

## **Towards A Just Society**

### **A subfund of the MCF**

Recognising that as 'whities' we had benefited and were continuing to benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous people, our family and a few friends had started to explore the best way to achieve a measure of justice for Indigenous Australians.

Most of us had been active in this area, some in Alice Springs, others with organisations like ANTaR but had despaired of achieving change through the political process and decided to use our modest means to start a fund to support strategic initiatives.

We consulted widely within the Indigenous community and its leaders who confirmed that education was seen as a 'circuit breaker' in the cycle of disadvantage and also that there was little if any concern that mainstream education would weaken traditional cultural values. Indigenous academics and students alike saw the acquisition of knowledge and skills simply as a means to achieve better living standards for their people.

Starting our "Towards a Just Society Fund" as a subfund of the Melbourne Community Foundation, utilizing their Trust Deed and their financial administration services, made for an easy start and freed us for our 'hands on' approach. Our own expenses are contributed by members, allowing all donations to flow directly to projects.

### **Worawa Aboriginal College**

We started slowly – the last thing we wanted to do was to assume that we could determine priorities.

One of the Aboriginal elders we had consulted suggested we should contact Worawa, a co educational secondary boarding school owned and run by an Aboriginal Committee of Management for Aboriginal youth on 60 hectares of rolling country side just outside Healesville.

Founded in 1983 by Aboriginal visionary Hyllus Maris, Worawa aims to provide a "total education" – excellence in mainstream education, developing a student's intellectual and physical capabilities, but also his or her awareness of Aboriginal culture, reinforcing their sense of identity and self esteem.

We were invited to work with Worawa as a support group to the college management, trying to cope with a substantial funding shortfall caused mainly by the insistence of both levels of government that as a 'non government' school Worawa should receive subsidy funding only, even though it lacked the fee income of other schools in the private sector.

Recognising that the level of need was beyond our capacity, we initiated "Friends of Worawa", now grown to 60 members. 'Friends' set about providing basic necessities for students, raising funds from the wider philanthropic

sector and from government instrumentalities and engaging the Victorian Government in an effort to achieve a more sustainable funding formula, taking care to proceed only as requested by the Aboriginal leadership of the College. To date Friends of Worawa has raised several hundred thousand dollars for a variety of purposes.

Towards a Just Society (TJSF) provided grants where the need was urgent, in some cases in a co funding arrangement with other trusts, eg the Myer Foundation. In total TJSF has made eight grants to Worawa between 2003 and 2006 for a total of \$ 120,750 for additional cottage parents, equipment, a social worker, initial development of Cultural Resource Centre. Individual members of TJSF have also contributed substantial funds eg for bathroom renovations.

For TJSF it continues to be a useful apprenticeship, putting into effect our policies to use our funds to overcome strategic bottlenecks, to apply limited resources to achieve a 'multiplier' effect and to share or mobilise expertise as required. We have also been confirmed in our determination to respect the principle of self management and the need to have due regard for traditional values in the education of Indigenous youth.

We are grateful for the patience and trust we have experienced and congratulate President Leanne Miller, a niece, and Deputy President Lois Peeler, a sister of Worawa founder Hyllus Maris, on the progress Worawa Aboriginal College is making, with enrolments above nominal capacity and new developments in the pipeline.

### **Bursaries for Indigenous students**

TJSF also has experienced some growth, with several new contributors joining us and while maintaining our commitment to Worawa, we are now tackling the post secondary sector, with the aim to increase Indigenous participation and completion rates. Once again we sought advice - there seemed to be agreement that relatively small contributions to living costs, books etc would assist students 'to stay with it'.

In 2005/6 TJSF has funded 75 bursaries with a median amount of \$ 2,500 ea, working with Monash and La Trobe Universities and the School of Medicine at the University of Melbourne. Discussions are under way to expand the scheme to other faculties at Melbourne and to introduce it at Deakin University. In each case the Indigenous Studies unit selects potential recipients and monitors changing financial needs and academic progress, providing TJSF with two reports each year, identifying students by initials only.

In addition TJSF has contributed to the living costs of four Evonne Goolagong scholarship students at Box Hill Senior Secondary College and to the training of Indigenous legal workers intending to work on coronial inquests of deaths in custody.

TJSF has welcomed and supported the formation of “Changemakers” as a desirable move by the philanthropic sector towards greater strategic awareness of the need for systemic social change.

TJSF currently distributes in excess of \$ 150,000 pa – we could usefully and responsibly double that amount and welcome enquiries from interested donors or other philanthropic funds.

Sid Spindler, Chair