

A juggernaut of impact

WHEN EVIDENCE & POSSIBILITY TELLS THE STORY BEST

A once-homeless teen is now a nonprofit CEO raising millions for highly successful Indigenous youth programs. **Anthony Cavanagh** shares what lived experience and proven impact can achieve



Ganbina CEO Anthony Cavanagh with high-achieving student Jake Zerbato.

At 13 years old, Anthony Cavanagh took to the streets. His mother had walked out, and he was left surrounded by substance abuse and family violence. He slept under bridges, in trainyards, on couches and in laneways. He found food on the ground and stole from Melbourne's Queen Victoria Market so he could eat.

Today he is CEO of Ganbina, home of Australia's most successful Indigenous school-to-work transition program. He exists far from the fear and instability of his younger days, but a common thread connects him to his youth. That thread is education, a literal lifesaver for a teenage Anthony and a beacon of hope for hundreds of young people today.

F&P's Fiona Atkinson sat down with Anthony as he explained how the power of proof and potential have helped him raise over \$13 million to keep First Nations children and youth engaged in school, study and employment.

SCHOOL — A SHELTER AND HAVEN

A Taungurung man, Anthony grew up in the housing commission estates of Melbourne's Dandenong and Broadmeadows in the 1970s. Lacking role models (the adults in his life were illiterate and troubled), he navigated his chaotic teenage years by finding solace in school and the structure it provided.

"Regular faces — friends and teachers. Somewhere to be. Somewhere I felt protected. I had a sense of belonging. And honestly, a fair bit of it was filling in time. It gave me a solid sense of purpose and I'd say that sometimes it saved my life. I had friendships there. Those friends provided me with shelter and care over the years," says Anthony.

After finishing school, Anthony's first job was at the Nabisco biscuit factory. "I was just happy I wasn't in jail or dead," he recalls. In his early twenties, Anthony chose to channel his life experience into community work. At 22 he began his first government job in a Parkville boys' home. He could relate to the young

men and share what it was like to live on the streets. He encouraged the boys to stay with their family unit if possible, but mostly he emphasised education as the foundation for a better life. "I've continued to carry that belief with me and share it with many Indigenous boys and girls," says Anthony. "I say 'High school is probably the most important six years of your life. You don't want to live with regret that you didn't use the opportunity.'"

Anthony's career path would go on to traverse both community and corporate sectors as he worked across disability services, recruitment, public regional transport and in roles that supported people living with unemployment and disadvantage. Then, 10 years ago, he received a call from Gooreng Gooreng man Adrian Appo OAM, founder and then-CEO of Ganbina. He was moving on and the organisation was seeking a new leader. Anthony was the man for the job, and he has been changing young lives, and raising the money to do it, ever since.

ALL ABOUT GANBINA

In 1997, Ganbina, which means 'rise up' in Yorta Yorta language, was founded in Shepperton, located in Victoria's Goulburn Valley. "It was born out of high youth unemployment and crime rates, teenage pregnancy and loss of hope," explains Anthony. Until recently, the organisation's operations have remained in that area. They are set to expand, but more on that later.

The charity empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth (aged 6 to 25) to reach their full potential through the pillars of education, training and employment. At the heart of this work is a holistic one-on-one mentoring program called Jobs4U2. "It is Ganbina," says Anthony. The program includes initiatives such as cultural appreciation, scholarships and financial assistance, a learning-to-drive program, pathways to higher education and apprenticeships, leadership opportunities, and industry and corporate experience.

Expenses for 2022 were \$790,000 for program costs and \$737,000 for staff and operating costs. Divide that by 2022's 360 Jobs4U2 participants and you arrive at a very reasonable \$4,242 for each young person (of course, impact is more important than figures and we will get to that). So, costs are low, but it is still a lot to raise each year. How does Ganbina get there?

A ONE-MAN FUNDRAISING SHOW

Ganbina is 100% funded by philanthropy, predominantly from grants and the support of major funding partners, with a small trickle of workplace giving donations. To date, the organisation has not pursued government funding. That may change as its footprint expands.

Trusts and foundations account for 93% of funding, generally from successful applications to open grant rounds. Corporate support accounts for 5% of funding and 2% comes from individual donors. "They are all as important as each other, regardless of how much they give," says Anthony.

Income in 2022 was \$1.5 million, all from fundraising. This year it will be \$2.2 million. Anthony has secured \$1.7 million so far, and he is confident about the remaining \$500,000. Part of this confidence comes from a board who trust that he will meet target — and that is because he has, year after year. At every December board meeting, Anthony provides a budget for the following year (Ganbina budget for calendar years). The board will endorse a budget with a shortfall between \$300,000 and \$700,000. In 2019 that shortfall was the full \$700,000, which Anthony raised.

In the notoriously risk-averse nonprofit space, it is refreshing to hear of this level of leadership trust in their (one and only) fundraiser. "For the best part of 15 years we've headed into every year with a shortfall in our budget and we have successfully and exceedingly raised that money. I'm very comfortable with my ability to raise those funds. Of the \$499,000 left for this year, I have

about \$260,000 committed already," says Anthony.

Except for \$100,000 secured by former chair Sean Armistead, Anthony has fundraised \$13.4 million by himself over 10 years. Bear in mind that he is also overseeing the Ganbina operation and is a board member of Philanthropy Australia. He had his eyes fixed firmly on the dollars from day one and his focus proved to be critical given his first two years on the job coincided with the conclusion of several funding partnerships. "\$500,000 of our \$1.1 million income walked out the door in the space of six months in 2015," he says.

Believing there was risk in being dependent on a small number of funders, Anthony went to the board with a change of strategy that aimed to grow and diversify funders, focus on larger gifts and pursue grants over \$30,000. It paid off. There were 15 funding partners when Anthony joined Ganbina; today there are 28 and income has been on a continuous upwards trajectory.

"Of course, all the extra support increased our administration tenfold!" laughs Anthony. At the start of his tenure, he was CEO, fundraiser, marketer, media person and program developer. Since then, extra staff and expertise have been added to the mix, including a marketing and media manager, a national expansion manager, an executive assistant and an increased number of Shepperton operational staff.

"Now relationships and fundraising are my primary responsibility — they are 90% of my role. I enjoy it because each time I meet a potential donor I get to share the Ganbina story. And it's always an opportunity to enlighten someone about the situation for Indigenous communities."

When it comes to grant seeking, Anthony has been smart in his approach. The impact of Jobs4U2 is not limited to educational, training and employment outcomes. It touches youth, disadvantage, community welfare, juvenile justice, teenage pregnancy and Indigenous, regional and mental health-focused

programs. Anthony applies for grants relevant to all these areas.

And when it comes to philanthropists, "it's not very often that I actually ask for money," says Anthony. "When I go to a meeting about funding, I plan, I make sure I'm prepared, and I know as much as I can about the person I'm meeting. But I don't go in with preconceived ideas about how they might support. I just tell the stories and provide data and then if they want to give, that's fantastic. If they don't, they'll never hear from me again. I respectfully accept their choice."

"Fundraising is a tough gig, don't get me wrong. I enjoy it, I love it, but the reality is, every day I wake up and there are 350 to 400 Aboriginal kids who are depending on me to raise the money to keep the doors open."

"EVERY ABORIGINAL IS NOT BROKEN."

"The Ganbina model — my two daughters and I have lived it. We have broken the cycle of disadvantage in our family," says Anthony. "Both my girls have finished high school, gone to university and are now in corporate career jobs. I've lived what we are trying to achieve. So, when I tell the story of why the Ganbina model is successful and why it will continue to be

successful, it's completely real."

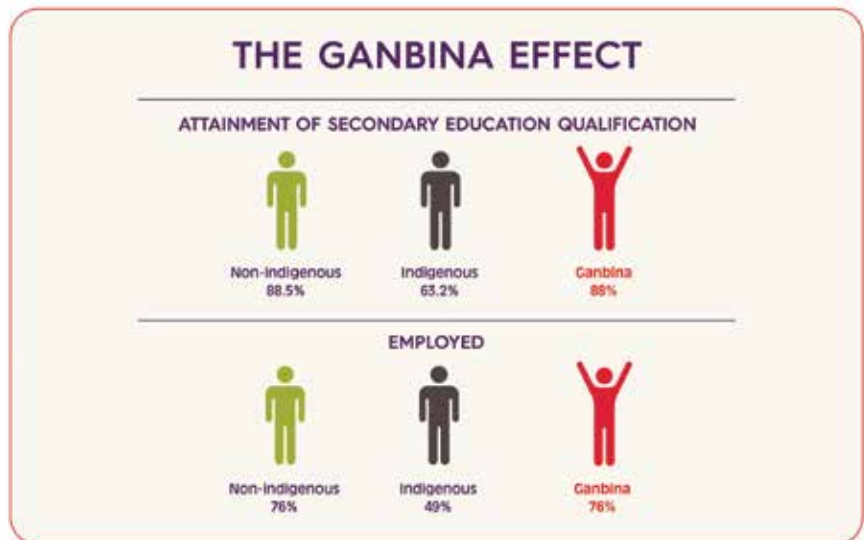
Not every nonprofit leader requires lived experience of the issue they tackle, but it certainly makes for powerful storytelling and authenticity, and that can be fundraising gold. That said, fundraising is not Anthony's primary objective for storytelling. "Yes, we hope it will attract some financial support, but the key driver is just to share the story. Every Aboriginal is not broken. There are so many success stories and not just from Ganbina. We want positive messages of change and influence to get out there."

"We need to be real, and we need to tell the truth. So, if we're telling positive stories, we're not making them up to help people feel good. They're real. Ganbina is a juggernaut of impact. It's been one of the most successful social impact pilots this country has ever seen. If you look at the data, the numbers stack up."

When Anthony joined Ganbina a decade ago, there were 280 children in the program annually, with the board planning to grow the organisation. Numbers grew to the mid-300s within a couple of years and today they hover around 400 participants each year.

A 2020 Social Return on Investment (SROI) report, prepared by Social Ventures

An impact infographic from Ganbina's November 2022 Partner Update.



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Australia, translated Ganbina’s impact into economic vocabulary, showing that for every \$1 invested in Ganbina, \$6.60 in social value is created.

Jobs4U2’s impact is profound. The average Year 12 graduation rate for the last 12 years — including the highly disrupted COVID period — is 88% (including three years of 100%), on-par with non-Indigenous Australia, and 76% of Ganbina participants aged 25-34 are employed, versus a national Indigenous average of 58%. “And to be clear, the jobs are career jobs, jobs of choice,” says Anthony. Stack these numbers against the fact that, nationally, 40% of all young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 17-24 are not engaged in education or work (compared to 20% of non-Indigenous youth) and you can see how Ganbina is making a difference.

This is cause for celebration and every year Ganbina holds an evening to applaud the achievements of students who strive to excel despite adversity. Some of those students go on to tertiary education both here and overseas, including Ganbina board member Lena-Jean Charles-Loffel, who was the organisation’s first Masters student, completing a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and a Masters in Public Health at the University of Melbourne.

“The narrative in the media, in government and elsewhere tends to be negative but I welcome any and every opportunity to tell the positive stories that are happening because Ganbina is closing the gap. I’m the storyteller, and our staff feed me the results,” says Anthony.

TAKING JOBS4U2 NATIONAL

In 2016, Ganbina partnered with PwC to expand its model into interested

communities. “Indigenous communities approach us; we don’t just walk in and presume we know what anyone needs,” says Anthony. “We’re not going to roll our wagons into town, kick the doors down and say, ‘we’re here to save you’, but any Aboriginal community who’s interested in our model can speak to me.” This sentiment reflects growing recognition of just how crucial Indigenous-led program design is. Nothing about us without us, as the saying goes.

Ganbina plan to pilot the model across seven new communities by 2027. The cost (including Shepparton) is estimated at \$40 million for 3200 participants over five years. Pilots are already delivering good results in Bundaberg and Townsville, with the latter experiencing a 98% Year 12 graduation rate in 2019-22, quelling any notion that Ganbina’s success is about its Shepparton location rather than its model. Another four communities in Tasmania, Queensland, NSW and Victoria are in early conversations, with programs set to begin within the next couple of years. Anthony is even receiving enquiries from New Zealand and Canada, with organisations exploring if the Ganbina model can work for their Indigenous communities.

As the program expands, Anthony will continue to demonstrate impact through compelling reporting. Funding partners receive biannual impact updates and thorough evaluation will be applied throughout the expansion process to capture the insights and data needed to provide philanthropists, corporate Australia and possibly government with compelling evidence for investment when it comes time for a broader roll-out across the country.

As for Ganbina’s potential to attract

government investment, Anthony says, “These guys are the biggest bank in town, they have a level of responsibility. We, and philanthropy, have done a lot of the groundwork for them. So much is possible for these kids. It’s happening right now. Hope is what Ganbina does. We can make this happen across the country as soon as we’re financially enabled. It’s as simple as that.”

BEYOND A GENERATION OF IMPACT

In just shy of a generation, Ganbina has helped over 2800 young people finish school, undertake tertiary or vocational training and secure jobs of choice.

With the organisation’s proven long-term impact, its focus on potential, opportunity and hope, and Anthony’s unwavering dedication to continuously raise more money to support more communities, that number could rise significantly over the next three decades.

“I was the only Aboriginal student in my entire law school,” says Carly Mohamed, former Ganbina participant and Principal Legal Policy Officer at the Department of Justice and Community Safety in Victoria. “How great would it be... if there were five other Aboriginal students... wouldn’t that be wonderful?” **F&P**

Ganbina participant Chloe Jones with her painting ‘Anganya’.

