

*Platforms for Indigenous and Non-
Indigenous Youth to Bridge the Cultural
Divide in Northern Territory*



“Birritjimi” image: Patrick Walker



“Garma Festival 2017” image: Patrick Walker

Disclaimer:

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Executive Summary

This project set out to inform the Northern Territory Government on the need to provide platforms for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous youth across the Territory to come together and be as one. The project aimed to gather relevant ideas and information from individuals and organisations about the need to provide platforms to help bridge the cultural divide between non Indigenous and Indigenous Australians.

Both of us are passionate young Territorians, haven growing up in Nhulunbuy, we have gained a strong appreciation for the culture and tradition that's surrounds us. Completing our final year of school in Nhulunbuy, we have become familiar with issues that are facing young Territorians such as the cultural divide. We have asked ourselves the question, "what has been done in the past and what *will* been done to further overcome the cultural divide?" As long term residents of Nhulunbuy we feel so lucky and appreciative of the access we have to learn about Aboriginal culture and believe that if other young people had access to learn about Aboriginal culture there would be less of a divide amongst Indigenous and Non-Indigenous young people in the NT.

In the research process we collected relevant data from surveys, conversations and research that gave us further insight in the situation. The surveys were the main form or raw data, and provided insight into what programs are working and what is needed in order to bridge the cultural divide.

We learnt that there are a number platforms having excellent outcomes to provide learning opportunities for Non-Indigenous people and that there are a number of ways this learning can be accessed. It was also evident that non-Indigenous people are searching and seeking for these opportunities.

Introduction

As year 12 residents of Nhulunbuy, we have both been exposed to the vibrant, patient and lively culture that is of Traditional Indigenous of North East Arnhem land. Naturally, we both share this passion to learn, appreciate and involve ourselves. We strongly believe that we, as a younger generation, operate and work most proactively when integrated and united with one another, across all cultures.

We have personally recognised that within our remote community of Nhulunbuy, there is a lack of environments and safe, warm spaces that invite *all* young people to be together and *be* together.

Throughout our project, the aim was to emphasise and demonstrate the importance of creating and offering platforms and spaces for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous youth. This is an important issue to address as to work together collaboratively it will unify and allow for progress.

We know that around one in five Australians say they have experienced race-hate talk, such as verbal abuse, racial slurs or name-calling (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). It is anticipated that platforms and spaces or environments, which incorporate the sharing of culture, knowledge and skills, will reduce racism in our society and further allow for mutual appreciation and respect across a variation of cultures. We need to better understand and acknowledge our differences rather than let them set us apart and further divide us.

At a time when there is so much going on in the national conversation about Reconciliation including Constitutional Recognition of the First Australians, there are encouraging signs in North East Arnhem land and that young people are embracing and advocating for equality and equal opportunity, however we want to explore what other avenues are available for young people.

This project examined the following:

- the success of the Garma Festival's Youth Forum;
- Community Engagement Programs run through Nhulunbuy High School; and
- Reconciliation Projects and Organisations

This project was used to evaluate and recognise platforms that offer young people to come together and learn from one another's backgrounds. We want to demonstrate the importance of large scale and smaller scale opportunities for young people to break down the cultural divide, learn about one another and ultimately live more harmoniously in our community.

Discussion

Across the process of this project, we gathered our primary data from surveys, personal experiences and general conversations from people within our community. When speaking with members of the Stars and Clontarf foundations at Nhulunbuy High School, we gained an insight into their roles and how they perceive certain issues within our school community.

Getting information for this report came with many different challenges. One that stood out to us was the western style survey format. As English is a second or third language for many of our peers in Nhulunbuy it was hard to get survey responses on what can or has impacted them in bridging the cultural divide. This limited the amount of Indigenous people who answered the survey and also highlights some of the challenges we face to break down the cultural divide. Learnings from this experience demonstrate the need to create learning and discussion platforms that are designed not only for a western style of learning, but are also inclusive of Aboriginal people.

Through our research we explore a number of platforms that provide a way for Indigenous and Non Indigenous people to come together and learn from one another and we explored further ways of how people can better connect with these opportunities in Nhulunbuy to bridge the cultural divide. We want to demonstrate that there are a number of ways we can make our community more inclusive from a large scale event to smaller community run projects.

The Garma Festival



We have both been attending the Garma Festival for years. Garma Festival is an environment where young people gather to share their voices, their knowledge and skills while learning about Aboriginal Culture. The Garma Festival incorporates visual art, ancient storytelling, dance – including the famous nightly bunggul – and music, as well as other important forums and education and training programs relevant to cultural tourism, craft, governance and youth leadership. The Garma gathering brings together business leaders, international political leaders, intellectuals, academics and journalists to discuss the most pressing issues facing Australia (YYF, 2017).

The Garma Youth Forum partner with an Indigenous Leadership Program run by FYA called IMPACT. The Leadership group is made up of several young Indigenous people from across the NT. They participate in Garma to actively provide other young people attending the Youth Forum (Indigenous and Non-Indigenous) with peers to look up to by developing their leadership skills, facilitation and organising and running team-building activities. Within this youth community throughout Garma Festival, there are other activities that explore educational, experimental and creative aspects – all immersing young people in Yolgnu Culture.

Volunteer experiences such as this provide young people with scope into the future and the possibilities they can strive for and achieve. Outside of the Youth Forum, there are endless activities that aim to inspire and educate guests attending Garma to learn about Culture. From personal experiences, these activities range from basket weaving, spear making, bush walks amongst the traditional lands, daily bungul (dancing), mannikay (song). We have taken part in traditional ceremonial practices such as 'The Smoking Ceremony,' which we have been told is the traditional method of discipline and cleansing via the steam of reeds from a sacred billabong.

One of the main aims of Garma is to provide facilitation for cross-cultural sharing of knowledge and identity. *“Facilitate the sharing of knowledge and culture, thereby fostering a greater understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.”*

It is important to note that students from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne attend annually through school-based fundraisings. Approximately 100 -150 students from across Australia attend the Garma Youth Forum. Travelling students can spend thousands of dollars to travel to attend the Garma Festival, this emphasises the great lengths young people and educators are going to in order to search for this cultural experience. It is a chance for hundreds of young people just like us to come together, from all across Australia, to learn and discover the same love for the Culture we are accustomed to as locals.

As locals we have knowledge, respect and access to the Yolngu culture that is right on our doorstep. It is our hope that other young people have the same mutual respect and knowledge across the whole of Australia as we do here in Nhulunbuy. Garma only provides a glimpse into the culture and tradition of Australia and it shouldn't be the only opportunity to access this respect and knowledge. Through our experiences, we believe that the best way for people to respect one another is through immersive experiences. We wish that all Indigenous cultures are as well recognised as they are here. This recognition will expand on what is showcased at Garma, and will further build relationships and therefore bridge the cultural divide.

While this cultural experience can be very expensive, we feel that from personal experience and through our surveys that activity's held on the land of the traditional owners like the Yolngu people is the best way learn in depth about traditional stories, experiences and ways.

We conducted a survey on the Garma Experience. This survey was distributed to past participants of the festival, in particular, the Youth Forum. We didn't get as many responses as we hoped for; however, it comes to explain the importance of their experiences and the emphasis on more opportunities like it. Majority of the responses were from Nhulunbuy High School as well as St Francis College in Brisbane. When asked, "Why did you attend Garma?" majority of the responses were based on *“learning about the Indigenous culture that surrounds us”*. One response was positive in saying *“was lucky enough to be asked by my school as a chance to get to know my culture more”*. .

The survey explored the question *“Do you believe being exposed to traditional Aboriginal culture opened your eyes to the lack of cultural awareness across Australia?”* Responses included *“Absolutely”, “Very much so”* and *“Definitely, before moving to Nhulunbuy and attending Garma the amount of times I have, I had absolutely no clue about these people and their traditions.”* These responses demonstrate the impact that having exposure to culture can change and individual's perspective quickly.

When asked *“Would you like to see similar platforms made available for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people in order to learn from one another?”* every single response to the survey said *“YES”*. This shows the clear need for the government to look into creating further opportunities for cultural experiences across the Northern Territory.

“Why is learning from one another essential for overcoming our country’s cultural divide?” – The question provided different perspectives in responses like - “So we can see that we aren’t all that different”, “Culture helps bring people together, why can’t people of different cultures do the same for one another?”, “Australia’s culture should be exposed to the world, just like we learn about other countries and their culture in learning at school”. Overall the responses continue to show the clear need of further education on the traditional owners of the Australian Land.

Community engagement programs



As a part of this project, we also wanted to explore what impact smaller scale community engagement opportunities can have to break down the Cultural divide. We believe that Nhulunbuy High School is achieving great outcomes through hosting community events in gradually bridging the cultural divide on a community level.

One example of this is the staff and students of Nhulunbuy High School held a community barbecue in the community of Birritjimi (Wallaby Beach). The aim was to make the Indigenous parents and families feel included in the High School community and their child’s learning. Whilst this does not directly target young people, it makes young people feel more secure and supported in the school environment. Without a doubt, Indigenous people feel most comfortable on their own land, when they are felt understood and respected and especially if the person speaks their language. It is important that parents and extended family are actively included in their child’s learning and this will further close the cultural divide.

In the future, we would recommend that this is followed through and an outreach program must be created. This would involve staff and school leaders regularly visiting communities and maintaining communication and relationships. By visiting the communities where young

people are from also provides the school community with a better understanding of the young persons environment and culture at home. This is a mutually beneficial relationship which ensures two way learning between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people.

We conducted an interview with the assistant principal at Nhulunbuy High School to further gain insight into how we can be more inclusive and what the barriers are for Indigenous students.

These issues may be contributing the root of the issue that is the cultural divide. *"We are currently seeing lots of students from the Boarding School getting homesick."* This is probably due to children having to leave their communities and families, in addition to this they may not feel included and accepted into our school. She explained that there are increasing numbers of younger students that are becoming addicted to smoking and petrol sniffing; this could be their way of 'coping' with their feelings of exclusion. *"It is not apart of their culture to come and speak with Non-Indigenous people to ask for help. Lots of kids don't ask because they are shy."* Because of damaging impacts on mental health and social well-being, they may turn to smoking or petrol sniffing which negatively affects their physical health.

Our principal also explained that *"There is a larger aboriginal population at school it causes lots of stress for teachers because they concerned on how to teach these children."* If we provide platforms for students and teachers alike to better learn about Aboriginal culture, we believe that the students would feel more comfortable as well as the teachers having a better cultural lens when teaching.

Community engagement opportunities such as a community BBQ are low cost, and demonstrate another cost effective way of bridging the cultural divide. It creates closer relationships between the young students of our school, their families and their teachers and student's leaders whom they are in the class room with everyday. We believe that through opportunities like this, relationships will soon grow stronger and have a huge impact on the children's education.

The ICEA Foundation

During our research we explored a non for profit organization called the ICEA Foundation. This program is a Western Australian youth lead organisation with the aim to facilitate 'reconciliation inspired by young people'. This foundation is breaking the cultural divided by building relationships between Indigenous and Non Indigenous young people, with the aim this will eventually break the divide across the nation. The ICEA Foundation believe they will inspire reconciliation through:

- Positive experiences
- Genuine Relationships
- Cross Cultural Understanding

They run events that are relevant, engaging and fun for youth both Indigenous and non- Indigenous whilst also directly targeting and overcoming issues that they face.

We feel a youth lead program like would be greatly useful in the Northern Territory and be a
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start in providing a platform for young Territorians to start breaking the cultural divide here, on traditional land, in a highly multicultural place.

Conclusion

We anticipated that through the interviews and surveys we conducted we would demonstrate the importance of large scale and smaller scale opportunities for young people to breakdown the cultural divide, learn about one another and ultimately live more harmoniously in our community.

It was found that there are indeed gaps amongst young people that are due to culture and a lack of awareness and understanding. We discovered this first hand when undertaking this project, as we found it challenging to ensure the voice of Indigenous people was present. However, it has been found that through events such as The Garma Festival, especially the Youth Forum, youth can overcome this.

From the above data, it is evident that:

- Non-Indigenous people are searching for opportunities to better engage, learn and understand more about Aboriginal Culture and that at times they are finding it very hard to access this. They are willing to pay a high price to travel to attend events such as Garma or feel that they can only have access to this at events such as Garma
- We believe that these opportunities are ways to have less division amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within our communities
- There are cost effective ways to offer these learning opportunities and it must be two way. The Non-Indigenous community needs to visit/engage with the Indigenous community (with approval) and not just expect the Indigenous community to come to them
- Simple, low cost activities such as community BBQ's are opportunities to share, connect and converse can make our communities more inclusive

Recommendations

Based on the learnings from our project, we believe that:

- Government should continue to recognise the value of cross cultural education amongst young Territorians, including learning local languages;
- The school community has an important role to play in providing cross cultural education for young people and can set up our communities to be a safer and more inclusive space after young people leave school;
- There is great value in young people attending and having learning opportunities at Garma Festival;
- Investigate a grant round for small scale cultural learning projects such as community bbqs on country, in consultation with the Aboriginal community that the school community can apply for in an attempt to bridge the cultural divide.

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Appendix 1. Survey Questions:

- Q1. Where are you from? (School, city, community etc.)
- Q2. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
- Q3. What year (or years) did you go to Garma?
- Q4. Why did you attend Garma?
- Q5. Do you believe being exposed to traditional Aboriginal culture opened your eyes to the lack of cultural awareness across Australia?
- Q6. In your opinion, do you believe Garma was inclusive and welcoming of youth?
- Q7. Do you believe that the Youth Forum provides enough cultural activities that benefit both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous youth?
- Q8. Would you like to see similar platforms made available for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous in order to learn from one another?
- Q9. Away from Garma, where do you have the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal culture?
- Q10. If yes to the above question, why is learning from one another essential for overcoming our country's cultural divide?

Appendix 2. Quotes and Discussion with Assistant Principal

"There is a larger aboriginal population at school it causes lots of stress for teachers because they concerned on how to teach these children."

"For many English is not their first language, it can be their third or fourth. There is a certain way to teach Indigenous children"

Children that are not from this area in particular feel quite ostracized. These leads to quite a bit of bullying, they become discriminatory between themselves.

"Our indigenous students are not very patient with students of special needs within indigenous community."

"School is left to deal and cope with special needs students. They have not had the help they have needed, this is detrimental to their health and well being."

"Lots of aboriginal students have gone through trauma. Violence happens more out at communities, and there are no counselling services or they do not seek services."

"It is not apart of their culture to come and speak with Non-Indigenous people. Lots of kids do not want to ask for help because they are shy."

"Sniffing amongst students... has come into school, gets picked up pretty quickly, heavy smokers- the students do not have patches, nicotine gum, so the school nurse is going to assist students on giving up smoking, so it doesn't interfere with their education."