

Passing the Bucks

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Artwork by Charlotte Moore

RIGHTING THE BALANCE IN FAVOUR OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

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By Charlotte Moore



It's 2007. Almost 3300 kilometres away from home, two women from Melbourne are standing in front of a school in regional Western Australia shielding their pale faces from the harsh Kimberly sun. They have one week to share their vision with the local community: to enable disadvantaged young women living in remote Australia to increase their confidence, self-esteem and well-being through singing, dance and drama.

This public school is in the heart of Halls Creek, a tiny town in the East Kimberley, 360 kilometres from the nearest regional centre. It's a quiet place, a one-street-wonder with a population of less than 2000, an IGA, a hardware store, a swimming pool, a school and a serious reputation. Surrounded by red dirt and scrubby bushland, this Kimberley pit stop has become the epitome of Indigenous disadvantage.

In 2008, Halls Creek was named the town with the lowest quality of life in Australia, it's socio-economic status placing it in the bottom 0.1 per cent of the Australian population. Ninety seven per cent of its inhabitants are of Indigenous background and it has the youngest population in all of Western Australia. It's not the kind of place you'd head to on holiday.

Those two women were Nicole Muir and Kylie Lee-Archer. They had both taken a week off from their satisfying roles with the Australian School of Performing Arts - Nicole as the CEO of the company and Kylie as the General Manager of Operations. With forty years of experience between them, the pair are currently considered to be powerhouses of the performing arts industry; their successes involve transforming Judith Curphey OAM's small group of young women in 1984 into the

Australian Girls Choir, the most successful children's choir in the country, and setting up Australian Arts Alive or a3, a educational performing arts program for school-aged children across the country. Their next mission started in Halls Creek - Girls from Oz.

They didn't expect to meet with resentment from the community. "Our initial point of contact, Shona Brown, sat us in front of everyone she could possibly think of. One of the women was a very angry Stolen Generation woman who had been doing a lot in the town. She was furious that the girls were in such a desperate situation. And she had every right to be so."

Indigenous people are over-represented in every aspect of society. Aboriginal women account for around two per cent of the female Australian population but a third of Australia's female prison population. Indigenous infant and



L-R: Kylie Lee-Archer, Nicole Muir, Jane Curphey, Judith Curphey and Girls from Oz, Halls Creek

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child mortality rates are double that of non-Aboriginal Australians. Indigenous women in Western Australia are 45 times more likely to experience family violence than non-Indigenous women, are the victims of homicide at a rate that is ten times greater than the rate for non-Indigenous women and there have been more deaths of Aboriginal women through assault than of Aboriginal people in custody. Over a third of Aboriginal women and nearly half of Aboriginal men will die before they reach the age of 45. Around 80% of these deaths are due to preventable chronic diseases.

Yet the statistic that had the greatest impact on Nicole and Kylie was that of teenage pregnancy. With rates for Indigenous mothers aged 15-18 nearly eight times that of the non-Aboriginal population, they knew that something had to change. "The incidence of rape in remote communities is mind-bogglingly bad," Nicole says. "We certainly have heard stories of girls wearing up to seven layers of clothes to bed so then their drunken uncle at home can't rape them."

Although this isn't the case for every girl, Girls from Oz has identified that self-confidence and self-

esteem are characteristics that can help young women avoid these situations and the performing arts provides the perfect vehicle for girls to learn these skills.

"We know that many of their mothers want them to increase their self-confidence and they don't want them to suffer from shame, a deeply embedded characteristic in the girls," Kylie says.

For Nicole, this desire drives her love of the program. "One of the things I have said many times is that if I can help any girl that I encounter to have enough self confidence to get herself out of a sexually threatening situation, then I've achieved what I set out to do. To speak up, or just plain old not put your head down and tolerate this because that's what's gone on before, that's what happens to women."

The program also seeks to provide alternative role models for the girls, a change from their school teacher, parents or elders with diverse life experience.

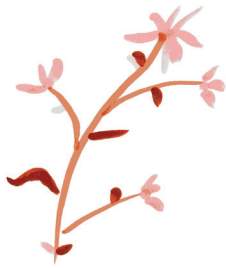
As a result, Girls from Oz employs young female performing arts professionals, many of whom started their careers with the Australian Girls Choir. The women visit the school once a term for five days, and the trips culminate in the selection of around eight girls to travel to a capital city and perform in the Australian Girls Choir's Annual Concert.

Kylie admits that there's something valuable about Girls from Oz not being at the school full time. "It changes how the girls see us; it changes the kind of

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Gerard Neesham with students from Clontarf Foundation Academy



relationship that we can build with them; it changes our sustainability. What we are getting from talking to the schools and talking to participants is that there is actually something cool about us, for want of a better word, breezing in. It means that we remain filled with enthusiasm and passion and joy and lightheartedness and kindness and patience.”

Additionally, it allows the Girls from Oz facilitators to maintain their skills. “You just don’t get that calibre of performing arts practitioner and educator in Carnarvon or Halls Creek. It is just very, very rare. It’s horizon expanding.”

But the one challenge that Girls from Oz are facing is financial as their struggle for funding is a fight they cannot seem to win. “It’s one of the few things in my entire life where I’ve thought on some days, this is actually too hard,” Nicole says. “I pick myself up and I dust myself off and I keep going of course because I won’t ever stop.” And it’s no wonder Girls from Oz is having trouble. Australia suffers from an endemic forgetfulness about the plight of Indigenous women. The 2014-15 Federal Budget clearly illustrates this.

The Federal Budget 2014-15

Savings

- ✕ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet - Indigenous Affairs Programme - \$409.2 million lost
- ✕ Torres Strait Regional Authority - \$3.5 million lost
- ✕ Department of Health - Indigenous Australians Health Programme - \$209.8 million lost
- ✕ Women’s Leadership and Development Strategy - \$1.6 million lost

Cessation

- ✕ National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples - Funding ceased

Expansion

- ✕ Clontarf Foundation Academy - Additional \$13.4 million over four years to fund an additional 3 000 places for boys
- ✕ Community Engagement Police Officers - Additional \$2.4 million over four years to engage twelve officers between 2014 and 2016
- ✕ Permanent Police Presence in Remote Indigenous Communities - Additional \$54.1 million over four years

Source: Australian Government, Budget 2014-15, Expense Measures

Clontarf Foundation Academy and Girls from Oz have a lot in common. Using Australian Rules and Rugby League as a hook for engagement with education, the program provides young Aboriginal men with the support, mentoring and motivation they need to become valued and successful members of society.

Eight years before Nicole, Kylie and Girls from Oz, a man by the name of Gerard Neesham found himself on a similar journey in Perth. A teacher and a football coach, Neesham had just resigned from the Fremantle Dockers when he was asked to help out at the Christian Brothers' Aboriginal College. He ended up coaching the school's football side and discovered that by linking their passion for footy with the requirement of attending school, he could positively impact the educational outcomes.

Fast forward fifteen years and the Clontarf Foundation Academy now receives almost \$29 million in funding, enough to put 4000 Indigenous boys through the program by the end of the year. At an annual cost of \$7500 per boy, the program is funded in three equal segments by the Federal Government, the relevant state or territory government and the private sector who each contribute \$2500. As illustrated by the 2014-15 Budget, the Federal Government has pledged \$13.4 million to the organisation over five years.

Shane Kiely, Clontarf's General Manager of

Partnerships and Communications, explains that with the support of this funding, Clontarf has developed into a sustainable organisation. Furthermore, he argues that it makes economic sense for the Government to invest in Indigenous boys.

"If that same kid goes into the juvenile justice system in Australia, it's costing the taxpayer \$440,000 annually. It seems like simple economics to me. If the kid goes to gaol, there's a fair chance that he's going to come out, be a drain on welfare, probably be violent towards his partner and not value education."

Whilst it's encouraging that the boys are receiving significant support, the decision to drastically cut funding to Women's Leadership and Development Strategy, the only Government supported female Indigenous program, illustrates the bureaucratic decisions that lead to the incremental development of discrimination against Indigenous women.

Following that first trip to Halls Creek, Girls from Oz hopped onto the funding treadmill. Over the past three years Nicole has met, called, discussed and lobbied every possible funding source, only to be told by the WA Government that the organisation falls between five different departments - Arts and Culture, Education, Aboriginal Education, Aboriginal Affairs and Regional Development.

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The author with students from Girls from Oz, Halls Creek

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without a map. Ministers and Director-Generals all agree that there is a seriously disproportionate amount of funding being directed towards Aboriginal boys. It's not just the boys even going to gaol, the girls go to gaol and yet because of the bureaucratic system, I'm still waiting. They have been saying for the last couple of years they're not very far away from putting a tender out for people who deliver programs like us to apply for recurring funding. That would make all of my dreams come true, at least for two of the three years."

While they wait, the organisation has instead turned to private and philanthropic funding. With the support of the Australian School of Performing Arts firmly behind them, Girls from Oz receives regular donations from staff salary sacrifice, chorister contributions and fundraising campaigns.

Their latest venture saw them secure over \$36000 from a matched funding program with Creative Partnerships Australia, the Australian Girls Choir and GiveNow along with one-off grants from the Critical Response Fund and Lotterywest.

But for an organisation with such vision and determination, the money just doesn't reach far enough. "Girls from Oz doesn't have the resources to allocate to content design, to planning and curriculum, to take that to the next level," Kylie says. "That can be quite frustrating - it really is, time and money."

It's March 2015 and I'm standing in the same place where Nicole and Kylie stood, and looking out across the same scrubby landscape they gazed at.

Five days and twenty five Girls from Oz sessions later and I am beginning to understand the complexities, the immense challenges and the beauty of this part of the world and the people who live here. My two colleagues and I watch as progress is made. Four-year-old children dance for the first time, their little hands waving scarfs in the air. We drag the old piano out of storage and sing 'Survivor' by Destiny's Child with the Year Five and Six girls, hoping they know we're singing about them too. Year Seven and Eight girls find a moment to dream, to trust and to feel just that little bit more confident.

And then there's that afternoon after a busy day at school, when I find myself splashing around in the picturesque Caroline Pool with five Indigenous kids; my pale skin poked and giggled at, my nail polish examined and my sunglasses modelled by five bedraggled faces.

One of the little girls pulled me aside, hugs me and asked if she can call me sister.

"All we need to do is to help them find their element and to help them be the best version of themselves that they can be," says Kylie. "Resilience and self esteem and confidence and teamwork and accountability and risk taking and all of those things that we believe are the important things that we're doing in Girls from Oz. It's not about singing and dancing, it's not about becoming a doctor, it's about being all of those important things, it's about knowing your own strengths - that's enough."