Media Release

‘Strong Sistas’ NAIDOC awards celebration

13 July 2018

Seven inspirational Aboriginal women in Victoria have been recognised with awards celebrating their commitment to community empowerment.

Indigenous Employment Partners (IEP) and Serco Australia celebrated NAIDOC week with a special event in Melbourne recognising 2018s theme “Because of Her, We Can!”

IEP works with Serco to support our indigenous employees in a culturally appropriate manner and assists non-indigenous staff to be culturally aware and respectful of their colleagues.

IEP Director Sara Stuart said: “Through our partnership with Serco, IEP have been able to celebrate Aboriginal women in Victoria through our inaugural ‘Strong Sista’ awards.”

A ‘Strong Sista’ is an Aboriginal woman who protects and cares for the cultural safety of other Aboriginal women.

This year IEP held their first ever ‘Strong Sista’ awards, asking Aboriginal women in Victoria to nominate peers who inspired them. From the many nominations received, IEP selected seven Aboriginal women who demonstrated the characteristics of a ‘Strong Sista’ through their proven ability to go above and beyond in support of, and to empower, their communities.

Hosted by Serco’s Head of Community Justice Lana Sandas at Ikon Park, one of Melbourne’s Parks and Gardens expertly maintained by Serco, the event focussed on the importance of strong community relationships and the commitment to celebrating and supporting Aboriginal people in the community.

“NAIDOC week is a time to celebrate and recognise the wonderful contribution made in Indigenous communities around Australia,” Lana said. “I am pleased Serco has been able to play its part this week and into the future through ongoing employment and recognition.”

The women were presented with a special gift which was made especially for the event at the Serco-run Southern Queensland Correctional Centre (SQCC). During NAIDOC celebrations at SQCC, several men hand-made gifts for each of the women as a token of appreciation gift from ‘brother to sister’. All artists identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and took pride in the knowledge their art pieces would be gifted to indigenous women at other NAIDOC events.

An Aboriginal prisoner named William, from the Kullili Tribe near Rockhampton in central Queensland, hand crafted and painted bowls. Handmade shields were created by artists Gary, Rodney, Duane and Bruce who all come from the Cunnamulla and St George regions in south west Queensland, representing the Kooma and Kunja Tribes.

Presenting the awards on the day Lana said: “Aboriginal women are an important part of the future of this country. Serco is so proud to be a part of this event celebrating the community work of such amazing and inspirational women.”

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Profiles of the seven inspirational women recognised at the event

Aunty Di Kerr
Described as a caring and motivated matriarch, Wurundjeri Elder Aunty Di has made a life-long contribution to her community in the areas of health, welfare, education, advocacy and land rights.

A mentor and foster carer for many Aboriginal children and young people Aunty Di relishes the responsibility of guiding younger generations and works hard to uphold Aboriginal culture in our modern world.

Aunty Di is well known for her advocacy work and strategic partnership networks with local, state and national governments. She also provides leadership and cultural advice to local councils, corporate and community organisations and is an ambassador for the Indigenous Leadership Network of Victoria.

Shona Stewart
Shona Stewart is the Aboriginal Employment Officer for the City of Whittlesea. Her role involves implementing the Council’s Aboriginal Employment Pathways Strategy and Action Plan, developing culturally relevant recruitment initiatives and providing advice and training around Aboriginal employment and cultural awareness.

A proud Wiradjuri / Latdjte Latdjte woman, Shona believes in a future of equality, respect, understanding, appreciation and progression for her people. After a 17-year career in recruitment Shona has realised the importance of employment and education to those who are socially disadvantaged – particularly for Aboriginal people. She is committed to ‘Closing the Gap’ through place-based employment.

Shona wants to start a ‘ripple effect’ amongst her community, giving a helping hand to those in need and asking them to reach out to their families and communities and pass it on.

Antoinette Braybrook
Antoinette Braybrook is an Aboriginal woman who was born in Victoria on Wurundjeri country. For the past 15 years, Antoinette has been the CEO of Djirra (formerly Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Victoria), an Aboriginal community controlled organisation providing holistic, culturally safe, specialist legal and non-legal support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who experience family violence.

In addition to Antoinette’s leadership of Djirra, since 2012 she has also held the elected position of National Convenor for the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum, the peak body for the 14 FVPLSs throughout Australia.

Through her work, Antoinette seeks to give a voice to Aboriginal victims and survivors of violence.

Cheryl Vickery-Nicholls
Cheryl is a descendent of the Yorta Yorta Clan and has had extensive experience working with Aboriginal people and communities in various Aboriginal Community Health roles. She has successfully run her own businesses, including distributing Aboriginal media content around the county via The Aboriginal Program Exchange (TAPE) and during her time working with SBS radio.
Cheryl’s most recent work has been in promoting Aboriginal Health programs and she prides herself in working well with Aboriginal clients to ensure their needs are met and better outcomes achieved. Cheryl has two children, including Geoffrey who is profoundly deaf, and she is a strong advocate for the deaf community.

Cheryl works tirelessly to look after people and she’s always helping friends in need. She was raised a good listener and on many occasions throughout her life she has had to advocate for people she’s worked with, including attending hospital appointments, looking for housing and dealing with VCAT and court matters.

Katrina Harrison

Katrina Harrison is a proud Palawa woman who lost 20 years of her life to domestic violence. For two decades she lived a life in the shadows, with no friends, no possessions and no freedom. Opting to go shopping at night because it was easier than explaining away the bruises, every move Katrina made was scrutinised.

A few years ago, Katrina made a conscious and positive change to her life. It was not easy to make this change but she did it, taking one step at a time. Today, Katrina’s life is very different. With two full time jobs she supports her 10 children, two dogs, two cats and has many friends.

This year’s NAIDOC week theme “Because of her, we can!” resonates personally with Katrina. Her daughters inspire her to make positive changes in her life, in a professional sense through her work and within her community.

Karen Lovett

Karen Lovett is a proud Gunditjmara woman from Portland, Victoria. She grew up as a state ward along with her twin sister until she was 18 years old. She didn’t have the chance to grow up in her aboriginal community and never acknowledged being Aboriginal which hurt her father and twin sister very badly.

After fighting depression for many years, and despite not having any interest in art before, Karen started to paint. She made some beautiful paintings and they always made her smile. They had bright colours and were always about her life in some way. One day another artist came to her house and after seeing the paintings, suggested Karen take them to a gallery in the city. So, although feeling very nervous, she did.

The woman from the gallery politely told Karen as was a Victorian aboriginal she should go back into community and learn about what she was painting and why. Karen had never been so embarrassed in her life. She went home, put her paintings away and didn’t paint for two years as she was just so confused.

A few years later, Karen’s mother-in-law took her to the Indigenous Education Centre at Kangan Institute in Broadmeadow’s because she wanted her to learn about these beautiful paintings Karen was doing and where they came from.

10 years later, Karen has completed her TAA Certificate 4 and now teaches the very class she started in as a student. Karen is so grateful to her father (even though he has passed away now) and her twin sister for standing by her and slowly helping to bring her back to her community. Thanks to organisations like the Indigenous Education Centre and Stolen Generations (now Connecting Home) she is back in community where she belongs.

Leanne Sumner

Leanne is a proud Gunditjmara woman, following in her ancestor’s footsteps and is known as not one to back down!

Leanne has over 30 years of experience across service sectors including health, education and government, in providing advice and brokering between services and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Leanne continues to support her communities through her involvement on committees and community groups. Leanne has been a mentor for many Aboriginal workers and is currently supporting Aboriginal employment initiatives in Victorian Government.

Leanne has provided Cultural Awareness training in building awareness of cultural protocols, implementing cultural safety and providing advice in addressing service gaps in organizations building on their reconciliation commitments. Leanne draws on her extensive personal and professional experiences as an Aboriginal woman from...
the western district of Victoria, through her storytelling. Leanne is most proud in her career of establishing Aboriginal supports including accommodation for families of patients at Monash Health, a food bank, clothing bank and implementing the PIP pharmacy program across sites to provide medication for Aboriginal patients when they leave the hospital.

*Photo: Leanne Sumner with her handmade gift from men at Southern Queensland Corrections Centre.*