

A Kimberley Collaboration

The story of the Boab

Network

2008-2018

Robert Hoskin

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be aware that this document contains images and names of people who have passed away.

Acknowledgements

This is my third writing on what it means to relate to the people of Mowanjum: the first was a PhD focussing on journeys the Boab Network made with the people up-country, the second was on the Bear family history (a key *Ngarinyin* family), and now another was on the work of the Boab Network. This book, as with the other writings, rests on the stories and insights of many people – not only those who have supported me in the present, but those who have gone before. In other words, in writing about this Kimberley history, I am deeply moved by the history of this extraordinary community of Mowanjum and the way in which it demonstrates a healthy collaboration with white-fellas from church and community.

I acknowledge and give thanks to those at Mowanjum who have graciously welcomed me into their lives and community. My mentor, Eddie Bear, together with other members of his and other families have consistently supported me in this work and contributed substantially to its outcome.

This book is the result of a collaborative journey with many from Mowanjum and those in the Boab Network who have worked with and related to these people. My wife Jill has given remarkable support, particularly as our personal lives have been disrupted by frequent trips to the Kimberley, often leaving me physically and emotionally depleted.

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Robert Hoskin

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Introduction

The Boab Network is a group of volunteers which originated from the Floreat congregation of the Uniting Church, based in Perth, but now involving people from the wider community and other States. The Network works towards ‘closing the gap’, which is the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social factors; whether in health, education, incarceration rates, longevity etc. Aboriginal people, including communities such as the Mowanjum community, near Derby in the Kimberley, experience dramatic differences in their social conditions than those non-Aboriginal people in mainline Australia. I have written this book with the help of many people, members of the Boab Network and the Mowanjum community, to explain and demonstrate how Australians might work together, even though we come from radically different backgrounds and experience.

The name ‘Boab Network’ was eventually adopted to describe a collection of people with differing skill sets who work together to help the Mowanjum Aboriginal Community retain their connection to land and cultural integrity, within a settled existence. Such a culture runs counter to free market capitalism with its emphasis on property ownership and individualism. Our efforts do not suddenly appear overnight but, for most of us, come out a life-time involving our Christian faith and life experience. As many of us come to retirement we find we have time to commit to such a venture of reflection and action in a rapidly changing and challenging world.

Overview of the Boab Network

We describe ourselves in our website as “a collection of volunteers who share a common interest in building positive relationships with the people of the Mowanjum Aboriginal Community through the experience of working alongside them whilst supporting the community to find a better future”.¹ Mowanjum is an Aboriginal community on the outskirts of Derby, some two-hundred kilometres from Broome and could be called the gateway to the Kimberley. The history of this community is briefly described in Chapter 1, beginning with Presbyterian missionaries who established a mission at Kunmunya on the Kimberley coast in the early twentieth century.

We aim as a volunteer and non-for-profit organisation to “work alongside the people of the Mowanjum Aboriginal Community to alleviate some of the social and economic disadvantage experienced by the people through the support of community initiated projects”.² Children and youth experience extreme disadvantage, whether in health through untreated sores and other complaints, lack of education and later work opportunities and the ever present reality of drugs and alcohol in the community where they live.

The Boab Network has initiated and supported a range of projects and activities aimed at addressing this disadvantage. Of most importance, however, we seek “a trusting relationship with the people of Mowanjum that has fostered positive change, community development, new opportunities for individuals and the community and rewarding relationships”.³ In other words: we seek to nurture and support those healthy relationships essential to our long-term work in the community, for we realise our work is only as good as the relationships we have with the people. Our work is an expression of our Christian foundation and current links with Floreat Uniting Church. Although we involve people who would see themselves as Christian or attend a church, we are inclusive of all who have a concern for humanity.

Toward a just society

Our concern is that the Mowanjum people flourish as all Australians. According to the Prime Minister’s ‘Closing the Gap’ report of 2018, most of the key factors of health, employment, education and mortality are on track.⁴ But as will be discussed in Chapter 6, this is not the case for the Mowanjum people. Closing the gap is a matter of the common good which may be defined as “that which benefits society, in contrast to the private good of individuals or sections of society”.⁵ When thinking about justice and the common good, there are fundamental principles that need to be considered: dignity of the person, preference for the poor and vulnerable, participation, subsidiarity and solidarity. The fulfilment of these and other principles lead to justice and the common good being realised for a community struggling to maintain itself at the edge of the Kimberley, WA.

The Mowanjum community resides in an economically rich area of Australia, given the region’s substantial mining and tourist interests. Although the people, through their traditional heritage, have native title to substantial parts of the Western Kimberley, they remain in an impoverished low-income state, with high incidence of ill-health, unemployment, truancy, alcohol and all the related social ills of violence and incarceration. The Boab Network seeks to redress this

balance and help create a social dynamic where the children and youth can flourish, with all the privileges afforded in mainline Australia.

Dignity

It is important to realise that, since settlement, Aboriginal people have a history of being treated as ‘second-class’ citizens, or worse. The Kimberley history is no different. Even empathic missionaries such as the Presbyterians at Kunmunya sought to ‘civilise’ the *Worrorra*, a series of clans on the Kimberley coast north of Derby. The Boab Network seeks to bring a different attitude, which atones for this terrible history. Boab volunteers learn people’s names, both children and adults, an important aspect of the culture, spend time with them and see them as special and as equals.

Preference for the Poor

Many of our first-time volunteers have a shock when they engage the Mowanjum community, because of the obvious signs of poverty. However, the real poverty is not easily visible. We work with the knowledge that only 30% of children attend the primary school and such attendance is spasmodic. Many have obvious sores, to the point we need to educate our volunteers to take care and treat any cuts immediately. The people, like many Aboriginal communities, experience high rates of incarceration. The WA government has installed a multi-million-dollar prison close to Mowanjum. Residents of the community will be reminded every time they turn left down the Gibb River Road at night, the lights of the prison shine bright remind them they will have relatives held within.

The work of the Boab Network, which is described in the chapters to follow, illustrates our concern for those who are vulnerable. We tell the story of the Community Resource Centre, numerous bus trips to Perth, helping to gain funding for the redevelopment of the pastoral station and subsequent irrigation project, monies for return to country⁶ and many other projects. All these actions arise from our conviction that Australians need to be mindful that communities such as Mowanjum experience poverty, and this must be alleviated, for the common good and justice to be realised.

Participation

The principle of participation has a double edge. On the one hand, we are deeply concerned Aboriginal children and youth can participate in the best our Australian society can offer. We also have a responsibility to participate in Reconciliation,

and this means being willing to join with the people in creative ways as they strive for justice.

Initially, we did not choose to go to Mowanjum, the community chose us by inviting us to respond to the unacceptable number of youth suicides that were occurring at the time. The community have also been keen to educate us in their culture and way of life. This is done as we undertake up-country trips with them and experience life on the land. We participate in the best of their society as, in turn, we invite and assist the people to participate in the best of our lifestyle. This thinking underlies our yearly bus trip to Perth, to enable their youth to see life from a different perspective.

Subsidiary and the empowerment of the Mowanjum community

This principle relates to that of participation. The word subsidiarity is an uncommon word for many people, but it simply means listening to the people and encouraging them in their struggles for self-determination and taking control of their resources and concerns.

Subsidiarity is about empowering communities. Taking account of subsidiarity ... means ensuring decision making happens at the most appropriate level so all those affected can contribute.⁷

This principle is fundamental for the work of the Boab Network. We recognise it is the local community, in this case Mowanjum, who know what they need and determine who should be asked to respond to these needs. For example, in 2013, I interviewed my mentor and friend Eddie Bear who was, at that time, Chairperson of the Mowanjum Council. He clearly stated the needs of the community and affirmed our role in meeting these needs.

Well, the thing is our children. We need to make our children go the other way. We need to get them more involved in things they need to know, what they are supposed to do and be near to their family, going to school and things like that.

We want to see our children doing the right thing and going to school. That is what would make me happy. It would give pride to the old people and to see them going to school, growing and doing exactly what their parents tell them to do.

Working with the Boab Network puts strength into our community. And I have learnt more; like you coming and learning, I have learnt too about what your role is in Mowanjum: that's caring and gathering

together. It has been a great help. Return to land was good. But now we are starting to go back to country with our children. The main thing is to get them to go back to country and teach them our culture. And the heritage of most of our culture is in the Bible too. We can learn both ways, in the word of God and in our culture.

We are very aware that many non-Aboriginal people, individuals and organisations have visited the Mowanjum community with their own agenda and sought to do things their way. This is not the way of the Boab Network. We seek to be consistent with this principle of subsidiarity which means listening to the needs of the community and working with them to fulfil these needs.

Solidarity

This principle can be expressed in many ways, but for the Boab Network it means to walk in the shoes of the Mowanjum people; to be very mindful of their concerns, the griefs and their joys. We are forging an attitude of solidarity over time as many of our people encounter and relate to the Mowanjum people. In Chapter 3, Ross shares the story of being present in the community when a member of the Mowanjum community's band called, 'Red Alert' suicided. This band had formed with the help of the Boab Network, so this death had a dramatic effect on the volunteer Network group who were present, particularly when the grandmother of the deceased youth came to stay with them in the Manse where they were living. This, and many other events, have enabled us to have a first-hand awareness of the issues the Mowanjum people face and to therefore walk in solidarity with the people. Another example is listed in Chapter 6 when the government rescinded the housing contract which provided essential administrative funds. Boab Network member, Richard Smith and others sought out the Governmental Minister concerned and, through advocating the needs of the situation, could secure the necessary funds to support an assistant administrator for the community.

Chapter 1

The Mowanjum Community

This chapter summarises the formation of the Mowanjum community. If you would like to read more, we recommend the excellent book which is available through the Mowanjum Arts centre, *Mowanjum: fifty years community history*.⁸ The book gives the history of the community in the people's own words, which cannot (and should not) be replicated here.

The *Worrorra*, *Wunambal* and *Ngarinyin* peoples, like other Aboriginal peoples across Australia, have experienced white-dominated power relationships with missionaries, pastoralists, police and other government and non-government officials. Mowanjum people have been forced to cooperate with white institutions or individuals for diverse reasons, with many significant examples of collaboration between Indigenous/non-Indigenous people in the Kimberley. This history of collaboration began when missionaries from the Presbyterian Church reached out to Mowanjum forebears on the Kimberley coast early in the twentieth century. It was clear in discussions with the Mowanjum people that this relationship was both creative and destructive. On the one hand, the presence of the mission saved many families from the disastrous consequences of 'white' encroachment into the Kimberley. On the other, government, missionary and other pressures forced the people to leave their traditional lands and in being dislocated, the people suffered from white control as did other Aboriginal people across Australia.

Against all odds, the *Worrorra*, as the *Wunambal*, and *Ngarinyin* peoples (who later formed the Mowanjum community) retained their connection with their lands and culture. They have a common belief and heritage expressed in these words:

*We are the people of the Wanjina Wunggurr – the creators of our land and sea country. The Wanjina Wunggurr made the law for us and our country... We believe all the land, sea, heavens and all things in our country were put here by Wanjina and Wunggurr – our creators.*⁹

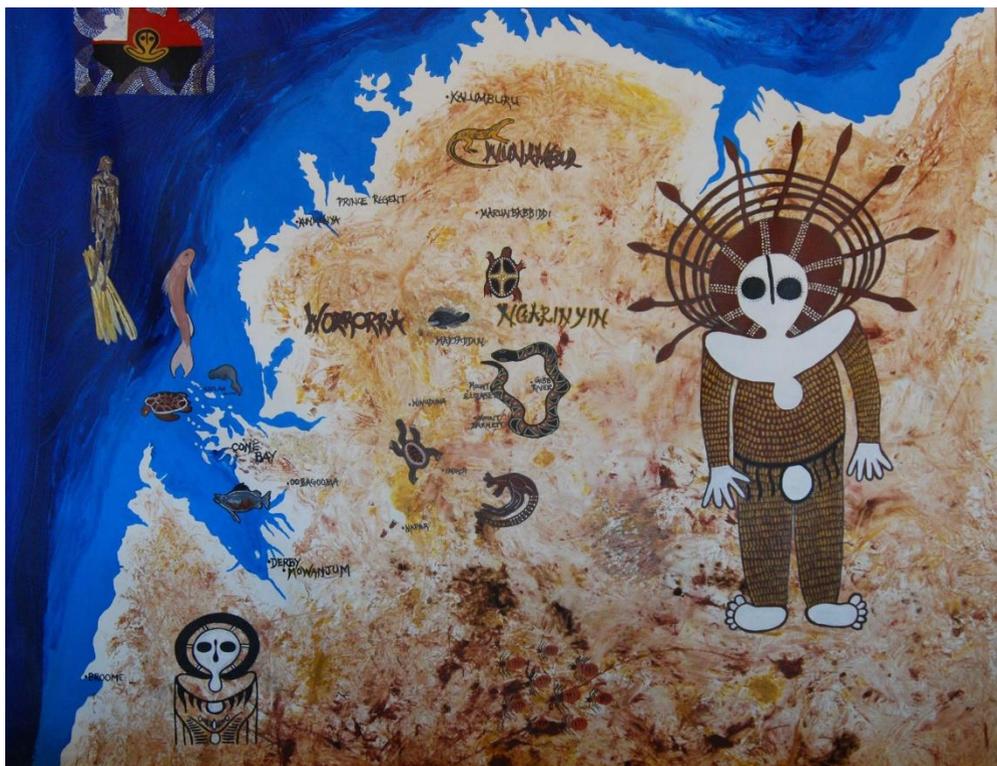


Figure 1: Map of the Kimberley, painted by Leah Umbagai.

Together, these three groups might be called the *Wanjina* peoples, given the role their major *Wanjinas* (*Rimijmuddu*, *Namarali* and *Wodjin* respectively) play in their lives. A *Wanjina* is a spirit being, or ancestor who created the land and takes care of the people. We are therefore very mindful and appreciative of Mowanjum’s unique culture and ethos, so deeply rooted in the Kimberley landscape. For example, visitors to Mowanjum enter via the Arts Centre, which has been designed in the shape of a *Wanjina*. On entry, they would be greeted with a large map, towering above the counter. The *Wanjina Namarali* is prominent in this map, painted by Leah Umbagai (Figure 1) which clearly shows the heritage of the people, a substantial portion of the Western Kimberley. The visitors would then be greeted by a parade of *Wanjinas*, exhibited on the Gallery walls.

Introducing the people of Mowanjum

The Boab Network is part of a relationship between the forebears of the Mowanjum people and the Presbyterian (and later Uniting) Church that has taken place over the past century since the first Presbyterian missionaries met *Worrorra* people on the Kimberley coast in 1912.

A church historian, Maisie McKenzie, recorded the history of the Mission beginning with its formation through to the late 1960s.¹⁰ The mission was established at Kunmunya after an early beginning at Port George IV. The Presbyterians, in contrast with many missions of the time, had the goal of preparing the people for integration in wider Australian society while honouring their unique culture. The mission began well, but by 1926 there was serious consideration to close it down. The Rev JRB Love and his wife Margaret, however, brought new energy to the Mission from 24 August 1927 until their departure in 1940, ensuring the mission's long-term future.¹¹

During Rev Love's time, significant leaders emerged including Njimandum, Albert Barunga and Alan Mungulu. Not that the Mission remained stable, for it went through a series of dramatic changes in the late 1940s. In 1947 the Western Australian government approached the Presbyterian Church to take over the government ration station at Munja. This led to the formation of a new mission at Wotjulum further down the coast toward Derby. In 1951, families from Kunmunya and Munja moved to Wotjulum.¹² The move lasted five years before the people were moved again to Old Mowanjum outside of Derby by mid-November 1956.¹³

McKenzie gives a balanced and respectful account of this long history from the mission's formation to the move to Mowanjum. For example, she includes chapters on key Elders such as Njimandum and his two children Elkin and Alan (Mungulu), then Albert Barunga. These chapters are detailed and indicate Aboriginal men and women were valued by mission staff as significant people. Such figures as Njimandum, sat 'astride two worlds' retaining his 'tribal' identity and yet integrated into a new way of life.¹⁴

McKenzie also notes the fifty-year collaboration between the three groups and the missionaries was essentially to prepare the people for integration within white society. The "careful policy of integration pursued by the Mission throughout its history has not been easy". This policy challenged both State and Federal governments' approaches to assimilation, a policy which denied Aboriginal identity and way of life. The people were consulted about the move, but the attraction of education and work prevailed. They reluctantly gave up their access to traditional coastal lands and moved to the town of Derby. According to a transcript of Albert Barunga's words, Wotjulum had failed and the young people wanted to live near Derby. David Mowaljarlai suggested the name Mowanjum meaning 'settled at last'.¹⁵



Figure 2: The Bedford truck on a day's outing.

The Old Mowanjum community continued under the control of the Presbyterian mission from 1956 to the early 1970s. One of the significant events in this period was the involvement of the Ecumenical Institute from the early 1970s. This group arose out of and fostered a 'black power' ideology (based upon the 1960s and 1970s Black Power and civil rights movements). The Institute's involvement led to resistance from the local community of Derby, with the result the Presbyterian church terminated what it had thought to be an experiment.¹⁶

In 1972 the Mowanjum community became an incorporated body with a nominated council of Elders. Thus, began an era of 'self-determination' but, ironically, Old Mowanjum remained at the mercy of government action. In the mid-1970s, the people were informed that the West Australian government wanted to extend the runway in the Derby Airport. They were forced to move again to a new site on the Gibb River Road, and a new Mowanjum opened in December 1980. The runway was never enlarged. The church at Old Mowanjum literally just vanished and with it the spectacular Wanjina paintings which were painted on the rear wall of the church.

Contemporary historical accounts obviously reflect the change from a view of history written predominantly from the perspective of white people to that of Aboriginal people. Historian Mary Anne Jebb (2002) records an historical account of the Kimberley's pastoral history and outlines the complex collaborative

relationships that were imposed upon and/or created with the people. Families from Mowanjum including the Bear and the Barunga families, some of whom are my key dialogue partners, have a history of engagement with the white controlled pastoral stations. Jebb's history includes the subjection of the people, their collaboration with their 'enemies', the creation of a working relationship that broke down barriers between Aboriginal and white people, and the continuance of the prejudice of the past.



Figure 3: On the way to school.

As the above story unfolded, the mission became the host, giving protection and care to a people under threat from the colonial takeover of the Kimberley, the settlers and police. The *Worrorra* shared their culture with those who were willing to listen with respect, such as the Rev JRB Love, who served the people for twenty years in its early days. The Mission however, endeavoured to share their culture and faith, with the result many of the people were able to read and write in English, appreciating the complexities of white culture and faith. The government put pressure on the mission throughout its history, first encouraging the people to move closer to Derby in 1956 on the pretext of jobs, education and health. The 1970s brought significant change with self-determination and a move to new Mowanjum down the Gibb River road. The Church, which had clearly been a host to people exiled from their country, had to step back and change its ministry. By this stage, a large part of the Presbyterian Church had morphed into the Uniting Church who continued to minister to the people. In a sense, the model changed

from the church being host, to being allies of the people as they struggled to creatively live near a white dominated culture.

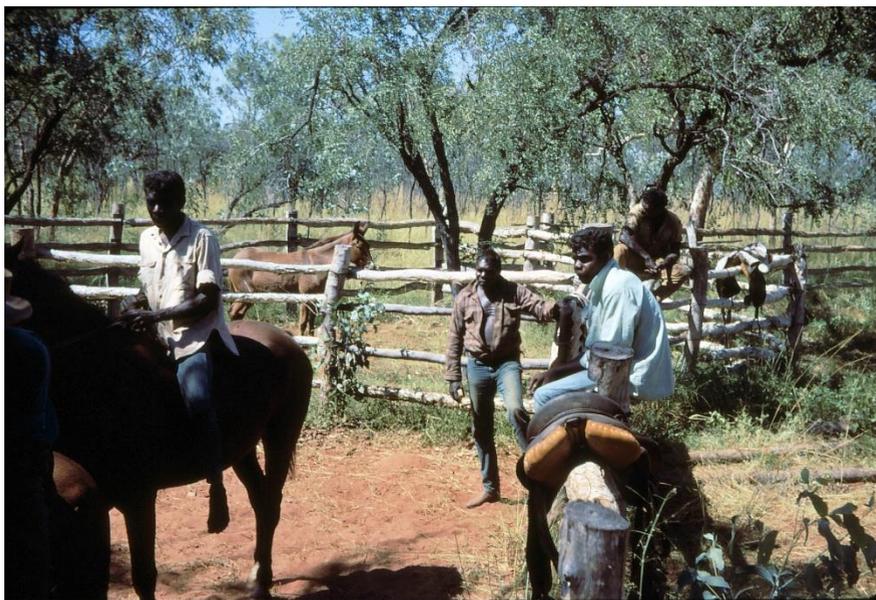


Figure 4: Old Mowanjum pastoral station.

The photographs illustrating life at Old Mowanjum (Figures 2-5,8) are part of a collection of Gwen and Wayne Masters (who worked at Old Mowanjum during the 1960s) give a small indication of life in this community on the outskirts of Derby. Gwen worked in the early childhood education centre, a reminder the community placed a high importance on the education of children. Other priorities were the development of the pastoral station which recognised and built on the work many Aboriginal men had undertaken in the Kimberley pastoral industry. The mission also encouraged the continuance of the culture, as the people participated in regular cultural activities such as songs and dancing, presenting these to tourists visiting the area. A key priority was to facilitate and prepare the people for ‘Self-Determination’ which occurred during the mid-1970s. This formed a basis for the community which has continued to this day, despite changing government policy and in the face of many social issues described below.



Figure 7: The children at play

This long-term relationship between the people of Mowanjum and the Presbyterian (and later Uniting) Churches was honoured over the weekend of 3rd to 5th May 2013, when the Boab Network assisted the people as they hosted church ministers and laity who had worked at Mowanjum in the past.

The three-day event began with a formal welcome in the Mowanjum Uniting Church with *Worrorra* elder Joy Morlumbun (dec.) welcoming their guests. Her words reiterate the story outlined above:

In September 1912 the lives of the *Worrorra* people and their neighbours the (*W*)*Unambal* and the *Ngarinyin* were irreversibly impacted by a group of English-speaking missionaries from the Presbyterian Church in Australia. The Rev Robert Wilson and his wife Frances landed at a place called Port George IV. At least that was its English name. Its indigenous name was *Mingunya*.

The strangers established a mission nearby then moved to Kunmunya, a little further inland. In time our people began to trust them and call them our friends. So, began a journey which continues to this day. And now, I am pleased to welcome our old friends and our new friends as you have come to join with us from across Australia. We will tell stories and share memories. We will remember this extraordinary journey of the past as we will speak of the community

of the present. We will celebrate our spirituality which brings our culture and our faith together.

So, in the name of God, of those now departed, I would welcome you to this special event and hope you will be as blessed as we will be in our time together.



Figure 6: The people who gathered to honour a century of relationship.

As much as the Mowanjum people have learnt to live with being exiled from their traditional lands, yearning for a return to their lands continues to this present day. This yearning was expressed in the speech given by *Worrorra* elder Janet Oobagooma at a smoking ceremony which was held at Old Mowanjum during the three-day event to remember the past. Janet's speech also records this long journey from Kunmunya to Mowanjum in her own words.

My people and I came from Kunmunya and beyond. I am both *Worrorra* and *Wunambal*, so I too know what it has meant to have moved from my lands and the spirits of my ancestors.

I knew what it was to listen to my elders and to be told the stories which remain with me to this day. I know what it is to pass on my language as the people gave me language as a small child. For the creatures of my land know and hear my words, as they too know

Worrorra language, the crocodile, the kangaroo and the fish in the sea and inland streams.

I moved from Kunmunya, through Wotjulum to Old Mowanjum where we, like the psalmist, cried out for the lands we left behind. We came to almost nothing: One well with salt water. A dry and barren land compared to the overwhelming beauty of the lands we had left behind. We left a paradise to live in the mud of Derby.

Yet, we made a life together. Our friends from the church, so many names, came with us and helped us fashion this new community where we relied on agriculture instead of hunting. We planted vegetables and herded cattle. We built a beautiful church and painted the *Wanjinas* on its walls opposite the cross.

Yet, even when we felt cut off from the lands we left, we kept our culture. Our people sang and danced; we painted our precious *Wanjinas*. All the while we learnt the *kardia* (whitefella) ways. We learnt their language and even to relate to their strange way of life.



Figure 7: Rocks in Cone Bay (Yalun) on the Kimberley coast.

Then after choosing the name Mowanjum for our community which means a settled place, the government moves us on and we left Old Mowanjum to build a new community up the Gibb River Road.

My heart ached as people demolished our church and left us with nothing once again. Yet, we have everything. We have our culture and we have our faith. That will get us through to tomorrow.



Figure 8: Preparing for the Junba.

The Mowanjum Festival

One of the key ways in which the people of Mowanjum kept in touch with their culture, while reaching out beyond themselves to White Australia, has been through their art and through the annual Festival which has been run in the first week of the July in school holidays. It is run in July, because the milder weather brings the many tourists from Southern and Eastern Australia who undertake the grey nomad pilgrimage down the Gibb River Road. They come like sea-gulls flocking to the beach. They come by road or air, bringing or hiring a four-wheel

drive in many cases for the well-publicised journey down the Gibb River Road. Mowanjum is located at the Derby end of the road so can attract many to the Art Centre.

The community also reached beyond themselves by taking their art and dance to Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. I first met Peter Croll and a group of artists when they came to Melbourne and held an exhibition in the Australian Post Building way back in the late 1990s. This was shortly after *Ngarinyin* Elder David Mowaljarlai had been to Melbourne and gave a talk with Prof. David Tacey and artist Michael Leunig, followed by a seminar at Melbourne University. The people were keen to share their unique culture and not keep it hidden from the rest of Australia. I think the prime example of this readiness to engage in Reconciliation was when Donny Woolagoodja, who was to become a close friend of many of us in the Network, shared his special *Wanjina, Namarali* at the Sydney Olympics in 2000. It was an incredibly moving moment when the huge portrayal of *Namarali* rose above the spectators and dancers in the Sydney stadium.

I followed up my conversation with Donny by travelling to the Kimberley in 2002. In my initial visits to Mowanjum, the community hall was the focal point of the community's art and culture. The walls were covered in *Wanjinas* and other images from their cultural heritage. I entered the hall as a stranger looking for a way to assist in the Mowanjum Art and Culture Festival about to take place. I was quickly invited to help with the preparations – to join an ongoing collaboration as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people worked together to present the event. I found it a pleasure to work in the hall, surrounded by the *Wanjinas* and the women of Mowanjum as they applied themselves to the task of painting. It was a privilege to participate in their community and culture in the many levels described below. I experienced the hospitality that underlay indigenous/non-indigenous collaborative relating, which I would later explore in my research.

I worked in the old Art Centre, helping to frame art, assisting in the gallery and supervising the repair of the *totems* used in the festival. I worked near the Aboriginal women artists who would spice their painting with conversation and laughter. It is a community occasion, as people celebrate being together just as much as the opportunity to paint their profound *Wanjinas*. The longer I stayed in the community hall the more I began to let go of my city mentality and to collapse into another realm. The *Wanjina*'s power stirred within me. In the evenings, I engaged in some deep conversations, feeling like a friend rather than a stranger in this community. I was fortunate to continue to spend time with the women as they prepared their special *totems* for the upcoming corroboree. I joined with them to

weave *totems* made of wool and wood. We constructed several wooden frames representing the central *Wanjinas* and canoes. They spent many hours winding the wool around the *totems* in preparation for the dance. I joined in, helping to make small crosses for the children to carry. Thus, began many years of making and repairing the *totems* used in the festival. With each experience, I found myself drawn deeper into the life and culture of the people and closer to the time when I would need to do my own weaving. I would later weave a PhD dissertation, exploring the complex and dynamic interaction I had experienced. Helping with the festival would be only a small part of my work, which also included leading worship for the small Mowanjum Uniting Church congregation, writing a story about a family and often being drawn into cultural issues.

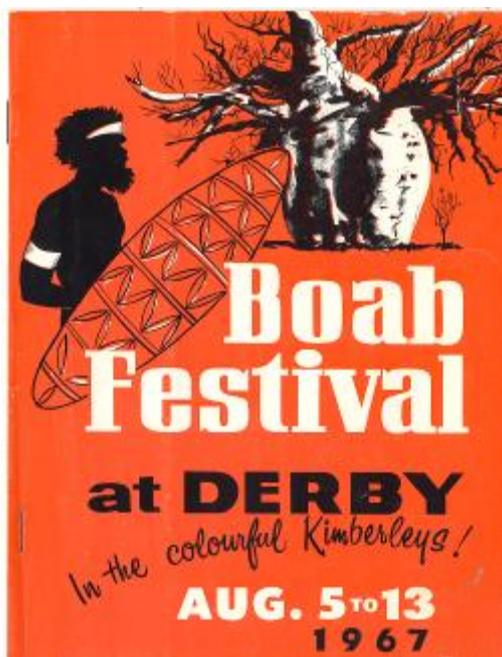


Figure 9: Page from the Shire's Boab Festival leaflet of 1967.

The Mowanjum Festival is an offshoot from the people's participation since 1961 in the Derby Boab Festival. Early on, the people had reluctantly performed in Derby at the Boab Festival on the Sunday night, but then when the organisers did not accede to their request to change their day, they organised a corroboree in Mowanjum.¹⁷ Being a mission, they were concerned with a Sunday performance which conflicted with their Christian beliefs. The West Kimberley/Derby Shire subsequently changed their approach and the people participated in the wider Boab Festival.

The Mowanjum people initiated their own festival in 1998 as an event within the Boab Festival. In the early years, the Mowanjum Festival was a two-day trans-cultural interaction which included visiting guests from Guinea, West Africa, New Zealand and a range of stores selling trinkets and other carnival type of goods. In later years, it became a single day event concentrating on Aboriginal culture without the stalls. This change seems more in keeping with the wishes of the people.



Figure 10: The Mowanjum float in the 2011 Derby Festival parade.

While the community have engaged in many Australian excursions, their festival remains a key way in which they can share their culture with wider Australia. Up to a hundred performers, from Mowanjum or other Aboriginal and Torres Straits Island communities, share their songs and dances to tourists and locals. This huge operation needs good organisation, and this is where the Boab Network and other volunteers were able to assist. There were all kinds of jobs to be done, from helping set up the stage, to working on the *totems*. The *totems* are pieces of wood in which the symbols/images from the various stories are painted.

Not that we can do any painting, but we can dress up the artwork with wool bound around the perimeter of the story board, or place cotton wool on the tips of the protruding steel frames.

Overview



Figure 11: Framed! Peter Croll.

The Presbyterian missionaries had reached out to the three language groups on the West Kimberley coast, people with the intent of protecting them from the negative effects of colonialization. Yet, as much as they acted as a buffer from this white take-over they brought and established their own colonial ways with significant demands, rewards and other intrusions into the life and culture of the people. A central facet of the missionaries' approach generally was to see work as a moral project, in which the inculcation of Christian values co-existed with the cultivation of the land. This is true for the mission which formed Old Mowanjum. They, like missionaries in other regions of

Australia, helped to change the people from a hunter gatherer society to that which was closer to the Western ideal of a 'settled' existence. The Presbyterians achieved this change in stages, as the people moved from their traditional lands to Old Mowanjum. This new community at Old Mowanjum was built around a pastoral lease, in which the people were trained in various pursuits including building, care for stock and, for the women, household duties. In other words, the missionaries were instrumental in replacing the traditional hunter gatherer society with the moral economy of Western agricultural society.

Not all the people who now form the Mowanjum community have mission roots. Some, like the Bear family arrived the 1970s following a shake up in the Kimberley pastoral industry. The *Ngarinyin* people, had remained in the lands by serving on pastoral stations with little or no payment and small rations. The change came when equal wage was introduced between 1966 and 1968, leading to many Aboriginal families being made redundant, becoming refugees seeking accommodation in Kimberley towns of Derby, Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek.

This century, the people thus moved through many stages of relating. They experienced the era of protectionism, championed by AO Neville. Yet, as historian Tim Rouse asks, did 'Protection' protect? Their race and identity were critically

challenged in three ways: physically with high mortality rates, genetically with trans-cultural marriages and culturally.¹⁸ The people survived both physically and genetically, though they have experienced significantly lower longevity than Australians generally. To their credit, the missionaries encouraged the continuation of traditional culture, where it did not directly oppose Christian teaching and hunting/gathering to compliment the new food source. This meant many of the people could openly affirm both the *Wanjina* and the Christian teaching, unlike many other Aboriginal peoples associated with a mission.

The people moved to self-determination in the mid-1970s, setting up a new Council and employing an administrator. Ironically, as stated above, they were also forced to move yet again and, literally over a weekend, moved their community further away from Derby off the Gibb River Road. This era of self-determination did not sit well with the prevailing assimilationist notion of an Australian way of life at that time, which assumed a homogenous society built on the image of a good citizen and happy family. Haebich writes of the official version of this concept as emphasising 'lifestyle, family home ownership, suburban living, mateship and a fair go for all'.¹⁹ It seemed they could only be self-determined if they were prepared to become like the rest of Australia.

Thus, the people were at the mercy of ever-changing government policy. In the 1970s they were also supported by the Federal Government initiative to encourage displaced communities to return to their homelands. For Mowanjum, this meant receiving a grant to purchase the Pantijan lease. In later decades, many Mowanjum people would fight for Native Title, only to experience the government's later reluctance to encourage Aboriginal people to 'own' their lands, in the wake of pastoral and mining resistance.

Thus, Mowanjum, as other Aboriginal communities, has been seriously challenged and affected by changing government policy. This continual dislocation and intrusion by a colonialist inspired government has damaged the people to the extent it lies behind the suicide epidemic of the early 2000s. In recent years, the promises of employment and education have not been realised leaving Mowanjum youth with dashed hopes for a creative future.

For example, the suicide epidemic that led to the Boab Network's involvement in the community followed high unemployment caused by Government outsourcing of Mowanjum's Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) to an external agency in Derby. Of course, there were other contributing reasons: namely the continual changes the community has experienced over many decades; from policies of protection (if it could be called

so), assimilation, self-determination, back-to-country and, in recent years, continued pressure on small Aboriginal communities.

Now, we are deeply concerned at the WA Government's proposed cutback of funding for WA Community Resource Centres from \$13 million to \$8 million per year. Our concern is the impact on all remote Aboriginal Communities, including the Mowanjum community. This threatened reduction in funding is one of many changes imposed on the community. On the one hand, Mowanjum gained from the Government's response of National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPRIH), which gave Mowanjum significant improvement in housing with overcrowding reduced by 36%. Yet, soon after, the NPRIH required outsourcing of Mowanjum's responsibility for the management, repairs and maintenance of its social housing with loss of rental income. This disempowerment by outsourcing is compounded by lack of investment in essential community facilities and services. Dr Richard Smith (Chairman of Boab Network) has researched relevant statistics and initiated a range of community projects in response to these issues. He, as others, has spent many hours advocating community needs and issues to relevant government departments. The consequences from comparison of Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 with 2016, reveals the following declines: employment (-85%), individual income (-7%), rent paid (-45%), number of people over 65 years (-81%), decline in children completing year 10 (-51%) and year 12 (-38%). Ironically, in this same period, the WA Government built the new West Kimberley Regional Prison helping create one of the highest Indigenous incarceration rates in the world.

The Boab Network has therefore operated within a complex and diverse environment, responding to the needs of the Mowanjum community, while interacting with government policies and programs. Chapter 2 describes how the Boab Network came into being, emerging from initial requests from the Mowanjum community with a summary of its first programs. We join a long history of church involvement with the people of Mowanjum. In so doing, we are careful not to repeat past mistakes, while affirming that which was healthy and productive. We are part of the same church that has sought the best for the people of Mowanjum, though we might take a different approach both theologically and practically.

Chapter 2

Beginnings of the Outreach Program

This formation story involved several key and long-standing members of the Boab Network; Richard Smith, Ross Gobby, Marie Yuncken and Lee-Anne Burnett who were searching for a practical way to express their Christian faith. In other words, they were struggling with the question: how to move beyond charitable giving to community engagement, and with it, issues of justice and the common good. Each of these long-standing members brought a different perspective and experience to this important question. Richard's story of this initial engagement is complemented by Ross's story.

Richard's story

Richard Smith shared his early days with All Saints Floreat Uniting Church, having "ceased regularly attending a Church, as the evangelical Christianity (they) left seemed increasingly irrelevant". Richard and his wife Claire were invited to attend Floreat Uniting Church by their eldest son Matthew with wife Jo and their grandchildren in 2005 who had moved to Perth from Utah, USA. Richard and Claire began attending Floreat to see their grandchildren take part in drama or playing their trombones. Matthew had begun attending a 'Living the Questions' study series²⁰ led by the minister Rev David Tressler who invited Richard to participate. Richard was soon engaged by the wisdom of 'Progressive Christianity' together with others of like mind; Ross Gobby, Marie Yuncken, Keith Bakker and Lee-Anne Burnett. This engagement and discussion provided the theological energy and motivation for eventual development of the Boab and Black Pearl Networks as part of Floreat Uniting Church's Mission and Outreach.

Richard's concern for Aboriginal people, particularly those in the West Kimberley, arose from a series of engagements following his partial retirement in 2006. As a volunteer guide on Rottnest Island, he learnt about Rottnest as a penal colony for Aboriginal people incarcerated for resisting removal and for hunting food on their ancestral lands which now offered them sheep and cattle to feed their tribe.²¹ He then took the opportunity to explore the West Kimberley Coast and Western Arnhem Land on an ecological trip on the Sail Training Ship

Leeuwin. Richard visited various mission sites including Sunday Island on King Sound, the site of a mission from 1899-1934, which was later relocated to join the Presbyterian mission at Wotjulum.

This engagement with Aboriginal people continued in the Northern Territory when he went with Dr Jeremy Russell-Smith into Western Arnhem land to participate in their research into the impact of different wildfire regimes on the ecology of the Tropical Savannas. They visited remote Aboriginal communities, returning with “a new appreciation of the richness of Aboriginal culture in northern Australia”. Richard shared his insights and experiences with the Floreat Uniting Church congregation. Soon after, Floreat’s minister, the Rev David Tressler asked him to consider becoming Chairman of Floreat Uniting Church’s Mission and Outreach Committee. This included the Creative Living Centre established by Marie Yuncken which in time would play a vital role in running the Boab Network within the Floreat UCA as a tax-deductible, not-for-profit charity.

Richard accepted these roles on return from a month-long assignment with Australian Business Volunteers to Vietnam. The Mission and Outreach committee began its work with two outreach objectives – one to an Aboriginal Community in Western Australia and the other in eastern Indonesia. They then entered discussions with the WA Uniting Church Synod’s social justice secretary Rosemary Hudson-Miller and Uniting World’s National Director, Rev Dr Kerry Enright to explore potential opportunities. Kerry Enright indicated that Uniting World with partner GKI church in West Papua were supporting the English program with a teacher Shelly Houghton at their Otto-Geisler College in Jayapura. The Mission and Outreach committee took up this opportunity, which has become the Black Pearl Network.

Then Rosemary advised; the only Aboriginal Community in WA with a Uniting Church was Mowanjum near Derby 3000km north and part of the NT UCA Synod. The NT Uniting Church Synod gave them contract details of the Rev. Andrew Watts, UCA minister to the small Uniting Church Congregation at Mowanjum between 2000-2008, a remnant of 60 years of Presbyterian Mission that ended in 1973. Initial contact suggested the church might raise funds for renewal of their hymn books, but the initial contact led them down a new path of mission and ministry.

Ross' story

The Mowanjum congregation is part of the only Aboriginal Community in Western Australia with an operating Uniting Church. Its then minister, Andrew Watts, lived in Derby, with a focus on the conventional ministry of preaching the word and celebrating the sacraments of baptism and eucharist to the people of Mowanjum. For a time, Andrew's ministry was combined with a Frontier Services ministry to remote communities. The presence of a UCA congregation at Mowanjum would give the Boab Network access to the community in a way that is not possible with other Aboriginal communities. There was also the support infrastructure associated with the church, including a church compound in Mowanjum and a Church hall in Derby built in 1968 by the Inland Methodist Mission as a Youth Centre.



Figure 12: The Rev Andrew Watts.

For over nine months, nothing came of initial contacts with Andrew until the summer of 2007/08, when there was a spate of suicides among teenagers in the Community. Out of 25 teenagers, five attempted suicide and two were sadly successful. This led Andrew to ring Richard and ask the Outreach Group to assist, initially to help with support for professional counselling.

Members sensed a deeper need than a simple project solution. Richard and Ross flew to Derby in April 2008 to discuss the needs of the community, particularly children and youth, with Andrew Watts and elders Janet Oobagooma and Heather Umbagai (dec.). Further visits in 2008 were made by Ross together with Keith Bakker, and later by Ross himself.

The problem was how to translate this desire to be helpful into meaningful and effective action that would make a difference with an issue like youth suicide. They began to search for something they could do. Ross Gobby recalled:

We noted the correlation between the spate of suicide attempts during the summer school holidays and wondered if boredom adversely affected the spirit of the kids. We wondered if a program of activities directed mainly at teenagers would help. But how could we as older outsiders engage with teenagers; a difficult ask in any community?

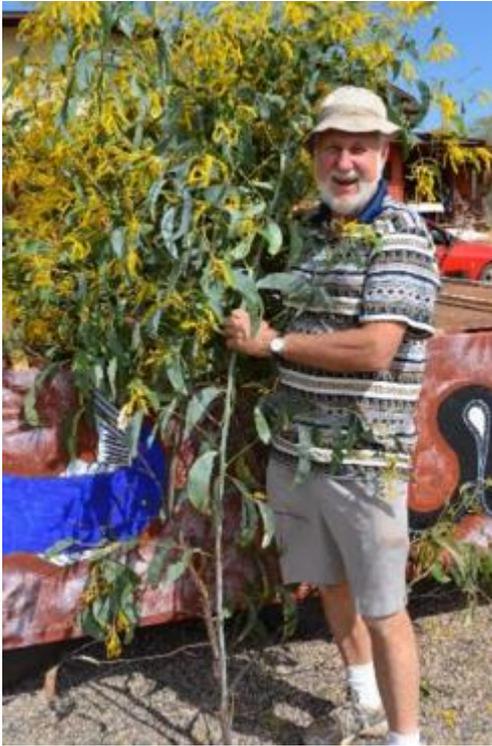


Figure 13: Ross Gobby at the festival.

Ross, who has been an important figure in the development and outworking of the Network, recounts his personal story leading to his involvement with Aboriginal people. Ross spoke of attending a weekend workshop run by Landmark Education which challenged him to explore what gave his life meaning and purpose. This challenge and watching the Choir of Hard Knocks led Ross to reconsider his priorities. He was deeply affected by the director’s commitment to doing something for people who need help for the marginalized in our society.

Later, when Ross was taking a year off work to get over a medical problem, he had time to read the newspaper every morning. Ross read the account of the WA State Coroner Alastair Hope who investigated more than twenty suicide deaths in the Kimberley. This eventuated in the Coroner’s report early in 2008, causing Ross to reflect on the situation Aboriginal people have in Australia, concluding “there is no group more marginalized in Australia”. Ross’ interest in justice and community development also stemmed from the activities of his parents and extended family. They had always been active in the community, especially with youth groups, so influencing his lifelong involvement with youth activities.

Given Ross's desire to reach out to Aboriginal people, he recounted feeling apprehensive when it came to his initial encounter with the people of Mowanjum. Ross drove out on a short ten to fifteen kilometres' journey from Derby to Mowanjum with the Rev Andrew Watts and Richard Smith. He remembered he never had talked to an Aboriginal person and, as many other Australians, his view of Aboriginal people was the product of many stereotypes, emphasising this 'cultural divide'.

I asked Andrew "How do you engage with Aboriginal people?" Andrew is a tall laconic man with a Kimberley drawl. In his slow deliberate way, he replied, "You talk to 'em!" I felt stupid at having asked the question, after receiving such an obvious retort which was fortunate because it stuck in my mind. I have often thought back to Andrew's comment and reflected on how profound it is. How does non-Indigenous Australia engage with Aboriginal people across the cultural divide? It is so simple, that it is profound... "You talk to 'em!"

When they arrived at Mowanjum it was about lunch time, so they were hungry. They stopped at the community store, a *donga* (transportable building) perched in the middle of the community.²² Ross bought a pie and sat on the table top of one of two park benches on the veranda of the store with his feet on the seat eating the pie. After a little while an older Aboriginal woman came and sat on the other bench. He silently sat with the woman then:

With Andrew's injunction ringing in my ears both Richard and I started to talk to her. This lady is now deceased, so it is Mowanjum custom not to use her name, but it turned out she was the grandmother and primary carer of the teenage boy who had committed suicide only a few weeks before during the summer school holidays. She was extremely sad. It was traumatic for her to recall the circumstances leading up to the suicide. Her conversation was tinged with hopelessness and despair, deeply touching me. The ice had been broken. We visitors from Perth had started talking to the people in Mowanjum.

Ross began to talk to a woman employed as a youth activity provider under the CDEP scheme about supporting her in running an active program for kids in Mowanjum during the next school holidays. It was difficult to work in collaboration with her as there were no phone or computer links with the

community. This meant Ross had to go up to Derby and Mowanjum several times during 2008 with other Outreach committee members. They spent time with Andrew in Mowanjum getting to know people and planning the kids' activity program for the coming summer holiday. As Andrew was aware that he would soon be leaving (in August of 2008), he encouraged Ross to make his own relationships with the people, and "stand on his own two feet" rather than to go through Andrew.

I tried to involve Andrew and go through him to build the relationship with people in the community. Although Andrew was helpful, he was reluctant, pushing me to make my own relationships and stand on my own two feet. This was fortuitous given that the woman who was to be their contact with the kids and families of Mowanjum, got a job in Derby in September and didn't continue in that role.

The Outreach committee planned to run a children's program for a week before Christmas 2008, then return for a week or more after New Year. One of our first major hurdles was to gain UCA approval for the use of Andrew's Manse in Derby and the Church's Toyota Troupy (four-wheel drive vehicle) to launch a summer program. Andrew was to move on to the East Coast, so it was arranged Ross would fly to Broome, pick up the Troupy and drive it to Derby. As they had lost their Derby contacts, Ross spent a couple of days in the community to get organized before the rest of the group arrived. He had to pick up the Troupy, which Andrew had parked in the yard of the Uniting Church in Broome. Ross shared:

Before I set off on the two-and-one half hour drive to Derby, the minister suggested we pray. Although I am a church member, this was out of character for me, certainly at that stage of my spiritual journey. But he asked if God would to go with me. As I drove by myself on the long drive from Broome to Derby the feeling of apprehension returned. I keenly felt I was going out on the skinny branches. But the recent prayer was a great comfort and I had a strong sense that what I now call the universal spirit was indeed with me.

Under Ross' leadership, a summer program was conducted in 2008/09 to counter despair among children and youth.

The first summer holiday program and the formation of a team

The first summer school holiday program was in two segments: before Christmas 2008 and after New Year with three other volunteers it was a great success. But

initially the program only attracted primary school aged kids. The teenagers responded like teenagers do, “by lurking in the background”. It seemed below their dignity to get involved in activities that were swamped by the eager, bright-eyed fearless little kids. This changed towards the end of the program when one of the teenage boys asked Ross if he would take them to hunt goannas.

One of the important things for any new outreach is time to talk and reflect. Ross remembered the team talked a lot, discussing what they were doing, whether it could be a relevant contribution to making a difference to the incidence of youth suicide, and what were the other issues confronting this community. They soon realised the social issues in a community like Mowanjum were complex. The community had many strengths, and were open to any assistance the team could give to helping make progress with some of the problems, yet was this enough? They quickly understood one summer holiday program was not going to make much difference and at least they needed to come back and run kids’ activity programs during the other school holidays throughout the year. And there was a complex interaction of other negative issues that made life difficult for not only the kids, but everyone in the community. Within a few weeks, they started to see the enormity of the task if there was to be any sustained progress. Ironically, we still deal with this question. As Ross reflects:

While a constant holiday program has saved the community and the children from negative effects of children being bored and causing mayhem for the people, we wonder what might produce significant change in their lives in such areas as education, jobs, health and many other factors.

Ross and the team could see this task was way beyond the resources of the Floreat Uniting Church, or even the Uniting Church in WA. They would need to go outside the church for help. So, the Boab Network was born. They set out to recruit to their cause anyone who had an interest in the social conditions in the Kimberley. They decided to limit their activity to one community, namely, Mowanjum. In this way, they would focus their resources and the energies of a small number of volunteers.

The Boab Network grew from this initial beginning to presently have about eighty contact email addresses, with about half of the people active. The other half of the people on the address list are interested and support the Boab Network in some way. Of the eighty, about one third are members, or associated with the Uniting Church; about half of these are from the Floreat church. The Boab Network, then, is overwhelmingly made up of people other than the original group

from Floreat Uniting Church. with several people from other churches and faiths. The group shares a common ethic, namely a concern for social justice.

The Boab Network's relationship with the Mowanjum community formed a pattern originally based around the school holidays. We were very aware of the community's concern for their children and youth, given the fact that Mowanjum had been set up for the benefit of these young ones. The tragedy of attempted and actual suicides had made it painfully clear help was needed, as well as the need to advocate for long term support in a range of areas including education, health and the provision of employment. We, therefore, began a holiday program described in chapter 3 to follow.



Figure 14: Mowanjum boys dressed up for Festival.

Chapter 3

Our major priority: children and youth

The Boab Network began through our concern for the health and well-being of children and youth in the Mowanjum community. This concern continues to be our major focus. We have organized a children and youth holiday program, four times a year, consistently since the summer of 2008/2009, including an annual bus trip to Perth for older students to expand their horizons and see the possibilities if they continue their education. Ross Gobby was the prime motivator and leader of this program for many years followed by John Tyrrell. After the success of the first summer, Marie Yuncken succeeded in gaining a significant three-year grant from Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) for teenagers with disability. This certainly applied in Mowanjum's case, where youth were impacted by dysfunctional families, lack of education, risk of suicide and a host of other concerns. The group received substantial funding, initially for three years and then a further two years of \$28,000 increasing to \$34,300 a year, to help run school holiday programs. This grant has been supplemented by extra donations of cash, bicycles, and clothes with substantial contributions from Dambimangari and Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporations for up-country visits. This funding made the visits by Floreat Uniting Church members affordable and sustainable, and expanded the scope of the program to include visits by the young people to Broome, Perth and back to country visits to Cone Bay and Majaddin.

We are fortunate to have a range of volunteers with differing experience and age ranges. Our young adults provide the energy and enthusiasm bridging a trans-cultural gap connection with both children and youth. Older members such as Ross Gobby, John Tyrrell and Lee-Anne Burnett provide maturity and experience and, of course, relating to the older members of the Mowanjum community. Other volunteers, such as Marie Yuncken, support this program with the capacity to reach into the Perth community and ensure we receive the necessary support and funding.

The holiday program takes on various incarnations throughout the year, with activities based on weather conditions and events occurring in the community

at the time. This chapter gives an account of several of these programs with comments from those who have participated in them. They are not complete in the chronological sense of summarising all our school holiday programs; that would take a book. Rather, we detail a few of those programs which occurred at Mowanjum or the bus trips to Perth, to give you (as readers) an idea of what occurred and why. Chapter 4 to follow, likewise gives an account of several of our up-country journeys.

This work with children and youth took on new directions in several ways. Ross and others have supported the development of a local band which has given concerts in Perth, Mowanjum and Broome. Leah Umbagai has been a mentor of our work generally but also co-facilitator and bus driver of our bus trips to Perth. She was appointed as a youth co-ordinator for some time, bringing a new dimension to the work. Also, in recent years, the Network has initiated the funding for a program for early childhood and young families. We have been fortunate that Gail Cresswell, who has extensive teaching experience, initiated this program (see Chapter 6).

Our school holiday program has been appreciated by the community for many reasons. As former Chairperson of the Mowanjum council Eddie Bear argues, this is now a necessary way to keep the children involved during their holidays:

When the Boab Network came in, it gave the children something to do during the school holidays when they had nothing. Some of the kids, you see them in the town. But now you see them here. There are activities that they can do, sport games like basketball. Give them opportunities to do things like umpiring. Or like the bush, let them see what is out there. When we take them to Majaddin we show them what is there, but it is up to every individual to survive. Some kids ask, "When are we going to Majaddin?" When they do something they like, they want to keep doing it. It is important to bring you guys in too. It is like a two-way learning. The Boab Network learns from us as we do from you. When you took them to Perth, they loved it. You had the Royal Show, it was good to experience it. They will have this on their mind in the future.

Kirsty Burgu also spoke of the importance of the holiday program from the perspective of one who is responsible for many children:

The Boab Network has been really good, especially around holiday times. When kids are around and humbugging. When their parents want to have a rest. At least there is something for them to do and you guys all come down and take them out and take them to the pool, take them out to the river. Have all kinds of activities for them to do during the school holidays. It was good, it is good. And with that support, it has helped most parents and families. When the activities have finished the kids come back home and go to sleep.

Involvement in the Festival



Figure 15: Ross Gobby and Peter Croll preparing the truck for the float.

Members of the Boab Network took part in assisting the community with their annual Mowanjum Arts festival in 2009. They have continued to assist in subsequent festivals as this involvement is a very important way for new volunteers to be introduced to the community and its culture. The Festival, which takes place in the July school holidays occurs at a delightful time of the year. Volunteers would arrive before the Festival and help with preparing the float for the Derby Boab Festival. They would then help in a variety of ways with the Mowanjum Festival, preparing the ground, helping with the repair of *totems* to be used in the dances, and the extensive sewing necessary for women's costumes.

Nelly Bakker spent many hours at the sewing machine, working on the costumes and teaching the Aboriginal girls and young women to sew.



Figure 16: Junba (dance) at the Mowanjum Festival.

Involvement in the festival was an important way of introducing new and existing Boab members to the community. Marie Yuncken recounted the impact the first Festival she attended had on her. She spoke of the honour of being invited backstage to paint the kids. Then, the manager of the Arts Centre, Jenny Wright, asked Marie to work there while the staff were watching the Festival events. This meant some fast learning! Marie rushed out to get the book on Mowanjum, so she could answer the questions asked. She had known nothing about Aboriginal people in her early life, recounting they were ignored in her education and her later career in the health department.

Volunteers would experience the wonderful welcome and hospitality of the people, beginning friendships which could then be developed and maintained over years to come. In recent years, we have become far more aware of protocols and training to ensure our new volunteers are prepared for this trans-cultural involvement at Mowanjum, either at Festival time or in other holiday programs. Protocols were developed by two of our younger and talented volunteers who are

undergoing university degrees, relevant to working in the field of medicine or social awareness and health generally. These protocols would assist those new to such a community. We also have follow-up nights in Perth for those taking part in the program, where people can give extensive feedback, and generally continue their relationship with the Network.

We have been fortunate to have had many enthusiastic young adults who have supported our programs. David Marshall shared his experience at the Mowanjum Festival. His words give another perspective of the importance of this event to both the community and to members of the Boab Network. He arrived at the Mowanjum Art Centre on the day of the Festival and found the place “a hub of activity, a very rare sight in Derby”. They helped in various ways from keeping the kids away, to collecting and shaping branches for the performance to sewing. Our volunteers also experienced the festival, watched by some 1000 people who come from as far away as New Zealand. Not only was there dancing, singing and music, but the tourists could watch the artists painting and carving boab nuts while an Aboriginal man from Broome taught tourists and the kids how to play the didgeridoo.

Volunteers would be exhausted when they returned to the Hall after the festival. Their work would not be finished, however, for they would go out to the Art Centre for the clean up the next morning, after a well-deserved sleep-in.

Holiday programs at Mowanjum and in Derby

A holiday program has been offered every January since 2009. The school year is badly planned, because it would be better for children to be in an air-conditioned classroom during this hot, and often, wet period of the year. Extensive holidays should take place in the dryer and cooler months of June/July when they are able to go up-country. Unfortunately, the WA School year is determined by Southern Administrators who seem to have minimal sensitivity to this argument. Our programs are designed to offer an alternative to what could be a long boring summer, in which children and youth are free to create havoc in the local community.

This program usually involved two teams, each spending a week, organizing a variety of activities at Mowanjum and swimming in the Derby pool. In recent years, the Boab Network’s program has been complimented by Fair Game Australia’s program, offering games and sporting equipment to the children and youth of Derby.

Lee-Anne was one of the early organizers of the holiday program, having an interest in helping others since she was a child. She spoke of her first encounter, with a small team, of Mowanjum children. Her interest was not new as she had been interested in Aboriginal people all her life and, as an experienced mid-wife, she frequently dealt with them in her work. Lee-Anne was thrown in the deep end, when both Ross and another member became sick. She had to take charge of the program, which meant working hard with art and sport. Later, when everyone was on deck, they hired an extra car to supplement the Troupy because of the number of children involved.

By January 2013, the program had grown to involve more volunteers, and extended to three weeks with the involvement of the Fair Game organization on the third week. This group have similar aims and ways of operating to the Boab Network. The team had grown to include a rolling roster of 19 overlapping volunteers to cover the fortnight. This overlapping of people coming and going seemed to ensure continuity, both in the programs they did with the kids and in the way the volunteer group itself operated. The teams were about the right size to cope without being too big, except maybe for a few days when the Fair game people joined them.

The team offered a range of activities. They hired a bus to take children swimming in the local pool, spending late morning to early afternoon every day Monday to Friday. Although the pool is closed Wednesday, the pool manager invited them to come in for a special session with huge blow-up fun ‘tube’ activities followed by a barbeque. As Ross shared, “His big-hearted generosity was much appreciated by everyone”. They ran craft activities like decorating calico bags, drawing ‘life maps’ and played games like basketball, flour bomb war and water slides and had a disco on Wednesday night. Members of the team took the teenage boys on two goanna hunts, to a pool on the May River, about 30km up the Gibb River Road. This highlight activity was not an easy exercise as the Team made two bus trips and used numerous 4WD vehicles to transport about one-hundred people, some 60-70 children and youth, and 30-40 adults. As often happens, the outing presented other issues, as Ross explained.

The first party got there about 10.30am and we had a great morning in the water, but we were finishing lunch around 1.00pm when a storm broke and it poured with rain, off and on all afternoon. We were worried about getting everyone back through tracks that turned to rivers; but we made it and experienced a taste of life out bush in the Kimberley in the wet season.



Figure 17: Boab Network team of January 2013.

In the second week, they continued with the swimming program in the Derby pool most days, had discos Tuesday and Friday nights and a movie Monday night. They had a special guest (Ali Lord) help them with cooking activities using healthy food. The team also ran the usual games, craft and water slide activities. There was a lot of interaction for the kids with computers and books in the Community Resource Centre (Telecentre). Great one-on-one or small group interaction throughout the whole time. A highlight was when a group of about 15 teenage boys went to the oval and played a spontaneous football game. In the third week the Fair Game group carried on this intensive program, with our emphasis on sport and health.

Hosting a program with such diversity and involving so many children has its difficulties. Children tried to stay in Derby after swimming, thus requiring intense supervision. Ross was relieved when parents accompanied the children, a trend we seek to foster. Yet interest and involvement from many younger children created problems.

Ross concluded his report by stating, "Overall the activities went very smoothly this year. Our volunteers are maybe more experienced and relaxed. The kids were active and enthusiastic participants". He concludes this has occurred because the relationships are developing between Mowanjum people and

members of the Boab Network. The positive signs of this is that although the team worked hard and got tired, “there was a spirited light-hearted vibe this year with lots of laughter among kids and volunteers”.



Figure 18: The Water Slide.

One of the highlights of the children’s program is a waterslide set up in the Church’s grounds. The waterslide was a great success for it was complemented with watermelon and, for children with sores, dressing them with bandages. The waterslide also provides some competition for the kids to see how far they can slide.

David Marshall, a younger member of the Boab Network, gave an account of his involvement in the October 2013 program. He wrote of experiencing a small team of people who were new to him, comprising Libby Weeda, Lee-Anne Burnett and myself (Robert Hoskin). Education of volunteers is a key component of our program, though it happens naturally rather than being contrived. David

spoke of his meeting with Mark Norval, the local Kimberley artist, who gave a personal account of his long-term relationship with the Mowanjum people as well as their history.

Mark Norval, who had started the festival whilst running the art centre about 15 years ago joined us, as well as Donny and Tim, a film maker who has had a long and close relationship with Mowanjum. They had some stories to tell us and Robert almost interviewed them about the artistic history of the tribes of Mowanjum and the Mowanjum Festival. The conversation was brilliant, and I didn’t say a word, just keenly listening to the stories and trying to take as much in as possible.

Along with volunteer education, it is important to take advantage of mellow nights spent reminiscing on the day’s event, in serious conversation about all kinds of issues and simply letting off steam.

Living at Derby and being involved with Mowanjum can be hard work, particularly when we need to prepare to go up-country. We cram a range of activities into a short amount of time, as well as having to take responsibility for our meals and accommodation, which is in a community hall in Derby.

We had our serious moments, as well as our fun times. David wrote of a conversation he and I had on the issue of economics and the rationality of choice and decision making. He was obviously reflecting on the relationship between his involvement at Mowanjum and his studies to come. His words illustrate growth in empathic awareness that would later undergird David's study, as well as his involvement in the Boab Network. He was also trying to make sense of the gap between his experience with the Mowanjum people and what he had been taught at school and university.

I discussed the possibility of basing my thesis for the honours around Mowanjum somehow, which I will start next year. This was based around using or creating a different economic model for the people of Mowanjum. These differences I had noticed had been a lack of planning for the future, especially around nutrition and healthy eating, another passion of mine. The other things we discussed were the economics behind the pastoral lease, for from both the conventional economic model, but also the rationality behind the Mowanjum way. I asked about the differences between the ways we see land compared to Aboriginal people and how that would be incorporated into a new economic model.

The group enlarged our focus, discussing government policy for the northern half of Australia and who is setting that policy. My opinion was that the wrong people were being consulted when setting these policies. David shared that he was dumbfounded and couldn't believe government agencies wouldn't ask the opinions of people with direct experience. It seemed to him to be a reason these policies are failing and requiring an organisation such as the Boab Network to bridge the gap between the government and the Mowanjum community. Our programmatic involvement is detailed in Chapter 5.

It breaks one's heart to hear millions of dollars are not being spent properly. These conversations really put fire in my belly for change and improvement. Being at Mowanjum can break your heart a million times over if you let it. Alternatively, if you see the positives and look

for things that can improve and the potential of the community, you may cry with happiness.

The debrief

Our volunteers receive both orientation and debrief sessions to support their involvement at Mowanjum. As an example, most of the volunteers met for a debrief in the week after the whole group returned from Derby in January 2013. They were asked how they had experienced being involved in the program. Overall the group enjoyed the experience of being involved and nearly all were likely to continue their participation. Their responses included:

Being thanked for the activities by the children.

The older kids taking responsibility to get other kids to ‘do the right thing’.

The relationship of trust we seem to have, especially with older teenagers.

It was also important to learn new ways to relate to the children, and this might mean they ‘don't respond as much to our being *disappointed* with them as being yelled at’.

Fair Game appreciated the partnership with Boab Network.

The younger members of the Team were conscious of being good role models, which was affirmed by the older Boab Members who complemented the younger members for their leadership and organisation skills. It was felt everyone pulled their weight with kid's activities: for example, preparing for the discos. Everyone took responsibility for chores etc. and functioning of the group house, most people took turns in cooking and the joint shopping list on the fridge worked well. The group also considered problems, giving ideas for future volunteers. They felt there was better engagement with community adults, but as noted above, younger children tended to “take part in activities primarily planned for older kids” which drove the older children away and made the activity hard to run. It was also noted: “Kids are often *ratty*, probably because they are hungry”. This led to the question whether supplying fruit was enough; should we have a budget for supplying more substantial food? Indeed, is this our role? Other questions included: how to encourage adult involvement, how to improve our communication given children frequently asked the group when activities would happen, whether we needed to be more proactive about ‘child-care’, or would this be patronising? And the important question of subsidiary: how to involve the children, adults and the community in program planning, thus “seeking to come from their perspective and culture”.

The problems the team faced included the continuing issue of dogs, with the concern we (or the children) might be bitten, the issue of providing fresh food for the children, and general concerns about transporting the large numbers of children: not to mention the difficulty of supervising them in the pool. There was a need to consider a strategy to deal with violence (occasional fights among kids), but also to consider our response to known violence among adults in the community.

A difficult year

We have had our difficult years, whether in terms of problems with the internal team relations, or when outside factors such as a suicide, impacts the program. Such a suicide which occurred in 2012, radically affected the Team of eight volunteers in the first week and fifteen in the second week, four of whom were present for the whole period. The first week was interrupted on the Friday by a funeral. The team were invited to attend and at the family's request, some members formed a choir to lead the singing of a couple of hymns at the funeral service held in the Uniting Church at Mowanjum. The Team were glad to participate, feeling accepted by the community. This euphoria quickly changed, however, on the Saturday morning when a young man who was well known by members of the Team, committed suicide.

The Team woke to the news the lead guitarist of the Red Alert band had taken his life in the early hours of the morning. This changed everything for they knew the family well and went out to Mowanjum to find his grandmother who effectively raised him and his mother who were both distraught. The Team brought them back to their house in Derby for the weekend, to sleep and rest in the cool quiet of the air-conditioner. This meant the planned bush trip on Saturday was cancelled and instead they took the mother, grandmother and three of the younger women out to May River for a swim and a picnic. As Ross shared, "It was a great cruisy afternoon and a tonic they needed".

In the following week, other events such as the disco and a concert involving the Red Alert Band were cancelled. Instead, the Team took two busloads of children with a few community adults to Broome. They swam at Cable Beach for several hours and then had lunch on the lawn and afterwards went to the Town Beach water playground. As Ross shares, "The kids were unusually fractious; both going to Broome, but to a greater degree coming home". This could have been because of high sugar intake, but more likely the trauma in the community or the absence of community adults were factors.

Although the group did maintain a program following this traumatic event, the death deeply affected them and the community. Ross wrote of sitting on the front porch of one of the houses talking with members of the Red Alert band about their loss. They discussed the future of the band, suicides, drinking and drugs and things in general about how Mowanjum was going. Lee-Anne read Ross' account in an email and responded:

I'm also concerned about the mental and physical health of you and your team. Clearly you are burning the midnight oil and I know how strenuous the days are. At least the Derby house is a safe haven and a great place to debrief but do look after yourselves too. Be strong and take good care of yourselves while you're looking out for our young friends at Mowanjum.

It would not be right to go into more detail of this terrible time. Rather, the experience is an example of what it means to be 'on the ground' when tragedy occurs. A principle concern is that other band members or their friends would also be at risk and follow with a copy-cat suicide. Ross, therefore asked slightly older boys in the community to look after the band members or others at risk. As we reflected later, it was appropriate for people, like Ross, to be able to talk and care for those deeply affected by trauma, adding another dimension to the Boab's involvement in the community. Who knows how this tragedy may have played out in the lives of other band members without our involvement?

Bus trips to Perth

The Boab Network has sponsored many bus trips from Derby to Perth, involving youth and some accompanying Mowanjum adults. It has done this to enable young people to experience a wider frame than just life in Derby. We want to empower the youth to ask questions, to see possible futures within their grasp; to see possibilities such as attending colleges in Perth. Some do, with the result we have had over a dozen Mowanjum youth taking up the challenge of college education.

In past trips, Ross Gobby, together with Leah Umbagai or John Tyrrell drove the long distance from Mowanjum to Perth over a period of three days. The group would stay in the Floreat Uniting Church and be hosted by the Boab Network and Church community. These trips would enable the Network and Floreat Church to host reciprocal visits; as Mowanjum families hosted us on our visits to their country.

The road trip to Perth has remained a highlight for the Mowanjum youth, though some have independently travelled to Perth with their families to attend Perth hospitals, others have gone more than once. As there were many road trips to Perth, I must be selective. I have chosen Ross’s report of the highlights from the 2012 bus trip to Perth, the third trip of its kind, described as “cruisy with a great bunch of kids”. Not that things went completely without incident. They were “teenagers after all!”. The journey followed on from the traumatic death of the Red Alert Band member, which happened earlier that year.



Figure 19: Day out with the Dockers.

Some ten girls and eight boys made the trip. They were supported by twenty-eight volunteers in Perth. The Mowanjum adults, together with the children and youth, stayed the whole time in Perth at the Uniting Church in Floreat. This was the usual venue for the Perth stay and an impressive gift from the people of Floreat Uniting Church, an expression of hospitality supported by many people from the church and wider to provide meals and other support to this large group.

Perhaps the Church’s greatest contribution was simply “hanging out” with the Mowanjum group, spending creative time with them. Although as Ross shared,

“It was still hard to stop our adults from jumping in and taking over”. The church worked well as a base, and unlike previous years, Ross and the other hosts organised fewer activities which might have locked them into a tight program. The kids really appreciated having something to do, but in an un-organised way - every teenager’s dream! Because there was little structure, the group hung around the church, badminton, pool, table tennis, watching TV or visiting the temporarily set up computer room.

The group took responsibility for their own chores. They cooked most of their own barbeques, but this was backed up by our host mob who did some food preparation, cleaning up, washing clothes etc. It was important to achieve the balance between requiring the kids to “look after themselves” and support them in doing this better this time. It was also important to have a large host group “hang out” with the Mowanjum mob and spend one-on-one time with them. This would usually take place during activities. Yet, there were many occasions when a ‘host’ would go off with a small group, either to visit their relatives who were in Perth, to go for medical treatment, to visit host homes, or to go shopping. The more fragmented grouping with diverse activities gave everyone more opportunities to get to know each other. It was rich experience for all involved; hearts were lost, and friendships made! Highlights of the trip included visits to Rottnest Island, Ashton’s circus and Kings Park at night.

Ross noted several children were taken to the Derbarl Yerrigan health centre in East Perth for various treatments. This was mainly related to open sores and boils. As he shares, they returned to Mowanjum, “armed with bucket loads of medicines, all healthier than when they came”.

Ross ended his report with the question “Is it worth it?” He admitted the question had arisen from the experience of the suicide in the previous January.²³

Unrealistic Expectations

The 2012 trip to Perth went well because of the many years’ relationship the members of the Boab Network had with Mowanjum people. Despite this experience there were difficulties, as Ross explains in the following reflections on his work. One of the major issues for trips such as this is the clash between our expectations of how the children and youth might behave in our culture, and their understanding of what is the norm. Do we alter our expectations on the basis we frame our approach from their culture - an embedded and emergent response - or do we impose our expectations on the situation with its discipline and restrictions?

This is where our understanding of what it means to be host in some situations, and guest in others, is particularly relevant. When we host such trips, it

is very appropriate we set rules. The difficulty we face is to set these rules in a way the children and youth can understand and thus relate to what we are saying. As Ross shared, he can often feel uneasy, knowing the expectations church people might place on those staying under their roof. He would want everyone who encountered the group to be impressed by them, but this meant he would require the kids to be on their best behaviour. Ross also admits to “a healthy dash of self-interest, because it would also make him look good and make life easier if there were no *problems*”.

The patience of the team can be tested when children went AWOL from the main group and travelled independently on public transport to catch up with relatives who lived in another suburb of Perth. This would lead to differences of opinion between those hosts who feel responsible for the children and the Aboriginal Elders who might question whether too many expectations are laid on them and their children. As Ross explained:

It is always a hard lesson to learn: to accept people as they are. But we manage this within our own families. Other members of our family do things that annoy us, or with which we don't agree. Why can't we extend this empathetic acceptance to a group like the Aboriginal people?

Although some trips go particularly well, some have their incidents, and the learning that goes with such crises. Ross remembered a bus trip when they reached Meekatharra after dark. It is inappropriate to go into details, except to say that a fight broke out during a basketball game on the new, well-lit basketball court. Ross was concerned that the fight would escalate to the point that it would attract the attention of other Aboriginal youth in town or worse, the police, particularly when some of the group angrily headed into town. One boy was hurt and taken to hospital, but fortunately with no serious injuries.

He later discussed the incident with a Mowanjum Elder who replied, “Now you know what we are really like”. This reply led to Ross thinking further about violence, noting of course, that white youth are often violent and uncontrollable.

I have thought about this comment often since then. What does this mean? Do Aboriginal people harbor an inherent level of innate violence that lies hidden and dormant in the presence of outsiders like me but can erupt and spill over at any time? Is it part of ancient Aboriginal culture? Several elders in Mowanjum say it is not. Violence is not part of their culture. Maybe, but I suspect it is more to

do with recent experience since the coming of non-Indigenous people to the Kimberley was accompanied by violence and this unresolved trauma is the root of the violence we see now as well as many other social issues.

The Red Alert Band

One of the most interesting ways in which the Boab Network has supported Mowanjum youth is through music. It helped form a band which proves to be a wonderful role model for innumerable younger kids. It helped Boab members get to know an older group of young men in the community who previously had little contact. It is also a fun way to experience and involve this part of the Mowanjum family.

The Red Alert Band began when a group of boys in their mid-teens talked with Ross and others about forming a band. They didn't have any instruments, nor did they have any of those things necessary for a performance. There was a visiting group of PLC students who had come to Mowanjum and the band wanted to perform for them. The boys talked to Ross about getting the requirements to put on a performance. They needed electric guitars, drums as well as mikes, amps and speakers. Ross spoke to Peter Croll who said he should go and see a local Derby sound contractor who set up sound systems for events such as the annual show and Mowanjum Festival. The boys from the band knew him well and were not surprised when he "grizzled and complained". But, eventually, as he always did, he got the things together with no fee being charged. He admonished the youth who were with Ross every inch of the way, telling him how they should look after the equipment and not do what they did last time.

Ross and the boys received what they wanted and went to the community hall in Mowanjum to set up. The plan was to have the concert about 7.30 pm. They began rehearsal about 4 pm, while Ross and his team were decorating the hall with balloons and coloured lights. Then they launched into one of their songs. Ross' perception they were an ordinary group, given that they had no instruments to practice on, was completely blown away. For Ross, "It was loud, it was raucous, it was fantastic. It did your heart good to hear this band leap into this fantastic group of songs".

So, with this introduction, Ross knew the night would be a great success, though Peter Croll had warned him music draws the whole community: the good and the bad and the ugly. This would be a problem around 8 or 9 pm, when people had a lot to drink. Undeterred by these comments, Ross went out to find some

burly blokes who could act as bouncers. We had them at the doors. The girls from PLC came out as arranged but were shocked when a bouncer took to a drunk who was a nuisance. The bouncer hit the drunk who went down like a sack of potatoes. To Ross' surprise the man got up and went in another door. Despite this intervention, the prospects of violence were very high with the result the teachers and carers of the girls, sensing the escalation of danger, got them on the bus to leave. But the rest of the community enjoyed the experience.

Ross later reflected this unfortunate instance, which had nothing to do with the band. He admitted he was completely wrong in trying to get bouncers as young, fit, healthy blokes to control the situation. When he later spoke with Mowanjum people they told him he should ask an elder to be on the door. He took their advice and instead of having fit young bouncers, asked an elder of the community to be on the door. For instance, on one occasion, the elder concerned was a frail old lady, yet quite capable of controlling situations that can become violent,

Ross and others were blown away by the band. Despite the melee, he regarded this as one of the highlights of his involvement at Mowanjum. There were also a couple of girls who were impressed enough with the band to invite them to play in Perth.

Without doubt, for me, the rock band event on Wednesday afternoon and evening was the biggest step forward. It certainly 'wowed' everyone from outside Mowanjum which lifts their status and pride.

Ross organized for the band to fly to Perth. When they got there, the PLC girls arranged an event at the school around 4 pm. The other students had to pay admission and they played to a couple of hundred people which raised a few thousand dollars. They ended up this tour, having a concert in the Floreat Hall, where the band made another thousand dollars or so. The band had several other non-paying gigs and recorded a CD. The plan was these events would defray the costs of them coming to Perth, but they were a few hundred dollars short, a small cost for the benefits received.

Chapter 4

Up-country journeys

A high priority for the people of Mowanjum is retaining their connection with their traditional lands. This is essential to them retaining their cultural identity and certainly has led to the feelings of disorientation and loss of self-worth experienced by youth. Without this connection, young people are rootless and in danger of losing their relationship with their unique culture which has continued for over 50,000 years. This was very clear in my initial meeting with *Ngarinyin* Elder David Mowaljarlai and subsequent journeys with his people and the *Worrorra* elders. Indeed, such journeys reverse that colonialist imposition which has changed them from being hosts to guests in their own country.

We have become very aware the people are our hosts when we visit their lands, even when we take part in significant organizations. Elders such as Donny Woolagoodja want to teach us their culture on these visits and this is essential to anything that we might do with them at Mowanjum.

Yalun (Cone Bay)

The Network's first visit was to a place called Yalun (Cone Bay) on the Kimberley Coast. Yalun was established by families from Mowanjum in the 1990s as the government through ATSIC assisted Aboriginal families to return to their traditional lands. Yalun was relatively close to Mowanjum, either a day's drive through difficult terrain, or several hours by boat.

The visitor to Yalun by boat would be greeted by the sight of four or five houses perched on the beach flats, nestled between hills and the escarpment on both sides of a long harbour. It is a tidal beach, so the skipper must pick the right tide to avoid a long and messy journey across the mud. The resident crocodile would make such a journey very difficult!

The Mowanjum people enjoy being at Yalun. It gives an opportunity to fish in the well-stocked harbour, full of barramundi. For the young and adventurous, it provides an opportunity to hunt for turtle, a traditional diet. This is not an easy



Figure 20: The settlement at Yalun.

undertaking, even with a motor-powered boat. The skipper would skilfully guide the boat through the coral reef, while one person stands on the bow with a harpoon.

Marie spoke of her trip to Cone Bay which followed on from their first youth program in January 2008. Donny Woolagoodja acknowledged their work at Mowanjum, by inviting them to go to Yalun the following April. He said, “You have been so good to us, so we need to show you our country”.

I just felt so privileged. It was such an eye opener. Because I was cook, I bought all this bulk food. I was able to go on the boat. They hired a launch thing which had a freezer for the food. Donny produced the boat and skipper. The deep freeze, they used for fishing was used for the meat.

A range of Elders went with a small group of Boab people and including the Arts Centre’s Cultural coordinator, Peter Croll. They stayed for five days. Marie and others stayed in Leah’s house, which she described as a treat, even though it had deteriorated over time. Two doctors from Derby camped in a tent at the side

of the house. Because there were broken down fridges, they had to put our meat into a freezer turning it on and off to keep the cool, but not frozen.

One of the first activities was to go out to the barramundi farm in the middle of the inlet. She talked to the skipper of the company boat who said it was great when Mowanjum men came to work for them as they arrive with the basic and necessary skills. This contrasts with most of the white staff, graduates who come from Tasmania, the department of Marine Studies. These graduates come up with all the technical and university knowledge about the fish and the industry, but they need to be taught how to manage the boats, particularly when the boat needed to be moored near to the tanks when they feed the fish. As the skipper said,

With Mowanjum fellas you don't have to teach them how to manage a boat, you don't have to teach them about the fish and they have all those innate skills which they survive with. When they live on site, they are reliable workers.

This trip began Marie's education: she was introduced to the importance of the *Rambarr*, the avoidance law that prevents a man having contact with his mother-in-law. She noted one man did not come up to receive food. She initially thought it was a sexist issue but was later to be told he couldn't come up to receive the food because of *Rambarr* issues.

Marie was delighted to have a taste of turtle, which was a new experience for her, but was surprised, however, when she was left out of the sharing in the barramundi feast. The teenagers had gone on another boat but had got hungry and returned for the sandwiches Marie and the team had prepared. When Marie looked at the bottom of the tinny, there were three turtles which they had caught. She thought she would never have let her teenagers go off in a tinny, particularly in such dangerous waters. But, not only did they handle the trip, but hunted as well. They not only had the initiative and skill to catch the creatures, but when Marie arrived at Cone Bay, to light the fire and cook them as well.

And to taste turtle that had been cooked was absolutely amazing. On another day, however, the fellas from Cone bay on the day after we visited the fish farm. We were asked, "What did you think of the barramundi?" They gave us eight barramundis, but it was not enough to feed everyone, so we didn't see any!

John Tyrrell also recounted the importance of his first trip up-country with a Mowanjum family which occurred at the end of 2012. When Peter McCumstie, the CEO of Dambimangari, asked John to do a survey of the buildings up there,

Gary Umbagai and his family took him there overnight. He came back with a report of the works needed to be done to the five houses. He noted, “It was an exciting experience”. It was something he had never done before he joined the Boab Network; he had never spoken to or got up close to an Aboriginal person. To go to Cone bay with an Aboriginal man, his wife and three young kids and a baby was an exceptional experience for this Irishman.

Majaddin in *Ngarinyin* country

In the year following the first Boab Network trip to Yalun, 2010, several of us joined Eddie and his family to Majaddin on *Ngarinyin* lands. Eddie was keen to host this visit, as he was in the process of developing the family’s connection with their traditional lands and wanted to take tanks and other equipment to be installed for the bathrooms and toilets. The Majaddin trip opened a door for me, not only by providing a basis for my research, but as it turned out, led to a further calling: to take part in the long-term vocation of being with Eddie and his family as they struggled to take care of and protect their lands. Eddie, his family and others from the Boab Network, collaborated on five trips from 2010; each offering new ways of being together and encountering land.

This journey to Majaddin began collaboratively, but the encounter with Aboriginal traditional lands changed the nature of our relationship. We entered a host/guest relationship, in which (we the non-Indigenous participants) were the guests and the Mowanjum people our hosts on their land and their terms. This host/guest model radically reversed the power relationship inherent in many past Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations.

The Invitation to Majaddin

This initial trip to Majaddin involved at least seventy people: families from Mowanjum, Rangers, members of the Boab Network and several other community members. The trip evolved from conversations with Eddie Bear from Mowanjum and Ross Gobby from the Boab Network. The two men and their communities had been working in a collaborative relationship with the objective of providing a program for Mowanjum children and youth. Eddie invited the Network and other families in the Mowanjum community to join with him and his family for several days in the remote location at Majaddin.

We have since come to understand the importance of our presence, as Ross reflects:

We are like a neutral broker, which changes the dynamics within the various groups with Mowanjum. We can relate across those dynamics which affect relationships between families, and thus reduce any potential for conflict.

We have also become aware of the importance of organizing trips involving many people from Mowanjum as Peter Croll noted:

The huge costs involved with the fuel and food and being able to sustain themselves out there for a reasonably long period of time. You would be limited and only be able to get a certain number of people out there like your own immediate family. Whereas on these back to country trips you can get a lot of people who have connections to that area.

Crossings

The journey to Majaddin involved a distinctive crossing as we travelled to a remote location in the Kimberley to encounter *Ngarinyin* culture and caves in a profound way. Such a crossing may be physical but is also emotional. This sense of the crossing began as I drove from Mt Barnett on the Gibb River Road to Mt Elizabeth Station. I was ‘out of my comfort zone’ not only in driving a four-wheel drive vehicle, but also in crossing through a dirt track in the far north of Australia.



Figure 21: Eddie pointing to the new Ngarinyin sign.

The host/guest relationship

Leaving Mt Elizabeth station, we headed for Magpie Jump-up. This is a watercourse that descends from the plateau to the plains. We carefully drove down this watercourse which can be navigated only in dry weather. This crossing marked the edge of Eddie's homelands. Beyond this point we were reliant on Eddie's hospitality and care. For Libby Weeda, one of our Boab volunteers, this was a moment of transition:

Especially at Magpie Jump-up, it really resonated with me. That was the point where I encountered the literal space between leaving part of me behind and entering a completely new space. ... It felt like I expanded. I was seeing it from a somewhat different perspective.

Paradoxically, even though Libby was allowed access and included completely, she was very conscious of not entering fully into their social state. In a sense she remained in a liminal or in-between state. In making this physical crossing through Magpie Jump-up, not only did we make emotional, psychological, spiritual and political crossings, but we moved from a collaborative relationship to one of being guests in a host/guest relationship. Such a relationship has implications not only for us as guests, but for our host Eddie as well who shared:

Being the Elder of that country, I feel good about people coming to look at my country and me speaking about it and sharing what old people tell me. I speak out to the kids and even you.

We crossed through such an edge – indeed several edges – as we travelled through Eddie's land. In so doing, we moved from a relationship centred on shared action to that of host/guest centred on place and our host's relationship with place.²⁴ As noted above, such a relationship involves a necessity to observe protocols and obligations. Such tension, inherent in the welcome to place, has implication for collaborative relationships, particularly those which involve Aboriginal communities.²⁵

We were very aware of our reliance on Eddie and his family, not simply because of the courtesy of being a guest, but for reasons of survival. We crossed into a dependent relationship which required new learning and experience.

Ross began this journey with the presumptuous thought he was taking the people to their country. In fact, it was the reverse:

We were completely dependent on their sense of direction and straight navigation, ability to get water, the preparation and how we did the food, the shooting of the cattle and other creatures supplementing our food.



Figure 22: Trucking the plumbing materials to Majaddin.

Libby made a similar comment:

... it was more than being just humbled. I was completely aware of my absolute ignorance of culture and my lack of understanding of rituals and ‘smoking’. I knew next to nothing. Because I knew very little, it put me immediately in their hands because they had to guide me completely really in the appropriate ways to go around things.

To cross consciously into a host/guest relationship is thus to broaden and extend the meaning and nature of collaboration. A host/guest relationship ceases to be work or activity centred. It becomes a complex interplay of many dimensions, including a larger understanding of hospitality than simply between two parties. We were not simply working in collaboration; we were living on and being in relationship with the land, and the spirits (*Wanjinas*) of the land which created all living things and thus had first offered hospitality to the host. As Eddie shared:

Yeah, and even the old ancestors have lived up there and passed away. They are right there. And another thing, when we first go up to that country, I had my mother there with me and that old man pass away. But mum used to go in the place and she sang out: “This my young’ns, they all here, my children, and these all here”. So, she was introducing us to the country and to the old people. They don’t know us, but when we go in there, their spirit is still there. And mum just call out there. “These our little ones”, so every one of us, all the kids, come to be welcomed in this country.



Figure 23: Eddie butchering a cow at Majaddin.

Our presence on this trip supported Eddie and his family as they came home in a new way. Eddie was clearly at home in Majaddin, particularly as he invited others to share his home. In a strange twist, we who were the visitors enabled our hosts, Eddie and his family to truly come into their home. Eddie acknowledged this gift in a later conversation. “I think when people come out, it’s a healing process we go through too”. This healing relationship occurred at many different levels:

Well it does bring people together. Sometimes you can look back on when Aboriginal people started to work for a ringer, in a stock camp and station, and some *kardia* bloke were real bad, treat them like dirt and work them hard. (Eddie did not want to describe the bad treatment; rather, he continued) You see what happened when you

guys come in? That's a different thing to the past, in the way it feels. It's all different (the experience of whitefellas). You guys come up there to share our culture. It makes me feel good!

Eddie's words affirmed my contention there was far more to our relationship than a work focussed understanding of collaboration. This shared return to land offered non-Indigenous participants such as those from the Boab Network the opportunity to enter a relationship with the people who had the potential to heal past injustice.

The vision

Eddie took this opportunity of being on land to share his vision for Majaddin with two members of the Boab Network and me. It meant a great deal to him for the Mowanjum people and his non-Indigenous friends to join him in this important visit and to know how much this country meant to him. He said:

It was a real something to see other people look at my country...The stories told by our old people could live and non-Indigenous people and even our young ones too, to understand that you know.

Lee-Anne Burnett noted this was an important moment in our conversation, for him as well as us.

To think by being there, you might have kindled the spark that allowed him to think his vision might become reality. That's what it has done. I am sure he always had the dream. But suddenly he began to think it might be doable.

Eddie came to see his vision for the return to Majaddin in a new and more complete way because of our collaboration. His vision for Majaddin broadened to include others outside of his family group. It is a place where he could share with others from Mowanjum and beyond.

Eddie has a vision of Majaddin being a special place not only for the Mowanjum community, but for non-Indigenous people as well. Of course, non-Indigenous people would not be privy to all the cultural knowledge that would be passed on to younger *Ngarinyin* people. This welcome speaks of the continuation of Eddie's relationship with his land. Eddie has truly come home to his place in the act of being the host. In being guests of the *Ngarinyin* people we were reversing a trend that had occurred for most of the twentieth century with white men seeking to be host to a dependent Aboriginal community, whether by establishing communities such as Mowanjum, on the pastoral stations or in government programs.

Dissonance in the garden

We continued to experience what it meant to cross into another culture and way of being as we lived on the land with the traditional owners. We worked together, spent time sharing food and conversation and enjoyed the opportunity to be in community. In this respect we felt in familiar territory, yet we also felt the dissonance of experiencing ways of living and being, remote from our own experiences and cultural understandings.

For Mowanjum people, being on country and engaging in hunting can be exhilarating as *Worrorra* Elder Gordon Barunga shared: “I like to see when we get together chasing that thing you know. I feel happy”. I also felt this exhilaration noting in my diary following a hunting expedition:

I got caught up in the hunt, oblivious to the dangers of the drive. I filmed an intensive sequence of the hunt, from the first sighting, the shots, and the involvement of the people in cutting the cow up. The children and youth watch, but then, certain young boys are given the responsibility to cut up the other side of the cow.

Yet, for some of our team it can be uncomfortable, if not traumatic. We were challenged by the sight of a cow being killed. Keith also had trouble eating the bush food because he had been traumatised by the kill that had gone seriously wrong. He was now being discerning in what he would or would not eat. For example, he shared he would not have any of the cattle, having participated in this kill. Keith added he had trouble with other food:

I didn't go for any of the brim soup either, it was a bit rough for me, but they don't use it as soup; they just put it in a bit of foil paper and just peel the skin off and tear bits of meat off them.

Yet surprisingly Keith summed up his experience of the trip to Majaddin with the words: “and so for me the whole thing was a terrific learning”. Keith was not the only one to have difficulty with the conditions. For Ross and Libby, our food arrangements were “a step too far”. He and Libby left the campfire and went around the back of their vehicle where they found some tinned ham and some other stuff with which they felt comfortable. With their salad and spam meal on clean plates out of the dust, it was to them like a picnic. Not that they are the only volunteers who have had difficulty with being up-country. We are mindful it may leave some volunteers disappointed or angry to be in this situation, so alien to their way of thinking.

It was difficult to deal with a different set of cultural norms and values from our own. It also challenged my feeling of wanting to control our experience, if not the way the camp operated. A recurrent theme concerning the interaction of the Boab Network with the Mowanjum people in this initial journey to Majaddin was our attempts to bring order in what we perceived as chaos. Questions which we considered included: to what extent should we take responsibility for food preparation, ordering the supplies and preserving what we believed was an acceptable hygiene level? Should we live as the Mowanjum people live on country, or meet some of our own expectations regarding these issues?

Together we clarified an important issue, yet to be fully resolved. What boundaries need to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of being in the bush? We, who are non-Indigenous, face a difficult choice. We could try to live as Aboriginal people up-country; or acknowledge that this is impossible, undesirable and we can live up-country in our own ways. We tried to prepare food in a central location, but this seemed counter to the people wanting to have their separate camp fires. This led to the question: would we bother in future to prepare communal meals? It seemed more appropriate to adapt our approach to what we experienced as Aboriginal groups cooking food in their own family groups. These questions brought us back to more fundamental questions: what does it mean to be a guest in Aboriginal lands and what is the nature of this hospitality?

Crossing to the sacred place

We were invited to visit the Majaddin caves while participating in traditional protocols, which meant being ‘smoked’ and taking part in a brief ceremony in which one of the Elders announced our presence to the *Wanjina*. This event reinforced my understanding that we were not only guests of the *Ngarinyin* community but of the land and the spirits of the land. We had the opportunity for new learning about what it meant to be with Aboriginal people in a completely different relationship. If the past is a guide, non-Indigenous people consciously or unconsciously have sought to control Aboriginal people in the assumption of the dominance of Western cultural superiority and thought. Out bush, at Majaddin, we were challenged to learn what it meant to be in relationship with the land, people and their spirituality. This would affect our understanding of what it meant to collaborate with Aboriginal people and communities. The caves are sacred places, so I was invited into communion with the people and the creation Spirits of the land; it was as profound as any spiritual experience in my own religious tradition.

Eddie Bear hosted this high point of our visit. A key *Ngarinyin* Elder accompanied him, speaking in language to the *Wanjinas* and telling stories in language. Again, we faced an edge, a threshold which required certain procedures in order we might have the right of crossing. Such procedures arose from the sacred/spiritual memory of our hosts and defined our relationship with this place, as much as the landscape and our bodies. Hospitality exists in the tension between unconditional hospitality – the freedom implied through being welcomed as guests to this place – but also of conditional hospitality – the necessity to undergo a process of welcome adhering to prearranged protocols of behaviour. Such protocols would not only apply to our experience of Majaddin, but to how we shared this experience with the wider public.

We were very conscious of being guests who had to be led into the proper relationship with these ancient sites. By following the instructions and teaching we affirmed their right to be hosts as they related to their country and developed a vision for the future. This contrasts with many tourists and other visitors who ignore or dismiss the importance of the Traditional Owner's host role. We would not collect knowledge to bring back into a Western academic or communal environment. We would avoid removing stories or images from their connection with country, as is often done in the name of research. In this respect, we were told not to take photos of these places. I therefore deleted any images the children might have taken on the cameras we had provided. I could take sound recordings as an important record for the community, but I was reminded to treat these recordings sensitively and not to use them in any video I might produce. Being a guest is radically different from wandering unannounced into a sacred place. It is essential to observe the protocols which in this case were concerns about recording the sacred place and images. I had been careful to gain permission to use my recorder, but in a later conversation with a *Ngarinyin* Elder I was warned not to play this to the wrong people. Not everyone has permission to hear traditional language and stories, and this may be an affront if shared with the wrong person. I decided not to include this sound track in the video I ultimately made for the community.

Despite our best efforts to adhere to the protocols, we did breach an important cultural norm. We had been told we would travel to the caves before breakfast but waited for hours. Indeed, we thought it would not happen, and went through many discussions and emotions. Finally, our hosts led us toward the caves, travelling in convoy. We behaved like whitefellas by becoming impatient.

We were later told an Elder had been upset; she and others were pushed to go before they were ready, which was inappropriate. Ross noted:

We were waiting ‘til the old people were ready to go. We weren’t going to any old place, it was a sacred site and we can’t go to a sacred site like that unless the old people are ready to go. Now what constitutes ‘being ready’ I have no idea, because I’m *kardia* (*a whitefella*). But something constitutes being ready. And when they’re ready, they’re ready and off we go. But I pushed the envelope. I went before I should have. It was like shouting in church or something like that in our culture. It is completely inappropriate behaviour. No one said anything overtly to me. But very subtly the word was got to me through third persons. “Listen mate, you were out of line then...” And I linked that to the fact we were completely their guests. And here I was, a guest in their country, taking the lead and acting like a bull at a gate, and I am not proud of that. And it has taught me humility.

As it turned out, this was a pivotal moment in our relationship with the people, because it revealed our unconscious tendencies to act to control a situation even when we were clearly in the guest role. As we reflected on this incident, it became clear we were not merely dealing with polite issues of etiquette; it was a basic ethical dilemma. The situation affirmed we need to wait on our hosts for permission and for guidance when in their lands rather than if we as non-Indigenous peoples have automatic rights. We in the Boab Network have since adopted this into our mission statement and accompanying values (see chapter 5).

Poulton Pool and the art camp (October 2011)

The Boab Network were clearly guests in a host/guest relationship in the traditional lands of Yalun and Majaddin. We experienced a different kind of up-country journey in our trips to Poulton Pool which is neutral territory. The Mowanjum people do not have any claim or traditional relationship with this place on the May river, some 60 kilometres from Mowanjum. We organised an artists’ camp in collaboration with the Art and Cultural Centre in 2011, then returned on a second visit in 2013 with a group of four from the Boab Network, Mowanjum adults and twenty children/youth. The second visit was more a family gathering with team; David Marshall, Libby Weeda, Lee-Anne Burnett and myself.

The 2011 trip to Poulton Pool was a compromise. We had intended to organise a trip to a remote part of the Kimberley, but this did not eventuate. The advantage of this journey would be its proximity to Mowanjum, some sixty kilometres down the Gibb River Road. The disadvantage was it would not have the same draw for the Mowanjum people as trips to traditional land involving the Boab Network: to Majaddin in 2010 or Yalun in 2009. Yet this collaboration led to significant insights that not only challenged the way we viewed work and being, but also the very meaning of collaboration. We were taught the importance of empathically relating to the land and community, which placed emphasis on the being and not the doing. Aboriginal people listen and emotionally relate to the land rather than objectively as is a Western response. In this respect, David shared his greatest learning, which was how to be with Aboriginal people rather than what to do for Aboriginal people. I had begun to learn this in our previous visit to Poulton Pool, but now David reminded me how we put this empathic being and relating into practice. Such being with the people and the land includes listening to fascinating stories, looking out for crocodiles, enjoying creative imagination, swimming and fishing.

The Artist's camp - 2009 trip to Poulton Pool

The 2009 Poulton Pool trip was intended to support Mowanjum artists as they painted on country. We combined this objective with the Boab Network's aim of providing a holiday program for children. Forty adults and children from various families took part in collaboration with three staff from the Art Centre (an Aboriginal couple and a non-Indigenous arts facilitator together with three people from the Boab Network). We spent four days at Poulton Pool with a mixture of activities including fishing, swimming, supporting art activities and generally being with the people and the land. Joanna Wilkie (Jo) from the Mowanjum Art Centre set up the arts tent and carefully ordered the paints and the canvases. Lee-Anne Burnett organised the food while I videoed various aspects of the camp and generally spent time with the people.

This journey did not involve traditional culture in the same sense as Majaddin, for there were no cave sites and therefore no need for the protocols around such visits. We found the experience, however, equally challenging because we tend to be over-active in our work and relationship with the people. This trip led us to understand the necessity of being in a good relationship with the people and the country as a precondition to action. It also reinforced the

importance of letting go of those Western constructs such as the need for objectives, clean cut organisation and a set of expected outcomes.



Figure 24: Poulton Pool.

Although the camp was collaborative, the word collaboration again seems inadequate to convey the depth and quality of what we experienced at Poulton Pool. The word collaborate assumes shared work and activity. Yet we were being challenged to let go of a work focus and to experience what it meant to be with the people on the land. The shared experience at Poulton Pool was not a tourist trip, and it was far more than a collaborative exercise. To focus on collaboration with Aboriginal people might be yet another way of controlling the situation: seeking to pull them into a non-Indigenous way of thinking. At Poulton Pool we were being taught important lessons to undergird our future actions. We were being taught what it meant to be empathically on the land, which included the importance of place and a new understanding and appreciation of time.

Empathically being on land

In the camp at Poulton Pool we learnt how to be with the people in a creative and transformative way consistent with their understanding of what it means to relate to the lands and to each other. For example, I asked Aboriginal artist and chair of the Art Centre's council, Kirsty Burgu, what she thought about land and place. Kirsty said it was going back to their roots:

You know where our ancestors walked and what they did. We follow in their steps. When we go out to country, we go fishing, go hunting, and the places they went, we went. So, if you say for Yalun side, we started going to Yalun when I was a teenager. We went out there and that's when my mum took us out there; all the time we were going to our dad's side, in the *Ngarinyin* area. Mum wanted us to go to her area.

Kirsty spoke about her dad's origins at Pantijan and then stated what her dad used to tell her:

We want you to go back to your country and learn about your country because the land is more precious than anything. When you have no land, you have nothing.

I noted the importance of the purchase of the Pantijan lease in Chapter 1. This moment was obviously a treasured memory and continued to influence the present. I then asked Kirsty if the Mowanjum children appreciate this message. She replied the people were following a different way now, "... like town way. But when they go out is the time for them to learn. They go out bush and learn thing, that's a good time."

Kirsty, and others from Mowanjum, were teaching us to be with and in the land. Time is not an independent variable as it is in contemporary Western life. There is a confluence between conscious time and the order of creation. Kirsty Burgu discussed the difference between life out bush and life at Mowanjum. She spoke of a different approach to time. Time follows from the movement of the sun out bush, while in Mowanjum it is haphazard. Life follows a natural rhythm in synchronicity with the rhythms of day and night and the seasons that are taking place in the land. For example:

But as soon as sun sets, we must have everything ready, bed ready, *mangarri* (food) ready, and we eat before the sun sets. But when we are in Mowanjum we eat any old time. But while we are here, we have centipedes that come 'round and ants. So that you need to tidy the area where you eat, and you have to cook in the early part of the afternoon and eat it before the sun sets.

I asked Kirsty if we were living a different kind of time up-country. She replied:

Yes, we were. (laughs) That's why at night, we were just relaxing. About seven. We were just laughing. I was just drinking tea every

minute. That's the only thing. But you notice the difference in the bush. When I am here in Mowanjum, I get up any old time. I just get up and I just sleep in and I get up late and I go to bed late here. But when I am in bush it's different; maybe the smell, maybe not inside walls which block everything out.

Well when I was a child, I got up early daybreak before the sun, and I was making tea, eating breakfast. By night-time we had supper early, bed was made. At Mowanjum all the kids don't go to sleep, but out in the bush they go to bed early. You heard all the noise for a while and then all quiet. And we had no clock or watch to look at and we didn't know what time it was. We got to sleep early.



Clearly the place and its natural rhythms determines the time, rather than some external concept of time independent of the place. This is probably why people like Kirsty feel so disoriented at Mowanjum, which is not their traditional country. They have not come fully into a Western concept of time and miss the sense of time which is associated with the land. I was beginning to move into a different rhythm out bush. I told Kirsty I loved the moment of getting up around daybreak and getting into the routine and feeling the sun rise. Kirsty also spoke of the healing nature of the bush.

Figure 25: Libby Weeda and Barbara Bear.

Because when I am here at home, I hardly see the sun, like most of the day when I am asleep; it makes me angry. So, by going out bush it helps me to enjoy the day and then I go to sleep early. So, you feel more better. When I was at Mowanjum I had a lot of pains in my back. But out there the pain just went. And when I come back the pain come back with me. (laughs)

As I empathise with the people on country, I am challenged to enter a new relation to time.²⁶ As Kirsty has indicated, a whole set of relationships and actions take place at the various times of the day. Time is confluent with the physical environment and the needs of responding to the environment. I light a fire at the beginning of the day; I seek food or work in the early morning; I rest in the heat of the day; I play in the afternoon and tell stories at night. It is a natural confluence with the rhythms occurring around us. In this way, I empathically relate to the land, rather than imposing my own routines and time restraints on this relationship.

A new breed of artist

I watched as an Elder painted a *Wanjina*. The land had obviously impacted this senior Elder and affected her art, it also had a surprising effect on the children's art. We were witnessing a new generation of artists, influenced by being on the land with their Elders. Indeed, the children surprised us with an explosion of art. They really got into painting. At first, they did the child thing and created havoc in Jo's carefully prepared art tent. They were mixing colours in the paint and not cleaning brushes, but with a bit of organisation this settled. They produced some lovely work. I found it very significant that they would proudly show off their work to us and wanted to be photographed with their piece, as adults would have done.

This experience led me to take the initiative on the next trip to Majaddin, and with the assistance of a visual artist, introducing children to new artistic possibilities. This creativity led to a very positive outcome. Jo shared the ongoing story:

I still remember the day he sold his first painting for \$40. When young artists sold paintings, they would keep the whole moneys. And his sister also sold a painting. When he came in, I said to him, "Guess what I have for you?" I said, "This is your first art pay. Well done." He was so chuffed. So chuffed, and I will never forget that day.

Relating

Such visits to country are all about relating, either to each other or to the land. I asked Kirsty about the importance of our time with her son. She had asked us to watch over her son in the water and we had taught him to swim. I began by saying I noticed she has the older ones looking after the younger ones. Kirsty replied her older siblings cared for her out bush and she in turn looked after her younger

siblings. She then thanked us saying: “When you guys were there, it was a help, it was sort of like a community help”. I noted it was a lovely feeling to be trusted with their kids and this meant we had a sense of being part of the family. Kirsty agreed, saying they were treated better than expected. Her son needed to be taught by someone other than his mother.

Kirsty then told me this swim had made a difference for her son. He opened up rather than talking to other children with his head down. She said, “He never talked to kids like that. Nothing, like being himself. It gave him courage and confidence”. This meant we took the pressure off her; she no longer needed to worry about him swimming. She added, “and then when I knew it was safe, I relaxed”.

A shared experience at a place such as Poulton Pool can often take on deep meaning and significance. The following story shared by Ross illustrates the nature of communion in the bush.

One of the most beautiful moments on that whole trip was when I went over and sat with two Aboriginal friends Rachel and Mickey and they pulled a fish in an alfoil wrap out of the fire which they had cooked. This was quite late in the evening, it was dark certainly, the kids had their evening meal and were off running around playing and they were just sitting there by themselves. Mickey asked, “Would you like a bit”. I don’t think we had our evening meal by that stage, so I said, “Oh yes”. Mickey had one fork and I another, so we shared this fish and chatted while we ate the fish. It was a very sharing time. Poking and eating out of this same fish. He would break a bit off and have the bit and break another bit off and poke it over my side of the fish which I took to mean, that’s your bit – which I did, and I picked it up and I ate it. Eventually, he lifted the backbone, so we could get at the bottom side, didn’t turn it over and pulled the bones off the top. It was a very communal effort. I asked him about the lung of the fish. I said, can you eat that bit and it was nice. It was nice, fatty.

In the above example, Ross, Rachael and Mickey shared the experience of a fish – a simple act, with profound consequences. In one sense this has nothing to do with collaboration, being the opposite of shared endeavour. But such communion is the basis of a good collaborative relationship. Ross and I have few opportunities to meet with Mowanjum families in this relaxed and intimate community setting. It was an illustration of the precious time we spent together.

Relating to people up-country offered unique opportunities to engage in extraordinary conversations. Such conversations offered other Boab participants and I an opportunity to experience a different world view to our own, again an empathic relating. We had a profound late-night conversation with the women early in the camp. We were resting together after dinner and talking about various experiences. As often occurs at night the subject gets on to cultural and spiritual matters. Lee-Anne recalled talking with the women the previous night about the spirits and their beliefs in these supernatural beings which absolutely form part of their whole belief system.

Laughter helps transcend the cultural divide

Following is a night's interaction which describes what is possible when trans-cultural differences are transcended, and we meet each other in spontaneous ways. I have no idea what might flow from such an interaction, but a night of laughter opens new possibilities for co-action because the boundaries have been relaxed, indeed transcended.

We heard raucous laughter from Kirsty's camp. Jo's son, Tristin, was entertaining the children with an application from his phone which transformed their voices into a cat's. I went over to investigate. Jo amused both children and adults with her contortions leading to reactions from Aboriginal people, both children and adults. We were really relaxed in each other's company.

I later spoke with Theresa and asked if she thought people enjoyed having us with them. She said, "I reckon when you are there you do a good job with the kids and with the people". I said to her, "Well thank you; that's what I want to hear because I would hate to be intruding. But I don't feel that. I feel we are all in it together". This led Theresa to talk to me about our inability to relax:

Theresa said, "Sometimes when we see you do so much things, we like you to sit down".

I asked her if we do too much and she answered yes. I said, "So we don't relax enough?"

Theresa laughed and said I only relax when everybody is ready to go down. That is when people are ready for bed.

I said I would feed this back to Ross and others.

But Theresa added, "It's just like us, we can't relax when the kids are like that. We got to keep an eye on them at the same time". She told me they liked it when Ross and Lee-Anne and I played with the kids and were very happy. They were telling us to do this or that or carry them

on their backs. Theresa added, “Because it was hot. We were concerned about you, you and Ross”.

I responded to Theresa by saying the next time I go out I would try and relax more.

Teresa’s empathic concern for us illustrates a fundamental difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal approaches to work and being. I can’t relax at times because I know things must be done and organisation is necessary. Yet, my culture often places too much emphasis on the doing and not enough on the being. Here was an opportunity to learn to relax and flow with the day. In simple terms, there is a time to work and a time to ‘chill out’. There are also health issues for being on country is a risky business. It is easy to become dehydrated. The Elders were showing concern for us, with a wider understanding of community. We were part of their family up-country and when the health of one person is threatened, so the health of the whole family is at risk.

Summing up

This chapter outlined three up-country journeys, each with their distinctive gains and challenges. I spoke with Peter Croll, who has organised the Mowanjum Festival over the past twenty years and has been particularly interested in issues of culture and up-country trips:

Having the capacity to get people back to country is good. We did the mighty Majaddin trip. People really enjoyed the experience. We had people who were able to return to Majaddin, but many kids who had never been there and had no clue as to where their families were from. Although it is very important, these can be expensive exercises to do. Unfortunately, it is not as easy as it used to be. You could chuck twenty people in the back of a truck, but you can’t do that anymore. Now it has been three or four Land Cruisers with everyone wearing seatbelts, having enough water, food and infrastructure to do that. It is a major part of keeping the culture alive.

Having experienced many trips and knowing how expensive and difficult these can be, both physically and emotionally I am sure they are worth the effort. My concern is for those volunteers who have been unable to join with us on such trips because we do not recommend up-country journeys unless the volunteer has at least one Mowanjum experience. I am also mindful of those who have felt the trip was either a waste of time or led to difficult and challenging issues. Not every trip has led to such glowing reports as what I have included.

Also, although it is important to help organise up-country visits, this is not enough. As we have found with the Mowanjum community, many Aboriginal communities in Australia suffer from a range of issues, contributing what has been the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal standards of living. Chapter 6 explores this matter in detail, together with the projects undertaken in collaboration with the Mowanjum people. Yet, it requires dedicated people with effective strategies to enable such projects. The people and their approach to this work are described in Chapter 5 to follow.

Chapter 5

Key people and their strategies

A volunteer organisation such as the Boab Network is heavily dependent on key people who are prepared to offer countless hours, often with little thanks and at times seriously affecting their personal and family life. I want to acknowledge the people who have made this work a reality and explore some of the applied strategies, including our approach to organisation, an essential aspect of our work. Our key people have often contributed in personal and costly ways to ensure the viability of the Boab Network and its work with the Mowanjum people. For example, members of Boab bought vehicles with their own money, they supported a youth through a court case, provided essential resources including vehicles so necessary for our operation. John Tyrell for instance, specially went out and got himself a bus driver's license so he could drive the kids in Derby and bring them to Perth.

Our aims and objectives

The Boab Network aims to work alongside the people of the Mowanjum Aboriginal Community to alleviate some of the social and economic disadvantage experienced by the people through the support of those projects initiated by the community. We began this work in two major ways: with a regular holiday program for children and youth which included assisting in up-country visits, experiencing the people's culture and ethos and having creative opportunities to dialogue with the elders about the needs of the community. Our major objectives arising from this consultation is detailed on our web site²⁷ include:

Education: particularly recognising the role of early childhood education and the Early Learning centre (ELC), drawing on the work of Economist and Nobel Laureat James Heckman on the high return from early parenting and learning from 0-3 years of age.

Employment and training opportunities: This includes developing the Community Resource Centre, creating jobs through the development of

its Pastoral Station, the Op-shop and made contributions to other ventures the community has undertaken which have secured employment for Mowanjum people (see Chapter 6). As Eddie Bear shared, the community can involve the children at an early age as they take them out to the Station to see what is happening.

The Pastoral Station gives us income, but the main thing is our kids have a job when they grow up. They are not getting into town but getting out there and doing a job. They have to learn to ride a horse. We had kids coming out there, mainly kids about 11 and 12.

Sustainability: The Boab Network provides support to the community in ensuring good governance practices and support. We have assisted the CEO in various submissions to Government and have a consultancy place on the board of the Arts Centre.

Culture: Recognition of culture, through art, dance, song, spirituality, language and visits to their ancestral lands is important for building self-esteem and helping the young people contribute to our multicultural community.

Relationships: The Boab Network recognises the importance of developing meaningful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Two-way learning is an essential part of developing authentic relationships.

Making these objectives a reality requires key people willing to spend countless hours in consultation, planning, coordination and writing reports. They also have their own gifts in relating, in networking, organisation, advocacy and practical and organisational skills necessary for the effectiveness of our organisation.

Strategies

Relating and relationships

In reflecting on the past decade, Ross concluded, if he had to write a manual describing, as a non-Indigenous outsider, how to engage with an Aboriginal community he wouldn't change much from what we did:

First 'You talk to 'em!' Then, you spend time listening to the community and talking about what you could do before you do anything. Visit several times before any action. You might start with

young primary school aged kids who are fearlessly, innocently and enthusiastically easy to engage in doing just about anything is fun. Then, wait for the teenagers to overcome their shyness and come to you with what interests them and out of activities with small kids and teenagers get drawn by necessity into interacting with the parents and other adult carers.

Ross spoke of the necessity of forming a creative and authentic relationship which must precede any effective action. And this means it is equally vital to return to the community on a frequent basis. The people must cope with an endless stream of individuals, groups and government agencies who come and go, so it is important we do not add to this confusion. Ross learnt there were fifty-five NGO government agencies who service Mowanjum. Most of these organizations are staffed by mainly non-Indigenous people engaged for what is usually a very short time. Staff turnover is enormous. It is always difficult to recruit and retain staff in a regional remote community and the heat, isolation and lack of services in a place like Derby from where Mowanjum is serviced doesn't help.

Ross illustrated this concern through a conversation with a teenager he began to know well after several trips. The conversation was typical of most conversations he has with young teenage boys; focused exclusively on the activities at hand conveyed through short sentences punctuating long silences. The conversation occurred on the way back from a goanna hunt. To Ross' surprise, a couple of the boys with him in the front seat started to articulate what he understood to be a thank you, expressing gratitude for his being with them. He then asked them whether there was anything different about the way in which he related to them. The reply was a simple sentence. "You are the only person we have known who has ever come back".

Engaging land and culture

I was asked to compose a letter of support for the Boab Network which could be signed by Mowanjum elders. To my surprise, Donny Woolagoodja, a key Elder and support for the Network, told me the letter was not deep enough. I had left out the important part. I asked what this part was, and he replied I had omitted the fact they were teaching us their culture as they introduced us to their land. This comment has led me and others to place a high priority on up-country visits, for these are essential to our learning about their culture.

Libby Weeda and her brother Lewis, for instance, had been keen to share in this journey as other younger adults made a similar observation:

Eddie, in opening himself up and sharing the journey with us, invited me to open to a whole new perspective or path. I am invited to go beyond a goal-oriented approach. It is not about having goals or achieving them or applying my intrinsic culture. It was feeling a deep sense of connection with what Eddie's story told me. I felt part of this and it enabled me to see things from a completely different paradigm. My Western paradigm was being turned on its end, but not in a challenging way. I was brought into relationship which was dissimilar to what I might have in Perth, it was a new type of relationship.

This need for culture and returning to country were a common theme for those friends from Mowanjum, whom I recently interviewed. When I met with Donny Woolagoodja on the ground where his house at Old Mowanjum once stood, he spoke about the people's need for return to country and engagement with their culture. Donny reminded me that his ancestors, who were here for forty or fifty thousand years, had culture all the time. He and others must keep it going because it is the stronghold of Aboriginal people.

Education is very important. Education for young people to study their culture. But people don't understand what this means. We are trying to put to the world that this is their culture, their dreamtime. This was the story that was put to them, to put to the world, to make them understand. Non-Aborigine people don't understand: the people grew up in the country and they (our ancestors) knew what was there for them to have. But our culture is fading away in the Western world. So, it is good to bring it back.

The government does not provide money to enable them to do this effectively. Indeed, education is seen within a one-way 'whitefella model' leading to poor school attendance where children opt out of the dominant system. Donny acknowledged the Boab Network has provided resource, funding and leadership to help his people get back to their traditional country.

It is a big country. You need a lot of knowledge to do it. To make people understand, young people need more education in the bush and more education in the Western world. So, they can understand and pass it onto the next generation.

The main thing is their culture can be strong all the time. It is not up to the Western world give you what you deserve. But it is more important the culture give you what you learn. It is important to learn something different. In the Western world, culture is different from our world. Our world is dreaming about how the dreaming came about. And the song-lines that run between our country is something that is very important. It is not just what you hear and see, you have more learning to do. It is the history of our culture.

This vision has many implications for the Boab Network and how it relates to the people of Mowanjum. It would be sad if we simply offered a white-fella program, which did not assist the people's need to teach and affirm their culture. Donny continued to speak of the importance of culture:

Culture is something different, you have to get them back to where their ancestors was. So they can carry it on. If they don't do that, they we've lost it. To make sure that thing (culture) has to be strong all the time. You got this world now, it is all technology and they get into that thing and forget about other things. You have to learn both kind of thing to keep them strong. You need money to do this and it the government is very hard to give us money.

It is not a matter of simply taking the children and youth up-country. This is important, but only part of the story. We have a critical role in assisting the people as they educate their children for engagement with the land and their traditional culture. For as Donny shared, it is important to teach the children about culture before they are taken to the caves. They have to be taught "something is very special in the caves" and they have to respect this. Leah Umbagai, as many people at Mowanjum who are familiar with our work, acknowledged Ross and the way in which he and other Boab Network people have engaged in bush camps, coming on holidays and by bringing adult and youth volunteers, building a bridge between Mowanjum kids and non-Aboriginal society. She added:

You listen to us. There is now a strength and bond in that we have now as a community. We had this bond but living in two worlds made this difficult. When this bond is stronger, then everyone as an individual is stronger within themselves.

Two-way benefits and two-way learning

We look for two-way transformation and benefits, and this is very consistent with the traditional Aboriginal way of thinking where there is reciprocal giving. On the one hand, we hope our relating and work will lead to positive change in the Mowanjum community. Yet, this is only half the story, for it is we who also need to change. I agree with David Marshall, when he said we have made an impact at Mowanjum, though we are very aware that we have barely begun in what might be achieved in the future. We continue to look for small changes, not necessarily large transformations. David began his journey in 2012. Now, four years later, noted on this last trip he noticed the kids were better behaved.

One of the eleven-year-old boys came to me the other night when we did the concert. We were running the sausage sizzle. He came up to me and said, “This is awesome, thank you”. It wasn’t like we were making him say thank you. Another band member sent me a message saying thank you for the work we have done in organizing the activities. And look at what Richard has done with the Resource Centre and the Early Learning Centre. These are massive positive impacts and they will stay. They will continue to have these massive impacts on the kids. There are people there to make sure this happens either in the community or in the Network. The future possibilities created by the Pastoral Station is the light at the end of the tunnel.

Learning is a two-way endeavour. We have much to share with the people, to raise the sights of children of youth. The computer resource centre is an example of this technological resource, but it is a two-way process as Kirsty Burgu explained:

The Boab Network have been a great help. It has been a two-way learning. They have taught me some things and I have taught them. I am glad to have them here. I was just speaking to Leah and she is saying “I am learning both ways as well”. It is not just a one-way, it is a two-way. It is good to have the Boab Network with us and I don’t want it to stop. I just hope it keeps going.

Eddie shares this view in simply saying, “Getting to know each other and learning our way and your guy’s way: and not only that, friendship”. It brings everything. You learn more from each other. This is important, because our fundamental objective is to form relationship. As Leah shared:

There are many issues we have to face, and we have to do these alone. But the support we have from the Boab Network has helped. They never came in to do this work for us but gave us support and strength for us to do it ourselves. That is one thing I mentioned at the beginning, “Don’t do nothing for us, we work together rather than work apart”. Make a difference in the people’s lives and the community is a shared responsibility. Walk side by side with us and give us a little bit of guidance.

Running children and youth programs

Many young adults from Western Australian and Victorian universities were brought into relationship with the Mowanjum community with the possibility of acting as models for their children and youth. As Eddie shared:

We get some of the younger boys. Some of them are still going to school. If we could get someone from that age in the Boab Network to meet with our children. Some of the young kids think they can do what they like. Your young kids can show them something different. You can talk to them and tell them that is the wrong thing to do.

Kallem Mungulu reinforced this need by saying there is a lack of role models in Mowanjum. The Boab Network in his words, “has helped him become what I am”. There are young people in his community ready to step up, but they need the opportunity to speak with people outside of the community.

There are not much people willing to step up and be role models in Mowanjum. Cause the younger kids today see a lot of drinking in Mowanjum. Whereas before they didn’t have much when I was growing up. I got taught by elderly people. Donny for instance. He was like a role model to me. Eddie. They were strong, but now it is just alcohol. They are lacking leadership in Mowanjum. I think that we have to do something. It has to do with our end of the rope.

As others, Steve acknowledged our holiday program, particularly as it teaches children and youth to engage with non-Aboriginal people:

Not only Richard, there are other people involved like Ross has been heavily involved, yourself, in different areas. So, it has really complimented the community. It has made my job a lot easier. You can see a difference in the kids with the involvement of the Boab Network. The school holiday programs have made a difference. We

used to have the store broken into. Now we go for a long time before this happens. You can see a change in the kid's attitudes as well. They can be unruly, but it is good to see the interactions with the Boab adults. You think with these little ones coming through and they are used to interaction, not only with Aboriginal people but with non-Aboriginal people. It teaches them to engage. Derby is a mixed culture. They must learn the engagement both sides which is good for the community.

Networking

We have been fortunate to have several people with a talent for networking: Marie Yuncken, has been with the Boab Network since its formation. She has carried the administration of the Network. At times this has been a heavy load, particularly when she did not know where the money would come from and feeling responsible to find funds for the general program. Marie's role was, and is, crucial in getting the funds to establish and maintain the school holiday program (see Chapter 3). She has enabled some of the projects mentioned in this chapter to be created, by helping to gain the necessary funding, such as for the Youth Coordinator. Yet, this is only a small part of her role. One of her key roles has been to guide the Creative Living Centre as it transitions to a not-for-profit charity with ATO tax deductible status which manages the Boab Network.

Advocacy

Richard Smith is concerned the people of Mowanjum can live in a healthy environment, particularly where the children can be educated and grow up with prospects. He has continually advocated for a fair deal for the community, whether it be in writing the business reports detailed in Chapter 6, or in writing and speaking with various government agents and ministers to make them aware of the possibilities for 'closing the gap' and ensuring the good health of the Mowanjum people.

Richard works to help the Mowanjum community to become self-sustaining, free of the need for government handouts. In this respect, he has developed the four major business proposals described in this chapter: the Community Resource Centre which has enabled children and adults to access a sustainable computer resource, funding for the pastoral station and the flow on to the irrigation project, an early childhood centre together with a coordinator and now funding to extend Mowanjum administration. Three of the proposals have

been accepted. The proposal to develop the early childhood centre was rejected, without so much as a review of the pilot project.

Steve Austin, the CEO of Mowanjum Community stated the community has been far better for the support the Boab Network has given him and all the community members as well as the directors.

And it has been some really big achievements by having this partnership with the Boab Network. We wouldn't have got the resource centre if it were not for the Boab Network, the early learning centre, the op shop, the pastoral station. This was something I was going to do but without Richard Smith's expertise in business plans it would never have come into being. I never had the time to write business plans which Richard was willing to do. The business plan for the pastoral station and then for the irrigation would not have got us to where we are. The business plan for the irrigation, was needed and if you employ consultants you pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to get all of this done. Richard done all this on goodwill. There were no charges to the community. He saved us a fortune in dollars but enabled us to move forward with all these possibilities. He has been a real asset for the community.

Framing and reframing our mission, values and objectives

Richard like Ross, myself and others in the network have a concern for the underlying philosophy of what we do. Indeed, a feature of the Boab Network has been its capacity to consider its work in a larger philosophic and theological context, drawing on the input of a variety of people. It has sought to be reflective since it first began.

Floreat UCA congregation established a Creative Living Centre, provided a range of speakers and discussion groups; a platform where the philosophy and theology underlying our work could be considered. Though these seminars and weekly evening studies, book reviews and discussions focused on a wide range of topics, Boab Network people were relating these issues back to their experiences in Mowanjum. As Ross shared:

This helped us debate the various dilemmas we frequently encountered and think in a liberal, progressive way about the ethics and philosophical basis of what we were doing. It was a rich, fertile interaction and it was hard to distinguish whether the raw experiences

we had ‘at the coalface’ informed our understanding or whether our philosophical quest influences what we did.

The Boab Network hosted a strategy day to frame our mission, our vision and objectives. We arrived at a variety of objectives which have formed the basis of our work with the community. The Boab Network also ran a seminar in August 2013 called Celebrating Mowanjum’s Future which included a wide range of speakers, the retired politician Fred Chaney, the Aboriginal lawyer Tammy Solonec (Director of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples) and the Labor party’s nomination for a Federal seat in Perth as well as Elders from Mowanjum and Derby. Paul Bridge, an Aboriginal man who is principal of Derby District High School, spoke together with the ex-chair of the Mowanjum council Gary Umbagai and an Elder of the Mowanjum Uniting Church, Alison Burgu. This seminar helped us to understand the issues faced by Aboriginal people and formulate a response.

I had the opportunity to reflect on our work and practice with Mowanjum elders and members of the Boab Network, resulting in a doctoral submission with the Australian Catholic University. The then chairman of the Mowanjum Council, Eddie Bear, became my mentor and friend, helping me to write and frame my ideas. Later, I co-authored a book with Eddie on his family story as they displaced from their traditional lands at Majaddin in the West Kimberley to engage in the pastoral industry before moving to Old Mowanjum.²⁸

Collaboration

A key to our collaboration with the Mowanjum community has been the work of Steve Austin, Mowanjum’s CEO, who arrived in 2008. Steve has been open to the Boab Network, allowing us to work in partnership with him. This has led to an effective collaboration, with Richard supporting Steve as he undertook many of the above developments. Steve has kept the Administration of MAC going when other Communities, such as Looma, lost such expertise following the outsourcing of CDEP. Without such administrative support the CRC, EPLC, Pastoral Station etc. would not be possible. The average duration of such white CEOs is eighteen months, but Steve is still there after a decade.

Steve attributes his long term stay at Mowanjum to the support of Eddie Bear, but also, the Boab Network has helped. Steve came with extensive experience working in Aboriginal communities. He has instigated a range of community development which included the building of many new houses together with maintenance and repair of existing houses. He established the

Mowanjum Driving Academy. Steve has re-established the pastoral station described below, complimented by a grant from the Department of Water to establish the irrigation facility. Steve continues to take an active interest in building a sustainable and economically viable community supported by excellent administration.

Practical engagement

We are fortunate we have people with good practical skills, and a willingness to get things done. John, a registered builder, has initiated many projects for the Boab Network. John, together with Keith, developed a community centre in Derby which enabled school age Aboriginal mothers with children to continue their education. Keith, apart from helping with the Derby community centre was asked to develop a community garden near the Community Resource Centre. This has complemented other Mowanjum initiatives such as the Breakfast Program.

Teaching skills

We are also fortunate to have a person with exceptional teaching skills and Montessori background, who has been willing to live and to work in Derby. Gail Cresswell was employed by the Mowanjum community to develop the Early childhood program. This has led to her being employed as the teacher at the Early Childhood classroom at Mowanjum. She is also a part-time Chaplain at the nearby prison and therefore engages in a substantial ministry to Aboriginal women, supports the music at the Catholic Church and assists the Uniting Church Minister.

Hosting the Mowanjum people

We have been guests at Mowanjum and up-country but have also acted as hosts when families and individuals come to Perth or Melbourne. Lee-Anne Burnett, as many other people in the Network, have offered hospitality and care to folk when they needed accommodation in Perth.

As an example, a young man came to her on Christmas Day with a request to stay at her house after his partner and close friend ended up in Perth after a car accident. A similar thing happened when a family required accommodation, so Lee-Anne liaised with the minister to allow them to stay in the Church, they stayed for three weeks. The experience ended with a strong relationship with the Mowanjum elder, her family and the church

Experiences in both Perth and Mowanjum with Aboriginal people and families helped Lee-Anne to appreciate Aboriginal culture. It helped her to relate better to all Aboriginal people within her sphere of contact.

I think it is a huge gain in the way the two cultures can live together more happily and with more respect and understanding. When I am told that the way they seem to be seen as unreliable, or lazy, but I don't see it that way anymore because I understand why they don't think ahead. They do live in the present. They don't plan, they don't like confrontation and they will say something and will not do it. I now understand why they are culturally like they are because I understand the culture better. This is not to mean that I understand it perfectly by a long shot. We want Aboriginal people to say yes, and so hear the yes when they really mean no. Relationships, friendships, understanding and respect are the most valuable learnings.

Organisation: Creating the 'Not for Profit' business structure

Organisation and funding are essential for the viability of any volunteer organisation. We were fortunate we had received a significant three-year grant from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) for teenagers with disability. But, as time went on, the future sustainability of the Boab Network operation came into question. We needed to maintain the volunteers, particularly of young people for the school holiday program. We also needed to maintain the donations to fund the travel and other expenses. Fortunately, Marie had previously formed the Creative Living Centre for innovative initiatives within Floreat Uniting Church Mission and Outreach. This then became the vehicle for setting up a not-for-profit tax-deductible entity to manage the Boab Network and the Black Pearl Network for the Papuan program. Help was provided by the Church Treasurer, and qualified tax accountant Deborah Marshall. Ian Passmore of the Uniting Church WA Synod office also provided advice in the development of a Constitution within the Uniting Church (UCA) that would make the CLC autonomous, with its own bank account and board, but answerable to Floreat Uniting Church Council. This arrangement gave the CLC access to the UCA's insurance coverage for the Mowanjum school holiday program.

As Honorary Secretary, Marie organizes the meetings, agenda, minutes and reports to various bodies including the church and donors. In addition to this formal role, Marie liaised with the Floreat All Saints Church Council for various activities involving the Boab Network. She is currently assisting with the re-branding and marketing of the Boab Network to attract volunteers, donations and sponsorship. Marie has taken a keen interest in the protocols and risk issues

concerning the Network, being prepared to act as oversight to the way in which we manage our activities. Perhaps her greatest contribution has been the way in which she has supported the various volunteers and staff. For example, Marie has constantly supported Gail Cresswell in her work at Mowanjum as well as being available to book flights for volunteers and arrange the necessary working with children checks.

A Web site (www.boabnetwork.org) was developed with a donate button linked to a Pay Pal account and an associated Facebook page to raise the public profile of the Boab Network.

We have also received funding from other Uniting Church congregations, Perth City (Wesley) and St Kilda congregation in Melbourne as well as from Kimberley Aboriginal organisations of Dambimangari and Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporations for up-country visits. Though finance continues to be an issue, as we continue to apply for appropriate grants from State and Federal departments.

In summary

The Boab Network has grown from the contribution of many people. It has maintained a constant holiday program, as well as substantial community development on limited funding and the personal contribution of many people involved as volunteers or donors. We have developed significant strategies that have arisen from our engagement and relating to the people of Mowanjum as well as our reflective approach to this 'mission', based on what we understand as following the way of Jesus in progressive and contemporary way.

The following chapter illustrates a range of projects that have emerged from this engagement, all consistent with the needs and wishes of the Mowanjum community. Now, after a decade, we must review our approach yet again; as well as bringing new people with their energy and enthusiasm into this ongoing relationship with the Mowanjum community. We do not believe our work has finished, but rather we have prepared the ground for a new decade of interesting and creative projects and programs.

Chapter 6

Projects and possibilities

In this chapter, we record our involvement in the wider context, in programs and projects that involve the structure of the community. In this respect, we put into practice the strategies and approaches outlined in Chapter 5, thus complementing our work with children and youth and our engagement with the people's culture and land. We believe it is important to take a holistic approach to community development, not at our initiative, but in continuing consultation with the Elders of Mowanjum. We are responsive more than initiatory. Our work and actions have arisen from many hours of listening, sometimes around the campfire or from requests from the CEO of Mowanjum. We have been conscious of the culture and ethos of the people, so have tried to work from this basis of an emerging rather than imposed methodology and approach generally. We are also very aware that we are empathically involved with the people. We want to see justice and transformation occur.

For example, we developed the Community Resource Centre (CRC) described in this chapter as one innovation needed to be addressed, given the lack of resources normally available to Australian families. Well run with good staff, the centre provides a safe place for children and women in often difficult situations. With internet access now available via NBN Sky Muster it offers the opportunity for educational homework support, community networks and more efficient delivery of services by WA Government Agencies into the Community.

Adjacent to the Centre is the community garden designed to offer fresh produce to families in the community. We take the host role in these places, particularly the computer centre which is based on technical expertise and relies on skills in organization. When Old Mowanjum was established, the Presbyterian Church established a working pastoral station through the combined efforts of staff such as a farmer from Victoria, Bruce Godwin together with the Aboriginal community. This station provided meat for the community as well as income. With Richard Smith's help the Mowanjum community have recently been able to obtain substantial funding and loans to enable it to employ a local company to set up and develop the necessary infrastructure to enable the renewal of the station.

This has since led to other critical developments, such as the irrigation project centre pivot funded by the state government.

Other recent projects include obtaining funding to employ Leah Umbagai as a youth program coordinator. Leah was employed for two years to develop a creative approach to youth. We have also obtained funding for an early childhood coordinator, Gail Cresswell, to work with children in the zero to three age range and their parents.

These projects are set within a context. Richard Smith, who has been an initiator of many of the substantial projects involved in this chapter, wrote the following preamble in his personal recollections of the Boab Network. This might give the reader an understanding of the larger story and issues leading to these projects.

Helping a Stone Age people²⁹

Australia never experienced the agricultural revolution afforded other parts of the world around 4000BC. A revolution that was the necessary precursor to settled existence for development of civilisation. This contrasted with the West Papuans in Eastern Indonesia who achieved settled existence through cultivation of the Taro (*Colcasia esculenta*) a tuber with edible leaves and starchy roots, also sago from the spongy sap of a palm tree.

After the last Ice Age, the rise in sea-levels 20,000 years ago completely isolated Australia and it would be thousands of years before European agriculture touched its inhabitants. The fact they did not develop a farming culture of their own is no reflection on their energy or intelligence. Farming has only emerged in fertile regions of the world where there were animals and plants that permitted domestication. Australian soils were largely infertile and the marsupial kangaroo and wallaby or emu were not amenable to domestication. Given the hand that nature had dealt them, it is of no surprise the Indigenous in Australia of 4,000BC were still gatherers and hunters, as the first Indigenous of Australia had been 60,000 years before and so they were at the time of European colonisation.

Australian agriculture, at this time of colonialization, was understood as a system known as 'slash and burn'. This is an unfortunate term to apply to such a highly developed system of resource management. It makes it sound like a wanton assault on the natural environment of accumulated experience, when in fact it was a calculated process, based on centuries of accumulated experience, in which areas of forest were cleared by a mixture of tree felling and fire, to create an open landscape, fertilized by ash, where new growth of a new kind, particularly

grasses and shrubs could establish themselves to attract the animals and birds they hunted and the plants from which they gathered seeds and dug for tubers. In Australia, as in many other parts of the world with similar circumstances, it was the work of people who knew what they were doing, and it represented a domestication of the landscape as profound as the domestication of animals and plants performed by settled people. In comparison to the Aboriginal people who created a much more productive land for the arriving European colonists, our legacy in the last 200 years has been one of profound degradation of much of the land from overgrazing in pastoral areas in agricultural areas, excessive deforestation causing salinization, erosion and soil acidification. In addition, these practices have contributed to global warming from emissions of Greenhouse Gases of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, methane and carbon monoxide from these exploitative activities.

The Rev John Love in *Stone Age Bushmen of Today*³⁰ reflected on the original motivation for the Mission to the Aboriginal Tribes of North Western Australia:

The history of the Australian Aboriginal since the coming of the white man has been a sad tale of the usurpation of the tribal territories, the breaking down of tribal organisations and the speedy extinction of all the tribes in all the settled parts of the continent. Numbers of efforts have been made to secure justice for the Aboriginal and to help him to meet the inevitable contact with the white man. One of these efforts has been the establishing of the Mission of the Presbyterian Church to the Aboriginal natives of the north coast of Western Australia. The early attempts to establish the Mission met with disaster and tragedy.

Over 100 years later, members of the Boab Network are engaged with the same challenge of securing justice for the Aboriginal and helping them adapt to living within white culture.

Community Projects

The challenge we face is assisting people to transition from a hunter-gatherer culture to a settled existence within a European culture based on free market capitalism. The Mowanjum Community, while only some 10km outside Derby, lacks many of the basic facilities that exist in the town and would be

expected in a white suburb. With 350 residents in 76 houses the many children and youth need a healthy environment in which to develop their potential. For example, for the Aboriginal people of Mowanjum such an environment is not provided:

- Individual houses do not have telephone lines and therefore internet connection which cuts them off from low cost access to the information age.
- There are sealed roads around the community but not to individual houses with access often through mud and puddles of water in the wet season and dry and rutted surfaces in the dry season.
- Children do not have access to a quality playground with a water facility to cool off in hot weather and cold fresh water from bubblers to drink.
- The basketball courts lack a cover to enable play during the heat of the day and functional lights that would enable play at night.
- The football oval does not have an ablution block and change rooms.
- There is no Community Centre for a health clinic, early learning centre, playgroup, social interaction area and other services.
- The Community Store is old, asbestos clad and encased in a wire cage to deter burglary.
- No cold fresh water bubblers around the Community to encourage the drinking of non-sugary drinks.
- The people have electricity, but this is cut off when the account literally runs out of money, which is often the case.

Before European colonization the Mowanjum people were tribal stone-age, nomadic hunter-gathers from three tribal areas with many intra-tribal clans. Their isolation on the Australian island continent had prevented their access to the plant and animal species of the Neolithic agricultural revolution that spread across much of the world in the last 4,000 years. The European colonists had some 500 generations to develop the social skills to live peacefully within agriculturally based settled communities. The people of Mowanjum have had five generations to date to make this transition with inter-and intra-tribal community separation and lack of agricultural skills. While genetic evolution via DNA happens over thousands of years, cultural evolution can occur rapidly within generations if the right conditions are provided, particularly for the

emerging generation. This has made the human species highly adaptable as evidenced by its conquest of the world at the expense of all other species.

How can these neurological and anthropological insights be used to assist Mowanjum? The foundations of this cultural evolution in each generation is established in the first 3 years of life when 80% of human brain development occurs and foundational social, cognitive and language skills needed for later learning are set down. Without this foundation, the future of most Indigenous people is severely limited. While active parenting of zero to three-year-old to develop these foundational skills is part of white culture, it is not part of traditional Aboriginal culture where survival is determined by the ability to gain an adequate share of food from gathering and hunting.

While the Boab Network's school holiday program builds relationships, diverts children from anti-social behaviour, treats immediate health issues, teaches healthy cooking and eating and hopefully encourages on-going school attendance, it does not impact every day of life in a way that will build lasting cultural change. Changes which will retain the best of their cultural heritage (art, connection to and sacredness of land) and will enable them to incorporate the best of western culture of health, education and employment while building resistance to the violence and abuse of alcohol and drugs prevalent in their culture. Therefore, running parallel with the school holiday program my own efforts went into many community projects which often included business plans to gain access to external funding for much needed facilities necessary for building a viable Mowanjum Community into the future

At the end of the Mission era in 1975, like most aboriginal people in remote areas, Mowanjum folk had insufficient employment opportunities and depended on social security benefits. One bright spot in 1977 was the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) scheme, devised after Aboriginal communities including Mowanjum requested 'work for the dole'. Aboriginal people wanted payments to go to their communities, not individuals, to provide development funds to build and maintain their houses and community facilities. Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation (MAC) effectively managed its CDEP grant for many years contributing to its development needs, restoring Aboriginal dignity and empowering the community. It was an income support scheme that enabled Aboriginal people to work, to learn skills, become educated, to be self-reliant and independent, and escape the 'sit-down money' of social security. These employment and housing services were progressively outsourced or privatised from 2006 (see Table below). A high level of unemployment and associated

social, health and educational problems subsequently developed. This situation led to the spate of youth suicides in 2007/8 and the formation of the Boab Network.

A legacy of this CDEP era was many community buildings. There were two iron sheds one for the Women and the other for the Men originally unlined without air-conditioning. The Men's shed had a toilet attached. Opposite these sheds were a series of four dongas arranged around a U-shaped area that were previously the offices for running the CDEP projects within the community. They had power and phone line connections. One donga had been converted by the Unity of First People of Australia (UPFA), a non-profit organisation founded by Ernie Bridge, AM (15 December 1936 – 31 March 2013) an Australian parliamentarian who was the first Indigenous Australian to be a Cabinet minister in any Australian government. UFPA led by Ernie's brother Peter converted one donga into a kitchen from which they developed a Breakfast Program for children before they left for DDHS. The objective was to both improve nutrition and school attendance. The program was ultimately taken over by the women of Mowanjum with financial support from the Dambi Trust. The next donga had been converted into a home work support centre, which we would eventually convert into the Early Learning and Parenting Centre for Gail Cresswell. When this folded due to withdrawal of Federal funding it became an extension of the Op shop. The remaining two dongas were joined by a doorway cut between them for easier access for the Op Shop, where the community has access for a nominal price, clothing, footwear, towels, sheets, kitchenware and sports goods freighted north by the Boab Network to Mowanjum.

* * *

Business Plans for MAC

Richard sought to address this social disparity and the need for community resources by writing a series of Business Plans and Acquittal reports from 2009-2018. He applied to 'Royalties for Regions', a policy formulated by Brendon Grylls of the National Party of Western Australia state government spending from the major population centres, particularly Perth into the rural areas of the state. This spending was funded by setting aside 25% of the state's mining and petroleum royalty revenue, which was held in a special investment fund (SIF), capped at AU\$1 billion annually. Other funding would come from Federal Programs such as the Indigenous Land Corporation for Aboriginal Businesses for reactivating the Pastoral Station.

| Business Plan | Funding body | Details | Amount raised |
|-----------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| Plan 1 | Royalties for Regions | Establish the CRC | \$100,000 |
| Plan 2 | Royalties for Regions and Lotterywest | Extend the CRC | \$160,000 |
| Annual operational grant | | Six monthly CRC acquittal reporting | \$700,000 p.a. |
| Replacement grant | Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access (RIPIA) | Replace computers | \$30,000 |
| Donation and installation | Private donation | Introduction of 11 iPads into the CRC. These were donated by Edward and Becky Smith, Santa Barbara, USA. Installation required security cables to be installed to prevent theft. | \$11,000 |
| CRC Special Projects Grants | Seedlings from WA Dept Regional Development and a subsidiary grant from Dambimangari Trust | Used to develop vegetable beds and shade house. The project was inspired by the late Heather Umbagai to improve the diet of the Community. The work was undertaken by Keith Bakker assisted by Lorel but lapsed with lack of community interest. | \$15,000 plus the cost of seedlings |
| Business Plan 3 | Indigenous Land Council (ILC) | Mowanjum Pastoral Lease | \$1.5 million |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---------------|
| | | 2011-12 Grant for yards, fencing and bores for half the 56,000ha lease. (\$500,000). | |
| Business Plan 4 | WESTPAC | Mowanjum Pastoral Lease 2011-12 Overdraft facility to purchase cattle. | \$500,000 |
| Mowanjum Early Parenting and Learning Centre- | PACE grants from Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2013/14 | Gail Cresswell, a former principal with Montessori experience successfully applied for a PACE grant from Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2013/14 and Richard was involved with John Tyrrell and Keith Bakker in restoring a donga next to the Breakfast Centre for this purpose. The PACE grant lapsed, and Gail took a position with DDHS to run the Mowanjum Kindy/Pre-primary class within the Community. Many funding applications to the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) to continue Gail's initiative failed which was an overwhelming disappointment. | |
| Plan 5 | Water Corporation 'Water for Food' grant from Royalties | MAC contracted with Pardoo Station to take over the management of the Pastoral Lease and Centre Pivot fattening for a per head agistment fee. The funding | \$2.9 million |

| | | | |
|--------|---------------------------|--|---|
| | for Region Funding). | provided by the WC was inadequate for this project and with MAC facing bankruptcy and urgent appeal went out for additional support. This led to some additional funds and to initiative 5. | |
| Plan 6 | WA Government Reform Unit | Improving Mowanjum Corporate Governance and early education of 0-3 years 2015- 2016, To fund a Deputy CEO for 2 years 2016-18 to help develop a contract with WA Housing for management including repairs and maintenance of Mowanjum’s 76 social houses. The rental income paid to WA Housing and then back to Mowanjum Aboriginal Corp. (MAC) would make this position financially sustainable in the longer term. This led to Business Plan No. 6 to demonstrate the economic feasibility | \$400,000 |
| Plan 7 | WA Housing | Contract for management of Mowanjum Social Housing for MAC from 2018 in return for rental income | est. \$370,000 pa plus in time additional funding for repairs and maintenance |

The above Business Plans and development initiatives concerning the Community Resource Centre 2010 – 2018, the pastoral station, and early childhood centre were as follows. Together they indicate the extent of the Boab Network’s community development and what can be achieved by involved and passionate volunteers such as Richard.

The total amount of income Mowanjum received from the above Business planning and support would amount to some \$7 million over 10 years. In the same period, the WA Government the West Kimberley Regional developed a prison just down the road from Mowanjum for 120 male and 30 female Aboriginal prisoners. On a visit to the prison organized by Chris May, Karen Sloan’s sister who is a warder Bandyup Prison, we arranged with the Superintendent the loan of their Prison Bus for our School Holiday program. The Prison have recently donated a bus for Boab Network use.

Community Resource Centre (CRC) 2009 – 2018

Initial concept and development

Richard facilitated the development of the Community Resource Centre, which he describes in detail in Chapter 6. In 2008, the Elders of the Community asked Ross to help their children become IT literate. This coincided with St Hilda’s Girls School in Perth donating 20 PCs with their large VDU screens to store at Ross’ warehouse. The next question was how we deployed them in Mowanjum. Steve Austin (CEO) suggested the possibility of a TeleCentre. These had just been rebranded as Community Resource Centres funded from the ‘Royalties for Regions’. Ross, through his networking, recruited Ian Weise who was a former IT expert in the WA Water Corporation to give IT technical advice. Ian had experience in setting up many of its telemetry systems around the State for monitoring water storages. He discovered the PCs still had the Windows XP license’s sticker, so we were able to re-install the Windows XP operating system, together with other useful software, particularly games and software to play music and videos. USB wireless adaptors were installed to provide Wi-Fi internet access. When funding became available, we purchased new Wi-Fi laptops and deployed the old stock in houses throughout the community.

The process of gaining this funding was onerous. First, on behalf of Mowanjum, we submitted an ‘Expression of Interest’ to the Dept of Regional Development to demonstrate Mowanjum met all the criteria. Once the EOI was

accepted, a full application with a Business Plan addressing the business criteria was developed. This involved canvassing letters of support from prominent local people, conducting a survey of the Community Members and then holding a public meeting in which Max Betteridge, the Department of Regional Development Government official attended to gauge local support. How then to get members of the Mowanjum Community to attend a meeting to demonstrate their commitment to a Community Resource Centre? As luck would have it the international One Laptop per Child (OLPC) project had just been launched in Australia and Damien McDonald the Australian Manager was persuaded to bring five of these little green computers to demonstrate at Mowanjum. Richard recollects this initial meeting:

Damien set the OLPCs on the large table in the Mowanjum Board Room and we got Eddie Bear, the MAC Chairman, to begin playing a game on one of them. The word soon spread throughout the community that fun was to be had in the Board Room and soon an interested crowd turned up to play on these machines. Max Betteridge was so impressed by the enthusiasm of the Community to engage with the computers, we passed his assessment with flying colours.

The OLPC concept in 2010 was exciting with the development of ‘the green machine’ or simply ‘the \$100 laptop’. The mission of the non-profit organization stressed through the One Laptop per Child meant empowerment, engagement, and education by providing each child with a rugged, low-cost, low-power, connected laptop with content and software for collaborative, joyful, and self-empowered learning. With access to this type of tool, children would be engaged in their own education to learn, share, and create together. They became connected to each other, to the world and to a brighter future.

This became our dream and hope the DDHS would take on this vision. We thought to speed the process by buying five units, but they never took off and were soon superseded by laptops, iPad and then smartphones. At least the idea and enthusiasm finally got our application accepted.

After the OLPC demonstration and Community meeting, Ian Wiese and Richard then travelled with Max Betteridge to visit two Indigenous CRCs that had been established at Looma and in the neighbouring Jarlmadangah community which had taken over the Mt Anderson Station. They also visited the CRC in Broome which serviced a largely white community. With the benefit of these and other investigations, Richard and Ian set out to design and build the CRC from

scratch within the Mowanjum Woman’s Centre. A phone line had to be installed by Telstra. It was also a CRC requirement there be a public access point. This could not be at the Women’s shed in the heart of Mowanjum, where visitors were not permitted to go. The Arts Centre came to their aid, providing a small room for three laptops and a desk in the main gallery for the public internet access point. This meant the CRC would be in the Women’s Shed and Arts Centre. Another



Figure 26: Richard Smith and Lorel Holmes in the Resource Centre.

part of the design was to enable internet access from individual houses using Wi-Fi transmitted into the Community. Since there was limited bandwidth, the internet usage had to be limited by charging for access. For this purpose, Ian Wiese visited an internet café in Margaret River and found out the software they used to sell internet access. This resulted in adoption of the *Arinda Surf Easy* modem and software. Additional software known as Deep Freeze was installed so when each computer was closed at the end of each day, it restarted at the beginning of the next with the original settings. Any files created during a session had to be saved to an external USB drive.

We also had to appoint a Manager for the CRC. Steve Austin suggested Lorel Holmes who was working for his wife Erica in the Mowanjum Store. She had been educated in the USA, had worked for the US Department of Agriculture and had a wide range of skills in computing, accounting, people management and building talents. Lorel, whose reflections are included below, was appointed the

inaugural manager until her retirement in 2017. She has since left and women from the Mowanjum community now manage the Centre.

Members of the Boab Network designed a set of benches that were secured to the walls. They were secured to the metal studs in the walls via horizontal lengths of 100x25mm wood. To this wood, the bench tops were placed and secured with screws, with supporting legs at the edges/corners of the benches projecting into the room. These bench tops with access holes for electrical and security cables, legs and chairs were all sourced in Perth by Keith Bakker whose skills from being in the furniture business were invaluable. We had them freighted to Derby where Keith and Richard installed them in the single room CRC in 2010 and with John Tyrrell in the CRC extension in 2014. Beneath the bench tops attached to the 100x25mm piece of horizontal wood was attached a chain which was used for a security cable to each of the first 13 Laptops.

The CRC was so popular that when we asked the Community how the Centre could be improved; their response was that the space be doubled. Another application (Business Plan 2) went into DRD for the extension with matching money coming from a Lotterywest Grant. The number of laptops were expanded to 22. In addition, 11 iPads donated by Richard’s son Edward and his wife Becky from the USA were also installed.



Figure 27: Sarah Pearce and kids in the Resource Centre.

Management of the Centre

The ‘delightful overworked Manager’ Lorel Holmes ran the Centre from its inception for several years based on strict reciprocity, where in return for IT access the children must attend school, learn to respect others and the complex equipment at their disposal. This discipline is helping them to develop a set of values essential for their cultural evolution into a sustainable community. There were signs of social transformation - Over the first five years, the number of students attending Perth private schools had risen from zero to 11. Lorel regularly reported the behaviour of children within CRC changing in so many positive ways, “some even declaring their love for her”. So, I caught up with Lorel and had a long conversation about her initial experience of the centre.

Lorel used to work at the Community store, situated on a large block of land not too far from the centre. She heard Richard saying to someone they were looking for a person who could manage the new Resource Centre which had just been established. Lorel recounted, “I walked up to him and said I would like to apply for the job. It’s been awesome’.

It has also been awesome for the Boab Network. Lorel’s family have a long association with Mowanjum dating back to the time when her father, Budd Crockett, managed Pantijan, a leasehold given to Mowanjum by the Federal Government in the early 1970s. She, like her father, continues to make an impact in the community. When we first opened the centre in 2010, some of the children were so young they couldn’t even get their hand across the mouse. Lorel introduced them to computers, showing them how to move the mouse. They soon learnt to click on iPhones. There were games on the computers, so when they could recognise what game they wanted to play, they began to learn. It didn’t take them long, because, as Lorel shared, the Principal of the school told their IT teacher she “had better sharpen up her skills because these kids know more about a computer than you do”. This was in sharp contrast to the children’s previous experience at school.

Lorel shared that before the Resource Centre opened, the children were so hesitant around computers at school, they would stand back, and they would be pushed out because there were never enough computers. This meant Derby kids got the computer usage and they didn’t. As their confidence grew, the children were no longer hesitant, and were the first to come through the door. In the first few years the children attended the centre by themselves. Then the mothers discovered the centre was a safe place for them to go. Indeed, during the hot time of the year, the CRC became a favoured place; lovely and cool, as Lorel shared:

Once in a while an adult would poke their nose in and then begin to come, mostly the mothers. And they came, and they loved the games. There are hidden object games, lots of games. They just fell in love with them and the parents would come and play the games on the computers. The kids would play their kids games and watch You - Tube and whatever else. They would go on line to do fruit games for school.

The CRC had been such a success it produced some extraordinary problems. They began the centre with ten laptops, but within the first week they knew they had to have more. As Lorel explained, the first computers didn't have headphones; the result was 'bedlam' with children each listening to a different program, producing a cacophony of sound. This was made worse because the kids were ten-deep at every computer. The problem of the headphones was solved, and then extra computers purchased with the help of Dambimangari. This request was initiated by Edna Mungulu who was on the board of Dambimangari. With twenty laptops, Lorel exclaimed,

Man, we were smoking! The kids thought it was awesome. During the school holidays, we had to give each child a number and they would have twenty minutes on the computer before they had to change and allow the next group to come in. We were overwhelmed.

This gift was further augmented by the gift of iPads. This meant the children were no longer interested in the computers but wanted the technology of the iPads. Luckily, Lorel had an iPad herself. While Lorel didn't know about the games, she could refer to Greg and Linda Wilson and his wife who provided a home-school for their children. They knew all the appropriate games that are good for the children to assist their learning.

As the computers increased, they began to be conscious of the lack of room. This initial period became stage 1. As noted above, two years after the centre commenced, the community had a meeting with Richard and Lorel who asked them what they wanted to do. They said, "We need more space". The need came from them! Then another person said since the resource centre is close to the basketball court, we should put a cold-water bubbler outside. So, this was also their idea. John Tyrrell drew up the plans, then Richard wrote another proposal applying for funds. John Tyrrell also became involved in the extensions which began in April 2013. He began with getting quotes, assisting with the Lotterywest

funding application and then passing the work to a local builder. As John remembered:

Richard and I made sure all the contracts were signed and in order. We made sure the plans reached the council on time. Once the builder started it was a quick process to get it done. I felt less emotional about this work compared to the Hub. But it has been very well used. People get straight into Centrelink though the designated computer. Of course, they have the toilet in there, the kitchen working well and the cold-water bubbler outside. That was magic.

The extensions delighted Lorel, who was keen to share some statistics, though she added that in hindsight they should have built the centre twice as big again, because on occasions, they still ran out of room. With another grant, they brought a further five computers to have about 22 laptops. In terms of visits, they have 700-900 per month in the school holidays. During the normal year, there would be around 600 visits. They come in and stay for a while and then go away for an hour to play, and then they would come back. This meant they would then be counted again. Lorel started counting because she wanted to know how many kids were attending.



Figure 28: Lorel Holmes and Keith Bakker showing off a community award.

The centre received a West Australian Community Resources Network Award in 2012. The plaque hangs proudly in the centre. It stands as a symbol of what can be achieved, given the appropriate funding, community support and the hard work of people such as Richard, Lorel, John and Keith.



Figure 29: The extension to the Resource Centre.

The CRC continued to expand, and its operations increased, which meant there was opportunity to hire trainees critical to Mowanjum's long-term future. Lorel began on her own, then the government gave a grant to hire two trainees. The Centre also received a gardening grant to install an adjacent community garden which was developed by Keith (see below). This was wonderful for Lorel because she could go outside with the garden trainee and work in the garden growing cucumbers, pall beans and paw paws. But, as often happens, grants are cut, leaving Lorel under pressure. Another innovation was to have the mail delivered to the Centre, which has brought the adults in droves. The adults then stay and use the computers during the day. The children come in after 2.30 pm, when school finishes, so the mornings are freed up for the adults.

One of the major achievements of Lorel and the centre has been to keep order and discipline, in what could emerge as a chaotic enterprise. She is keen to make the place as quiet as possible.

I make them be quiet if they come in the Resource Centre. It is a constant. It is no today and no tomorrow and it will be no next month and no next year. I am not wishy washy, I just say, no you are not allowed to do that. And if you choose not to obey, be then out the front door you go, and you don't come back for a while if you are going to be naughty.

Although Lorel brings a no-nonsense approach to the centre, the children and adults love being in there. She has succeeded in making the centre a pleasant place to be, and many have enjoyed her hospitality. As Lorel stated: "The adults can do something without the kids screaming. There's no humbugging. We don't allow the kids to humbug their parents in there. They have to come in and behave themselves". But kids are kids and sometimes they get angry with her, and one day even threw rocks at her car or through the car window. She had to put her car into a lock up. But, this anger does not last, as Lorel explained:

But when they see me up town, they say "Hello miss". They run up to me and give me a hug and say, "We love you". So, I know they are not being angry at me for being a disciplinarian.

The Resource centre is an important place for families, as Lorel explained to me. She sometimes fed the children Weetbix after school. Though, as Lorel admits, she is limited because she neither had staff or the money to pay for food. The centre is seen by the women as a safe place from issues of violence. I don't get a lot of them, but occasionally, a woman will come into the centre to seek refuge.

All this activity happens with support of Boab Network members such as Richard who does six monthly acquittal reports to the WA Government, prepares the budget and is available on call.

Any time I need anything I can call Richard. If it wasn't for the Boab Network, we wouldn't be able to run this service to the community.

As Lorel reminded me, through the provision of this technology, the children, youth and adults have access to a wider Australian and worldwide resource. As Lorel stated, "The kids have become tech savvy".

IT Design for Mowanjum Community Resource Centre – Ian Wiese

For many years, Ian Wiese was responsible for the planning and management of the Water Corporation's SCADA program. SCADA is an acronym for Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition. These systems monitored and controlled water and wastewater systems across the state, and they almost always used radio networks for communications, Ian had been involved in the IT industry since 1970, initially in the WA Treasury Department, then the Met Water Board. In 1980 he joined Brunei Shell and became involved in their SCADA projects. On his return to WA he re-joined what was then the WA Water Authority (subsequently becoming the Water Corporation).

The system as originally designed by Ian Wiese continues to operate. It is now managed by women from the Community daily and Greg Wilson who attends one day a week. The bandwidth, never adequate for more than a few users, has been up graded using the NBN Sky Muster satellite service. The external aerial on the CRC is still actively in use. The aerial on the office building is not operational at the time of writing. Technology moves on rapidly and most now have internet access via their mobile phones at a much higher cost. The public access point in the Arts Centre is no longer operational as the requirements of Indigenous CRCs by Government changed following a review in 2013.

Mowanjum Pastoral Station

Having given substantial time and energy to the formation of the Community Resource Centre, Richard turned his attention to another important identified need, that of the Pastoral Station.

The Mowanjum property incorporates a pastoral lease of approximately 52,000 hectares; freehold blocks of approximately 500 hectares (site of Old Mowanjum); and the area of the Crown land grazing license, which is approximately 4,850 hectares. The total area of land controlled by MAC is 57,350 hectares. They also own two blocks with houses in Derby. Its neighbours are Meda, Yeeda and Debesa stations, the Derby town reserve and Derby RAAF facility. Historically, cattle were run during the Mission era, but this ended in the 1980s during the CDEP era. Indeed, a key feature of Old Mowanjum, developed in the 1950s was the running of some 1,200 head on what had been a small pastoral station on the outskirts of Derby. Bruce Godwin developed this enterprise with the help of many people, Aboriginal and white. He spoke with me about this work, sharing how difficult the land was with, surprisingly, a lack of water. They

installed several bores, as well as a ‘turkey nest’, a large dam to collect water in the monsoon season. Bruce also seeded Buffel grass throughout the property, with the help of a local airman. This enterprise fell into disrepair, particularly when the people shifted to new Mowanjum in the late 1970s. This resource remained an unused asset for some 15 years despite its potential for generating employment, income and training.

All Pastoral Leases were due to be revised in 2015 and those not operating were to be forfeited back to the Crown. On 1 July 2015, all eligible Western Australian pastoral leases that met renewal conditions were up for renewal. The renewal marks an historic event that will never happen again. It is the only time in Western Australian history, every pastoral lease has expired on the same date and it is the only time in Western Australian history every eligible pastoral lease that met the renewal conditions was renewed on the same date. Lease renewal gives pastoral lessees security and certainty with new leases providing tenure for up to 50 years. Lease renewal allows pastoralists to continue to focus on their pastoral business and contribute to the economic and social fabric of Western Australia. The pressure was on Mowanjum to comply with its pastoral lease or face forfeiture. Almost 40 years has passed since the lease conditions had been complied with. Passing from the Mission Era to Government had seen the abandonment of a major source of employment of the Mowanjum people who were skilled in pastoral and cattle management.

In 2008, cattle were not being managed on the property and there was insufficient infrastructure to run cattle. All boundary fencing was in a poor condition and served limited purpose. A large amount of fencing on the property needed replacing. Other water sources were of a seasonal nature. There were no yards, except for one at the Old Mowanjum site. Most of the infrastructure on the property had not been maintained for many years. It was a priority to get artificial watering points in working order, repair or replace some fencing, and the yards so the cattle enterprise could expand outside the current paddocks. Significant time and financial investment were required.

With advice from Russell Shaw, Department of Agriculture & Food’s, Kimberley Indigenous Management Support Service (KIMSS), a Mowanjum family (Keith Nanowatt, Penny Bidd, Dominc Puemorra) formed an Aboriginal Corporation in 1999 to sub-lease Mowanjum Pastoral from MAC to again run cattle and provide employment for up to 10 Indigenous people. A Business Plan was prepared in 2008 by Yael Katz, *Bluebone Solutions* for a grant from the Indigenous Land Corporation set up to support such Indigenous enterprise. This

application occurred when Mark Davis was CEO of MAC. The first tranche of money was granted by Indigenous Land Council (ILC) but the work did not materialize, forcing MAC, with the new CEO, Steve Austin, to resume responsibility for delivering the outcomes and resuming responsibility for the lease. Jason Russ a pastoral contractor from Derby, undertook the work of yard construction, fencing and bores.

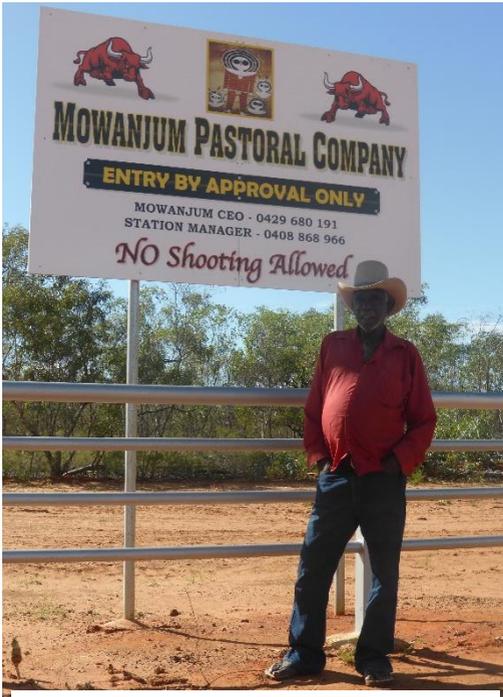


Figure 30: Eddie and the Pastoral company.

Having successfully completed the application and Business Plan for the CRC, Steve Austin then asked Richard to revise the 2008 Business Plan for the additional funding from ILC needed to create a viable cattle business on their Pastoral Lease with the 2015 deadline approaching. The 2008 Business Plan as overly ambitious, expecting an eventual profit from making and selling hay, harvesting and selling grass seed in addition to raising and fattening cattle. Steve Austin therefore asked Richard to help revise the Business Plan with input from Jason Russ as the prospective manager. Richard sought to arrive at a business model that would satisfy ILC and would return a profit within 5 years, but this was not acceptable to the ILC. Following consultation with them in Perth, Richard discovered a workable financial model that satisfied the ILC. Based on this model of fattening of weaners purchased from other cattle stations, the ILC approved \$1.5 million to build the yards, fencing and bores with trap yards, that automatically muster stock in a paddock when they came to water (See Business Plan 3). This enabled about 23,000ha of the 56,000ha pastoral lease to be developed for running cattle. The ILC grant however did not cover the purchase of stock, therefore an application (Business Plan 4) was made to Westpac Bank for a loan of \$500,000 with the interest rate subsidized by Government for the first three years through the Indigenous Capital Assistance Scheme (INCAS).

Steve Austin used the \$500,000 to purchase an in-calf Brahman breeding herd. This timely action meant the Mowanjum Pastoral Station was up and running

for the first time in 30 years. It also became the basis for more development. The Dept. of Water with 'Royalties for Region' funding for its 'Water for Food' project saw an opportunity for an Indigenous project in the tropical north west. Mowanjum's pastoral property was well situated on permeable pindan soil above a shallow aquifer of fresh water on the flood plain north of the Fitzroy river. This then required another business plan to apply for the estimated \$3.5 million required to install a centre pivot irrigation system.

Richard was then asked to write another Business Plan (5) for the Irrigation Development, which was infinitely more complex due the introduction of intensive irrigation and direct grazing technology from a temperate environment (dairy) into a sub-tropical beef fattening enterprise.

The irrigation Project

The Department of Water and Food program were looking for an Aboriginal community in which they could invest for a food program. They approached Eddie and Steve. They were impressed by what they achieved. This third business plan resulted in \$3.6 million allocated both to Mowanjum and to the department of water to put in the bores in the new development. This project made substantial funds available (\$4.9 million) for the implementation of large pivot irrigation works drawing from underground water from the Fitzroy River basin. MAC's pastoral project could then provide pasture for intensive grazing all year round.

The grant and loan monies meant work could begin, which included clearing a 38-hectare site, fertigation shed and fencing to keep the kangaroos and wallabies out. The pivot would then be installed, two production bores and six monitoring bores dug and then the planting of the crops. This project continues to gain State wide attention. *The West Australian* promoted the venture in an article headed *Stockman to ride tall again*.³¹ The community is "using centre pivot irrigation to grow Rhodes grass to fatten cattle as the beef industry gathers strength in the far north". Eddie was quoted as saying:

This is for the kids growing up. We want to see a future for them. It is a long journey, but we have grass here now (for cattle feed) and for two years ago we didn't.



Figures 31 and 32: Arial views of the pivot and irrigation scheme.

The housing contract

As with the Computer Resource Centre, such initiatives are visionary and have attracted appropriate awards. The Mowanjum Community recently received an award for their pastoral and irrigation enterprise. Yet, as we have found, receiving funding continues to be problematic. As Richard states below, one government agency might give while another takes, cancelling out the benefits. We were knocked back on continued funding for the early childhood learning centre. The

Mowanjum community also suffered the loss of the substantial housing project which generated necessary administrative funds and job opportunities.

Housing this year has been outsourced. The management of the leases, all the rental income, goes to the government and not back into the community. Nor does the community provide repairs and management. All that money goes to a QLD company, which is not going to employ and train people in the community. Mowanjum then becomes a reserve, and the basic infrastructure in the community decays. The children don't have decent playgrounds. The business plan says this model should be reversed. Instead of pulling money out of the community, the government should put money in a strategic way.

This is one more example of the outsourcing of Federal to external service providers who then lack the capacity to deliver the services. Their resources abound with large financial and physical asset surpluses, while those of MAC decline towards insolvency and disrepair. 2016 was turning out to be a critical year for Mowanjum where major pitfalls must be navigated, for much was at stake

Again, Richard was mindful the community be empowered to build a sustainable future. A key component of this development was the need for good community administration, which means administrative assistance to supplement Steve Austin's work overloaded by the growing pastoral and irrigation enterprise. Richard organised a written proposal for \$400,000 funding for administrative assistance over two years.

The outcome of this Business Plan (6) was a grant of \$400,000 to MAC over two years (2016-18) for employment of a deputy CEO to improve governance and develop a sustainable management plan for Mowanjum social housing. The first two appointees (Glen Moulton and Pennie Gross) did not last the distance but the contract for management of MAC's social housing was finalized with WA Housing in 2018. This has offered new possibilities for Mowanjum, given the prospect of a substantial addition to administration monies, which has led to the employment of three staff to meet this demand.

Early childhood program

Another key element in Richard's business plan is the importance of early childhood learning. As Richard stated:

So, when you write a business plan it is important to empower the people to be part of the solution to their problems. They will step up. One has to appreciate that many of the older ones are past it with ill-health and alcohol. But there are the mothers and the grandmothers. Therefore, it is so important to focus on this age group of the 0-3 years. The best chance to help the children to overcome the cognitive and behavioural problems is in the first few years of life, when 90% of the brain develops.

Many of the children attending kinder from age 3 to 5 are not toilet trained, they have basic behavioural problems and can't engage with learning. Thus, an early childhood program was recently established to provide education and support to children and parents in the 0-3 age group. This project began when Ross met Gail Cresswell, a very experienced teacher and member of the Augusta/Margaret River Uniting Church. She had a background of a teacher in the Murcheson area of WA Pia Wadjjarri and the other in the Ngaanyatjarra desert lands at Wingellina and was keen to work for this program. She is viewed with very high regard within the Education department. She not only set up the Pia Wadjjarri school from scratch, but she had 100% attendance at the school. Then within a few years, she had every member of the community involved in education of some sort. The women were doing cooking classes, the men were doing mechanics classes everyone was involved in some form of education. She is a community facilitator as well as school teacher.

Ross had an opportunity to talk with Gail over lunch at Margaret River, and recount the Boab Network's involvement in Mowanjum. Following this meeting, Gail said she would be interested in getting involved in the program, in some way to do with Education. Gail enlarged Ross' story, explaining this initial interest in the Kimberley from her perspective.

Gail remembered Ross and Lee-Anne coming to Margaret River with the West Papuans.

We hosted them at my school for the day. We had a wonderful day and it was a passing comment at the end of the day when Ross said, "this is a little bit of paradise", which it is. It is a most beautiful school. But, I said, yes, it is but my heart is still in Aboriginal education. That one comment was enough for Ross to reel me in.

Gail then explained what occurred when she attended the centenary event in 2013 which took place at Mowanjum. Many women spoke to her about coming

to Mowanjum and bringing a program for the children. When, she spoke about Montessori, to her surprise they all knew what she was talking about. It was miraculous, given many mainstream people don't know about Montessori and this little community of Mowanjum had been sending their children down to the principal of Riverland's Montessori school (Liz Marcus) and then sending their children on to independent high schools in Perth. They had been doing this for twenty years. For Gail, this was a sign she was meant to work at Mowanjum. Ross never misses a good opportunity, so when Gail expressed some interest, Ross caught up with Paul Bridge, Principal of the Derby School and followed up Gail's interest in working in the Kimberley.



Figure 33: A corner in the Preschool.

Paul had heard about Gail and was very keen to have her involved. Gail and the Boab Network faced a huge challenge in establishing this new project which neither deterred Gail, nor the Boab Network. Gail then retired from her principal role in the Montessori school and had undertaken some short-term work. While she was in transition to Derby the news came that Paul and his wife received a Churchill Fellowship and left the school before the New Year. Government cutbacks also meant there were tight financial constraints on all High Schools and a freeze on making such appointments as Paul had proposed. As Ross concluded,

“Even if Paul was there, it was debatable if he would have had the resources to employ her anyway”. But this news didn’t deter Gail, she went to Derby anyway.

We arranged subsistence funding for her for the following year. In this time her husband died which meant she took time off, So, we organized replacement teachers and for those to be paid we moved heaven and earth to get this to work. I think she was there in this role for eighteen months.

Paul Bridge returned from leave, appointed Gail as the teacher in charge of the centre in Mowanjum which included pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and pre-primary. Yet, the position and funding were not the only challenges Gail faced. As Gail shared, it has been “like a roller coaster ride, from the depths of despair to the heights of exhilaration which can be exhausting”. The community embraced her for, as Gail is very aware:

If there is one thing these people understand, it is death. They were able to be totally supportive to me. I have felt completely included and at home when I came into the community and this becomes stronger as time goes on.

Gail has been supported by Marie who would talk things through, in a kind of mutual support, adding:

It is a wonderful thing to be supported in your work by people who don’t live here. The Boab Network gives me every support, especially when I started the zero to three. Nothing couldn’t be solved. It was a wonderful gift.

Gail committed five years to Mowanjum, undertaking what can be described as a ministry both to the people of Mowanjum and to those in prison, for Gail is also a part-time prison chaplain. She loyally supports the Uniting Church minister and his wife, as well as plays the violin for the local Catholic church and is also a registered Marriage Celebrant. Her work certainly demonstrates the connection between ministry and other forms of social service.

Gail went to Mowanjum to develop an early childhood program, and certainly demonstrated such a program has potential for the community. But, despite Richard and Marie’s best efforts to secure funding for the continuation of this program, the proposal for further funding was rejected, without any follow up or review. Gail is now employed by the Education Department as a teacher at the

Mowanjum Kindergarten/Preschool reporting to the Derby District High School. DDHS As Gail recounted:

The 'Zero to three' program only went for six months because funding was not continued. It was never going to succeed because it was set up as a parent engagement program. The parents didn't want that. They wanted childcare. That didn't matter to me. By starting with the children, I knew I could make a difference. There is not much you can do with people who are entrenched in their own way of doing things and couldn't see any reason for being involved in an early childhood program. There was never going to be any more money from that source. When the funding stopped, the Boab Network continued to pay me. They raised the money and paid me my wage until the end of last year and through the holidays as well until the education money kicked in.

The three, four and five-year-old program is attached to DDHS. Paul Bridge, who understood the needs of Mowanjum, totally supported me with my intention to use a Montessori approach in the classroom. Having seen the success of the Montessori program at Kiwikurra and Blackstone Remote Community Schools I was willing to take it on. The program works particularly well with Aboriginal children. They don't need to be sitting at desks, in the one place and not being able to move around. The children need freedom of choice and all the manipulative materials are perfect. These children learn from doing and this is exactly what Montessori is.

The prison is an important part of Gail's work with Kimberley Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women as she explains:

My chaplaincy there is very meaningful to me. It is the one opportunity to speak to the women, and sometimes the men, when they are dried out when they are their own beautiful person. It is like an Aboriginal retreat. And speaking with a former prisoner last night about how that was for her. They took her into their midst and she taught them as they taught her. It was a two-way relationship. She was incredibly lonely. You are locked down for the night from 5.30pm. They have family and friends who are on the outside and they don't have visitors. They don't have transport. You must organize it so far

in advance. You can't just go and do it which is how Aboriginal people like to do things. They like to just go and do it.



Figure 34: Gail caring for a joey.

Marie Yuncken affirmed her work in the prison and gave the following example, adding “What she is doing in the prison is extraordinary”. Often, the prison would discharge the women on a Friday afternoon. This created enormous difficulties for the women, when Centrelink doesn't give them any money till the following Thursday. They have nowhere to go, they can't get a bus and the prison is not obliged to get them home. A lot of the women live in other communities. Most of them know somebody around Derby so Gail has a kit of bedding sent out from the Boab Network. The bag includes sheets, blankets and a pillow together with some clothes. Gail gives them this gift as they leave the prison, so they can have self-esteem when they visit their friends. Instead of going totally empty handed, they can say, “I

have my own bedding, can I stay with you tonight?” As the Chaplain and pastoral carer, Gail decided this was one of the most important things she could do for people when they are sent out of the prison. Thankfully, this has now been improved with the opening of Derby Aboriginal Short-stay accommodation.

Gail's house has been a refuge for many people, including those like me who seek a place to stay when we work at Mowanjum. It would be difficult to operate effectively in this harsh and demanding climate without being near to such a gracious and welcoming person. We then become aware of how much she gives to the community, as people call by her house wanting rides back to Mowanjum or seeking financial support. This said, I am conscious of how vulnerable she is, given these heavy demands as well as teaching full-time. Perhaps, more discussion needs to be made with the Uniting Church to explore how a model of ministry can

be developed that recognises the needs of the Boab Network as well as the local congregation. But that is another story!

Gail makes it clear she feels very strongly this is where she is meant to be. Gail is an extremely positive person who shares this infectious spirit with those whom she meets.

I feel very strongly that Mowanjum has a bright future. I refuse to hold the notion of a deficit way of looking at these kids and their education. We should be celebrating their gifts and strengths and teaching to their gifts and strengths.

Another interest of Gail's and of the Boab Network is the Op Shop. This is run from a small donga near to the CRC and serves as an important source of clothes and other affordable goods for the community. Gail shares that with the help of the Boab Network and the wife of the Uniting Church minister, Losana, order was established in what had been a kind of junk shop.

It was fantastic because people know they can go there and get warm clothing. They can get towels and sheets, but there are also two of their own running it. The Op Shop is like the breakfast program which started as a whitefella program and then is run, very successfully, with community people running it. That's the model: you want to give the foundation and understanding of how to do something and you walk away when people can stand on their own.

Other programs initiated by the Boab Network

The Hub

Members of the Boab Network were involved in the development of a community centre in Derby. To break the cycle of disadvantage and poverty, the principal of the High school, Paul Bridge, had asked the Boab Network for help to restore the building to enable Indigenous teenage mothers to continue their education. John Tyrell, a licensed builder, together with Keith Bakker, a tireless worker, spent time in October 2011 and January 2012 restoring the building and in May 2012 dismantling a redundant shade house to reinstate at the Mowanjum CRC. They were also aided by Indigenous students from DDHS, Marie Yuncken (lobbying Hon. Liz Constable), Ross Gobby (co-ordinator and toilet cleaning), Geoff Lilburne (kitchen cleaning) and Richard Smith (installing toilet paper holders). I spoke with John Tyrell and Keith Bakker who gave their accounts:

We sat around the table with Paul, Anna Alderson (dec.) and Lee-Anne to discuss how to get teenage girls with children into the education system. I then took this building project on board, drawing up plans and collecting materials donated by different suppliers I have worked with over the years. Everyone was generous with toilets, cisterns, basins, tiles, paint, you name it. All contributed for no cost. The job ended up costing the school twenty thousand dollars.

As both John and Keith recounted, “It was awful to begin with”. The school owned the property, but it was used as a shelter for Aboriginal men who used it despite them being locked out with broken air-conditioners. They got a shock when they gained entry to the building, because there were spiders everywhere, dung over the floors and the floor was in a shocking mess. The duo spent days cleaning the mess which they did in record time. They went home to Perth to return with the tools needed for the next stage. They faced Kimberley heat, opening the doors and windows to let in as much fresh air as possible.

They cleaned the main hall up over a couple of days. They then appraised the toilet block where the tiles were broken. When the Principal, Paul Bridge, saw the difficulties they faced, he kindly agreed he would send some help from the school. So, the woodwork teacher, who also happened to be of Dutch background as Keith came along with several other people. The place looked magnificent when they finished. Paul, together with the Deputy Principal reviewed their work and said, “This is absolutely amazing what you guys are achieving”. When they finished all the inside work, the school then came with a team from the Curtin Detention Centre to fix the grounds and outside of the building.

It took John and Keith three weeks to complete the project, which they learnt later was to be opened as a community hub. Keith and John were invited to the opening attended by a range of dignitaries, including an Aboriginal film-maker from Broome. As Keith noted:

The building turned out to be a huge success because Paul decided to make this a community hub. People came from Perth running a variety of conferences on drugs, rehabilitation, alcohol together with community events and courses. The place looked amazing with furniture from IKEA. We couldn't believe it ourselves when we walked in. They were all very grateful and our fares were paid. As far as I was concerned it was the most worthwhile thing we did in Derby.



Figure 35: Keith Bakker hard at work.

The experience was important for both men, particularly John who shared:

It didn't mean a lot at the beginning but later, when I saw Aboriginal mothers and white mothers with their kids all mixing together, I felt moved. It brings tears to my eyes even today, just thinking about it

The Community Garden

Keith Bakker had spoken with the late Worrorra Elder Heather Umbagai about the future of the Mowanjum children. Heather was concerned their diet was poor and needed to be enriched with fresh food. She asked Keith if he would develop a community garden to complement a breakfast program which she was initiating. I tagged along with Keith, Richard and Ross as they explored the possibility. We went to Looma, a small Aboriginal community on the Fitzroy River some 100kms from Mowanjum, where a well-maintained vegetable garden in steel tubs was situated in the community's school. These beds became the model for Keith's plan.

The next stage in the program was to install several steel bins next to the CRC, with shade cloth and a watering system. Keith and others spent many hours researching the materials needing and installing them on site. Keith followed with

planting the new crop. It was satisfying to see the new shoots emerging, even though there were some hiccups. I remember a terrible moment, when a young boy had got in the compound and taken out all the carrots (well before their maturity). These things happen!

Youth Co-ordinator

We have been very aware of the lack of continuity between our holiday programs and ‘normal’ life at Mowanjum. We could secure funding for a youth coordinator from the State’s proceeds from crime. This was supplemented by complimentary funding from Dambimangari, Lotterywest and a private school in Perth. These funds meant we had enough to fund the position, provide a vehicle and trainees to work with the coordinator. We did this because it is hard to run a program on your own. Leah Umbagai applied and was successful. She took this role for more than a year. Ross had been instrumental in guiding this program which provided for trainee support. Unfortunately, Leah found it hard to recruit and fill this position on a consistent basis for it was difficult to get volunteers, let alone a paid person to assist. Leah ran a program for children, with some twenty kids taking part in the activities.

To manage a group of that kind and size is difficult with one facilitator. They did all kinds of sporting activities; basketball and participation in sporting carnivals. She took them to country on several occasions camping, these were often linked with art programs. She undertook a lot of programs to do with health and wellbeing. She would talk with girls about grooming and health issues pertinent to growing teenage girls. I am not aware of doing any like this for the boys. A lot was achieved. But the program could have been better if Leah had more support. It is difficult to run youth programs in any small rural community white or black. Unfortunately, the program did not attract further funding.

Ross asked the question, “Would we do it again?” He answered this question by saying he would if we had the right person to do the program. We would need someone like Leah who was aware of Mowanjum’s unique cultural ethos. Leah provided the right skills and interest to ensure youth received the necessary support in language skills and other cultural matters. We could not maintain the program, which is a pity. It seems to be the nature of work in Aboriginal communities where grants are given for short term programs, rather than a long-

term support. When money is given in the short term and then withdrawn, it is difficult to achieve a substantial approach in the long run.

Mowanjum Op Shop

Claire Smith recounted the beginnings of the Op Shop:

It's difficult to recall how this started but Gail remembers a donation of clothing from the Red Cross in Broome sitting in the Women's Centre, now the Op Shop, and thought it would be a good idea to see if they would sell. Some women were keen but two of them sadly died, one in tragic circumstances. Gail recalls the first months were a nightmare as she tried to cart the wonky clothes racks out on to the veranda.

The Op Shop came together, like a well-oiled machine. Losana Marr, Sharon and Mark are now regularly opening the shop, the funds are paid into the Mowanjum Amenities Account managed by Nardia. Freight is now being paid from the profits.

We receive varied requests. One year there was a call from Ross to go to Canningvale Good Sammy's to source blankets for the freezing folk attending the Junba, which we fulfilled. Back in 2010 on the first trip to Perth hosted by Scotch College Ross emailed Claire.

Ross and Leah stated there was a need to seriously address the issue of warm clothes. Only three children on the trip had anything like a jumper. The girls had next to nothing tops. It wasn't that they hadn't packed, they just didn't have warm clothing. Footwear was another problem, some had thongs, most were barefoot. The email said:

Claire you will be interested to know the sleeping bags were all used last night. These kids don't know how much they owe you.

Claire's commitment to sourcing clothes and other goods was born; but where to find them? Claire's boys were swimmers so knowing how much was in the lost property box at the pool, she asked Beatty Park Leisure Centre and they obliged, providing a regular monthly collection.

Each month our house represents a Chinese Laundry. Some items are repaired, they are not discards, or merely left behind, but good quality clothes, towels, swimwear and other aquatic items.



Figure 36: Preparing the clothes for the Op Shop.

She also approached Venues West HBF Stadium: the Boab Network has established a great relationship there thanks to Nigel Crawley who has also arranged for the kids on the January Perth trips to attend Arena Joondalup for free access to the pool and basketball courts. They have also generously supported us with donations of clothing, shoes, sporting goods and boxes of swim goggles.

Back in Perth, sometimes goods accumulate to overflowing, so several Jumble Sales, Fetes and Pop-Up Shops have been held. Thanks go to the congregations at All Saints and Wembley Downs churches for their donations and support. The proceeds are raised for the Boab Network's school holiday programs. Every bit helps to go to a volunteer's airfare.

John Tyrell and his family have also been great contributors in boosting the supplies. Several times a year, items are boxed up, labelled and sent to Mowanjum. Thanks to Richard who ropes them on to the ute and drives to Forrestfield to load on the pallets. It takes three days to arrive in Derby where the Rev Jo Mar or Greg Wilson collect the goods. Among the items frequently requested are towels, sheets and curtains. Household goods, chairs, toys, sports gear, scooters and bikes have been sent, along with clothing and footwear.

It then became necessary to extend the space at Mowanjum. One year, Richard made an opening between the two dongas to make easier access and Chris, Karen, Matt and Claire painted the exterior.

The Boab Network has provided toys to World Vision for the newly opened Playgroups in Mowanjum, Pandanus and Imintji and there is an opening for other goods to go to these outlying Indigenous Communities through Linda Wilson. The Boab Network is grateful to the many people who have kindly donated to this cause, which seems to be growing exponentially each year.



Figure 37: Claire Smith prepares to send goods to Mowanjum.



Figure 38: Richard assists the process.



Figure 39: Selling good on Derby market day.



Figure 40: Losana Mar in the Op Shop.

And all the other small jobs

John brings a remarkable skill to the Boab Network with his attention to detail. It is in these small things, lies the difference between a community that goes well and one that falls apart. For example, John solved the pressing need to provide a toilet for the Church. I remember taking a funeral there and with so many people, they had to hire a toilet which eventually got pushed over. John recounted a little of his work:

We all work together to get these things happening. Even something as simple as the providing a toilet in the Uniting Church in the community. That went on for ages. I drew plans for the toilet and went to the Shire. They wanted it to be a disabled toilet. Then the Shire building surveyor left, and we went in with another plan which they approved. And then Dambimangari gave us a free toilet which they were using on a building site. It was a complete cubical with shower, basin and toilet. So, plans changed again. So now there is a toilet there which is fully functioning. And this is the work of the Boab Network. This has been so important because the community has funerals in the church and in the past toilets had to be brought in. In the past, these were vandalised by the children



Figure 41: John Tyrell and Matt Sloan painting the Op Shop donger.

In summary

Even as I write, there are new projects taking shape, but too early to describe. As I have said before, our projects emerge from the needs and wishes of the community. Sometimes, we must act quickly as when the community faced the loss of their pastoral lease, or when the Derby High School was unable to provide funds for the early childhood program. At other times, programs can take time to emerge supported by many conversations.

We are keen to reflect on the past; both what has been achieved and what has faced difficulty or been inappropriate. We are continually learning from this long-term involvement with the community, noting their context is under continual change as governments change direction and policy. An account of this reflection is given in Chapter 7 below. I was able to interview a range of volunteers, together with various people at Mowanjum. Their thoughts and reflections are outlined below.

Chapter 7

Reflecting on the past

The Boab Network were quickly introduced to the culture and ethos of the people as they invited us into their lives, taking us up-country, teaching us their ways and allowing us to participate in their lives in a unique and engaging way. We in turn invited them in our homes and the Floreat church, enabling children, youth and adults to experience our lives in Perth and Melbourne. This then, became an example of mutual participation, where they were our hosts and we were guests in their country, and vice versa in ours. All the while, we sought an emergent philosophy and understanding.

As we were completely new to this trans-cultural engagement, our ideas and understanding emerged from the actual experience of relating to the Mowanjum people. We were therefore less likely to impose a Western mentality on our engagement. I say this with reservation, for we continually reflect on our whitefella tendency to impose our culture and action-based philosophy on the people of Mowanjum. We have sought to bring an empathic response to Mowanjum issues. This has meant we have been involved in the difficult issues people face. We have been there when our friends suicided, to dress the sores of the children, or struggle with difficult issue of recurring injustice. In this respect, we have not sought to be impartial, or detached, but are caught up in the people's ongoing struggle for justice. Equally, we have sought to listen to the people before we acted, so our actions might be in accord to Mowanjum's needs and not ours.

We have spoken at length about our underlying approach to relating and working with the people of Mowanjum. An essential aspect of our development has been to engage in an ongoing reflection on our experience which underwrites the principles of our engagement. We have taken this reflective approach because we are conscious of past practice which led to the suffering and further hardship of Aboriginal people, for example: the stolen generation. Actions were taken with the best of intentions, but without reflection what the outcomes might be and in many cases without consultation with Aboriginal families. A more recent example is in the Howard Government's intervention in the Northern Territory based on the need to act and make change but being seen by many communities as a reversion to past colonial practice.

The fundamental problem seems to be that many whitefellas (including government agencies) get involved with Aboriginal communities coming from a

fix and change mentality. We know, from many past examples, we must move beyond an interventionist to a collaborative approach if there is to be any lasting change. Why is this? A fix and change mentality assumes we have the answers and Aboriginal people do not have the answers or resources. This approach is particularly inappropriate if we assume our whitefella approach based on the dominant culture is superior to Aboriginal culture. We might argue this superiority arises from many changes which have been initiated within our society such as science, technology and military capability. In taking this view, we act on the basis that might is right. So, when it comes to change, we immediately think we can make a difference through applying this superior technology and education; forgetting the sophistication of Aboriginal culture and heritage.

Many, if not most, non-Indigenous people who have no background relationship with Aboriginal people get involved because they are aware there are problems in Aboriginal society/communities and the history and place of Aboriginal people in Australian society is not good. They want to help change this situation and fix the problems. It is important to get to know Aboriginal people before any action can take place. This means it is important to spend time with the people and do things together: whether in the Mowanjum community itself or on trips to their country further north in the remote north Kimberley or to our country in Perth. This is a two-way learning for, on the one hand, we come to appreciate the beauty and complexity of their culture and spirituality from which we learn profound insights. On the other hand, we come to see deficiencies in our own western culture, highlighted by the contrast to Aboriginal culture.

It is a matter of relating to the people and avoiding a fix and change mentality which often accompanied Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relating. The late Anna Alderson shared a conversation with a young woman whom she was sharing a room in Derby. They were discussing many issues when Anna's companion said, "but surely doing something is better than doing nothing". Anna replied, "Surely it's not. Sometimes doing nothing is more important than doing something". The young woman was shocked because she hadn't considered the possibility doing nothing was better than making a premature or inadequate response.

If our relationship with Aboriginal people is to be authentic and sustainable, it can only be in a partnership; the only way forward can only be through collaboration. To do otherwise is to fall into what is seen by non-Indigenous people to be to 'fix and change' as the way of closing the gap. We, as non-Aboriginal people might criticise Aboriginal people for their chaotic approach to life, but the problem is as much on the non-Aboriginal lack of understanding,

failure to listen, failure to learn and benefit from what Aboriginal culture can teach us. It is a failure to see Aboriginal culture and people as the 'big' people they are. Perhaps, many people in our society fail to appreciate the unique gifts Aboriginals bring to our living and being in Australia. For example, in Bill Gammage's recent book on Aboriginal farming techniques, he argues Aboriginal people had a very effective and sophisticated approach to land management.³² Through the application of creative fire-stick farming over long periods, Aboriginal people changed the nature of the landscape to accommodate their needs. They had animals they hunted coming to feed on flora in areas where they could be effectively caught. They encouraged a range of bush plants to harvest in the right season. This approach to land cultivation was sophisticated and fully in accord with their ability to move around the country. The original pioneers therefore experienced a land that was a product of Aboriginal land management, akin to what Gammage calls a great estate. Those communities who did choose a settled lifestyle such as in Western Victoria, built stone houses and fished for eel and other foods with a trap system installed in the waterways. Aboriginal people of the Kimberley were equally sophisticated. For example, the *Worrorra* knew how to navigate the complex and dangerous waters of the seas around the Kimberley, hunting turtle and other sea creatures with ease. They, like the *Ngarinyin* and *Wunambal* had a complex spirituality and culture and art which is unique and distinctive in its own way. Many of the Elders have an encyclopaedic understanding of the landscape. We are therefore committed to the importance of working together for the transformation of both the Mowanjum and white community; ourselves as well. We actively seek to learn from their way of being - as they do from ours.

So, our ongoing reflection has enabled us to be far more aware of how special the Mowanjum people are. We have certainly gained a respect for all the people in the community. We have learnt through our interaction to treat all people as special. This means we have developed a holistic program which caters for needs of the early age children, youth, mature families and elders. We do not focus exclusively on one or other groups in the community. Indeed, our own diverse membership helps us to interact with various ages and interests in the Mowanjum community.

How then do we reflect together? Members of the Boab Network are as involved in or hosting a range of seminars, workshops and other forums in which significant issues are explored and an operational philosophy developed. This chapter, for instance, arose from a series of Perth based conversations,

complemented by debriefing in Derby as we worked in the various programs. Such debriefing occurred naturally at the end of the day when impressions and experiences were raw and real. It was further complemented by an active email process which picked up some of the key issues we faced. We certainly valued being able to exchange ideas through the medium of the internet. It is important to note, however, we had extensive conversations with Mowanjum people when we went with them up-country or conversed within the community.

Reflecting on the past together

I visited Boab Network members on several occasions since 2015. I began by asking what people thought about these past seven years of relating to the people of Mowanjum, I then explored their future hopes and aspirations for the Boab Network as well as for Mowanjum. I also followed up people from Mowanjum and asked them similar questions, including what they hoped for in the future.

The following examples will give you, as a reader, an understanding of the depth of our reflections. They include reflections on orientation and first impressions, relating to the Mowanjum community and within the Network, go-betweens to the wider community, difficulties our people have faced, returning home and integrating their experiences, two-way benefits, faith and spirituality, and finally (re)-conciliation.

Beginnings and getting involved

The beginning of this special relationship with the people of Mowanjum can happen in many ways. The following stories reflect on what it means to get involved, those first impressions of the community which for some people can be alarming.

Karen and Matt Sloan's two sons visited Derby in the January holidays, although it was confronting for them to relate to Mowanjum people, they spoke highly of their participation. Their experiences were profound, and their parents wanted to share in that experience as well.

The opportunity for Karen and Matt to be involved came when Marie contacted them for an April program, and indicated this holiday program could be cancelled because of low numbers. Karen, Matt and Karen's sister Chris were keen to respond. Although it was only a small team involving Richard and Claire Smith, they did what they could do knowing they would have a different approach to relating to children and youth than younger volunteers:



Figure 42: Karen Sloan feeds the joey with Claire looking on.

We went to the pool and did all those things we normally do. But we also painted the building around the CRC, it was really great for us because it was a small group. We stayed with Gail which was wonderful. Immediately, we felt connected to Derby and to the kids. We wanted to come back because we didn't want to leave it too long before returning or we would become one of those number who just come and don't come back for ten years or don't come back at all. So, we went again in October.

Orientation and first impressions

It is important to prepare our people for their engagement with the Mowanjum community. We do this through orientation sessions supported by material which includes our protocols and other information. Lee-Anne shared: after eight years we have finally got a well-prepared orientation, the last orientation she ran was the best to date. The session was intentional, with guidelines, PowerPoint and follow up with each team. In her words, "It really worked". Those little problems which we had in the past, such as confusion about roles and respect each other's role, were addressed.

This preparation can only go so far. New members, whether young or old, may experience a kind of culture shock. This means they will experience and judge Mowanjum through what they have been used to in their often privileged and well-resourced lives. Many of our young members have spoken of their first impressions and reactions to relating to the Mowanjum community. Young Lewis Weeda shared:

It was shocking at first. That is how they live and it is not good enough! As a community, I think they are living in an impoverished environment. They have problems which aren't good for them.



Figure 43: Hayley Smith and Lee-Anne Burnett at the Mowanjum Festival.

Sarah, who is undertaking medical studies, saw the community had a different standard of living to what she was used to. It was definitely an eye-opener for her and her brother Antony, even though they had seen poverty when they visited family in South Africa

I had seen poverty there, but I was not expecting to see it in Australia like that. It was a bit of a shock. I sort of was prepared, for Libby had told me a bit about it, but it is different to seeing it than hearing of it. What I hadn't expected was to see that people were happy as well. You hear all the negatives, but the other side of this is the fun of running around with the kids.

David Marshall was not shocked initially, but later was confronted by the stories told by children and youth. As he became more and more involved in the Network, he became aware of physical limitations such as poor roads and the lack of infrastructure. While these limitations were bad, he was deeply affected when he

heard their stories and what is happening to people. It then became more than a matter of the community's lack of physical possessions or wealth. As David shared:

The more you get involved in the program and talk with people and understand the stories, that's when you get shocked and think "That's crazy!". The stories have changed my perspective. It has certainly been a shock to recognise where you are born is pure luck. I was very lucky where I was born and not everyone is so lucky. I work hard and try my best in everything I do. But that doesn't mean other people who try their best are going to get to the same position. There are so many outside factors you can't control.

Other volunteers remembered those strange moments. Libby remembered when she first went up to Mowanjum, there was a little kid who started to lick her hand.

He looked at me petrified saying, "Why isn't it coming off". I am so white, he thought I was painted white. I didn't know how to respond.

Sometimes, we are shocked by the medical issues faced by Mowanjum children and adults. Claire shared her initial reactions to the children:

I trained at PMH and what I saw back in the 60s amongst our young Aboriginal patients – I was witnessing again in 2008. Thick runny noses, ears, eyes, loose tummies, sores. My heart sank. How could this be!

The kids were absolutely delightful, climbing over me – leaving wet patches on my lap! I was totally prepared to do what I could. It was the first of several trips north and committed hours in the south.

Other times, we can be shocked by the unexpected. Claire recounted one school holiday trip when there was a putrid smell coming from under the Op Shop. Everyone said it had been bad for a week. John braved the situation and discovered it was a dead dog. As Claire asks, "How he survived dragging it out and burying it is beyond me. I'm sure he remembers it well".



Figure 44: Hayley and Libby with Mowanjum children.

Relating at Mowanjum

The other side of the cultural shock which volunteers might experience is the opportunity to be with children and youth who are relaxed, energetic and full of life. Being with them at Mowanjum can be a playful experience, offering our volunteers opportunity to relax with the kids as they take responsibility. In this respect, it doesn't matter what the activity is, the important thing is to give them time. As Marie reminded me, children wanted to be spoken to, played with, acknowledged. It didn't matter if you were doing art or waterslide. Even in the vehicle, they wanted to be next to Marie, wanting attention. She became like a grandmother to them.

They were very curious, they wanted to dissect my earrings and watch. Looking into my eyes, talking about spots and moles. They were all very personal, playing with my hair. It was their way of making a close relationship.

We are about relating and relationships; so, it comes as no surprise our people begin to form good friendships with the Mowanjum people. John spoke of being labelled John the Baptist, because he answered some faith questions when asked by a Mowanjum Elder. Ross has been respectively labelled by the children, ‘Sir Ross’.



Figure 45: Richard with his ice-cream and friends at the Mowanjum Festival.

Sometimes the unexpected happens in the most ordinary encounters. Lee-Anne remembered one of her first experiences in Mowanjum when she drove all the girls to their houses after a disco. At that stage, she didn't know the community at all. She didn't know where their houses were so the kids had to tell her.

As some of the kids were dropped off I tried to drive around the community not knowing where to go. The hire car was an automatic vehicle and I have never driven an automatic. When I was getting completely befuddled, one of the kids in the back said, “Do you know how to drive miss?” I thought, they can all drive better than me!

It is important to realize our younger members are placed in an extraordinary situation, well outside of their normal experience. Sarah, for instance recounted her second trip to Mowanjum: We might think such a person will easily integrate into the experience, but this may not be the case. She spoke of returning a year and a half after her first visit and felt she didn't have Libby with her, the person who was her 'safety blanket'.

I remember when I got to the Arts Centre and you both went to talk with people and I went with the kids. I couldn't remember many of their names. Most of them couldn't remember me. We caught the bus into town. It was the first time I have ever been the only white person, so it was all the kids and me on the bus. It was an interesting inversion of the normal balance. People can be quite rude about Aboriginal people on the trains in Perth, now I know what it feels like. I remember one fourteen-year-old, he was very sweet, because I looked a bit lost, said, "Sit with me".

Relating to the people of an Aboriginal community as the Boab Network often means we must endure the tension between wanting to initiate action to get something done, and of waiting on the people, encouraging others to take action or to initiate a contact. As David reminded me:

You have to be the one to initiate things, and then, when the friendship is formed, you move on to a different relating. But you need to recognise you are in the community. In the school holiday program, it is easier to be around the under 10s and under 12s. They want to know you and see you. With the old kids they are not particularly interested unless they see you make an effort to want to know them.

This may be OK for an extravert such a David, but other Boab members may be reticent to make this initial contact. Sarah explained her trip to Broome with Leah and the kids, aged twelve and up. John and Leah drove the kids there and they engaged in a camp with archery, high ropes and other adventures.

It was nice to not have the little kids because they can be so demanding. It was great to relate to the older girls. They were 'teenager-ish', slow to get involved in the activities. They would hang back as a mark of being 'cool'. We had barbeques and went to the movies one night. Leah drove us around. I can be a bit shy so trying

to make a relationship with the girls who were also hanging back was difficult. It got easier with time.

The stories kept coming when Libby remembered her time at Mowanjum. She visited the Prison Boab Tree with some PLC girls.

One youth had my camera and he went up to this PLC girl and said, I have never seen legs like that. It was just so beautiful. The girls had spent the day taking photos of aboriginal people. I don't know if he was responding pointedly, but I certainly was angry at the intrusion. Was he genuinely curious? She was horrified.

And yet, as Hayley Smith stated, there is a bitter/sweet side to this relating. She spoke of being heartbroken as her eyes are opened to the reality of Mowanjum life:

Being in Mowanjum and developing close friendships fills your heart. The people I meet are deeply sincere and meaningful, however, their stories are heartbreaking. Whether it is the elders sharing with you how Australia's history of forced removal has impacted their lives and of their family or hearing from a friend the multiple types of abuse that they experience every single day. It completely breaks your heart, but in the best possible way. I would choose that heartbreak over and over, because it means that I am more aware and embedded in learning the realities of their circumstances. Through taking time to deeply listen and learn, there is a space in where we can work together for a better future.

Relating up-country

Relating up-country has been significant for our reflection on who we are and what we do. There were many spontaneous conversations around the campfire with various Elders from Mowanjum, conversations which allowed us to reflect together on what Mowanjum's needs might be and how we might approach these in the future. I remember many conversations at Majaddin, where Eddie and his family shared their vision for the future. It gave us an opportunity to appreciate the significance of land to the family and how we might work in collaboration with them.



Figure 46: David Marshall up-country.

they wanted to do. They might talk about things like going to the pool, up-country to May River or to Broome. He and the Team would respond by organizing their program around their interests. They in turn would get the message that their opinions and preferences (and they themselves) were important to us. As Ross stated:

The crucial thing is not whether I am fun to be with, a good friend, easy to talk to, or cool; but it is because I recognise them as real people, worth hearing from.

Being ready to follow the guidance and hospitality of Mowanjum people is important for them, but equally important for our own people. David spoke of the importance of going up-country:

A lot of my strong memories come from trips out hunting; celebrating after we had caught a goanna. It was a series of new experiences where the kids or adults were in charge. And they love to share their

One of the most significant relationship building times was the corroborative camp at Poulton Pool described in chapter 4. A lot of good things happened at that camp. We taught an older child with special needs how to swim which was essential to his self-esteem. The camp brought children and adults together in a creative way which ended up beginning the art career of young artists. Ross and I were forced to reconsider our approach to work, as we were challenged when we worked in the hot sun at the wrong time. We learnt the importance of being rather than simply doing.

Ross shared his approach to gaining the children's interest and involvement. He would talk to a group of kids about what activities

stories with you. I asked many questions which the boys were happy to answer.

I asked Lewis if he felt challenged by being up-country with Aboriginal people. He said, no, but added he was challenged by the climb up Jamieson's Gorge which involved a rather careful ascent to the top of a large cavity in the rock.

My sister, Libby, was stressed. If I died, falling off the top of the cliff, mum would kill her. It was a great experience, and I didn't find it challenging, I definitely felt safe. What held me during this up-country experience was being related to Libby. People knew this and welcomed me because of this relationship. I also knew a few of the Mowanjum youth through school, which helped.

Lewis also found new ways of connecting with the country and the people as this following story about his desire to repair a set of bagpipes illustrates:

I spoke to Donny about the bagpipes and asked him what wood they used for didgeridoos. He replied by asking, "Would you like some wood for your bagpipes?" I asked him, "Where does this wood come from?" He replied, "The wood over there looks good". We then got someone with a chain saw to cut it out, Aboriginal way!



Figure 47: Navigating Magpie Jump-up.

Libby sat next to Lewis as he recounted his story, listening with intent. She then recounted several stories from her up-country experiences including a time when I was with her. A Ngarinyin man, named Bindy took us to these amazing caves where we experienced this incredible rock formation, with all these doves flying out. The same trip included a less auspicious moment when we were negotiating Magpie Jump-Up, a difficult drive at the best of times.

Bindy was saying just put it in first. Our Boab driver replied, I can't put it in first. Bindy yelled out, "Woman put it in first and it will let itself go and do its own thing". The driver ignored his advice and continued revving the motor, so we got stuck on a rock, it was so stressful. And then Bindy said, "If you do not put it in first, I am going to stall the engine!" They continued to yell at each other. Finally, Bindy leaned over and put in it first. It was amazing. When he did this, the car just found perches on its own, just tuckering along. Very slowly we made it up this rock face. For me, this felt such a metaphor for whitefellas trying to force their way up something, trying to impose their will on the people or the environment. Of course, you need to listen to people like Bindy. Why do we take our city approach to driving in going up the cliff?

And then there were the turtles: Libby remembered the time when Eddie and Donny wanted several of us to experience having fresh water turtles placed on our back. This followed the Law that we could only eat turtles if they were placed on our backs. Libby recounted her experience:

I was petrified it wasn't going to move. It would be like, "That's it, you're out, a lost cause". I think Donny kicked it to get it going.

Libby then shared that she had felt privileged when she was asked to take her brother Lewis and another Boab woman up to the top of Jamieson's gorge (Grasshopper Dreaming). Donny asked her to take her brother and another volunteer up there which "felt so lovely. I really want to go back. It gets under your skin".

Hayley was also impacted by a back to country trip. She told of sitting next to Donny on the banks of a river, listening to him telling her the Dreamtime stories of the country we were sitting on. She recounted other experiences, of goanna hunting with the young adults, and having the kids be the experts; spotting the

goannas, running after them, catching them, making a fire, cooking them up, and then even peeling back the skin to show a piece of ‘good meat’ for her and passing her the claw to hold so she could eat it. Hayley continues:

Similarly, on a Back to Country trip we were climbing this steep cliff, and the Boab Network members were very shaky on their feet, unsure where to hold or step next without falling. The kids we were with were all so light on their feet and swift at climbing through all the rocks, but instead of going ahead, they all stayed with us and with absolute calmness and patience, told us where to next place our right hand, and then our right foot, and so on, until we made it down to the river and went for a refreshing swim! Those moments are so precious; when the Mowanjum kids are the experts and not only are we learning from them, but they are so kind and patient in teaching us.



Figure 48: A relaxed Hayley.

Relating within the Network

As the Boab Network was initiated by the Floreat Uniting Church, many of our volunteers have the benefit of long-term relationships with the congregation. Younger members such as David, Libby, Lewis and Sarah have known and been known for many years as well as their older counterparts. As David shared, he feels part of an extended family at Floreat. This means he can relate to people with many different political and religious views which promotes conversations and “a lot of thought”. David learns things when he listens to the views of others and this means hearing new things, not what he already knows.

This family feel was reiterated by Sarah who is also involved with Fair Game as well the Boab Network, running the equipment side of their work. She was introduced to Fair Game when they shared a house with the Boab Network when they came to Mowanjum.

They are a lovely group of people. What I really like about the Boab Network is our continuing relationship with the community which involves a diversity of age range. Fair Game do go back to

communities. The Boab Network involves a larger age range with a deeper connection with people. That is quite special to be part of. It broadens your horizons and helps you relate to more groups of people. If more Australians had that opportunity, we would have a different relationship with Aboriginal people in society.

John acknowledged the benefit of sharing roles, knowing different people have different gifts and therefore can take complementary responsibilities:

It is great being part of the Boab Network because we have all got our individual talents. You look at anyone in the group. They are all keen and want to get their hands dirty. You don't have to do a lot of work yourself. If I had to raise funds to get myself up there it wouldn't happen. People have many roles. I have spoken about David and the importance of his relationship with the older boys. When Richard and Claire come up together Claire is involved in the Op Shop. She does all the cooking for us. When I first joined the Boab Network, we had a couple of ladies who specialised with the cooking.



Figure 49: The goanna hunt.

Hayley spoke of the inspiration and guidance she has received from members of the Network, which she describes as “altruistic, academic, compassionate people who are driven with such a sense of righteousness and social justice”. She has been inspired by their ongoing commitment despite personal hardships, which might include keeping afloat financially, or seeing friends in Mowanjum go through bad times at the very moment when things finally seemed to be getting better. The Boab Network has also guided the way she interacts with people; “not just from Mowanjum, but people from all walks of life”. Hayley reiterated our approach in which we walk alongside the people, rather than going in and taking over or imposing our will. She affirmed our readiness for listening, two-way sharing:

It is about learning, collaboration and support. It is an approach which is person- and community-centred, and culturally sensitive. This is an approach which I have seen enable platforms for building meaningful friendships and supporting community-initiated projects. This is an approach I will carry with me throughout my life.

Our relating has its funny moments. Lewis was staying at Gail’s house and sharing a room with David. There had been stories of break-ins, so they were aware of keeping safe.

The dogs were barking a lot that night and David was getting quite scared. He was thinking, why are these dogs barking so much. Suddenly, the blinds move. He looks over and sees this person and leaps on him. He stands up and starts screaming out loud. He realizes that there is no-one there, it was simply me kicking the blinds. And the weird thing was, when David woke up in the morning he said, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to cause you problems last night by jumping on you. I didn’t remember anything. I only know this story because David told me.

After Lewis told me his story, Libby asked me if I remembered the time when Lee-Anne got an asthma attack. This story has been recorded earlier. We were playing spoons and thoroughly enjoying ourselves. Lee-Anne was laughing so much she got the attack. We were a very small group behaving a little like a family unit.

We weren’t laughing when we cleaned a large freezer ready to go up-country. Libby reminded me, cleaning the freezer was a nightmare.

Someone had left half a cow in the fridge and the power was turned off. We cleaned it with a vanilla flavoured cleaner. And even now when I smell vanilla, I want to vomit thinking about all the maggots crawling out of this fermenting cow we had to deal with. Matt Sloan summed up the Boab Network when he said our commitment is our strength.

It is a very diverse group. If you are all of one mind, then you don't get tension, and this leads to results. There are people with an active involvement in Christian communities as well as people who just want to come and help out. They are relating just because of their humanity.

This comment led Karen to clarify aspects of our diversity which includes diversity of age.

It does provide people in their late teens and early twenties with something that is not about church. It is acting out your faith in the world. It provides a mechanism for those young adults to be drawn in.

Go-between

Thus, as we have discovered, one of the valuable roles we can undertake is to assist agencies that want to interact with the community but have no contacts. We can introduce people from agencies and get meaningful dialogue between people from the respective agency and the people of Mowanjum. Ross shared several examples of what it means to be a go-between Mowanjum and the wider community. For example, Amnesty International was seeking to compile a report to help Aboriginal people. The issue for them was how to go into a community and find people with whom they could talk. We undertook the role to introduce the Amnesty International team with people within Mowanjum and over a couple of days there was a very fruitful dialogue. But this could not have happened as efficiently and effectively without our mediation. The same process happened with the Fair Game association who were seeking a way to engage the community in sport and a healthy lifestyle. The Network was also able to assist the community in gaining the presence of a community nurse. Ross, like many of us, had been concerned the kids had sores. He had heard of or discovered there was a clinic which was in the old pensioner building, but it was shut.

I spoke with one of the nurses at the hospital who said there were funds for Mowanjum. She was also keen on preventative medicine and keen the clinic should open. The next time I went to Mowanjum the clinic was open.

Difficulties

We can't be perfect all the time. Or put another way, our volunteers are placed in a very stressful situation which can lead to angry or unexpected responses. Marie admitted a couple of boys riled her one day. She got cross with them and sent them off. She admits: "It does get to me when I think about the times I lost my temper with the children". John recounted the day he raised his voice to the kids. He swore in the bus. One of the kids came to him the next day and said, "I told my mother you swore at us". John replied, "It is very sad you get a good Christian person like me swearing. You really upset me". The boy responded, "That's what my mother said, you must have really upset him".

The climate can be a challenge, particularly in the January Holiday Program where the weather is extremely hot and humid. Claire Smith recounted her initial visit during such a holiday program. It was the very first school holiday program in January 2008. Their son Edward, who was holidaying from USA was keen to visit Mowanjum again and said, "Come on Mum you have to come". This meant Claire joined the team during this inclement weather.

We stayed in the Boab Inn, it was HOT. The aircon so noisy we had to turn it off at night. The sweat oozed from every pore. Outside games were a challenge, inside not much better. These days the CRC is a haven.

Sometimes we get into difficulties because we must adhere to our own protocols, such as the need for seat belts to ensure all passengers are legally restrained. Not that our best efforts can match the ingenuity of the children! Claire recounted the following anecdote

On a trip to the town pool I was prepared to take four children in our hired car, trying to strictly adhere to protocol to have one child per seat belt. On return from the pool, the same kids wanted a ride home to Mowanjum, except there were 5 of them. When I said that little one was not my original passenger, I got the reply. "Yes, she was Miss, she was on the floor under our legs!"

I had no idea.

Lee-Anne recounted several difficulties she had encountered including food safety procedures. As a registered nurse, she is naturally aware of the dangers of unhygienic food preparation which can easily occur on up-country trips without refrigeration.

If food is left out and something goes wrong, I will feel responsible. And people will have a right to hold me responsible. I have knowledge. If I allow that to happen then I would be responsible.

Lee-Anne also spoke of the need to “tread gently”. She relates a time when an Aboriginal friend pulled her past the front gate of a Mowanjum house.

The person in the house came out with arms waving shouting at me because I was a white person. I quickly retreated to safety. That was on my first visit to the community, which means I am not game to walk up to the front door. I will stand at the fence and yell. If they really want you to come inside, they will come out and invite you in!

A difficulty some of us experience concerns learning language or culture. The Elders try and impart their culture and language, but this is unfamiliar to white fella ears. We often find our capacity to retain what they are sharing or to speak the language is limited, as Libby shares:

I felt blessed listening to Gudu and Janet, sharing their knowledge of bush medicine. I felt so frustrated when Gudu tried to tell me the different types of pandanus and I couldn't remember which was which. She then put me to the test as we were driving. She would point to a pandanus and ask, “Which one was that one?” And I would have no idea.

We have become aware of the possibility our members may have mixed motives in their relating with the Mowanjum community. This has made us alert to separating personal interest from the wider work of the Boab Network. This is now addressed in our protocols. I encountered this difficulty when I undertook my doctoral research. I was very conscious of shifting from a volunteer to that of research student with the Australian Catholic University. One of the strategies I adopted was to ensure I gave back to the community. I agreed to write a book for Eddie, my mentor, the story of his family's travels over the past century through the Kimberley. David, who undertook an honour's thesis came to a different position, he never used his relationship with the Boab Network to focus on the Kimberley. He was conscious of wanting to separate the two roles and wants to

be a Boab volunteer rather than a researcher. He doesn't want to force himself on the Mowanjum people. He relies on his experience with Mowanjum in a different way, as he shared:

My involvement with the Boab Network is helpful in so far as I can rely on personal experiences rather than dreaming up an answer to why that might be the case. It gives me a lot of practical experience I can take to my research.

Return to the City

Returning home has been difficult for many of our people, including myself. It takes some time to integrate the extraordinary experience of being with the Mowanjum people, particularly if we go up country. Libby shared, she felt physically heartbroken the first time she went back to Perth:

I sat next to a girl perfectly done up for a gymnastics competition. It felt so surreal when she, this hyper active girl, said, "I won this". Her sash was a symbol of Perth's competitive life. Mum said it takes me two to three weeks before I am back in Perth mode.

John admitted, each time he returns to Perth, it takes him longer and longer to get back into ordinary living in Perth.

Especially this time. I have been back a couple of weeks now. When people approach me with issues, I would say, that's not an issue. Get yourself a life! Come with me to Derby and you will experience some issues. It takes a long time when I come back from a trip up there to get back to reality here.

Sarah had a similar experience. It was reverse culture shock to come back. She shared of going back on Facebook. She didn't have easy access or the time for social media in Derby. She remembered everything people were saying was trivial compared to what she had experienced.

There were much larger issues at play at Mowanjum. I always feel like that when I return to Perth. People don't really understand what is going on in this country. I remember the comments of one of my friends who is a really nice person, said to me when I returned, "and are you going to marry an Aboriginal?" I didn't know how to respond. I have no idea where that came from.



Figure 50: Eddie showing the team and his family a special cave at Majaddin.

Although we return to our homes, in a deep sense, we bring our relationships with us. Relationships are formed which may extend way past the brief encounters at Mowanjum. David spoke to me of continuing to talk with certain people when he returns to Perth, through Facebook and email. And as several of us have found, people ask “Where’s Ross?” In a sense we may never say goodbye. Yet again, there is a paradox, because our people will move on, our young adults will move interstate or engage in career and family. We must consider the implications of this and find a process of disengagement. As David stated:

I have never thought about what happens if and when I move away. I then can’t come so frequently, but then, once a friendship lasts a certain amount of time, it will last a lifetime. When we get the changeover of volunteers we need to think through this process. I would like to go up there and not be part of an organized holiday program. I would like to simply be with my Mowanjum friends. That’s why it may be important in twenty years’ time to ring up Mowanjum friends and say I would like my family to come up.

Returning home may also include the need for seeking out a larger picture of Mowanjum and its history over the past century, beginning with the first mission at Kunmunya, as Karen reflected:

I feel as though I would like to be more familiar with the wider Aboriginal story and its implications for the people of Mowanjum. I want to get below the surface. There are issues about alcohol and providing hope for those kids. It seems they get to a certain age and then get lost. There is a whole generation that seems to be missing. It is so sad, and frightening, we as a nation can't provide hope for the kids to become functioning adults.

With this reading and reflection, our members may find themselves caught up in the major questions of inequality and social justice faced by the community. For example, Karen was obviously caught up in our concern for supporting Gail's initiative around early childhood:

The other thing for me is education. I feel really sad we lost money for the 0-3 years' education. I see it at the other end, at the university where they have so many programs to try and encourage Aboriginal people to go to University: Pre-medical courses, pre-university courses. But we should start at the early beginnings, particularly when primary education is not working.

To which Matt added his perspective as a professional teacher:

And if you start behind it is impossible to catch up. The time and energy and resources are not available to help kids to catch up. It needs to be a whole package and you need parent involvement to support that process. We have kids at our school. You don't see the parent's support, so you don't get the gains. That could reflect the life of the parents and the family.

For Matt and others in the Boab Network, the key is education for the kids to have any options for their future. Education is prerequisite for employment opportunities. This is a huge challenge, especially when there are issues at school with behaviour. That means they miss out classes and fall further behind, losing their confidence. As Matt observed, the kids are hard on each other. If someone is not very smart, then everyone lets them know. That triggers off reactions, it is vicious cycle.

Benefits for the volunteers

Many of Boab Network Members spoke of receiving unexpected benefits for themselves. They may have set out to make a difference with Aboriginal people,

but as their stories illustrate, they have been profoundly influenced by their relationship with the people of Mowanjium.

Lewis who, following in the footsteps of his sister, Libby, went up-country at the early age of 14, spoke of the importance of learning about Aboriginal culture and to build relationships with the people. He took a special knife which was used in a range of different situations by the Aboriginal people. He shared he didn't want to be someone observing; there for the ride and not doing anything.

I wanted to be useful. The knife enabled me to learn about living out bush. When you have a piece of meat in your hand which is still twitching it is that fresh. I was learning a lot of skills as well as cultural learning. I only got to use my knife with the fishing, because I didn't have the skills. They would use it and I would watch.



Figure 51: Libby and Hayley showing us how to change a tyre.

Benefits include gaining different skills such as changing a tyre. David Marshall stated:

I have never changed a tyre in Perth. If people looked to me, I wouldn't do that. I am a structured person, an economist, analytical. So, I have gained practical skills mixed with awesome experiences like going out hunting. Learning how to skin a cow.

Members also spoke of changes in their life perspectives. Libby spoke of growing so much physically and spiritually. She stated, "Mowanjium has grown

me up more than I have had an impact”. I can also attest to the time when she taught others to change a tyre up-country, with everyone watching on, and cheering! David spoke of what it means to come from a place of conservative values. Such values assume, if a person does not get a job it is their fault. Such values are radically challenged by the reality of a community such as Mowanjum where children miss out on education and experience and upbringing which is radically different to that experienced by him and other Boab Network members.

Many members would state this involvement has changed their direction in life. In my own case, I have devoted the past seventeen years to relating to the people of Mowanjum and now writing extensively of this involvement. John Tyrrell, who is closer to my age, shared his intent to sever committee obligations in Perth and give more attention to Mowanjum. One of the less obvious benefits of being part of the Boab Network is the diversity of our community. Libby spoke of the incredible relationships with people in community, as well as within the Boab Team, together with an incredible cultural experience. This diversity in age and experience may also benefit the community.

It is wonderful they get interaction with people with diverse cultural backgrounds. This is two-way learning, I think that is what is great about the Boab Network compared to other programs run by young people. We have a real mix of ages involved with the community. It is so powerful for young volunteers, to relate to the older volunteers.

A less obvious benefit is to experience an Aboriginal community first hand. It is easy to be misinformed by dramatic accounts in the press. Sarah spoke of encountering a different side to those often-inherent prejudices with Aboriginal people, “I think the most profound thing I learnt was; just because a person is of a lower economic status there is still joy in their lives”.

Another less obvious moment, but common to many people, is the realization of what Aboriginal people must face in white society. Libby remembers

I don’t know how it happened. We were on the difficult stretch when someone’s tyre popped. I got, in that moment, how it must feel to be Aboriginal in Perth, I was the only white person with twenty Aboriginal people in the middle of nowhere.

Both David and Libby, are at the beginning of life careers, speak of the influence of the Boab Network on their life paths. Libby shared:

It was a big reason why I went into medicine. I just loved the rural environment. I think I have a better understanding of the challenges Indigenous and non-Indigenous people face in the rural environment and the many difficulties Indigenous people have when they try to access health care. I have experienced the level of health literacy in Mowanjum and seen how it is a barrier. This is something I would never have experienced. I remember one trip when a child had a massive slit down the front of his leg. He wanted to go to the swimming pool with the others, but I said there was no way he could go with a cut like that. He had done it the night before, so it was too late for stitches, but it needed to be treated. He was petrified of having to go to the hospital. I finally got it out of him why he was so scared of going to the hospital. “Am I going to get a needle, and will I go home?”, were his two questions. He was horrified at having a needle and this plays into cultural reasons. I wondered whether he thought hospital is the place you go to die or stay for a long time.

Libby’s story was also affirmed by Ross who knew the family well. When Libby was in year 10, she identified as a gifted child but drifting in life. She was getting distinctions without trying but with no real direction. This changed after her first trip to country. She returned completely focussed. She saw she could become a medical person to work with Aboriginal people. Her marks shot up. David’s parents were also impressed by David’s involvement in Mowanjum as it brought new awareness and understanding. David shared:

The Boab Network has changed my whole perspective, it has changed the direction in which my life is taking. Because I recognise I am so aware now of being born into a fortunate situation, I want to make a positive contribution to the lives of other people. I wouldn’t want to sit in some sort of job that doesn’t make the world a better place.

Faith and Spirituality

Our relationship with the Mowanjum people also impacts our faith and spirituality and desire to be involved in reconciliation. The Boab Network, while established by the Floreat Uniting Church, takes an ecumenical approach in welcoming people from other faith communities, or those who would see themselves outside the church. Thus, our approach to faith and spirituality are certainly not homogenous but ranging from many beliefs and approaches to life.

Many of us have been deeply affected by our up-country trips, fully engaging in a variety of learning experiences. We affirm the importance of land for the people of Mowanjum, a key aspect of Aboriginal culture and spirituality, but also the importance of sharing and being part of the community. We have felt a connection with Aboriginal spirituality, and the stories which various people have shared. These stories were not only interesting, but for people such as Libby, challenged our Christian beliefs, and enriched our faith, challenging us in a good way to experience a different depth of spirituality to our upbringing within our conservation Australian culture.

I think of it as tram lines. There are these lines which connect people with land and trees, past and present. The goal for the spiritual person is to tap into that web and tap into those tram lines which are here and there. Talking with Elders of the Mowanjum church, I can see they do not think of their Christianity as separate from their culture. Rather the two are intimately connected. They also have given me a feeling of a strong touch of humanity which I haven't felt elsewhere. I remember being with a Worrorra Elder as we were parked by Lennard River, frying sausages for a bunch of kids. She was telling me funny ghost stories. There was a moment there when I realized we had shed many layers and we were simply interacting at a deep level.

Libby has been impacted by being with various elders. I am very aware that a number think highly of her, as this following story demonstrates. Gudu, is a senior *Worrorra* woman, who had regard for Libby, enough to catch and cook a barramundi.

I also had a moment like that with an older Elder. We were on the Derby tidal flats in our Troupy heading toward the stretches of quicksand next to the river. We followed several Troupies; Donny's, Eddie's and another. It is a such an incredible area with that vibrant green grass leading to the desolate grey mud of the marsh. I call it no-man's land

We had gone there to fish, I am not a good fisher, but I caught a catfish and it screamed so loudly that I had caught this catfish. Someone was teasing me later, "Did you catch a catfish, we didn't know that!" Of course, everyone had heard my scream. We drove back with Donny and Gudu in another Troupy. When we stopped later, Rachel went up to Gudu and said, "Libby caught a catfish", giving me such flak. Then

Gudu said, “Oh, I caught you a barramundi”. She then cooked it for me in the hot sand then we all shared the fish. It was so natural.

Yet faith and spirituality is also being part of a larger community. Libby is very aware of the larger support of a faith community. She reminded me of the older part of the Floreat congregation who have supported the Boab Network in many ways both financially and in many other ways.

I think they would like to be a part of a reconciliation program even though they are not able to travel to Derby. If the Boab Network wasn't associated with the church, I wouldn't have found out about Mowanjum and this work.

The other aspect of our faith journey is the sharing that occurs between the volunteers around the dinner table and other relaxing conversations. These offer opportunities for many people to meet Christianity in a non-proselytising way. If volunteers want to talk about spiritual issues, they can sit around the dinner table and talk with other volunteers. This allows for a conversation which may not happen in other programs. As Libby shared:

A lot of volunteers have told me they really enjoyed the depth of conversations around dinner. There is no expectation such as you have to believe in God. It is simply an open conversation. I think a lot of people are not used to talking so openly.

From the perspective of Mowanjum people

We have endeavoured to share our knowledge and experience with the people, they in turn continue to teach us their culture. If we fail to appreciate and be open to this, then we will repeat past mistakes which see our way of life as dominant. Donny reminded me, this is two-way learning, for he and others have helped us to understand their culture. As their youth “learn something that comes from the ground” rather than books, so do our volunteers. We are taught important truths we can pass on for the benefit of wider Australia. Donny's grandson Kallem Mungulu spoke in similar fashion of the importance of country:

It is a shame. Once upon a time, Mowanjum was very strong. There were proud people in Mowanjum. But the help we get from the Boab Network is getting young people out country and they love it. They love going camping, fishing, or just down the road or whatever. I look back and I see that I did that one day with Ross from the Boab Network. It is like seeing myself all over again. And going out

hunting. The boys they really love it. The Boab Network has been a really great help.

The culture side of things too in Mowanjum has dropped off big time. I read books about old Mowanjum and Kunmunya and the culture was just constant. It was day to day life. It is not like waiting for the Festival, but constantly practising your culture. Now, we just do modern day life. We do what *kardia* teach us. We become culture for that one night and then it drops off. I think it would be good to practice that every day of the year. Not just the month of July when they start practising culture. It should be every month of the year.

Final thoughts

The above reflections are but a glimpse into the experiences of the many volunteers who have taken part in the programs of the Boab Network. They have been impacted by the opportunity to relate to a people with an astounding history, who remain in close relationship with their traditional lands. As Kallem shares, the people face significant challenge in retaining this cultural connection in the face of dislocation and government apathy and/or resistance. This challenge is one of many challenges the community faces, including bridging the gap in social and communal opportunities in so many areas of their life.

We are mindful of these challenges, particularly as we engage the people of Mowanjum first hand. In Chapter 6, we recorded initiatives taken in community development, and this includes seeking to fix some of those blatant failures of government policy, both federal and state. Members of the Network such as Richard Smith, act as a bridge between the Mowanjum community as they advocate for secure funding in various areas not provided in existing government spending. We are also conscious Mowanjum children and youth are often excluded from Shire of Derby programs who fail to follow them up. Again, we act as go-betweens in overcoming this gap in service. In this and other ways, we engage the community in ways a government program (which is both impermanent and impersonal) could never replicate.

This said, our work has barely begun. As Karen shared, each visit provides an opportunity to be taken deeper:

In past visits it was about engagement with the kids, but this time it is engagement with the community as a whole. And I see, every time you come, each time is deeper.

In Chapter 8 to follow, we share a few of our hopes for the future, noting these changes not only by our relationship with the people of Mowanjum, but also with ever changing government policy and the political context.

Chapter 8

Hopes for the future

This book is written and completed a decade after we began our work with the Mowanjum people. As the above chapters illustrate, we have consistently offered a program for children and youth, complemented by significant community development such as the resource centre and the redevelopment of the pastoral station. The question remains, is this enough? Are we in transition for new programs yet to be offered? Those who formed the original group of volunteers, including myself, are now in our seventies and while many have energy and enthusiasm, we are conscious we need to encourage a younger group of people to build on what has been established.

Dreaming the Boab Network

Expanding the Network

To build the Network is to expand and develop this mode of relating and working outlined above, and through this work to influence many people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It has changed the life of non-Aboriginal people as much as it has benefitted the community. We have seen our members move from little or no contact with Aboriginal people to a rich, deep and personal involvement. This again, is a wonderful example of reconciliation at the grass roots. In this respect, we want to promote the development of networks like this. Through this expansion, many issues can be addressed as we have in the past.

Relatively new members, Karen and Matt Sloan discussed their perception of this need to expand the Network. They acknowledge the “amazing things have been able to be achieved”. They also point out we must ensure younger people are coming through and it doesn’t rely on one or two people at the centre of the organization. Karen acknowledged it is important to have people tangibly “standing beside them accompanying them on the journey”. But it is equally important to have people who can access government funding; those who know how to deal with the complexity of government policy. Karen adds:

It is important to have someone to bridge that gap. To keep hold of that diversity, to keep young people involved in the Network. It is making sure old people teach the middle people, teach the young people.

In other words, we need a succession plan which gives the future the best change of happening. We also need to avoid becoming insular, continuing to be in touch with both our local community as well as the Mowanjum people.

Our younger members such as Libby and David have been closely involved with promotion of the Network along with people like Marie and Richard. We obviously want to involve many younger people given we need their energy and ability to relate with children and youth. There is an age gap between the older generation of Ross, Richard and Marie and younger generation of Libby, David and others. David stated:

We are one of the longer running programs in the community. It just depends on how much longer we can keep our programs going. We have three generations of people: we have a lot of university students in their twenties who are interested in the Network and being part of the programs. Then you have a lot of people who are retired or semi-retired who have got more time to give. People such as Marie and Richard put so much time into the organization, that when they choose to move on it is going to leave massive gaps. That's what I worry about, the transition phase. Will the younger and mid-life people be willing to pick up the slack?

Yet, as much as we want and need to expand the Network by taking on more volunteers, it is also critical to maintain existing relationships with the people of Mowanjum. David spoke of this tension, as he argues it is not a matter of simply expanding the Network:

Part of the strength of the Network is we have a recognised body of people relating to the Mowanjum people. We don't want to lose our clear relationship with the community. If new people go up to Mowanjum, they need to be supported by people who have been part of this relationship for some time. We can have many people in Perth to share the Boab Network's interest and want to know what is going on and to help in whatever way they can. On the other hand, you don't want to be putting pressure on people.

David joined Libby, Lee-Anne and Richard to explore the way in which we market the Boab Network. As he has said, “We need to grow but it is a delicate balancing act. I don’t think we should grow too big”. We advertise, at present, through the University of Western Australia, and have had volunteers through the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. This may be the beginning of a more extensive marketing plan. This book, then, becomes a part of this because people can read what we are on about and doing in the community. They can read the various stories of our engagement and it will become a kind of instruction or preparation manual for our volunteers.

An intentional community

In our latest trip, we were joined by Armin from Germany who, with his family, lives in an intentional community there. Armin had been to Mowanjum before staying in a caravan with his wife and daughter at the back of Gail’s house. With the words ‘intentional community’ in mind, I asked Karen and Matt for their thoughts, thinking this may be one way of expanding or deepening our Network:

There needs to be an intentional community to support people working with the Mowanjum people such as Gail who has an extensive ministry with families and in the prison. That is the beautiful thing about the Network you get involved as you are able. Some people have university, jobs, other people retired. There is a real mix of ability involved. And these things change over time, with those who give a lot at one stage and may need to draw back at another.

Financial Independence

To build the Network is to make the Boab Network financially sustainable without being dependent on unreliable government funding. We want wide grass roots supports with small donations from many people. We want to explore how we could brand the Boab Network. This involves a marketing consultant exploring how we brand and present the Network to the wider community. The Network is already set up as a charitable not-for-profit organisation. Do we use this fact together with social media to attract financial support? We need donations to keep the Boab Network going.

Relating and learning as the Boab Network

Indigenous peoples such as the people of Mowanjum share their stories in many ways, at the Festival through songs, dances and visual representations. However,

this sharing of story is never confined to the Festival, it happens up-country in very natural ways such as telling stories at night before the children go to bed, reminding children and youth about what is right and what is wrong.

It is essential we do not end up with a holiday program which simply introduces Western values and understanding to the children and is not able to integrate their culture into what is presented. If we do this, we reinforce the colonial view that our culture is more relevant than theirs. Perhaps we need to explore some creative and practical ways on engaging Aboriginal ways in our program. For example, we could arrange visits to local wetlands with all ages over a lunch and in so doing allow story-telling to emerge. Perhaps we could investigate ways of sitting with children/youth and encouraging them to explore resources which are already available in the CRC.

Many of our people have visited country with Mowanjum families which has been a vital part of our education and relating with the people. The sharing of culture is a normative experience involving the whole family and it has been a privilege to be part of this. When I went to Mowanjum and shared in the Mowanjum Festival, in 2002 I was immediately taken to country. My education had begun. Ross and I have been up-country many times in our relating with the Mowanjum people. We would be immersed in their culture and pick it up, not simply by the spoken word but by what they would do and what you would do. In all of this we would be guided by the people teaching us what was appropriate and inappropriate. In this way, we would allow the people to be our hosts, as we host them in Perth and in the CRC. It is vital we develop a reciprocal relationship and not a one-way street.

Going up-country with the people can challenge our Western values and spirituality which encourages a split between the mind and the body or between a rational/technological/scientific and the land. We have been consciously or unconsciously indoctrinated; our minds have supremacy over and are separate from our bodies which in turn are separate from the land. Aboriginal culture with its unique spirituality offers a radically different approach, where the person is intimately related to land both in terms of them knowing their place in the land and their totem animals or fauna. Engaging the land through this relational perspective offers a way to heal the split in our Western consciousness that has resulted in a terrible disconnection with the land and all its ills. We have now to cope with global warming and the wholesale destruction of the land with such processes as fracking and insensitive mining practices.

Hopes for Mowanjum

Gail, like others in the Network, is a visionary, who works for the needs of the future as well as being mindful of her vision for the future of Mowanjum:

I have a great vision for the community, and I have had it from the minute I arrived. I have a strong feeling Mowanjum can be a place encouraging the empowerment of women. I have shared this with the women and they know where I am coming from.

Gail has experience in women's programs in other Aboriginal communities and therefore knows this empowerment is also possible for Mowanjum woman. As Mowanjum women begin to heal themselves, there will be a ripple effect which may involve other people in the community, not only Aboriginal, for as Gail shared: Mowanjum can be a place of healing for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Although the people have a history of dislocation, they have been able to remain viable in the face of extraordinary pressures. They know what it is to contend with many peoples with their diverse backgrounds. Again, Gail feels:

There is so much potential in this little community and they have not glimpsed that. Although some of the women are beginning to get an idea there are bright spots on the horizon.

I spoke with members of the Boab Network in Perth who shared a range of responses to the question, what are your hopes for the future? Sarah for example, thought jobs were a key, noting "being idle is not good for people". Richard was also concerned for employment, noting there are many small business opportunities, such as the Op Shop, which we would like to see the community run. Therefore, Richard developed a series of business plans to encourage local initiatives such as the redevelopment of the pastoral station.

Yet it is important the Boab Network has the overall strategic view to keep these programs balanced. So, when people go to Mowanjum we want them to understand both the significance of the pastoral station or the importance of going back to country. These programs offer opportunities for local people, whether as training in the pastoral industry or as rangers on country. It is important for Boab people to understand the ecological implications behind the up-country journeys. It is equally important for the Community to see that they are teaching our people in culture and understanding life from the perspective of the local people.

Other concerns include *Justice Reinvestment* to address the high incidence of interaction with the judicial system which includes fines, penalties and incarceration. Focussing on *Education* is a priority, we are very aware only 30% of primary age children attend the local DDHS.

Education

The community and other observers believe the state education is designed for urban white children, and certainly does not suit the needs of Aboriginal people. This leads to low attendance rates, poor educational outcomes and early drop-out. We need to address how we deliver an education that engages children, meets their needs and will give them a good grounding for the challenges they face in their adult life. Such education must include their capacity to relate to land and culture which is clearly outside the scope of the present state system. The challenge is to develop a concept for a better way to educate the children, either by modifying the state system or to develop an independent school. Would our role be to bring together educational professionals with a background in Aboriginal educational issues to workshop a model for a better education? We could then discuss this model with the members of the community.

We took the initiative, through Gail's efforts, to support the early childhood learning. We trialled a zero to three-year-old program, but this did not continue as the funding dried up. We were concerned education begins in the family from birth, and support should therefore begin sooner rather than later. If this is correct, and if we miss them in this initial life formation, then we have probably missed the boat. We are acutely aware of seeing some of the older youth, who were teenagers when we started, ending up in prison. We ask ourselves, did we make any difference? As Lee-Anne argues it is important to start earlier, because then we can reinforce learning already experienced. For example, we can say this sore needs to be treated and they will have already learnt the importance of Western medicine.

It is then, not a matter of teaching them stuff we take for granted. They have never learnt, because the people who taught them didn't grow up in a culture like ours. Now, as they have to live with our culture, we need to teach them these little things. And, this is the problem, you can't sit them down to teach them because that seems patronising and insulting. It is insulting to infer they don't know that stuff. And sitting down is not their educational way. It is insulting to say they

need this education because everyone would be expecting they already have it.

Lee-Anne, like others in the Network, feel it would be great to do something educationally to help change the situation. This requires creative thought, for there are many opportunities for education along with barriers preventing children and youth hearing what is being said. Education also involves providing a role model for long-term employment. When so many in the community rely on welfare money, it is difficult for the new generations to break that pattern. Being creative, means finding a way that affirms the best of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. Gail, for instance, is concerned we are failing the community children by giving them the education system on offer in Derby.

I find it frustrating with all the personnel and with all the people available it has been such a short-sighted approach to education. With the early age children, I have focussed on grace and courtesy. It is learning to be responsible for yourself and to be learning resilience in yourself. They hold all the answers in themselves. So too, with the older children, by giving them resilience programs to affirm they can control their destiny. They can do whatever they want to do. They are more than capable of becoming successful whatever. And they don't need to engage in the dysfunctional behaviour that seems a part of the youth in Mowanjum.

On the other hand, we have supported those who have sought education in Perth. Maybe it is important for some young people to seek this wider education, temporarily leave the community and when they can obtain good employment, return to the community to show others there is a better way. We see some kids who are doing this as well as older people coming into the community with skills. But then, children need to be exposed to these wider possibilities. We need a better way of teaching: A way of modelling how to play with your kid, how to understand your child's developmental stages, having some of the girls working in the early learning centre as cadetships.

A community centre

Many people have spoken about the need for a community centre offering a variety of resources and could be a place where people could meet and yarn. A community building could be built near the early learning centre, with the community nurse next door to the centre, next door to the shop, the mail, and then

a big area with benches and tables with places to sit around in the shade. We began to explore the option of a large community centre with the help of an architect at the University of Western Australia (UWA), but that seems too costly at present. We would have to do large fundraising. We are fortunate to have someone as practical as John Tyrrell who is very aware of the need to provide a cost-effective solution to this issue.

We are looking at concreting the area and putting a roof structure over the top. We would like to put a play park in there, together with a music room for the band. These plans are being drawn up now. They would then be discussed by the community to check whether this is what they want and need. As soon as we get the plans down on paper, we can then contact the community.

A nurse's station

If the community centre idea became reality, the community nurse would be stationed nearby. She could sit down with the people and spot a child who needed attention. She might say to the child and parent, just come with me and I will attend to you. Marie shared:

When the boy fell off the roof two days after we left, I felt really sad. As soon as we leave, they are finding their own way to deal with boredom. He was such a dear little thing. It affected me terribly.

But it also affected one of the boy's best friends who became listless after that.



Figure 52: Marie Yuncken hard at work!

Our volunteers are very aware of the health needs of children and youth, with many untreated sores, lice in their hair all of which are treatable conditions.

A community bus

The present health system fails because the hospital assumes people go there for treatment. This may work, if the people had access to a community bus. Marie has spoken to the West Kimberley Council and at Mowanjum about the suggestion for a community bus, but this was initially resisted because of the fear people would bring alcohol back to the community but the need is still on the agenda and there is an indication that it may be provided.

Long term programs

Lee-Anne spoke of the huge waste of government resources, if the grants are only given for a short time. If funds are only given for one or two years and then discontinued prematurely, the gains are easily lost. Such short-term funding pattern is short-sighted, as we experienced with funding for our 0-3-year-old early learning and parenting centre. ELPC

You must set long lasting programs. It takes people a little while to build trust and get involved. The true potential for every program is never realized. You can't follow through with long term results because there is no long-term program. Imagine how much time and energy could go into Mowanjum if we didn't spent so much time looking around for funding. It is a great shame and a terrible waste of resources.

New agricultural options

Keith established the community garden in response to the late Heather Umbagai's concern for a healthy community. An area was set aside for fruit trees to be planted opposite the garden, but nothing eventuated. He remains hopeful there will be interest in growing the Kakadu plum, *gubinge*, at Mowanjum. There is research at the University here in Perth to domesticate it. There is world-wide demand for the plum given it has 40-60 times the concentration of vitamin C than oranges.

Final thoughts

This story of the Boab Network has barely begun. Floreat Uniting Church members followed up the community's request for help some nine years ago, in April 2008. Although, ten years seems long in terms of the average length of programs associated with the community, it is short in terms of the longer involvement of the church which began in 1912. We see ourselves as one more response in a century of responding to the needs of Kimberley Aboriginal people.

We believe reflection is an important part of our work, for it undergirds the way in which we respond to the community and support our own organisation. The results of this reflection led to my own work in doctoral studies and the book written with Eddie (see Thekimberleyvoice.com)

We are a non-hierarchical organisation, a group of peers who seek to assist each other in our work with the Mowanjum community. In turn, we treat the people of Mowanjum as our peers, and certainly avoid the colonial ways of relating in which white-fellas often came with a sense of superiority. Our work has barely begun because the gap between social indicators such as education, health, incarceration, longevity, and the employment of Mowanjum people compared with the rest of the population is very real and needs to be overcome. We, of course, do not suggest we have the answers for this issue, but we believe such injustice can only be alleviated by the people of Mowanjum working in collaboration with agencies such as ourselves and government departments. Making a difference means, establishing a mutual respect where we listen to the needs and concerns of the people as we find creative ways of meeting these needs together. This book illustrates our contribution to the life of Mowanjum. Hopefully, this contribution overall has been positive, even though we have made mistakes along the way. It is engagement that is demanding and often extremely risky for it can affect our own health and well-being. It is also innovative, because we are working on the edge of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships, and at times trail-blazing.

Many people: many facets

The work of the Boab Network embraces many facets of work both within Mowanjum and in the surrounding community. We have been fortunate to have a range of well-skilled volunteers who have both initiated and worked on a variety of social development projects. As stated above, these projects were responsive, in the sense they arose out of extensive conversation with people from Mowanjum. Nor were they all whitefella managed concerns. We supported extensive development of the pastoral station and its accompanying water for food program by providing detailed plans. We began the Op Shop but encourage local participation and now ownership. Some programs like the CRC continue to be mainstream programs within Mowanjum, others ended with funding cuts. We are, however, reluctant to accept such terminations, particularly for the pre-school program. We believe this intervention in family life for the zero to three years old

children is vital given the nature of Mowanjum community. Thus, we continue to search for viable funding options.

We have undertaken an impressive list of social development and community programs, all on a meagre budget of some \$30-40,000 per annum. Despite our successes and in the face of this extremely small budget, we have been refused government funding. Whilst this is disappointing, we will broaden our horizons to seek funding from the private sector. As Chapters 7 and 8 describe, we have a significant track record, both in our work with the community and in what we have offered to your volunteers. We believe we have a significant vision for the future with implications not only for the people of Mowanjum but relevance for similar concerns across Australia.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Chapter 1: The Mowanjum people have experienced dislocation and ever-changing Government policy. How might this impact the current generation of children and youth?

Chapter 2: The Boab Network was invited to respond to the increase in youth suicide. What might be the strengths and limitations of such a volunteer organisation in dealing with complex trans-cultural concerns?

Chapter 3: The Boab Network has offered a children's program in every school holiday since 2008. Is this an appropriate response to the obvious gap in government services and program, and what are its limitations?

Chapter 4: The Mowanjum people have wanted the Boab Network to assist in organising up-country journeys and indeed have seen these trips to share their culture and ethos. What might be the difficulties faced in supporting this community as it continues to visit lands in such a remote part of Australia?

Chapter 5: The Boab Network has carefully reflected on its aims and objectives over many years. Are these appropriate given the continuing change in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relating? What other aims/objectives could be considered?

Chapter 6: The team, together with people from Mowanjum have worked together to create substantial change in the community. To what extent do these projects address what has been termed 'closing the gap'. What other possibilities should be considered?

Chapter 7: Team reflected on its experience. What do you read as the most significant learning from this engagement with the people of Mowanjum.

Chapter 8: Hopes for the future. What would be your hopes for the future of Reconciliation and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationship and relating?

REFERENCES

Including books and other resources to provide information on the Aboriginal people and issues relating to the people who form the Mowanjum community.

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Notes

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- ¹ Boab Network, 'Working with the Mowanjum Aboriginal Community', <<http://www.boabnetwork.org/>>
 - ² Ibid
 - ³ Ibid
 - ⁴ Australian Government, 'Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's report 2018', <<http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-2018.pdf?a=1>>
 - ⁵ Lee, 'Common good', < <https://www.britannica.com/topic/common-good>
This understanding is clearly expressed in Catholic Social Teaching (CST), based on our common Christian heritage. Thus, it has been easy for me to teach at the ACU even though I am not a Catholic, for CST accords with what I consider to be an exegesis of Christian teaching and certainly consistent with our work in the Boab Network
 - ⁶ Country has a special meaning for Aboriginal people to include the flora and fauna and all associated with land including their cultural connection.
 - ⁷ Caritas Aotearoa NZ, 'Catholic Social teaching: our traditions of justice', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGwuq7IVmF0>
 - ⁸ Mowanjum Aboriginal community and Mowanjum artists, 2008
 - ⁹ Kimberley Land Council, 2011
 - ¹⁰ McKenzie, 1969
 - ¹¹ Ibid, 87, 156
 - ¹² Ibid, 175
 - ¹³ Ibid, 209
 - ¹⁴ Ibid, 105-121
 - ¹⁵ Ibid, 206
 - ¹⁶ A former Presbyterian Minister at Mowanjum, Jonathan Barker, remembers a conversation of a colleague, Ron Denham, with the Derby Town Clerk, who had written an article on the front page of The Western Australian: 'Is there Black Power in Derby?' The officer replied, "There's a new lifting of heads and squaring of the shoulders of the Mowanjum Aborigines and the people of Derby don't like it". Barker, 2013.
 - ¹⁷ McKenzie, 1969, 256
 - ¹⁸ Rowse, 2017, 137
 - ¹⁹ Haebich, 2008, 93, 94
 - ²⁰ Felten and Procter-Murphy, 2012
 - ²¹ Green and Moon, 1997, 368
 - ²² A donga is a transportable steel building, one room and often used for accommodation.
 - ²³ Ross asked if members of the Boab Network had seen an article written by Russell Skelton that appeared on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald and Canberra Times. The article described Mowanjum and neighbouring Derby as the suicide epicentre of Australia.
 - ²⁴ Such hospitality is intimately related to a place. Casey (2011) argues that place has an edge. This edge is both physical and conditional and involves many factors or dimensions including the difference in history, language and tradition. Casey writes, 'All such edges, spatial and bodily and cultural, enact what every edge effects: they bring together and they separate, both at once ...' (44). On the one hand such an edge is broad enough to allow the stranger to enter and to feel welcome, as we did when we descended through Magpie Jump-up into Majaddin. Yet, on the other hand, this edge also reveals difference and restriction, as we encountered protocols such as sensitivity to photographic records.

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- ²⁵ Ian McNiven and Lynette Russell (2005) are critical of past and present colonialist practices which assumed the right to control or undermine the involvement of Indigenous communities in their research. In such relationships, archaeologists, for instance, have often presumed a kind of absolute welcome or right to enter the Other's land and culture.
- ²⁶ Kenneth Gergen (2009) speaks of confluence, as distinct from causality which is dominant in my Western tradition. Gergen contrasts the difference between a causal and confluent understanding of human action (pp. 49-59). He notes that the whole is the sum of the relations. A lighted match, for instance, does not cause the gasoline to combust, but 'combustion is the achievement of a particular combination of flame and gasoline' (p. 55).
- ²⁷ <http://www.boabnetwork.org/>
- ²⁸ Hoskin and Bear, 2017
- ²⁹ Aydon, 2009, 420
- ³⁰ Love, 1936
- ³¹ The West Australian, 28 July 2014, <
<https://thewest.com.au/countryman/news/stockmen-to-ride-tall-again-ng-ya-374767>
- ³² Gammage, 2014