

Connecting to Country, Culture and Community

Willum Warrain Aboriginal Gathering
Place Project and Stories

Libby Porter and Taneisha Webster in
collaboration with Willum Warrain Aboriginal
Gathering Place members and community



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Willum Warrain Aboriginal Gathering Place
Project report and stories

November 2020

Acknowledgement of Country

Willum Warrain Aboriginal Gathering Place is located on the lands of the Boonwurrung / Bunurong people. We acknowledge and pay respects to Ancestors and Elders.

We at the Centre for Urban Research and Sustainability & Urban Planning acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation on whose unceded lands we conduct our research, teaching and service. We respectfully acknowledge Ancestors and Elders past, present and emerging who have always been caring for Country. We pay our respects to Country, the lifeworld that sustains us all.

Our research, education and service are already in a relationship with Country and the people of Country, here and in all the places we undertake our business. As mostly non-Indigenous people, we acknowledge our obligation in this relationship: to uphold the ngarn-ga [understanding] of Bundjil and practice respect for community and culture. Though there is much we still need to learn, especially about ourselves, we affirm our dhumbali [commitment] to that work. We hold as central to our business, dhumbali to a shared future with Indigenous peoples everywhere and especially Kulin Country and peoples.

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Terminology

Please note the term ‘Aboriginal’ is respectfully used to collectively refer to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while acknowledging the heterogeneous nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



Artwork by: Aunty Bea Edwards



Project purpose and background

Willum Warrain Aboriginal Gathering Place is a place of hope, healing, being and belonging. Community calls for a Aboriginal centre began in 1980s, and Willum Warrain Aboriginal Association was formed in 2011 resulting in Aboriginal Community-Controlled gathering place being opened in 2014. It is located on Boonwurrung/Bunurong Country in the town of Hastings, Mornington Peninsula.

Willum Warrain is run by an all-Aboriginal community-elected voluntary Board and operates cultural strengthening and community engagement programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their kin living on or connected to the Mornington Peninsula. Aboriginal people make up over 85% of the staff members at Willum Warrain and hold a variety of roles including Executive Officer – Men's Business, Executive Officer – Women's Business, Women's Business – Cultural Lead and Cultural Tour Guide.

The programs delivered at Willum Warrain are offered at no cost to the community and are inclusive to all Aboriginal people and their kin. There is a membership system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and a 'friends' system for non-Indigenous people to join and support, which has grown to over 1000 members (including 470 Aboriginal adult members) in 2020. Willum Warrain is a space where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can come together to connect with Country and culture. It is also a place where non-Indigenous people can learn and practice reconciliation.

In 2017, Libby Porter visited the Gathering Place and met Peter Aldenhoven as part of another project. After a couple of visits in 2017 and 2018, and conversations over cups of tea on the decking, Peter and Libby discussed a strong mutual interest in the importance of place for supporting connection and the role Willum Warrain plays in the community. A project telling the Willum Warrain story and what the Gathering Place means for Aboriginal people was discussed as a potential way to work together. This collaboration could help Willum Warrain share their vision and successes with the wider community and help advocate for additional support and funding which prioritises Aboriginal cultural programs and local community-controlled responses for Aboriginal people.

In 2018, Libby and Willum Warrain successfully applied to the RMIT Seed Fund which supports collaboration between RMIT researchers and community partners on projects that deliver a tangible benefit to the partner. We embarked on a co-designed process that was rooted in the values of self-determination and reflected the aspiration to tell the Willum Warrain story in and through the voices of the people of Willum Warrain and the Country itself.

An intention for Willum Warrain was to build an archive of material that demonstrates the importance of the Gathering Place for the community. We began to think of these as place-making and community-building practices. Willum Warrain, as an organisation, valued the idea of documenting the importance of activities and practices to help advocate for funding on new or existing programs. From an academic and research perspective, the project will help by sharing stories from contemporary Aboriginal place-making activities in urban contexts. Both can assist other Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in efforts toward reconciliation.

The RMIT Seed Fund supported the project with \$18,000 to create a short film and collect stories through short interviews with Willum Warrain members exploring their experience of attending the Gathering Place and what it means to them. The funding was firstly utilised to cover the costs of creating the film which we hired Zakpage, an Aboriginal film company based in Sydney, to create. Secondly, a Willum Warrain community member, Tamika, was employed to help organise and conduct the interviews and support cultural safety. Lastly, the funding covered catering expenses for community gatherings and interview transcription.

This report focuses on the stories from the interviews.



What we did and how

The project was co-designed from inception. The Willum Warrain Board met formally with Libby twice, once to meet and discuss shared purpose, and a second time to workshop the project design. A 'Walking with Us' agreement was negotiated to ensure correct cultural and institutional protocols were in place.

Aboriginal people make up over 85% of the staff members at Willum Warrain and hold a variety of roles including Executive Officer – Men's Business and Executive Officer – Women's Business.

Approval from the RMIT human research ethics committee (HREC) was required for the project to proceed. We worked closely with the HREC to ensure that the Willum Warrain Board retained ethical and cultural oversight of the project. We sought, and obtained, ethics approval with specific conditions that gaining and recording informed consent from participants would be in accordance with culturally appropriate methods determined by the Board and in line with the Walking with Us agreement.

After a wide search for suitable partners, Zakpage were hired to do the film work. Zakpage charged only for their time and contributed their travel costs from Sydney to the project. The Board guided the filming work in collaboration with Alison and Nik from Zakpage including preparing the script, choosing filming locations and participants, and approving the final version of the film.

During March 2019, Libby and Tamika conducted the interviews together. All members were invited to participate in the interviews through communications from the Board via email and Facebook. Tamika and staff at Willum Warrain also approached some members directly to participate. In total, 10 interviews were held with 11 participants at the Gathering Place. All the interviews were transcribed, some by Tamika and some by an external transcription service between April and September 2019. All of the interviews were held at the Gathering Place.

The interviews asked participants to share, as they could, how each person came to be involved at Willum Warrain, what Willum Warrain means and why it is an important place. The interviews asked participant to reflect on some of the challenges they have experienced connecting to Country, culture and community and how Willum Warrain plays a role in being connected.





Themes and stories

The story of the Gathering Place itself echoes many of the stories that people told about finding Willum Warrain and making the Gathering Place part of their own lives. The Aboriginal community in the Hastings and Peninsula area had been campaigning for 15 years for what they described as “a place of our own”. Finally, they were offered a site by the local Council. As former President and a founding member, Peter Aldenhoven describes “it was a dumpsite... down the back of factories, a pile of road-fill accumulated over 40 years, that was bulldozed flat”. That was the first major challenge: to make a physically challenging and unattractive space somewhere welcoming for Aboriginal people and a place of pride.

Fortunately, there was a strip of remnant bush which underwent cultural burns to bring back any native flora and remove all invasive weeds. Over the past six years, Willum Warrain has heavily invested in the external environment by planting thousands of native plants and trees and improving wetlands, bringing back native animals in abundance and creating a healthy and thriving ecosystem.

Another ongoing challenge for the Gathering Place was funding. It was Mornington Peninsula Shire Council and the then Department of Health who first funded Willum Warrain, with support for one Gathering Place Coordinator. After 15 months, however, the Department of Health withdrew the funding. At the same time, the Shire Council was downsizing, and despite being supportive in principle, no money was available to support Willum Warrain. As a consequence, Willum Warrain was closed for a over four months while other funding was sought. This was eventually forthcoming from philanthropic sources, enabling employment of a part-time Gathering Place Coordinator. Since then, Willum Warrain has experienced significant growth and at the time the research was conducted, there were 12 part-time employees plus hundreds of members and volunteers.

Coming to Willum Warrain: “everyone has their own story, their own journey”

Willum Warrain Aboriginal Gathering Place is a place where Aboriginal people find themselves, their cultural identities, stories and connections to culture, community and Country. Every participant in the project spoke about their own often painful journeys of discovery, journeys which led them to Willum Warrain through one

means or another. There is a strong sense of having been ‘led’ to the Gathering Place in order to become ‘found’. Community members spoke about many different ways this occurred in peoples’ lives: as a recommendation from a friend or a health worker, participating in a program or to bring children to playgroup, discovering the website, or doing community service rehabilitation programs. Each person has their own journey and own story that has led them to Willum Warrain and these speak to important common themes.

Throughout people’s stories, a common theme was identity. Community members spoke about not knowing much about their Aboriginal heritage, finding out late in life, or being denied knowledge of their Aboriginality. Each story was a journey of searching for information, of “trying to find where we fit”. These journeys were, and still are, painful. Everyone spoke about being “scarred by pain” from racism, grief or loss, intergenerational trauma and the negative impacts of colonisation. Willum Warrain is a place that helps Aboriginal people heal from these scars. As one community member reflected, “culturally [Willum Warrain] is very good for me because it helps take away the pain of the past, gets rid of the pain”. Another stated, “I feel whole again” now they have found their cultural identity. It has been observed by many that “people are healing and they don’t even know they’re healing here”. The undeniable potential for collective healing at Willum Warrain was evident from each interview.

This healing is about finding connection: connection to self, community, culture and Country. For many community members, finding Willum Warrain was intricately part of a process of searching for family and kin, and the need to connect with family. This means not only blood-related family but the wider sense of kinship and connection. Many people spoke about Willum Warrain as the place where they learnt



about their Aboriginality, culture and values, in ways that have been unavailable in other parts of their lives. Willum Warrain welcomes all Aboriginal people to the gathering place and is accepting of everyone no matter their cultural journey. This open-door model removes any barriers for Aboriginal people to engage with community and culture, including feelings of shame and inauthenticity and experiencing judgement or denial of identity.

Finding self, family and belonging was perhaps the most important and enduring theme across all of the stories community members told about finding Willum Warrain. One participant stated, “I walked through the gates and I felt like I was home...I was so overwhelmed by emotion and I just knew, I knew I was home, I knew that I’d reconnected with my culture”. The spiritual connection to Country and ancestors and sense of being home at Willum Warrain runs deep. Each person spoke about coming to Willum Warrain and immediately feeling, “I belong” both within their Aboriginality and community.

This often comes from the experience of the world outside the gates of Willum Warrain, the experience of trying to make a life in a society where to be Aboriginal often means an experience of injustice, racism and denial. One community member said, “it’s hard for kids who are going through a difficult time trying to identify as Indigenous in an urban space and trying to put themselves out there.” Willum Warrain provides a safe haven in the face of this, a place to belong and freely express Aboriginality. There is a strong sense at Willum Warrain of profound inclusion, no matter a person’s background, experience or circumstance and this has created opportunities for community members to change their personal narratives. An Aboriginal staff member reflected on when they arrived at Willum Warrain to do community service and felt immediately that he belonged, (“I wasn’t looked at like a criminal, I was just a visitor or volunteer helping out and, in the end, they’ve given me a job out of it. So, I must not be too bad of a guy”). Many reflections highlighted a sense of hope, for self, the next generation and broader Aboriginal community and the role Willum Warrain has in this.

Belonging, safety, connection and being welcomed were the words most widely used to describe this feeling that many participants struggled to put into words, such was the depth of their emotion. One community member stated Willum Warrain is “like a safety blanket”, a place of protection. Yet this safety blanket is not only for one’s self. Community members also spoke about the importance of that safety “rippling” out from individual people to become an intergenerational cloak of connection. A vital part of what the Gathering Place does is to offer connection to prevent future loss and pain, based on people’s experiences of trauma in their own pasts and childhoods. The nurturing and healing effect of Willum Warrain ripples out to each person’s wider family

and through the generations. Indeed, many people come to Willum Warrain because they are searching for something more for their own children, for a place where their own children, or future children, can experience culture and connection and “practise our culture while still growing up in a semi-urban area”. The desire to break the intergenerational cycle of cultural disconnection is strong within the community at Willum Warrain.

A community member describes the importance of learning the tradition of making possum skin cloaks:-

“When I decide to have children then that’s something that we can do for our kids right from the start. My sister and mum will be able to create her/him that initial possum pelt with our journey as a family burn on it and then they can gift it to her/him and then as she/he grows we’re able to kind of wrap them in culture right from the start. That culture revival is so important because we haven’t been able to get that. It’s so empowering to be able to give that back and to change that story for my family and my nieces and my nephews and hopefully my own children and they’ll never have to have that disconnection”.

Through this healing process, people are able to find pride in identity and strength in cultural knowledge and practice. This too is intergenerational in significance, extending forward and backward through generations. Another community member said:

“Willum Warrain allows me to breathe, to be okay with having the colour that I’ve got because I’m damn proud to be Indigenous. Not just for myself. Not just for my children but for my grandmother and my mum”.

“A destination for collective healing”: What Willum Warrain does

Belonging and identity are nurtured at Willum Warrain through a range of activities, programs and events. These include a women’s group, men’s group, playgroup for young children, youth group for teens, a garden project, the monthly Big Mob Cook Ups, Sorry Day events, annual Reconciliation Week walk and BBQ, Welcome Baby to Country ceremonies, community meetings, language learning, craft skills and activities, music, dance, and visits from school and other community groups and Aboriginal people from other parts of Australia.



Among the women there is also a strong sense of pride and identity in the women's group. One participant described the women's group as "a band of sisters come together...a strong sisterhood" and this was echoed by all of the other women who participated. Another community member said:

"The women's group is my home base. It's where I go to... be able to yarn or source support to figure out my problems, if I can't figure it out with my husband or my family. It's basically my home away from home".

The importance of the women's group for mental health was reflected on by many community members: "for me it's getting with women who are like minded ... It's like we're sisters but we're all from different tribes". The Gathering Place fosters strong community connections which flow into community members lives outside the Gathering Place.

Women's Group is designed to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal women to learn a broad range of cultural skills, knowledge and history and is therefore structured around a variety of activities including weaving, possum skin cloaks, dance and Indigenous plants. Community members spoke about the cultural importance of partaking in the possum skin cloak making, which was a particular focus of the women's group prior to this project. One community member described that:

"We had an Elder come in and teach us how to make possum skin cloaks. We were taught about the history of possum skin cloaks, about how you would make them, what they were made for and their purpose. I was really lucky. I came down and ... it was a place for me to learn something that I had lost and that was really powerful for me. Being able to share that experience with my sister and my mum was really something special and something that we'll always kind of have, that we got to do this together".

Another community member spoke about the importance of the possum skin cloak, saying: "I poured a lot of myself into that... being a part of the possum skin cloak for Willum Warrain, it's amazing to be able to give Willum Warrain a part of me." Another participant reflected "as a person who is on her own Country when at Willum Warrain, the cloak is especially important", and "I feel honoured wearing that cloak as it was made by women's group". The moments of healing described by participants (Aboriginal women) demonstrated the inherent power

Willum Warrain is a product of the enormous amount of work undertaken by very many people, every day. While the Gathering Place is supported with paid staff, all of whom are community members, lots of the work is done through voluntary work. People spoke about their love of undertaking this kind of work, and of the activity itself as central to the creation of a sense of belonging and connection. It is through the work of tending to the garden, daubing the men's hut, organising a craft activity, repairing the bathroom doors and cooking for a community event that expresses the values of the Willum Warrain community.

All of these activities and programs are about being "wrapped in culture", immersed in community and connecting to Country. There is a strong sense of the vitality of being together as the practice of belonging and connection. In other words, it's as much about the activity itself as it is about the opportunity to sit and yarn. A community member reflected: "when you come here you relax, you have a good laugh, have a feed and just be part of a community...just being around our mob...it's good". Such activities are also vitally important for cultural transmission, as it enables people to pass on knowledge to each other and their children.

The men's group offers an important place of connection and healing through such activities. Participants spoke about the range of interests and activities people in the men's group have been doing – spear making, axe heads and shield making, didgeridoos and woomearas, and the sense of "sitting around, just yarning". The men's group also have outings such as fishing trips and bush walks. One of the most significant activities in men's group which participants spoke about was the traditional style Aboriginal hut that the men have built over a period of approximately two years. One community member described this as "a real healing and learning experience" and that "in a lot of ways it's been the journey, not the destination with the hut". Speaking passionately about the moment when the hut really came together:

"When we were building the hut, you've got all the main poles coming up and meeting at the top, then we've woven branches all around. Although we hadn't finished yet, we hadn't mudded it, when you went inside those poles felt like they were fingers holding you in. It's like a big cuddle".



of repairing disrupted songlines, of reawakening cultural traditions, finding connections and the intergenerational potential.

Willum Warrain is continuously trying to expand into new activities and programs that reach out to the Aboriginal community and provide new opportunities to engage with culture. At the time of undertaking the interviews, a new partnership was being developed with Department of Justice and Safety and Peninsula Health to engage community members with community service hours and court ordered mental health treatment. One participant spoke with pride about being the new Community Programs Officer overseeing this program where: "it's for anyone that's been required from the Magistrates Court to participate in a mental health program, with medium risk of reoffending. So, they get the choice to go to Peninsula Health or come here [Willum Warrain] and do cultural programs and cultural healing". Offering such a program is viewed as an extremely important opportunity for community members to change their narrative and rebuild their lives. As another community member reflects "people have got to do X number of [community service] hours and often they are spreading mulch in the street roundabout. But when they come here there's a different dynamic at work". The Gathering Place offers Aboriginal people a chance to reconnect with their culture whilst simultaneously addressing any justice matters and aims to build long term relationships between Aboriginal community members. Connections of this nature can act as a protective factor for community members, building support networks and friendships, finding identity and cultural pride and creating a sense of belonging and hope for the future.

Over many years, a lot of hard work and many volunteers, Willum Warrain has grown into a little natural oasis, including billabongs, Koorie bush trail, ceremony ground, women's sacred space, traditional style huts, vegetable gardens and meeting areas. All these areas are important to the functioning and cultural possibilities of the Gathering Place and have helped create a strong sense of place for community members. These physical aspects ensure connection to Country is strong. Every participant spoke about the different areas at Willum Warrain, the vitality and sense of the place. The whole site is itself very significant and hard-won, given the long struggle the local community had to get a "place that's just ours". It also required a lot of work, given that what was handed over for the community to use was an old council dumping ground. A community member describes some of the work involved at the outset:

"When we first moved in, we burnt that bit of remnant bush half a dozen times or so to kill off weeds, introduced weeds and release dormant seed stock. But in a sense we were expunging the land and starting the healing process and then everything we've done, all the work and all the cultural investment, the development of our wetlands and bush trail, you know we've helped our Country heal and in doing so helped ourselves heal".

Now, as a participant expresses, there is huge pride and importance in being able to connect to Country on the site: "you go through there (the bush trail) at the right time of the year and there's native lillies on the ground, there's also manna gums and swamp gums." Aboriginal people are deeply connected to Country and many believe if Country is sick so are the people, Willum Warrain has been able to regenerate their land and create a healthy and thriving environment which flows into their community.

Providing the opportunity to connect to culture is central to the purpose of Willum Warrain, for as a community member says: "it is hard being Aboriginal in a concrete and asphalt world [with] the patina of colonisation and urbanisation, this overlay of the Country makes it hard to get connection to nature and to the bush". The natural beauty of the Gathering Place is central to the healing process of connecting to the bush.





People spoke about the physical aspects of the Gathering Place with utmost pride in the way that the Board, staff and community have regenerated an ecosystem including native animals and plants. This has created a genuine oasis in an urban area, a sanctuary that supports people to connect with each other and to Country.

Everyone at the Gathering Place spoke about the importance of this feeling of being on Country. This also offers the opportunity to connect to Country in different ways, to grow and learn with native plants and animals and for cultural knowledge transmission. An Aboriginal staff member said, “we’re trying to develop a Koori plant trail where we can teach food, tools and other uses”.

A striking moment for visitors to the Gathering Place is the sense of arrival and its spiritual feeling. At the front gate, there is a small pond surrounded by native plants, where Bunjil and Waa (sculptures) are perched and the frogs croak. Everybody spoke about the importance of this part, of entering the Gathering Place whether for the first time or hundredth time. One participant reflected, hearing the frogs croak “sends a calming sensation through you. It’s like there’s a spirit walking with you, guiding you”. This sense of being acknowledged on arrival is strong for everyone, as a community member said, “every time I walk in the gates the frogs croak. It’s like an acknowledgment, that you’re doing alright, that this is where you should be, that the people here, and the space, is good for you”. There is an overwhelming sense of being felt by Country and acknowledged by ancestors when arriving at the Gathering Place.

The community is constantly creating new places and spaces within the Willum Warrain site. The ngargee (ceremony) ground is really significant because this is a place where the community comes together for celebrations, ceremony, fire, gatherings, music, dance and yarning. The sense of freedom these spaces evoke is very important for children. As a community member said:

“We get here [Willum Warrain], we make a cuppa and the kids just run free, in the bush, the ngargee area and play in the sand”.

The sense of safety, of freedom and belonging even for small children is noticed by community members. Being able to connect children to culture, to Country from a young age is so important for many community members who themselves were unable to or forbidden to as children.

Recently Aboriginal women took part in creating a sacred women’s space, where only women and children can go, at the Gathering Place. This space offers a hugely important sanctuary for women and is embedded within all things significant to women. All of the Aboriginal female participants spoke about this as a place to go

for restoration, healing, to be able to “breathe easier”, “listen to my surroundings” and “feel the sand under my feet”. The women’s space is helping people with their own mental health and self-esteem challenges by offering a sanctuary for belonging and connection. It is also a place where participants described a strong sense of being connected to ancestors. One community member said that even when the weather is really still, “I come in here and I sit down and the wind just picks up, even if it’s just for a minute it does. It’s like there’s ancestors here with me, I love it”. For another community member, the presence of ancestors is extremely important for the work that the women undertake in the space: “because we’re grateful for the spirits of the earth and the spirits of the trees. Before we do anything we thank them and ask them, ‘do you mind if we just tidy up a little bit and maybe break off this branch?’ And so that area means a lot”. The interconnectedness of all things living and responsibility to care for Country is really felt in this space for Aboriginal women.

Taken together, the place, programs, work, activities and community at Willum Warrain are a profoundly successful example of what is possible and the value of becoming a destination for healing. As an Aboriginal staff member says:

“We’ve proven here at Willum Warrain, on a small piece of land we can heal not just the land and ourselves but we’re actually involved in healing a lot of non-Indigenous people too... We say we’re a destination for reconciliation but probably we’re a destination for collective healing”.

For example, at the 2018 and 2019 Reconciliation Week walks and BBQs, more than 750 and 1000 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from right across the community participate in walks of solidarity, acknowledgement of Aboriginal history and commitment to a reconciled future.

“The inherent possibilities of Aboriginal organisations”: How Willum Warrain embodies self-determination

Willum Warrain as a place and a community embodies and practices self-determination. The organisation is entirely run by Aboriginal people, according to self-determining values, principles and approaches. Self-determination is threaded throughout everything that Willum Warrain is and does – the values, meaning and purpose and the practices of cultural revival, relationship and radical inclusivity.



At Willum Warrain the Aboriginal perspective is, as one participant observed, the only perspective present: “it’s not a way of thinking, it is how we think...it’s just always that”. Being at Willum Warrain in relationships and connection with community and culture means that this practice of fully being Aboriginal on the terms of the community itself, is profoundly important. A community member described this as the practice of “people getting together, celebrating who we are, the fact that we’re Aboriginal”. Willum Warrain is a place where culture is celebrated, valued and prioritised.

A community member described the welcome that is extended to everyone who arrives at Willum Warrain as “a welcoming...that you just don’t get anywhere else.” This simple, radical inclusion is at the heart of Willum Warrain’s philosophy and practice. This welcome is extended unconditionally, as another participant states: “it doesn’t matter where you’ve come from or what your connection is or what your story is, you’re just here to be you”. Everyone is welcomed, nobody is judged. An Aboriginal staff member says that most of the Willum Warrain community – he estimates “a third of our membership” – have a “lack of cultural identity and knowledge” because of assimilation and colonisation. He states:

“And so for community who walk through our gate, our sisters and brothers, we just say welcome and we accept them and we hope that they can find who they are through us sharing culture”.

The practice of this welcome and inclusion is also a vital community service that Willum Warrain provides. As a community member explains:

“One of the big challenges is you get Aboriginal people coming through the gate and they’re totally lost. They might not have a bed to sleep in, any food or emotional support and we can be there for them, it’s helping the community”.

This focus on inclusive welcoming and cultural strengthening comes from the community’s values. It is community values that drives Willum Warrain as an organisation. An Aboriginal staff member explains:

“What we’re trying to do is something focused on community. We’re a whole of organisation charity so we’re not a business, we’re not trying to turn profit for a particular cohort of people, so our agenda’s different. We’re going to focus on cultural strengthening... [because] our community has said that’s their highest priority, cultural strengthening”.

Building an organisation like this requires overcoming considerable challenges in contemporary Australia. Willum Warrain is largely run by volunteers, with just a small number of part-time paid staff. As an Aboriginal staff member notes: “we’re a highly effective gathering place that’s got tremendous support and community engagement but you know we haven’t got a single full-time employee.” The struggle for resources is an ongoing one and is more than simply the ability to run programs. It goes to the heart of what it means to be a self-determining, Aboriginal-led organisation, or in this Aboriginal staff member’s words: “the power to control our destiny”.

Some of these resourcing issues are linked to the deficit model that is often the default position applied by non-Indigenous organisations and governments. The assumption of government programs, funding opportunities and even philanthropic initiatives is that funding must be directed towards overcoming problems. As one Aboriginal staff member stated, from a funding and philosophical perspective this fails to understand a more positive appreciation for “what’s the potential... what are the inherent possibilities in Aboriginal communities?” This devalues the history of Aboriginal culture, the longest living culture on earth, a culture of great knowledge, wisdom, kindness, leaders, warriors and with responsibility to Country and kin.

This inherent potential is the foundation of Willum Warrain’s philosophy. The community and organisation are always working on what a Board member identified as “what it means to truly support Aboriginal community, what it truly is for an Aboriginal community to be Aboriginal led and run”. This continues to require difficult conversations about self-determination, about lateral violence, and figuring out how to practice being Aboriginal on other people’s Country.

Not only is this practiced through the activities and programs discussed earlier, but through the practice of valuing everybody’s effort and work. As an Aboriginal staff member said: “It takes all of us as a team and as a family to put a place like this together and that’s what makes it special for everyone that walks through that gate as well as the workers that are here.”

The self-determining philosophy of Willum Warrain as a community-based organisation was identified as vitally important for creating identity, belonging and pride for the local Aboriginal community. From these flow enormous benefits to social and emotional well-being. As an Aboriginal staff member said: “This place is everything to me. It’s given me a job. It’s given me community. It’s given me Aboriginality. It’s given me self worth.” The potential to impact the lives of Aboriginal people, families and the whole community and create intergenerational change through the Gathering Place is endless.



It's the best thing I've ever done...it's definitely put me in the healing process, it's given me hope. I get emotional about the place because everyone's been so good to me and I just love the place. I know that there's a lot of people in the same boat, they'd be lost without this place. It just gives them somewhere to come, they know that they can come, and they can be safe.

Another community member said that he was unaware of what was missing in his life until he came to the Gathering Place, developing strength in his identity and pride in the face of the racism he has experienced. His story echoed other participants' experiences and demonstrates the important effect pride and belonging has for personal social and emotional well-being:

"I love this place so much. It's just, it's hard to explain, just coming here feels like there's a load off my shoulders, like the air's lighter. I can talk to anyone about anything, [I'm] not judged, so welcoming. And it's the people that really make it too, definitely, like I think the smile on people's faces, you know, you're not judged or anything, and... that connection that I've never had which I needed".

Similarly, for another community member, this sense of "non-judgemental welcoming" has been essential for survival, because: "it wards off depression... you develop a sense of belonging and a sense of ownership of our culture. When you come here you think, 'This is my mob. This is my place'".

The opportunity to share and experience culture is central to the healing that happens through Willum Warrain. A community member describes the importance of this sharing as:

"Connecting with people who are feeling the same way has been really helpful as well because you often wonder - why do I feel like this? Growing up a lot of us have felt like we are different and it's not until we all sit together and discuss how different we felt, how we didn't fit in, we weren't the same and realise we've all experienced the same thing that we're not different and not misfits anymore".

Simply because many of the community members have "suffered significant degrees of loss of cultural knowledge", sharing culture is vitally important to healing. Sharing and learning with each other helps "wake up dormant or sleeping culture" and revitalises a sense of identity and belonging. This is more, though, than an individual experience. It is one of cultural resurgence and is why Willum Warrain as an organisation is so inclusive of sharing with non-Indigenous people as well. Peter explains: "the dynamic is when we share culture, it's fantastic for us, it builds our pride and our identity, so it's not a one-way transaction."

Sharing culture is also fundamental to the ongoing storyline of culture, community and Country. A community member spoke about this as an "Aboriginal storyline that should never stop" and:

"It continues and it's wrong for us to keep it to ourselves. It just keeps on going and going and going. Our stories, everything is flowing through us and needs to be passed on. And you've got to sit and listen to whoever is talking or you will miss out on important culture. Culture, respect, the lot. ... our story should never close. It's flowing like a stream."



Further Information

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Acknowledgment of Country

RMIT University acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations as the traditional owners of the land on which the University stands. RMIT University respectfully recognises Elders both past and present. We also acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands across Australia where we conduct business, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures and heritage.