

All is Not Lost in the Fight to Solve Global Indigenous Disadvantage

Written by Samatha Lenkic



No matter where you are in the world, Indigenous people are severely disadvantaged. In the United States, Native Americans are less likely to hold a high school diploma or a bachelor degree than their non-Indigenous peers. Globally, almost half (47%) of all Indigenous people have no education, compared to 17% of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Despite these sad statistics, there are glimmers of hope across the world. This Indigenous Peoples' Day (October 9th), we wanted to showcase a program that appears to have achieved what so many governments all around the world have failed to achieve – to close the socio-economic disparity between Indigenous people and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Almost as far away from the United States as you can get, is a little program for Indigenous youth in Australia. Located in the south-east of the country is a small regional city, Shepparton. The town is home to the largest Aboriginal population in the state outside of its capital city Melbourne, with as many as one in 10 people being of Aboriginal descent. However, in the early 2000s as many as 8 in 10 Aboriginal residents were unemployed. But within one generation, this has now changed.

This change has occurred thanks to a unique school-to-work transition program for Aboriginal children and youth that was developed within the community. It is a model that has also managed to remain independent of government funding, instead choosing to be almost entirely funded by philanthropy. The program has attracted funding from philanthropic organizations all over the world, including Paul Newman's Own Foundation and the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust in the United States. There are now talks of expanding the model to not only other Indigenous communities within Australia, but to international Indigenous communities including ones in North America.

Twenty-six years ago, in Shepparton, the socio-economic disparity between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents was stark. Retired businessman and long-time Shepparton resident Jim O'Connor remembers despite Shepparton being a thriving regional economy, the Aboriginal population were known for working in low-skilled jobs or being unemployed, while their children and youth rarely made it past middle school. This often led to a dysfunctional cycle of juvenile crime and anti-social behaviors. Jim always believed the disadvantage began in the classroom. "The average person's view of Aboriginal dysfunctionality in young people is kids pinching cards. But the majority of kids that aren't making it are quietly falling behind in the back of classrooms," he said.

He noticed government programs aimed at improving Indigenous people's socio-economic status seemed to wait until Aboriginal people were in jail or unemployed before intervening. Jim felt that by this time, the damage had already been done, particularly when Indigenous

education attainment was so poor. It wasn't until Jim met an Aboriginal man who had recently immigrated to Shepparton who also shared Jim's frustrations, that an idea for how the status quo could finally be shifted was born.

This man was Adrian Appo, an Aboriginal man who grew up in the northern part of Australia. Growing up, he was considered an exception to the rule. He had not only completed high school, but he had excelled. Despite the occasional racist barrier during his career (he remembers one particularly incident in the 1980s when a psychologist told him that Aboriginal people 'did not understand conceptual thinking' and therefore he wouldn't be admitted into the air force), Adrian built a successful career as an electrician. Eventually he relocated to Shepparton and began working at the local government employment office. His role was to help local unemployed Aboriginal people find work. However, he soon became very frustrated with the system. Help was only really available for long-term, unemployed Aboriginal people. "Maybe it's my tech background, but I just thought there's a flaw in that method of thinking," he said. "I just thought, this is not going to change the game. What we're going to do is take 10 people out of the unemployment pool every year and give them a job, but in that time, you've got 20 people falling into it and by the time they swim across to us, unemployment is not their only issue," he explained.

Adrian met Jim when he became employed at Jim's business Worktrainers, a recruitment firm for disadvantaged people. Adrian found that Jim also shared Adrian's concerns with how reactive governments were to Aboriginal unemployment and they both agreed that earlier and much more long-term intervention was the key. Jim agreed to let Adrian use his office to work on a side program after-hours that would help Aboriginal people transition through the key moments in life. Adrian realized that he had been 'successful' because he had successfully moved through each transition stage in the education system. First there was primary school, then high school and then college education or employment. However, many of the Aboriginal children and youth were dropping out once they got to middle school, which would lead them to a life of welfare dependency and unemployment. Since the education system took a young person from the age of five to 18, Adrian and Jim decided the program would need to commit to the next two generations of Aboriginal youth in order for there to be long-term impact. This program was eventually titled Jobs4U2 and would be run under a charity named Ganbina, a word meaning Rise Up in the local Indigenous language.

Once the program was up and running, it didn't take long for the local community to feel there was a change in the air. Local high school teachers started commenting that more Indigenous kids than ever before were staying in school. Not only were they staying in school, but they

were thriving. Aboriginal youth were suddenly graduating with their high school diploma, often the first in their families to do so and then going onto further education or employment. Until very recently, this was a very rare thing for an Indigenous person to achieve.

What made Ganbina's Jobs4U2 program different from anything that came before it, was not only the long-term generational commitment, but how the model continued to expand and change until it addressed nine key elements that had the greatest impact on whether an Indigenous person would succeed in the education system. Ganbina not only ensured kids had necessary life skills such as a bank account and were registered for the tax office, but they also ensured children had money for school textbooks and access to free tutoring if they were struggling in subjects such as English and Math. The impact started to not only be apparent within the education system, but outside of it. "I notice there are now Aboriginal kids behind the checkout, in service jobs all over town. You didn't see that 10 to 15 years ago," Jim said.

After twenty-six years since the program began, a lot has changed for the local Aboriginal community, but the work is far from done. Last year, Ganbina celebrated its 25th anniversary and since 2013, a new CEO Anthony Cavanagh has been leading the organization. Similar to Adrian, Anthony is an Aboriginal man who has overcome significant adversity in his life. Homeless as a teenager and stealing fruit from markets to survive, he managed to finish high school and it is this he says that prevented him from becoming another statistic.

Now that the model has been refined and proven to be a success in the Shepparton community, Anthony has ambitions to expand the program across not only Australia but also other countries. To date, there has been interest from a Native American tribe in Los Angeles, as well as Canadian and New Zealand Indigenous communities.

"We know the model is successful. We want other communities to have the success that we're having each year in Shepparton. We're really keen to talk to other communities who are interested in hearing about what we do, why we do it, and the way we do it," Anthony said.

One small program at the opposite side of the world, may just prove that with the right thinking and determination, there is hope for the world's Indigenous people.

For further information about the work Ganbina does visit www.ganbina.com.au

This content was paid for and created by Ganbina. The editorial staff of *The Chronicle* had no role in its preparation.