

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE – PUBLIC SECTOR UNEARTHED

EPISODE #6

EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES WITH KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER,
RESHAUNE SINGER, AND JASON QUIN

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18 December 2023

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Delivered in a partnership between IPAA ACT and contentgroup

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JULIA AHRENS:

Hello, everyone. Before we get started with this podcast, we'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Ngunnawal and the Ngambri people, and pay our respects to the eldest past, present and emerging. And acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. We'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast is also joining us from.

JASON QUIN:

I feel like Empowered Communities operates a little bit like a diplomatic service, trying to keep connections alive between community and government. And so, trying to structure systems and have people in the team that can move between those far-flung places and stay connected, that's the real challenge.

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

EC really has paved the way in terms of place-based partnerships and supporting community to actually say, "This is what we want, this is what we need," and holding government to account in that regard. And so Empowered Communities and NPY is not cut and paste, Empowered Communities in North-east Arnhem Land or Empowered Communities on the Central Coast. It's as varied as the communities in which we try and empower really. And I think that's unique.

RESHAUNE SINGER:

There've actually been some really good interactions and response from people. Currently, there's a large network of the emerging leaders on the alumni have made a group together, a WhatsApp group, just so they can keep in contact with each other.

JULIA AHRENS:

Welcome to Public Sector Unearthed, a Work with Purpose spinoff series about the people who drive grassroots change and reform in Australia's public sector. If you're wondering about the unfamiliar voice, my name is Julia Ahrens, and I'm IPAA ACT's communications and engagement manager. Both our normal presenters that you're very familiar with, Megan and Brock, are taking a well-deserved break today.

For those tuning in for the first time on Public Sector Unearthed, we are putting people, and their stories front and centre. That means our guests talk about their journeys in the public service and how they're making a difference through their work, mentoring, communities of practice, diversity and inclusion networks, and the effective promotion of values and purpose of the public sector.

But as you'll hear today, we also have the opportunity to connect with people in community and in community organisations, and the difference they are making and how they're working together with government to make a difference. You would've probably heard this in the intro, but those were some of our highlights of today's

episode. And these are a few of the people behind the scenes of the Empowered Communities program. And we really hope it's making you want to listen in to the whole episode today.

We'll jump straight into the conversation in just a minute but let me tell you a bit more about a panellist before we do. Kristina Musial-Aderer, who is advisor Empowered Communities at the National Indigenous Australians Agency was the one joining me in the studio. And Reshaune Singer and Jason Quin from NPY Empowered Communities Partnership dialled in all the way from Alice Springs.

To give you an idea, the Empowered Communities is a program through which the Australian government is working with First Nations leaders and communities supporting ownership and building true partnerships. During that process, all parties look to set priorities, improve services, and apply funding effectively at a regional level. In part, communities are currently active in 10 regions across Australia. Kristina, Jason and Reshaune will tell us how the program runs from the ground up, how they connect with community, and what motivates them to keep going every day. Let's jump into the conversation.

Very excited to be here today with Kristina, Jason and Reshaune. We'll hear about the inner workings of the Empowered Communities program in just a bit of a second. But before that I'd love to take a minute and speak about a bit of more of a personal aspect. And I might start with you on that, Jason. What are some thing, some aspect of your job when you get in the morning that makes you smile and keeps you motivated?

JASON QUIN:

Well, fortunately we've moved our team out to this really beautiful place called the Desert Knowledge Precinct. And as a result, arriving at work means driving through local bushland, say the week before last. I arrived in the morning and there was a goanna on the road. And it ran off to a log and sat there and I stopped and looked at it. And then I drove in a bit further and there was a Bowerbird in the tree next to the car park. And then I went inside and felt already pretty grounded in the landscape that we work in.

And there's a big painting inside the lobby as we walk in that speaks to the cork woods, the type of tree that is common in this area and the dreaming story linked to that. And so, the best part about my job is just how connected it is to community and connected to the history of the region and the ongoing life of people who've lived here long before colonisation. And that the work is very much about remedying some of those impacts and trying to achieve better outcomes for people living in this region, people from this region.

And having those reminders in terms of place and the idea that life as it's understood here is inherently linked to country and people and the environment around us. And it's good to be reminded of that. And in my work, that's pretty present, which is healthy and good for me.

JULIA AHRENS:

That sounds fantastic. I love that. And when you talk you can feel that connection that you make with country and the people around you. Kristina, I mean we do have beautiful wildlife in Canberra as well, but for you, what is it that puts a smile on your face every day?

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

It's not loden, but I think Empowered Communities is such a unique partnership with government in that usually government is the person saying, "We have this funding and here's what we want you to do with it." And it's pretty rigid and it's very time limited. And Empowered Communities flips that on its head in terms of where an enabling partner.

But in my work with Empowered Communities at NIAA I work across the agency in supporting Empowered Communities. I get to see programs and aspects of the agency that I wouldn't otherwise see in my bubble. I get to learn about 10 regions in Australia. I was at West Kimberly Monday. Hey, it takes a lot to get to West Kimberly, but I was there on Monday for meetings with the EC backbone there.

And I get to just see the beautiful country and landscape there as well. I got to go to Derby and work at a Derby for a while. I think I am uniquely... I love showing up at work and just digging in and seeing different aspects of how we can take this further. What's going on in this space that we need to link up a community to. How do we leverage that and not just stick with the status quo?

JULIA AHRENS:

Yeah, that's really powerful. And Reshaune, yet for you, what is it for you? Because obviously there's the connection to country as well.

RESHAUNE SINGER:

Yeah, for me it would be... I'm a bit lucky. I get to do a lot more driving than Jason, so I get to drive around. I'm currently out bush right now. I don't know if there's echoes in here, I'm very echoey at my end. But for me it's like, it's good to travel.

Because everyone in the region is related to me as well, so it's not just going for a work thing. It's almost like just an outing with family members going at bush. And a lot of our workshops and all that are out bush as well. Or there's a bit of both going out country as well as working in an office. But yeah, it's great.

What puts smile to my face is going for coming out bush, seeing family members and just catching up with family members. And I start talking about work and then it takes a while for them to adjust to, "Oh, we're talking about work right now." And they're like, "Oh." And then it's like, "Oh, you do this." And then they start asking questions about what I do and then like, "Oh, I was like, can I do that?"

And that's how most of the emerging leaders bring them on that. It's family members but also, they're also trying to improve themselves as well. It's using that connection and it's the kinship here is the great network to have.

JULIA AHRENS:

When all the three of you are speaking, I feel like I can actually put a picture together in my head of what it looks like and what it feels like, this program. Kristina, I'd love to hear from you a bit about compared to other programs, what makes Empowered Communities so special?

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

I mean, as I mentioned before, government's not the driver, or what we call an enabling partner. And so, what Empowered Communities was first implemented in 2015, it was bipartisan support from the governments. And there was this real momentum behind actually saying what government is doing to date isn't working. It's top down, it's bureaucratic. And EC really has paved the way in terms of place-based partnerships and supporting community to actually say, "This is what we want, this is what we need," and holding government to account in that regard.

And so Empowered Communities and NPY is not cut and paste, Empowered Communities in North-east Arnhem Land or Empowered Communities on the Central Coast. It's as varied as the communities in which we try and empower really. And I think that's unique, and I think government only now is turning its mind to how do we make Playspace work? These guys are ahead of the curve. I mean it was first talked about in 2013, it's been 10 years. It's really nice to see it evolve and change.

JULIA AHRENS:

Yes, it seems to really shine a spotlight on that specific approach in government at the moment where Glenn Davis has just recently talked about it that there needs to be more play space, more community led, listen in instead of leading the projects and having the communities instead lead those projects. That's just a... Yeah, it seems to be really, as you said, ahead of the curve.

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

And it's not consultation. I think government as bureaucrats, we think we're doing partnership and what we're really doing is really complex consultation processes. And I'm sure Jason and Reshaune can tell you more about I guess the work from there and

in terms of what differentiates Empowered Communities from other government processes which they're engaged in. But NIAA, it's really about a partnership and stepping back and letting the Empowered Communities regions actually set the agenda for what change they want to see in their community.

JULIA AHRENS:

Yeah. I think that's actually a really good point to jump in probably for Jason because you are the executive manager for the backbone team in the NPY region. Can you tell us a bit more about the region? Because I remember from our pre-chat it's quite a complex region. And how you're running the Empowered Communities in that kind of setting.

JASON QUIN:

Thanks, Julia. Well, an interesting point that I would raise and given what little I know about your background, it's interesting that perhaps to say that the NPY region, the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara region straddles a tri-state area. The APY lands, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands in South Australia, several communities along the southern border of the Northern Territory, and then the Ngaanyatjarra lands in Western Australia. And in terms of land mass, it's equivalent to the size of continental Germany.

JULIA AHRENS:

It's massive. Yeah.

JASON QUIN:

Yeah. It's an often reflected point that perhaps anywhere between five and 8,000 people, depending upon how you want to draw the line and how you want to calculate populations. That's very few people for such a large area. And the population of Germany, is that 80 million or something like that?

JULIA AHRENS:

I think 81, we're nearing 83. Yeah. It's a huge difference.

JASON QUIN:

It's interesting to say perhaps 8,000 versus 80 million. But the challenges of distance, the tyranny of distance as is often said, is a really big characteristic of the region that impacts on the costs of delivering services, the costs of just simply people staying in touch with one another.

As Reshaune indicated, familial or family relations are really strong, people are really connected with each other. And that's I should have said before, one of the things that makes me smile about my job is getting to work with Reshaune and others. Reshaune, if you haven't picked up already, is actually great fun to be around and I'm always learning from him.

But it's worth reflecting that in this context, it's amazing how aware people are of each other and who's related to who and who's doing

what. I think that I always feel like I have a very small brain in the context of keeping track of people when I'm reflecting on that.

But the point is that all of these people living across broad distances are very connected. And so, social activities, et cetera, bring people together across vast distances. And that has all sorts of implications in terms of costs and time. And I guess for us, the number one challenge for this region as compared to other Empowered Communities regions is that it's a tri-state region.

We're dealing with a trilateral governmental environment with different rules on different sides of the borders. People who may be engaging with a system in one state then have to try to interact with a system that's just across the border. They might be a child who goes to live with relatives an hour away, but that may cross a state, a jurisdictional border. And then there are all sorts of implications.

And so, trying to coordinate and harmonise that environment, in the context of a reform initiative, is very challenging. And so, listening to people about their challenges and looking for ways to overcome them are at the heart of Empowered Communities work. And we've got this added complication of a tri-state environment.

JULIA AHRENS:

It does sound like obviously a very complex thing to keep in mind because you have to really every day think about the different sort of regulations and rules. And how do we actually connect people with each other across those borders, both in minds but also in how it's split up. Reshaune, obviously you talked a bit about how you get to drive much more around the region and you're a bit more mobile than just sitting behind a desk. Can you tell us a bit about a day in the life?

RESHAUNE SINGER:

Usually if I'm at the office, I'm trying to keep track of where everyone is. Just in case if it's coming up to a workshop for one of our Merchant leaders program, it's always fun to try and figure out because a lot of the people, everyone moves a lot. Everyone's very...

I think they spend maybe a month and some people spend a month in the community and then they move to the next community just because how everyone's related, they just, everyone likes to travel around. It's fun trying to, it's... Because if they go to the homelands, there's a lot of, there's no phone reception as well.

You got to try and find people that when they saw the last person might be two days ago, try and track down the next person that saw them. And then if you can't do that, I just usually drive and try and find people. And yeah, there's a lot of ringing, and a lot of driving and just relying on other marking leaders if they're seen that

person. And if they're in another community, then I'll try and usually get someone to go find someone. And yeah, just do a lot of management of that. But it's great. Because yeah.

JULIA AHRENS:

Yeah, as you said, there's a bit of that managing the professional and the personal relationships and how those come together as well and how you step in personally into those relationships. And it sounds like really the glue that makes everything stick together in the program. And I think that's really powerful.

RESHAUNE SINGER:

Yeah.

JULIA AHRENS:

Wonderful. Jason, talking about making things stick together, obviously there's Kristina's role, there's Reshaune's role, and I feel like you sit in the middle of that. How do you help build that crucial connection between what is often happening in Canberra in a government department and what's happening in community?

JASON QUIN:

Yeah, it's a good way of looking at things. I feel like Empowered Communities operates a little bit like a diplomatic service, trying to keep connections alive between community and government. And so, trying to structure systems and have people in the team that can move between those far-flung places and stay connected, that's the real challenge.

And so, it's also about trying to merge digital systems and the tangible systems of a full drive and a long dirt road out in between remote communities. And as Reshaune points out, it's a highly variable environment between stakeholders who are on the end of a video call versus people who are relying on a landline public phone in a community and everything in between.

A lot of the emerging leaders or one program that we work with, people who are working across schools or health services and they use smartphones and email. Or our community panel that helps with joint decision-making, older people, senior leaders who may not maintain a phone, certainly don't use email. And they might sit on four or five community boards. And it is amazing what they maintain in their minds when we think about how we rely on our smartphones for our diaries and our email inboxes and everything else.

And so, we have to work across various systems. And as Reshaune says, we have to be constantly updating our understanding of where people are, how to contact them, and maintaining expansive networks of people just so that we can keep in touch with key stakeholders. I guess we aspire to have something of a nervous system across the lands. Whether we

achieve that or not is up to other people to judge, but that's what we have to try to do.

JULIA AHRENS:

I love that idea of the nervous system and building those connections. And Reshaune, you became part of that nervous system through the Emerging Leaders program. You told me that you were doing the program, but you were also acting as a bit of an interpreter. And so nowadays being involved with the program as well, how are people from community responding to it? And what are your experiences with people who are doing the Emerging Leaders program?

RESHAUNE SINGER:

Yeah. How people have responding to it is there've actually been some really good interactions and response from people. Currently, there's a large network of the emerging leaders on the alumni have made a group together, a WhatsApp group, just so they can keep in contact with each other.

And from the emerging leaders workshop, a lot of the stuff we've done, which is leadership itself. A lot of people have taken that initiative around what's happening within the APY, mainly just with keeping up date with what's happening with the local land council. And everything and trying to keep in touch up to date with what's happening and how they can add onto that. And how they can help the older people and also younger people as well, creating their own groups and having a voice. And getting all these...

A lot of good things have come, people are talking to each other more. Not just with family wise, but people are actually starting talking about what the young people need and what's the next steps that needs to be taken. A lot of looking towards the future. It's a lot of that's happening, which is great. And just watching that usually from the family members and other participants that are usually have been a bit quiet around all that stuff. And seeing them, almost being the voices for the younger people is great.

JULIA AHRENS:

That's fantastic. Obviously, I can see the pride on everyone's faces when they talk about this program. It's quite amazing and quite outstanding. And Kristina, obviously listening to what Reshaune just said a bit about the program, how people seem to just, yeah, they rise to the next challenge. They're really keen to listen, take things on, make a difference. How does that make you feel about the future of the program?

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

Oh, it's fantastic to see that. I mean, what I was saying before is we are not driving it, we're supporting it. And to see the young people at NPY lands picking it up, what was a vision from some of their elders and leaders and community from 10 years ago. And actually going, well, how are we going to make this work for us? How are

we going to bring this forward? And how can we ensure that we can rise up as the next generation of leaders? I think it's fantastic.

JULIA AHRENS:

Well, we hope to of course, see this program rise up further. And I think I'm just very grateful that the three of you have made time to come and speak with us today. I'm sure people will really love listening to some of those stories that you've told today because they're both obviously very professional in nature, but there's always a heart, there's heart in it. And that's a really great thing to hear.

Yeah, what really stood out for me is obviously it's a very complex environment to operate in. But the way you make it sound, it's like it's almost not easy, but you make it look like it's a really doable thing. And it will encourage people, I believe to keep going.

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

And you could also say from I guess an NIAA perspective, as Jason was talking about the nervous system. We have our regional offices who are on the ground, supporting local leaders as well, supporting the Empowered Communities backbones and working closely with them as well. It's not just Canberra.

JULIA AHRENS:

No.

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

I feel like I'm a small part of a big machine. And doing my best to keep the good word up and ensure that the department listens and considers community viewpoints in how we develop our policies and implement our programs. And that's where I see myself sitting in Canberra.

JULIA AHRENS:

Fantastic. Well, thank the three of you so much. And well, I hope maybe we'll at one stage revisit the program maybe in 10 years' time, see where it's grown into because it's been fantastic. Thank you so much.

RESHAUNE SINGER:

Thank you very much, Julia.

KRISTINA MUSIAL-ADERER:

Thank you, Julia.

JASON QUIN:

Thanks, Julia. Thanks, everybody.

JULIA AHRENS:

Thank you. Listeners, what did you enjoy about this story today? Let us know by leaving a comment on our social media channels, or even better by writing a review. We are on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify, and many other podcast platforms.

We're now rapidly approaching the holiday period and I know many of you might already be on leave. And I'd like to take a second on behalf of the teams at IPAA ACT and contentgroup to thank you for another year of supporting the Work with Purpose podcast series.

There is a lot of love that goes into producing each of these episodes. And as I'm sitting here with the production team in the room, I'm just really grateful and we are really grateful that you love the episodes as well.

In the coming weeks, we'll switch to our holiday programming. That means you'll get the opportunity to listen back to some of our favourite or more so your favourite episodes of this year. This podcast is produced in partnership with contentgroup and the APS Reform Office. If you'd like to hear more about how the government is engaging with communities and other organisations, we do highly recommend you check out the APS Reform Offices Charter of Partnerships and Engagement. We've left a link to that in the show notes. For now, have a great break. And we hope to have you back listening to work with Purpose and Public Sector Unearthed in the New Year.