

“Sometimes you just need someone to believe in you”: Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership



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By Nicole Richards

“Investing in our mob in this way is powerful, the belief in the inherent potential of individuals as changemakers,” explains Peter Aldenhoven, a proud descendant of the peoples of Quandamooka in Queensland.

Aldenhoven speaks from experience. Named an Emerging Leader by the Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership in 2017-18, Aldenhoven is Executive Officer / Men’s Business at [Willum Warrain](#) on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula and previously

headed up Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led philanthropic fund: [Koondée Woonga-gat Toor-rong](#).

"The Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership believes in empowerment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through leadership," Aldenhoven continues.

"Receiving the award personally was an endorsement of my work, my family and my mob. It was a deadly opportunity and came with significant responsibility."

The [Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership](#) aims to "empower Indigenous leaders to focus their drive and energy in areas that have been identified by Victoria's Indigenous community as being of importance" by providing financial support, networking opportunities and professional development.

The catalyst for the Fellowship was a discussion over lunch between four civic-minded business associates in 2002 about how they might better support a local Indigenous leader they greatly admired, Yorta Yorta man Paul Briggs OAM.

"Paul is such an amazing leader," says Maree Davidson AM, who was one of the four people present at the discussion. "He re-established the Rumbalara Football Netball Club as more than a sporting club – his vision was to create it as a vehicle for improved health and wellbeing, economic independence, strengthening of cultural identity and pride and as a contributor to regional development.



Peter Aldenhoven with former Emerging Leader winner Jody Barney and Rod Catterall. Image credit: [Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership](#)

“He also started Australia’s first Indigenous credit union, he set up employment programs, he was behind what is now the [Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation](#). Anywhere you looked across Indigenous education, employment or health he was there initiating and innovating.”

“We knew that Paul was trying to hold down a full-time job as a public servant and we wondered what might happen if we pooled our resources and found some more money so that Paul could be paid a living wage for five years so that he could focus on achieving the vision he had for the Indigenous community.”

The group set up the Sir Doug Nicholls sub-fund (named after Paul’s mentor and role model) with Australian Communities Foundation (then Melbourne Community Foundation). The sub-fund was re-named Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership in 2007.

“We had absolute faith, trust and belief in Paul,” Davidson says. “He didn’t have to put in a proposal or report to us every month. We were investing in him and his vision and that’s what we’ve continued to do with our Fellows and Emerging Leaders.”

A year after establishing the Fellowship, the four founders progressed the initial conversation and widened their ambitions.

“We were having lunch again,” Davidson recalls, “and we said, ‘This seems to be not a bad idea. What if we put a call out to see if there’s another Fellow?’ So, we did, and we received quite a few applications. There were some people who were at established leadership levels like Paul and there were other applications from people who were much earlier in their leadership path but we could see real potential.”

That year, after attracting additional funders, Daphne Yarram was named a Fellow and Belinda Duarte and Trevor Pearce become the Fellowship’s first Emerging Leaders.

“With the Emerging Leaders, who are appointed for a year, it’s about helping them achieve their vision any way we can, for instance making introductions, bringing them into different networks or helping them build their leadership skills and experience through a project that is of benefit to their community.

“Ultimately, our interest for the Fellowship is in supporting the leadership capacity and capability of Victoria’s First Nations community.”

For Davidson, who is stepping down from the Fellowship in early 2020 after 17 years, flexibility has been an integral part of the Fellowship’s success.

“One of the things we hear from our alumni that they value most about the Fellowship is that belief. That we have faith and trust in them and that we’re there for them.

“One of the biggest success factors is that the Fellowship is relationship-based; it’s all about people.”



L-R: Cienan Muir, Maree Davidson AM, Kylie Price and Ngarra Murray. Photo credit: [Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership](#)

For educator and Yorta Yorta woman Kathryn Coff, who was named an Emerging Leader in 2017-18, the value of those relationships cannot be underestimated.

“Having that acknowledgement of the work that I do at the cultural interface was really important, it felt like a very safe and supported place,” she says.

“The Fellowship gave me the opportunity to form relationships and have experiences that wouldn’t have happened otherwise.

“It gave me the opportunity to see the bigger picture and the ability to work with other Indigenous people who are working in this space. Honestly, when I received the award it felt like I was in a room full of movie stars: these are all the people I look up to. It was really healing and enabled me to keep moving forward. Sometimes you just need someone to believe in you.”

Since being named an Emerging Leader, Coff's valuable perspective and teaching experience led to a specially created position at La Trobe University as an Indigenous Practitioner in Residence which still enables her to work in community, which is something she says she "would never give up."

[Ngarra Murray](#), an Emerging Leader in 2009-10, is a Wamba Wamba, Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung who has worked within the Melbourne Aboriginal community for more than two decades. As well as being a passionate artist, Murray is National Manager for Oxfam's First Peoples' Program, is a board member at the Nicholls Foundation, and a member of both the National NAIDOC Committee and the Victorian First Peoples' Assembly.

"The Fellowship is a unique and diverse network that is making significant and positive impacts in our community," Murray says.

"The Fellowship has been a great support over the years and helped me to achieve my aspirations in my personal and professional life. My learnings with the Fellowship have allowed me to transform the way I think about leadership and broaden my awareness and perspective beyond my community. It's changed the way I exercise my leadership and my approach, and it's pushed me to test how and why you lead."

In February 2020, the Fellowship's newly created Executive Director position will be filled by a member of the First Nations community, Katrina Mohamed.

"It's now time for others to have the opportunity to shape the Fellowship's future and support its work," Davidson says.

"Philanthropy is changing but I think we still need more investment in our First Nations people who are the catalysts and who will be the ones leading or driving the social change."

Learn more about how you can support the [Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership](#).