friends in Deed* by Heather Saville or contact the office to learn more about current projects. I will leave the last few words to Heather:

... connection to traditional lands and spiritual roots... provide a place of healing for the harm caused by so many years of dislocation and forced assimilation. Heather Saville, *Friends in Deed*, p. 81

Notes

1. Uluru Statement From the Heart, 2017 <https://ulurustatement.org/>
2. Heather Saville, *Friends in deed: 50 years of Quaker Service Australia*, Quakers Australia, 2009
3. Heather Saville, *Friends in deed*, pp 90-91
4. Jundi Mibunn Beenleigh Housing and Development Company <http://www.bhdc.org.au/cms/index.php/jinndi-mibunn>

QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are culturally sensitive, as well as being economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

Find us on Facebook for more photos and stories: facebook.com/quakerserviceaustralia.

Unit 14, 43-53 Bridge Road, Stanmore, NSW 2048 Australia • administration@qsa.org.au
PHONE+61 2 8054 0400 • FAX: +61 2 9225 9241 • ABN 35 989 797 918



ACFID
MEMBER