

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Building Conflict Capability

The AIDC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Mediation Training Scholarships Program has gone from strength to strength in 2014. AIDC has had the privilege of training exceptional leaders in both NSW and WA. In 2015 we will be expanding our programme across the country. In this Bulletin our Communications Consultant, Bernard O'Shea interviews two of our 2014 participants from regional NSW, Cheryl Penrith and Leroy Johnson.



Leroy Johnson - Chairperson, Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Lands Council.

Leroy represents a community of about 600 people from Wilcannia in the north-western corner of NSW. "We have one petrol station, a pub, one café but two football teams," he says.

He said he initially found the dispute resolution course nerve-wracking. "It was something new, and you are mingling with the top end of town, which is daunting, but by the Wednesday I felt comfortable.

"The course has given me a map to look at the disputes and conflicts that I come across." Much of dispute resolution, Leroy says, is "about letting people come to their own conclusions about what should happen, instead of having the decisions superimposed on them.

"We talk about self-determination a lot, and this process allows the parties involved to do this. They then own it – that's the trick, I think."

Leroy says he didn't have "a lightbulb moment" on the course, "but it cleared a lot of fog".

"There are a lot of issues in the community. It's remote, there are not many options for work and the employment prospects are low. The 14 to 25/30 is the biggest group – the average age of the men there is 33. I deal with a lot of grief and loss, of losing family early. A lot of the kids move away or get locked up.

"The thing about the dispute resolution course is you get lots of opportunities to practise and to see others practise, and practise makes perfect.

Leroy says there will be a lot of native title determination coming up at federal and state level in the year ahead. "I'm sure there will be dispute. I'm hoping to be able to play a role. I want to practise and get better at it."

"Someone I knew had done the course, and I thought it would be valuable in my line of work, and I can see how I can use what I learned in the mentoring that I do.

"Aboriginal people often will rather avoid conflict than address it, so they will walk away from it without saying what their feelings are. This can lead to misunderstandings.

"Lots of times it's pride, lots of times it's cultural – you don't speak back to your elders, for example. Sometimes the issues that people have with one another aren't really issues – it could be the way they talk to each other – so the perception becomes the issue."



Cheryl Penrith - Director, Moreton Consulting; Principal, CM Consulting and Director, Diran Bila.

Cheryl says the Aboriginal communities are often fractured and have factions. "It could be there's a group that aren't engaged with anything, who don't have a voice."

Thus when local government and community officials are making decisions about people who don't have a voice, it is obviously not the ideal process and may not lead to the desired outcomes. The decision makers are unsure of what the group wants, and the people in the group can't articulate their needs.

Dispute resolution courses such as those offered by the AIDC can help community mentors and mediators bridge the communication gaps.

"A lot of it is around managing relationships – the way in which we deal with each other," says Cheryl. "It's a lot of what we really do."

Cheryl said she liked the group dynamic and camaraderie among the 15 people on the course. "Barristers, company directors, mediators – they all have the same struggle."

"The best thing I got out of it all week was that I changed someone's perception – she was a mediator – that they couldn't do anything, that they weren't getting anywhere. I said something and it took off from there, it was a breakthrough. She said, 'I'm never going to forget you, you've changed my life'."

Cheryl works in the Wagga Wagga region, and although it is more urbanised than remote Aboriginal communities, she says a lot of the issues are similar. "My expectation for Aboriginal people in a town like Wagga Wagga is that people should be thriving, but we're not. There is something missing, something not right. People are still living on the edge.

“There are services there, but are they the right ones?”