

## 2019 Stan Grant Indigenous Employment Award

### Winner: Life Without Barriers

#### **Cultural Support Planners maintaining children and young people's cultural identity through connection to family, community and culture**

##### Origins and principles

Life Without Barriers has been on a ten-year reconciliation journey and believes that reconciliation must live in the hearts and minds of all Australians. But reconciliation is more than a belief for the organisation – it is embedded in all actions and activities.

Over the last 10 years, the Life Without Barriers Board has consistently displayed a passion and commitment to reconciliation. In 2016 with the launch of a stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), Chair Terry Lawler AO, put his thoughts down on film by sharing that a stretch RAP is a roadmap to achieving reconciliation and eliminating racism. Across Australia it is acknowledged that there is over-representation in Out of Home Care (OOHC) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people due to historical and current government policy and practice. As a non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation working in this complex space, it's imperative that Life Without Barriers partner with and actively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to ensure the cultural safety, connection to family, country and social support is provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care.

Life Without Barriers seeks to recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and carers. In accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles, Life Without Barriers seeks to place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers. When care arrangements are made for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children they will not, unless it is absolutely necessary, be placed outside their culture and family.

It's also essential that employees and carers know about the deep commitment to reconciliation and have a shared understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and achievements, and engage in truth telling about Australia's history, as well as maintain knowledge of contemporary challenges that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Life Without Barriers board member, Natalie Walker, a Kuku Yalanji woman from the Daintree Rainforest in Far North Queensland, recently made a statement that epitomises where Life Without Barriers stands as an organisation regarding providing culturally competent care and maintaining cultural connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care. She said, "While Life Without Barriers is unable to control why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are in state care, Life Without Barriers can control the environment when children are in care and under their supervision."

##### Implementation

The challenge as a non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation is how to provide culturally competent care and maintain cultural connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care. This is achieved by actively recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and carers and embedding culturally appropriate policy and procedure into service methodology.

Coming to the end of a Stretch RAP, Life Without Barriers engaged Supply Nation supplier, PwC Indigenous Consulting, to walk alongside them on the journey to explore what their next RAP might look like. As part of RAP development, the Board endorsed Life Without Barriers to explore how they can advocate for better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care, keeping best interests of the child at the core.

To ensure that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice informed Life Without Barriers services, key identified roles were created across the organisation, including:

#### *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Support Planners*

These roles are designed to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and connection is maintained for the children and young people in care. This is managed through a personalised Cultural Support Plan which ensures children retain their connections to family, community and culture, regardless of their placement. One aspect of Cultural Support Plans is to go on a Return to Country trip or cultural camp, with the goal to forge connection to Elders, involvement in the communities where they live, and a voice to be able to speak about what they want.

It should be noted that contractual arrangements applicable to Life Without Barriers for completion of Cultural Support Plans varies around the country. States/territories who do not have legislated responsibility, work in partnership with the relevant Department to ensure that Cultural Support Plans are completed and implemented.

Tasks of Cultural Support Planners includes:

- developing Cultural Support Plans for children and young people in OOHC, in partnership with the children and young people themselves and their family, and Elders and community, supported by a multidisciplinary team;
- working with relevant stakeholders to ensure that the identified goals within a Cultural Support Plan are implemented;
- ensuring that any risk with implementing or delivering goals are communicated with the appropriate manager; and
- promoting, supporting and monitoring Life Without Barriers' compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principles and related standards.

#### *A National Reconciliation Lead*

The National Reconciliation Lead will develop and govern implementation of the Reconciliation Action Plan and manage relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations at a national level and determine a Life Without Barriers position on relevant current events and policy.

#### *State Leads Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Initiatives*

These roles will be based in QLD, NSW, NT, WA and SA and will drive the implementation of the RAP, provide cultural support to local leaders and staff and build partnerships with external organisations.

#### *Aboriginal OOHC unit*

Established within the NSW State Office, these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Support Planners support local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care.

To grow a pipeline of talented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, Life Without Barriers actively support trainees (with nine placed currently and four more positions under recruitment). Life Without Barriers has also participated in the CareerTrackers Program for the last two years, successfully placing eight interns. In recent years, Life Without Barriers has assisted Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander employees gain qualifications including a \$30,000 scholarship during 2017/2018 to a talented Aboriginal medical student in Victoria.

To attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, Life Without Barriers developed videos for use on their career website, featuring current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. They also attend career expos and run targeted recruitment campaigns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Disability Support Workers.

Life Without Barriers has embedded reconciliation into their culture, including the majority of meetings held across the organisation now begin with a Welcome or Acknowledgement of Country. Life Without Barriers released a mandatory e-learning module for all employees and carers and have targets for face-to-face Cultural Awareness Training which is delivered by State Lead Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Initiatives members. In some regions, this training is outsourced to Aboriginal providers and Elders from the area.

Life Without Barriers NAIDOC commitment has also recently been incorporated into a consolidated Employee Leave Policy. Although the HR system allows employees to select different kinds of leave, cultural leave, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Ceremonial Leave/NAIDOC Leave and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Sorry Business have not been clearly defined before. The NAIDOC paragraph now reads, "Life Without Barriers is committed to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, community and culture through Ceremonial Leave/NAIDOC leave under the special leave allowance of three (3) working days paid leave per calendar year. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees may need to access ceremonial leave to support their culture, community and family/kinship. The leave can be used to attend culturally significant events or NAIDOC events up to a maximum of three (3) working days paid leave per calendar year."

Life Without Barriers actively seeks and maintains partnerships with 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations across the country including Kalwun Development Corporation, Link Up Queensland, Logan District Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Elders, and Orange Medical Service.

Life Without Barriers has only recently developed a leadership capability framework and is in the process of rolling out their first Leadership Engagement Program for top 100 employees. This program is to prepare leaders through discussing themes around change, values and leadership. Of the cohort, five per cent identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Life Without Barriers initiatives are designed to ensure genuine support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the OOHC program. Life Without Barriers has committed to culturally appropriate practice through three initiatives:

1. Embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Support Planning Policy Guideline.
2. Actively recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural support planners.
3. A commitment to a Reconciliation Action Plan.

### Benefits and Outcomes

Life Without Barriers has by no means solved this challenge but has laid foundations to ensure that voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are prioritised. Reconciliation is an ongoing journey and progress is measured against Reconciliation Action Plan targets.

The mandatory e-learning module 'Introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture' has been successfully completed by over 2,000 staff. The number of employees who have participated in face-to-face Cultural Awareness Training is over 400 in 12 months.

National Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC activities in 2018 included 56 events across the country. Wherever possible Life Without Barriers partnered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to support their NAIDOC events rather than arrange their own.

Life Without Barriers completed an Employee Engagement Survey in March 2018. Of the 2189 respondents, 80 per cent believe Reconciliation is important at Life Without Barriers.

The Stretch RAP has many targets including an employment target of 10 per cent. At end of May 2019, this sat at 6.4 per cent or 314 staff. While there is still work to be done, retention of this cohort is on par with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Another data point is Reconciliation Australia's most recent barometer. Some highlights from the survey results included:

- Life Without Barriers scored the 16th highest response rate of the 65 organisations that participated.
- Senior Leaders and Executive place high importance on the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
- Life Without Barriers staff believe it is important to undertake a formal truth telling to acknowledge the past with 71 per cent responding that it is very important.
- 97 per cent of respondents believe it is important (either fairly important or very important) to know about the histories of Indigenous people in Australia.
- 71 per cent believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold a unique place as the First Australians.

### Summary

Life Without Barriers acknowledges that the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection and out of home care is one of the most pressing social challenges facing Australia today – one which continues to create cycles of intergenerational trauma and disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Life Without Barriers reconciliation vision is built on the belief that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, carers and people we support, must inform their work. A key component is Cultural Support Planner roles, to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people's connection to family, community and culture, through embedding culturally appropriate organisational practice.