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Australian  
**Rural Leadership**  
Foundation

**Australian Rural  
Leadership Foundation**  
Leadership Impact  
Case Study:  
First Nations Australia







With a network of more than 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander alumni, the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation has provided a platform for some of the boldest and brightest Indigenous leaders in the country to find new ways to connect to culture, community – and each other.











## Michelle Deshong

Kuku Yalanji woman Michelle Deshong was born the oldest grandchild on both sides of her family.

"Despite having no say in it at all, my order of birth in the family structure dictated lots of firsts for my family and lots of obligations for me – some spoken and others expected," Michelle said.

Born in the 1970s as the daughter of an Aboriginal father and a non-Aboriginal mother in north Queensland, Michelle remembers a happy childhood, but one that also gave her a front row seat to resilience and strength, as her parents worked hard in the face of challenging perceptions when it came to race relations.

The concepts and expectations that ran through her early years offered Michelle Deshong an intrinsic understanding of how to read a room – and the perceptions of those who occupied them.

"Even as a teenager in high school I could see that people around me had ready-made perceptions of who I was and what I would ultimately become, which most people assumed would be a young Aboriginal single mother," Michelle said.

"I was steadfast in proving them wrong and become incredibly competitive and stepped into multiple leadership roles to show my story was just beginning – I was not going to be disadvantaged by preconceived notions.

"When I turned 18 I moved to Canberra to take on a role within the public service and that was equally

about proving to myself that I could do it and also showing other young, Indigenous woman like me that they had choices about how their future could pan out."

For Michelle Deshong, it was a move that cracked her future wide open.

More than 20 years in the public service followed, in roles including a stint as a Senior Advisor in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Today, she leads the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute as its CEO.

In the years between she's won accolades including being named as one the country's Top 100 Women of Influence, to being awarded a prestigious Fullbright Scholarship.

But it's her work as a leadership facilitator she holds up as her greatest achievement.

"That is my true passion, sharing my story and helping others learn the value of leadership, in whatever form that may take," Michelle said.

"This came in to stark clarity when I was accepted in to the Australian Rural Leadership Program in 2008 and despite being a few years ago now, there are lessons I still carry with me and enact upon every single day," she said.

"I went into the program wanting to test my capacity as a leader – not just as an Indigenous leader, or a female leader, but a leader in my own right.

"It was challenging, and like nothing I'd done before – or since to be honest. I had to face

particular fears, I had to ask for help and I had to build relationships I wouldn't have had the inclination or opportunity to do otherwise."

For Michelle, one of the greatest lessons in leadership was challenging her own perceptions of others.

"I had been on the receiving end of stereotypes my whole life so having to recognise that I also stereotyped others was actually quite confronting," she said.

"As an Aboriginal woman coming in to a rural leadership program that was heavily focused on rural people took some adjustment initially, and I remember landing at the airport on the first day of the first session and seeing this blond, non-Indigenous woman with her RMs on chatting at a rapid rate and I thought, 'Oh she won't be my cup of tea!'"

But more than a decade on from that first meeting, the woman in the RM boots remains a friend and mentor of Michelle's.

"The whole program gave me perspective around how much the values and passions of other people can bring to a space even if at times that contests my own," she said.

"An example of that is around Native Title and Land Rights; I was sharing the space with farmers and others who opposed it which made for some contentious and courageous conversations but I've never forgotten the value in truly understanding both sides of the story.

"Having always lived and worked in the Indigenous Services space meant I'd never had to consider what climate change or irrigation costs might mean to a rice grower or a pig farmer, but when you start to unpack those big issues you recognise

the impacts on the economics of the nation, the cost of food on supermarket shelves, and how we are all so reliant on each other – and it's up to good leaders to bridge those divides."















## Torres Webb

For Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP) Course 18 graduate Torres Webb, bridging divides is his life's work, acting as a conduit linking culture, education, and science.

With a mantra to focus on 'what's strong rather than what's wrong', Far North Queensland and Torres Strait man Torres Webb is a Cultural Capability Advisor with the CSIRO's Office of Indigenous Engagement.

"It's a role that affords me the opportunity to work with scientists to support Indigenous-led approaches that strengthens and shares knowledge around land and sea management," Torres said.

"Importantly it also makes it possible for true understanding and knowledge exchange to take place to support cultural best practice by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people."

It's been a natural role for Torres to step in to, after years leading the way in improving outcomes for young people as a science educator, also with the CSIRO.

"I studied environmental science management at university and am now responsible for helping educators incorporate Indigenous science in the classroom," Torres said.

"As a kid who was told graduating high school let alone university wouldn't be likely, it's a pretty great thing to be helping teachers teach better

these days," Torres said with a smile.

Early in his career he saw an ad for the Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP) in his local paper, The Torres Strait News, and decided to apply.

"That was nearly 10 years ago now and hindsight is a wonderful thing – I signed up thinking the time was right because I felt like a leader, but I was in my twenties, a baby!" Torres laughed.

"However, that's the exact reason it couldn't have come up at a better time, because it grounded me and put me in my place.

"I accepted I was someone growing in to a leadership role, and this opportunity gave me the platform to connect to new mentors and strengthen my network with people who had the same vision as me to improve the livelihoods of Indigenous Australians and start making inroads on finding the positives and the things worth celebrating," he said.

"It gave me a really clear direction around the type of leader I needed to be – not wanted to be – and also gave me the spark to grow into that role and be able to support others too, especially the younger generation."









## Kenny Bedford

It's the younger generation that Elder and traditional owner from Erub in the Torres Strait, Kenny Bedford, has his sights firmly set on.

A graduate of the Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP) Course 20, Kenny Bedford knows the value of offering opportunity to those coming up through the ranks.

"My father was a pioneering fisherman in the Torres Strait and he always had me involved in some way, from a little boy, through my schooling and even university, there was always an opportunity for me to fish commercially but no expectation or pressure to do so as a permanent living," Kenny said.

"Community representation in fisheries management however helped to develop my leadership skills and taught me about politics. With so many stakeholders and interests at play it helped me to understand the importance of examining an issue from different angles, from different perspectives." Kenny said.

With commercial fishing in his DNA, Kenny returned to the sector after studying a Health Science degree and working in Indigenous public health.

"I moved to Thursday Island in the late 1990s and after frustration working in the government health system I decided to return to my remote island of origin, Erub, and had little choice but to return to commercial fishing to make a living," he said.

"I became an advocate and representative out of both desire and necessity, but the ARLP gave me the chance to assess my values and think more critically and strategically about how I was going to best lead my community.

"I had heard about the program offered through the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and knew a number of people who'd done it and spoke highly of the opportunity so decided to apply.

"Being accepted gave me time to reflect on my personal leadership style and stretch myself to build the capacity to steel myself against the personal and external challenges that were to come.

"Completing the ARLP gave me greater confidence in leadership roles including as Councillor and Deputy Mayor of the Torres Strait Island Regional Council as well as my responsibility as the local Member of my island community and as portfolio-holder of fisheries of the Torres Strait Regional Authority.

"I am grateful for the tremendous experience and support of my fellow ARLP alumni over the years and of the lessons learnt through that program, I know this played a big part in what was a real turning point in my leadership story.

"This set me up well on a course of being part of leading what was a period of significance in fisheries development in the region for my people that ultimately saw us gain much greater control and ownership over the resources in our waters."



While stepping back from the demanding roles of political leadership in recent years, Kenny continues to serve as a Director on multiple boards and organisations and hones his leadership skills these days by encouraging the next generation of Indigenous leaders.

"Community leadership can be taxing, and if we keep relying on the same people from the same communities time and time again, we wear out good people and also overlook those who are willing and need support around them to step up," Kenny said.

"I am so impressed by the talent and drive of so many of the young people in the communities I have worked in and I'm often encouraging them and trying to find opportunities for them to demonstrate and develop their leadership.

"I know that one of the things I found difficult at times in my emerging leadership years was trying to forge mentor relationships with a generation that didn't always value the opinions and ideas of young people.

"I think that's a cultural thing and I'm happy to challenge that for the greater good of all communities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It's about giving the older generation the respect they rightly deserve, but also about Elders knowing the worth of those young people who are wanting to follow in their footsteps."









## Moses Nelliman

Moses Nelliman, a Torres Strait Island man based in north Queensland, is one of the first graduates of the Milparanga Leadership Program – delivered by the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation and specifically designed to develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

“I had applied for the course in 2018 but was unsuccessful which was a blow at the time, because a friend and I had applied together – he got in and I didn’t,” Moses said.

“I got some feedback from an ARLF alumni and I applied again and got in to the 2019 intake. But as much as I wanted it, the timing wasn’t great because just before the course we’d suffered a one in 100-year flood in Townsville,” he said.

“In the weeks leading up to the first part of the program I’d been spending days and nights cleaning up the houses of friends and family who had been seriously affected by the flooding. I was so fatigued and quite shell-shocked when I went from disaster zone to a motel in Perth, but in a way it put things in to perspective for me – once I got settled it was better than I expected.”

With a resume including nearly 20 years in the Queensland Police Service, Moses has been working for the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP) in his home town of Townsville for the past two years, with a focus on finding employment for Indigenous jobseekers.

“I simply wanted to have a real impact and do more for my community,” he said.

“While the timing proved to be hard initially, being accepted into the Milparanga Leadership Program 12 months into my role with DATSIP was a critical turning point in my career.

“I had done Indigenous leadership programs before but Milparanga was different. We spent time on country and I’d not done that before and I found it to be very freeing for me.

“That was paired with some feelings that were also confronting insofar as we were all a long way from home and some of the personalities in the group were much bigger than others. It took a bit to settle the dust sometimes, but every experience was worthy.

“I’ve had leadership thrust on me previously and I had to learn on the run so I felt I knew what made a good effective leader but the Milparanga program proved to me that leadership is many different attributes and regardless of your experience, you never stop learning.

Moses said he’s learnt to better recognise leadership qualities in others also.

“That’s incredibly applicable for the clients I’m working with each day. At the moment I’m coordinating 17-24 year old’s on a construction project and I can see different types of leadership qualities in each of them that I can help them channel for the greater good of the team – leaders don’t always have to lead from the front.

Moses said that realisation has helped him reassess how best he can serve his community.

“I’ve come to see that there were a lot of activities that I was involved in for the sake of it without having any tangible impact or delivering something helpful,” he said.

“I’ve lived more years than I have left. It’s up to me to better channel my knowledge and be affective. Not as a leader specifically, but as someone who can see where my skills are needed and apply myself to that task for the greater good. It’s exciting to have the power of that knowledge and put it in to action.”



A person with curly brown hair is seen from behind, standing in a forest. They are wearing a black t-shirt with the word "YARRABAH" printed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the back. The person's right hand is slightly raised. The background consists of numerous thin tree trunks and dense green foliage, creating a natural, wooded setting.

**YARRABAH**





## Elverina Johnson

An internationally renowned artist and activist, newly minted Australian Rural Leadership Program (ARLP) Course 25 graduate and Indigenous alumni, Elverina Johnson has made a career from producing work that inspires action – a catalyst for change and recognition.

“I’ve lived in a lot of places and travelled extensively but I always come back to Yarrabah – it’s home, and it always will be,” Elverina said.

A picturesque Aboriginal community just south of Cairns in Far North Queensland, nestled alongside the Great Barrier Reef, Yarrabah is not without its challenges – but for Elverina Johnson they’re opportunities.

“We live in sometimes difficult situations and many outsiders would see our community as disadvantaged,” she said.

“But I see my home through a different lens because I have a connection to country, culture and family here. I choose to use the opportunities I have through my art and my music to leave the town from time to time, upskill myself then come home and use those new skills and pieces of knowledge to help lead.

“I had teachers who recognised leadership qualities in me and pushed me from a young age to take on leadership roles in school and the community, but I was a typical teenager who wanted to do teenage things but I always felt I was different and didn’t fit in for some reason.

“It was later as my passion for human rights and social justice issues started to really evolve that I started listening to those old stories in my head about the leader I should or could be.”

Elverina heard about the ARLP through an alumnus and was interested initially but didn’t think the course was for her.

“I’d done a lot of things in the leadership learning space and I’d been travelling the world so I couldn’t see the worth of the ARLP on face value,” she said.

“After some thought I started to reflect on the personal upheavals I was dealing with and the mental health impact that was having on me. I know that setting myself a challenge is the best way for me to push through so made the decision to apply.”

Accepted in to the 2018-19 program, Elverina openly admits it wasn’t what she expected.

“From a personal development point of view I still think about some of the activities we did and think, ‘how did I get through that?’ I feel a sense pride that I overcame my anxiety and I still draw on that as a source of strength when I’m faced with different problems,” she said.

“To be honest, one of those activities made me feel like I had conquered the world and I returned home with a really strong sense of accomplishment and felt really free – but also very determined to start owning my knowledge and leadership skills as an Aboriginal woman.”



Elverina said one of the big things that stood out for her during the program was the personal realisation of her cultural leadership and how much knowledge she possessed as a First Nations person that non-Indigenous people in the group didn't have.

"It gave me a great sense of pride and also gratefulness that I had been raised in a culture that taught me about bush foods and survival, and how to identify different plants and animal species," she said.

"When we went camping in a really isolated area of the Northern Territory those skills and old lessons came back to me, and I felt in that moment that my cultural leadership was just as important as other aspects of leadership.

"I was able to lead a group of people that ordinarily I wouldn't have spoken up in. It was an important reminder to always value my history and knowledge."

It's through her art that Elverina best honours her history and knowledge – and uses it to evoke leadership in others.

"I love especially engaging with the younger generation and using the Arts to pull out the best bits of them," she said.

"There is such a narrow view of leadership. People think leadership is power or politics. But it's not a job. Leadership is an attribute, and you can show leadership in whatever space you like.

"Sometimes as an Indigenous person you don't always get the choice about whether you lead, it can often be expected or thrust upon you by community. But if that happens you have a responsibility to answer that call with respect – however you must know what sort of leader you want to be and think about the type of people you want to follow you.

"As a First Nations leader it can be tiring educating people and constantly working to breakdown the

false sense of identity that has been pushed upon Indigenous Australians because of other people's perceptions.

"But I am better for the experience. A better person, a better artist and a better leader and I have a safety net of support in my fellow alumni that will ensure I keep getting better and doing better – which can only have positive outcomes for my home community."









Graduates in this study were supported by:



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