Journey West to Menindee
2013 & 2014
Transformational journeys to Menindee

An annual four-day camp for Charles Sturt University (CSU) staff at Menindee in western NSW aims to produce an institution-wide transition from Indigenous cultural awareness to cultural competence.

Dr Barbara Hill, Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy Coordinator in the CSU Division of Student Learning, said, “The experience of participants at Menindee affirms that social justice and reconciliation are at the heart of efforts by the University to produce an institution-wide transition that will foster and ensure increasing Indigenous student recruitment, retention and completion of its courses.”

Starting in 2010, there have been five group journeys to Menindee - Ngiyeempa country - with over 70 participants. These included CSU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Andrew Vann, early in his tenure in 2012, and before him, former Vice-Chancellor, Emeritus Professor Ian Goulter, in 2011. There were 25 participants in 2013 and 32 in 2014.

CSU’s Strategic Context

The learning experience is an expression of the University’s commitment to achieve objectives which are reiterated in the University Strategy 2013-2015. Specifically, CSU aims to ‘improve educational outcomes and lives for Indigenous, regional, rural and remote Australians’.

In Indigenous education, CSU has adopted three strategic priorities. These are to:

- implement cultural competency training for all staff,
- ensure all undergraduate programs incorporate Indigenous Australian content consistent with the Indigenous cultural competence pedagogical framework, and
- maintain national leadership in this area.

The University's efforts will be judged by its ‘improvements in the proportion of Indigenous students’. A new analysis of ABS Census data by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) revealed there was a notable increase in the number of Indigenous students in Australian tertiary institutions between 2006 and 2011 (from 7 057 students to 10 128 students), with enrolments growing by about 43 per cent. The authors noted, however, that Indigenous students are still considerably underrepresented in Australian higher
education. While Indigenous people made up 2.5 per cent of the Australian population in 2011, only 1.09 per cent of university students were Indigenous.

Against this data, in 2014, CSU had 906 Indigenous students, an increase from 628 students in 2011; the majority of our students study by distance education.

Ripples and Seeing

According to Dr Hill, the process of cultural transformation the University and its staff have embarked on can be illustrated by analogies used in the media promote understanding both for participants, and for the wider community.

“"In the recent ABC TV screening of First Footprints, the director Bentley Dean explains an experience he had one evening around the campfire with Wiradjuri archaeologist, Wayne Brennan,” Dr Hill said. “Mr Brennan explained the meaning of an ancient Wiradjuri idea – birrung burrung – literally the moment when ripples in a pond cease, allowing one to see deep into it.”

In 2010, Wiradjuri Elder, Aunty Gloria Dindima Rogers spoke similar words to the first CSU group to travel to Menindee:

A stone thrown into a pond sends out many ripples. That is what we are doing here.

The CSU journey west to Menindee cultural immersion experience in 2013 again created these ripples. With Aunty Beryl (Yungha dhu) Philip Carmichael, and her expert teaching, the group had a very powerful individual and collective sense of ‘seeing deeply into things’.

I feel this experience really resonates with the Wiradjuri phrase prefaced in the CSU University Strategy yindyamarra winhanga-nha – ‘the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live in a world worth living in’.

A Journey, not an Event

Dr Hill and former CSU colleague Dr Jane Mills have written that cultural competence is an ongoing journey, not an event. This process is testified to by participants who have reported their perceptions of the journey to Menindee in post-camp reports. The University’s aim is to build Indigenous community engagement and collaboration into performance management descriptors so that those who do engage are encouraged and rewarded. Two examples illustrate this process:

- Professor Robert Davidson (Assoc Head of the CSU School of Dentistry & Health Sciences; Professor of Medical Imaging), wrote of his Menindee experience, “One of the reasons I was invited to attend
the weekend was that the Bachelor of Medical Radiation Science is undergoing a revision to integrate Indigenous Australian content into the course, rather than having it as a stand-alone subject. It was felt that this would help students to understand that cultural competence was integral to their future practice, rather than an optional addition.”

• CSU is working with Menindee Central School, Aunty Beryl Philp Carmichael and her daughter Julie Philp with ‘Joining the Dreaming’ to bring deep space to the investigative classroom. At the October 2012 cultural immersion experience in Menindee, CSU staff delivered two telescopes to the school and Aunty Beryl, as part of an ‘Indigenous Sky Stories in the Middle School’ project led by Associate Professor David McKinnon from the CSU School of Teacher Education.

This CSU-funded project uses astronomy as the context for engaging Australian Indigenous middle-school students (Years 5-8) in science, mathematics and technology, as well as aspects of engineering. Astronomy is a component of the National Science Curriculum and an Australian flagship Super Science area. Students learn about the contents of the universe and how objects within our Solar System move, knowledge which is integral content for the National Science Curriculum ‘Earth and Space’ strand. In addition, Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous counterparts will share their cosmogonies with Sioux, Arapaho and Crow Nation students in North and South Dakota, and Wyoming, in the USA. The interaction within and between nations will allow marginalised groups and their communities to share, compare and contrast their ‘sky stories’.

A Word

Writing of his 2012 Menindee experience, CSU Vice-Chancellor & President, Professor Andrew Vann gratefully acknowledged Aunty Beryl and her family’s hospitality, and looked forward to returning. He noted the Ngiyeempa tradition of story telling to transmit law and expectations, and reflected on what universities can draw from that at a time of significant change:

It seems to me that in the contemporary university we have a critical need to nurture a sense of shared culture owned by all parties and to retain a sense of agency in the face of what is admittedly a very competitive environment.
Debbie and I are fairly ‘seasoned’ bush travellers, so when Barb Hill asked us to come to Menindee, the simple question from us was “when?” We have previously visited Ngiyeempaa Country many times before, most recently only a few weeks prior to this visit. Although we have been “in country” many times, on this weekend however we learnt that only a few weeks ago we had travelled extensively through Ngiyeempaa Country from Brewarrina on the Barwon River to south of Menindee. The Ngiyeempaa Country is a vast and beautiful region.

On our much earlier second visit to Ngiyeempaa Country we entered via a southern approach through Mungo. That visit had a major impact on us not only from gaining a greater appreciation of the environment and wildlife, but also from a greater understanding of the heritage and culture of the region. At Mungo National Park we were fortunate to have one of the young rangers show us around. His knowledge of the region, its history and the culture of the peoples who have and still do inhabit the Ngiyeempaa Country left us in awe. Following that visit we gained some minor level of appreciation as to why Indigenous Australians have such a deep respect for their land they live on; why the flora and fauna that enables them to survive; an understanding of their many “stories” that their culture is founded on and the respect they have for others especially their Elders.

This weekend visit to Ngiyeempaa Country at Menindee has extended our understanding and appreciation of the people and region even further. Not long after arriving in Menindee we meet two inspiring women, Aunty Beryl Carmichael, Yungha-a dhu, and her daughter Julie Philp. Later we meet Julie’s partner Bruce and many of her family. What was immediately felt on arrival was that we soon became part of Aunt Beryl’s and Julie’s extended family. We were welcomed as long lost family and we left with the understanding that we were always welcome to visit anytime.
Aunt Beryl is well acknowledge as an elder of the Ngiyeempaa peoples however she is also an inspiration to all of us who have had the privilege to spend some time with her. Over the weekend Aunt Beryl (I still can’t get over what an amazing person she is) carefully lead us through aspects of her life, provided us with an insight to the vast and strong heritage of the Ngiyeempaa people, developed our very basic understanding of the Ngiyeempaa peoples' knowledge and bush skills and described the recent traumas that the Ngiyeempaa peoples have suffered. None of us left unaffected by her.

On Saturday morning Barb asked Aunt Beryl to talk about her life. One of the intriguing aspects for me was Aunt Beryl’s talk about always feeling the presences of the Ngiyeempaa ancestors and especially Uncle Geordie’s presences when she is out bush. Aunt Beryl described a time when others were unsure about the presence of the ancestors then she told them when he was around the wind dropped off. At that time moment she told them she felt his presence and the wind died down. The scientist in me is always looking for explanations so I took this on-board and started thinking. Later that evening a camp fire was built and we all sat around for a relaxing time and chat. Rosie was taking photos of silhouettes of the people with the fire in the background. On looking at the photos there was something unusual about them. An image appeared in the photo. Next day we put the photos on a computer and showed Aunt Beryl., Aunt Beryl informed us matter of factually that the image was Uncle Geordie and she was not surprised that he was present at the camp fire with us. He would have felt the good vibe of the weekend and would have wanted to visit.

What a great weekend we had with meeting and getting to know the locals, the CSU staff who attended and developing a greater understanding of the Ngiyeempaa peoples respect for their heritage and environment.

**Take Aways for the MRS Course**

One of the reasons I was invited to attend the weekend was that the Bachelor of Medical Radiation Course is undergoing a revision to integrate Indigenous Australian content into the course. We had started to work with Barb Hill and Wendy Nolan on integrating Indigenous Australian content into the course, rather than having it as a standalone subject. It was felt that this would help students to understand that cultural competence was integral to their future practice, rather than an optional addition.

- A 1st year subject has been revised to introduce Indigenous Australian content in respect to the allied health environment that is to contextualise for these students the importance of understanding Indigenous Australian issues in relation to health. This early subject is designed to develop an understanding of cultural issues and early skills for the students when involved with Indigenous Australians in the health care environment.
• In 2nd year students attend 12 weeks of clinical placements as part of a yearlong subject that seeks to contextualise clinical practice. It is during this subject and their clinical placement that they will develop early cultural awareness and beginning competence skills.

• In 3rd year the course will introduce a subject dedicated to cultural aspects with a major focus on Indigenous Australians. It is in this subject that the impact of this weekend will come to bear.

• Finally, in 4th year the students undertake 36 weeks of clinical placement. It is here that the outcomes of the course revisions to develop Indigenous Australian cultural responsiveness will be put into practice.

It’s a joy to travel to Menindee once more and, as on other trips, the journey itself is an important part of the pleasure. We leave at dawn – the children are bundled sleepily into back seats, mist rises from damp paddocks, curls above dams – and meet for McDonalds at Orange, as we do always but only on the way to Menindee, giving it the air of a treat. By Lake Cargelligo the landscape has begun to change, to flatten out, and the faces on the main street are different too, somehow: people know each other, call greetings, and greet us too as we wait for fish and chips that we eat by the lake, beside the corpses of carp and broken bottles. By Ivanhoe it’s different again – once the site of a thriving gypsum mine, it’s now a tumbleweed town – a hot, dry wind blows, the streets are deserted. After that, the landscape becomes flatter and flatter, the sky seems larger. There’s talk of prizes for the first emus spotted, and they start to appear, lone adults then families with chicks. We stop to see. Cotton bolls line the roadside, tangled in prickles. We get out to run ahead of the car, stretch our legs, and kick up some red powdery dust.

I hadn’t realised how long cat-heads could cling to your soles. I hadn’t realised how well thirty people, of all ages and interests, each with a different reason for being there, could get along – there was plenty of space at Kinchega, and some of us camped a bit away from the shearers’ quarters and kitchen ... and every person brought something unique to the group. I hadn’t realised starlight could be so bright – that you could see by it

Ruth Bacchus
even without a moon. We didn’t have a fly for our tent, and could see those stars all night ... I don’t think I’ll ever bother with a fly again.

I hadn’t been to the old Mission before, seen the strange desolation and beauty of the place Aunty Beryl spent her childhood – so full of memories for her, both the good memories of a child in a secure family and the hard memories of mission kids, their lives determined by the whims of whitefella bureaucrats. The latte-brown Darling flows slowly past the sites of old buildings now just a few stumps. I hadn’t been to the sandhills, where Aunty Julie used to take her kids and where ours now tumble gleefully down, climb up, tumble down again.

We take our first swims for the season – one where the shoreline is open, the landscape like a sea-beach, and the water the colour of moonstone; the other near our old camp, down the track and over some logs, where the water is the weak-tea shade lent by river-gum leaves. Trees grow past the shore and into the lake – for ten feet it’s a tangle of branches, vines, birds’ nests knotted on with cobweb. The slope is gentle so we walk out, on soft sand, until we’re waist deep. Dead trees are silhouetted by the sunset; pelicans perch in their branches and look dubious when someone takes the plunge, ducks, and comes up yelling – the water is not yet quite warm. Cormorants dive nearby so there must be fish, but we can never catch any.

What we do catch, as always, is some new knowledge: to do with culture, country, connections, plants, people, the past, the present, the future ... so many things both concrete and ineffable.

Aunty Beryl said: ‘We’ve still got a lot of talking to do.’ I realised I’d come to think of talk as something on the way to action – to be enjoyed, but more a preliminary to doing than a goal in itself. It’s not much of an insight really, but sometimes Aunty Beryl can do that: point toward something that ought to have been completely obvious and it seems like a revelation.

The purpose of my participation in this Indigenous immersion experience was to learn and experience more about Indigenous culture. The talks by Aunty Beryl and seeing a DVD of discussions with her was therefore the highlights of the weekend for me. The swims in the lakes, discussions at meal times and throughout the weekend, sitting...
around the fire, seeing Saturn through a telescope and driving through interesting landscapes was also enjoyable. What is unforgettable for me is the connectedness between Indigenous people and the land. This close relationship includes living off the land for food and water, the historical and spiritual significance of places, the cultural value of places and for living out the culture. Taking the land away from indigenous people was therefore deeply traumatic and radically changed the way Indigenous people lived. It seems that this matter still needs to be fully resolved.

My thanks go to Barb Hill for her organisation, Aunty Beryl for sharing her stories and answering our questions, Julie and her team for preparing the food, colleagues for interesting discussions, and CSU for making my participation possible.

Our visit to Menindee over four days in September 2013 continued a journey which began for me when I first applied four years ago to undertake one of the inaugural CSU Indigenous Education Fellowships foreshadowed in the University's Indigenous Education Strategy. I missed the first 2010 CSU expedition to Menindee because my mother was gravelly ill. Family and teaching responsibilities seemed always to slide in front of later invitations to make this journey. Now, finally, with my ten-year-old son, Joe, and partner, John Fry, by my side we were ready to journey from Wiradjuri to Ngiyeempaa Country, a more isolated, very different Place. I was jaded from the journey I had begun with CSU and hoped that in Menindee I would be refreshed, re-tuned and re-readied for the work that needs to be done at our University.

*Places come into us lastingly; once having been in a particular place for any considerable time—or even briefly, if our experience there has been intense—we are forever marked by that place, which lingers in us indefinitely and in a thousand ways, many too subtle for us to name.*

Edward S. Casey (Casey, 2001, p.688)
Being in Place

“... there is no place without self and no self without place.”
(Casey, 2001, p.684)

Most of us stayed in the Shearers Quarters accommodation at Kinchega National Park right next door to the communal kitchen, dining room and lounge area where we gathered each morning and night for yarning, laughing, listening and learning. The more intrepid camped a kilometre away at the camping clearing. We were staying on an old sheep station, now absorbed into the National Park, and were able to enjoy the recent colonial and farming history preserved in the buildings by the National Parks and Wildlife Service: the shearing shed, the fences, the sheep holding yards.

But for the travellers the most dramatic features were the lakes, each one different and abundant with wildlife. On the Saturday afternoon many of us took our children to the nearest lake. It was huge – expanding beyond where we could see – and shallow. We squelched our toes in the pale smooth grey white clay underfoot and through the water. The liquid we splashed about in was almost opaque but watery thin. Reflected upon by the bright hot blue sky it reminded me of the turpentine jar where my father used to soak paintbrushes he’d been using to paint our bedroom walls pale blue. The children made clay pots and let them dry in the sun.

The next afternoon those of us swimming plunged into a green lake – the one where our current vice chancellor had swum and camped alongside on his CSU visit to Menindee.

(Others got out their fishing lines … finding a perfect shaded spot around the corner). Trees of various kinds were knee-deep in water around the edges of the lake and we swam around them. Some people sat in the fork of one tree favoured on previous trips by other CSU Menindee travellers. As the sun prepared to set we
returned to the causeway on this lake: all the CSU travellers had agreed to meet to watch the day end. Scores and scores of pelicans, ibises and other waterbirds were massed here to catch dusk prey. As the children played, the adults went quiet, perhaps disturbed by the beauty of the water and wildlife as the sun's brilliant copper disc descended behind it. Such stillness, so much life.

Out of Place

"we are not the masters of place but prey to it; we are the subjects of place or, more exactly, subject to place."

(Casey, 2001, p.688)

In our first learning meeting on the Saturday, CSU staff and the people and the family who had travelled with us gathered in a circle with respected elder Aunty Beryl Carmichael. Aunt wanted to hear from each of us why we had come. I said I had come just to "be", and to be with people instead of with screens and computers. My son was next and gave as his reason "to exist" (Of late, whenever asked what his plans are or recent activity undertaken he often responds that he will, or has "existed". An irrefutable observation.)

The responses thereafter around the circle grew in intensity, intention, specificity and emotion. One spoke of passion about the work of colleagues in promoting Aboriginality Sovereignty through respect for Indigenous Culture and Knowledge, others wanted to better understand Country and connection to Country, while others expressed frustration over higher education's role in valuing (or not valuing enough) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture and People.

Aunty Beryl was welcoming of all the reasons. She told us about the displacement of her people – families separated between trucks they didn't realise were taking them to two different places hundreds of kilometres apart. And then lifetimes lived not knowing where those other members of her family and mob and had been taken, each group assuming the others were all dead.

On another day Aunt took us to the mission where she grew up outside the Menindee township. There had been houses for her mob’s families to live in and a house for the mission manager. But there was nothing left to show that there had been a settlement, except for the occasional bit of plumbing buried under revegetation. The buildings had all been levelled when the continued existence of the mission was deemed by government no longer required. But yet, for Aunty Beryl, it was still very much there. For Aunt this, as on every visit, was a happy return to her childhood home; her memories of this place were not sad, apparently because the manager had not interfered with the people’s desire to continue Culture, including to keep hunting when they
wanted to, to augment sugar and white flour rations with healthy high-protein tucker. Some Sovereignty was permitted and aunt’s father, a lore/law man, was able to pass on knowledge. And the beautiful river remained, faithful to the land.

People of Place
I felt privileged to meet Aunty Beryl and to travel with fellow CSU staff and their families - such strong supporters of the CSU Indigenous Education Strategy and of the role of higher education in Reconciliation. It was a privilege to meet colleagues, partners and offspring. And it was a privilege to share the Menindee journey with precious members of my own family:

Joseph Fry
on his Menindee Journey.
“Everything about the drive to Menindee was boring except for Narayan Wainwright. We travelled in the CSU marketing truck together with my mum and dad. And Narayan and I shared a tent down at his mums’ campsite while we were at Menindee. The parts I liked best were going to the mission where Aunty Beryl grew up and then making spears and clapping sticks. Aunty Beryl was nice... cool. The lakes had a nice colour to them. It was fun making pots and other things out of clay in the pale blue lake - that was my favourite lake.”

John Fry,
Sustainability Manager, Rahamim Ecological Learning Community, Bathurst
Our visit to Menindee Lakes was long overdue. Kay, Joe and myself had heard reflections from Barb (Dr Barbara Hill) and Ruth (Dr Ruth Bacchus) about the value of spending time out of our temperate woodlands around Bathurst and visiting the semi arid zones of Western New South Wales in Kinchega National Park. Although I have had a long association with Charles Sturt University, I was visiting as a member of the Mercy Institute who have been educators and carers in the lakes country for many decades.

Much of our time was spent with a local Elder Auntie Beryl Carmichael, who introduced herself through her journey stories over many decades of her life in country, a meeting place for many tribes for thousands of years. To meet with a local Elder who can fire our imaginations and share her cultural, spiritual and geographical history of the region was an experience that will inform us for decades to come.
As Auntie Beryl related her experiences I thought of an American Elder, Chief Seattle, who once said: “Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web he does to himself.” The recent history of European settlement in the lakes country is our story that my experience there compels me to examine.

The Aboriginal people were conscripted into the sheep industry – an industry that brought immense wealth to a few settlers – and the end of a traditionally managed landscape. Along with traditional culture, the ecology and the soul of the land has suffered incredible damage. As privileged visitors – researchers, designers, managers and educators - we are compelled to give some thought to the future of Aunty Beryl’s community and what we can do to help repair the fractures.

Our visit should be the beginning of a journey into country and culture that is capable of renewal, even in the face of despair. An enlightened university, government, corporate and religious partnership with the community would be capable of achieving a new vision for the lakes country.

Fittingly, for all of us making our way from CSU’s far flung NSW campuses, it’s a long journey to Menindee and cannot be taken lightly. I would like to acknowledge the much smaller group of CSU staff who made the first journey with Dr Barbara Hill to Menindee to meet Aunty Beryl. I would like to thank Aunty Beryl Carmichael for her grace in spending time with us and her determination to continue sharing and teaching Indigenous connection to Country to all who will listen. I would like to thank the two CSU Vice Chancellors who have travelled with Dr Barbara Hill to meet Aunty Beryl at Menindee. I would also like to thank Dr Barbara Hill for her courage and commitment in organising this latest Menindee journey and for launching so many with so many CSU staff over the last few years. It is a huge step to lead so many into new terrain. .. it’s different from what many of us are used to and unpredictable. You never know if along each step or wheel turn you will have what you need to carry on or if, when you are ready to return home to the familiar, it will be possible to come back to the same Place.
Whenever I think of Menindee, I think of red dirt, grey lakes, olive coloured shrubs. Paper flowers. Brilliant sunshine. Quiet. I think of stories needing to be told. People needing to be listened to. Knowledge yet to learn.

To me, jumping in a car with a 4 and 7 year old was an easy decision. I would not pass up an opportunity to go out to see Aunty Beryl lightly, and I really felt like the children would get so much out of the trip as well. Despite 13 hours spent travelling, stopping for ice creams, photos and car sickness, the travelling was relatively painless: thanks to Kate Rose’s teenagers occupying my two!

The whole group stayed the full weekend at the Kinchega Woolsheds cabins and camping area. Having promised Darius, 7, a night in a tent we spent Saturday night sleeping under the stars but were fortunate enough to get a room to ourselves for the other nights.

The days were filled with plenty of activities. On Saturday morning, we all sat in a circle introducing ourselves to Aunty Beryl and explaining why it was we were there. It is always so inspiring, as an Indigenous person, to hear that all these people are interested in Aboriginal people and their culture and so eager to learn more. On Saturday afternoon, we swam on the clay banks of Lake Cawndilla. The children (and some adults) made pots and sculptures out of the pure clay and left them to bake in the sun. It was lovely to sit and relax, but to also chat with the other people who were there and just get to know them a bit better. When we got back to the woolshed, I had to get ready for a 2 hour run (part of my training for the New York Marathon this year). Running along those dusty roads I saw a huge group of 12 emus all together, numerous kangaroos, a few sleepy lizards and a handful of different tracks in the sand. It was quite scary, but also quite awesome, to be out there in what felt like the middle of nowhere by myself. The sun setting was glorious to watch as I shuffled along, and the temperature cooling down was also very welcome. I am extremely thankful for the encouragement and support everyone in the group offered me when I looped back to refill my water bottle before heading off again. With the sun set and dusk well and truly upon me, I was on my way back ‘home’ when I came to a sudden halt. There, in front of me on road was a huge snake all stretched out. In the darkening light, I waited for him to slither away, but stood there for a few minutes with absolutely no...
movement from him at all. It was only when I nervously skirted around that I realised I’d been in a stand-off with a stick.

On Sunday, we headed out on a drive to the Old Mission site, stopping along the way to pick quandongs, learn about the healing properties of emu bush, find sticks suitable for spears, and to be taught by Aunty Beryl about a tree which used to warn them of an impending drought. When the orange/red berries appeared on the tree, they would gather as many as they could and stockpile them. Over the dry months, this would be their main source of nutrition when there was no food left.

Sitting at the Old Mission site and listening to Aunty Beryl talk has, over the years become more and more relevant as my knowledge of Aboriginal history has increased. Each year, I take back home with me a different aspect of her stories. Sitting on the banks of the river, Darius thoroughly enjoyed making his ‘spear’ (our convoy having collected appropriate sticks on the way out to the mission). Dave Ritchie showed the young ones how to hit the bark with the back of an axe to bruise it and make it easier to peel. It was getting well past lunch-time so we headed back to camp, with a quick stop to take photos of a group of eagles gathered together and also to visit the sand dunes.

After lunch, we had a rest before heading over to Pamamaroo Lake for another afternoon swim. This time, we headed over the weir to the place where we’d camped in previous years. The children and adults enjoyed swimming, and we were in a great vantage point to watch the sunset during our last night at Menindee.

I am always so thankful to be offered the opportunity to visit Aunty Beryl and her family. The children got so much out of the trip this year: Darius learnt how to make a spear, and really identified with Aunty Beryl’s welcome speech “If you muck up, you get sent home!”. He was excited to tell his classmates at school what he’d done during the school holidays. Olivia enjoyed seeing the different animals, but still talks about our camping trip to “Lake Pamamamamamaroomoo” and Menindee.

Personally, I enjoyed building more of a relationship with some of the people I work with, but also just learning to take the time to be still and listen.

I’d like to personally thank Aunty Beryl and her family, especially Aunty Julie who does a whizz bang job in the kitchen and making sure we’re always fed and comfortable.
After travelling the 1000-odd kilometres from Bathurst through towns I had never heard of and on dusty roads that seemed to go on forever, we arrived in Menindee. I came ‘prepared’ with my notepads, pens, ipad, iphone and a few other modern luxuries. However, I found out very quickly that while these tools were important to document any thoughts or reflections about the journey after I retired to my room, they were not the reason I was there.

There were two reasons why I initially wanted to go to Menindee. The first reason was that I had recently developed and was coordinating a subject called ‘Indigenous People: Sport Identity and Culture’. I had not proclaimed to be an expert on the topics taught within the subject, but I do have some knowledge and I have also learnt a lot during the development of the subject and from the friends I had made at the Centre for Indigenous Studies. The second reason is harder to explain, I felt that I needed to go, it seemed right and it also seemed that I was being pulled out west. I also took my nine year old daughter, she desperately wanted to join me.

During the first meeting with Aunty Beryl, I almost immediately felt that I was in the presence of someone very special and extremely knowledgeable. She and her daughter, Julie, were welcoming and thankful we had made the journey to meet them. I felt the same feeling around Aunty Beryl that I felt when I was with my grandmother, when you feel that you have to be on your best behaviour and you realise that what she is saying, is important. I felt a deep respect for her on our first meeting.

Aunty Beryl shared numerous stories about her time at the Menindee mission, a place that once had four rows of housing. The mission was now dismantled and forgotten about by many, although Aunty Beryl remembered where everyone lived. Some of the stories she shared were haunting and unfathomable to me, a non-Indigenous middle class woman. Others stories seemed familiar, the kind you hear about when you were a child or in a news story. These stories did not seem real, they did not seem possible, until you hear about them first hand. Therefore, her stories hit a chord; she remembers the horrific incidents that many of us now cringe.

Despite having a very different childhood to Aunty Beryl, I could see how important her
connection to land and space is, it was her ‘supermarket’ and her home. I don’t think I can truly understand this connection, unless I have lived it. What I did begin to learn was more about her country, the challenges she regularly faces and the importance of sharing these stories. Passing on this information so that it is widely discussed is pertinent. Passing on her stories to my daughter was also very powerful for me, my daughter was captivated with every word that Aunty Beryl spoke (see the picture) and went to school when we returned to share her experiences and some of Aunty Beryl’s stories with her classroom.

Whatever the journey is – it’s not only the destination that matters it’s who you travel with….

Our journey of discovery to Menindee: The experience as told by our words and images.

On an early morning walk on a track behind the old shearing shed it seemed like we were the only people who had walked along this track in quite some time. That may have just been an illusion but the landscape seemed to have that effect. The vastness of the horizon, the vibrancy of the colours and the ‘sounds of silence’ had an impact.
Animal footprints were in abundance on the track but as city dwellers we were only able to identify the emu’s prints, and we were pretty pleased about that small achievement. We could identify the tracks of the last vehicle that had been this way and of course our own footprints but of the other animals we could only guess.

Surrounded by the distinctive patterns of the animal footprints, the rich earth tones and vibrant colors of the bush you couldn’t help but reflect on the traditional owners who had lived off the land for thousands of years; who have been and still are inspired by this landscape to create the distinctive art and culture - the distinctive motifs that reflect the excitement of colour and patterns of the environment.

Aunty Beryl’s passion and generosity in sharing her story really made a lasting impression on us.

There are so few people who know the Ngiyeempaa story. Aunty Beryl took us to the Mission, here she felt happy and at home. The strong link to country was very obvious.

Aunty Beryl told us the story behind some of the Ngiyeempaa mob coming to the Menindee Mission. The trucks that came to pick up the Ngiyeempaa mob, not telling the people where they were going and taking no care to ensure that families were together.
Then one truck was sent north and one truck to Menindee Mission, neither groups knowing what happened to the other group for 50 years. The young children separated from their parents and not being seen as humans with feelings.

Aunty Beryl did not dwell on the problems of the past, but shared the story so that we have the context of the mission. The Aboriginal people have over the past 250 years been through major upheaval of culture and like us their culture continues to evolve. Often we don’t have control of what happens to our life, are we able to make the most of the opportunities or situations we find ourselves in?

The concerns that Aunty Beryl had for justice extended beyond the Aboriginal community. She vividly recalled how the Chinese people were discriminated against and she could still remember the song sung mocking the Chinese with their long pigtails.

Aunty Beryl talked about the tree that indicated a drought was coming by producing fruit. This was a real insight into some of the deep knowledge about country that has been passed on from generation to generation. I think we all came away with an appreciation of the complexity of this knowledge and the hope that it will be continued to be valued and passed on.
The simplicity and sophistication of the ways of the old people is one that resonated with us time and time again.

With just a few words a whole way of being or living is explained. For example, the totem be it animal, bird, rock or flower is never hunted, killed or desecrated out of respect for ancestors. This seemed to be about connection, spirit and respect but also, of course, practical conservation techniques.

As Aunty Beryl instructed the group on what tree branches would make the best spears and kids both young and old made somewhat informed choices, you could get a sense of why the knowledge of Elders is so important.

Passing this knowledge from one generation to the next was a matter of survival and while physical survival skills may appear to be no longer relevant in the modern world, the relevance of how to make a spear still binds both young and old.

Aunt Beryl told us of her memories of the Darling river, when the river was wide and deep and clear long before the European carp was introduced.
Aunty has fond memories of her time by the river and as we sat and listened to Aunty and spears were shaped and made, you couldn’t help but feel that peace and connection with the land.

The feeling of connectedness amongst the group, even though we were together for such a short time, is one memory that will stay with us. We were all, somehow, able to be in our own space, doing our own thing, whether swimming in the lake, choosing the perfect stick to transform into a spear or just listening to Aunty Beryl telling us about the old people’s ways. Part of that enjoyment, was that we were able to ‘single task’ for a while and enjoy just being in the moment. This mindfulness coupled with the vibrancy of the colours; red earth, blue sky, yellow sun, white bark, all around us added to a rich experience.

We felt privileged to be a part of the experience and journey. What do we feel we took away from this experience…. The power and beauty of the landscape… The setting of our time in this special place with each other… Our memories…

Engage, listen, learn and respect
References
