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**Relationships, trust, and community: the journey of a First Nations-led funder**

From building trust with community, to considering the source of funding, Koondee Woonga-gat Toor-rong is doing philanthropy differently.

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[Danielle Kutchel](https://probonoaustralia.com.au/author/daniellekutchel/) | 9 November 2022 at 10:54 am

Victoria’s first First Nations community-led philanthropic fund is leading the way in decolonising philanthropy by developing deep relationships with funders and recipients.

[Koondee Woonga-gat Toor-rong (KWT)](https://www.kwtfund.org.au/home) developed out of the Australian Communities Foundation sub fund ‘Towards a Just Society’, which had supported Victorian First Nations communities through grants for 14 years before deciding to transition to Indigenous control.

KWT emerged in 2019 and still operates as a sub-fund of the Australian Communities Foundation (ACF). Its name means ‘to give jointly, to share together’, in the Woiwurrung language and was bestowed on the organisation by Wurundjeri Elder Aunty Diane Kerr.

Grants are given through established networks with Woor-Dungin and the Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership.

Jody Barney, executive officer at KWT, said the journey from Towards a Just Society to KWT had taken a lot of time to get things right, as relationships were formed and community wisdom harnessed.

The board also had to consider allyship and the goals and processes of the new philanthropic organisation.

She said there were a lot of firsts, and plenty of learning to be done.

But with the support of ACF, the Fellowship of Indigenous Leadership and Woor-Dungin, KWT has found its feet in the world of First Nations philanthropy.

As well, Barney is the first deaf Aboriginal woman to be an EO in the philanthropy space in the world — a milestone she’s proud of, and that she hopes will inspire others.

A focus on community

What makes KWT unique is its different approach to philanthropy; rather than basing grantmaking on the basis of applications, it invests in discussions with applicants.

“We find out how they’re working with the community and if it doesn’t meet our structure and how we would be wanting to work, then we find the right place to refer them to to get those funds if we’re not able to help,” Barney explained.

“The process really is about the collective thinking of giving. It’s not about a financial transaction, it’s more about a relationship.”

The application process is designed to be simple and a culturally safe entry into the application process for philanthropic funds.

“We want to hear them and their story and their vision and what they want, and what the money… will do. That allows us to have far more information to make a decision,” Barney said.

Afterwards, there is a debrief where KWT asks about what was successful and what wasn’t and considers other impacts or opportunities into the future.

“For us it’s more about sitting and having a yarn and understanding the context and what the value-add for our community is going to be. From a cultural perspective, it’s a valued space to be in.”

At the moment KWT is staying focused on Victoria, but asked whether there are plans to expand into other states, Barney said: “never say never”.

The organisation currently also supports those seeking funding who are based in other states by referring them to other opportunities.

“We don’t just say ‘no, your application is rejected’ and leave it at that. If we did that, that would not be our way. We want to help them in some way so that they can then be engaged with who they need to engage — going back to that collective approach to philanthropy.”

Culturally, she said, First Nations people see philanthropy as an automatic process.

“Because First Nations people and communities are a collective community and a collective people, it’s based on what you can provide. We look after each other. [In] the process of sharing and caring for each other [it] doesn’t matter whether you’re related or not — everyone helps one another,” Barney explained.

“Philanthropy is really about how we extend on that collective approach of giving.”

The concept of reciprocity informs the work of KWT. Barney said the concept flows through First Nations communities and that First Nations communities recognise the value of “sharing and caring” and grassroots action.

But when it comes to philanthropy, First Nations people often don’t have access to the funds needed to establish project and events, she said.

KWT fills that gap, providing the capacity to open opportunities for First Nations communities.

“We’re very fortunate to see and read through many applications and through discussions with community members to find out the actual events and… the work that’s being done. And then we are part of the philanthropy enabling that to happen,” Barney explained.

The importance of trust and relationships

Relationships are vital to KWT’s work. Developing trust is central to the process of giving and receiving funds.

“If you talk about Western ways of thinking and accountability, there are so many rules. We have rules as well, but when you compare a Western philosophy and Western thinking, when you’re talking about finance and giving and how things are spent, what the numbers are, how you create change and what the impacts are going to be is very much a Western way of thinking,” Barney explained.

“And for us, we think in a cultural way. We think about how we’re going to maintain those relationships prior, during and post, and it all comes back to trust. It’s a two-way street.”

This leads into the relationships that KWT has with its own funders. They must meet certain cultural protocols too.

“We have a standard where we cannot accept the funds because of cultural impacts of what’s required. For example, we won’t get funding from any companies related to alcohol. It means that sometimes we miss out on funding, but that’s OK for us,” Barney said.

“We want to make sure that the impact that we make in the community has a positive connection to the funders and from our funding. People know who sponsored or provided those grants. They see where the money comes from… the community will ask, ‘where’s the money come from?’”

Creating a better form of philanthropy

The decolonisation of philanthropy is an area of interest for KWT, which is exploring how it can contribute to more culturally aware practices.

This would ensure a better experience for First Nations people and improved outcomes for their communities.

KWT is currently going through incorporation and will become the first 100 per cent First Nations-led and controlled incorporated philanthropic organisation, giving it more authority around decision making on how it does things.

Barney expects this to open up doors for conversations with other major philanthropic organisations to consider philanthropy through a First Nations lens.

KWT is also a member of the [Indigenous Funders for Indigenous People](https://internationalfunders.org/) global network, and Barney said learning from other First Nations funders globally has been invaluable.

So far KWT has funded a variety of different projects in the community, on issues like culture, gender, youth, elders and sport.

Barney said feedback from applicants was that they had found the application process valuable.

Funds are given in a holistic manner; a sports team for example was given funding to cover memberships, uniforms and buses for transportation to matches.

By taking a holistic approach, KWT helps organisations and individuals to more completely achieve their goals.

KWT receives funding from varied sources, including the Paul Ramsay Foundation, and Barney said she was interested in developing relationships with other philanthropic organisations that could support KWT’s mission and actions while helping it to grow.

“We want to know how we can improve and develop and design and be creative in the culturally safe philanthropy space so that we can do good for the community,” she said.

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