

Intergenerational Volunteering Case Study* National Seniors Australia – INSTEP (Indigenous Skills Transfer Exchange Partnership)

The INSTEP (Indigenous Skills Transfer Exchange Partnership) first launched in November 2006, by National Seniors Australia, with the first placement of volunteers in indigenous communities occurring in May 2007. The program, which was initially launched in conjunction with FaHCSIA (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs), aimed to address the skills shortage of remote Indigenous communities by utilising the skills and experiences of older Australians. National Seniors Australia utilises their extensive membership of over 280,000 individuals by encouraging members to volunteers in an Indigenous community. Many National Seniors members have an abundance of skills and the INSTEP program offers 'grey nomads' opportunities to volunteer and pass on their skills to Indigenous communities through various project placements.

Volunteer projects with INSTEP are generally one month in length and mostly occur during the months of May to November each year. Many volunteers incorporate their volunteer experience as part of their 'grey nomad' travel to North Queensland. The program's current capacity caters for between five to ten volunteer placements in various Indigenous communities at any one time.

'The cost effectiveness of the INSTEP program is a real strength as many of the volunteers have qualifications and abilities far beyond those which could be hired for work in remote areas- and they come for free'. Harry, volunteer

Volunteers are involved in month long projects in communities which can be part of larger projects in the community, or specific skills transfer type projects. Many of the projects are based in education and include helping in the classroom, listening to children read or enhancing the skills of the teachers in the educational settings. Some projects will have predefined outcomes before the onset of the project, but many projects change and evolve to meet the needs of each particular community at the time, once the volunteers are in the Indigenous community.

Volunteers are given a thorough induction and orientation prior to travelling to the communities and have constant phone and email support from the program manager if required. Many 'grey nomad' volunteers stay in their own caravans at nearby caravan parks and travel into the communities each day.

Among some benefits of the INSTEP program for the volunteers is a unique experience in the way that different communities and cultures operate. Volunteers obtain a different perspective on life.

'Being more relaxed when you're working is something that people can really learn from this experience. It's so different to working in the city, and you learn a whole new way of operating...it's like a calmness under any situation. You have to be so flexible and so accepting, and just let things slide. It's a very relaxed way of operating'.

The cultural experience is also unique as *'we find that the communities we go into are very trusting of our volunteers, so they really do let volunteers into their lives. It's something you wouldn't experience*

There are a range of programs in the community that offer opportunities for different generations of individuals to interact. Many organisations facilitate specific intergenerational volunteering programs which can be through one of 3 approaches.

1. Seniors and youth volunteering together
2. Senior volunteer working with youth recipient
3. Youth volunteer working with senior recipient

This case study represents an example of older volunteers working to pass on their skills in Indigenous Communities.

when you were just travelling'. Volunteers gain so much from their experience that many are willing to return to the communities the following year for further projects.

INSTEP Volunteers

Bruce and Gillian McFarland, a Canberra based couple have had several volunteer exchanges in Indigenous communities with the INSTEP program. The ability to use their skills and life experience in a volunteer capacity and package it into a worthwhile month long project was certainly something that appealed to the couple.



"The attraction of doing a month at a time- we get it done, and are not tied down to every Wednesday morning for the rest of the year'.

Bruce, who is a retired science teacher, uses his teaching skills to enhance the learning of both the students in the schools and the science teachers. Bruce created a series of 'kitchen chemistry' shows, using simple everyday kitchen ingredients, which proved to be extremely popular in a number of the Indigenous schools. The students were able to participate firsthand a range of practical and educational science experiments. Bruce was also able to enhance the teacher's skills. He asked them to identify an area of the curriculum that they would like to build up their own skills.

'In one school, the year sevens were doing a unit on Antarctica. I added another dimension to the curriculum through building in science experiments about icebergs by using long iceblocks'.

Initially, it took the community a while to understand what Bruce could offer, but on the second and third trips to these communities he was able to hit the ground running.

'When I walked through the door on the second and third projects, I got a month of full bookings from the science teachers.'

Gillian, a retired nurse, worked mainly in the schools and the health clinic doing various craft such as knitting and crocheting or education. She agrees that it's really important to go back to the community.

'It really did surprise me. People remembered what we'd done and it just took off. One lady [who I hadn't seen for twelve months] said, 'I'm glad you've come back because I need to cast off this scarf'.

Gillian, who collected a supply of knitting materials, buttons, beads and craft materials for her trips, enjoyed the skills exchange experience in the Indigenous community.

'They've got limited supplies of anything up north, and the kids get so excited being able to sew coloured buttons onto felt or simple things like that. I really learnt a lot in the community, such as how to make a grass basket, and it felt good to be trusted by the community. They're not secretive and you can really have some great discussions. You get to sit down and talk to them, and that's a real privilege'.

Both Bruce and Gillian offer that the keys to successful experiences are being patient as you're trying to set up and engage the community and multiplying your flexibility by 100.

Di and Graham Agnew

Di and Graham Agnew, a Brisbane based couple have had several exchanges with INSTEP. Di, an ex-nurse and counsellor, particularly enjoys volunteering with Indigenous communities.

'It's good to get out of your comfort zone. I really like working with aboriginal people. I like the culture and it's a little bit different. I just find the culture really interesting, and having been to Hopevale, really enhances your understanding of the culture.'

She found that the community was particularly welcoming of volunteers from the INSTEP program.

'It was fantastic. We were accepted so well and we never felt out of place. We had our volunteer badges on and they were used to seeing volunteers. They were friendly. It was such an honour being there really and being accepted by the community.'

Di and Graham took over from a Sydney couple during one of their exchanges, and found the community was ready to put their skills to use and learn from them.

'My husband's a builder and they loved him. He couldn't look sideways, as they had another job for him'.

Di used her skills in the primary school, in the capacity of a teacher aide giving vital one-on-one support to the students in the classroom. *'They really needed that one to one as the kids' concentration was limited. Quite often when we were reading they would snuggle up close to me and we would read together. We also worked in small groups, and it was really specific. We played lots of educational games and interactive things on the wall with the computers. It was fantastic really'.*

Di also visited the students, and provided classroom support at nearby Cooktown High. *'They were making these 3D boxes. One of the little girls came up and asked me what to do and I made a few suggestions with what she could do. Then the teacher ended up picking hers out as the best in the class. The girl was thrilled and came up and said 'thank you miss'.*

In addition to helping out in the classroom setting, Di spent time at the aged care centre and also the cultural centre exchanging skills and participating in the community. At the cultural centre *'...they showed us how to do plaiting with grass and make dilly bags. One of the guys up there showed us how to do the aboriginal dancing...and we were all out there in the dust having a practice. So we learnt a few things too.'*

'We had a ball. I'm sure I got more out of it than I put into it. Just being accepted by the community...it was a huge thing. Previously, when we had been travelling there was a barrier. We're volunteers, we're here to help and we were accepted. And I felt totally at home.'



I like a challenge. I've done all sorts of nursing & counselling and I like something to get my teeth into. It really is a fantastic experience and I felt special. Not everyone can just walk into a community. As travellers, they just look at us. As volunteers, we were accepted by the community.'

In addition to her volunteer experiences with INSTEP, Di volunteers each week at Southside Education Centre. At the school, she works in the classroom providing support for the Indigenous girls in a variety of activities.

Harry Oldfield

Harry Oldfield, a retired chemical engineer has been involved with INSTEP for two and a half years. From his base at the Gold Coast, he utilises his background in project planning and general management to provide support to INSTEP's project manager on funding applications and other assistance predominantly as a virtual volunteer. Harry's able to respond at short notice to needs that arise as well saving hours of travel time by *'logging onto the National Seniors computer system from home'*. Although occasionally he commutes to the Brisbane head office for face-to-face meetings with the project manager, Harry recommends *'volunteering virtually as a means of achieving very satisfying results from expenditure of minimum time'*.

In addition to his work as a virtual volunteer Harry, accompanied by his wife in true 'grey nomad' fashion, has visited the Cape York communities of Mapoon, Napranum, Hope Vale and Yarrabah to gain a more direct understanding of some of the communities that INSTEP works with. During his time in these communities, Harry was impressed by the exceptional friendliness extended to him as he identified possible opportunities and projects for INSTEP volunteers.

Harry believes that *'volunteering to work with different generations is probably the most satisfying experience a volunteer can have'*.

INSTEP's Project Manager coordinates the placement of the volunteers in Indigenous communities, matching the needs of the community with the skills of volunteers who wish to be involved. The community identifies the type of volunteer who would be suitable through a series of discussions with INSTEP's project coordinator, and is matched with potential volunteers from National Seniors.

Strengths of INSTEP

'Our volunteers do the job because they want to- and achieve the best result they can for the people in the communities. The absence of financial motivation or vested interest enables volunteers to give maximum focus to helping the people' **Harry, volunteer**

'Giving the communities 'people power' so they have extra hands to help. It's a supervised & supported program' **Di, volunteer**

The INSTEP project is an innovative example of how older Australians are utilising their abundance of skills and life experience to build capacity in Indigenous communities. Not only does the community gain from INSTEP volunteers, but the volunteers themselves often report that they gained far more out of the experience and opportunity than what they contributed.

'From the volunteers point of view...we just get so much out of it. All fun and no responsibility.' Di, volunteer

'Every volunteer I have spoken to has said that they have achieved great satisfaction from making a difference by their work in the communities' Harry, volunteer

By harnessing the abundance of skills that volunteers offer, INSTEP is working to create long term change in Indigenous communities.

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Case study written by Leonie Bryen, June, 2009

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