

First Nations Rotary Group Study Cultural Exchange – Wiradjuri and Oceti Sakowin

The Idea

Through a web of Rotary contacts, interests in First Nations peoples, emerging understanding of how Rotary can participate in Reconciliation in Australia (and elsewhere), and a strong desire by District Governors (past and present) and Rotary clubs. The idea of Indigenous exchanges of young professionals started to 'come together'. Like all good ideas it need capability to make something of the idea!

Connections were made internationally via the Rotary Fellowship program, when Rotarians from Parkes and Rapid City South Dakota (SD) USA, hosted each other and a few of them started to talk about how Rotary could support local First Nations people to be proud of their original culture. The idea of Peace Parks blended with local Indigenous art emerged. This provided solid ground to extend international sharing to include Vocational understanding and cultural expression.

These ideas require funding, and so the previous District 9700 (which made up most of Wiradjuri country) set aside District funds to support the Exchange concept. The SD team did the same. With delays due to Covid, the Wiradjuri team went to the lands of the Oceti Sakowin in late 2023; and the Oceti Sakowin team (1 Team leader, and 4 delegates) came to Wiradjuri country in October this year, 2024.

Organising the visit this year, was made possible by the unending support of local Rotarians. All the team and the two drivers were home hosted, every night. Each community where we stopped put together a great itinerary for the delegates, focussing on local First Nations services, culture, stories, education, and their history of being colonised. Both stages of the Exchange were strongly supported by District Grants from the Rotary Foundation.

The travel was by rented 12 seater mini-bus which proved to be very good value. The vehicle was driven by both Ann Dib and Michael Milston.



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Katoomba:



One example of the hospitality was making contact with a previous Club Rotarian who had moved, asking if they could prepare a short stop lunch and catch-up with a First Nations elder. Upper Blue Mountains Rotary came to the party in spades. After a 17 hour flight then a 2 hr drive out of

Sydney, the visit to Echo Point, the stories told by Auntie Carol, and a lovely picnic lunch, was the start of their wonderful adventure.

Over the next 2 weeks the Team visited:

Orange:



Activities included: a Welcome to country with a smoking ceremony and demonstration by local dancers, didgeridoo playing, visiting the Aboriginal Medical Service, checking in with a Boys Camp (for boys who are disengaged with education), discussion about TAFE and tertiary education within the Wiradjuri community, watching the film *Rabbit-proof Fence* – all in 1 day. The next day included a 'Yarn-up' with a range of other services and businesses; including the recognition that both First Nations were treated to a viciously enforced assimilation through stolen generation / removal of children to boarding homes. This was lightened up a bit by having crocodile and kangaroo for lunch! Visit to the local hospital to meet the local kangaroo mob; social get together with Rotarians before heading off the next morning.



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Parkes – Condobolin: the trip to Parkes was the first opportunity for the delegates to see the open plains (so familiar to them and their reservations). After Parkes on the way to Condo, the delegates (on advice of the Parkes Mayor) stopped at the Bogan



Gate Pub – this was a different cultural experience, and well enjoyed. In Condo over 2 days the delegates

visited the local museum and primary school where Wiradjuri was being taught and culture practised. There were boomerang throwing demos, dances, stories told, language spoken and sung, cultural expression in arts and building design.



Next stop was ...

Wagga Wagga: here the delegates were surprised that the local Elder Uncle Hewitt, would check-in with them every day and spend much time with them. The team visited and saw how the local Army Base provided safe and respectful places for cultural business; visit the local native fauna park; discovered the local Wiradjuri Museum; strolled along the Murrumbidgee river listening to creation stories and viewing murals, and civic places with connection to country. There were a couple of school visits, where there is good progress being made in use of language, supporting youth (the Clontarf Program) and encouraging involvement in sport, art, and community activities. The delegates also addressed 2 Rotary meetings covering 3 Clubs, and met with medical services.



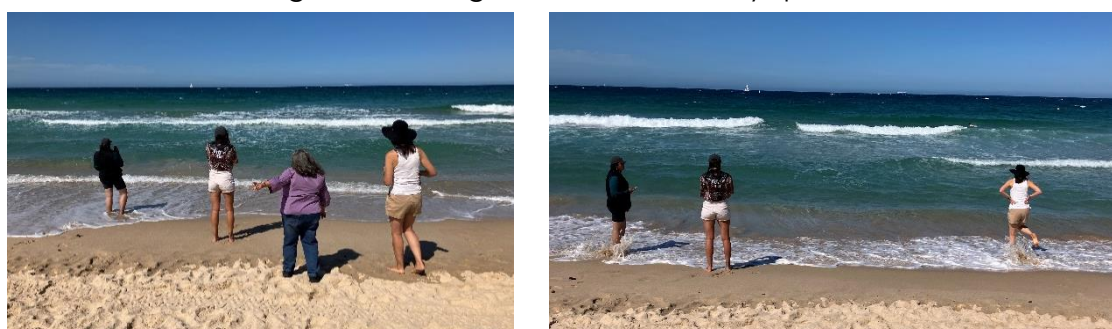
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Mittagong: After Wagga Wagga (and about half-way into their exchange) the delegates travelled to their next destination – Mittagong in the Southern Highlands for the D9705 Conference.



Their presentation was fantastic and so well received by attendees that they gave it a standing ovation! There was much conversation with the delegates after that. The next stop was Canberra, and the delegates went with their Canberra hosts but the GSE bus made a slight detour to the South Coast beaches – as the delegates are land-locked in SD, seeing and running in the sea was very special for them.



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Canberra: There are many Rotary Clubs in this city, and the team presented to at least 5 clubs. The Canberra Rotarians developed a most valuable itinerary – getting information about services from AIATSIS, meeting medical services (with a smoking ceremony and chance to talk with elders about their trauma experienced as members of (and descendants of) the stolen generation, talking with peak bodies, visiting the Tent Embassy and old Parliament House, the Canberra Peace park, the ANU Jabal Centre to Aboriginal learning, had a night out on the town (hosted by some fabulous Rotarians) and to top it all off, they had a 2 hr yarn with Prof Mick Dodson.



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Sydney: Leaving Wiradjuri country and driving to Sydney the delegates were pretty tired, but when we got to Sydney, there were many people who were Wiradjuri met at the next stop – the Uni of Technology Sydney(UTS).



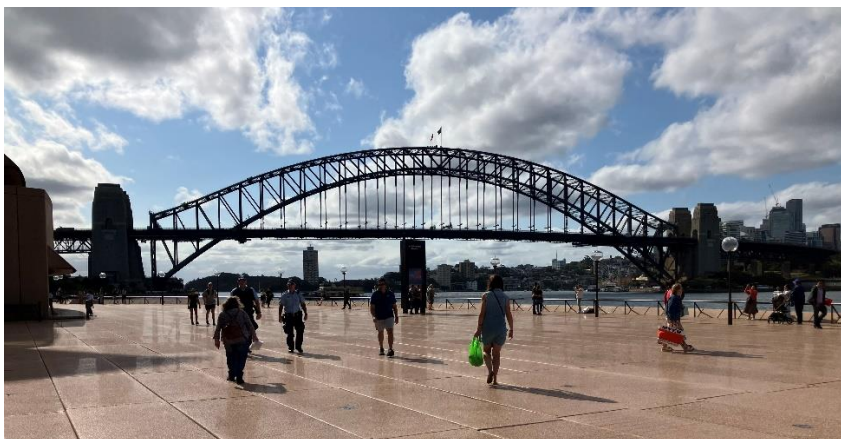
The visit there showed the special safe and respectful areas been set aside for Indigenous students, and work being researched about managing plastic particulates and climate change, and a multidimensional visual space.

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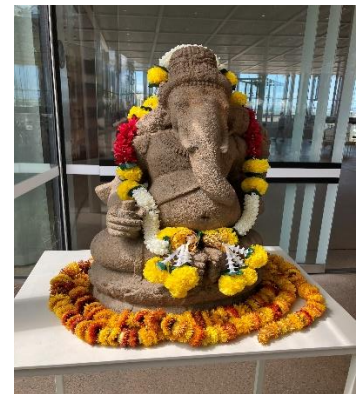
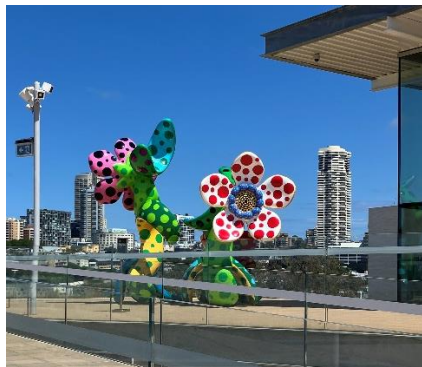
The final day in Sydney included a visit to an inner-city homeless support service with a strong reference to supporting Indigenous people.



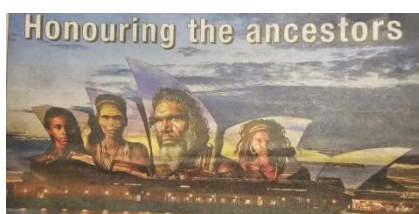
Then a free afternoon (where some went to the Art Gallery, while others went to Luna Park !)



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And that evening the Rotary Club of Sydney Cove held a social night and took the delegates out of a harbour cruise! Which was such a fun ending to their exchange.



The Delegates flew out to the US on Saturday 2 November at 10.15am – and arrived in the US the same day at 7am!

What did the Delegates say about their Exchange?

We do not have an evaluation at time of writing, but we do have some materials they have had published, or recorded.



Team Leader Rtn Kibbe Brown, who lives in Rapid City and is a registered dietitian and lieutenant commander in the U.S. Public Health Service serving the Indian Health Service's Division of Diabetes, has said: The shared experiences of both countries' First Nations Peoples, "include their deep connection to the land, traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyles, the experience of colonisation and displacement by European settlers, disruption of their cultures through assimilation policies, and ongoing struggles

for land rights and social justice...These are often marked by high rates of poverty and health disparity within their communities. Both groups also have diverse languages and cultural practices across different regions.

"We had the most incredible time. We were so warmly welcomed by our Wiradjuri aunties and uncles and in each place we shared and learned...We returned home with best practice ideas in the areas of health, education, business and culture." Kibbe went on to add that the exchange coincided with the US President Biden making a formal apology to the Native American community for a 150-year-old Indian boarding school policy (which was established in 1819 and enforced until the 1970s, where children were forcibly removed from their homes and families), which Biden said was a 'blot on American history'. [from the Rotary Down Under Magazine, Dec-Jan 2024-5, issue 678 pp10-11].

The Argus Leader story, referenced below in Dawn Marie's experience, also spoke with Kibbe and reported that she found that the Aboriginal community are "doing really well" with education, keeping them in school and catering to their demographic. She said she and the group were able to visit a Koorinal school [in Wagga Wagga NSW] mentoring program geared toward keeping Aboriginal young boys in school, observing them playing rugby and eating a hot breakfast together before school, which Brown said was a "great way to start the day." In Orange, Kibbe said she also learned more about a Best Blokes Camp where the students can attend as an incentive to do well in school. "It was just really impressive," Brown said. "You could see how it was working. You could see the energy. It was really positive, and they felt really supported."

The article concluded quoting Kibbe who said these types of cultural exchanges are important to share ideas across cultures, and to advocate for each other. "I think this time in history is unique in that Indigenous people around the world are having kind of a moment where they are making gains in education and in the workforce, but we need to learn from each other's programs of what's been effective in that process," Brown said.

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Delegate Dawn Marie Johnson was interviewed by the Sioux Falls Argus Leader, Newspaper journalist Morgan Matzen in late Nov 2024. The full story is [What these Indigenous South Dakotans learned on a cultural exchange to Australia](#)¹. Some pertinent comments therein:

Dawn Marie, is the Sioux Falls School District board vice president, who “would like to open each school board meeting with a land acknowledgement. ‘Land acknowledgements like that are a small step to be respectful to First Nations people, and put Native people top of mind every time the statements are heard or read’ Dawn Marie said to the paper. Dawn Marie added: “If I were to read (a land acknowledgement) at the beginning of every school board meeting, what that would mean to our Native relatives to know that they’re being thought of when we’re working on curriculum, when we’re talking about budgets,” she said, noting it’s an idea she may bring to fruition. “It’s just one of those, ‘I see you’ moments... It matters.”

She’d also like to continue supporting Indigenous education, and create extra programs and intentional support inside schools to uplift Native students, reduce chronic absenteeism and improve Indigenous graduation rates.” Like Kibbe Dawn Marie said “how similar their (Oceti Sakowin and Wiradjuri) cultures, history and beliefs are, ‘It’s really crazy the parallels that we have,” Johnson said. “We’re so similar, and we were doing traditional practices almost to the T in different continents at the same time. It’s wild.” Reported the Argus.

The Argus reported that ‘each visitor [delegate] also gave a presentation about themselves, how they’re connected to their culture and how that’s impacted who they are today. Johnson, who is from the Sisseton Wahpeton Tribe of the Lake Traverse Reservation, said she told them about how her grandmother and her siblings endured the boarding school era.

She said she was able to see the effects of “[Closing the Gap](#),” a strategy in Australia by its government to achieve better life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, firsthand in medical spaces, educational opportunities, housing, job opportunities and programs.

Johnson said she found the trip exciting because she got to go to a different country and see firsthand how it’s making waves in uplifting its Indigenous population.

“I think it’s unfortunate that billions of people were impacted in this way and had to die for the greediness of wanting land and power, but I also feel very empowered to know that there’s people across the world who endured the exact same thing, and they’re being uplifted and supported by their government, and now have opportunities to build back their culture and move forward,” Johnson said.

¹ <https://www.argusleader.com/story/news/education/2024/11/12/indigenous-south-dakota-leaders-take-cultural-exchange-to-australia-sioux-falls-school-district/76206584007/>

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Johnson said data from the latest state report card by the South Dakota Department of Education that shows Native American students are disproportionately more chronically absent, drop out of high school more or score lower on tests than their peers isn't "surprising, given it wasn't that long ago that a lot of these policies were built in to separate Native people from their culture."

She noted the last boarding schools only closed relatively recently, so people are still alive today who were impacted by those policies.

"I just don't feel like we've had enough healing to be able to get to where we should be," Johnson said. "In the grand scheme of time, we're just not far along enough to be a healthy version of us."



Tianna Yellow Hair lives on the Pine Ridge Reservation and talks about her tour company and what she learned at a recent Rotary Group Study Exchange program in Australia. Listen to the radio interview (the first 22 minutes) at:

<https://www.sdpb.org/podcast/in-the-moment/2024-11-25/tourism-technology-two-growing-industries-in-sd-reservations>



We haven't heard back from **Corey Stover**



and we know **Nick Dion** has spoken to his Rotary Club in Wagner SD

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