

West news

Connecting and partnering
with Aboriginal communities

Issue 8 – Autumn 2022



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Welcome to *West news*

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays its respect to the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal peoples.

In wake of the 14-year anniversary of The Apology to the Stolen Generations, this edition of *West news* puts the spotlight on the Victorian Child Protection Service. The department's Linda Gerdtz talks about the initiatives that are being undertaken to increase engagement by Aboriginal Elders, organisations, families and communities to ensure the work it does to protect at-risk children and young people is carried out in a culturally safe way.

Proud Palawa woman Nicole Hudson shares why she felt compelled to work in such a sensitive area for her community.

We also hear the inspiring

story of Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative's Simon Flagg, who started work at the Co-op as a 15-year-old and has returned, two decades on, to take up the role of CEO.

Proud Gunditjmara man Troy Lovett explains how, and why, a large water tank in Heywood has been transformed into a striking work of art.

You can read about the Koorie Engagement Action Group's moving Survival Day Dawn Ceremony and hear how Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative marked The Apology anniversary.

We trust you enjoy this edition of the West news.

Shane Cumming Message

I would like to thank Jason Kanoa who has stepped down as Co-Chairperson of our West Division Aboriginal Governance Committee and Chairperson of the Koorie Caucus of the West Division Aboriginal Governance Committee, positions he has held since 2019.

Jason has displayed outstanding leadership during a period that has included the COVID-19 pandemic and given strategic direction to DHHS/DFFH as to the ACCO health and wellbeing response and service delivery for Aboriginal people in West Division.

Jason has also led the ACCO sector in developing a new way of working with DFFH to achieve self-determination for Aboriginal people who



access services and programs, or are clients of DFFH in West Division. Jason has represented the division with distinction and great advocacy at DFFH statewide forums and committees, such as the Aboriginal Children's Forum and the Aboriginal Strategic Governance Committee.

I would like to sincerely thank Jason for his commitment, time and wisdom and wish him all the best in his future endeavours at Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative.

**Shane Cumming,
Manager, Aboriginal
Engagement Unit,
West Division**

Deputy Secretary's message

Dear Readers,

Greetings from Dja Dja Wurrung Country. We recently celebrated an important milestone – one year of Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) operations. In this time, the West has continued to deliver significant investment and reform in community services that aims to embed the self-determination of our staff and communities. We also acknowledged the recent 14th anniversary of the Apology to the Stolen Generations, which is a reminder of the importance of this work as we look to the future.

I'm looking forward to working closely with our Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation colleagues over course of the year to improve our practice and service delivery and embed Aboriginal voice in our work. The Wungurilwil Gaggapduir Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement underpins this important work and I'm delighted to see both Linda Gerdtz and Nicole Hudson (featured on page 4 and 5), leading work in Child Protection focussed on greater outcomes for Aboriginal people, families, children, and West communities.

I am also incredibly

pleased to be able to announce that we have recruited to new Aboriginal Cultural Safety and Awareness Advisors positions across West areas, which will play an important role in ensuring cultural support plans build Aboriginal children's connection to culture, Country and strengthen relationships. Our West Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff play a vital role in our work, and we are grateful for their experience as we continue to embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety Framework.

Finally, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Jason Kanoa, for his



exceptional support and stewardship as the West Division Aboriginal Governance Committee co-chair since 2019. Jason has been instrumental in his advocacy to drive self-determination across the West. I wish you all the best in this new chapter with Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative.

**Paul Smith
Deputy Secretary,
West Division**



Lake reflects reconciliation

If you want to know what reconciliation looks like, you should attend the Survival Day Dawn Ceremony at Lake Wendouree, says Ballarat City Council's former Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer Nikki Foy.

The sight of about 1,300 people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, converging at the lake in the darkness before the dawn is a physical demonstration of solidarity and reflection, Nikki says.

'It's people coming together, being stronger together, sharing stories, shedding tears together and sharing understanding.'

Nikki instigated the annual event in 2020, along with the Koorie Engagement Action Group and the strong support of Federation University's Aboriginal Education Centre.

It is no coincidence the Survival Day Ceremony, like the ANZAC Day service, is held at dawn. Nikki wanted to prompt those who think Aboriginal people should get over

their 'troubled history' to reflect on that sentiment.

'Do you go up to an old person selling poppies or who is wearing medals and fought for their country and tell them to move on and get over it?', Nikki says. 'Well, Aboriginal men and women fought in the Frontier Wars. That's when the penny drops for some non-Aboriginal people.'

Ballarat Council has committed to hosting the Survival Day Dawn Ceremony every year. In 2021, the council installed two additional flag poles at the site to fly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags alongside the Australian flag. It has also pledged to remove two cannons from the site.

'It's an amazing service. It supports me on a day that is otherwise an emotional one,' Nikki says.

You can watch the 2022 Survival Day ceremony on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjglRfoQuow>

A large crowd gathers to mark Survival Day. Photo: Yvon Davis, City of Ballarat.

Focus on Child Protection

Emergency placements on notice

A new Child Protection project to reduce the number of children in emergency out-of-home placements in Victoria's West is already having an impact.

Children are placed in emergency 'contingency' accommodation, when they need to be removed from their families due to child protection concerns but none of the usual funded care options are immediately available.

West Division held the unenviable record of having the highest number of contingency placements in the state before the Executive Director of Divisional Placement & Support, Linda Gerdtz, was asked to review the situation in September last year.

'Contingency placements are always just a short-term arrangement until we can find something, because we don't have placements just waiting around for kids who have got really complex care needs. But kids do experience a lot of disruption to their care when this happens, so we really needed to look at who these children were, what was going on, and why it was happening,' Linda says.

It soon became clear that the children in contingency placements had complex needs that did not fit neatly into the usual models of kinship care, foster care or residential care.

'These kids get to a point

where they're really hard to look after. They've experienced trauma, they've been removed, they're acting out and are difficult to manage. They might be running away. They might hurt people. They generally attract a lot of different diagnoses around mental health and many of them have disabilities and developmental delays,' Linda says.

Another finding was that organisations needed more flexibility to be able to provide the type of care children needed. This has led to greater utilisation of funded targets.

'For example, we had a residential unit that was set up for four kids and there might have only been two kids living there,' Linda says.

Linda has been working closely with both Child Protection and the funded services to ensure everyone has enough support to provide appropriate care for these children.

'Ultimately what we want to be doing is supporting children to either go back to family or leave these care arrangements for something that's going to sustain them and support their development and wellbeing to help them reach their potential,' Linda says.

'It really requires a working partnership that we probably haven't had before and we are seeing the results, which is really fantastic.'

Focus on Child Protection

Increasing Aboriginal engagement in Child Protection

Increasing Aboriginal engagement in Child Protection is not the easiest objective but Linda Gerdtz, West Division's Executive Director Divisional Placement & Support, is up for the task.

Linda was working as the Statewide Principal Practitioner for Children and Families in the Office of Professional Practice in 2020, when she was seconded by West Division to work in the Brimbank Melton area.

Increasing engagement

Linda and her team led an increase in the number of cultural plans completed for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care from around 30 per cent to 70 per cent. Linda also asked her colleague Shane Cumming, the Manager of the Aboriginal Engagement Unit, to help increase cultural awareness in her team. Drawing on his background in education, Shane suggested incorporating the Engoori process as part of the West Division Aboriginal Governance Committee meetings (WDAGC).

'Engoori is a process of reflecting and supporting culturally informed decision making for Aboriginal people, developed by the Mithaka people of South West Queensland. It is about respectful communication within and across Aboriginal communities. It was adapted by Shane's friend Scott Gorringe to help manage cultural

challenges in schools,' Linda says.

'It's about how you approach using your authority in making decisions and who you are. It orients you to Aboriginal ways of thinking and doing. They are the sorts of things that we decided we had to start doing because we didn't want to just think that Aboriginal governance was about having a meeting and turning up to community discussions.'

With Shane and other members of the Aboriginal Engagement Unit, Linda visited her local Aboriginal organisation and sat down with Elders to talk about their priorities and how they could work together to support the needs of Aboriginal people.

'It's just meant that more informal relationships and networks are established. So, some of the members of the community, including Elders, will ring me when there's an issue.

'That's just how we wanted to do our business with Aboriginal people; not just say you have to come to our office at this time and have this appointment. It's like, "Okay, we'll come and have a yarn with you at your place".'

Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making Forums

In a flow on from the WDAGC consultations, Linda helped set up Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making Forums (AFLDMs) in collaboration with the Aboriginal Engagement Unit and

Aboriginal organisations. The forums bring people working in Child Protection together with Aboriginal organisations and community service organisations. To overcome any barriers to their input and participation, some of the forums have included pre-recorded interviews with Aboriginal people.

'Our last one was on cultural safety and 80-odd people attended via Microsoft teams. Our staff absolutely loved it...and feel that it gave them a greater ability to work in a more culturally sensitive way with Aboriginal people.'

Cultural safety

One of the tangible outcomes of the forums has been the decision to recruit five Cultural Safety positions to support staff in dealing with situations involving Aboriginal people. These Aboriginal-identified roles are in addition to the Victorian Government's Aboriginal Workforce Strategy to increase the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal staff.

ACCOS' leadership

Linda says Child Protection in West Division benefits from the huge number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that already play a central role in supporting Aboriginal children and families, whether they be where children are at home with their parents, or where children are in care, or are being restored back



West Division Executive Director Divisional Placement & Support, Linda Gerdtz

to their family.

'Aboriginal organisations have fantastic leadership in that space. They know their communities and they come up with lots of innovative ideas about how to do that well. It's really our job to allow them the authority and support and funding to be able to do that.'

Aboriginal Engagement Unit

Having a close working relationship with the department's Aboriginal Engagement Unit has been key to the success of much of her work, Linda says. 'I need to have someone who has the cultural authority to help me do my job because I don't want to cause more harm to anybody.

'Child Protection's obviously a really challenging space for Aboriginal people so the first thing you've got to do is show that you care, and you're interested and you want things to be different. It's also about leading really differently in that space. It's about how you can be a leader that respects the authority that Aboriginal people have over their own future.'

Changing the system from within

It was seeing the repercussions of the Stolen Generations policies and ongoing involvement of Child Protection on her Aboriginal community when she was growing up that prompted Nicole Hudson to seek a work placement in Child Protection.

'I'd seen the impact of that policy of taking their children away,' Nicole says. 'I grew up with the anxiety of living in an environment where adults were constantly aware of Child Protection and where Child Protection was a threat used against kids. That's why I went into it — to make sure things were different.'

No regrets

Seven years on, Nicole has no regrets about her decision to stay in the Child Protection area.

'If Aboriginal people want to change history and want to create a way in which we work with our people that's more reflective of what's culturally normal for us and that's less harmful, we need to be in the field. We need to be advocating.

'Within the role that I sit with now, I'm able to work with services that provide a support to our families and have conversations around what's working for the family, and it really feels like you are building really good plans with families to keep them together.'

A Practice Leader in the Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Preservation and Reunification Response Program and proud Palawa woman, Nicole says she has seen significant and positive changes in Child Protection's approach to dealing with troubled Aboriginal families. This includes a greater understanding of the devastating toll the Stolen Generations era has had on some Aboriginal families who are dealing

Interested in a job in Child Protection?

Go to <<https://childprotectionjobs.dffh.vic.gov.au/why-child-protection>> for details.

with the ongoing trauma and its impact on their ability to parent.

Community input

Child Protection's aim is to keep families intact as much as possible, with initiatives such as the Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making process, which encourages families and communities to have input into care plans for at risk children; and, the Lakidjeka service, delivered by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VAACA), which provides Child Protection with advice on the best interests of Aboriginal children and young people when there are safety and wellbeing concerns.

'If you don't consult with Lakidjeka, there's a "Please explain",' Nicole says.

Cultural support plan

When there is no other option than to place an Aboriginal child in out-of-home care, they should have a cultural support plan, which sets out how they are going to maintain or foster a connection with their culture.

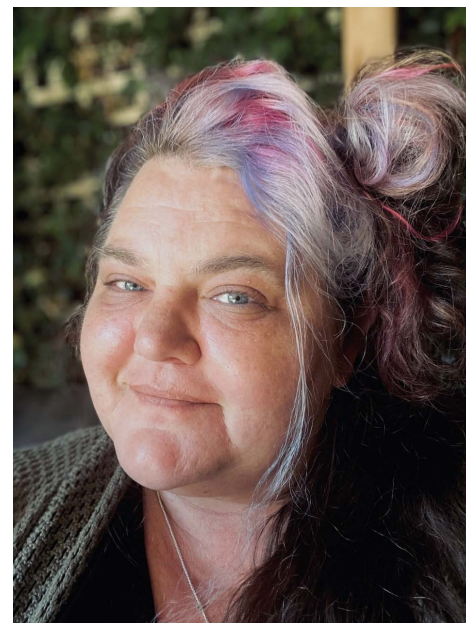
...they're not bad people you know, they're just making bad choices...

Nicole's favourite part of her job is safely returning a child to their family after their parents have addressed the protective concerns. 'Particularly those parents that have really struggled and it's taken them some time. Knowing that a parent cares enough to recognise that this situation is not great, and change, and you get to give that child back to them, they're the good days and those clients stay with you.'

Hardest task

Unsurprisingly, the hardest task is having to remove children from their families. 'Because they're not bad people you know, they're just making bad choices and as a result it's impacting on their kids. But it doesn't mean they love their kids any less.

'But ultimately I am a Child



A/Practice Leader, Child Protection Navigator Nicole Hudson

Protection Practitioner first and foremost and it's part of the role. If the decision's been made to remove the child, then there's going to be a bloody good reason and if I do need to remove that child, then I will try as hard as I can — and I need to be able to validate to my superiors and my team managers that I have tried as hard as I can — to find a placement for this child within their family network. For us to place an Aboriginal child in out-of-home care it means there are no other opportunities. Even as an Aboriginal person you just have to understand that sometimes children need to be removed from their parents.'

Nicole says it's vital that more Aboriginal people work in Child Protection.

'It's not a job that I think everybody can do. I'm not going to lie. It's definitely not, but the government is committed to wanting to create a different way to work with our Aboriginal families, to keep our Aboriginal families out of care, and it's only going to get better.

Culturally-safe space

'When I started, I didn't know whether the department wanted me to celebrate being an Aboriginal woman or not, but it's not just supported, it's actually advocated,

• Turn to Page 6

Gunditjmara diggers brush with fame

A 30-metre-tall mural on a water tank in Western Victoria is shining a light on the story of brave Gunditjmara brothers who enlisted in both World Wars to fight the Germans overseas, despite battling racism at home.

The Indigenous War Memorial Mural depicts Gunditjmara brothers Alfred, Leonard, Edward and Herbert Lovett who all volunteered to fight in World War I. Alfred was too old to re-enlist for WWII, but Leonard, Edward and Herbert signed up again with younger brother Samuel in tow.

Troy Lovett, a great grandson of one of the men who lived at Lake Condah Mission, says whilst many people in the Heywood area would be aware of the brothers' war experiences, few would realise the struggles they faced to be treated fairly upon their return to Australia.

After fighting alongside white soldiers as equals, the men were hoping they would be entitled to receive their own land through the soldier settlement scheme, but it was not to be.

'Out of all the thousands of soldier settlements, I believe only two in Victoria went to Indigenous soldiers,' Troy says.

Troy had grown up listening to Aunties talk of their hopes of using the Heywood water tank to highlight the story of the brothers, so he leapt at the opportunity to propose the mural as his project for the Leadership Great South Coast 2020 program.

'I think that it's important to have that education for the young ones. Truth telling was one of our big objectives with this project,' Troy says. 'Even though it's hard to hear some of the things that happened back in the day, I still think it's pretty important to tell those stories.'

Troy's leadership team was successful in generating backers for the mural and a reflective garden that has been created at its base, raising more than \$120,000 worth of donations and support

from the leadership program, the Victorian State Government, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Corporation, Wannon Water, and the Glenelg Shire.

The team chose Matt Adnate to paint the mural. Adnate, as he is known, is respected for his sensitive depiction of Aboriginal Australians. He is the artist responsible for the striking Sheep Hills grain silos mural, which depicts Wergaia Elder Uncle Ron Marks, Wotjobaluk Elder Aunty Regina Hood and two young Aboriginal children, Savannah Marks and Curtly McDonald.

Upskilling Aboriginal artists in the art of working on large scale projects was another of the project's aims, and Adnate collaborated with Gunditjmara artists Levi Geebung on the painting, and Tom Day (a great grandson of Herbert Lovett) on the final design. In addition to the brothers, the mural includes totems

of significance to the Gunditjmara, and Captain Reginald Saunders, a Purnim man who was the first Aboriginal Australian to be a commissioned officer in the Australian Army.

The mural was completed in May 2021 and is now being promoted as part of the Australian Outdoor Art Trail, which includes 49 silos and more than 100 water tanks that have been painted with large scale murals.

With many of Fredrick and Herbert's descendants still living in the area, it has been empowering for the Aboriginal community, most particularly the young people, to see their relatives represented on the water tank.

'The whole process was awesome, and to get this result — something that looks so good — it's just the cherry on top.'

Gunditjmara artist Tom Day working on the mural. Photographs courtesy of Matt Adnate.

• From Page 5

and not only just for Aboriginal people, but for all cultures. There's still room for growth but, overall, it's a really culturally safe space.'

Nicole says she's proud of the work she does within Child Protection. 'Getting up in the morning for me is about knowing that whatever I'm going to be doing today, it's going to help somebody else.'



CEO role two decades in the making

Simon Flagg struggled to read and write when he left school at 15, but that didn't deter Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative from employing him as an Aboriginal Trainee.

A couple of decades and a master's degree later, Simon has returned to the Co-op. This time as its CEO.

It's a dream come true for Simon, who has coveted the role for years.

'The CEO back then was Uncle Trevor Edwards. When I left, he asked me what I wanted to do in the future and I just said, "I'd love your job". He said, "You can do it. Just believe in yourself", and here we go; twenty-odd years later, I'm in the role,' Simon says.

Assistant Director

In the interim, Simon has been employed by both the federal and state governments, working his way through the ranks of the public service to become an Assistant Director in the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Simon is a proud Wemba Wemba man, but he was born and raised in Geelong. He began working at the Co-op after finishing Year 10 and is still grateful to the organisation for giving him a chance.

'I was about to be a dad. So, as a 15-year-old, the world had completely changed for me and my priorities had to get straight. I couldn't read or write the greatest and the best thing about the Co-op was they didn't care about that. They cared

about helping me grow and develop, and I've been lucky throughout my 19-year career in government that I had other people who did the same.'

Literacy struggles

That luck saw Simon go on to land his next role with the Federal Government, despite being open about his struggle with literacy.

'I had to read archival records that went back to the 1800s and capture all the Aboriginal names and missions out of it. Funnily enough, reading old archival records that I was interested in, and learning about my culture and my history, was what ultimately improved my reading and writing to the point that I was able to progress my career to become a director in government.'

Master's Degree

Simon has earned a Master of Public Administration along the way, but he says it has been his lived experience of some of the key social issues impacting his community, and his skills in community engagement, that have been key to his success.

'My mum was born up in Swan Hill, she lived on the river in a two-bedroom tin shack with dirt floors, as one of 12 kids. We're not talking years ago; we're talking my mum's generation.

'When I work in this space, I am putting on a lens not just what community have taught me, but what I've actually lived, and that's probably helped me



more in my career than anything. Because I can relate to it. I understand it.'

Ambitious agenda

Whilst he has only been in the CEO role for a couple of months, Simon has already set an ambitious agenda for himself and the Co-op.

'I'd been thinking for years about what I would do if I got this job, so I've been listening for years to my community about what they want fixed and changed and advocated for, so it's a matter of just getting in here and starting to make the changes.'

High on the list is a \$26 million infrastructure project that will create a hub that brings together all 170 Wathaurong staff and services that are currently working out of three buildings. It's a project that has been talked about since 2015.

'In an ideal world, we'd raise the funds first and then build and that would be 10 years down the track, but we can't wait 10 years. We need it in five. So, we're going to be building and raising the

Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative CEO Simon Flagg

funds at the same time... you got to do what you've got to do.'

Recruitment drive

The Co-op is also finalising a recruitment drive for seven new funded positions with a community engagement focus, and undertaking a refresh of its strategic plan with the community's input.

The last plan was done in 2015, before the COVID pandemic hit, wreaking havoc on the community and exacerbating existing issues such as poor mental health and family violence.

'It's really about helping support this organisation to become a thriving place for community to connect and network and engage and have a culturally safe space to be. It will also help get the message out that Geelong does have a very active Aboriginal community and that we really should all be proud, because Aboriginal history is Australian history.'

Powerful yarns mark apology



It has been 14 years since the then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised, on behalf of the Federal Government, to the Stolen Generations – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from their families by successive colonial and Australian governments.

The Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative hosted a live stream to acknowledge the

anniversary of The Apology and to hear from Stolen Generations survivors.

Uncle Glenn Shea and Auntie Helen Brotherton and her daughter Simone shared their stories and experiences and talked about what The Apology meant to them back in 2008, and what it means today.

These yarns and acknowledgements must happen all year round

Uncle Glenn Shea, Auntie Helen Brotherton and her daughter Simone mark The Apology.

as we commit to truth telling and working for change for our mob. On the anniversary of The Apology, and every day, we remember, reflect, support and wrap our arms around all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been and continue to be affected by Stolen Generations policies.

Scan the QR code to watch a powerful six-minute snippet of the 2022 National Apology Day live stream where Uncle Glenn Shea talks about the impact of removal of children from family, community, culture and identity, and the importance of reconnecting and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge.



Article contributed by the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative

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Contributions to West news are welcome. However, please note that we cannot print every article received. The decision to include an article will be made by the Editor and we reserve the right to edit material.

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