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## Introduction

Ngalingah Mijung Dubais which translates in the Bundjalung language to Our Happy Women (OHW), emerged in 2015 as a response to the needs for Aboriginal women in the Northern NSW to come together in a culturally safe and supportive environment. OHW has proven to be extremely effective in fostering leadership skills, strengthening culture, and reinforcing women's networks and inter-generational collaboration.

Our Happy Women uses a community development framework whereby the group is determined and controlled by Aboriginal women. The program works in partnership to provide TAFE level training, work experience, volunteer opportunities and employment in art, fashion and textiles, manufacturing and retail, creating education and employment opportunities and pathways.

## Partners

YWCA Australia  
Communities for Children (Cfc) Northern NSW  
Independent Artist: Anne Leone  
Southern Cross University/Manager, Enterprise Lab: Tanya Egerton  
Wellways: Renee Bridge  
North Coast Area Health: Roseanne Roberts

## Objectives

Our Happy Women (OHW) aims to provide Aboriginal women in Northern NSW with meaningful opportunities for employment and training. The group fosters leadership skills, maintains and strengthens cultural traditions, and reinforces women's networks and inter-generational collaboration. This ensures wellbeing through achievement, pride and independence in a culturally-safe and responsive environment.

OHW's ultimate goal is to create "Our Happy Women Designs" - a social enterprise dedicated to transforming the lives of Aboriginal women and girls facing persistent social and economic disadvantage and marginalisation.

## Methods

Aboriginal community engagement facilitator Aunty Mim Bolt coordinates a weekly program that brings Aboriginal women together in a culturally safe arts hub. These women work together with a local artist to produce art and textiles to create meaningful opportunities for employment, training and social change.

Partnership with the Enterprise Lab at Southern Cross University has supported the aspiration of Our Happy Women to use their skills and talents in creative arts to established their own social enterprise. SCU has supported the group to develop an Entrepreneurial Development Pathway that provides a road map from idea to business start, and beyond.

This has resulted in the development of textile arts which have been showcased at pop-up shops, fashion parades, art exhibitions and market stalls providing an opportunity to 'try', test' and 'learn' business and interpersonal skills in a low-risk environment.

Each phase of this journey has increased skills and confidence and puts Our Happy Women in control of creating their own future – not just their own business.



*Every time OHW meet, we celebrate the strengths of our Culture in the Bundjalung nation. We build on our social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing beliefs through our connections with each other and with the community.*

*Some of the methods we use that impacts our social and emotional wellbeing are taking on projects like the Cairns Indigenous Arts Festival tour. We took 20 women to CAIRNS in 2018 where the Elders and women went snorkelling at the Great Barrier Reef.*



## Lessons Learned

### Challenges

The richness of the program and its strong connection to Community has resulted in a waiting list of women wanting to join the group. The YWCA team assist regularly with community events and this partnership enables the Aboriginal community engagement facilitator to focus on mentoring and supporting participants.

Limited resources restrict the expansion of the program and to reach the full potential of a social enterprise the program would benefit from the following:

- A Program Support Worker to assist with the organisation of the weekly group
- A dedicated space for gathering together and creating art

The program currently maintains its momentum by producing art that can be sold at stalls within the community and, taking commissions so that funds are available to buy more resources to keep the program running.

### Were the objectives met?

The women attending the group are empowered through creating art and connecting with Elders and Community. This results in increased self-esteem and confidence and the uptake of skills such as handling cash transactions, food preparation and workplace safety. Some women have gained employment or started their own business, have commenced study or have gone on to further study and, all have developed a stronger connection to their culture.

### Were any objectives unmet?

The program is continuing to work towards a fully functioning social enterprise. This is a work in progress as resources need to be secured to increase the art materials and expand the saleable stock.

### Should these activities be continued, renewed and strengthened?

The ongoing weekly commitment from the participants, the volunteers and the YWCA, indicates that the program is having the desired outcomes. The empowerment of women in the group would result in its continuation regardless of the leading role of the Aboriginal community engagement facilitator. The program would be strengthened by an increase in participants where more women could access its benefits.

### Does the program provide value for money?

The items that are produced from within the group are created individually and this provides a strong sense of pride and esteem. People love to hear the stories so every bit of money that goes into the program is just as valuable as the money that goes out.



*Our Happy Women did their very first Fashion Show entitled "Freedom" at the Lismore Women's Festival in March 2017*



*OHW wearing their natural Indigo tie dyed t shirts that they created. At the Fashion Show.*



## Impact/What's Next?

An expansion of the OHW program would support employment and skill development of Aboriginal women. As OHW evolves into a sustainable social enterprise it is anticipated that:

- There will be full time employment opportunities for women in the group
- Work experience opportunities will be available to young Aboriginal women
- Workshops and training will be available to increase cultural knowledge through the medium of art
- Community wide events will support inclusion in creative projects and events

## Acknowledgements

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