

## Redfern: the untold story

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The story of Redfern is one of Australia's most important examples of resilience and transformation in brutally difficult circumstances, yet it is a story most Australians don't know. Ask the average Sydneysider about the inner-city suburb known for its large Aboriginal population, and they'll advise you that property prices are rising, but it's best not to visit at night.

Chances are, they haven't heard how the local Aboriginal community worked with police to defeat a heroin epidemic and recreate Redfern as a hub of hope and dynamism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. They probably haven't been to the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence at 6am and seen fifty people boxing and sweating together and providing a generation of youth with a sense of direction and self-discipline. More than likely, they have never tasted kangaroo or crocodile at the Purple Goanna cafe on Redfern Street, as Jessica Mauboy belts out hits from *The Sapphires* over the speakers on Koori Radio.

This is a story that needs to be known – not only in Sydney but nationwide – because Redfern's transformation has the potential to inform and inspire other communities around the country.

### A meeting place

With a major railway station and numerous factories, Redfern attracted Aboriginal people from across New South Wales throughout the early twentieth century. Many came for work; others came to escape institutions or look for families from whom they had been separated.

Millie Ingram first came to Redfern in 1956. She recalls, 'there were shoe factories, bag factories, a clothing industry which you could get into. There was Berlei Bras down at Central that I worked at. There was another chewing gum factory up at Chippendale and a chocolate factory in Redfern. All those industries were around, and plenty of people had plenty of work.'

The large Aboriginal population made Redfern a natural home for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civil rights movement that arose in the 1960s and 70s. This movement created Aboriginal organisations with Aboriginal leaders, to promote and defend the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

When police started enforcing a 9:30 pm curfew in inner Sydney and arbitrarily arresting Aboriginal people walking the streets after this time, Aboriginal leaders worked with lawyers to establish the Aboriginal Legal Service. Founded in 1970

to provide free legal advice and representation to Aboriginal people, the Aboriginal Legal Service was the first organization of its kind in Australia. In 1971 came Redfern's Aboriginal Medical Service, Australia's first Aboriginal-controlled health service.

Redfern's cultural and political landscape underwent a major transformation when the Aboriginal community decided Aboriginal people should be housed in the Block, a precinct close to the railway station. Several houses were empty, and developers were pushing to move in, so in 1972, a small group of homeless Aboriginal people occupied three empty houses in Louis Street to keep the developers out. This led to the formation of the Aboriginal Housing Company, which by 1994, had purchased all the houses on the Block, forming a powerful symbol of an ongoing Aboriginal presence in the heart of Australia's biggest city.

People who lived in Redfern in the 1970s recall it as a place of great optimism. Long-term resident of the Block and Chief Executive Officer of the Tribal Warrior Association, Shane Phillips, remembers, 'during the early days, the Block was this great, strong vision and it represented strength and unity and resistance. I saw a lot of the great role models of Aboriginal communities there. It became a meeting place for people from all over the country and all over the world.'

### A downturn

The late 1980s, however, witnessed a dramatic downturn for Redfern, with the arrival of drugs, particularly heroin. Dealers and users, many of them non-Indigenous, came from beyond Redfern, but the community also found itself affected. The Block became a hub for drug dealing and use, and for violent crime. Residents feared to park their cars in front of their houses, as they risked being stolen or destroyed.

Jinny Jane Smith, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media and arts organization Gadigal Information Service, describes the impact of drugs on her own family, a proud family of political activists and artists with a multi-generational connection to Redfern. 'When the drugs came into Redfern, my father was one of the people that was trying to fight against them. My older siblings, my brother and my sister, were both heroin addicts. I fell pregnant in rehab at 18, so I was drug affected myself. That's three out of four children of my mother and father who were drug affected. When my siblings were going through their drug phase, coming in to Redfern, it just felt dark and gloomy because of that drug influence.'

Redfern experienced another tragedy in 2004. A seventeen year-old Aboriginal boy came off his bicycle onto a fence in Waterloo, and later died from his injuries. Attributing his death to the result of a police chase, a crowd gathered in the Block and rioted late into the night, throwing bottles, bricks and Molotov cocktails. The NSW State Coroner concluded that the death was an accident, but a key police witness refused to provide evidence, and the boy's family continues to argue police were pursuing him.

## A victory against drugs

Family by family, the Redfern community worked to overcome addiction. Jinny Jane Smith and her siblings transformed their lives. 'We were brought down by the effects of drugs, and we stood up to fight alongside the community elders and say, we are here, we are strong, and we can survive any of this. Now my sister's completely clean. I've been clean since I had my daughter. My older brother though is suffering psychosis due to his drug intake over the years.'

Aboriginal leaders recognized that the only sustainable solution to drugs and crime in Redfern needed to come from the community, and that people needed to honestly confront drug abuse in their own families. Shane Phillips, of the Tribal Warrior Association, was one of the leaders in the campaign against drugs. He recalls, 'I had to face up to heroin use and even dealing in my family first. I said that the community was allowing the police to come and clean Redfern of drugs, and that we weren't protecting dealers and users, even if they were our own family. Once we all said that, then people knew we were serious, and started to get involved in the fight against drugs.'

Shane Phillips explains that community leaders focused on the positive aspects of Aboriginal culture. 'We said, from now on, Aboriginal culture is based on what it was always about. It's not based on substance abuse or drinking or things that are going to be dysfunctional to our kids. We're not going to have a perfect community, no one does, but we have to be proud and try our best to give our kids a safe environment and a thriving community that has a vision of excellence.'

Community leaders worked together to support their most vulnerable members. In 2004, Mudgin-Gal Women's Centre launched a grassroots Black Out Violence Campaign, followed by a community education campaign in 2008, which worked with male role models such as Aboriginal football players to deliver a strong message against family violence and sexual assault. Started in Redfern, the Black Out Violence campaign has won awards and spread across regional New South Wales.

Seeing the same men going in and out of jail again and again, Mark Spinks formed the Babana Aboriginal Men's Group, which offers healthy community activities, friendship for isolated people, and pathways to work. He explains, 'we can get between 50 and 100 blokes to a meeting. I don't pay them. So there's got to be a reason why they come. And I think the reason is they want to contribute; they also want to change their lives. If that means they want to get off the grog and the drugs, we are a great vessel to do that.'

In spite of a history of mistrust between police and the Aboriginal community, Aboriginal leaders recognized that they needed to work with police to disrupt drug operations and dilute the dealers' grip on their suburb. When two Redfern police commanders, Catherine Burn and Luke Freudenstein, demonstrated their willingness to listen to Aboriginal people, the Aboriginal leaders agreed to work alongside police to combat the drug trade.

Luke Freudenstein, who began working in Redfern in 2008, recalls that when he started in his role, 'people were coming in to Redfern to commit robberies and buy drugs and use drugs, because they thought they could get away with that. Substance abusers would shoot up blatantly in front of police. They had no fear using drugs in front of police.'

Working closely with Redfern Aboriginal leaders, Freudenstein and his team issued a warning to drug users. 'We gave them a period of time and told them to cut it out, after which they'd be searched, and if they had drugs on them, arrested and charged. We did that with the drinkers as well.'

A central component of the Aboriginal-police partnership to address crime and disadvantage in Redfern began in a boxing gym, when Shane Phillips and the Redfern All Blacks rugby league team visited the PCYC, where Luke Freudenstein went boxing with the police.

Under the program, formed in 2009 and entitled Clean Slate Without Prejudice, police and community leaders work together to identify young people at risk of falling into the juvenile justice system, and instruct them to attend boxing training three times a week, at 6am. After boxing, participants eat cereal together, then they can attend classes to strengthen their literacy and numeracy, and learn the road rules so they can get their driver licence.

Participants are paired up with Aboriginal mentors, who pick them up for boxing, ensure they go to school, and help them discuss any difficult issues with their parents. Mentors encourage participants to study and help them find jobs. Participants and mentors also attend forums on topics such as family violence, victims of crime, substance abuse, and the impact of crime on people's future opportunities. Phillips explains, 'we as a community in Redfern are no longer conditioning any of our kids to aim for mediocre. We're teaching them to aim for the stars and focus on the process. And that process is hard work and strong families.'

One program participant, now seventeen, explains, 'in Year Ten, I was getting into lots of trouble, mucking up, going out, getting locked up. I got expelled from one school. I was trying to do my Year Ten at the behavior school, but I just failed that, started getting into heaps of trouble, getting locked up. That's when I got into the boxing program. Shane took us on, with Jay as my mentor, and I just put my head down and said that I wanted to go back and get my Year Ten. And I stuck it through with Jay and the boys helping me and getting me to school on time. And it's been really good, doing boxing. I got my Year Ten. Boxing got me into a good routine, and self-discipline as well.'

After Year Ten, he started working on the Tribal Warrior Association's boat on Sydney Harbour. He was then offered a job on the wharf where the boat is moored. Now, he works full-time on the wharf, and does extra work on the weekends on another boat. He is working towards achieving his Master Class Five certificate so he can drive big boats. Having recently earned his driver licence, he is saving up for a car.

According to Freudenstein, thanks to community and police efforts, the robbery rate in Redfern has plummeted since 2005, and residents have access to basic opportunities formally denied to them. 'Now the Block is a place where you can't get a parking spot. Whereas years ago, residents couldn't park their car there. You'd fear that it would be stolen or broken into.'

### **A cultural hub**

Redfern is now returning to its roots as the vibrant 'black capital' of Australia. The National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy brings together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teenagers from all over Australia to set goals, and introduces them to the employers, universities and role models who can help them achieve them. 'It's really about raising their expectations and their aspirations for themselves,' explains Chief Executive Officer, Charles Prouse.

The hangout of choice for young Redfern residents is the shining new National Centre of Indigenous Excellence (NCIE), which boasts a gym and pool with over 900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members training alongside non-Indigenous people, and a range of health, fitness and educational activities aimed at supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve their best. Even at 6am, NCIE staff glow with enthusiasm for their jobs.

Rohan Tobler, NCIE's Facilities Manager, loves his work. He lost 31 kilograms and gave up smoking since he started at NCIE. Tobler says, 'to be able to work here and service my community is a huge honour – to tackle the issues that we saw as kids, and to finally see someone grasp the fact that not everything about us has to be in a negative context. Here they concentrate on the talents and skills that we've got, and harnessing them and fostering them.'

The Mudgin-Gal Women's Centre is a hub for women and their children, who drop in for classes, events and workshops. Redfern also has weekly Sunday walks, run by Babana Aboriginal Men's Group. Chairperson Mark Spinks explains, 'it's more about the talk that happens, because a lot of blokes go back to one-bedroom bedsits with no family and no-one else, so if we can be the catalyst to turn them away from just talking through the bottom of a schooner glass, I think that's a good thing.'

Redfern also has a centre for older Aboriginal people – Wyanga Aboriginal Aged Care. Chief Executive Officer Millie Ingram stresses that culturally-appropriate services are especially important for elders from the Stolen Generation, who are often suspicious of authorities and reluctant to seek assistance from mainstream institutions. She tells of one elderly client who came to Wyanga after seeing two people jump to their deaths from her public housing tower. 'She loves coming here, because she's at home. She can forget about all that stuff that's going on in her high rise, and sit here in comfort without fear of anything, and enjoy the company of other Aboriginals here.'

## A showcase for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

Many Redfern community members pride themselves on showcasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to the rest of Australia. Gadigal Information Service, based in Redfern, was established in 1993, to challenge negative media stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and support them to tell their own stories.

Koori Radio 93.7 FM, part of Gadigal Information Service, broadcasts 24/7 to the Greater Sydney Region, and reaches a national and international audience via rebroadcasting and live internet streaming. Its award-winning team produces a 'live and deadly' mix of current affairs, news, community information and talkback, along with music from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, international Indigenous and black artists.

Prime time on Koori Radio is reserved for youth, with high school students broadcasting the Young, Black and Deadly show every weekday after school. Grant Maling, 18, hosts the show on Monday evenings. Maling started with Young, Black and Deadly in 2009. 'The year before that,' recalls Maling, 'I didn't know what I was going to do career-wise. I didn't know where I was going to go, but I wasn't going to uni, I knew that.'

Yet once he started hosting the show, Maling's confidence grew, and with it his aspirations. His passion and determination earned him a traineeship with Channel Nine. He has just finished his Higher School Certificate, and has applied for a place in a Bachelor of Communication. 'Ever since I started with Young, Black and Deadly, I've known I'm going to do media, I'm going to do journalism, I'm going to be on air in some way or form, because it's what I love to do.'

Gadigal Information Service also seeks out wider audiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music, through its artist development program for new musicians, Young, Black and Deadly creative workshops for under-18s, the Gadigal Music Label, and the Yabun Festival – the biggest single-day Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural festival in Australia. Its Klub Koori program hosts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians in a range of venues to expand their audience base. Artist Development Manager Darrell Sibosado explains, 'it's about getting our artists onto the stages and into venues, but also creating new audiences.'

The Purple Goanna Cafe on Redfern Street serves kangaroo and crocodile as well as a great flat white. Owner Suzanne Grech had the idea for the cafe when she was living in Marrickville, and she realized she could get Chinese food, Indian food, Greek food and Italian food, but she could not walk down the street and find Aboriginal cuisine. Suzanne Grech explains, 'the whole community is aware that Purple Goanna's here and it's an Aboriginal cafe. We have Aboriginal staff. We do Aboriginal food. We hang Aboriginal paintings. We play Aboriginal music. And we have all these great cultural aspects together. Redfern is just the place for it to be.'

The Redfern Aboriginal community's cultural reach extends on to Sydney Harbour, where the Tribal Warrior Association runs Aboriginal cultural cruises. Shane Phillips sees the cruises as an opportunity to educate Australians and visitors alike, and to instill a sense of pride in young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'When I went to school, I felt embarrassed about what they said about my people. I wanted to change that, so isolated Koori kids in school could feel proud.'

### A future of excellence

Redfern's Aboriginal community have big hopes for the future of their suburb. Jinny Jane Smith is raising her eleven year-old daughter in Redfern. She observes, 'since living here with my daughter since 2008, I can't see us living anywhere else. I feel that Redfern has more of a moving forward attitude, working together to benefit the younger generation, or the next mob coming up. That's always been one of my goals because it was something that my parents did, and I want to do that for my daughter.'

Nevertheless, the success of Redfern remains precarious. It depends on a few overworked leaders who rush between appointments. A major challenge will be educating and supporting the next generation of leaders, to ensure they can build on the wins of their elders. Mark Spinks states, 'it irks me to think that the only Aboriginal people we talk about in high positions are sports stars. We've got to concentrate on making our kids more comfortable at university through programs like Nura Gili Indigenous Studies Unit at New South Wales University so they can stay there and finish their studies and become the people that they want to be.'

Redfern's Aboriginal community also remains vulnerable to funding decisions of government. Delays or redirections of government funding can mean closure of much-needed community organisations, many of which already struggle to find the money to keep their doors open. In the words of Jinny Jane Smith, 'the ideas that we have as a community are great; we just don't have the money to make it work.'

Redfern's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population are keen to ensure Redfern retains its Aboriginal character, even in the face of gentrification and rising property prices. Many refer to Redfern as a sacred Aboriginal space in the urban landscape, and are concerned that wealthy new arrivals are crowding out lower-income Aboriginal people. Charles Prouse of the National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy says, 'I hope that Redfern keeps its black identity and I hope it doesn't become one of those working class suburbs around Australia that have become trendy and yuppified, because Redfern is the black heart of Sydney, something to be proud of.'

Redfern's Aboriginal community are therefore advocating for the Pemulwuy Project, a redevelopment of the Block which they have been planning since 1984. Pemulwuy was a Bidjigal warrior who led the first major response to the British invasion. The Pemulwuy Project will include 62 affordable Aboriginal homes.

The Aboriginal Housing Company has submitted a Development Application, but it still needs \$70 million for the project to go ahead.

For many people, the Pemulwuy Project symbolizes hope not only for Redfern but for other communities around Australia. Aboriginal Housing Company Chief Executive Officer Micky Mundine says, 'if the Block can get out of the vicious cycle, build a brand new community, and stand up and be counted, then anybody can do it.'

Redfern's leaders are aiming to reach out to the wider public to highlight the achievements of Aboriginal Australians. They dream of an Australia with National Centres of Indigenous Excellence, Purple Goanna cafes and National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academies in every town, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians on mainstream stages across the country. They are also exploring options for expanding the Aboriginal presence on Sydney Harbour to include joint management of Goat Island, Bennelong's traditional homeland. Shane Phillips says, 'we see it as a tool for bringing people together and making people proud of the Aboriginal history and the Aboriginal participation in this area, particularly on Sydney Harbour.'

While the Redfern community continues to support people who are having difficulties, the talk is shifting from a focus on problems to an expectation of achievement, inspired by the words on the gates of the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence.

In the words of Charles Prouse, 'a suburb that's had a bad name is reversing that and becoming a place of excellence and brilliance and innovation and excitement. That's being driven by Aboriginal people, and if that can be done here, than it can be done all across Australia.'