

## **Cindy's Story.**

Cindy Dawson saw the film and dance routine and right away knew it carried the seeds for a better future for her people. However, there was something lacking, for it didn't seem to address an issue of the great gap that weighed heavy on her heart – housing. She grew up in Eastern Arnhem land and moved away to boarding school on a church-funded scholarship. Her partner was a carpenter and Cindy quickly became part of his family's building business. They specialized in modular homes for mining companies and Cindy quickly demonstrated special skills in transport and logistics. After her first child was born, Cindy wanted to return home to community for family time. While she welcomed the family support, she was struck by the contrast in basic living conditions. She had been away for long enough to get used to taps that ran water, toilets that flushed, air conditioners that worked, and the thing that got her most upset was broken windows and no flyscreens. And the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables. While she wasn't that into film and dance, as she watched the routine she knew that the underlying message-making was effective, it had an appeal to the emotions more than the senses. She also knew that this was the voice that could carry her message of change for her people.

Cindy had a message. It began as a somewhat controversial idea she saw on the ABC proposed by politician Bob Katter where he was pushing for the re-introduction of market gardens to communities and changes in land tenure to allow private ownership. She had first-hand experience of the difference between the modular homes they sent out to owners versus homes sent to non-owners. The former were looked after, the latter were good for business as replacements were needed. As for the market garden idea, she didn't know that during the war, all the troops stationed there had their food sourced locally; meat, fish, chicken, pork, and of course fruit and vegetables in abundance.

Surely, she believed it could be done again. But it was housing that was her principal area for change. After several months in community, she returned to Adelaide, her luggage rolling along, her son in arms and the drive for change in her heart.

Cindy's friend from boarding school was an indigenous girl adopted into a mining executive's family. Lucy went on to study design and technology at Flinders University, graduating some years later with her Master's degree. The message for change in Cindy's heart was shared with her closest friend. As it turned out, the timing was perfect, for Lucy was looking for a wagon to attach her passion to, and community housing was it. Together they pondered the question: "What if readily available affordable housing drove the need for change in ownership and land tenure?" They had been in white-man's world long enough to ask such a question, but they both had deep connection to indigenous culture to know that the quest they were on, ran counter to deep cultural affinities. Very deep.

However, Cindy had seen in the film and dance routine how that could be changed. She investigated the origins of the routine and traced it back to a little-known event called a 'culturally enriched therapeutic encounter' for men released from prison, on bail or parole for domestic violence. This event apparently used therapeutic storytelling to bring about change of not only behaviour, but attitudes running counter to culture were cleverly embraced at a deep emotional level. Cindy was proud for discovering what exactly had impressed her that night in community – people were drawn into the story primarily, a story with a profound message, while the senses were distracted by the movement and colour. And of course, storytelling was something Cindy had been exposed to in infancy, an essential part of being Indigenous.

Story telling aside, Cindy's focus was on housing. After discussions long into the night with Lucy, they decided on a plan – Lucy would concentrate on the design and manufacture of simple lightweight housing modules, and Cindy would focus on the transport and logistics. They made a determined, talented, and passionate pair of drivers, but they were not alone. Cindy had a network of people she dealt with regularly, people who respected her heritage and wished there could be some way to do more than argue about what to be done for disadvantaged Australians. People who, without a lot of intellectual inquiry, had an innate sense that constitutional change was more to do with grievance than useful change. These were practical people, many running their own businesses, and they eagerly came on board the wagon for they saw it was headed in the right direction.

Lucy too, had connections with people just as upset at kids running amok, domestic violence, seemingly poor attempts at closing the gap in areas of healthcare, schooling and housing. One could call them 'ordinary Australians' but as we shall see, they were people capable of doing extraordinary things. Her adopted family were wealthy, but did not live in a wealthy suburb. Instead, they lived in communities not dissimilar to the one Cindy grew up in - mining camps. They had wealth of a different kind – clear-headed understanding and deep compassion. Lucy was one of four adopted children, for her mother was a social worker and took children destined for state care in the city, gave them a home instead. And a future, as Lucy was known to proudly declare.

It is difficult to trace the early meanderings of the wagon Lucy attached her passion to. Difficult too, to see just what part the various people Cindy and Lucy enlisted played in it getting momentum. In any case, they were people less interested in their name in lights than having a show on the road. So let's talk about what happened. Lucy organised a design competition through her University.

She and her team had a clear idea of the housing modules needed to be; lightweight, re-cycled materials, durable, functional and easily assembled into a variety of configurations. Her father's mining company offered the significant prize, and designs were sought internationally, with one interesting stipulation, the design teams must be enrolled students. The winning design was from the Savannah School of Art and Design (SCAD) in the US, and it not only met, but exceeded the design brief.

One of the most attractive aspects of the SCAD design was its ease of manufacture. The modules were produced by a simple process known as 'rotational moulding' where plastic granules, mostly re-cycled, are heated and rotated slowly in a mould, both vertically and horizontally. The simultaneous heating and rotation distributes and fuses the plastic on the inner surfaces of the mould. The result is a product that contains seamless parts impervious to moisture, termite attack and resistant to the harsh outback weather. An insulating foam added rigidity to the structure, and electrical and plumbing services were all protected. Government funded manufacturing plants were set up in Kununurra, Alice Springs and Mt Isa, each offering training and employment opportunities for Indigenous people.

Cindy had access to early prototypes and with the help of her transport contractors, she designed an innovative way for the transport and assembly on site of the modules. The flat-bed truck was used as a scaffold for fixing the solar roof panels on the wall modules positioned beside the truck, and when the truck was removed, floor and remaining modules were fixed into position. An ideal arrangement for remote locations where cranes and scaffolding were not available.

It all sounds so simple. Two young Indigenous women with a passion to fix a problem. Actually, they fixed two problems that have plagued communities for decades; a chronic lack of suitable housing, and so much housing in a state of serious disrepair. One problem fixed by good design, the other by a good idea – ownership. They didn't have to do it alone for they were able to tap into a massive pent-up desire in all sorts of individuals and companies to support practical developments. People who had said no to what they concluded were ideological distractions, and were now ready to say yes to something they always knew needed to be done. Two young Indigenous women who were able to articulate their vision so well that both National and State governments came alongside with enough political will to close a gap so more Australians could have a place to call home.