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MCLEOD**

Shares His
Inspiring Tale

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TRAILBLAZERS & PIONEERS



STORY BY JOHN HUGGINS

Rod Williams

In the 1960s, an Aboriginal business called Billabong Cafe fed the locals and travellers of Tennant Creek, Northern Territory. It was owned and run by Sylvia Williams, the grandmother of future Aboriginal business pioneer, Rod Williams. Back in those days a young Rod Williams stood in the back room and peeled and cut potatoes that were to be turned into chips. The early exposure to business however, meant so much more than carving the humble spud. Here, with a knife in one hand and a potato in the other, Rod Williams thought to himself, "I can do this," and sure enough he did.

The idea of running a successful Aboriginal family business in the 1960s would have been nothing short of remarkable, given the policies of the day. This fact wasn't lost on Williams and he remains thankful of the experiences created by his late Grandmother.

"If more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experienced the internal working of their family business it might have the same influences that the Billabong Café had on me," Rod reflects.

Despite taking a brief detour via boarding school in Charters Towers and a Diploma of Welfare Work, Williams always knew he would one day focus his collective attention on business.

After deciding that Welfare Work wasn't for him, he became exposed to business even more so as an Industrial Relations Officer, straight after completing a traineeship with the NT Confederation of Commerce and Industry in Darwin. He promoted the organisation to potential members, looked after membership and communicated with government and union representatives.

He then went on to complete a Bachelor of Business at the University of South Australia and landed a role at National Mutual Funds Management. There he analysed coal stocks, gold, uranium, and diamond stocks. He essentially advised fund managers and portfolio managers of what to hold and what to hold off on in investment folios.

Arguably the most pivotal role of Williams' career came up when he accepted an offer at Normandy Mining as a Corporate and Exploration Consultant in 1990. He trained management on how to better engage and change the way that mining companies dealt with Aboriginal groups.

"We were out there and respected them as traditional owners and talked to them about what type of contracts and business they might want to set up on site."



Williams brought with him a form of respect, a new way of communicating and a comprehensive understanding of the needs of Aboriginal people.

After developing community engagement processes for Normandy Mining, Williams decided that he would boost his independence by creating his own business called Gongan Consultancy. As a single father, this would ensure he was able to spend more time with his son.

The name Gongan is pronounced 'Goin-gan' meaning very beautiful and special in the Bundjalung language of New South Wales. Rod's a member of this tribe and got the name given to his business by Elders.

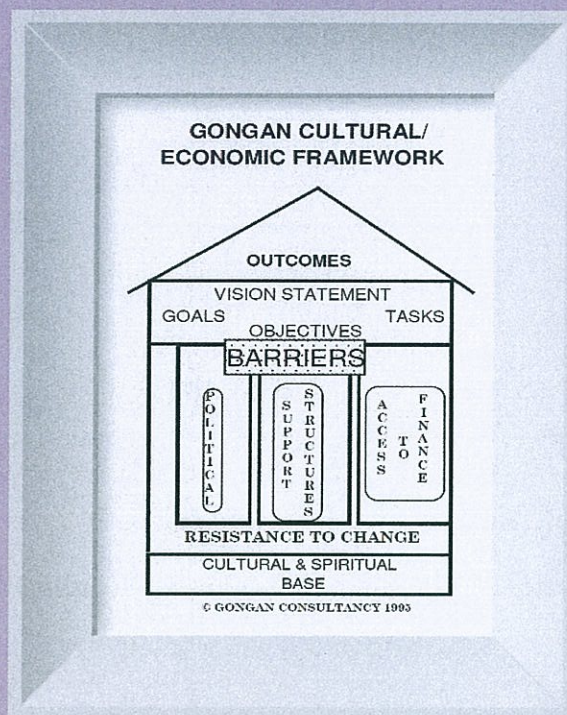
After shaking up a widespread approach to engaging Indigenous people, Gongan Consultancy created three management tools that would be a benchmark in Indigenous engagement. They collectively brought a new perspective on westernised business models that focus purely on monetary value.

Williams argued that more holistic priorities like family, cultural and environmental sensitivities should be taken into account when conducting business with Aboriginal people. Due to the disparity in the needs of business and Aboriginal people he believes that both parties should work together to create a corporate and cultural fit. You will see these ideologies form the basis of many of his concepts in the following models:

- Gongan Cultural/ Economic Framework (bottom up approach) is utilised as a directional management tool that has culture as the core principle.
- Gongan Corporate Planning Model (top down approach) is utilised as a management tool which ensures that corporations can negotiate a balanced long term agreement. Finding a good "corporate fit" while accommodating cultural and economic aspirations.
- Indigenous Business Network (IBN) Wealth Creation Model is a simple conceptual planning tool to build and distribute wealth across all levels of the community.

Williams explains some of the experiential background around his models. "In the mining industry, a lot of companies out there were just going out and saying 'We can make you a lot of money if you do business with us.'"

"I realised that the communities and the families were also asking 'How's this going to impact on our culture? How do our youth and elders fit in from a social point of view? How's it going to impact on our



environment? And yes we do want to make money, but not at the expense of those other things."

These models now form the basis of some of the consultancy work Williams does, where he applies their very concepts to real-life problems.

Apart from his advocacy in economic development relationships between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people, Williams remains one of the central figures who are responsible for bringing Indigenous business and economic development to where it is today.

Williams co-facilitated the first National Indigenous Business & Economic Conference (NIBEC) with Victoria's Graham Atkinson. NIBEC was created and organised by the late Charles Perkins and held in Alice Springs in 1993.

This groundbreaking conference brought Australia's Indigenous business owners together for the very first time.

Though two years later, after seeing the success that was NIBEC, Williams set up the first Queensland Indigenous Business & Economic Council (QIBEC) to help create the next national conference which was held in Brisbane in 1995.

He saw the benefit of creating dialogues and relationships between the few Indigenous businesses in operation at the time. While Williams and Co would do their best to build the Indigenous business from within, some negative external factors would hinder its development.

"When I first started, the image was that all black consultants were crooks and they didn't have the actual skills to do this kind of work."

And those knockers weren't the usual suspects.

"It was also from the community. They were more comfortable with a white consultant. We had to face that as well because we had to prove to our own mob that we had the skills to do it." But those perceptions weren't enough to keep Williams from realising his childhood dream of becoming a business owner.

For Williams, it seems that there would be no other career he would rather pursue, and he doesn't appear to be looking for an out anytime soon. This may be due to the fact that he still enjoys what he does. He even goes on to say, "I like the intellectual challenge and the difficulty of keeping my business operating."

"Every year in business has different challenges to face. And yes, I still ask the question if it might be better to go and work for someone else but the next consultancy comes in the door and it is business as usual."

Not only is he content with running his consultancy in the best way he knows how, but Williams is still willing to lend a hand to Indigenous economic development in Australia. As such, he has some advice to lend to aspiring business owners.

"My advice is to plan. Work out whether there's a niche there. The other thing that I've come to learn over the years is to be honest."

He continues, "Be honest about where your business is at and maybe it might help improve it."

And by that, Williams means to put your ego aside for a moment and tell people the truth when it comes to how your business is faring. It's simple. If it's not going well, say so. If it is, that's great. Williams reckons that you might find some more success if you're honest about your workload.

With Gonggan Consultancy turning 20 in February next year, Williams' advice is worth listening to.

Indigenous business is lucky enough to have a few pioneering business owners like Williams who are still in operation and are still able to contribute heavily to the industry that they help set up. It would be worthwhile to gain the perspectives of trailblazers and pioneers like Williams, who understand the past and remain very much at the heart of Indigenous business today.

www.gonggan.com.au

